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The EU should stop blocking Turkey's accession. Together we can create a more open, tolerant and prosperous Europe

Last week the European Union released the 2011 Progress Report on Turkey, the annual snapshot of Turkey's reform process as an EU candidate country. Unfortunately, this year's report seems to have had difficulty capturing the rapidly transforming image of Turkey.

The report ignores the elephant in the room, which is that Turkey's membership bid is being blocked by a handful of countries, bringing negotiations to a virtual standstill. Over half of the chapters in the accession process have been frozen, largely because some countries have linked Turkey's candidacy to a settlement of the long simmering Cyprus problem. Despite strong Turkish support for UN efforts to reunify the island, Greek Cypriots have preferred to escalate tensions instead of working for a permanent solution. As a result, a settlement remains a distant prospect.

The Greek Cypriot role suits the parochial agendas of some politicians, who argue that Turkey's size and culture make a seat at the European table impossible. In the face of this opposition, the EU's credibility has weakened in Turkey and public support for EU membership has declined, with less than half in favour of joining. More alarming, 92% of Turks believe that the Union has "double standards" when it comes to Turkish accession. Is it any wonder that the pronouncements in the EU's report do not generate as much interest in Turkey as they once did? Many Turks are also frustrated that the EU member states have not done much to demonstrate solidarity and support in the struggle against PKK terrorism.

Despite these challenges, Turkey is resolute in pursuing full EU membership because it remains mutually beneficial to both Ankara and Brussels. As the Progress Report points out, Turkey is the sixth largest economy in Europe and one of the fastest growing economies in the world.

Trade and investment between Turkey and the EU is flourishing, creating jobs and bolstering industry. As a transit hub between European consumers and the oil and gas reserves of the Middle East and Central Asia, Turkey is critical for European energy security. Furthermore, with the largest army in Europe and strong ties with the Muslim world, Turkey offers Europe an opportunity to boost its diplomatic clout and play an enhanced role on the global stage. Fears that Turkish membership would result in an influx of migrants to Europe are simply outdated; with Turkey's economy booming, tens of thousands of Turks have returned home over the past few years. I am quite sure that if Progress Reports were published for existing EU members, they would indicate that Turkey compares favourably with many states.

Nevertheless, the value of the European project remains clear to us, even during these turbulent times. Turkey and the EU have been connected for more than half a century and we want the momentum to accelerate. Nations that stand together are better off than those that stand alone, and as an effort to elevate commonalities over differences, the EU is a

unique accomplishment. Integration is the principle that has propelled Europe to historic levels of security, peace and affluence, and its benefits are as relevant today as ever.

Our partners in Europe should move forward with Turkey's membership talks in good faith, and envisage a more open, tolerant, dynamic and prosperous Europe, with the confidence to shape the 21st century for the better. This is a vision that we can achieve together.