



**European Economic and Social Committee
The President**

*SPEECH DURING THE INAUGURAL SESSION BY STAFFAN NILSSON,
PRESIDENT OF EESC*

at

*29th Meeting of EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee in Istanbul
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Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
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Check Against Delivery

Dear Minister Bagis, Dear Mr Hisarciklioglu, Dear Co-Chairs, Dear members of the EU-Turkey JCC, dear participants,

First, let me congratulate Mr Bagis, who has been reappointed in the new Turkish government in his position of Minister for European Affairs and Chief negotiator. We are very pleased that your Ministry has been strengthened and wish you success. I wish to thank you for the constant support you have provided to the work of the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee. We all look forward to maintaining excellent cooperation with you and further developing our relations with your Ministry.

I am delighted to participate in this first meeting of the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee that takes place since I have been elected President of the EESC. I have already participated in some previous meetings and this is always with great interest and pleasure that I join you.

This meeting of the Joint Consultative Committee takes place at a time when the two sides enjoy opposite economic situation. It is always striking for me to see how dynamic the economic situation is in Turkey. A five minute walk in Istanbul is enough to be sure your



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country is experiencing a fantastic economic growth. In the European Union, let me share with you my concern on how serious the economic situation is. The period we are going through is a key test for both European solidarity and leadership. I firmly believe that solidarity and responsibility will prevent the worse from happening to the eurozone. But EU leaders may still have very difficult moments ahead. They may have to make other difficult compromises to find sustainable solutions to the financial turmoil in the eurozone. But if we look back, the EU always came out stronger from periods of crisis. I believe this will happen again.

I am glad to be here at a time when Turkey and the European Union are experiencing major changes in their common neighbourhood, i.e. South of the Mediterranean Sea. Both our diplomacy and the diplomacy of Turkey are challenged by those unexpected and historical changes. Many of the leaders of the Arab Spring quoted Turkey as an example in terms of democratisation. This is certainly the right time to work together and harmonize our approaches in our relations with those emerging figures of the Arab Revolution. This is exactly what we will do. From this shared vision came indeed the initiative to co-organise with you in Istanbul the next Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Committees. I will revert to this Summit at the end of my intervention.

This Joint Consultative Committee brings together a lot of expertise and many influential persons. It makes the discussions and debates you hold very vivid and interesting. It also attracts attention on the work it makes, in the EU and in Turkey. It thus helps the voice of civil society being heard in EU-Turkey relations. I believe mutual understanding has also considerably improved since this Joint Consultative Committee was set-up. I know that solid friendship also developed along the years between both sides of the Joint Consultative Committee.

I fully trust in your new Co Chairmen's capacities to keep on producing quality work that will support the Joint Consultative Committee. I am aware that some of you have expressed frustration and fatigue about our common work. I fully understand them. The



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situation of the accession negotiations can of course explain this climate.

However, I think our EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee has to try to let aside politics. The blockade in the accession negotiations is regrettable. Your Joint Consultative Committee will keep on asking political authorities to move the process forward. The European Economic and Social Committee and I will keep on advocating for Turkey's accession to the EU in Brussels. We all wish to see Turkey make some move and to see some EU Member States change their position to unblock the situation. But maybe the current political context is not favourable for us to be heard by key decision makers on that matter. It does not mean we shall be desperate about that. But it certainly means we need to be patient, and to wait for a more favourable political environment.

In the meantime, I am sure that there are still a lot of topics that remain to be discussed by the Joint Consultative Committee. And it is also very useful in my view to review topics that have already been discussed. For two reasons. First, not only the Turkish economy is growing fast. But the whole Turkish society is changing speedily. So, reports have to be updated, to reflect the current situation. Secondly, reverting to key topics does not mean turning always around the same points. It means building expertise. This expertise is an essential pillar to bring recognition of the work carried out by the Joint Consultative Committee.

The three topics that you picked up for this Joint Consultative Committee are certainly very appropriate.

- *Building a low-carbon economy* is a key issue in the EU at the moment. It is one of the main objectives of the Europe 2020 strategy. I am sure the exchange of ideas and experiences you will have on this matter will be very interesting in terms of mutual learning between Turkey and the EU. Low-carbon economy and, more broadly, sustainable development is the main priority of my mandate as President of the EESC. You can find in this room my programme in Turkish. The EESC will organise a conference in 2012 to feed in the Rio+20 conference. We can certainly think of a way to involve you in



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this conference. But be sure that I will read carefully the conclusions of your meeting on this aspect.

- Secondly, the *benefit that Turkey's accession would have on EU economy* is also an expert debate that I am pretty much looking forward to listening to. There is no doubt that EU leaders cannot even dream about reaching the level of growth experienced by Turkey in recent years. I am convinced that Turkey's accession would indeed bring more growth and jobs in the EU.

- Last but certainly not least, the *visa issue*. I am very concerned that the visa issue has not moved forward between the EU and Turkish authorities. Our Joint Consultative Committee has already expressed its views on numerous occasions on this critical issue to improve EU-Turkey relations. I am glad you revert to it and insist on the necessity to ease the requirements currently imposed on Turkish citizens when travelling in the EU.

Your meeting takes place at a critical moment in Turkey. Your country is planning to undergo a profound reform of its Constitution. The EU will look carefully at it. The assessment made by the EU will play an important part on the following steps in the accession negotiations. From my point of view, an inclusive and comprehensive consultation process is necessary to carry out such an important constitutional reform. All sectors of civil society should be part of this consultation. It is widely admitted that changes are needed in order to guarantee the freedom of media and the freedom of expression, and to reinforce the independence of the judiciary. I count on you and on Turkish civil society to work in this direction. I count on Turkish authorities to listen to your voice.

Lastly, let me highlight that the cooperation of the EESC with Turkey is very strong. I am pleased to announce that we are co-organising our next Euromed Summit with you. It will take place in Istanbul on 16-18 November 2011. Thank you Mr Kumlu for your support as the Co-Chair of the EU-Turkey JCC. My warmest thanks also go to Mr Hisarciklioglu, without whom this project would not exist. You supported this initiative with enthusiasm since the very beginning. It is now a great pleasure for us to cooperate with TOBB team to prepare a successful Summit.



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I am confident this Euromed Summit of Economic and Social Committees will be an excellent opportunity for stakeholders from the south of the Mediterranean to learn key lessons from the democratisation process of Turkey.

I look forward to meeting many of you in November during this Summit.

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a fruitful meeting.

I am now pleased to give the floor to Mr Varadi, Deputy Head of the EU delegation in Turkey.

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