# EU money alone is not enough to stop refugees. We need a single voice towards Russia and Assad, says the Turkish ambassador.

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The Turkish public has full confidence in the leadership of President Erdogan, says new Ambassador Egemen Bagis

Egemen Bagis recently came to Prague as a new Turkish ambassador with the reputation of a man close to President Recep Erdogan, and also a former Minister of European Affairs. His task is to boost the business between the Czech Republic and Turkey and at the same time he advocates Turkish policy, which raises concerns among European politicians. The Turkish government has stopped preventing refugees from getting into Europe, which is now in danger of a new migration crisis. In Syria, at the same time, there is a threat of an open conflict between Turkish and Russian soldiers. Today, the presidents of both countries are trying to find a way to stop this threat at a meeting in Moscow.

In an interview with HN Bagis explains why European money is not enough for Ankara to stop the refugees, how complicated Turkey's relationship with Russia is, or whether it is possible to hope that two detained Czech citizens will soon be released from Turkish prison.

**Let us start with the current situation on the Turkish-Greek border. What does Turkey want from the European Union in a situation where it does not prevent refugees from crossing the border and the tension is rising there?**

Turkey has secured the security and costs, both financial and emotional, of accommodating millions of refugees in the last six or seven years. We have warned our colleagues in Europe a hundred times that this burden has become too great. Unfortunately, they did not see what was coming, and we found ourselves in a situation we could no longer cope with. Last week we lost 37 soldiers in Syria trying to bring peace and stability to that part of the country. Almost a million new refugees came to our border after this incident. We just cannot handle it anymore. Refugees have the right under international law to leave the country, they want to leave Turkey. They cannot go back, they are afraid of the Syrian dictator, they want to go to Europe. We can no longer protect the borders.

It is now up to the European leaders to decide what to do. The solution is not for these refugees to go to Europe or to stay in Turkey. The solution for them is to go back to their country, but in order to do so, we need to provide them with a safe zone where these people will not be killed. The international community must convince those who make decisions in Syria or on Syria - because most of the decisions on Syria take place not in Syria but in the capitals of other states - that the territory where these people return and start a new life must be defined. We have to build houses, farms, schools for them. What Europe can do now is to build this safe zone in Syria for these people. But no one in Europe understands the traumas. The only thing Europeans are talking about is how much money they give us.

It is not a question of money, it is a humanitarian issue. We have asked for support and have spent so far $ 40 billion over the past seven years. Europe has promised us six billion, but we have not even received half of it. In the last two days alone, they have decided to give Greece an additional EUR 700 million in addition to the two billion they have already provided to Greece. This is just another example of double standards. Turkey has been a NATO member for sixty years. Turkey has protected shared values, but unfortunately it is not treated fairly.

**What do you think should be a quick, short-term solution that the EU should adopt and what should it be in the long term?**

The short-term solution is to create a safe zone in Syria along the Turkish border where we can protect these people. The long-term solution is to bring democracy and stability to Syria. Everyone in the world has the right to live in a democracy where human rights are respected. Do the Syrians not deserve that? We do not want a piece of Syrian territory. The reason our soldiers are there is to protect our national interests, to protect our citizens from terrorism that comes from Syria. But we have to realize that if people in Idlib cannot be safe, people in Paris cannot be safe either. This is an international phenomenon and requires international action. No state will solve this problem alone.

**So if the EU now put more money on the table, would that be unacceptable for your government?**

It is not just about money. There must also be a political solution. We do not want EU money, we want the EU to feel co-responsible. Of course, money is important, but they cannot solve the problem. We need a single voice towards Russia, towards dictator Assad in Damascus, we need to convince all decision makers - the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, all the different tribes in the region - that a ceasefire is needed so that refugees can return to their country. And we will build it for them.

**So what is your idea of EU involvement?**

In the first place, the EU should have a single policy. Do we really want human rights for all human beings, or do we want them only for Europeans? If we want them for all, we must persuade dictators not to kill their people. We have to be really strong in our statements, we must say that if they attack innocent civilians again, we will bomb their capital city. We are a NATO member, they killed 37 of our soldiers and we received only a false recognition from the Alliance. How would you feel if someone came and killed 37 Czech soldiers? Would you not expect your allies to come up with something stronger?

**The question would be in what situation they would be killed and where…**

They were killed, even though we have an international agreement, an agreement from Sochi, which we concluded with the Russians, with which the international community and each of the international players agreed. So we are not there of our free will. Why are we in Syria? We do not want a single piece of their country. We want to protect our borders, we do not want terrorists to come to us. From a humanitarian point of view, we try to do the best we can.

**You mentioned Russia. How would you now describe relations between Turkey and Russia?**

From your own history, you know that relations with Russia are never very simple. We have a long border with Russia, a long history. Over the centuries we have learned to respect each other, we have had better and worse times. Now we are entering a new phase.

**The new phase means that we can expect an open conflict?**

We cannot answer the question now because of President Erdogan's meeting with President Putin in Moscow. It could be clearer in the coming days. But both sides publicly stated that they were not interested in the war. Neither the Russians nor the Turks want to fight, but when we Turks had to fight, we never ran from it. Our history is full of wars and bloodshed, and theirs is very similar. From past experience, we have learned to respect each other.

**It is a bit ironic situation, Turkish companies are very involved in Russia, Russian companies in Turkey, through which also Russian gas flows, through the Bosporus sail Russian ships with weapons to Syria. How is this to be understood?**

Russian ships sail across the Bosporus thanks to international agreements, under the Treaty of Montreux, we cannot stop boats crossing the Bosporus, we can only delay them as much as possible. But we are trying to be nice. Turkey and Russia have a unique relationship, just as the Czech Republic has a unique relationship with Russia. You have a difficult and complicated history with Russia, you have a president who appreciates Russian politics. In Turkey, we have a trade with Russia worth about $ 40 billion, and about 4.5 million tourists come from Russia every year. We do not always agree with them and we are probably the only country that has shot down a Russian fighter since World War II. We are not quite proud of it, it was not planned, it was a traitor inside the Turkish Air Force, who worked for external forces. Then we tried to improve our relations with Russia. However, we differ in our views on politics in Syria.

We think we need to depose that guy in Damascus, Assad, who is responsible for killing more than a million of his own. But President Putin obviously likes him and wants him to stay in power. This is our biggest disagreement. But when it comes to air defense, we are in the process of buying the Russian S-400 missile system to protect us. On the other hand, we are fighting with his closest ally Assad. It is a very complicated relationship, but as you know, the Russians are complicated and the Turks are even more.

**You mentioned Turkish soldiers killed, fifty in total during February. What is the limit, the number of victims that the Turkish public is able to accept without needing to protest or demand a policy change?**

The Turkish public has full confidence in the leadership of President Erdogan. People know that if these victims were not in Syria, there would be many more victims at home. Like you, you stopped direct flights from China or Italy because you feel it is a threat. You are trying to protect your citizens. For us, terrorism is also a virus that needs to be dealt with. We try to destroy the source of it so that it does not spread. Terrorism is a huge virus that cost Turkey 40,000 lives. And we are quite successful in pushing this virus out of our country. To keep it out of our country, we need to have troops abroad and destroy the virus there. Unfortunately, it was not the terrorists who killed our troops, but the illegitimate government of Syria that works with terrorists and some international forces to attack our troops. We respond moderately to the attacks. Turkey is a country with 83 million people and everyone is ready to sacrifice their lives for their country.

**Looking at President Erdogan's policy in recent years, it seems that, like US President Donald Trump, he is focused not on building long-term alliances, undermining long-term relations with the US, the EU, Russia, but on individual transaction relations. Is it not the wrong direction when you have someone around you who you argue with rather than building a partnership?**

Turkey has always been a bridge between East and West, between supply and demand, between suppliers and consumers. We have always said that as a bridge we must stand firmly on four legs. President Erdogan has been leading Turkey since 2002 and has always tried to strengthen all our four legs at once. In the same year when we started our accession negotiations with the EU, a Turk was first elected representative of the Organization for Islamic Cooperation. Our policy is to strengthen our relations with everyone. But on the other hand, when we see a threat, we try to deal with it decisively. Therefore, Turkey is a firm member of NATO, but it does not mean that we cannot have relations with countries that are not in the Alliance.

The Czech Republic is a member of NATO, but you also have vital trade with non-Alliance countries. Turkey is not moving away of anything, but wants to enrich relations with all parts of the world. We are trying to increase trade with China, we are also trying to increase it with the Czech Republic, Russia, but also with the USA. We are also trying to be a member of the EU, but that brings us to the Guinness Book of Records because no other country has waited so long to become a member of any international organization. So we look at alternatives when it comes to international cooperation. But 60 percent of our foreign trade is with EU countries, 80 percent of foreign direct investment in my country comes from the EU. We have Czech companies like Skoda, Energo-Pro, CEZ, which are big investors, and we also have a fairly substantial trade with the Czech Republic. All EU Member States are therefore important to us.

**What would you now consider the most important topic of Czech-Turkish relations?**

We have no major crisis in our relations. There are everyday situations that need to be addressed, but the leaders of both our countries are in contact, the ministers communicate, your Prime Minister Babis and my President Erdogan conduct a dialogue and are discussing each topic. Sometimes they agree, sometimes not, they respect each other. They have many similar features: both are workaholics, both are very business-oriented, both want to see results, both are patriots, both want to find solutions that will benefit their countries. They are committed to increasing mutual trade. Let me say that Prime Minister Babis is among those European leaders who have full access to President Erdogan whenever they need because they can communicate. There are smaller topics like Adularya where we try to find an acceptable solution for both sides. And there are some Czech citizens who got involved in bad things, and we try to understand what can be done.

**Do you consider the Czech Republic a Turkish ally within the EU?**

Of course. When I was Minister for European Affairs, my direct partner was then EU Commissioner Stefan Fule from the Czech Republic. We have had tough discussions sometimes, but we worked to have good relationships. We have always had very good relations with the Czech Republic within NATO, in negotiations with the EU, and for us, those relations have been direct and good since the times of Czechoslovakia.

**Let us take a look at some of the common themes. Will there be a Skoda factory in Turkey? *(The Volkswagen Group postponed its decision to build a factory in Turkey last year – edit.note)***

We would like to have it and we have provided a lot of attractive incentives to get it. But it is a decision that must be made by Skoda and its owner.

**Adularya? *(The Czech Export Bank lent CZK 12 billion for the construction of a power plant that is not completed - edit. note)***

Adularya is the result of bad behavior of the private sector on both sides, which fell into the lap of both governments. Both are committed to finding solutions to mistakes made by some people in the private sector.

**And Czech citizens in a Turkish prison? *(Two Czechs are serving six years in a Turkish jail for joining the Kurdish YPG militia in 2016, which Ankara regards as a terrorist organization - edit. note)***

This is a very complicated topic. Your Prime Minister is very interested in this - in their state. They are well looked after. The fact that we prevented them from going to the war zone probably saved their lives. Yes, they are in prison, but they are alive. If they could get there, they could be dead. But getting them to the Czech Republic is a legal issue that we are working on under the prisoner exchange convention, and there are some technical details. Both Ministries of Justice and their experts are working on them and we are trying to find an acceptable solution.

**Can we expect the solution soon?**

I would rather not anticipate. When we have something to say, you will find out.