



Turkey's accession negotiations must start

2002 is a critical year for Turkey. Its importance stems not only from the necessity to overcome the country's severe economic crisis, but also from the fact that this will be the decisive year in Turkey's long journey towards European Union membership. The challenge for Turkey is to make clear its own position as a candidate vis à vis the widening and deepening of the EU.

This year is already a landmark year in the history of the EU since it will have to start managing its fourth enlargement. As such, all candidate members are gearing themselves for that momentous process. In its 2001 Regular Reports, the EU indicated that 10 candidates that will possibly close the negotiating chapters in 2002 would be admitted as members by 2004. The decision will be made at the Copenhagen summit of the Union in December. Concerning Bulgaria and Romania, it is expected that the accession process will be finalized in 2007.

All of the 12 countries are currently negotiating with the EU. The negotiation processes of the 10 candidates have lasted 5 years and the widening of the EU will probably be completed in 2007 with the membership of Bulgaria and Romania. Considering this schedule, it is highly reasonable for Turkey to call on the EU for opening the

negotiation process with Turkey as well. We firmly believe that once the negotiations are opened with Turkey the process will end in 5 years time despite the country's bigger size compared with other candidates.

Turkey has had a customs union with the EU since 1996. It adopted the common customs tariffs and the common commercial policy of the EU. The decision for a customs union services is expected to be taken this year. Furthermore, as it was observed in the 2001 Regular Report, by now "Turkey gained greater understanding of the acquis". Consequently, Turkey is without question far more advanced than all candidates prior to the initiation of their negotiations, in most of the major policy areas of the EU.

Coming back to the European Commission's regular report on Turkey, we consider it a positive step that the said document emphasized the importance of the constitutional amendments adopted by the Turkish parliament in November of last year. It deemed this work of Parliament as "a significant step towards strengthening guarantees" in areas such as freedom of expression and association.

On the other hand, the conclusions of the European Council's Laeken Summit held in December 2001

noted that Turkey's prospects for opening negotiations with the EU are now closer. Thereby the European Council identified the main item on Turkey's EU agenda for 2002: the decision by the EU to decide on the date for launching accession negotiations. According to the Summit conclusions, the possibility of opening accession negotiations with Turkey has been explicitly mentioned at the highest levels of the EU. Furthermore, Turkey is now participating in the deliberations of the Convention on the future of Europe on an equal basis with members and other candidates.

The foremost priority for Turkey at the moment is the fulfilment of all the conditions necessary to begin accession negotiations with the EU with minimum delay. Turkey's candidate status as officially recognized at the Helsinki Summit could be of real significance only when Turkey starts accession negotiations. From our perspective, Turkey's accession negotiations with the EU should start by the end of 2002 and Turkey should be provided an accession perspective for 2007.

Besides the timing of accession negotiations, we attach particular importance to the decision to start the screening process. The initiation of the screening process will provide Turkey with a further technical capacity to accelerate its integration process to the EU. Moreover it will give added impetus to the implementation of the reform measures undertaken by the government in political and economic spheres. In this context we find it unfortunate that a number of EU Member States have made the initiation of the screening process a political issue and identified it with accession negotiations. In the Commission's 2001 Regular Report it was stated that "the pre-accession strategy should move into a new, more intense phase, with the detailed scrutiny of Turkey's legislation and preparation for alignment with the acquis". This expression ought to provide sufficient ground for starting the screening process without delay. We consider it unfortunate that government officials in some EU states invoke

a "pre-screening process" that does not have a legal basis in the pre-accession strategy. It is an established fact that there are no pre-conditions to start the screening process and there are no uniform procedures for it in the EU.

The observation that FDI flows to candidates doubled in the 1997-99 period lead us to conclude that, once the negotiations are open and Turkey's European vocation is no longer in doubt, FDI flows into Turkey will also grow exponentially. It is a convincing argument that the prospect of membership in the EU will be the key to sustained stability and welfare in Turkey as it had been in all existing and potential members of the EU.

One cannot deny the significance of a closer forward-looking dialogue supported not only by the public authorities but also by all parties in Turkey-EU relations. Turkey has started undertaking fundamental reforms and needs the European Union's support to sustain and further these reforms. In this respect, it is important that the EU unambiguously include Turkey in its policies, official statements and communication and information initiatives on the enlargement and the future of Europe. It is also imperative that it adopt a constructive and solution-oriented approach to support Turkey's efforts to overcome the problems of integration.

In this era of greater instability caused by the challenges raised by international terrorism, rapid technological transformation stemming from the new economy and information technologies, Turkey's move towards EU membership has acquired greater importance for all of us.

Turkey's path on all fields leads her towards Europe. Forward-looking Ottoman Sultans had already made that choice more than two centuries ago.

The founder of modern Turkey, Kemal Atatürk, most radically reiterated this choice. More than 70% of the Turkish public wish to see Turkey in the European Union. We, at TÜSIAD, pursue that goal persistently and systematically and work very hard to attain it.