European Commission - Speech

Speech by Commissioner Avramopoulos at Turkey's annual Ambassadors Conference: "Diplomacy: Active on the Ground and at the Table"

Brussels, 8 August 2019

[check against delivery]

Ankara, 8th of August

Dear Minister Çavuşoğlu,
Dear Friend,
Dear Ambassadors of the Turkish Republic,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would first like to thank Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu for the honour of inviting me to address this year's Ambassadors Conference.

Today, I feel that I am here among kindred spirits. As you know, I have also been your colleague, having served as a Greek Diplomat for many years but also as a Greek politician, dealing with highly sensitive issues related to international relations and public diplomacy.

I therefore also share with you the particular mode of diplomatic communication, allowing us to have a continuous and interactive relationship, which must above all be sincere and honest in order to be useful and substantial.

One might say of course, that in diplomacy, there is no room for honesty and sincerity.

From my experience, I can tell you that diplomacy is only effective if it is frank, even if this is not necessarily convenient nor pleasant. That is why I am going to be open and frank with you.

Dear Ambassadors,

We gather here in a place and country, located geopolitically, historically and culturally at the crossroads of east and west, north and south.

Modern Turkey is not only a land and sea-bridge linking south-eastern-most Europe with south-western-most Asia.

It is also a political, economical and cultural gateway between two continents: a historical highway around which empires and civilisations flourished, great wars were fought, and international diplomacy thrived.

In today's day and age, when our societies and our economies are becoming ever more interconnected, our citizens can feel what is happening across the world in real time, as if it is happening in their neighbourhood.

The global challenges we face are common and shared.

In this context, I believe that cooperation is the only way forward for the betterment of our world.

In diplomacy, it is not possible to achieve anything by being afraid of the difficulties.

All diplomatic structures across the world are very efficient in presenting the problems and very rarely in proposing breakthrough policies.

Nowadays, this attitude has started changing.

While being always cognizant and respectful to our history, we should never be afraid to overcome it.

It is only by looking at the future, having drawn the lessons of history, that we can move forward and avoid repeating our mistakes.

And I am thinking about the many challenges that we face today around the globe, which are common, which straddle seas and continents, and which negate all borders such as climate change,

mass movements of people, cyber and hybrid threats or terrorism.

The significance of diplomacy and multilateralism has never been greater.

In these turbulent time, the European Union remains a unique peace project in the history of mankind, built on these very foundations of multilateralism, and always investing in cooperation and partnerships to minimise our common challenges, and maximise our shared opportunities.

In this context, Turkey is a candidate Country, an indispensable partner and will always be a strategically important neighbour for the European Union.

This is a bond which is made inevitable by geography. It is a bond cemented by history.

And a bond which will always be strengthened by our mutual interests.

That is why Turkey, as a key regional power, should always keep its head turned towards Europe.

Over the past five years as EU Commissioner, I experienced first-hand the importance of the EU-Turkey political and diplomatic cooperation, and I have seen the difficulties coming from misconceptions, prejudices, and sometimes, the sclerotic attitude.

And to be frank with you, this, from both sides.

Nevertheless, a historic opportunity is offered to us to test our will, to establish a truthful cooperation, beyond and above the hurdles and the obstacles.

First, the management of migratory flows coming from Syria but also Afghanistan or elsewhere has required joint measures that have yielded results in Turkey and in Europe.

The EU-Turkey Statement is a clear proof that when two sides wish to work together, tangible results can be achieved.

Together, we have delivered on what is most important: curbing criminal smuggling networks and saving lives.

I would like to commend Turkey for hosting more than 3,6 million refugees fulfilling its humanitarian endeavour.

I know this is a huge challenge for your country.

I can assure you that the European Union stands by Turkey to manage it and will continue to do so.

The facility for refugees in Turkey has allowed us to ensure that:

- 1,6 million people receive the Emergency Social Safety Net support to cover basic needs;

- 500,000 children attend school

and their families receive support through the Conditional Cash Transfer for Education programme;

- and that 176 schools have been constructed.

This facility will continue to support projects for refugees in Turkey in the coming years.

To relieve countries hosting large population of refugees, such as Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon

but also countries in Africa, the European Union has also increased significantly its resettlement efforts.

More than 60 000 persons have already been resettled to Europe in the last four years.

We will continue. I know that Turkey continues to be confronted with heavy migratory challenges.

That is why our close cooperation must and will continue. We live in an era of human mobility.

Right now more than 67,7 million people are displaced, they are on the move and they are looking for a better life.

When the crisis peaked in Europe in the summer 2015, Europe was taken by surprise and was not prepared. Now, we are not where we were.

Five years later, we have made significant progress to better manage migratory flows.

We strengthened the management of our external borders.

We now have a functioning European Border and Coast Guard that will soon have at its disposal a standing corps of 10 000 border guards.

We stepped up our fight against the smugglers inside and outside Europe, by reinforcing Europol

and investing in our relationships with strategic partners, like Turkey and others.

We have increased our support to all countries along the migratory route towards Europe to address the root causes of migration, and to ensure that people on the move receive assistance closer to their home.

Dear all, In a globalized and interconnected world today, geopolitical instabilities and changes also require more cooperation to respond to security threats.

Europe, the United States, Africa, the Middle East and South-East Asia have suffered from terrorism in the last decade.

Turkey and its citizens have also been hit several times in the course of only a few years. Terrorism is a threat that does not stop at any national borders. Terrorism does not have one single face.

The Christchurch attack in New Zealand has demonstrated the scale and impact of right-wing supremacist violent ideology. Terrorism continues to threaten us all, across nations, borders or religions.

Unfortunately, divisive rhetoric only contributes to deepening the gap between our societies.

Instead we should all work to build bridges and foster mutual understanding, and most importantly: mutual cultural respect.

It is this lack of cultural understanding that made some believe in the inevitable "Clash of Civilisations". What Huntington and others two decades ago, claimed was the one, over-arching, underlying cause of all conflicts – the unavoidable tensions between cultures. I personally do not believe that this has ever happened, or that it will ever happen.

Simplistic theories of this type do not explain the causes of radicalisation, the roots of regional conflicts or the drivers of human displacement. Extremism is not civilisational.

On the contrary, the tragedies we experienced from terrorism, demonstrate that the world can come closer beyond and above cultural differences, building a strong alliance against terrorism, globally.

Tackling the threat requires joint work – concerted international action at bilateral, regional and multilateral levels, close cooperation with the private sector and political commitment to overcome national silos.

It requires common understanding and most importantly mutual trust.

The United Nations, the G7 and G20 are roofs under which our multilateral cooperation on security can take root and flourish.

Take the example of the foreign terrorist fighters that travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight with Daesh.

Because of its geographical proximity, Turkey is the most important country in the whole region to work with, in order to address the problem and neutralise developing threats.

That is why we insisted on reinforcing our cooperation with Turkey in this area further, proposing the exchange of liaison officers and an international agreement between Europol and Turkey to allow far-reaching information exchanges.

Cooperation of this kind can become a global model – both at regional and multilateral level

– for joined-up work to deal with security challenges in a concerted manner.

Dear Ambassadors,

With the rise of populism and nationalism today, there is a tendency to turn inward, to return to the logic of isolationism, and to write off multilateralism as a thing of the past.

In my view this logic is deeply flawed. We need to continue learning from our shared history.

The new reality of the 21st century demands cooperation with strong and visionary leadership but also acceptance of the responsibilities for the world of tomorrow.

The challenges we face should only bring us closer together, because they are common and they will only intensify in the future. The truth is that we all need each other.

A shared future for Turkey and Europe and good political, economic, and security relations are beneficial for all of us.

Even during challenging times, we have and we are always striving to find the best possible solutions in order to build together an environment of security and stability that directly contributes to the betterment of the lives of citizens and the functioning and resilience of democracy, economic growth and prosperity.

As European Commissioner, I feel confident that in the last five years, we have proven that a more open, cooperative and peaceful world order is achievable.

Still there is a lot to do. We need more open cooperation, both globally and between citizens, governments, and all different actors. We cannot disregard the efforts and vision of the generation in the aftermath of the Second World War.

We should not forget that out of the ashes of the world wars, peace and prosperity were born. We should not take all these achievements for granted. We need to remain vigilant. Peace and prosperity can only exist if we have a sustainable home to live in.

It is now key that we avoid the failures of the past, learn from them and preserve our values with a deep sense of responsibility, always bearing in mind the interests of citizens.

The future lies to a great extent in our hands.

We all need to work together in this common effort, on a values-based approach, as friends and neighbours.

Even though strategic choices and decisions are taken by national governments, as should be the case politically speaking, the role of the Diplomatic Service and of senior diplomats in this respect is essential.

Your opinions and counsels, based always on solid facts, your better knowledge of the global landscape and, of course, your commitment to duty can be crucial inputs to national policy,

far and beyond the lurking inward-looking nationalism.

With the passage of time, diplomats, while they always remain patriots, evolve into global citizens.

They have a better and deeper knowledge of other nations and peoples, and the skills needed to analyse the geopolitical context.

My goal in speaking to you here today is to contribute to opening new avenues of mutual understanding and respect, and to open doors for fresh ideas.

Turkey and Europe are inevitably bound to each other by geography, history and shared interests.

It is important that Turkey remains on a stable path towards Europe.

Our wider neighbourhood can and should become a model by evolving into a geopolitical landscape of peace, stability, security and development for all South-eastern European citizens.

I can assure you that we – and I personally – will continue to work tirelessly to nurture and strengthen this relationship, supporting your efforts towards a more prosperous future that seeks greater development, stability and peace for all.

Dear Ambassadors,

This is the first time that this important Forum, hears the thoughts of a European Commissioner, who is at the same time, a Greek politician.

By now, we know each other quite well. I belong to those that always believed, and still believe strongly in the Greek-Turkish rapprochement – walking always in the footsteps of great visionary leaders, like Venizelos and Ataturk.

Through all these years, I have always strived to create the conditions for mutual understanding and trust between Greece and Turkey, which can support the European perspective of Turkey, and the deepening of the EU-Turkey relationship across all fields.

I said at the beginning that I intended to express my thoughts in frankness and honesty. You should be sure that this is what I am doing.

Times have changed.

Revolutionary changes happened and transformed the landscape of the global economy, the human mobility, and the open world of media and the internet, where truth and lies nowadays intersect.

There is no longer place for the stereotypes we inherited from the past.

Our broader neighbourhood, the theatre of so many conflicts and bitter confrontations over the centuries, always had nationalism as its greatest threat.

Cooperation in this neighbourhood now requires a deep rethinking, and bold, far-reaching changes.

Above all, our region needs our commitment and attentiveness to a future that we are called upon to build together based principally on the respect of international law.

International law is the guardian angel for peaceful coexistence. International law is the instrument for international cooperation.

International law is the gospel that should define the ethical and practical relations between countries.

We need a new diplomatic architecture, without the historical prejudices of the past, and with bold initiatives to settle unresolved issues – which as long as they exist, will hold us hostage of the past.

Over and above the stratagems of states, and the parochial visions of some politicians, let us hear the voices of our citizens, that in this uncertain, volatile, worrying and in many ways dangerous environment ask rightly for security, certainty, peace and respect to their right to life.

Diplomats, much more than other delegates of the so-called "deep state", are the first to realise this.

Their osmosis with global affairs makes them – makes You – the most credible advisors of political leaders and democratically elected governments, so that final choices and decisions have – as I said earlier – our common future as their point of reference.

Our changing times require us to respect not to fear history. Not to be dependent on our past either.

This is, after all, the deeper essence of the concept of LEADERSHIP: being ahead of developments, looking at the big picture, and daring to confront headfirst anything that would be an obstacle or a problem, which are usually produced by the familiar ailment of states, a disease that we qualify in other words as "state sclerosis".

In addition to what I have stressed at the beginning of my intervention, and although I am not representing my country here today, let me stress another point on the relation between Greece and Turkey.

I believe that the newly elected prime minister of Greece, Kyriacos Mitsotakis, a leader with vision,

together with the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, a leader with whom I have established a long-lasting strong and trustful relationship since the time we were respectively mayors of Athens and Istanbul, are both strong politicians.

They have the power to take breakthrough and bold decisions to lead our countries into a new era of friendship, good neighbourly relations and share a common vision for our great countries.

Dear Minister,
my dear friend,

I understand gatherings like this one are a good occasions for learning and exchanging.

Besides their institutional nature, let them become the cradle for the fostering of fresh ideas, and the presentation of responsible analysis, to cultivate better and deeper understating of the global reality.

An approach that can serve practically, not only the national interests but also the vision and aspirations of people and citizens, for a better more resilient more creative and solidary world.

Diplomacy remains the field of first and last resort to address very important international and national issues, avoid frictions and unthinkable developments.

It is the area where politicians and diplomats can work together above and beyond silos.

I express again my thanks for your hospitality and I wish all ambassadors here present and all the diplomatic services to live this fantastic professional experience and adventure with inspiration, Knowledge and a deep sense of responsibility and duty under the moto that "we can be at the same time patriots and citizens of the world" to paraphrase Socrates and Confucius.

Thank you for your attention.