

## Address by Atzo Nicolai on relations between the European Union and Turkey (Maastricht, 4 April 2004)

**Caption:** On 4 April 2004, Dutch Foreign Minister Atzo Nicolai emphasises that Turkey's accession to the European Union does not depend solely on the accession criteria that need to be met, but also on whether the EU is in a position to welcome new members.

**Source:** Bot, Bernard, Turkey and the EU: Looking Beyond Prejudice. [ON-LINE]. [Den Haag]: Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken, [24.05.2005]. Available on [http://www.minbuza.nl/default.asp?CMS\\_TCP=tcpPrintMinBuza2&CMS\\_ITEM=9D34311B9F6847B3AE0701F3E113BF8DX3X45294X73](http://www.minbuza.nl/default.asp?CMS_TCP=tcpPrintMinBuza2&CMS_ITEM=9D34311B9F6847B3AE0701F3E113BF8DX3X45294X73).

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## Turkey and the EU-Ready for Each Other?

Symposium 'Turkey and the EU: Looking Beyond Prejudice' (4 April 2004)

Maastricht School of Management, Maastricht

### Age-old relationship

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The ties between Turkey and Europe go back a long way. Much further than the recognition of Turkey as a candidate state at the Helsinki European Council in 1999, or the association agreement signed by the EEC and Turkey in 1963, or the establishment of the westward-looking Republic of Turkey in 1923 by Kemal Atatürk. Those events are at best recent highlights in the age-old relationship between Turkey and Europe.

That relationship is not only time honoured but also unique. After the Middle Ages, when Europe set out to dominate the rest of the world, in its dealings with the Ottomans it remained above all a neighbour. For the Ottoman Empire was the only non-Christian great power that truly posed a threat to the Occident. And sure enough, within a hundred and fifty years, the Sultan's army twice advanced as far as the gates of Vienna. In 1529, and again in 1683, the Hapsburg Empire was able to fend off the attackers, but it knew the taste of fear.

### The Netherlands and Turkey

So Turkey was an audacious neighbour and in European politics it was a force to reckon with. William of Orange, the founding father of the Netherlands, was one of the first to recognise Turkey's value. He too was a brazen fellow and, like the Ottoman Empire, embroiled in conflict with the Spanish Hapsburgs. So he sounded out the Turks about the possibility of an alliance. The Ottoman Empire was willing, and in 1612 the new republic opened diplomatic relations with the Sublime Porte. With only a brief interruption, in the period when Napoleon held sway over the Netherlands, the bonds between our countries have held fast for four hundred years.

The Ottoman Empire was a model of tolerance and civilisation, especially compared to Europe. Because of the great freedom the Empire granted to its minorities, many groups persecuted in other countries sought refuge there. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, most of the Jews driven out of Western Europe found shelter among the Ottomans.

Unlike other peoples, the Turks respected the religion of the Christians they defeated. It is telling that even after Constantinople became Istanbul, it remained the centre of the Eastern Church. You can see why Dutch Protestants used the crescent moon, also found in the Turkish flag, as the symbol of their struggle for religious freedom.

### EU is not a religious entity

Ladies and gentlemen,

The dividing line between Christianity and Islam does not coincide with the borders of Europe. As we determine the contours of the European Union, we must move beyond the past. Of greater importance still is our vision of the future. Christianity has no monopoly on universal values like democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for minorities. Nor does European humanism have any such monopoly. That's why we call those values universal.

The European Union that I believe in is not an inward-looking Christian fortress. In my experience, the diversity of traditions on which the EU is based is the source of its strength. The strength to face the outside world with an open mind, with respect and with self-confidence. We can call on that strength to reverse the

rising current of opinion that says that Christianity and Islam are doomed to endless struggle. Decades of friendship between the EU and Turkey prove that to be a fallacy.

Religion is not among the guiding principles of European government. Nor does Islam play such a role in Turkey. The European principle of separation of church and state has a counterpart in the secular nature of the Turkish state. That places the country in the vanguard of the Muslim world. Turkey shows the sceptics that Islam and an enlightened modern state can coexist in harmony. The country is a beacon on the shores of the turbulent Middle East. To exclude Turkey on the basis of the religious convictions of its majority – that would be bitter indeed, as well as erroneous.

### **Process of change**

Turkey has taken its greatest strides towards democracy in the past few years, since the end of the Cold War opened up new options. The shifting balance of power gave it an opportunity to re-evaluate its relationships with countries like Russia and Syria. The process gained momentum in 1999, partly because in December of that year the Helsinki European Council decided to grant Turkey the status of a candidate state for EU membership.

Three years later, Turkey took off, under the leadership of Prime Minister Erdogan and Minister of Foreign Affairs Gül. The pace of reform is impressive. The fact that members of the Muslim democratic party AKP are responsible for this achievement shows that preconceived notions about the inherent conservatism of Islam need adjusting. The last local elections showed that the Turkish public supports current policy. So, to many people's surprise, AKP has now emerged as the right party to lead the country through these very demanding changes. But there is still a difficult path ahead.

### **Shared values**

As far as I'm concerned, religion is immaterial to whether a country can or cannot join the EU. So what does make a country European? The answer has two parts.

First, the EU is a community of values. That is to say, its members have shared values based on the principles of liberty and democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. These values are an integral part of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria. In order to become a member state, a candidate country must fulfil the political conditions set in Copenhagen, in addition to meeting certain economic criteria and adopting and implementing the Community acquis.

Second, the EU has a geographic criterion for membership. After all, the shared values of its member states are not their exclusive possession, but are also cherished by countries in other parts of the world. Only countries located in Europe may join the European Union. Unlike the shared values, this is in my view not an absolute requirement. In topographic terms, Turkey at best has a foot in Europe's door, especially when you consider that the bulk of this big country is on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. But that need not form an obstacle to membership.

Still, as "broad-church" as I am about the geography, I am equally doctrinaire about compliance with the other terms that we agreed on. One month ago today, the Monitoring Commission of the Council of Europe reported that Turkey is catching up fast. It concluded that in just over two years Turkey has carried out more reforms than in the prior ten years, a statement that made headlines all over Europe. This bolsters the case for Turkey. But it in no way implies that Turkey now automatically fulfils the Copenhagen criteria established by the European Union.

The European Parliament raised that critical point last week, when a large majority voted to approve a report by Arie Oostlander. That sent out a very clear signal to the Turkish government in support of the reforms, but the report also stressed that the European Parliament will not allow any relaxation of the Copenhagen criteria.

On this issue, I completely support the European Parliament. As has been stated in successive European Council conclusions, we have no objections of principle to Turkey's accession to the European Union, but the only way negotiations can begin this December is if it meets the criteria. A deal is a deal.

## **Credibility**

That may sound unfriendly, but it is a guiding principle for the Netherlands in the European Union. Nothing less than the proper functioning of, and the public support for, that Union is at stake. We must do the right thing.

“Where is the danger?” you might ask. Let me explain. The EU is sometimes perceived as having the bad habit of breaking down fundamental choices into baby steps. For example, the internal market and monetary union seemed to come about almost unnoticed by the public, after years of negotiation on technical details. These decisions were sensible and important, yet each new step was justified by reference to earlier commitments. The irreversible nature of the process is thus exploited to legitimise the final result. Often, Europe-wide public debate doesn't even begin until it is too late and the crucial decisions have already been made.

And so the most weighty and difficult choices made by the European Union seem to be stretched out over a long period so that they become almost invisible. In my view, this has serious consequences. The credibility of the EU sustains considerable damage, along with its public support. Politicians force each other into a narrow decision-making tunnel with only one way forward and no way back. In the end, Europe's citizens are presented with a *fait accompli*.

Unfortunately, decision-making about Turkey has proceeded in precisely this manner. Ordinary European citizens felt they were being sidelined when Turkey received the status of candidate state. Now, when we make a decision on starting negotiations, the only way to avoid another breach of public confidence is to adhere strictly to the procedures we originally agreed on.

It could go either way. If Turkey meets the criteria, talks can begin at once; if not, so be it. What is not an option, under any circumstances, is to leap into negotiations regardless.

So that's why I say a deal is a deal. It's not about pointing fingers or undermining the process. It's about protecting the EU's high standards from being watered down. Because if we sacrifice our credibility we will find ourselves in some very deep water indeed.

## **Decision-making capacity**

And that's not the only danger lurking ahead. The Union will soon have almost thirty members. We must take care that it does not lose its decision-making capability.

The absorptive capacity of the EU is put to the test with each new round of enlargement. On the first of May, the simultaneous accession of ten new, less prosperous member states will strain that capacity to its limits, at least for the time being. There's a good reason member states are so wrapped up in negotiations on the text of the new constitutional treaty. We must do everything possible to ensure that the EU can, when the time comes, accommodate Turkey without a serious loss of decision-making capacity.

Widening takes its toll on deepening. There is a danger that the Union may grind to a halt. To ensure that the EU will remain dynamic, quite a few changes will be required. It's not just Turkey that has to be ready for the EU; the reverse is just as true. The importance of keeping the EU dynamic is mentioned explicitly in the conclusions of the 1993 Copenhagen European Council, which state: “The Union's capacity to absorb new members, while maintaining the momentum of European integration, is also an important consideration in the general interest of both the Union and the candidate countries.” This is a valid and significant point.

## **Affordability**

A related issue is the affordability of the EU. Along with credibility and decision-making capacity, affordability is the third issue I would like to emphasise.

Calculating the costs of Turkey's accession is a risky business. Even after negotiations have started, it will probably take many years before Turkey actually becomes a member state. In that time, many aspects of EU policy will change. Still, estimating the costs is anything but pointless. Because no matter what margin of error we allow, it is clear that the price will be considerable if we stick to today's policies.

Take for instance the Common Agricultural Policy. The trend now is clearly towards direct income support for individual producers, decoupled from production. And by any standard, Turkey has many small farms. In the area of structural policy, too, it is clear that application of the current criteria would result in huge budgetary transfers to Turkey's industrial and rural regions.

I'm not trying to make the Turks in the audience feel guilty. They're not the ones who came up with the EU's policies. I'm saying it because no matter how uncertain the total figure may be, it is clear that if the EU means to live up to its commitments, fundamental reforms are necessary.

It seems clear enough to me that the EU has to be a reliable partner. As I said, a deal is a deal, and that cuts both ways. The question is how to handle the situation responsibly. Transitional periods could help, just as they will help us manage the forthcoming accession of the ten new member states. But even if those periods are a lot longer than the current norm, they'll be more of a band-aid than a cure. I would suggest a more radical course of treatment. Let us start reforming European structural policy and the Common Agricultural Policy as soon as possible. Before Turkey can fully join the EU, these two policy areas must undergo substantial reform.

## **Conclusion**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

For more than five hundred years, the Turks have been at the centre of a great power. In alliance with other European powers they have shaped the history of Europe. In 1963, the relationship between Europe and Turkey entered a new phase. Under the Dutch Presidency, the EEC and Turkey signed an association agreement, which evolved into a customs union in 1995 and eventually into Turkey's candidature for EU membership. In December, again under the Dutch Presidency, the EU will decide whether to open accession negotiations with Turkey.

I hope that we can reach a positive decision. This depends primarily on Turkey's further progress. Turkey has a great deal to offer the EU. Along with a rich history, a great cultural tradition and vast economic potential, it has a strategic location at the nexus of the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. Instead of Turkey having its foot in Europe's door, Europe could open a new door to the world.

But honesty compels me to say that a massive amount of work still awaits Turkey before this can take place. The European Commission's progress report, which will appear this autumn, will constitute the basis for the final decision of the European Council in December. Turkey can count on the Netherlands, during its Presidency, to do its utmost to ensure a fair and objective decision. Religion will not be an issue. Our motto will be, "A deal is a deal."

On issue after issue, Turkey's progress has been impressive. It has not let itself be scared off by the mountain of reforms ahead of it. The European Union could learn a thing or two from Turkey's dauntlessness. For it is not just Turkey that must adapt to the Union; the Union must also reinvent itself. In the end, only a credible, capable and affordable EU will benefit its member states – regardless of their size, religious background or membership status.

I look forward to further discussion in Turkey when I visit later this month.

Thank you.