

**Keynote Speech by Ambassador (R) Riza Erkmenoğlu on
“Turkey- EU relations - where to?”
Europump General Assembly, Bodrum, Turkey, 20 May 2017**

(Summary by Pierre Lucas - Secretary General – Europump)

On the occasion of the Europump General Assembly in Bodrum on 20 May 2017, former Ambassador Riza Erkmenoğlu, whose 38 year career brought him, amongst other positions, to NATO, Libya and Jordan, presented his personal thoughts about the current Turkey-EU relations. His lecture consisted in two parts: a) the situation at global level which can help understand b) the current stage of the Turkish-EU relations.

a) The situation at global level

The global – liberal - world order in place since some 70 years is coming apart, following the world economic crisis of 2007/2008 with trillions of \$US provided to the banks to rescue the international financial system, with globalisation and offshoring becoming synonyms of closure of factories, companies and unemployment. This has opened the way for populist politicians to develop formidable platforms arguing for protectionism, xenophobia and old style nationalism, and based on new communication tools through which they can easily promote their ideas.

At the same time mainstream political party leaders find it more and more difficult to provide answers to the needs of their societies, which creates a loss of confidence in democracy and in the capitalistic system, and also in international organisations perceived as incapable to provide global solutions.

As a consequence of this political and economic instability, a diffuse call for a strong leadership has emerged, paving the way for authoritarian administrations and regimes.

At the same time, the United States have started questioning their leadership over the liberal world order, wondering why they should carry such an enormous responsibility and make sacrifices while others get benefits. This new attitude can be noted in the Syrian conflict where the United States did not seriously commit themselves to contain it, despite Turkey’s insistence on a secure zone on land and no-fly zone in the air. The EU’s involvement has remained limited too, until the refugee crisis.

b) The Turkey-EU relations

The current “dead-end” state of the Turkish-EU relations should be analysed in the light of the fast few years, since the December 2004 European Council meeting, during which Heads of States and Government officially opened the EU membership negotiations with Turkey but at the same time indicated that “these negotiations are an open-ended process, the outcome of which cannot be guaranteed beforehand.” Such a statement had not been made for any other candidate to EU membership.

While negotiations started, as for any EU membership on a “chapter” by “chapter” approach, the opening of new chapters was always linked to “progress in the Cyprus issue”. Cyprus had become a member of the EU in 2004 but still as a divided island between Greek-speaking and Turkish-speaking parts. This did not help with the development of the negotiations as Cyprus started to use its veto right to block progress.

As of 2007, the Turkish positive mood towards the EU started to change, and Turkey’s strategic goal - since the foundation of the Republic in 1923 - to take its place among the European community of nations, started to be questioned. Very recently, the question of shared universal values was raised with a debate to re-introduce capital punishment into the Turkish criminal code while it is banned in all EU Member States, and with the referendum on extending the constitutional powers of the Turkish President.

It seems that the EU does not want to be the one closing the membership negotiation process, but populist political leaders are pushing in this direction. On the other hand, it seems increasingly difficult to continue to negotiate while Turkey falls short of the Copenhagen criteria¹.

The 2004 declaration can also be analysed as a missed opportunity for Turkey, which could have launched a major democratisation process and adopt universal values (independent of cultural and religious bias). This could have been supported, as it was when the customs union was signed in 1996, by the development of the negotiations on the basis of progress made at the closing of each chapter, not at the opening as it has become the rule since 2004.

How to move forward?

Both sides have interests, notably economic, to continue moving on with the negotiations, and some practical steps could be proposed, based on a step-by-step approach.

- Modernise the customs union by including in its scope agricultural products, services and public procurement
- Develop cooperation in the field of energy
- Cooperate in security matters, including fight against terrorism and organised crime
- Manage the refugee crisis and solve the visa problem faced by Turkish citizens
- Also, foreign policy can become a major area for cooperation

Since no action would only serve to further deepen the problem and not solve it, there is a need to move on with developing the EU-Turkey relations, and to do so to remain optimistic and positive.

¹ The 'Copenhagen criteria' define the conditions which any country wishing to join the EU has to respect. A candidate needs to have:

- stable institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities;
- a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competition and market forces in the EU;
- the ability to take on and implement effectively the obligations of membership, including adherence to the aims of political, economic and monetary union.