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Turkey and the EU: a promising partnership in research

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

Turkish R&D Info Day - TURBO and ALDE Event (European Parliament)

Brussels, 29 January 2009

Dear Prof. Dr Yetiş,

Dear Member of the European Parliament Mr Prodi,

Dear Ministers,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's event, devoted to Turkish research, shows the growing importance of a strong partnership between Turkey and the European Union in research and technology. It is significant that it is held here in the European Parliament – it gives us the chance to showcase what a promising partnership it is and can be.

Both the EU and Turkey value scientific excellence. We both know how important it is to develop strong research capacity for sustainable development and improvements in our quality of life. We also know the value of research cooperation as a pre-accession tool and a means to enhance our relationship by working together on global challenges. It makes sense to work together.

And we have been working together for more than a decade now. This is why I was particularly pleased when Turkey requested association to the Seventh Framework Programme for Research, or FP7. The Memorandum of Understanding associating Turkey to FP7 was signed in Brussels on 1 June 2007 and entered into effect as from 1 January 2007.

Two years of collaboration since then have strengthened the research dynamic between us. Turkey is successfully participating in all the FP7 thematic areas, has been very successful in obtaining Marie-Curie grants (proving the quality of their human resources) and is firmly entrenched in international cooperation instruments - such as Inco.net - on research coordination with the Western Balkan Countries, in research cooperation with Eastern Europe and Central Asian Countries, the Black Sea region and the Mediterranean countries, to name a few.

This cooperation takes place over a wide range of subjects, often in areas which could help Turkey's further integration into our European Research Area (ERA). These include food safety, the effect of GMOs on human health or support for the training and career development of food scientists. Turkey is involved in major research projects in the transport sector.

Turkish SMES are also benefiting through research cooperation. By sharing expertise and knowledge with fellow businesses in the EU in the electronics sector, on nano-materials and agri-food sector: new market access opportunities are being created. And together we are also doing a lot of research on socio-economic sciences and humanities issues as a means to understand each other's cultures better and stimulate intercultural dialogue.

Of course Turkey's participation in FP7 could be improved. Their success rate is lower than the EU average, and this is why the Action Plan was agreed between Turkey and the EU, as part of the negotiations with Turkey to become associated to FP7. This Action Plan identified areas in which we believe we have a common interest in increasing Turkey's participation in collaborative research. These include areas of global concern for research: energy and the environment, areas in which we need to engage more to find common solutions. At the same time, improving Turkey's scientific excellence in these two areas will help them comply with EU standards and technical regulations to meet energy targets and the "20 20 20" objectives or to meet clean air and water standards.

The Joint Research Centre (JRC), for which I am also responsible, is another key player in the research cooperation with Turkey, notably it has a pivotal role in assisting Turkey to adopt the *acquis communautaire*. In the context of its mission to provide customer-driven scientific and technical support for the conception, development, implementation and monitoring of EU policies, the JRC also supports the integration of research organisations and experts from EU Candidate Countries as part of its main projects and activities. The JRC and their Turkish partners built a good basis for cooperation through hosting temporary staff at the JRC Institutes, organising events such as workshops and training courses and cooperating on a wide range of areas of concern to citizens such as the environment, health, food, energy, security, chemicals and agriculture.

In other words, increased research cooperation can be a good pre-accession tool.

Of course, there is a *quid pro quo* in all of this: improving Turkish participation in FP7 requires that research is established even more firmly on their national agenda. Turkey is already doing well in this respect, as was established with the negotiations on science and research policy (chapter 25) in the accession negotiations. This was the first one to be opened and provisionally closed. Because, quite impressively, both in terms of participation in FP7 and integration into the ERA, Turkey's science and research policy was already well in step with us.

They have not rested on their laurels either. Since then, Turkey - inspired by our own ERA - has initiated its own Turkish Research Area (TARAL). Turkey has a national strategy plan to increase investment in research and increase their human resources capacity. They have also used, with some success, national support measures to increase their participation under FP7.

There is then a clear correlation between their national research policy aiming at strengthening the research capacity and the take up of FP7 projects. This is why I encourage Turkey to keep on doing what it has been doing. To keep on the path it has chosen and aim, just as we do in Europe, to avoid fragmentation of research efforts and establish sectoral priorities.

I hope Turkey will continue to mirror our actions at EU level, because what is valid for us here in the EU27 remains just as valid for our wider Europe: our borders don't diminish the need for us all to improve our scientific excellence to create critical mass and greater competitiveness.

However, to optimise its participation in the European Framework Programme, Turkey should also develop its own research capacity. I have already mentioned TARAL, Turkish Research Area. But they have also been working hard, through the Scientific and Technological Research Council of Turkey, or "TÜBİTAK", to establish a dedicated Division devoted to the EU Framework Programme. Turkey has set itself a target for increased investment in research: 2% of GDP by 2010 with half of it coming from the private sector.

Do you need any more examples to illustrate how Turkey is moving in the right direction in developing a system of joined-up modern research capacity?

Perhaps here I might also cite an existing tool to increase research capacity and competitiveness: the European Technology Platforms. Turkey is currently involved in thirteen European Technology Platforms. While this figure is encouraging, further participation - of industry in particular, but also of public authorities, research institutes, universities and other relevant stakeholders - would be welcomed. For our part, we continue to encourage Turkey to consider setting up of national technology platforms in areas that correspond most closely to its national strengths and priorities, such as manufacturing and construction.

Turkey, if you have not realised by now, continues to be a relevant and serious research partner for Europe. However, our efforts could be even more effective if complementary actions were taken by public authorities in Turkey. In doing so, key players in science and research will make Turkey a more attractive place to invest in research and to innovate, and thereby boost the economy and create long term wealth and employment. This would be good for all of us, both in Ankara and in Brussels.

I'll finish with a Turkish proverb which says something like "to believe a business impossible is the way to make it so".

Let's start believing more in the possible.

Thank you for your attention!