

The Turks – and a New Europe – are coming!

Carl Bildt

SEB Conference

Istanbul, September 28, 2004

This is certainly a meeting at the right place and at the right time. There is no issue more central throughout Europe these very days than the question of Turkey and the European Union. And there is hardly a better place to discuss it than here on the Bosphorous.

This is a true centre of European history.

The epic battles of the Peloponnesian war in the ancient world of Greek civilisations were fought here as well. The city of Byzantium had existed for more than 600 years when Emperor Constantine made the momentous decision in the year 330 to move the capital of the Roman Empire from the Old Rome to the New Rome he was building here and to make it a city of the new religion of Christianity.

The centuries that followed were tumultuous, but the famous walls of Constantinople repelled invaders and attackers for more than a thousand years. The Vikings came down the long rivers of Russia to their Miklagård, and it's not difficult to phantom their amazement when confronted with the splendour of Haga Sophia, where their scribbling is still to be seen.

Then, after more than a thousand years, the Ottoman forces took the city less than six hundred years ago. Haga Sophia went from the most splendid church of Christianity to the most impressive mosque of Islam. The messenger changed – but the God remained the same.

The story of the Ottoman Empire is little known and understood in most of our countries.

This empire lasted longer than any of the other major empires we know in the history of our continent, and at its height it ruled in its own peculiar way over a very large and very diverse area. Budapest – to take just one example – was an Ottoman city for a longer period of time than it has been the capital of an independent Hungary.

The ethnic and religious and cultural mosaic of the vast lands ruled in different ways from Istanbul during half a millennium is with us even today. It was in these lands that East was meeting West, South was meeting North, Christianity was meeting Islam, and where the most promising trade routes of the world – prior to the discovery of America - converged.

This was the city of the Sultan, of the Sublime Porte and of the Caliph heading all of Islam. But it was also the bustling city of the Genoese traders, the Greek administrators, the Armenian and Jewish businessmen, the French diplomats, the Albanian civil servants, the Bosnian Grand Viziers and soldiers and all of the others that came together to make it work for as long as it did.

At the end, it didn't. During the later part of the 19th century, it was seen as “the sick man of Europe” – of Europe, not of Asia or anywhere else. And the powers of the day stumbled across each other in their attempts to get control. Russia pressed towards

the South, eager to get control of the Bosphorous and the Dardanelle. The Habsburg Empire wanted to grab larger pieces of the Balkans. Everyone was part of the game.

The Byzantine Empire had fallen because it hadn't modernized. It was taken over by an empire that then in some senses was more modern and more able. And that empire was twice able to extend its challenge to the gates of Vienna, before there was a new revival of Europe and its gradual decline began and its demise set in.

The Turkey of today is the result of a series of rebellions, revolutions and reforms trying to build a modern European state out of the debris of an empire that had lost touch with modern times.

When the so called Young Turks raised their flag of rebellion in Thessaloniki in Macedonia in 1908, they wanted a modern European state instead of an ossified Ottoman empire. They failed then, but when the empire collapsed during the Great War, and the western powers tried to split the spoils in a truly humiliating way, their day had come.

Kemal Ataturk is undoubtedly the most significant European revolutionary of the last century.

The old order was swept away – sometimes with rather authoritarian methods. The last Sultan died in San Remo and is buried in Damascus. The last Caliph – his younger brother – died in Paris and is buried in Medina. They truly represented a different world.

In come Latin alphabet, Western dress, Italian and Swiss laws, German arms – and European democracy.

It hasn't been an altogether easy time for the Republic of Turkey. The legacies of the past took time to overcome. The geopolitical environment was far from easy. And for too long it was held back by outmoded models of inward looking and state-centred economic development.

But the European orientation of its efforts was always clear. It was taken for granted that Turkey should be part of the Council of Europe when that was set up as the focus of a new attempt at European cooperation immediately after the devastating Second World War – and the same was the case with all other major European institutions.

The then European Economic Community in 1963 signed the Ankara Agreement with Turkey and the Athens Agreement with Greece in order to help their modernisation, including the prospect of even membership in the somewhat distant future.

For Greece that process went much faster. When the dictatorship of the colonels fell in 1974 – after first having initiated the series of events that also led to the Turkish invasion of Cyprus – Europe felt the urge to embrace the renewed democracy by the offer of membership. The European Commission recommended against, but the safeguarding of democracy was – rightly, in my opinion - seen as more important than detailed trade conditionality.

For Turkey, it has taken much longer.

Initially, the blame fell primarily on Turkey itself. It was only with the profound Özal reforms of 1980 – with its radical measures to reduce the economic role of the state and liberalise the economy – that a new start became a realistic possibility.

Then, dissent inside the Community – a Greek veto – blocked progress. The Turkish application for membership, submitted in 1987, was shelved. But with the customs union coming into force in 1996, a new and important start was made.

It was hesitant at first, but has accelerated tremendously in the last few years. No less than nine impressive reform packages have passed the Grand National Assembly. Four of them under the previous government and five under the present Erdogan government following the truly scene-changing November 2002 elections.

Some of them have been truly revolutionary seen in the context of the country. Those related to the Kurdish issues perhaps foremost among these. Many have been both

difficult and controversial. We have seen that in the manoeuvrings over the new penal law. But they have all been driven by a European vocation and conviction we could only dream of in some of our countries.

It is the third major phase of profound reforms – President Ataturk was man of the first, Prime Minister Özal of the second, and Prime Minister Erdogan is now carrying forward the third.

Now, everyone is awaiting the recommendation of the European Commission on October 6th and the decision of the European Council on December 17th.

I am convinced they will both take the process forward. There will be - although not without qualifications that are necessary both in view of the remaining Turkish reform needs and the obvious European democratic needs - an opening of concrete negotiations of membership between the 25 present members of the European Union and Turkey.

But this is by no means the end of the story. It is only the opening of a new and even more demanding chapter in the rapprochement between Turkey and the rest of Europe.

And that must be seen in the context of the wider challenges we will be confronted with in the years to come.

The story of Europe since its re-start of 1989 – when the wall in Berlin finally came down – is mainly a story of success.

The agendas outlined in Maastricht in 1991 – an economic and monetary union, the beginning of a common foreign and security policy – and in Copenhagen in 1993 – the opening up for membership to all European countries being democracies, respecting the rule of the law and having competitive economies – have been realized to an amazing extent.

Europe today is freer, more prosperous and more secure than ever before in its history.

The rule of the law, and the institutions of modern states and economies, have been extended even to areas that until recently were part of the Soviet Union, and certainly the external Soviet Empire. The union today brings together half a billion people in a democratic community and in the largest integrated economy of the globe. It's an amazing achievement.

Now, we are looking ahead. There is a new agenda.

Economic reforms are crucial. Both in order to increase the dynamism of the older economies of Western Europe, and to further increase the growth potential of the newer economies of Central Europe and the Baltic region. We must start closing the economic and social divisions caused by the tragedy of Communism. Within a generation, that goal must be within reach.

But security - and further enlargement – is equally crucial.

What happened on May 1st was that eight former socialist countries of Central Europe and the Baltic region joined the EU. In addition, Bulgaria and Romania are scheduled to join in the next few years, completing that process. In total, it's a question of ten nations and approximately 100 million people.

I left Cyprus and Malta aside – theirs are special stories.

The next step isn't really Turkey. In my opinion, the next step is the rest of south-eastern Europe, of which Turkey is the most significant, but by no means the only part.

I'm talking about the countries of the Western Balkans – north of Greece and south of Slovenia. If they are five states or seven states remains to be defined in a peaceful and orderly way, and this by no means easy task will be central already in the coming

year. The region ranges from a Croatia that will start negotiations already early next year to an Albania and a Kosovo that clearly have a far longer way to go.

But if we add up the Western Balkans and Turkey we arrive at approximately 100 million people again, and between six and eight different independent states.

There is no avoiding this. When European democracies knock on the doors of the European Union, we cannot say no, and we have never said no, at the least not for any longer period. France tried with Britain for a decade, and then hesitated with Spain. But the process moved on.

But it's also in our interest. Europe needs the human potential of all these nations if we look towards the future. Europe needs the Young Turks to give it new impetus and new competitive strength in the increasingly competitive world of tomorrow. And we need also the complexities of these regions in order to be able to handle both internal challenges in our own societies and external challenges to our Europe as a whole.

When we discuss security, it is natural for us Europeans to pay particular attention to all the challenges coming out of the post-Ottoman area that stretches from Bihac in Bosnia in the north-west to Basra by the Gulf in the south-east. And it is just part of that large arc of instability – Zbigniew Brzezinski recently referred to it as the Grand Balkans – that stretches from Agadir over Astrakhan to Amritsar.

For more than a generation, we Europeans were threatened by the strength of Soviet power coming out of Russia.

But for the generation to come, our most difficult challenge will be to handle the consequences of the convulsions of the wider Muslim world.

These convulsions have different roots.

The misery and failure of large parts of the Arab world has as much to do with the failure of Arab socialism as it has to do with religion. But the end result is a region

where demographic and social strains are building up in such a way as to make explosions as well as implosions more than likely in the years ahead.

These explosions and implosion will occur in a region that is at the heart of the religion of Islam and the culture it represents.

What we are witnessing is a great clash within a civilisation. We see fundamentalists, traditionalists, reformers and secularists each providing their answers to the questions their faith and their peoples are facing.

It's a struggle of scholars, of statesmen, of soldiers and - sometimes - of suicide bombers. It will continue for years to come.

Our task is two-fold.

First to prevent this clash within a civilisation to develop into a clash between civilisations.

Then to try to help those arguing for open societies and an open world to prevail in this clash.

The importance of this can hardly be exaggerated if we look at the years to come. Were we to fail, the consequences would not only be extremely grave for a region that is our "near abroad", but these consequences would rapidly spread to the suburbs of our major cities, putting our own societies under severe strain.

We face very difficult and important issues.

One way or the other, we must succeed with the twin state-building efforts of Iraq and Palestine. The liberation of Iraq from its past and the liberation of Palestine from its present, thus giving security also to Israel, can never be separated from each other.

This is the Fertile Crescent of the age of Abraham. A decade ahead it will be fertile with either reform or with rage. The stakes - for all of us - could hardly be higher.

But the challenge goes beyond this. We must be able to deal with the rivers of rage that are flowing through much of the Muslim world.

Rage against their own corrupt, despotic and incapable regimes, more often than not seen as being supported by the West. Rage against what they feel is the humiliation of their religion and their culture. And certainly rage over the issue of Palestine.

And again – these are issues that stretch right into the heart of Europe itself. The Muslim world is our neighbour not only when we look at the globe – but increasingly when we look across the street where we live as well.

I lived for a couple of years in a predominantly Muslim city in Europe – in Sarajevo. I had a small mosque as my nearest neighbour.

For me, it is self-evident that the Bosnian Muslims are as European as the Bosnians of Catholic or Orthodox or Jewish faith.

Relations between these faiths have certainly not been harmonious in the past – in Bosnia or in Europe at large.

This year, it's 800 years since the shameful Fourth Crusade and its sack of Constantinople. The wounds aren't fully healed yet. It's little more than 500 years since the Turkish Muslim conquest of this city. It's no more than 400 years ago that Catholics were burning Protestants in Magdeburg, and Protestants were burning Catholics elsewhere.

And it's unfortunately not that long since being Jewish meant risk of sudden death in large parts of Europe.

Today, Catholics and Protestants and Calvinists can work together, Jews are coming back even to Berlin, there is the beginning of a difficult rapprochement between the Eastern and the Western branches of Christianity, and we have to encourage the

development of a Muslim faith that sees secular and democratic European states as their natural home.

And Europe is changing by the day.

For more than a century Europe was a place from which tens and tens of millions emigrated. Famine, oppression or war drove the millions away.

But since a couple of decades – no more than that! - it's the other way around. The price of success is attractiveness, and the price of attractiveness is that the poor, the oppressed or those seeking a better life would like to go there.

It has its problems – but it's still better than the alternative.

This dramatically increases our interaction with the Muslim world.

Berlin is partly a Turkish city – one of the largest. In Malmö in Sweden – our third largest town – Ali and Mohammed are the most common names of newborn boys. Amsterdam is rapidly heading towards a Muslim majority. Any given week, there are more people in the mosques than in the churches of the United Kingdom.

It's not going to be the islamisation of Europe. That will never happen. It is far more about the europeanisation of an important part of Islam, and of the building of a Europe that draws its strengths from its ability to handle diversity and pluralism.

In diversity sometimes lie – this we must recognize – the seeds of conflict. The post-Ottoman areas can bear testimony to that. But in this lie even more the seeds of astonishing creativity. Europe in its most glorious moments bears ample testimony to that.

It will be – let's be clear on that – a different European Union. Today, its largest city is London looking across the Atlantic. Then, its largest city will be this Istanbul with its different horizons.

So the debates that are now starting throughout Europe on the question of Turkey are not only unavoidable but also necessary and ultimately healthy.

We are facing a new future. We need to develop a realistic enlargement strategy that brings in a further more than a hundred million people, and that significantly increases the diversity of our union. We need to prepare and adapt our institutions and our policies.

And we need – not the least – to prepare a public opinion that today is hesitant towards almost everything – be that the new constitutional treaty, the prospect of further enlargement or the meeting with cultures and traditions still seen as alien and sometimes even threatening. Much comes together in the debate about Turkey.

A democratic Union requires the democratic consent of its democratic citizens.

This will take up a large part of the decade that is ahead of us. Large transformations require time. It will be needed by both the present members, the countries of the Western Balkans and not the least by Turkey.

The first really big enlargement will be completed by the time of the next elections to the European Parliament in June 2009. Then the Baltic and Central European nations will have been joined by Bulgaria, Romania and most probably also by Croatia.

But it is not unrealistic to expect that the next big enlargement – the Western Balkans and Turkey – will be completed by 2014 so that all its citizens can take part in the elections to the European Parliament in June of that year.

It's certainly ambitious – but it's by no means impossible.

Much will happen during these years. There will be referendums on the constitutional treaty in more than ten countries during the next few years. We know that there is no guaranteed outcome. There will be two parliamentary elections in Turkey during this period – as well as in most of the other European countries. The evolution of the

European Union to include also all of Southeastern Europe will, in some way, play a role in all of them.

But if we succeed, we will see a circle of history closing.

It was in June of 1914 that the true tragedies of Europe started. The race for the Balkans as the Ottoman Empire was decaying lead to the shots in Sarajevo that lead to Europe entering the long dark age that all of our continent could not come out of until the wall fell in Berlin 15 years ago.

Since then we have achieved much. Now and here we see what must be achieved in the years ahead.

A century after the tragedy of 1914, we can give all of Europe a truly new start.