

Speech at the Middle East Technical University

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Ankara/Turkey, 28 April 2014 Translation of advance text



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I am delighted to have the opportunity to speak to you here today, at one of the country's top universities and indeed one which belongs to the small club of educational establishments which are held in high regard worldwide.

As students and professors at this university you know how fundamentally important education and research are to every society. And you also know that science thrives best amongst creative minds, amongst students who do not shy away from decisions relating to morals and citizenship, including in their lessons and research. I thus respect and admire how the teachers and students of your university take on this dual responsibility as scientists and citizens in a way which enables them to tackle the challenges posed by our globalised world.

For eight years, the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin has been connected to your university by a German Turkish Masters Program in the field of social sciences. Students from Turkey, Germany and other countries delve into problems together. They work on modernisation and transformation, on migration and integration, and they abide by the motto – Do not research without the other, but with him. Do not talk about one another but to one another.

If this motto were followed more closely in other fields too, then perhaps misunderstandings would be avoided more often and mutually-acceptable solutions would more easily be reached. I would therefore like my words today to be interpreted in

the context of talking to one another, as an offer of a more in depth exchange of opinions as our societies move closer together.

Let me begin with some good news: Germany and Turkey have never before enjoyed such close and diverse relations. Today, we do not only know about Turkish people through hearsay, literature or a few personal encounters, as was the case in past centuries. Today, we know each other through a closely-knit network of business relations, through exchanges at political, scientific and social fora and above all through a great deal of contact in our everyday lives. Year on year millions of Germans holiday in Turkey. Thousands of business people, scientists and artists commute in both directions. With the help of exchange programmes, each year thousands of Turkish students travel to the European Union and to Germany whilst thousands of German students go to Turkey.

As for politics – for nearly 60 years, Germany and Turkey have both been members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, both are members of the Council of Europe and of the Organization for Security and Co operation in Europe. Moreover, the two countries have close economic ties via the European Union and Turkey's Customs Union.

This affiliation is of great importance, yet just as important to our relations is the fact that nearly three million people of Turkish origin have settled in Germany. Approximately half of them now have German citizenship. Lawyers and restaurant owners, factory workers and journalists alike have tied their present and future to their new home. Actors, moderators and comedians with Turkish roots appear on German television. There are MPs of Turkish origin in the German Bundestag. And a director of Turkish origin produced last year's most successful German film.

Even though there is still room for improvement in relations between immigrants and those who have lived in Germany for generations, it must be said that a lot has already been achieved. Germany, which was not a country of immigration and which initially had no desire to be one is now making great efforts to find ways to enable immigrants and their second and third generation descendants to enjoy equal and respected participation in the political and social life of their new society and for this to be a matter of course.

This is how we now live with one another more than we ever have done in the past.

And because we have grown closer and our lives are becoming ever more tightly interwoven we are following events in each other's country more than ever before.

In Germany we understand Turkey's interest in the wellbeing of families with Turkish roots living in Germany. We understand in particular their interest in the trial of a member of the so called National Socialist Underground, the extreme right-wing terrorist group which murdered ten people – nearly all of whom had Turkish roots – between 2000 and 2006. We understand the horror at the xenophobic, racist hate and at the fact that the group went undetected for such a long time.

We understand it because the horror you feel is also felt by us in Germany.

I guarantee you however that Germany is sparing no effort in pursuing the affair before the law. Rest assured that the overwhelming majority of the German population does not tolerate extremism. Alongside state institutions, a country-wide network of committed citizens and civic associations form a strong bulwark against xenophobic terrorism.

Just as you in Turkey are not indifferent to events in Germany, we in Germany are not indifferent to what happens in your country. And so at this point, please allow me to speak quite openly about what it is that concerns me.

I grew up in the part of Germany which was under Soviet influence until 1989. Until the age of 50, I lived in a system in which a communist party decided what was right and what was wrong.

This is why the time of the reunification of Germany was one of the happiest of my life. The era of intimidation and arbitrariness was over. The concentration of power in the hands of one party was dissolved. Since then I have been able to convince people of the advantages of democracy time and again – Germany respects the separation of powers, Parliament and the judicial institutions provide counterweights to the Government's power.

Influenced as I have been by this experience, I am particularly concerned when I see that somewhere the tendency emerges to weaken the rule of law and the separation of powers which has proved successful in many countries. So here and now I am wondering whether the independence of the judiciary is still secure when the Government replaces unwanted public prosecutors and police officers or attempts to influence the appointment of lawyers working in the state sector. Or when it seeks to sway court decisions in its favour or conversely to circumvent unwelcome verdicts.

Some Turkish citizens and indeed some Turkish politicians may find it difficult to accept such criticism. Perhaps one or the other will dismiss it as unfounded and unwanted. But please do not misunderstand me. I am not speaking out of a desire to interfere in domestic affairs but out of a desire to engage in dialogue, as equals. I am speaking out of concern as a citizen who, after many long years' experience in a totalitarian state, has become a defender of democracy.

As a democrat I know I must base my view on more than just the words and acts of those who govern. As a democrat I will always listen to those who are governed. And as a democrat I will speak out when I see that the rule of law is under threat – even if it is not the rule of law in my own country. I am making this interjection for the sake of the people, their freedom, their dignity and their freedom from bodily harm. And thus, as I would like these comments to be received as advice, I am, and we in Germany are, prepared to receive advice from other countries. We had to and we were willing to accept the criticism from Turkey, which for a long time following the xenophobic killings complained of biased investigations.

Turkey is a country on the rise and in transformation, a country with a society finding its voice, a country striving to reconcile tradition with modernity. We have been impressed by the rapid economic growth over the past decade – millions of Turks have benefited from growing prosperity. We have also seen the political influence of the military curbed, while violent confrontations have decreased following the opening of a process of dialogue with the Kurds and the historical taboos regarding Armenians, Kurds or Zazas have begun to fade. These are positive developments – and they are not the only ones to have taken place in Turkey.

Recently however, we have also heard voices expressing disappointment, bitterness and outrage over a style of leadership which to many appears to threaten democracy – for instance when citizens have a certain way of living their lives imposed on them. When their lives risk being more strictly controlled by the intelligence services. When religion is abused to serve political ends. When street protests are violently repressed and people even lose their lives in the process.

I confess that this shift alarms me. Also and indeed particularly because freedom of opinion and of the press are being restricted. We see access to the internet and social networks curtailed, critical journalists made redundant and even condemned, newspapers banned from publishing and editors coming under pressure from the judiciary.

Yet to inform thoroughly and be thoroughly informed are two fundamental requirements for a free and democratic society. This is the only way that problems can be detected and the conduct of those governing can be subject to control. This is the only way that a responsible citizen can develop and form his own opinions.

Moreover, my own experience has taught me that where freedom of expression is limited, where citizens are not at all or not sufficiently informed, not consulted and not involved, then displeasure and implacability grow and ultimately turn into a willingness to resort to violence.

Protest is a warning sign. However, if dissatisfaction leads citizens to seek better solutions and be prepared to take responsibility, then dissatisfaction turns into a useful and stimulating force. It serves the wellbeing of a country if citizens do not see themselves as subjects at the beck and call of their leaders. It serves the wellbeing as well as the stability of a country if citizens can use their skills to help shape their communities. If they want to make their city, their region, their state a better place to live.

When Turkish citizens are ready to act as such – as citizens who want to take an active part in shaping their country's destiny – we should laud this as a sign of political maturity. They should be welcomed as the driving forces of a vibrant democracy. Democracy needs such engagement.

Countless people with Turkish origins living in Germany agree with me. They wish for democratic discussion in the country of their forefathers. They have made our experiences and the experiences of the European continent their own – after two World Wars and two

dictatorial regimes we have chosen a democratic system which is liberal and based on the rule of law – one which is admittedly not perfect, but which is still the best of all known systems of government.

This democracy has promise because it awards all people fundamental rights and equal participation in their communities. No one may be disadvantaged, regardless of their ethnicity or the religion they abide by, the political ideals they represent or their sexual orientation. Everyone has the right to freely express their opinion and to congregate and if need be they can claim these rights in a court of law.

All of this safeguards the appeal of democracy and ensures it has a future.

However, 25 years after I was able leave a totalitarian state behind, I also know that living in a democracy is not only the fulfilment of a dream, it also requires hard work. Democracy needs responsible citizens. It needs citizens who support their state and navigate the constant stream of new obstacles. Citizens who do not lose patience in the long struggle for improvement. And not least, citizens who are able to compromise.

Democracy requires respect for the other. No one may be forced to live in a certain way. No one may be told which traditions to pass on to their children. We in Germany, too, had to and we still must learn this respect, not least of all towards the many immigrants from Turkey whose cultural and religious traditions we were not, and often still are not, familiar with or understand.

Democracy needs dialogue between different minds, controversial disputes in Germany have taught us this. When public discourse is poisoned and negative stereotypes are propagated then this is harmful to the community as a whole. It is harmful when emotions override evidence-based assessment and debate is shaped by polarising "us" against "them" thinking. Democracy seeks equilibrium, mediates between differing interests and in this way serves the whole.

Democracy lives very much from the people's desire to participate. It is concerning when citizens withdraw from public life – in many European countries the reality is that people are becoming disaffected with politics. In Turkey on the other hand, I see a lively civil society, striving to participate, even though no elections are currently taking place. Engaged citizens want to have a say in decisions over planning bridges, streets and shopping centres, the construction of nuclear power plants, airports and artificial lakes. They not least want a say in decisions over the role that religion and different faith groups should be accorded in politics and society in the future.

Some of these and similar questions touch on key points of the socio-political self-image. Solutions which are accepted by all and offer the internal stability that a society needs can only be found through constructive dialogue between representatives of different positions.

For you at this university, as students and teachers, I'm sure my remarks sound all too familiar. I have been told that you have been promoting dialogue between different minds for a long time. That your campus is a place of openness and liberal thinking. That here it is only reasoning that counts. Because peaceful co existence is safeguarded by compromise – between Turks and Kurds, Sunnis and Alevis, Christians and Jews, between majorities and minorities, between left-wingers, liberals and conservatives. I think that your country can be proud of a place such as this, with its consensus-based culture of debate.

Before I came to you here in the capital, at the border with Syria I was able to appreciate the great efforts that your country is going to in order to accommodate Syrian refugees. Turkey has taken in countless neighbours in need of help without complaint. It has not only ensured that people without a home have a roof over their heads. It is providing the stranded in refugee camps with food, it is building classrooms for children and guaranteeing that those who are ill receive medical treatment. The Government is even offering the half a million displaced persons who have taken their lives into their own hands and do not live in the camps free medical care. Civic initiatives help with job and apartment hunts or organise lessons for children. This scale of solidarity should by no means be taken for granted. I would therefore like to express my sincere thanks to Government and society alike. I would like to urge Germany and the European Union to offer more support to Syria's neighbouring countries in providing for refugees.

At the border with Syria I was also able to appreciate the NATO partners' joint defence system. German troops are stationed here in Turkey with Patriot missiles to prevent the war from spilling over into the country. Vice versa, Germany relies on Turkey's cooperation when it comes to preventing jihadists from entering Syria, including and especially if they come from our country. Together, Turkey, Germany and the other NATO partners are pressing for an end to the combat in Syria, for an end to the killing, to the devastation and for those responsible to be punished. Together, we are working to reach a political settlement and form an interim government which can launch the reconstruction of the country and enable the millions of refugees to return to their homes. Yet progress can only be achieved through joint action – go it alone efforts do not serve this goal and moreover stir up mistrust among allies.

In light of the most recent developments it is clearer than it has been for a long time that Turkey needs its western allies if it is to avoid being sucked into the whirlpool of events in its neighbouring countries, if it is to attract further investment to the country and if it is to be able to export to other countries without difficulty. A Turkey which isolates itself would harm itself. By the same token, Germany, Europe and the United States need a reliable and collected Turkey as an anchor of stability within the political, economic, social and military landscape of the entire region.

It cannot be questioned that in recent times little progress has been made in the process of forming closer ties between the European Union and Turkey. The accession negotiations have ground to a halt time and again. On both sides, voices can be heard that

question the point of them, and this is exactly why I want to call out to you here today: we should not allow those who speak the language of reciprocal estrangement to gain ground. Citizens' interest in one another has not dwindled, in fact it is growing.

So to conclude I would like to express hope – hope that the quest for more prosperity, more participation and for a commitment to social values, as well as the power and dynamism of this great nation, become ever more closely linked to the defence of universal human rights. If this happens we will see a fantastic impetus for development.

A democratic Turkey committed to the European values of freedom and democracy can construct a robust stable order which serves as an example for the neighbouring countries and the Arab world.

And a European Union that takes credible steps to bring the country closer to it can have a constructive influence in dialogue and can help promote further reforms within Turkey.

This is what I want to discuss during my visit when I speak to people in positions of responsibility, to civil society and to you.

The motto which you follow here on campus is also important in this regard: Do not talk about one another but to one another. We need dialogue – dialogue which is honest and candid. It is only on this basis that understanding can successfully pave the way to our shared future.