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EU and Turkish Perspectives on Black Sea Regional Cooperation

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Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to address such a distinguished audience on a subject which is becoming more and more important in international politics. At the outset, I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to the Southeast Europe Association for organizing this event and giving me the opportunity to share with you my thoughts on this significant topic.

The Black Sea is an important region, strategically located at the meeting point of two major continents. It is situated on important transportation and trade routes and energy corridors. Due to its enormous economic potential and natural resources, the interest of the international community towards this region is growing.

The economic potential of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) region is impressive. Covering an area of approximately 20 million square kilometers with a population of 330 million people, this region has a huge and dynamic economic potential. Their vast natural and human resources have enabled the BSEC countries to enjoy remarkable economic growth and development. Over the past five years, the BSEC region as a whole has been one of the fastest growing in the world, with 6% annual GDP growth. The total GDP of the BSEC countries amounted to 3.4 trillion USD in 2005. That represents 7.6% of the overall world economy.

The BSEC was established on the idea that stronger economic cooperation among the Black Sea countries would enhance stability in the region. The visibility of BSEC has increased as it has proved itself to be the most inclusive organization in a region where a number of frozen conflicts persist.

The BSEC is viewed by the international community as an anchor of cooperation in the region. Germany, Austria, France, Italy, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Belarus and Croatia, as well as non-European countries such as the United States, Tunisia, and

Israel are Observers. The EU Commission has also been granted Observer status. Indeed, BSEC is perhaps the only regional organization which has more observers than members. That in itself is proof of the interest it elicits and the potential that it represents.

After 15 years of existence, the BSEC and its related bodies have achieved institutional maturity and some notable successes. Starting with purely economic cooperation, the BSEC has broadened its scope of activities to encompass new fields including environmental protection, water management, science and technology, institutional renewal and good governance and soft security measures. Activities in the area of soft security include combating transnational organized crime, terrorism, illegal trafficking of drugs, human beings and arms, corruption and money laundering, all of them serious obstacles to investments and economic development as well as democratization and the establishment of the rule of law.

Tangible outcomes started to come out of a broad range of fields of cooperation in the course of time. The Memoranda of Understanding on the Development of the Black Sea Ring Highway and the Motorways of the Sea are important in terms of their targets, as well as for their expected positive impact on the development of trade and investment among the BSEC countries. Two new Agreements on the facilitation of visa issuance for businessmen and professional drivers are underway. Also the Project Development Fund, which is designed to finance projects by partners from at least three member states is a modest, yet significant achievement which I believe will prove its worth in a short period of time.

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

During its Chairmanship-in-Office of the BSEC between 1 May–31 October 2007, Turkey set its priorities on three main pillars. Within the framework of the first pillar,

we pursued the goal of making BSEC more active and effective by finalizing the ongoing process of transformation of the Organization. In this respect, the most important priority for Turkey was the continuation of the reform and restructuring of BSEC to ensure a more effective decision-making mechanism as well as rapid implementation of the decisions taken at the Council level. To this end, substantial gains were made in the area of implementation on modalities for fast track cooperation within the BSEC.

Another issue of organizational nature was strengthening of the financial structure of the organization. In order to make the BSEC more project-oriented and visible, the Organization should be provided with the necessary financial means and instruments. In this regard, more effective support from the Black Sea Trade and Development Bank would be useful. Bearing in mind the scarce financial resources of the Organization, Turkey also attaches special importance to further developing the BSEC's partnership with other international organizations.

The second pillar of Turkey's priorities was related to the BSEC's relations in the international arena. In this respect, Turkey attaches a special importance to the EU-BSEC interaction and considers that further enhanced institutional relations between the two Organizations will serve the interests of both sides. While BSEC offers the EU a well established institutional framework for interaction with the region, the EU may assist BSEC in carrying out major projects as well as supporting stability in the region through what is the region's only institutionalized multilateral platform. Therefore, Turkey desires to deepen BSEC-EU interaction.

The deepening of existing cooperation with other organizations, such as OECD and UNDP, and effective implementation of ongoing partnership projects have also taken an important place among Turkey's priorities. Let me just briefly touch upon two ongoing projects which are being carried out with these two organizations.

The "Black Sea Trade and Investment Promotion Programme" organized in cooperation with the UNDP and funded by Turkey, as well as Greece, aims at expanding intra-regional trade and investment links by identifying the untapped investment and trade po-

tential in the region and putting into place the mechanisms to exploit it. The project is expected to create immediate investment/trade generating results.

The second project entitled the “Black Sea and Central Outlook Study” which is being conducted by the OECD and funded by Turkey, Romania and Greece and having BSEC as its regional partner, will cover BSEC member states and the five ex-Soviet Republics from Central Asia. The study aims to systematically monitor and assess economic performance in the Black Sea and Central Asian regions. It will provide data and analysis of macroeconomic and structural policies and assess the economic performance of the countries in the two regions.

The third main pillar of Turkey’s strategy during its Chairmanship was the endorsement of a sectoral approach which also corresponds with the project-oriented vision that the BSEC has recently adopted.

During the same period, Turkey worked towards enhancing cooperation among member states. To this end Meetings of BSEC Member States on Culture, Transport, Science and Technology, as well as Meeting of the Undersecretaries of the Ministries of Education were held besides the Council of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs. Numerous working group meetings and workshops, as well as conferences were also held.

Of all the activities that took place during our Chairmanship, I believe that one of the most important and interesting was the “First Black Sea Games.” We have thus added a new dimension to our cooperation within BSEC, which is reaching out to the general public. This will certainly contribute to the development of a common identity in the Black Sea region.

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

We welcome the interest of the EU in the Black Sea region as well as its desire to develop its relations with the region in a more cohesive and solid manner. There are various possibilities for the EU to develop its own policies and strategies in the Black Sea region. We believe that BSEC can be the major partner for the EU as it is the only fully fledged and inclusive organization in the region. There is also consensus among the BSEC countries to develop relations with the EU. We are of the opinion that, BSEC and the EU should cooperate in the areas where we can have enough potential for progress. Activities in the fields of environment, transport, energy, trade and combating organized crime would have direct effects and consequences on the lives of the people.

The BSEC and the EU are bound to have a stronger dialogue. After Greece, with Bulgaria and Romania also joining the EU in 2007, there are now three BSEC Member States, which are at the same time members of the EU, and the European Union now has a coast line on the Black Sea. Among the countries in the region, Turkey is negotiating for membership of the EU, the Russian Federation is a strategic partner of the EU and Georgia and Ukraine are Partners in the European Neighboring Policy.

To this end a meeting of historical character was held on 14 February 2008 in Kyiv with the participation of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the BSEC and the EU Countries. With this meeting institutionalized relations between the BSEC and the EU have been initiated. During this meeting both sides agreed that greater involvement by the EU can increase the potential of the Black Sea regional cooperation and the Black Sea Synergy Initiative of the EU was welcomed as an important tool to achieve this goal.

We consider that this Black Sea Synergy Meeting is the beginning of a long term regional cooperation endeavor offering new opportunities and increased stability and prosperity to the citizens in the wider Black Sea area and the whole of Europe.

Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Preserving security and stability in the region is of great importance. Within this framework, an important responsibility rests with the BSEC, which, as I previously underlined, is the only fully fledged and the most inclusive cooperation organization in the Black Sea area.

Increased cooperation in the region through the BSEC mechanisms not only generates economic benefits, but also contributes to building confidence and reducing persisting bilateral tensions. This, in turn, consolidates stability and security in the region, which is in the interest of both the region and the international community. Turkey will continue to support the endeavors of the BSEC and its objective to become a project-oriented organization serving the common benefit of all its members.

In concluding my remarks, I would like to express once again my appreciation to the Southeast Europe Association for organizing this event.

Thank you.