

Turkey and the EU must stand together for a better future

Ömer Çelik | Turkish Minister for European Union Affairs and Chief Negotiator for Turkish Accession to the European Union | @omerrcelik 

The winds of change sweeping over the European continent have made the debates about the EU's current situation and future more relevant and essential than ever. As the Union struggles to restructure itself following the Brexit referendum, the biggest challenge is to reaffirm its legitimacy for its citizens.

In this respect, the European Commission's recent White Paper on the future of the EU, published in March, is a considerable step forwards to contemplating how the Union can evolve to better address the needs of its citizens and how a common future can be built. By setting out different scenarios for the European project's future, the Commission has paved the way for an open discussion on the possible transformation of the integration model and, more importantly, confirmed its commitment to a united and strong Europe.

As a candidate and negotiating country, Turkey is closely following these developments and debates, since they are intimately related to its own future. European history cannot be understood without Turkey. Although not a member of the EU, Turkey has been a European democracy for a century.

With its secular and modern identity, Turkey has historically been one of the most enthusiastic supporters of all the steps taken towards the preservation of peace, democracy and human rights in the world. After the Second World War, its membership of NATO and the Council of Europe and its application to join the then European Economic Community (EEC) were all the result of its commitment to maintaining stability and peace. This is also the main reason why the country aims to be a member of the EU. Therefore, Turkey feels it has the responsibility to follow and contribute to the debates on the future of the EU, while protecting its own values.

It should be made clear that the values the EU represents are universal, developed in response to great suffering and through the political and philosophical approaches of visionary statesmen. The EU is founded on a 'system of values' and it is this success that has made it attractive.

Thus, we regret to observe that in some countries there are developments in which these fundamental values are being eroded.

In the context of Turkish-EU relations, a crossroads has once again been reached. For Turkey, the most important component of the relationship is membership, having been a patient candidate for 30 years. Although accession is supposed to be a technical and structured process, in Turkey's case it has been highly politicised. While coming closer

due to its successful cooperation in the struggle against illegal migration, the attempted coup on 15 July and its aftermath have poisoned the relationship. While what is needed is a greater engagement from the EU, the feeling is that Turkey is being pushed aside.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to look forwards, since the major challenges ahead cannot be faced alone. While the EU has been able to overcome crises in the past, this is no longer possible in today's complex world where challenges are multifaceted and generally originate beyond the Union's borders.

In the fight against terrorism and extremist movements, and in the refugee crisis, Turkey has proved its decisive role as an indispensable partner. In the presence of intensive discussions and high-running tension within the EU on how to distribute the refugee burden, eventually leading to court decisions, it can proudly be said that Turkey has hosted more than three million people for years without any considerable tension in the country.

Moreover, Turkey's struggle against all manner of terrorist organisations has not only contributed to stability in the region but also protected the EU's borders. However, as to the fight against terror, a more vigorous approach in EU Member States' policies is needed.

This is also a period in which the arguments of far-right populist politicians seem to be gaining acceptance. There has been a substantial rise in the number of attacks on followers of different beliefs and religions. Therefore, countering islamophobia, xenophobia and the politics of hate is an essential step not only for the EU but also for the entire world.

Against this backdrop, it is time for everyone to step back and think about the reconstruction of Europe. It is clear that the EU needs a renewed sense of enthusiasm and credibility and a fresh start. It is also evident that such a beginning will require a bolder attitude regarding Turkey, which is more than ready to contribute to this venture as the future of the EU is also its own.