



OPENING ADDRESS OF
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PRESIDENT OF THE TÜSİAD BOARD OF DIRECTORS
AT THE 47th GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF TÜSİAD

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Esteemed Chairs, Dear Fellow TÜSİAD Members, Distinguished Guests, Dear Members of the Media,

Welcome to our 47th General Assembly.

Today is the last day of my presidency, which was inaugurated two years ago, and which had its days of glory and days of bitterness. In my inauguration speech delivered from this very desk, I said that "our work is difficult, and not only in Turkey, but all over the world the business community is heading towards hard times." Truly our days was not easy at all.

In this task, I and my Board of Directors, we worked devotedly and did all we could. We have implemented our program completely. We kept our promises. Most importantly, we did not allow daily politics to overtake our essential agenda concerning the future of Turkey. We explained our views and took care that our criticism would be constructive. We acted with a sense of institutional responsibility. We did not lose time on ephemeral daily issues and we focused on what is to be done for a better future for our country; we carried out all indispensable work completely.

Dear Fellow Members,

I would like to repeat it once again: whether we are aware or not, we are witnessing the emergence of a new world. We do not yet know how the form, norms, effective institutions and rules of this world will be defined. The liberal world as we know it is shaking. Democratic values, structures, and principles are struggling with populist, authoritarian waves in the global arena.

The idea of globalization is losing ground in the international system because of geopolitical developments. But the achievements of the modern world and the people's quest for equality, freedom, and justice cannot remain suppressed in the long run.

Even in fast-growing countries, authoritarian regimes ultimately have to respond to the non-economic demands of the society, outside of the realm of development and wealth. These countries are not exempt from the social influences of opportunities and challenges triggered by technological development. Their regimes will be held more and more accountable to their citizens. In developing countries people are asking more and more questions and they demand their basic rights and freedoms. I believe this dynamic will lead to a new and liberty-oriented order specific to the 21st century.

I do not believe that the current global populist wave, the authoritarian tendencies, and the isolationist discourses will last forever. The real agenda of the world for the coming days includes the quest for new types of economic policies, ways of sharing the fruits of growth more fairly, measures against unemployment, social imbalances and other new problems created by the new technologies developing at the speed of light. . This should be our main agenda as well.

A country like Turkey should take its part in this quest. For a time, we were a country that was looked upon admiringly and promoted as an example for the countries in our region. There is no reason why we cannot regain such a position. We managed to confess our foreign policy mistakes earnestly. Now, it is the time of taking decisions to put the economy back on track. Mr. Tuncay Ozilhan listed what should be done in domestic politics, particularly with respect to the security problem. I too believe that the security issues cannot be handled solely from a "security angle".

We believe that the essential question is how much we will contribute to the formation of this new order. Our last 200 years of history provide a plethora of hints about handling great transformations. We have to reconsider these hints, and focus on how our country's historical experience which can inspire future efforts.

If Turkey is going to contribute to the future of the Middle East, this cannot be done by importing the diseases of the Middle East. Turkey cannot achieve its goal of a common future with the European Union by rejecting universal values and clashing with its own allies. If Turkey is to play a role in redefining the regional balances, it should not reduce its radius of action and flexibility.

Dear Fellow Members,

In the first days of the year we witnessed a terrorist attack in Izmir that had a limited effect thanks to the self-sacrificing intervention of the police officer Fethi Sekin. The nature of the social reaction against this incident has deeply affected everyone. Before this, we had the cruel attack that shook our society on New Year's eve.

The track record of the perpetrators of the New Year tragedy, and the gloomy atmosphere created by some circles before this terrorist attack, generated an explosion of multidimensional reactions. This incident harshly reminded many people what the most precious concept is, or what principle is to be used in organizing social life and democratic politics: secularism.

Without secularism, we cannot prevent our country from being drawn into the maelstrom of sufferings, tragedies and the waves of violence we witness in the Middle East. I would like to take this opportunity to note that our Association emphasized this principle as the most basic principle for itself as well as for Turkey.

The founders of the Republic drew this lesson from the history of the country and their vast life experience, and made this principle the cornerstone of the new regime. We have to reclaim and adopt a contemporary interpretation of this principle, and we must strive for the dissemination of its correct understanding. This is not an issue to be taken lightly; it is a crucial issue and we should address it accordingly.

Dear Fellow Members,

I would like to use some part of my last speech for an account of the past two years. I also intend on referring to our recent history as well. The Republic was founded by the success of the War of Independence. The War of Independence was directed from the National Assembly, filled with heroes rebelling against the invaders of the Ottoman capital. It was an Assembly that harboured many powerful personalities and that jealously protected its authority, even in the most difficult times of the war.

It was this Assembly that founded the Republic. It was this Assembly, which approved our founding treaty, Lausanne, it was this Assembly that carried out our revolutions, established the principle of secularism, and approved important goals for our country and our society.

Even when he was at the peak of his power, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk made it a principle to always base the implementation of his decisions on the legitimacy of the Assembly. Even during the difficult early period of the regime, there were dissident voices and personalities in the Assembly. Even under the most difficult conditions the deputies took up positions and acted in the direction of the values in which they believed.

As a result, in the most idealistic early period of the Republic, decisions far ahead of their time were made and revolutionary steps were taken. The right of women to elect and be elected, and the Civil Code that was the basis of this right, were approved by this Assembly. One may point to various shortcomings, but a notion of citizenship that allowed people from all walks of life to reach the highest offices and mobilization in the spheres of education and public health were realized thanks to the National Assembly.

Recently, the National Assembly was the target of the traitorous and bloody coup attempt of July 15th. The Assembly met that night and showed that it was the main institution of our regime and our democracy. I think that everybody, especially the members of the Assembly should think about the significance and importance of this heritage as we are currently discussing and voting on constitutional amendments.

Dear Fellow Members,

I want to talk about certain urgent problems that occupy our minds and which go beyond the current debate on constitutional amendments.

On many platforms, we bring forward the polarization of our society and the erosion of our common values in recent years. I observe that the gradual loss of the plurality of voices in the media has deteriorated our environment of public discussion, restricted the right to access to information, and negatively affected the image of our country. I think that the constraints on freedom of expression damage our national unity and national interests.

I believe that the acrimony that dominates political discourse and the lack of respect for the unwritten rules that deepen democracies has a negative impact on our social peace. We are saddened to see the decline of our common goals, the acceleration of segregation based on values and lifestyles, and the development of difficulties in communication with the free and developed world.

Of course, we agree that Turkey has a serious security problem. It is impossible not to be furious and anxious about the cascade of inhumane terrorist attacks. We are not, however, convinced that a constant state of emergency alone can be a solution to the security problems.

Dear Fellow Members,

The PISA results published in December proved the inadequacy of the level of our education. The inability of our students to understand what they read in their native language, as well as the weakness of their maths skills, alarm me about our future. We need to think more seriously about the meaning of the lack of 21st century skills for these young people.

The current educational system reproduces inequalities in our country and raises generations of youth discouraged to ask questions, investigate, and understand the world,

and thus are unable to compete in the global arena. There is no doubt that this is a human and social tragedy.

With such an education system, it is almost impossible for the Turkish business community to realize the breakthroughs they are eagerly anticipating. Also, this educational approach is incompatible with the desire to “acquire a prominent position in the 21st century world,” a political buzzword and a target in politicians’ policy documents that we also share. The gap is gradually opening. We have been working in all areas of educational system for years. We published reports. We shared all the data and our recommendations with officials. I know that the new Board of Directors will continue and even increase these efforts.

Dear Fellow Members,

If we are to increase our competitive power in the global arena, we have to ensure that our youth can work in peace in this country. If we are to attract foreign capital, we must adapt our educational system to the requirements of the 21st century, we must have a constitution that promotes freedoms and a well-functioning judicial system that embodies universal legal norms. If we want to cooperate with Asian economies, we must be reliable in criteria such as efficiency, technology use, and appropriate infrastructure for the "industry 4.0" revolution. To this end, we support determinedly the Platform for the Digital Transformation of Industries, which we have developed in close cooperation with our government.

The significance of the work of the Board of Directors will be better understood if we look at the issues from this perspective. We made numerous visits to Anatolian cities in collaboration with TÜRKONFED in order to prepare for development and growth strategies that we will start we ultimately leave behind the difficult period we are now going through..

We made great efforts in order to prepare our future agenda by developing communication with youth, by investing in them, and by paving the way to a better understanding of the knowledge-based digital economy. I believe that the new Board of Directors, which includes a number of members of the previous Board, will complete the projects they initiated, enrich their content, and continue to prepare the Turkey of the future

I would like to add one more observation. I closely observed the demand in Turkey for science, for the skills needed to cope with the world, and for freedoms; I felt the strength of this desire more deeply and more than ever before in the last two years. The EU project is still crucial for the accomplishment of this desire. The present situation with the EU should not be a pretext for giving up on the goal of EU membership. TÜSIAD has always been an advocate and persistent supporter this goal. The problematic aspects of our current relationship should not let us forget what we achieved in the past.

We should think about how to define our relationship with the changing European Union, how Turkey can take a beneficial part within this structure. We will keep up our efforts and activities to this end as seriously as before. In this respect, we fully support the negotiations of our government on updating the Customs Union with the EU. Let us not forget that our global competitive power is based on Turkey’s progress in the EU membership process and its simultaneous openness to other regions of the world . Presently, it is reported that Cyprus negotiations in Geneva are moving towards a solution.

It is a historic opportunity for both Europe and Turkey. The political and economic effects of a solution will be very positive.

Ultimately, Turkey cannot attain its higher goals without securing its social harmony, without blending the knowledge and energy of its creative, productive classes, and without succeeding in using its pluralism as a power source. I believe that in order to accomplish that, we have no other way than to merge tradition and the future into a synthesis. To realize this synthesis, we need a better democracy respecting the rule of law and better governance based on participation and transparency.

The crux of the whole matter is that Turkey can establish its future prosperity only by renewing its institutions, providing the rule of law, respecting human rights and property rights, and implementing rational economic and technological policies that will contribute to the competitive power of its business community. We confidently entrust the task of handling these issues to the new Board of Directors.

Dear Fellow Members,

As the conclusion of both my term and my speech approach, I would like to finalize my balance sheet.

During the two-year mandate of our Board of Directors, four separate governments took office in Ankara. In all issues related to bringing our country forward we have been in open and sincere cooperation with our Assembly, our Ministers, and our bureaucrats. We sincerely thank them for their contributions and their assistance.

The gratifying and harmonious working of the Board of Directors, and the assistance of my colleagues in the Board, was my strongest support to overcome the problems we faced during these two years. Mr. Tuncay Ozilhan, the President of the High Advisory Council was always with us when we needed his support. The warnings and the recommendation coming from you, dear fellow members, have always been a guiding light. Your dedicated effort at our association's the round tables and working groups, and the spirit of solidarity you manifested in the most critical moments, was always a source of inspiration and enthusiasm. Thanks to you, TÜSİAD is a world-class knowledge centre.

I should certainly mention also our institutional brain power. Employees of the association give every kind of support that every President needs. They prepare the background for what is to be said, they ensure that the facts are checked, and they ensure that the approach is consistent.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the members TÜSİAD organizations starting with Mr. Zafer Yavan, who transferred his duty of General Secretary to Mr. Bahadır Kaleagasi, from the heads of departments to the youngest trainees, and particularly to our assistants without whom nothing can be done. They backed and supported me during my presidency, and they encouraged me with their effort and love.

I thank you all who are here with me for your participation. You are the ones who keep this institution alive and capable. Surely I will gladly continue to contribute to the work of TÜSİAD.

Goodbye.