

Dear... (*according to attendance*)

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to speak here at this conference on (*state the subject*).

I started working on Turkey three and a half years ago. Turkey of 2006 was a very different country to that at the beginning of this century. This came about after a wave of reforms that allowed the opening of accession negotiations in 2005.

In the same vein, Turkey of today is very different to the country of four years ago. The Turkish society has started to address openly a number of issues considered sometime ago as highly sensitive and, indeed, taboos. Be it on the "deep state", civil-military relations, the Kurdish issue, Turkish-Armenian relations, freedom of expression, cultural diversity, views unthinkable not so long ago, are exchanged in the public sphere and rank high on the political agenda.

This is demonstrated for instance by the "democratic opening" initiative, which the government launched over last summer. We have also witnessed recently one of the most significant diplomatic breakthroughs of the past decades in Southern Caucasus, namely the signature between Turkey and Armenia of protocols by which both countries commit to normalise their relations. This is an important step, which the EU welcomes as a contribution to stability and peace in the region.

We are now looking forward to a swift ratification of these texts. Disagreements will have to be discussed and settled through dialogue. In any case, this development is another sign that Turkey is becoming more

assertive, confirming its strong potential as a pole of stability in one of the most unstable regions of the world.

Another spectacular development, which nobody would have imagined a few years ago, is the so-called Ergenekon case, followed by the also so-called Cage and Sledgehammer cases. For the first time in modern Turkish history, suspects who have been, or are working for the state, including military officers, have to respond to charges as serious as attempting to overthrow the government and instigate armed riots.

These cases are a unique opportunity for Turkey to strengthen confidence in the proper functioning of its democratic institutions and the rule of law. But precisely because they are so important for the rule of law and the proper functioning of the state, it is crucial that the trial be conducted in an exemplary manner, with the sole aim of disclosing the truth, and in full respect of the rights of the defendants.

More recently, the EMASYA protocol was cancelled. This protocol allowed the Army to intervene without authorisation in case of security threats. This is a landmark achievement in civil-military relations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Turkish society has become over the years more confident and more aware of its rights. In many ways, it has demonstrated a democratic maturity and has gained ownership of a number of EU related reforms, which it sees largely as assets rather than constraints to improve the rights and living standards of the Turkish people.

Yet, a lot remains to be done. I will not list here all the areas which require improvements. The latest progress report of the Commission, adopted in October last year, provides a comprehensive overview of what was achieved but, also, what remains to be done to meet fully all accession criteria.

The issues at stake are serious, as they concern, still and again, fundamental rights. For instance, while there have been far fewer prosecutions under the revised article 301 of the Turkish criminal code than a few years ago, intellectuals still continue to be scrutinised and sometimes prosecuted for peacefully expressed opinions. A number of other provisions of the criminal code, or of the anti-terror law, are used to restrict freedom of expression in practice. Legal uncertainties and pressures affect equally freedom of the press in practice, as shown by the tax fine against the Doğan group.

In a similar vein, perpetrators of torture and ill-treatment still benefit from impunity, despite the ambitious "zero tolerance policy" launched by the government several years ago. This gives the unpleasant impression of '*déjà-vu*' from year to year.

At the same time, however, we see the willingness of the government to reinvigorate reforms in a difficult political environment. The broad consultation which started over last summer, known as "democratic opening", gives rise to hope. As such, the method used and the debate it triggered are encouraging and the EU can only invite the Turkish authorities to continue this discussion and translate it into concrete acts. Recently, the submission to parliament of a draft law setting up an

independent human rights institution and the adoption of the much-awaited anti-corruption strategy are also promising.

As regards accession negotiations, the opening of the important Environment chapter last December is an encouraging development, bringing the number of open chapters to twelve. We are hopeful that we will open more chapters this year. These include the chapters on public procurement, competition, food safety and social policy. However, this will require additional efforts from Turkey in order to be able to fulfil the demanding benchmarks. In the medium term, however, if things do not change, we face the risk of not being able to continue opening negotiating chapters.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We all know also that the prospect of accession to the European Union stimulated the energy of men and women who promoted reforms for the good of their country, providing a roadmap for progress.

Based on our experience with all candidate countries, we continue to believe strongly that the EU perspective is a powerful stimulus for change, provided, however, that this perspective remains clear and credible.

At the same time, the core principle of any accession negotiation is that progress in reforms determines progress in negotiations. The slowdown of reforms in Turkey since 2005 has been a serious handicap in the negotiations. A serious re-launch of reforms, addressing all critical areas, will become a powerful asset in the process that will convince people in

the EU that Turkey is serious about human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Constitutional reform remains a priority for further democratisation of Turkey, including the reform of the judiciary, the civilian oversight of the military, the establishment of the Ombudsman, the functioning of political parties and the extension of trade union rights.

If the encouraging efforts we have witnessed in the last year continue to develop, Turkey will re-create a virtuous circle of the same magnitude as the one which led to the start of accession negotiations in 2005. This is an issue of political will. It is about grasping the opportunities when they present themselves and focusing on what is really at stake: Turkey's integration into the European Union as a full member.

Speaking of opportunities, there is one which, definitely, no one can afford to miss: a comprehensive settlement of the Cyprus issue. It is time to turn to the future and to look for a pragmatic solution, within the UN framework, in accordance with the relevant UN Security Council resolutions and in line with the principles on which the Union is founded. The settlement of the Cyprus issue will also give an enormous boost to accession negotiations. In the same vein, and as the Council has stated, *Turkey needs to commit unequivocally to good neighbourly relations and to the peaceful settlement of disputes in accordance with the UN Charter, having recourse, if necessary, to the International Court of Justice.*

Ladies and gentlemen,

Since the beginning of this century we have had the privilege to witness the deep changes the Turkish people are prepared to engage in when a

clear European roadmap is provided. We also saw the same people taking ownership of those reforms, not necessarily to meet benchmarks and criteria, but simply because these reforms are needed anyway to take on the challenges of this century, for the good of their country. These two processes of reforms and EU accession are destined to proceed together. They may move on at times in parallel, they may not follow always the same speed, but they will inevitably intertwine and - inch' Allah - eventually anchor Turkey firmly into the European Union and, thus, consolidate its democracy.

Thank you very much for your attention.