

CER/BRITISH COUNCIL/TESEV Bosphorus conference
Keynote Speech of Commissioner Olli Rehn to open the Bosphorus Conference, Istanbul

Turkey and the EU: A win-win game

10 October 2008

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Thank you for this opportunity to exchange views on recent developments in Turkey and our future relationship. This series of Bosphorus conferences provides us all with a valuable forum for discussing the biggest challenges facing us. I commend the Centre for European Reform, TESEV and the British Council for bringing such a distinguished group together again this year.

You will not be surprised if I start my speech with a football metaphor, this time on the strong performance of the Turkish football team during the European championship this summer.

For the Turkish team, it was an uphill struggle – through injuries, pouring rain, dubious referee decisions and tough opponents. But whatever the obstacles, this team and its coach never gave up. They didn't get distracted from the game. They did their job, by staying focused right to the end.

Turkey is rightly proud of this performance, which should be an inspiration for all policy-makers. We need the determination, focus and energy applied in Euro 2008 to be applied also to the EU accession process.

The Commission's role in the accession process is to be the referee, always reminding all players of the agreed rules – in this case the Negotiation Framework, which was agreed by all Member States in 2005. This framework was agreed unanimously, and it is reaffirmed every time the Member States all agree to open more chapters in the negotiations.

The debate about Turkey's future accession has also continued in the EU, which is to be expected in democracies with lively discussions in the press and in politics. I expect the debate about Turkey to continue until the end of the accession process – and even beyond.

This debate causes a lot of sound and fury, but it should not distract Turkey from its efforts. We are working in the same direction – towards closer and closer integration between our economies and our societies, with the aim of Turkey becoming a full member of the EU.

The rewards do not come just at the end of the process, when Turkey joins. The integration that is progressively being achieved, and the reforms that Turkey is conducting in order to meet EU standards, are already bringing concrete benefits to Turkish and EU citizens in terms of trade, investment and energy ties.

In the economic field, we have already witnessed a sharp increase in foreign direct investment to Turkey thanks to the accession process: between 2002 and 2007, total FDI flows into Turkey have grown 16-fold, while FDI flows originating from the EU have grown 24 times in those five years.

It is true that Turkey is still facing steep challenges in terms of FDI and more generally in terms of structural economic reforms, but the initial impact of the accession process and of Turkey's economic reforms has been strong.

In everyday life, we can see the speed at which Turkey is changing, through the many pre-accession projects which we fund and organise jointly with the Turkish administration, business sector and civil society organisations. Turkish citizens feel a strong sense of EU standards and values in the broadest sense, such as respect of freedom of expression and the fight against corruption.

Our joint EU-Turkey projects bring a wide variety of benefits, such as better food safety, a cleaner environment, a modernised judicial system and improved women's rights. These projects meet the highest expectations and ambitions of the Turkish citizens, irrespective of the political ups and downs of the accession process.

I would like to see Turkey make faster progress now in the reforms that form the foundation of the accession process. Valuable time was lost owing to another political crisis this year. The Commission followed very closely the party closure cases before the Constitutional Court. The Court's decision at the end of July averted a full-blown crisis, but such cases highlight the need for urgent revision of the rules governing political parties, and also for a wider constitutional reform.

The political leaders of the country – both the government and the opposition – now have an excellent opportunity to found a broad cross-party consensus to make solid progress in the accession process. The history of past enlargements shows that success in joining the EU depends on a collective effort of all major parties to reform the country.

As long as the EU is used as a football in domestic political games, the accession process cannot bring concrete benefits. It is not just one party, one region or one segment of society that joins the EU, but the whole country. This is why, in my view, there is an urgent need in Turkey for a broad-based dialogue and consensus about the EU accession process amongst the political circles, the business community, the civil society and academia.

The recent cycle of a political crisis every year has not served Turkey well. Such crises absorb time and energy that are vitally needed to prepare Turkey for the future, both for the accession process and in dealing with the current world financial crisis.

I welcome the recent calls in Turkey for accelerated modernisation through EU reforms. The government's intention to adopt the third national EU reform programme is vitally important. I am looking forward to the formal presentation of this programme to the Grand National Assembly following consultations with civil society and opposition parties. Reforms should not be limited to technical issues, but also include judicial and constitutional reforms to modernise the country and reflect changes in Turkish society – including further moves to enhance the rights and freedoms of citizens.

I have already mentioned one of the important reforms, which is the rules on political parties. Another important outstanding reform is the creation of the office of an Ombudsman, who could help defuse the tensions surrounding the debate about the relationship between religion and the state.

The Ombudsman would be able to reassure Turkish citizens that their rights will be respected, whatever their personal beliefs or political affiliations. Yet the Ombudsman law has been stuck in the Constitutional Court for over two years. Now it's time to set up this institution at last.

It is also time for the political and social forces to recognise that, like in any EU democracy, the Turkish citizens – all Turkish citizens – want to see their lifestyles protected within a solid, tolerant framework without having to seek recourse to court cases.

I would like to remind you that the Ombudsman is an intellectual gift from Turkey to modern democracies. Swedish King Charles the Twelfth admired the functioning of this Ottoman institution during his time travelling in Turkey in the early 18th century. He established the office of His Majesty's Supreme Ombudsman in Sweden by signing an ordinance in Timurtasch, just south of Edirne, in 1713. Now it is time to re-import this excellent institution back to Turkey, after it has undergone several centuries of product development in various other European countries.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Despite all the disruptions, the accession process goes on. So far we have opened negotiations on eight policy areas, and we look forward to opening new ones later this year under the French Presidency.

We could also open several other chapters as soon as Turkey meets the relevant conditions set by the EU – what are called the “opening benchmarks”. The core principle of the accession process is that progress in the negotiations follows the progress of reforms in the candidate country.

If we want to keep the momentum up and open further chapters next year, it is urgent for Turkey to deliver on a number of reforms; for instance, the adoption of a law on trade unions in line with international standards to open of the chapter on social policy and employment.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

The summer ended with more good news coming from the football pitch. This time I'm not referring to the sports performance itself but the opportunity it provided for enhancing Turkey's international stature.

The historic visit of President Abdullah Gül to Armenia was a courageous step which I welcome wholeheartedly. There is now a historic opportunity to follow it up with concrete steps to achieve the full normalisation of relations between Turkey and Armenia. This would greatly facilitate regional stability and cooperation in this highly sensitive Caucasus region, starting with transport routes that will benefit Turkish exporters.

The Georgia crisis this summer highlighted the strategic importance of Turkish-EU cooperation to ensure stability and security in our common neighbourhood. One of the most effective ways to stabilise the Caucasus region and spread European values there is to keep Turkey and the EU moving together. Turkey has the potential to play a vital role in advancing regional cooperation in the Caucasus, and I was glad to see the Turkish government proposing initiatives to achieve this in the summer.

The Caucasus crisis also highlighted Turkey's potential when it comes to another issue of strategic importance – that is, energy supply. Here I encourage my Turkish friends to engage now seriously in the discussions in view of making Nabucco operational as of 2013. Too much time has already been wasted on arguing rather than making things happen. Both my colleague Andris Piebalgs, the Commissioner responsible for energy policy, and I are ready to play our part in this process. Let me also renew once more the European Union's standing invitation to Turkey to join the European Energy Community, which will help all Europeans to ensure their future energy security.

Finally, I would like to express the EU's solidarity with the Turkish people in facing terrorist attacks. The EU strongly condemns the recent acts of violence, and we deplore them utterly.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends,

Together, we can make fast progress. This will require a clear understanding that Turkey is part of the solution to our citizens' daily concerns.

Unlike in football, everybody can win in the accession process. But for this to happen, the candidate for membership must muster a strong team that carries key reforms based on a broad consensus and widespread popular support for the end goal.

I look forward to working with Turkey – together we are a winning team.