

'Cosy Europe: a thing of the past' from Die Zeit (7 October 2004)

Caption: On 7 October 2004, in an article published in the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit, Günter Verheugen, Commissioner for Enlargement, comments on the European Commission's recommendation that accession negotiations be opened with Turkey and gives reasons for the Commission's decision.

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Cosy Europe: a thing of the past

Turkey's accession would strengthen the European Union and make it a player on the global political scene

By Günter Verheugen

The question of Turkey's final place in Europe is one of security policy and security policy alone. That is nothing unusual in the history of European integration. Peace and security issues surrounded the inception of the whole integration project, since the European Union of today is the response to the war-ravaged Europe of yesterday. At least three of the five EU enlargement rounds that have already taken place did so not for economic or cultural reasons but for reasons of security policy and strategy. I am referring to the accessions of Greece, of Spain and Portugal, and of eight Central and Eastern European countries on 1 May 2004. Each round involved the stabilisation of fledgling democracies by means of integration — and so far the formula has worked and has made Europe not just more secure and more stable but also stronger.

Of course Turkey is a special case. The close ties between Turkey and the EU or its forerunners and vice versa are a product of the Cold War. In strategic terms Turkey was a key country for the security of the entire West. It was a prime concern to anchor this country firmly in the Western world. Consequently, in 1963, Turkey became the first associate member of the then EEC. At the time the German President of the Commission, Walter Hallstein (CDU), promised Turkey an equal place at the table with the European powers. Now the Cold War is over, we have a new international situation, and once again Europe and the entire West cannot do without Turkey. Even the objections to the enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were an expression of a mentality that had not grasped the significance of either 9 November 1989 or 11 September 2001 for the future of Europe. Both dates encapsulate microcosms of world history which manifested themselves to all those of us alive at the time as an overwhelmingly happy event — the fall of the Berlin Wall — and an overwhelmingly horrifying event — the attack on New York. Failure to include these two dates in your political thinking will leave you with a cosy feel-good Europe but not with the reality of the first third of the 21st century. The major security policy issue today is whether we shall succeed in shaping a relationship between Western democracies and the Islamic world that is free from conflict and based on tolerance and cooperation, or whether we shall enter a new, unknown type of world war arising from terrorist fundamentalism.

Chancellor Schröder first had to be convinced of the idea of accession

In this context, Turkey sees itself as the country that can make the vital difference. It is a large Muslim country, showing that Europe is not rejecting the Islamic world and that such a country can fully adopt European values and put them into practice.

Europe has an overwhelming interest in a stable Turkey that will be a reliable partner on an ongoing basis. Turkey's slide into anti-European fundamentalist Islam would shake the security and stability of the whole of Europe.

In Turkey, the major transformation from an authoritarian system into a modern democracy and open society is inextricably bound up with the European perspective. The Turks are unified by their desire to be Europeans and to be acknowledged as having equal rights. To achieve this, and this alone, they are prepared to accept reforms that were considered impossible just a few years ago.

Turkey's preparations for accession to the EU constitute a long history full of disappointed hopes on the Turkish side and unfulfilled promises on our side. In Luxembourg, in 1997, despite association and customs union, which conferred on Turkey the most privileged position that any third country had ever had relative to the EU, the EU was prepared only to confirm Turkey's eligibility for accession. No implementation strategy was offered. This led to the most serious crisis ever in the history of relations between Turkey and the EU, and it was then that I became involved with Turkey for the first time in my life. In 1998, when I was still foreign policy coordinator for the SPD, I proposed that Turkey be given the opportunity to prove its eligibility for

Europe and that a clear pre-accession strategy be devised to help it with this. I was able to persuade Gerhard Schröder that this was the right line to take in the summer of 1998, before he set off to visit President Clinton in Washington.

At the Cologne Summit in June 1999, Gerhard Schröder tried to bring his European colleagues around to this way of thinking. That was achieved, however, only in Helsinki in December 1999, after the Commission had submitted a proposal to this effect. In Copenhagen, in December 2002, the Heads of State or Government, diverging from the Commission proposal, then decided to open accession negotiations with Turkey without delay if, in late 2004, it could be shown that Turkey fulfilled the political accession criteria. Turkey had pressed for this date throughout 2002, while the Commission had absolutely refused to talk about dates. I took the line that homework had to be done before the next step could be taken. The Copenhagen decision was a compromise that can be understood only against the background of the Iraq crisis. The decision created one problem, however: anything that could not be construed as a clear ‘Yes’ would be viewed as rejection and, presumably, would create an even more serious crisis than that of 1997.

The election victory of the AKP under Tayyip Erdoğan in November 2002 changed the situation dramatically. Hitherto, Turkey had been unwilling to adopt reforms. Reforms were half-heartedly committed to paper, and only then because this was what the EU wanted. The government that now came to power was one that pursued democratisation, liberalisation and modernisation on its own initiative — in the interests of Turkey itself.

The result is impressive. The constitution and legislation have been virtually catapulted into the present day, and just a few projects remain to be completed. It is a revolution which — unlike the Atatürk revolution — is supported by a relatively broad majority of Turks. No one will be surprised to learn that the reforms are taking longer to put into practice. There are the usual bureaucratic hurdles, there are administrative weaknesses, and, above all, there is real obstructionism in the authoritarian and nationalistic sections of the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the security bodies.

In its assessment of the state of reforms in Turkey, the Commission applied the principles that it has successfully used with 12 other states in recent years. In so doing, it has moved away from a purely formalistic consideration of the regulatory framework and is increasingly also calling for ‘good governance’. The concept of good governance is not immediately obvious in the Copenhagen criteria. What must the verdict be if the regulatory framework is largely in order but governance is generally weak? You have to weigh up the situation. You have to evaluate the momentum of reform, the credibility of the whole process, practical successes already achieved — and then you have to estimate future prospects. The Commission’s decision was greatly, if not crucially, influenced by its in-depth discussions with the leaders of the non-Muslim religious communities, the trade unions, women’s organisations and human rights organisations. They all take the same position, claiming that they still have problems but that these will quickly disappear if the reform process continues. They are all pleading for the opening of negotiations.

The church leaders had a special message for Europe’s Christian Democrats. They do not want the position of the Christian churches in Turkey to be used as an argument against the country’s EU prospects. I was begged to play down the subject of Christian minorities. The patriarchs know why. They are relying on Europe.

Clashes between police and demonstrators do not necessarily constitute torture

Human rights activists in Turkey and elsewhere testify to the considerable progress made by the country, including in the fight against torture. One single organisation is making the very heavily politically motivated allegation of systematic torture. It is doing so on the basis of a hasty interpretation of the law and a definition of torture that immediately sees any clash between police and demonstrators as torture. If that were the criterion, Germany would also be guilty of systematic torture. So the former German Economic Affairs Minister Graf Lambsdorff is not correct when he says that a country that practises unsystematic torture is no better. The opposite of systematic torture is not unsystematic torture but individual abuse — this may be widespread, as in Turkey and elsewhere, yet not, for example, supported by the state but expressly combated.

I am well aware of the objections to Turkey's possible accession to the EU. People claim that Turkey is not European enough, not Christian enough, is too large, too far away, too poor, too backward and all that. So a few remarks here:

— Turkey is undergoing rapid change, and the pace of this change will continue to increase. The bizarre 'adultery crisis' has indeed shown that, in the event of conflict, the modern European Turkey is stronger than the traditionalist reactionary Turkey, which does also still exist.

— The cultural gap between Ankara and Copenhagen is much smaller than that between southern Italy and northern Sweden. The EU is founded not on religious values but on secular ones — freedom, human dignity, justice, democracy and the rule of law. Freedom of religion is a human right, but no one has the right to tell another human being what he or she should believe.

— One major strategic objection to Turkey's possible accession to the EU is 'overexpansion'. This argument was already put forward against enlargement to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is true to say that almost all the large empires in history crumbled because of overexpansion: Rome, Napoleon's empire, the colonial empires, the pan-German *Reich* (thankfully short-lived) and the Soviet Union. All these empires were welded together by force and could be held together only by force. The EU is not an empire, either in this sense or in any other. The EU is built on free will, equal rights and democracy. It cannot overexpand because it does not need any resources to maintain its territory. EU enlargement is not overexpansion but an extension of the area in which our common European values prevail.

— The form that any accession treaty with Turkey would ultimately take has not yet been determined. Uncontrolled immigration need not be feared if Member States retain the right to regulate immigration from Turkey at all times, even after accession. Nor are there any automatic arrangements for costs. For the major cost items — agriculture and Structural Funds — the accession treaty can set out specific arrangements which limit the net transfer from the Community's budget to Turkey. Turkey will not cost a single euro more than the EU members can and wish to pay for this project.

I have pointed out that accession negotiations will not automatically be successful. There is no guarantee — for one thing, Turkey's accession has to be approved both by the European Parliament and by all the national parliaments. To this extent the process is open-ended. But I must make one thing clear: we are talking about the opening of accession negotiations, and there are not two options to choose from in the negotiations. If an alternative should be used in the medium term because circumstances change either in the EU or in Turkey, making the project no longer politically realistic, then some thought would have to be given to this. The alternative of a 'privileged partnership' is, however, only a buzzword and is never properly defined. Any additional privileges that Turkey could be offered beyond the status that Ankara currently enjoys are in fact rejected by the advocates of a privileged partnership.

Turkey's path to the EU will continue to be long and difficult. If Turkey makes it, Europe will reap considerable political and economic benefits. But Europe will also have to be willing to consider its own capacity for reform, particularly with respect to agricultural policy and structural policy, which generate such high costs. These are policies that raise the issue of cost. And lastly: the EU would become a player on the global political scene at the latest after Turkey's accession. The EU would no longer be able to manage without a common foreign and security policy that is also worthy of the name.

Günter Verheugen is EU Commissioner for Enlargement and was largely responsible for seeing through the expansion of the EU to include ten countries on 1 May 2004. Since 1999 he has been travelling and carrying out inspections in Turkey. This coming November he will take over as EU Commissioner for Industry.