

‘Turkey: alliance or clash’ from Libération (20 December 2004)

Caption: On 20 December 2004, in an article for the French daily newspaper Libération, following the Brussels European Council held on 16 and 17 December, Josep Borrell, President of the European Parliament, outlines Parliament’s position on the possible accession of Turkey to the European Union.

Source: Libération. 20.12.2004. Paris. "Turquie: l'alliance ou le choc", auteur:Fontelles Borrell, Josep , p. 36.

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The accession of the Turkish State to the EU raises the question of what Europe's political ambitions are.

Turkey: alliance or clash

The European Council has decided to open accession negotiations with Turkey, a candidate country since 1999. On 15 December, the European Parliament voted in favour by a large majority (407 for, 262 against with 29 abstentions). This is a historic moment. Turkey, with one foot in Europe and one in Asia, standing at the crossroads of all the paths of history, is not a candidate country like any other. Whether it one day joins the European Union or not, it will have consequences for that 'clash' of civilisations which some people are trying hard to provoke or for the 'alliance' between civilisations which many of us hope for, because we see it as a guarantee of peace and shared progress. The Turkish question divides Europeans. They wonder what the geographical, historical and political limits of Europe are. For a long time, we avoided this question. The existence of the Soviet bloc was there to answer it for us. The iron curtain set our borders. Now that it has gone, we have been forced to choose how high Europe sets its sights. Some people want our ambitions to be narrower and narrower, while others want them to be wider and wider. Just as we are looking for an answer to these questions, Turkey finds itself in the middle of a passionate debate on our continent, a debate in which the European Parliament has much to say. At the end of the road, and we know that it will be a long one, Parliament will have to give its agreement if the accession is to take place. Europe's citizens should be aware of this.

During my recent visit to Turkey, in Ankara, Istanbul and Diyarbakir, I was able to see how imperative it is to fight against stereotypes, caricatures and historical misunderstandings on both sides. What do we actually know about each other? In Europe, there are people who fear a new Turkish invasion, without scimitars or janissaries this time, but by the mere force of demography. In Turkey, certain words such as 'Cyprus' or 'Kurdistan' provoke certain fringes of the population — and I saw it myself — to passion, polemics and rage.

All through my stay, I was able to see how involved Turkish society is in this process. All the people I had a chance to talk to in political circles, the trade unions, the employers' organisations, the defenders of human rights and the representatives of religious organisations shared, all of them, this same determination to see Turkey in Europe.

Of course, some sectors, the most reactionary or the most nostalgic for the past, reject any future accession to the EU. The most progressive political forces in Turkey, on the other hand, support the launching of accession negotiations with the greatest possible determination. They know that otherwise the reforms would come to a halt and the country could even slide backwards. For the Kurds especially, it is the only guarantee of an end to violence and of their identity being recognised. However that may be, we must all be well aware that the opening of negotiations is the start of a long process which does not automatically lead to membership. For the European Parliament, this is the single ultimate objective of the negotiations, but nothing and no one can guarantee that it will be achieved. It will depend on the efforts put in by both sides.

The EP also thinks that certain conditions have to be laid down in the negotiation process. In the event of grave violations of fundamental rights, a decision could be taken to suspend the negotiations. It has to be acknowledged that Turkey has made great progress and carried out major reforms over the last five years, but much remains to be done, much more than Turkey itself thinks. Just remember that the negotiations with my own country, Spain, took 11 years and that Poland only joined 15 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Despite the requirement for unanimity in the Council before negotiations can start, the Turkish question arouses a great deal of mistrust in several of the Member States. The special character of Turkey and the fact that most of its population are Muslim are among the arguments we hear most often. It is, nevertheless, certain that since it was founded the Turkish State has been a secular State and it offers the best possible proof of the compatibility of Islam with democracy. So, whatever the outcome of the process beginning today, we must make people understand that the EU does not define its frontiers in accordance with the 'clash of civilisations' and that, with respect to Turkish membership, there are no religious frontiers. Europe is not and cannot be a Christian club and Turkey must not be rejected because its population is mostly

Muslim.

Our concept of Europe is that of a union grounded in universal values such as democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This is the viewpoint from which we should look at the conditions for Turkish membership of the EU. We know that the Turkish question forces us to consider what our political ambitions for Europe are. Let me be quite clear on this point: Turkish accession must not cause us to give up in our efforts to make the Union into a political player on the international stage — on the contrary, it should cause us to make that great ambition even stronger.

Some people think this is impossible: if we admitted Turkey to the EU, it would be the ultimate distortion of the Union's reason for existing and would destroy its ability to have any impact on the world through a common foreign policy. Other people, however, think that Turkish membership is vital if Europe is to be able to play a global role by setting up a radically different relationship with the Islamic world from that which the United States has established in the Middle East.

Also, and this is just as important, the Turkish question raises another series of more 'prosaic' issues: its great size, its large population, the continuing poverty of the rural areas, which would entail massive subsidies to agriculture, an economy still feeling the effects of the crises which struck the Turkish lira a few years ago, and so on. And what if all our doubts over Turkey boiled down in reality to the simple fact that it is a very large, very poor country?

As we set out on the long road now opening before us, democratic debate is fundamental. The question of Turkey must be a priority for Parliament, because relations with the Islamic world are the major issue for the future of Europe.