
MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

EUROPEAN UNION AND TURKEY: A CALL FOR ACTION

Together with TÜSIAD and the Berlin Bosphorus Initiative, we recently gathered prominent experts and practitioners in European affairs to exchange views. We were in search of a more positive relationship between the European Union and Turkey. Our aim was to avoid the mistake of letting current political tensions get in the way of longer-term, wise, visionary thinking. This was an attempt to contribute to “geostrategic Europe”. An approach which may avoid the recent past’s mistakes, reinvigorate successful experiences, and better serve common European values and citizens’ interests. At least five points were considered for brainstorming:

- A sound economic partnership
- Replacing political tensions with structural cooperation
- Promoting European values
- Thinking in terms of European integration’s evolution and global challenges
- Open and effective communication with the public; avoiding disinformation and opacity.

Past mistakes?

Since the 1990s, every time the EU engaged Turkey in the European integration, the results have been good for European values and policies; for EU and Turkish citizens.

In fact, the cost of excluding Turkey from European integration is very high for both EU and Turkish citizens. If Turkey had been well-engaged in the EU accession process since the open-ended negotiations began in 2005 – on issues from foreign policy, rule of law, and refugees, to economic growth and energy policy –

today’s picture would be very different. The European Union would be a better global power, and Turkey would be a stronger European democracy showing greater convergence with European values and interests. The results of the EU’s failed Turkey policy are clear.

Problems? Tensions? Conflicts?

Political tensions are real, challenging, and harmful. However, non-constructive policies of disengagement are also part of the problem. They have been stimulated by years of ever weaker partnership, deadlocks, prejudices, and policy errors from both sides. Thus, we cannot find in more negative policies – blocking, suspending, or sanctioning different aspects of the EU-Turkey relationship – a relevant solution to today’s problems. As Albert Einstein would have said: “insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results”.

Then what?

Certainly, this is not the right time to propose and negotiate a new status for Turkey. Membership to the EU is not today’s question. Turkey’s politics and economics are in transition, the European Union has not yet evolved towards a better institutionalized model of differentiated integration; and from Brexit, to the “Biden effect”, to Transatlantic relations, and now post-pandemic global economic challenges, many factors justify not going in that direction at this time. Moreover, without the clear “conditionality” of the accession partnership process, the EU’s transformative power would be diminished. However, there is a need for political courage and leadership to explain to the public that positive steps are not a gift to anyone – they are tools of action to protect European values, standards, and interests.

How to act?

The European Union has at its disposal an effective soft-power algorithm which has consistently proved its effectiveness in the past: accession chapters, especially those covering the supporting pillars of a democracy – fundamental rights, justice, and freedoms (23&24). Already more than a decade ago, the former EU Commissioner Olli Rehn warned: *“We need to apply rigorous conditionality. Experience shows that the better the new member states are prepared, the smoother the EU functions after enlargement. Difficult issues, such as judicial reform and the fight against corruption, must be addressed at an early stage of the negotiations”* (European Parliament, 13 December 2006).

The successful achievement of the EU-Turkey customs union’s modernization process is also an important asset in the EU’s toolbox. By being part of the EU’s customs union on industrial goods, Turkey has already moved to be in compliance with more than half of the single market’s regulations. The next step involves the extension of this model to include services, agriculture, public procurement, and conflict resolution mechanisms. This needs to be a 21st century version partnership, a customs union 5.0 which also covers the European digital single market, the European Green Deal, and more broadly Turkey’s commitment to converge with the EU’s Sustainable Development Goals policies. This would enhance Europe’s global economic competitiveness and Turkey’s trajectory in the European economic and regulatory sphere.

A policy of positive re-engagement with Turkey would also propel the prospect of convergences on various foreign policy fields such as Cyprus, the Northern Mediterranean, the fight against terrorism, refugee crisis management...

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In this context, Institut du Bosphore – as an independent debate platform which promotes open and constructive dialogue on the Franco-Turkish relationship – has launched the publication series « Notes de conjuncture / Actuality Briefings » under the coordination of Didier Billion, Institut du Bosphore Board Member and Deputy Director of IRIS, in order to offer cross-sectional analysis of experts from Turkey and France on key issues in the bilateral agenda. The first edition has been dedicated to the crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, with contributions from Yves Bertoncini, consultant and teacher on European Affairs, and Prof. Dr. Ilhan Uzel, professor of international relations.

With our best regards and wishes for an end of year 2020 in serenity,

Bahadır Kaleağası
President