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Time is working in favor of Turkey over EU bid, says top negotiator

Stressing that Turkey has a dynamic young population and is dealing with a range of issues that concern Europe, from energy to human trafficking, the chief negotiator for Turkey's European Union bid said that "time is working in favor of Turkey as the country is becoming more and more important to the European Union."



State Minister Egemen Bağış met with the Ankara representatives of national newspapers for a lunch at the Secretariat-General for EU Affairs building on Wednesday.

Egemen Bağış, state minister and Turkey's chief negotiator for EU

accession talks, said on Wednesday they have jump-started the reform process in a push to clear a backlog of almost 30 draft laws pending in the Turkish Parliament. The government is also launching a major campaign bid to convince the skeptical European public of the benefits of Turkish membership to the bloc. "We are also gearing up a new communication strategy aimed at educating and better informing our own citizens on EU affairs," he underlined.

Commenting on the small number of chapters Turkey has been able to open so far in negotiations with the bloc, Bağış said Turkey should focus more on the number of processes rather than on the number of chapters. "Opening a chapter requires the consent of all 27 EU member states and as such we may face difficulties or even be hindered by some members despite the fact that we have fulfilled all the criteria for the opening of that chapter," he said. There have been political obstacles on 18 chapters; France alone blocked the opening of five.

Turkey's negotiator expressed the hope that they will be able to open a chapter on taxation before the Czech presidency expires. On social chapters, however, Turkey has decided to shelve reforms due to the global economic crisis taking its toll on the Turkish economy. "That was the common approach adopted after a series of consultations with both employers and unions' representatives," he said.

Bağış recognizes that the chapters opened so far are relatively easy to negotiate but the upcoming ones will be more difficult as they require a great deal of overhaul and come with a heavy price tag. He says he is not deterred by the challenges and affirmed his government's determination to push forward. "On the environmental chapter, hopefully we will be able to open it up after Sweden assumes the presidency. Environmental regulations are costly but we need to pass on a clean environment to our young generation," Bağış told reporters.

On a new campaign to convince the EU's skeptical public, Turkey is launching over 400 programs in about 40 cities across France this year. French President Nicolas Sarkozy is well known for his opposition to Turkey's full membership and he had raised his objections bluntly on several occasions. Turkey is aiming at the French public directly in a hope to sway them in favor of Turkey and allay concerns at the same time.

"We are also campaigning to win the hearts and minds of Turkish citizens as well," Bağış vowed, explaining a number of initiatives aimed to ease rising concerns over EU affairs among the Turkish public. The Secretariat General for the EU in Ankara is working in close contact with the Turkish Union of Chambers and Commodity Exchanges (TOBB), the largest business group in Turkey, as well as with civic community groups

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and universities to develop common projects to educate the Turkish public about the EU. "We attach particularly great importance to our young people's education and will discuss the overhaul of the curriculum and school textbooks to reflect the EU policies that Turkey has been advocating," Bađış noted.

Stressing that EU membership is a common position that has been adopted by successive governments in Turkey, Bađış said both the ruling and opposition parties share an obligation to support the reform process. "I, however, find it difficult to understand sometimes the position of the opposition on draft laws like the commercial code and obligations law which has nothing to do with ideology," he explained.

On the Cyprus issue, Bađış criticized the EU for not delivering on promises made to Northern Cyprus. "The EU has not kept its promise to establish direct trade with the Turkish Cypriots and has not fulfilled all its obligations on financial assistance," he underlined, signaling that Ankara is not willing to open its ports to Greek Cyprus before a comprehensive solution regarding the island is found. "We are fully supporting the ongoing negotiations between the two community leaders and will continue to do so," he said.

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ABDULLAH BOZKURT ANKARA

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