

# A COMMON FUTURE: TURKEY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION

*Turkey's challenges require a strong and bold leadership that can think smart and act strategically without losing sight of universal values. The Turkish society deserves freedom, democracy and justice and a country where everybody can speak their mind without any fear, where people can demand their rights in front of an effective court, where people are equal regardless of their gender, ethnic or sexual identity. Turkey can only achieve these goals by taking responsibility; blaming others will not solve problems.*

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**T**urkey is a young republic with a young population and a dynamic economy. Turkey has strong and competitive entrepreneurs, two million young people applying to attend a university every year and 50 million people below age 40. Turkey is a member of the international democratic community, a candidate for full membership to the European Union, a strong ally in NATO and a member of the G-20. Turkey has an historic, strong and functioning multi party system. Despite problems in the accession process, Turkey has democracy, rule of law, secularism and social state enshrined in the Constitution. Additionally, the vast majority of the country accepts these values as irreversible.

This is the positive side of the portrait. But examining the other side tells a different story.

Eight members of the parliament are currently in detention. One of them, journalist Mustafa Balbay has been in jail for more than 1400 days and in isolation for more than 400 days. Today more than one hundred journalists, three hundred military officers, five hundred students, and thousands of local politicians and academics are in prison without any guilty verdict. Prime Minister Erdoğan explicitly compared an unpublished book to a bomb, the Interior Minister declared that writing a poem could be an act of terrorism and although no court decisions have been yet rendered on behalf of any journalist in detention, both the EU Minister and the Justice Minister have announced that journalist are not under custody because of their “journalistic activities” but because of other crimes.<sup>1</sup>

The government exerts autocratic pressure on the media, unions, civil society, and every segment of the country. A typical example occurred in the debate for a proposal about the education system. The government closed every door to a pluralistic, transparent, democratic debate and pushed the law through the parliament. Instead of targeting a modern, democratic education, the prime minister has expressed the goal of raising a religious youth.

The basic values of society are under threat. Rule of law, freedom of speech, and gender equality are diminishing. Despite all of this, Turkey presses on with a stale EU accession process.

### ***The European Angle and Challenges on the Road ahead***

The latest European Parliament report adopted on 29th March 2012 underlines some examples of the challenges to democracy that Turkey has to face. If the citizenship ignores these problems, the future and fate of the nation will be uncertain.

<sup>1</sup> “The Minister of Justice Sadullah Ergin: You should internalize freedom of faith”, *AKP web site*, <http://www.akparti.org.tr/site/haberler/inanc-ozgurlugunu-icsellestirmelisiniz/16634>

The European Parliament stresses the need for reform of the judicial system and “Reiterates its concern that judicial procedures have still not been sufficiently improved as regards their efficiency and rules to ensure the right to a fair and expeditious trial, reiterates its serious concern at the excessively long periods of pre-trial detention, which can currently go up to ten years and become *de facto* punishment without a trial.”<sup>2</sup>

The world now more than ever is interdependent racked with enormous change. Internet and information technologies empower people, create new opportunities for the global economy and stability and finally, diminish prejudices among nations thus moving them away from hatred and hostility. As the recent events of the Arab Spring demonstrate, when these opportunities and demands for freedom unite, revolutionary changes happen. Today all across the globe, people are much more demanding of a democratic and transparent system where the State is pluralistic and rule of law prevails. In order to be a strong force in this world, change is inevitable for Turkey also.

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At the Swedish Social Democratic Party conference in 1975 legendary social democratic leader Olof Palme said “for us democracy is a question of human dignity.”<sup>3</sup> To protect human dignity and freedom, Turkey must reform the state in a progressive way. The Republican People’s Party (CHP) strives for a secular, democratic country where the rule of law is guaranteed. CHP also stands for a welfare state which protects the “less fortunate” of society.

There is an opportunity posed by the EU negotiation process for Turkey to fulfil these demands and be a part of the free, democratic world. To change the daily life of the nation, to be a part of a stable and secure market and to protect the freedom in the country, Turkey’s ill-functioning regulations must reform along the standards of the European Union.

CHP’s commitment to EU membership remains solid. For the first time in the Republic’s history, elected civilians have the opportunity to draft a new Constitution. CHP aspires to the following priorities for the new Constitution:

<sup>2</sup> European Parliament Resolution of 29 March 2012 on the 2011 Progress Report on Turkey (2011/2889(RSP)), *European Parliament*, <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=TA&language=EN&reference=P7-TA-2012-116>

<sup>3</sup> Olof Palme from a speech at the Social Democratic party conference 1975, *The Palme Center Online Academy*, <http://palmecenter.contento.se/opctraining/>

- To protect the principles of a democratic society like secularism, welfare state, rule of law,
- Gender equality and equal representation in the parliament and in the state offices,
- Active democracy, and abolition of the limitations against the freedom of expression, media freedom, rights of peaceful assembly
- To add a non-discrimination principle to the Constitution and construct an independent institution that will monitor the acts of discrimination in the state and daily life,
- To abolish the Council of Higher Education (YÖK) and open the way to freedom in universities,
- An effective checks and balances system,
- Transparent and accountable state governance.

But alongside the new Constitution, Turkey also needs new laws and regulations in order to be a functioning democracy and to join the EU.

The Statute of the Council of Europe, dated 1949, explicitly states “Every member of the Council of Europe must accept the principles of the rule of law.” Rule of law is a basic value of any democratic society and without this principle no state can protect freedom, justice and equality in the society. Turkey needs to change its system in a way that will increase transparency, efficiency and independence of the judiciary. The composition of the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK) must be changed and the government must be removed from judicial administration.

Rule of law is important but not enough. For a transparent and accountable government, a society also needs personal liberties, freedom of speech and media freedom. Turkey must have regulations to protect these basic rights.

In order to achieve a better democracy Turkey also needs a better political system. Reforming the code of political parties and the election system is as important as the Constitutional change. Under the current political party regime and the electoral system Turkey has one-man leadership in parties and a threshold in general elections that diminishes fair competition in politics. The very high electoral threshold of 10 percent should be removed and a whole new political system must be constructed. Turkey needs a democratic, participatory and pluralistic political system in which every member of the party can vote to elect their representatives and at the same time every eligible member can freely run for office. The political system must involve every fraction of the society. Only then will there exist a more democratic society.

## ***Turkey's Future is with the European Union***

Due to the approach ridden with double standards among some EU countries and the unwillingness of the Turkish government, the negotiation process is frozen. Still, with the “positive agenda” of Mr Stefan Füle, the EU Commissioner responsible for enlargement and European neighborhood policy, Turkey has room to carry out reforms and take necessary steps to inject its EU accession process with new momentum.

Turkey-EU relations need to be reformed in a way that ensures that Turkey continues to change in the direction of EU standards while at the same time contributes to the multi-culturalism of the EU. In this respect, the “EU 2020 agenda for growth” also opens new opportunities for Turkey because both economies have a great potential to benefit from cooperation.

A democratic Turkey which is a part of the Union will also be a guarantee for a more powerful Europe and a stable Middle East. In this time of change, a stable, democratic Turkey could have a huge impact in the region and affect the ongoing change in the direction of democracy.

Turkey is a unique political example in the region and in the world. However, in an increasingly more competitive world stage it needs much better governance to reach its full potential. The Turkish society is young, increasingly better educated and dynamic. Turkey also has a lot of challenges ahead that it needs to address without any further delay. These challenges cannot be overcome by letting private political agendas takeover the political discourse. These challenges require a strong and bold leadership that can think smart and act strategically without losing sight of universal values. The Turkish society deserves freedom, democracy and justice and a country where everybody can speak their mind without any fear, where people can demand their rights in front of an effective court, where people are equal regardless of their gender, ethnic or sexual identity. Turkey can only achieve these goals by taking responsibility; blaming others will not solve problems.

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Either Turkey will realize its demographic advantage and potential to develop necessary democratic institutions that ensure pluralistic, representative and transparent governance, or Turkey will fall into a trap where the government becomes

increasingly oppressive in response to the pressure from changing demographics and changes both at home and in the region.

This is the challenge the Turkey faces. If Turkey meets the challenge with a new way of thinking, then Turkey can also be a force to renew Europe by contributing to the ideals of a just world, a fair economy, and active democracy across the continent.