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**Egemen Bagis, Turkish Minister of European Affairs: "Send back the elevator for EU accession so that we can take it too !"**

- Ally - Turkish official expressed gratitude to Romania for supporting Turkey's accession to the EU

Turkey is more determined than ever to continue on the road to the European Union. Most of the negotiation chapters are still blocked by certain European countries. The Turkish Minister of EU Affairs, who was on a short visit to Bucharest, said Romania is a friend who supports Turkey, but asked her to be more "vocal". He was joking : since it is said that Romania was the last to take the elevator to join the EU she should now send it back, so that Turkey can take it too. Egemen Bagis spoke with " Adevarul " about Turkey's long journey to Europe, visas for Turkish citizens, energy policy, solutions for Cyprus problem and the situation in Syria.

By Eliza Francu and Ion M. Ionita

Mr. Minister, Your visit to Romania had excellent media coverage. You are a popular figure here.

Minister Egemen Bagis: I am trying to be. In fact, I don't think I'm popular, but my country is. Just as Romania is very popular in my country.

Q. With what Romanian officials have you met ? What subjects have you taken up?

A. I met with the Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Minister of European Affairs. I came to Romania with two messages: one of gratitude and appreciation for the support given by Romania to Turkey in the EU accession negotiations. The second is actually a request to continue this support. So far we opened 13 negotiation chapters and there are 20 more. But 17 of them are politically blocked, we cannot open them. I try to make lobby in the Member States, especially those who are our friends. The things should not be blocked like this. The Romanian officials understand these complaints. It doesn't make sense that Turkish citizens require visas to come to Bucharest. Any other Balkan candidate can enter the EU without visas, except for Turkey. It's really offending.

Q. Did the Romanian authorities promise liberalization or facilitation of visas for Turkish citizens?

A. So far, the Turkish citizens could only obtain 1-year visas. Romanian Foreign Minister informed us that, from now on, the Romanian embassies and consulates will issue visas valid for five years for Turkish businessmen. For the beginning. But on April 26, it will be a meeting of EU interior ministers in Luxembourg with Commissioner Malmstrom. At that meeting they will discuss the idea of giving the Commission the mandate to start visa liberalization process with Turkey. So I asked your Prime Minister to instruct the Interior Minister to support Cecilia Malmstrom to get that mandate and start the process of liberalization. If this happens we are also prepared to sign a readmission agreement which will guarantee that Turkey will do even more in the fight against illegal immigration to Europe. Imagine that Russia has already lifted visas for Turkish citizens. Because they want that the Turkish businessmen, tourists, students go there and contribute to their society.

Friendly countries like Romania and Turkey who have 134 years of good relations should not impose visa.

Q. But it is not because we want this...

A. I know. But, Romania is now part of the European Union. In the EU, you are a country as powerful, influential and equal as any other - France or Germany. We would want you to be more vocal, protect your interests. Visa exemption for Turkish citizens is also good for the Romanians and Greeks and Germans and Frenchmen. They have to understand that.

Q. We should not forget that we also have our problems with Schengen. We are members of the EU but we are not part of Schengen, because of the same political deadlock mentioned by you.

A. Therefore you should raise your voice even more. It is not correct what they do to Romania, it is against the promises they made.

Q. Turkey's accession to the EU is a big political challenge and you have powerful enemies in Europe.

A. I say that Turkey's accession is not a challenge but a great opportunity for Europe. Turkey is the key for solving the challenges of Europe.

Q. Some German officials say that there is a stagnation in Turkey's accession process and that they are not convinced that Turkey still wants to join the EU.

A. Any country which started accession negotiations completed them at a certain time. Some countries such as Romania became members quickly, others, like Britain, faced the veto of France or of others, but, finally became EU Member States, others such as Norway and Switzerland completed negotiations but then said "Thanks, we don't want ". Today is not the day to decide what Turkey will choose. Now it's time to focus on the process which brings benefits to both parties. The process makes Turkey more democratic, more transparent, more prosperous and ensure Europe that it has a more reliable ally, a strong market. It's a win-win case. Unfortunately, some people in certain countries, including Germany, hope that Turkey might say "No, we are not anymore interested". But, I assure you that we waited 45 years just to get a date for starting negotiations. We didn't give up. For reasons of domestic policy, some politicians may want to hear Turkey saying "goodbye", but this will not happen. It's too late to ask whether Turkey should be EU member or not. They have the right to postpone accession, to try to exercise their veto to block some chapters of accession, which is what they actually do, but they cannot stop this process. It could be stopped in two situations: either Turkey withdraws or the EU withdraws, but, for this, unanimity is needed: 27 countries. If they would manage to make all 27 states to say "no", this is it. But, until then, I will not waste a minute to think about it.

Q. You are in Romania for the second time within two years. Has anything changed in this time in Romania's position regarding this issue?

A. The Government changed, but the attitude didn't. I appreciate that former Prime Minister Boc supported us and I had now a fruitful discussion with the current Prime Minister. Everybody I met impressed me. I find it natural for us to come and thank, but also to say our discontent because Romania is not just any state in the EU, is a friendly state. Sometimes I joke with Romanian colleagues and tell them to send back the elevator for accession since they were the last to go up with this. They try to do everything they can but there are elements which sometimes prevent the elevator to work.

Q. After all, you'll have to convince powerful states like France. What can you do to convince them?

A. France was one of the countries who voted to open negotiations with Turkey and France is not against this process. Only some politicians in France are against, but no politician has the power forever. And sometimes politicians have the right to change their opinion.

"There is no unified EU-energy policy"

Q. Romania has a strategic partnership with Turkey. Can it be improved?

A. Another message that I bring is an invitation from Prime Minister Erdogan to Prime Minister Ungureanu who accepted it. We hope that when the two Prime Ministers will meet in Ankara, things will continue from where they were left by previous Romanian government and we will continue these discussions about the strategic partnership.

Q. I was referring to cooperation in the economic field.

A. The Romanian Minister of Economy is now in Turkey. I signed an agreement with the Romanian Minister of European Affairs, he signs an agreement with the Turkish Minister of Economy. Our economic cooperation is going very well.

Q. In the last years it was talked about energy cooperation, Nabucco project. What is actually the case, because everything seems blocked ?

A. It is in the interest of both Romania and Turkey that Nabucco become a reality. But unfortunately there is no unified EU-energy policy. Each EU country tries to get the cake for her. We have complaints against this as well. Just an example : 70% of energy resources that the EU needs is either south or east or north of Turkey. And, the only way for the EU to have access to these resources is through the cooperation of Turkey. In spite of this, we could not open so far the energy chapter. We could not open it just because one Member State - Cyprus - blocks it.

Q. Meanwhile, Russia is pressing to build its own pipeline, South Stream.

A. Can you blame them? You would do the same if you were Russian. It's no secret that the Russians have a united and strategic policy on the energy problem, compared with the EU.

Q. What is Turkey's position in connection with the competition between South Stream and Nabucco?

A. Turkey is determined to be an energy center. We negotiate with our neighbors, with all partners, including Russia, Iran, Egypt, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Europe. But all other parties have clear energy policy. When it comes to Europe, you are not sure that she has a unified energy policy.

Q. We'll have a pretty big problem this year in July, when Cyprus will assume the EU presidency. Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan has threatened to boycott the EU presidency. Does Turkey maintain its position?

A. We will not have a problem. Turkey's relations with the European Commission, European Parliament, Member States will continue as before. But, we cannot in the situation of being forced to recognize a country that we have refused to recognize since 1963 just because they claim to be the EU Presidency. Cyprus question was not a condition for the accession of Cyprus, it should not be a problem for Turkey's accession either. A candidate-country meets with EU presidency only if a chapter of accession opens. But, just because of Cyprus, we did not open any chapter throughout the last three EU presidencies. So, a fourth Presidency will

not affect us. We can wait for another six months, we have waited for 43 years, since 1959. Six months will finally end and we are patient and determined. If they decide to lift the blockade on these chapters and they will invite us for talks during their presidency, we will probably be too busy to come to this ceremony and will request a new date, in January.

Q. What can Europe do but doesn't do to solve the Cyprus problem?

A. Europe has to encourage both sides to reunify the island. When the sun rises over the island, it shines on two different states, two different governments, democratically elected presidents, two parliaments, two different school systems. These two states, since they are both democrats, have to decide whether to reunite or whether they can not do this. But we want the problem to be solved. It's a big burden for the European Union and its interests. On April 26, 2004, the European Council decided unanimously to end the isolation of Northern Cyprus. According to Taiwan model: there are many countries that do not recognize it, but have ties, trade exchanges with this. The same can be done in case of Northern Cyprus. Only one state implemented that decision, the citizens of only one EU member state can easily travel to Northern Cyprus and its companies can make import/export with North Cyprus and that country is Cyprus. The Greek Cypriots, who block, for example, the Romanians to do business with Northern Cyprus, allow their companies to import and export from/to the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. It's an oxymoron, is hypocrisy. It is against logics.

Q. But, if this solution will not work? What will happen then? Turkey will annex northern Cyprus, as you said a few days ago?

A. I didn't say exactly this. If the Turkish Cypriots, by their own will, decide to unite with the Greek Cypriots, we gladly receive the decision. If they decide to separate the roads and become two states we accept this as well. If they decide that they have to unite with Turkey, we will think of this as well. We are not in a hurry to annex anything. But, we want a solution and the reunification is the most viable one. That's what we would prefer. However, nobody should expect that we will abandon the Turkish Cypriots. When we left them alone, they were massacred. We will not let this to happen again. If we have to withdraw our troops from Northern Cyprus, we must receive guarantees that there will be no bloodshed of the Turkish Cypriots anymore. Since 1974, when the Turkish troops arrived on the island, there was no bloodshed anymore. The Turkish troops on the island have guaranteed stability and peace for both sides of the island. Perhaps, that's why the Greek Cypriots voted against the Annan plan : because they did not want the Turkish troops to leave the island. If the plan was accepted by both sides in the referendum ( and the Turkish Cypriots accepted it) then, we were obliged to withdraw all troops. Perhaps, subconsciously, the Greek Cypriots wanted our soldiers to remain for their own protection.

Q. Protection against whom?

A. That's the question we should ask ourselves. Because, I don't understand why they voted against the Annan plan. If they want to be on their own...

Q. Maybe they didn't like the idea of a federal state.

A. They negotiated this plan, I also participated in the negotiations. We worked together on the plan, then, the President at that time of the Greek Cypriots, Papadopoulos, signed it. But, immediately after that, he cried *live* on the TV, in front of his people. He said he had to sign it, but advised them not to vote it.

“ Syria should learn from Romania’s experience ”

Q. Last year, the landscape has changed enormously in the Middle East because of the Arab Spring. What is Turkey's perspective on these changes and on the current issues in Syria?

A. We support Syrian people one hundred per cent, not the bloody dictators, not the regimes that kill their own people. Turkey was among the first states who told Mubarak, Gadaffi and then Assad to go.

Q. What will happen if the Syrian regime does not comply with the Annan Plan?

A. The council of “ friends of Syria” will meet again and the international community will try to reach a joint position. We are glad that the Romanian Foreign Minister played a very active role in the last meeting on Syria.

Q. Do you share the same view with Romania as regards Syria?

A. I don’t believe that our view is too different. We all are interested in saving innocent lives. Romania does not want innocent people to be killed. You know from your own history what happens when a dictator starts killing his own people and know how people react. I wish the decision-makers in Syria to learn from Romania, what happens when you kill people.

Q. There are more views in the international community on how to achieve democracy in that country. What is Turkey’s view ?

A. Turkey's position is very clear. And, the speech of our Prime Minister Erdogan last week at the Istanbul summit was very clear and direct. He said that " we no longer trust Assad". And we would be surprised to see him keeping the promise made to Kofi Annan.