“Europe and Turkey – Partners in difficult times”

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Anyone who is in the habit of tuning in to the many political talk shows on German television will have happened across quite a few discussions about Turkey recently. Often – and I know this from my own personal experience – such discussions can become quite heated, and sooner or later they hit on the question of whether Turkey is actually a European country.

I find this discussion problematic for several reasons.

Firstly, the European Union already answered this question in principle back in 1999, when its Member States unanimously decided that accession negotiations could be started with Turkey. Only European countries – European in the geographical sense – can accede to the

EU

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Secondly, talking about this question does not get us anywhere at all if we want to determine what common policies the

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and Turkey should pursue.

To my mind, “European” is far more than a mere geographical term. Above all, being “European” means regarding oneself as part of a community of shared values, being passionately committed to democracy and the rule of law, and setting aside national interests for the benefit of a great joint project. Admittedly, this interpretation may sound a little euphoric, and it derives, no doubt, from my passion for the European Union and for European politics. But it does point to the substance of what lies behind the current strains in relations between our countries.

When it comes down to it, the question is where Turkey stands as far as values are concerned. It has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1949 and of

NATO

since 1952, and a CSCE – now

OSCE

– participating State since 1973. Turkey has been an

EU

candidate State since 2005. I believe that says it all: with its membership of these organisations, all founded on the basis of shared values, Turkey has formulated its ambitions.

But these very organisations – for example the Council of Europe and the

OSCE

– have recently made repeated criticisms of Turkey. In an opinion dated March 2017, the Council of Europe expressed fears that Turkey's new constitution did not have enough checks and balances to safeguard against the country becoming an authoritarian regime.

The

OSCE

Representative on Freedom of the Media, long a colleague and friend of mine, Harlem Désir, has criticised the state of freedom of the press in Turkey at least half a dozen times since he assumed office in July 2017. I wish Turkey would give more of a sign that it is taking this criticism seriously and tackling it.

The most difficult, but at the same time the key aspect of the European-Turkish partnership, is the economic relationship between the European Union and Turkey. There is no question that the

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and Turkey are close partners. The economic figures make this particularly clear: the

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is by far Turkey's most important trading partner. Conversely, Turkey was the

EU's

fifth largest trading partner in 2017. It goes without saying that both sides are keen to preserve and expand these relations.

However, the

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and Turkey would also do well to work together because there are a large number of challenges which we can only resolve together. These include the fight against terrorism. Many Germans did not realise until January 2017, when the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin was illuminated in the colours of the Turkish flag to remember the victims of the dreadful attack on the Reina nightclub in Istanbul, that Turkey is the European country with by far the most victims of terror attacks. If we are to guarantee our citizens' safety and defend our model of society against the madness of blinded terrorists, then we need to work together. On that we firmly agree.

Similarly, we can tackle displacement and migration movements only if we work together. There are now more than three and a half million refugees registered in Turkey. Your country is thus making an overwhelming contribution towards resolving the humanitarian crisis triggered by the brutal conflict in Syria.

We need to share these burdens; it cannot be left up to individual countries to shoulder them. The

EU

should therefore make available a further three billion euros for supplies for refugees in Turkey.

We also have to combat the main reasons why people flee or are displaced. Our prime aim here is to ensure that peace is finally restored in Syria. Turkey has a crucial role to play as a bridge builder in its double function as

NATO

member state and a partner in the Astana Group along with Russia and Iran. Nobody doubts that, as one of Syria's neighbours, Turkey has a legitimate and pressing interest in the resolution of the conflict.

However, I have to point out in this connection that the offensive in Afrin was deeply disquieting to us in Germany – and has provoked heated debates. We don't find the arguments put forward for the military operation convincing.

We would have wished a close friend and

NATO

ally to consult more closely with us and to address the concerns expressed. It’s unfortunate that in the current situation the Turkish army’s operation in Afrin limits our scope for finding a political solution to the conflict.

Even in difficult times, it’s important to keep channels of communication open despite all differences. This is the reason for my visit. Afterwards, I will be travelling on to Ankara where I will meet my counterpart, Minister for

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Affairs Ömer Çelik. It was good and right that President Erdoğan met the heads of the

EU

institutions for talks in Varna, Bulgaria, at the end of March.

However, we shouldn’t delude ourselves:

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Turkish relations are currently in a bad way. This becomes especially evident when we look at the most recent country report drawn up by the European Commission. It highlights massive setbacks in the spheres of democracy and the rule of law.

When reading the report, it becomes clear that things are heading in the completely wrong direction at the moment – not only is Turkey no longer moving closer to the

EU

at present, it is actually taking major steps away from it in political terms. This stands in contrast to the commitment to Europe and European integration expressed on repeated occasions by the Turkish Government. It’s good that the Turkish Government holds fast to this goal. Unfortunately, however, its political actions often point in a completely different direction.

At times, we hear voices from your country claiming that criticism of Turkey’s policy is evidence of hostility towards Turkey or even Islamophobia. It is also sometimes said that the rest of the world doesn’t want to see a strong Turkey. I cannot understand this rhetoric and can only reiterate that wanting to move closer to the

EU

means wanting to share its values and fundamental principles. I – and I'm speaking on behalf of the entire German Government when I say this – want to see a strong Turkey fully committed to European values.

The

EU

is more than an economic community. First and foremost, it's a union of values. Our fundamental values – democracy and pluralism, the separation of powers and freedom of opinion – are not up for negotiation. A functioning rule of law system, independent courts which citizens can trust, fair trials and respect for human rights are the very foundation of Europe. Without freedom of opinion or freedom of the press, this foundation will begin to crumble away. If they are absent, the quality of public debate and thus also the competition to find the best political ideas will suffer. Sooner or later, this inevitably leads to democracy itself being undermined. Unfortunately, the large number of journalists and academics detained shows that this process has already reached a dangerous stage in Turkey.

In the light of developments in Turkey, the question as to whether it is even still right to conduct accession negotiations is frequently raised in Germany and the

EU

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must not close the door. I know from many conversations with citizens of your country that the

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is an important political anchor, indeed a beacon of hope, for many people. They regard it as an effective organisation which combines economic interests and social progress with high standards in democracy and the rule of law.

At the same time, however, the accession process will, in reality, remain on ice until the political situation in Turkey changes. That also means that the longer the current situation continues, the less the accession process would appear to be the right political instrument to reconcile to the interests and expectations of both sides when it comes to partnership. We therefore also have to consider how we can improve cooperation and make it fit for the future.

I'm thinking here of the modernisation of the customs union and the lifting of the visa requirement for Turkish citizens who want to travel to the Schengen area. We have

formulated clear agreements as well as expectations on this and – with regard to easing visa requirements very concrete – criteria. Without positive steps, without a change of course on the rule of law, any progress in these two areas would be difficult to justify to almost anyone in the

EU

. I say this as a directly elected member of the Bundestag who has to answer very critical questions about Turkey during conversations with citizens.

Time and again, I'm confronted with demands that the financial aid and pre accession assistance granted to Turkey as an

EU

candidate country be scrapped. The German Government shouldn't make any decisions which bring short term applause on the domestic front but damage our long term interests. Rather, we should use the pre accession assistance wisely and in a targeted fashion so that it is spent responsibly in the interest of people both here and in the

EU

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I'm especially keen for funds to be allocated to university and youth exchanges, in programmes like Erasmus. I'm glad that funding for this will be doubled in the new

EU

budget.

For the greatest potential of

EU

Turkey relations lies in their boundless wealth of contacts and friendships between our civil societies. As young people, you have a crucial role to play in this. Many of you have already been to the European Union and some of you have friends and relatives there whom you visit on a regular basis. When I talk to young Turks, I'm often struck by the fact that young people in Turkey and the

EU

have the same questions and hopes.

I’m delighted that the number of Turkish Erasmus students has risen. In the 2016/17 academic year, there were almost 3700. Unfortunately, there’s a less positive trend in the opposite direction: in 2016/17 the number of

EU

students here in Turkey fell to 3300.

Many more students should be travelling in both directions. For our experience in Europe has taught us that getting to know each other and engaging with others are the best ways to tackle hate, fear and stereotypes. For as Mark Twain once said: “Travel is fatal to prejudice!” Let’s embark on this fresh start together!

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