

Turkish Ambassador Bağış: Russians and Ukrainians play football in our country. The Czech Republic is an example for the world

Russians and Ukrainians play football in Türkiye. The war is a political issue, which is why Ankara is trying to bring both sides to the negotiating table. Turkish Ambassador to Prague Egemen Bağış said in an exclusive interview with CNN Prima NEWS. According to him, the Czech Republic and Slovakia are an example for the whole world because of the peaceful way the former federation managed to break up. Bağış sees a two-state partition as the only solution to the conflict in Israel.

You have been the Turkish Ambassador to the Czech Republic for over four years. What can be accomplished in such a time?

Despite the pandemic and work stress, I have enjoyed every minute here. Turkish-Czech relations have progressed a lot in the last four years. When I arrived, the volume of our bilateral trade was about three billion dollars; now it is 6.3 billion dollars. So we have more than doubled the volume of trade. But the potential is 10 billion.

We have improved cooperation on many levels. This year we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the beginning of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Czechoslovakia, which were started by two great leaders - Atatürk and Masaryk. We follow in their footsteps. We share the common values of democracy, human rights, and peace. Türkiye is a candidate country for the European Union. And the Czech Republic supports this move because it would benefit both sides.

You say that bilateral trade is getting stronger. What goods in particular are involved?

Historically, we have bought many Skoda cars. We cooperate in the field of energy, many power plants in Türkiye use boilers and turbines from the Czech Republic. Our mines also use your products. Türkiye supplies the Czech Republic with jewelry, textiles, and chemicals, and during the pandemic, we were also a leading supplier of masks and disinfectants. We are currently exploring the possibility of cooperation in the field of artificial intelligence. The defense sector is also important, where our countries are complementary.

In your opinion, what are the key moments that have shaped our 100 years of diplomatic relations?

A lot has happened. For example, I read the memoirs of the Turkish ambassador who was serving in Prague when the Nazis came here. The occupation broke off our relations for a few years. Even after the Soviet intervention, it was not a friendly period for diplomats. But the relations of the Czech and Moravian courts with the Ottoman Empire began many centuries ago, and our connection is very deep. It is no coincidence that in every Czech town you can find a person with the surname Turek (Turk).

During the First World War we sent 30,000 of our soldiers to help Austria-Hungary. Over 1,400 of them are buried in various places in the Czech Republic. There is one cemetery in Pardubice, another in Hodonín, and a third in Valašské Meziříčí, where every year we commemorate the memory of the boys who fought in their time for the same values that unite us today. Young Turkish soldiers traveled here in trains to give their lives fighting the

invading forces. Moreover, after the Velvet Revolution, Türkiye supported the Czech Republic's entry into NATO. We have the second-largest army there after the US, so we have strong leverage. We have always supported the entry of historical partners because we believe that NATO can prevent world wars.

Relations between Türkiye and the Czech Republic are good on a diplomatic level, but what about ordinary Turks? What do they think of the Czech Republic? Is it not just a small country in the middle of Europe for them?

I don't think you are a small country. You are bigger than many EU countries, but they often have a stronger voice. Ordinary Turks like the Czech Republic. They like to come here. The most frequent destinations for Turkish tourists are Prague, Vienna and Budapest because they have the hallmark of history from our point of view. Prague is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe. Many Turkish students come to the Czech Republic under the Erasmus+ program. They study in Prague, Brno, and Ostrava. They prefer Prague to Berlin, Paris or Vienna because it is safer for them, more economically advantageous and the transport links are better. There are four daily flights between Istanbul and Prague.

The world should study the way Czechoslovakia was divided.

What surprised you most about the Czech Republic?

Czechs are a bit distant at first sight. But once they understand you, they tend to be very warm. Here in the Mediterranean, people are very friendly right from the start, but over time they can be a bit reserved. As a member of the Advisory Board of the UN Alliance of Civilizations, I have always praised the way the Czechs have managed to assert themselves despite historical hardships. I believe, for example, that the world today should intensively study Czech-Slovak relations. Because many conflicts around the world require a two-state solution. And the division of Czechoslovakia was the best two-state solution from which the world can learn. Czechoslovakia broke up without a shot being fired, and two functioning democracies emerged that continue to work together.

Is there anything you've had to get used to here? Any special traditions?

During the Christmas season, I was amazed that people take home a live fish. That was different for me, but at the same time fun. I was also interested in the teachings of Jan Hus. In Turkish school textbooks it says that Martin Luther introduced the concept of Protestantism, but Hus came up with similar ideas 82 years earlier. Therefore, the true founders of the Protestant movement are Czechs.

You mentioned religion. Do you think we have prejudices against Muslims in the Czech Republic?

In the whole of Europe, people have little information in this respect. This also applies to the Czech Republic. A solution is education. We need to explain religion better. Islam is etymologically based on the word peace. Islam is one of the most peaceful religions in the world, if you interpret it correctly. But because of misinterpretation, it has acquired a negative image. However, the Muslim community in the Czech Republic is growing. And it is not just immigrants, but also native Czechs who have found answers in Islam.

What answers does Islam offer?

Islam teaches us to be good people. You cannot be a good Muslim unless you are a good person. In the same way, you cannot be a good Christian or Jew unless you are a good person. During the holy month of Ramadan, we fast during the day and eat at night, which teaches us to understand the needs of those who do not have access to food. You see -

tens of thousands of people are starving in Palestine today because of the embargo imposed by the brutal Netanyahu regime.

As a NATO member, Türkiye is a major player in Western politics. But does it feel to be a part of the West?

We are the easternmost part of the West and the westernmost part of the East. Equally, we are the most European country in Asia and also the most Asian country in Europe. We are a bridge, we always have been, since the Silk Road period. We are also, for example, a mediator between energy distributors and their customers. 70 percent of Europe's energy needs are located north, east, or south of Türkiye. Even during the pandemic, Türkiye proved to be a very reliable partner. We are a major player in NATO, but we are also trying to join the European Union.

If it helps Ukraine to secure peace, we will support its membership of the European Union more vigorously than our own.

How do you see the current relations between Ankara and the European Union? Is it still a priority for Türkiye to join the EU-27?

Without a doubt. EU membership is a strategic goal for Türkiye. Unfortunately, the process has been beset by problems. Both from Brussels and from Türkiye. We are the longest waiting candidate country, we have wanted to join the bloc since 1958. I think we should be in the Guinness Book of Records for that. It is important for us that every country that has applied for the EU has eventually got in. Türkiye will also get in.

We have always supported the expansion of international structures because we believe that this will ensure stability and peace. The EU is a kind of nutritionist who advises you on what to improve. Countries that have applied the advice are more democratic, more prosperous, and more secure in all respects. Türkiye sees this advice as an opportunity to become a better country. But things take time.

What if Ukraine had joined the EU before Türkiye? Wouldn't you see that as unfair?

Frankly, there have already been several manifestations of unfairness. More countries have joined the European Union before us. For us, however, the process is more important than the result. If it helps Ukraine to secure peace, we will support its membership more vigorously than our own. We want the bloodshed there to end. Türkiye is the only country that can bring Russians and Ukrainians to the negotiating table. There is always room for diplomacy.

However, it takes two to negotiate peace. How do you convince Putin to attend the talks?

We tried. We've achieved a safe corridor in the Black Sea or a prisoner exchange. We welcomed Zelensky to Ankara and I believe that Putin will soon visit Türkiye.

So Türkiye is a mediator during the war?

The most successful one.

Do you think peace can be achieved without Ukraine giving up part of its territory?

Neither I nor you can decide that. It is up to the Ukrainians and the Russians. For me, it is remarkable that both Ukrainians and Russians consider Türkiye to be their favourite destination. And here we can see with our own eyes that they can get along. If you go to

any hotel in Antalya, you will see Ukrainians and Russians talking and playing football or volleyball. So it is not a war between Ukrainians and Russians. It is a political war that has to be resolved by the politicians. That is why we are trying to bring them to the negotiating table. All wars come to an end.

Can you imagine a government that bombs hospitals and religious buildings? Israeli soldiers attacked civilians queuing for food from UN aid workers. If that's not terrorism, tell me what is.

Your President Erdogan said two years ago, coincidentally in Prague, that "peace is always better than war".

I totally agree with that...

Even if it was a peace that would soon lead to more and bigger wars?

Peace does not lead to more wars. Wars are unresolved disputes. Therefore, we must resolve the dispute to prevent wars.

The Czechs have a different historical experience. In 1938, British Prime Minister Chamberlain willingly sold us out to Hitler for the sake of a supposed peace. When dealing with Putin, should we not also bear in mind that a second Munich should not be repeated in the 21st century?

Yes, we have the opportunity to learn from history and ensure that mistakes are not repeated. But the solution is not to stop talking to each other. We must give peace talks and diplomacy a chance. Hitler did not rush to Prague in 1938, but seized the armaments factories in Pilsen, which enabled him to invade the rest of Europe. Yes, it was short-sighted. We can make better choices today.

One more quote from Turkish President Erdogan caught our attention. It was when he said that Israel is a terrorist state. Do you agree with that as well?

What Israel has done in recent months is unacceptable. They have killed more than 32,000 innocent people. They claim they were Hamas members, but most of them were women and children. Neither Israel nor Palestine will be safe unless both sides are safe. The only solution is a two-state solution. For Israelis and Palestinians to live side by side based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine. Unfortunately, Netanyahu has said that he does not want any two-state solution. This means that the problems are deepening.

I fear the global consequences. Billions of Muslims around the world are furious. Even in Russia or European countries where they have strong communities. These people do not understand that the international community cannot stop a country like Israel. We need a ceasefire immediately. We need to end the starvation of the people of Gaza. Civilians there have no access to food. Can you imagine a government that bombs hospitals and religious buildings? Israeli soldiers are attacking civilians who are queuing up for food from UN aid workers. If that's not terrorism, tell me what is?

What about Hamas? That's not a terrorist movement in your opinion?

The Palestinians chose Hamas themselves. However, what Hamas did on 7 October last year can neither be explained nor accepted. We are against it. We are also clearly against hostage-taking. However, what Hamas did on 7 October was not a response to a single day of oppression. It was a reaction to 75 years of torture by Israel, to Israeli expansion and

invasion. Netanyahu is now only strengthening Hamas in the eyes of the Palestinian people. The killing must stop. How many of the Palestinians killed were actually from Hamas? And how come the Israeli secret service – according to some, one of the best in the world - cannot find the hostages? How come it could not prevent the October attack? The answers to these questions would surely be of interest to many people around the world.

You're talking about a two-state solution. But how to prevent the peace of arms from being too fragile?

First, we have to stop sending ammunition there, which affects both sides. Türkiye has offered to be the guarantor of the ceasefire. If necessary, we can call in UN troops, troops from the international community. Then the two sides have to negotiate with each other. But with every day of killing, it gets harder.

What is Turkey's relationship with Israel now?

We were the first Muslim country to recognize the State of Israel. In our country, there is only visible anger against Netanyahu and his government. Don't get me wrong, it is not that we, as Turks, have something against the Jews. Not at all. When the Spanish expelled the Jews from their land in 1492, the Ottoman Empire was the only one to offer them refuge. The Jews became part of our society. I myself have many friends among them.

There is another big issue linked to Türkiye: migration to Europe. Do you think we can expect another wave of migration soon?

Thanks to Türkiye, the number of migrants flowing into Europe has decreased. But the solution is not to build walls. We need to find the source of the problem. In the Czech Republic, you have half a million Ukrainian refugees; we have over three million Syrian refugees. None of them have come for tourist reasons. They came to save their lives. We need to reach a point where they can be persuaded to go back.