



7th EU-Balkans Discussion Group Luncheon

The Residence of the Turkish Ambassador to the UK

69 Portland Place, London, W1B 1QS, 21 November 2012

A speech by H.E. Mr Ahmet Unal Cevikoz, Ambassador of the Republic of Turkey to the UK

Distinguished Ambassadors,
Dear Guests,

May I, first and foremost, welcome you all to the Turkish Residence. I would like to thank Rudi Guraziu for his intense efforts and cooperation in organizing this event. I also would like to thank our speakers Mr Oleg Levitin from EBRD as well as Mr Özger İnal from ENKA who has taken the time to travel to London for this gathering.

The Balkans region is a priority for Turkey not only from the political, economic and geographical perspectives, but also due to its historical, cultural and human ties with the region. It is the geographical connection of Turkey with the rest of Europe and bears great importance with its regional cooperation potential and the EU accession objective which we all share.

The region has achieved considerable progress in the last 15 years. However, there is still unfinished business. It is the most fragile part of Europe and the test case for lasting peace and stability on the continent. Full integration with European and Euro-Atlantic institutions is the tool to finish that business and to ensure that the tragedies of the past that have haunted our region will never be repeated again.

There should not be any “black hole” left in the region. International attention continues to be needed, but is increasingly less obvious as the focus turns to the opportunities in Asia, the concerns about what is happening in the Middle East and with the EU mired in its own troubles. We support the integration of all Balkan countries with the EU and NATO as soon as possible and without any discrimination.

Utmost economic integration and the preservation of the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social structures in the region constitute the main objectives of Turkey’s Balkan policy, which is shaped by the principles of “regional ownership” and “inclusiveness”. Considering itself a Balkan country too, Turkey attaches great importance to its bilateral relations with the countries of the region. Our trade volume

with the Balkans have reached 18.5 billion USD in 2011. 1075 Turkish companies have already invested in the Balkans. Turkish companies are contributing to the infrastructure of the region by building motorways, airports. Turkey is not the biggest investor in the region, but it is the only country that continues to increase its investments.

Let me say a few words on each country.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

Turkey attaches particular importance to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of BiH. Acquisition of a functioning state structure within its internationally recognized borders is crucial. We want to see a “united, stable, prosperous, multi-ethnic” BiH which will become an EU and NATO member in the not too distant future. Activating Membership Action Plan will constitute a crucial step ahead. Solving the defence property issue swiftly will assist this process immensely.

Local elections were held throughout the country, except Mostar, on the 7th of October, and voting sessions in late October at the Parliament reshuffled political balance. We hope that political leaders in the country now will finally proceed with the reform process in the aftermath of these developments. If they fail to do so once again, BiH will lag behind the other countries of the region in terms of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Serbia

Serbia has a key role to play in the future of the Balkans. Serbia’s integration with European structures is not only for the benefit of Serbia, but also for the whole region. The normalization of the relations between Belgrade and Pristina is vital for the stability and prosperity of the Balkans. It is also a key for Serbia’s EU perspective.

Turkey fully supports the Pristina-Belgrade dialogue. We welcome the recent meetings between High Representative Ashton, PM Thaci and PM Dacic. We hope that these meetings will yield concrete results soon and all points of agreements reached in previous negotiations will be implemented.

Kosovo

Since its independence, Kosovo has made remarkable progress towards strengthening its democracy and state institutions, as well as developing its economy. The end of the international supervision of Kosovo in September 2012 has been an important step forward.

Being recognized by 92 countries, Kosovo has also become a member of the IMF and World Bank. We also welcome the recent decision by the European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to offer membership to Kosovo. EBRD membership will help Kosovo in its efforts to achieve greater socio-economic development, prosperity and stability for all its citizens.

Steps to bring Kosovo closer to the EU are of critical importance to ensure lasting peace and stability in the Balkans. We welcome the Commission’s confirmation that Kosovo is largely ready to open negotiations for a Stabilisation and Association Agreement.

Macedonia

Clearing the way for Macedonia's European and Euro-Atlantic path is crucial not only for ethnic harmony in the country but also for the overall peace and stability in the Balkans. We consider that Macedonia has certainly fulfilled every criteria required to be a member of NATO. We noted that the European Commission's 2012 Progress Report on Macedonia reflected accurately the important reforms undertaken.

We believe that the name issue should not be an obstacle for Macedonia to integrate with the European and Euro-Atlantic structures. We support a mutually acceptable solution through diplomatic means under the UN auspices. We also welcome and encourage bilateral contacts between Athens and Skopje. Overcoming the differences will benefit both countries and the region, as a whole.

Greece

Our relations with Greece are evolving gradually since the inception of the dialogue process in 1999. Our economic and commercial ties are also intensifying.

Following the elections in Greece this year, we have given new impetus to our relations. Our Foreign Ministers met three times. In the meantime new rounds of the political consultations and of the exploratory talks were held.

Furthermore, as agreed between our Foreign Ministers, we are ready to host the second meeting of the High Level Cooperation Council in January 2013. We are resolved to make further contributions to the current positive trend in our relations. The Aegean Sea should be a sphere of friendship and cooperation between our countries.

Albania

Turkey considers Albania as its strategic partner in the Adriatic and appreciates its positive contributions to the security and stability of the region and beyond.

Our cooperation in the field of military in general, and our joint mission within the NATO framework in Afghanistan in particular is a significant dimension of our bilateral relations. We support Albania's efforts for European integration with heartfelt solidarity.

Croatia

As for Croatia, in addition to our bilateral relations, there also exists good cooperation regarding regional issues, in the framework of Turkey-Croatia-Bosnia-Herzegovina Trilateral Consultation Mechanism and the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECF).

Turkey, which has strongly supported Croatia's accession to NATO, also supports strongly Croatia's EU membership and sees it as a future partner in the European Union. We have no doubt that Croatia will also continue to provide strong support for our EU membership after its own membership.

Montenegro

We believe that Montenegro is a good example for mutual coexistence and multi-ethnic harmony, as well as for political stability and progress in the integration

process; and, as such, represents a success story in the Balkans and a model for other countries of the region.

Turkey is a strong supporter of its NATO and EU bid. We are pleased that the European Commission's 2012 Progress Report on Montenegro objectively reflected the reforms that Montenegro has achieved so far.

Bulgaria

Turkish-Bulgarian relations have greatly improved in the recent past. There is no doubt that the establishment of the High Level Cooperation Council (HLCC) in March this year, and the agreements signed therein will help elevate our strong relationship to a level of genuine partnership. The visit of President Plevneliev to Turkey on 28-29 November will definitely help us review all aspects of our relations.

The Turkish-Bulgarian economic and commercial relations have developed considerably. Our trade volume has exceeded 4 billion Dollars in 2011. The amount of Turkish direct investments and the value of the projects undertaken by Turkish companies in Bulgaria have exceeded 2 billion Dollars.

Romania

We value our relations with Romania which is a crucial neighbour on the Black Sea, a strong ally in NATO and an important economic partner in the region.

Despite the negative impacts of the global economic crisis, our trade volume has reached almost 7 billion Dollars in 2011 and Romania remained Turkey's largest trading partner in the region.

Slovenia

Our relations with Slovenia have developed significantly during the recent years. Our Prime Minister's visit to Slovenia in May 2012, accompanied with 7 Ministers, was a good opportunity to give momentum to our cooperation within the framework of the Strategic Partnership Document.

Dear Guests, dear colleagues,

Finally, let me exploit this opportunity and say a few words about Turkey-EU relations. Membership in the EU has always been a strategic choice for successive Turkish governments. Turkey, as part of the European family, is an asset and a source of strength for the EU. Unfortunately our accession negotiations have almost come to a stand-still due to political blockage. There is a growing frustration among Turkish people. Faith in the accession process of our public has decreased considerably. According to the latest public opinion polls it has dropped to 17%. We expect a new step forward to be taken during the EU Presidency of Ireland regarding the negotiation chapters.

We are glad to observe that the Balkan countries are enjoying visa liberalisation, which in return consolidates their reform processes. Providing visa exemption to Turkish citizens is an important item on our agenda. The Justice and Home Affairs Council gave the mandate to the Commission to start negotiations with Turkey with a view to granting visa free travel to Turkish citizens. In return, we have initialled the

Turkey-EU Readmission Agreement in June 2012. The signature of the Agreement will depend on the formal submission of a mutually agreeable Road Map to visa exemption by the EU.

The time has come to leave behind fears stemming from biases and out-dated perceptions. In recent years over 100 thousand young Turkish people returned from Europe to Turkey to take jobs. Turkish economy grew at a rate of 8.5% in 2011 whereas the EU economies recorded growth rates of 1.5%, and 0 or minus in the last 3 quarters. According to OECD projections, between 2012-2017, with an average rate of 5.2%, Turkey will record the highest levels of annual growth rate among all OECD countries.

Let me conclude my remarks by saying that we wish to see the Balkans as the young, dynamic and energetic driving force of Europe. We wish to see a region which becomes a hub for infrastructure, transportation and energy projects as well as financial transaction.

As a negotiating accession country and a close economic partner of the EU, it is our sincere wish that the EU overcomes the on-going financial crisis. We hope that the crisis would not lead to an introverted EU. Enlargement policy, which significantly contributes to peace, security and prosperity in our continent, should continue unabatedly.

Turkey is convinced that this region is capable of becoming a centre of stability and development at the heart of Europe.

Thank you.