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THE FUTURE PATH OF TURKEY WITHIN THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

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Since 1989, when European history gathered momentum with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Council of Europe's role and impact have changed dramatically. Now the Council of Europe - as the 'Council of Greater Europe' - has reached a turning point. Having helped the new states which emerged from the wreckage of communism to establish themselves as democracies, it is now preparing to launch new partnerships, to start working in new ways - underpinned by the Council's genuine values: democracy, the rule of law and human rights. At the same time, the Council intends to monitor states where the rule of law is still fragile and make sure that they truly apply our standards.

At a time when the European Union is itself embarking on the enormous task of admitting new members, the Council of Europe can already make a vital extra contribution to the consolidation of the rule of law and respect for the individual throughout Europe. Today, the Council of Europe is ready to take up the massive challenge of forging a pan-European society. Faced with the crucial challenge of building a Europe without dividing lines based on common values, the Council needs the full trust and support of its member governments. A major political awareness and visibility campaign - based on a plan for the medium-term priorities of our organisation - aims to promote within Europe's governments the vision of a greater Europe based on common values. During the course of this campaign, I shall also have the opportunity of discussing the challenging questions of the future of our organisation with politicians, media figures and academic personalities in Turkey.

The modern Turkish Republic is founded on the principles of a peaceful foreign policy, secularism, the rule of law, a pluralistic democratic system based on participation, and fundamental human rights and freedoms. Under the leadership of Kemal Atatürk, Turkey underwent, in a short period, sweeping reforms based on the contemporary system of values in all spheres of social life - reforms which enabled the Turkish nation to participate in the system of values shared by the European family of nations. From the proclamation of the Republic, Turkey established her legal and social order according to European norms; multiparty politics were introduced in 1946 and major strides, first and foremost in the areas of the freedom of the press and labour union rights, were taken towards an open and participatory social order. Turkey placed the individual and the inalienable human rights and freedoms of the individual at the very core of her efforts. Thus, a dynamic process of the evolution of democracy and the legal order was set in motion in Turkey.

With the accession to the Council of Europe in August 1949, Turkey joined the European project at an early stage. Since then it has been an important member of the organisation and has traditionally made important contributions to the intergovernmental and interparliamentary activities of the Council. However, one should not be indifferent to problems that still exist concerning the country's internal cohesion and its national integrity. As the country is founded on the future-oriented reforms

of Kemal Atatürk, this should be a commitment to ongoing reforms. Any stop in the reform process would be a reversion, a relapse.

A current example is the prison crisis in Turkey. Visits of the Council's Committee for the Prevention of Torture will hopefully contribute to finding a sustainable solution in full respect of human rights standards and the Council of Europe's norms. The decision of the Turkish government last year to defer the execution of Abdullah Öcalan to enable the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights to deliver a judgement was a brave decision which underlined Turkey's commitment to preserving our organisation's values. It reassured all those who are working for abolition of the death penalty in Europe. I hope that it was at the same time a first step towards the definitive abolition of the death penalty in Turkey. Like all the other 42 Council of Europe member states, Turkey is committed to respect and defend democracy, the rule of law and human rights. These matters are no longer internal affairs, they are European problems and Europeans, no matter what their nationality or origins are, must share the responsibility of safeguarding these principles and values. Therefore, it was highly appreciated when Turkey gave observers from the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe the possibility of following the trial of Abdullah Öcalan on İmralı Island. At the time, still a member of the Assembly and its Committee on Legal Affairs and Human Rights, I was present myself at the opening of the trial. Feeling the public atmosphere around the court proceedings, going to the island on the same boat as the representatives of the victims of the PKK terrorist, discussing the matter with journalists, even on a late-night live programme on television, I was able to confirm that the authorities and the judiciary, even the much talked about and criticised State Security Courts, provided under difficult circumstances a transparent trial which complied with international standards.

So, in many respects, Turkey is going in the right direction. But some important reforms should still be envisaged. On the one hand, for example, there is a multitude of free and independent media, but on the other hand, there are still restrictions on freedom of expression which are based on fears and petrified principles from the past. A modern democratic society has better means to defend the democratic order and the territorial integrity of the state than the suppression of opinions by penal law. In that sense, I would recommend an urgent review of the so-called Anti-Terrorist Law.

Without putting into question in any way the concept of the Turkish nation, based on the equality of all citizens no matter what their ethnic or religious belonging, I do not see in this concept an obstacle to the recognition of the cultural richness of ethnic and linguistic diversity which should also be seen as one of the advantages of the Turkish nation.

Early membership in the Council of Europe was a clear expression of the political role of the country as a reliable European partner - a policy that has been further confirmed with Turkey's membership of NATO, the Black Sea Economic Co-operation structure, the South-East European Co-operation process and the OSCE. Modern Turkey, in the tradition of Kemal Atatürk, is an important, responsible and equal actor within the European project - a European actor with an important role to play in the enhancement and reinforcement of peace, security, stability and prosperity in international relations, particularly with neighbouring countries on the basis of a peace-seeking foreign policy. There exist a wide range of activities and objectives: Turkey should continue to undertake initiatives and efforts towards the settlement through dialogue of bilateral problems with Greece; it should act as a model for the Turkic states and the Islamic world in their further development of the basis of universal values; it should enhance, as a key actor, stability in the Middle East, in the Balkans, in Central Asia and, of course, first and foremost in the Caucasus region - a region where Turkey has strong social and cultural ties and a special interest in establishing

peace, stability and co-operation. I want to stress in this context that a decisive part of the regional role which Turkey has to play will be in a peaceful and satisfactory solution to the Cyprus problem for all. Cyprus, an island inhabited by two ethnic communities, deserves a political solution that takes into account the legitimate interests of both communities in accordance with international law. Turkey should accept that the Council of Europe, in particular its Parliamentary Assembly, is in favour of a bi-zonal, bi-communal state of the Cypriots, Greeks as well as Turks. Therefore the Council of Europe recognises together with the international community only one Republic of Cyprus. It is one of my dreams to see the Turkish-Cypriot representative, whose seat is still vacant, among the parliamentary delegates from the Republic of Cyprus.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Turkey immediately recognised the independence of the Caucasian countries without any discrimination. Its approach to the Caucasus is shaped by its desire to establish comprehensive co-operation in the region particularly with the contribution of the three states in the southern Caucasus - Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. As all three states are members of the Council of Europe - Armenia and Azerbaijan joined our democratic family only some weeks ago in January - closer co-operation between Turkey and its Caucasian neighbours is more than welcomed. The solution of the Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhazia conflicts constitutes one of the important and urgent issues for peace and stability in the region - important and urgent both from Turkey's point-of-view and from the position of Council of Europe. Only a peaceful resolution of all conflicts in the Caucasian states will contribute to the political stability and the economic well being of these countries. And only this will open up prospects for increased and fruitful regional co-operation.

Turkey was the first country to recognise the independence of Azerbaijan in November 1991. With Azerbaijan, Turkey shares a common language, culture and history. From the outset, Turkey was known as a staunch supporter of Azerbaijan in its efforts to overcome the difficulties it faced as a newly independent state. Turkish-Azerbaijani relations are developing not only in the political field but also in other spheres such as economy, trade, education, transport, telecommunication, agriculture, social security, health, sports, culture, science and tourism. The legal framework of these relations is shaped by more than 100 bilateral agreements signed between the two countries between 1991 and 1999.

The conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh between Azerbaijan and Armenia, which has caused so much human suffering and loss of so many human lives, is a source of serious concern for the Turkish people as it is for the Council of Europe. The simultaneous accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan at the beginning of this year was a unique event - never before has our organisation experienced the accession of two states having such a bitter dispute between them.

The origin of the current conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh dates back to 1988. When the Soviet Union began to disintegrate in the late 1980s, the Supreme Soviet of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Region appealed in February 1988 to the Supreme Soviets of Azerbaijan and Armenia and to the USSR government to approve its decision to secede from Azerbaijan and to join Armenia. The Azerbaijan Supreme Soviet rejected this resolution and the related appeal because it constituted an illegal act according to the Constitution of the Soviet Union, which stated that borders of the Union Republics could not be changed without its consent. In July 1988, the Supreme Soviet of the USSR also rejected the decision of the Armenian Supreme Soviet demanding incorporation of Nagorno-Karabakh into the Armenian Republic and in January 1989 imposed direct rule over Nagorno-Karabakh. Following the independence of Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1991 and the withdrawal of the Russian troops from Nagorno-Karabakh in early 1992, the conflict turned into a

full-scale war.

Through its active participation in the meetings of the Minsk Group, which is charged with working out the necessary political elements for an acceptable settlement of the conflict within the framework of the OSCE, Turkey underlined its willingness to contribute to the finding of a peaceful solution for the region. Turkey has also welcomed the bilateral dialogue that has started between Armenia and Azerbaijan at the level of the Presidents and the parallel meetings between the Ministers of Defence and Ministers of Foreign Affairs.

Turkey recognised the independence of Armenia on 16 December 1991. Due to the difficult economic conditions following Armenia's independence, Turkey has extended humanitarian aid to its neighbouring country and facilitated the transit of humanitarian aid to Armenia through its territory. Turkey invited Armenia to the establishment of the Black Sea Economic Co-operation Organisation as a founding state. However, Turkey has not established diplomatic relations with Armenia because of the Armenian stand on the Azerbaijani-Armenia dispute over Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia's occupation of one-fifth of Azeri territory. In this respect, the Council of Europe welcomes the commitment of the Turkish government, stated in its current Foreign Policy Programme, to "support efforts and initiatives for Armenia to withdraw from the territories it has occupied and to strike a peace deal with Azerbaijan." The simultaneous accession of Armenia and Azerbaijan to the Council of Europe should also be seen as the chance to establish good Turkish-Armenian relations once and forever.

Georgia's independence was recognised by Turkey directly after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Since then, neighbourly relations have been well developed in many fields. Turkey has been providing economic and political support to Georgia since the establishment of the modern state. It has to be seen as an important factor for stability in the Caucasus region that Turkey attributes great importance to the preservation and the maintenance of existing friendly relations with Georgia and that Ankara believes in the necessity of further enhancement of bilateral relations in all spheres.

However, Georgia has not yet resolved all its internal problems. The conflict in Abkhazia still endangers peace and stability in the country and thus in the entire region. Right from the outset, Turkey has supported the peaceful resolution of the conflict within the internationally recognised borders of Georgia. It has been contributing to the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia with military observers, it has provided Georgia with humanitarian assistance and help in order to address the sufferings of the people in Georgia as a result of the Abkhaz conflict. Turkey also supports sustained dialogue between the two parties, within the framework of the Geneva Process. In this context, Turkey hosted a conference in Istanbul in 1999 and brought the parties together with a view to contributing to the peace process.

"We believe that peace will be a most welcome development leading to all sorts of co-operation among the Caucasian countries", is one of the key sentences of the Foreign Policy Programme of the Turkish government. As a result of recent developments in the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean region and the Middle East, Turkey's traditional strategic importance and weight has become all the more pronounced. Turkey is now the key player in this axis that might be called the process of 'Eurasianisation'. Being one of the traditional member states of the Council of Europe, the expectations are high vis-à-vis Turkey's future role as a key player in the Euro-Asian axis and concerning its contribution to the building of a Greater Europe based on common values, on democracy, the rule of law and human rights. The situation is challenging, the

task is not an easy one. But I have confidence in the strength of Turkey and in its willingness to assume a fundamental role in the process of European unification.

The Council of Europe is ready to assist Turkey on its future path, to make use of the opportunities and responsibilities of its position to the benefit of the country and to the benefit of Greater Europe without dividing lines.
