

Turkish Prime Minister: "We have fulfilled our promises"

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Istanbul, Turkey – Turkey has met its obligations as it pursues negotiations for membership in the European Union, the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, told participants in the closing session of the World Economic Forum in Turkey. At a summit next month in Brussels, EU leaders will assess the progress of the talks, which have been hampered by the issue of Cyprus and Turkey's limits on the access of ships from the divided island to Turkish ports. "We have fulfilled whatever promises we made," Erdogan said. He added: "We know there are difficulties to come. But we are continuing to move forward with great patience. The responsibility falls more on the EU than on Turkey. We are looking for political common sense." Approximately 400 business, government and civil society leaders from more than 40 countries participated in the two-day World Economic Forum in Turkey, the second such meeting since 1998.

Erdogan said that Turkey has implemented a range of economic, political and social reforms in an effort to meet EU requirements. The problems have been in the implementation of the new laws, he said. "This is a change of mentality. It is not something that happens overnight." While he acknowledged that public support for EU accession has fallen sharply among Turkish people, Erdogan insisted that "our people want to see Turkey as a free and prosperous partner of the free world. This is what Turkey deserves. But sometimes some wrong and unjust views from the EU have had an impact on public opinion. The EU must understand this." He stressed that Turkey's joining the EU would benefit both sides and contribute to the peace and prosperity of the world. "It will demonstrate that an alliance of civilizations is possible," the prime minister said. In addition, Turkey's joining would help the EU address key problems such as the continent's population deficit and its energy security.

Two World Economic Forum Young Global Leaders bolstered Erdogan's argument. "If Turkey were not to join the EU, it would weaken the union," said Mabel van Oranje, Director, EU Affairs, Open Society Institute, United Kingdom. "We would all lose out." If Turkey joins Europe, added Mehmet Gürcan Daimagüler, Honorary Chairman, Liberal Turkish-German Association, Germany, "we would have more democracy in Europe and the world. Europe will lose power without Turkey."

Participants at the World Economic Forum in Turkey agreed that Turkey must stay the course in pursuit of EU membership, while Europe should not let issues such as Cyprus derail what would be a major opportunity for both sides. Turkey had done much to achieve economic and political stability, boost its global competitiveness, and reform its economy and society over the past four years, but it has much more to do. Summarizing the recommendations of participants, which included such measures as the implementation of the new commercial code, the reform of education and the need for greater labour market flexibility, meeting Co-Chair Güler Sabanci, Chairperson and Managing Director, Sabanci Holding, Turkey, observed that "Turkey has to go from rent-seeking structures to profit-seeking structures to continue to increase its competitiveness." In addition, she remarked, "innovation has to be a top priority on our agenda."

Co-Chair Muhtar A. Kent, President, Coca-Cola International, USA, called for wider and closer links between European and Turkish companies. "It's all about the harmonization of cultures and religions which is critical," given that the Middle East region has been marked by increasing instability. It is imperative that European and Turkish leaders work to change the negative perceptions people in Europe have about the consequences of Turkey's membership in the EU, Kent advised.

The enormous progress that Turkey has achieved has led to a new optimism and self confidence, said Victor Halberstadt, Professor of Public Economics, Leiden University, Netherlands, also a meeting Co-Chair. "My impression is that all this is irreversible," he observed. But maintaining that momentum for change will be increasingly difficult. Turkey, he said, should try to better understand the enormous transformation that Europe is undergoing. "We are all in this process together," Halberstadt noted. Indeed, gaining membership in the EU has always been an arduous process. "It requires patience and understanding and recognition of the difficulties," meeting Co-Chair Peter D. Sutherland, Chairman, Goldman Sachs International, United Kingdom, and a Member of the Foundation Board of the World Economic Forum, agreed. Many Europeans feel threatened and have turned intolerant, he said. Turkey's accession to the EU is therefore all the more important. "The alliance of civilizations is the antidote to the clash of civilizations," Sutherland concluded. "Turkey is not a supplicant. It is a

major player in the world in which we live. We are not dealing with easy issues. Neither Europe nor Turkey will see this as a dialogue of constant remonstrance but it should be a dialogue of constant reconciliation."

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