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LUNCHEON SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER GUY VERHOFSTADT  
AT THE TURKISH BELGIAN BUSINESS COUNCIL  
ISTANBUL, 4 NOVEMBER 2003.

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Mr President, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, It is a genuine pleasure for me to address you here today. I would like to thank DEİK, the Council for External Economic Relations, and the Turkish Belgian Business Association for this unique opportunity. For a Belgian Prime Minister it is a special experience to give a speech in Istanbul - a city that, with its rich history, has always served as a bridge between East and West. In fact, few people know that today's special link between Belgium and Turkey is nothing new. In fact, Belgians developed a large proportion of the Turkish railway system, as well as the Istanbul tram system, in the 19th century. The Orient Express, which used to carry the 'beautiful people' of the Belle Epoque from Ostend, London and Paris to Vienna, Belgrade and ultimately to Istanbul, was conceived and developed by a Belgian. A Belgian company provided the steel pipes that first brought gas to Istanbul. Another Belgian company was responsible for lighting many of the city's streets and hotels. Belgium built and operated coalmines in Zonguldak. We can quite safely say that Turkey called upon many Belgians for its process of industrialisation. Today, good relations between Belgium and Turkey are different, but no less important or intense. I would even go so far as to say that the political contacts between Belgium and Turkey have never been as intense as during the past year. Belgian Foreign Minister Louis Michel has held regular meetings with your Foreign Minister, Abdullah Gül. Over the past year I have met your Prime Minister on three occasions. And let's not forget the hundreds of thousands of Belgian tourists who visit Turkey every year. In fact, the conclusions of Belgium's presidency of the European Union in 2001 included a very encouraging paragraph on Turkey. At that time, Belgium also ensured that Turkey would be treated in the same way as the twelve other candidates for accession, both in the Convention on the future of Europe and in the Intergovernmental Conference currently under way. As you will have noticed, these many intense contacts are mainly linked to Turkey's application to join the European Union. Its application is a matter of great interest for many Belgians and Turks. And this is also the subject that I would like to talk to you about today. Ladies and Gentlemen, The European Union's largest expansion to date will soon be upon us. On the First of May 2004 the Union will take in no fewer than ten countries, boosting the EU's population from 380 million to nearly 450 million citizens. Such a radical change does not happen overnight. It is the result of a long process. Together we have seen just how important this process is. In each of the ten countries involved, it led to appropriate reforms as well as political and economic stability. Moreover, the enlargement process is not a one-way street. Every expansion leads to debate - debate among policymakers and among the citizens of the European Union. It forces us to think about the Union's objectives, its limits and its roots. In this respect, Turkey's application is very significant. After all, the debate on Turkey goes right to the heart of these issues. In this debate some people let themselves be driven by fear. They are afraid about Turkey's borders. Suddenly, Europe will share a border with Syria, Iraq, Iran, Armenia and Georgia. Some people are afraid about Turkey's size. Turkey alone has more people than the combined population of the ten countries that will be joining the EU in May 2004. Some people are afraid of Islam. Ninety-nine percent of the Turkish people are Muslim. And still others are afraid of seeing economic deterioration in our own country. I am convinced that fear is not only a bad advisor; it is also the wrong advisor. In a speech in Bruges, almost exactly one year ago, I said that we should not let ourselves be driven by our emotions, whatever their origin. Some ten years ago, the European Union set

out a number of objective criteria, known as the Copenhagen criteria. These criteria determine when a candidate for EU membership can begin accession negotiations. These are political and economic requirements, such as respect for the rule of law and the rules of democracy, protection of minorities, freedom of expression, freedom of the press, fighting corruption via an independent police force and judiciary, efficient government administration and the ability to cope with the pressures of the free market. These criteria were used to assess the candidate Member States that will be joining in a few months. The European Union must also use these same criteria to assess Turkey's application. I am convinced that Turkey, once it will have fulfilled all of the Copenhagen criteria and will have been reformed in accordance with the principles so dear to us, will be a valuable addition to Europe. Religion is not one of these criteria. That would simply be absurd. Since the age of Enlightenment, more than 200 years ago, the separation of religion and state, as well as tolerance of other faiths, have been fundamental European values. It is no coincidence that these values can be found in the Belgian constitution of 1830. And the secular state is also the foundation of the Turkish Republic founded in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The separation of religion and state is one of the fundamental rules of both the Belgian and Turkish forms of government. Perhaps that is a reason why Turks integrate well in Belgium. Of course, this could be improved, and the government is making efforts to improve it. In Belgium today there are near 200,000 Belgians of Turkish origin or, as you put it, Turks with Belgian nationality. Following the latest elections, Belgium now has two Turkish members of parliament. There are many municipal councillors of Turkish descent. I myself come from the city of Ghent, where 5% of the population is of Turkish origin. That does not cause any problems at all. Belgians of Turkish descent are involved in Belgian society - something which is very clear and a valuable addition. It is this separation between religion and state that Belgium expects of all current and future EU Member States - along with respect for the religious beliefs of others, freedom of expression and the right to personal development and absolute equality between men and women. Some people fear that Turkey's AK party would turn Turkey into an Islamist state. The reality looks different. I note that the AK party accepts the separation of religion and state, and I have no reason to think that this will change. Moreover, the experiment that the AK party is pursuing in Turkey is of global significance. We greatly value Turkey's commitment to spread a spirit of renewal to all countries of the Islamic Conference. We were especially impressed with the clear message of Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül, when recently in Tehran he called upon the Islamic countries to carry out a critical self-diagnosis and did not hesitate to offer a vision of good governance, transparency and accountability based on fundamental rights and freedoms, such as equality of men and women. Here a historic role has been set aside for Turkey, not just with regard to its own population, but also with regard to Muslims in the traditional Islam countries and in Europe. I hope that Turkey takes up this role and plays it to its full. Ladies and Gentlemen, Tomorrow the European Commission will publish its annual Progress Report on Turkey. In the report, the Commission will assess Turkey's progress on the Copenhagen criteria. It is clear that Turkey has already made an enormous effort in terms of legislation, and a great deal of progress. A lot of hard work has been done, and this is very much appreciated. The aim now is to convert this legislation into reality right across this vast country - including in border areas and police stations far removed from Ankara. I am pleased to note that work is being done to implement this progress in this very manner. The implementation structures set up by Turkey, from the very highest levels of government to the lowest echelons of the civil service, show that Turkey is very aware of the need for the precise and accurate implementation of the new legislation. The Progress Report on Turkey will no doubt point out some gaps too. That is normal. The same was true of all applicant countries at a similar stage in their reforms. Consequently, Turkey must not be discouraged by this report, but must see it as encouragement and a guide for completing and adjusting the reforms. For instance, the report may encourage Turkey to make greater efforts in terms of protecting minorities. This is a very important point for Europe. And I am of the opinion that Europe has a number of important achievements to its credit in this regard in other candidate Member States. Take, for instance, the situation of the Hungarian minority in Slovakia. Up to ten years ago, this was a highly explosive situation. Today, the Hungarians are protected by the Slovak state. Other examples would be the Roma, or the minorities in the Balkans. This must also apply to the Kurdish population in Turkey. I wish to make myself

very clear on this issue. I am aware that one aspect of this issue is linked to terrorism. The 9/11 attacks took place during the Belgian EU presidency. Belgium, along with the entire European Union, immediately said 'no' to terrorism. The PKK was placed on the list of terrorist organisations. Indeed, Belgium - like Turkey - is convinced that we must crack down on anything and everything that tends towards terrorism. Turkey has been through extremely traumatic experiences with terrorism in various forms and of various origins. Any political movement that resorts to violence repudiates itself. But there is a big difference between terrorism and freedom of expression. What Europe means by the notion of 'respect for minorities' is that these minorities must be allowed to organise themselves democratically and must be allowed to take part in the democratic decision-making process. This also applies to the Kurdish Turks - or the Turkish Kurds. Ladies and Gentlemen, The question whether Turkey can join the European Union has already been answered - at the European Council in Helsinki in December 1999, at the European Council in Laeken in December 2001, and at the European Council in Copenhagen in December 2002. For that matter, what do the conclusions of the European Council of Copenhagen say anyway? The Union encourages Turkey to pursue energetically its reform process. If the European Council in December 2004, on the basis of a report and a recommendation from the Commission, decides that Turkey fulfils the Copenhagen political criteria, the European Union will open accession negotiations with Turkey without delay. So, the date of accession is in your hands. Belgium shall watch to see that these agreements are complied with. The Belgian government will ensure that no new criteria slip into the evaluation process. But the Turkish government can help too. Let's look at the issue of Cyprus. The European Union has always said that failure to find a solution to this issue would not prevent Cyprus itself from joining - even a divided Cyprus. Accordingly, failure to find a solution should not block the start of negotiations with Turkey. But at the same time, everyone realises that it would be much more desirable to find a solution before Cyprus joins on the First of May 2004. There is indeed a window of opportunity during the next six months. After all, you and I know that a solution would certainly facilitate the process. So we are hoping for a speedy solution, which requires direct Turkish support. I am of the opinion that the plan proposed by United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan should be used as the foundation for a fair solution. That means that difficult - or even painful - choices will have to be made. I hope that everyone is prepared and encouraged to do so in the months to come. But let me be quite clear on one thing: it would be a mistake to postpone a solution for the Cyprus problem until late next year and to link such a solution to the evaluation of Turkey's application. Those who entertain this scenario are playing a dangerous game; one in which they stand to lose more than they can gain. Ladies and Gentlemen, I do not wish to talk solely about politics today. After all, a large part of the European project is about economics. The reunification of Europe started in 1951 with the European Coal and Steel Community. In 1957 this was expanded into the European Economic Community. Since then we have created a single market and a single currency, the Euro. Europe is an economic success story. Turkey, too, has enjoyed economic successes, including, notably, success in controlling government finances, managing inflation and restructuring the banking sector. Turkey also passed its sixth IMF review. But uncertainty and fear still prevail. In Belgium, people are afraid that when Turkey joins the European Union, businesses will relocate, thus leading to the loss of jobs. One example of this is the decision to move Ford Transit production from Belgium to Turkey. Overnight, Belgian workers at Ford found out that 3,000 jobs in Belgium would disappear and be moved to Turkey. Others are afraid of a sudden influx of new migrants from Turkey. And in Turkey, there is uncertainty about persistent instability in the balance of trade. I am convinced that this fear is unfounded. Evidence of this can be seen in previous expansions of the European Union. In Belgium some people were just as reticent about seeing Spain and Portugal join 20 years ago. What happened? The economies of those countries grew enormously. New opportunities were created in terms of doing business and creating jobs. The result is that Spain and Portugal are now countries of immigration, instead of countries of emigration. The same applies to investments. The big trigger is when accession negotiations begin. That is the signal for businesses to start investing massively. We saw this quite clearly when negotiations began with the countries that are due to join just a few months from now. Today, Belgian companies are among the leading investors in Poland, the Czech Republic and Bulgaria. This can happen in Turkey too. Some Belgian companies have already had

excellent experiences in Turkey. The Belgian business community is clearly confident about Turkey's economic prospects, as witnessed by the fact that my official visit to Ankara and Istanbul is accompanied by a number of leading Belgian industrial players. Another example of this is the bilateral customs cooperation agreement that I signed yesterday with Prime Minister Erdogan. I am also pleased to announce that three Belgian companies have made significant progress during this trip in major business matters in Turkey. In order to continue this positive trend, it was agreed yesterday that in the first week of May 2004 our Crown Prince, Prince Philippe, would travel to Turkey along with a large economic delegation with a view to developing strong business relations between Belgium and Turkey. Here too, however, Turkey itself holds the key to further success. The list of economic reforms is impressive. This policy deserves to be encouraged and must be pursued. The most important things to foreign investors are legal and fiscal stability and security, along with a transparent and efficient government and justice system. Ladies and Gentlemen, Last year Turkey won the Eurovision song contest, just pipping Belgium at the post. Nobody knew who would win until the very last moment. The fact that Turkey was so popular in so many European living rooms shows that there is no anti-Turkish sentiment in Europe. And I'm not just saying that because it is thanks to the 12 points that Belgium gave Turkey that the Eurovision song contest will be held in Istanbul next year. Sertrab Erener fully deserved to win. Belgium and Turkey also have close links in the world of science. I am a keen amateur archaeologist and I regret that I didn't have the time during this trip to visit Sagalassos, the ancient city excavated under the leadership of the Belgian professor, Marc Waelkens. Sagalassos is one of the largest archaeological sites in Turkey and enjoys a worldwide reputation. The scientific project has also forged many human bonds over the years between hundreds of Belgian and Turkish archaeologists, as well as between Belgian and Turkish authorities and the local people. The professor and the project leave behind not just a physical trace in earth and stone, but also a spiritual trace in terms of expertise and training. I am pleased that Turkey values this and that Professor Waelkens was awarded the Grand Prize for Service to the State, the Üzün hizmet medalyasi. Belgium certainly enjoys good relations with Turkey. And Belgium wants to further reinforce these relations. My country wants to be a partner with your country, on its way to EU membership, on the way to economic development. The key to this is in your hands. But we are quite prepared to make our contribution. Thank you.