

"We have opened the door to Turkey" from the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (18 December 2004)

Caption: On 18 December 2004, the day after the Brussels European Council held on 16 and 17 December, the German daily newspaper Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung comments on the decision taken by the Twenty-Five to open negotiations for accession to the European Union with Turkey.

Source: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. 18.12.2004. Frankfurt a.M. "Wir haben der Türkei eine Tür geöffnet", auteur:Stabenow, Michael , p. 6.

Copyright: (c) Translation CVCE.EU by UNI.LU

All rights of reproduction, of public communication, of adaptation, of distribution or of dissemination via Internet, internal network or any other means are strictly reserved in all countries.

Consult the legal notice and the terms and conditions of use regarding this site.

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/we_have_opened_the_door_to_turkey_from_the_frankfurter_allgemeine_zeitung_18_december_2004-en-f92c480b-a23a-4516-a1a7-053b9dbcafa0.html



Last updated: 28/07/2016

‘We have opened the door to Turkey’

by Michael Stabenow in Brussels

The European Union Heads of State or Government spoke with one voice to hail the outcome of their summit as a ‘historic milestone’

That was two years ago, just outside Copenhagen, as they celebrated the conclusion of accession negotiations with 10 Central and East European countries — and thus, symbolically, the end of the division of Europe.

Yet many of those present already suspected that a preliminary decision also taken at the Denmark Summit might, two years later, drive a wedge between Europe’s governments and majority public opinion.

It was decided that the question of accession negotiations should, henceforth, be simply one of timing: and the period envisaged should be short rather than long. No less a figure than Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen apparently concurred. Today, like Austrian Chancellor Wolfgang Schüssel, he is one of those who view with scepticism Turkey’s trek towards Brussels which began back in 1963. As host of the European Council meeting, however, he was anxious not to dim the vision of an economic and value-based Community stretching beyond the geographical bounds of the continent.

Accordingly, the Turkish Prime Minister of the day, Abdullah Gül (currently Turkey’s Foreign Minister), had to be included in the ‘group photo’ symbolising the ‘new Europe’. Even then, in Copenhagen, however, the man who was to succeed him as Premier, his party chairman, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, was pulling the strings in the background.

In contrast to the mood in December 2002, the closing statement from the Brussels Summit eschewed any hint of happy anticipation at the prospect of Turkey’s accession to the Union. This time, the European Council took a more sober tone, welcoming the ‘decisive progress’ made on reforms and expressing its ‘confidence’ that Turkey would actively pursue these efforts. Unsurprisingly, speaking after the dinner attended by the Heads of State or Government at which 3 October 2005 was fixed as the date for negotiations to open, none of the summit participants used the term ‘historic’.

Commission President José Manuel Barroso, with his habitual Cheshire cat grin, summed up his sentiments by saying that ‘the EU this evening opened the door to Turkey’. Seated beside him, Jan Peter Balkenende, Prime Minister of the Netherlands — quite unbidden — described himself as a ‘happy and contented President of the European Council’, although his vinegary expression suggested quite the opposite.

Perhaps, at that moment, his mind was on the two hours of late-night talks with Erdogan that lay ahead and the tedious squabbling over the Cyprus conundrum that was to follow.

Balkenende had not, in fact, envisaged the Summit going the way it did. Among friends in the European People’s Party (EPP), he had been relieved to realise that the form of words advocated by Schüssel and Germany’s Angela Merkel, Chairman of the CDU — an explicit reference to a ‘privileged partnership’ with Ankara but without accession — stood no chance of being adopted.

The formula finally agreed — an assurance that, should the accession negotiations fail, Turkey must remain anchored within ‘European structures’ — has appeal on two fronts. On the one hand, it emphasises that the outcome of the accession talks is not a foregone conclusion. On the other, it can be cited by both advocates and opponents of Turkish accession in support of their respective positions.

German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder gleefully let it be known in Brussels that, ‘although some people might not like it’, accession remained the unqualified goal. Balkenende, by contrast, insisted there was ‘no guarantee’ that Turkey would accede.

Meanwhile, there also seemed to be no guarantee that Erdogan might be persuaded to recognise Cyprus in the near future. Experienced EU policy boffins had produced an imaginative way round this problem. It would suffice if Erdogan undertook to sign an additional protocol extending to the 10 new Member States the customs union that had existed between Turkey and the EU since 1996.

Since Cyprus — in the northern half of which some 300 000 Turkish soldiers remain stationed — is one of the 10 newcomers, such a move would amount indirectly to recognition of the island republic, or so the argument goes. Erdogan, however, who had spoken only on Thursday of his desire to have ‘a coffee of peace’ with Greek Cypriot President Tasso Papadopoulos, had to be pressed hard on Friday before he would bend to the EU Member States’ demand.

‘If you want to be part of a family, you have to recognise all the members of the family,’ urged EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana — and, in fact, the representatives of all 25 EU Member States took the same view. By Friday afternoon, however, there were signs that Erdogan was, in fact, prepared to meet the EU partners’ requirements and sign an appropriate declaration of intent.

It had been stipulated in Copenhagen that negotiations with Turkey were to begin ‘without delay’ if the European Council decided at its December 2004 meeting that the country fulfilled the political criteria for accession. And, at their Friday session in Brussels, the Heads of State or Government unanimously certified that the criteria had been ‘sufficiently’ met.

Closer scrutiny of their position, however, reveals a measure of doubt. It is noted that Turkey needs to implement six specific items of legislation. The Commission is also to continue ‘closely monitoring’ the reform process to ensure it is not effectively reversed and is comprehensively implemented, with particular regard to fundamental freedoms and full respect for human rights. One remaining ‘point of concern’ identified by the EU partners is the need for ‘zero-tolerance of torture and ill-treatment’.

As a result, the precise substance of the ‘political criteria’, laid down in Copenhagen in 1993, remains unclear. By contrast, Europeans now have a fair idea of what their national leaders mean when they talk of acting ‘without delay’: no fewer than 290 days will elapse between the Brussels decision and 3 October 2005. That is the date on which, in Luxembourg, on the margins of the EU Foreign Ministers’ monthly meeting, the negotiations will officially begin.

The fact that the EU should extend its feelers across the Bosphorus precisely on German Unity Day has a certain piquancy. Like so much EU planning, however, the schedule is based on several political considerations.

The obligatory pre-accession process known in Euro-speak as ‘screening’, which involves comparing EU law with Turkey’s own legislation, is likely to take a few months. There is also a desire, chiefly on the part of French President Jacques Chirac, to play for time.

Chirac recently promised the French that they would soon be given an opportunity to vote on the EU Constitution and, eventually, (Chirac envisaging that the negotiations will take up to 20 years) on Turkey’s accession. In order to avoid what Paris regards as a ‘telescoping’ of the constitutional debate into the separate debate about Turkish accession, Chirac wants to leave plenty of time between the referendum on the Constitution and the opening of talks with Ankara.

It is, therefore, not unlikely that the constitutional vote will be held before the summer holiday period, probably in June. On the other hand, advocates of Turkish accession like Gerhard Schröder and Italy’s Silvio Berlusconi will not be prepared to accommodate further delay in opening the official negotiations.

Next October, the Commission will deliver its traditional ‘progress report’. If it finds that Ankara is not really moving at an acceptable pace along the path of virtue signposted ‘rule of law’, then fixing the start of talks for November or December could potentially reopen the divide between pro and anti-accessionists that has now been carefully bridged by the Brussels compromise formulas.

The haggling that produced the compromises has, however, sidelined the truly fundamental question: what will Turkey's accession mean not only for Turkey but also, and crucially, for the European Union and for the process of political unification?

Indeed, who can really predict how the Old Continent will look by 2020 — currently the most likely date for Turkey to accede? Both advocates and opponents of its accession will, however, concur with the comment of one summit participant who, during the late-night session, spoke of a 'decision with enormous consequences'.