

## **If Europe is to keep growing, it must think big**

**By Carl Bildt**

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The debate on Turkey that has exploded across Europe highlights the urgent need to develop a new grand strategy for the further enlargement of the European Union.

In Copenhagen in 1993 the Union opened its doors to the former communist dictatorships of Europe. The decade since then has demonstrated the extraordinary transformational powers of the EU model. The institutions of democracy, the rule of law and modern market economies have been extended over large areas of Europe.

The process continues. Bulgaria and Romania are still working to achieve membership by 2007. It is likely that, by the European Parliament election of June 2009, no fewer than 10 former communist states or soviet republics, with a total population of about 100m people, will have joined.

But this will not be the end. In Thessaloniki in 2003, the Union reaffirmed its commitment to the countries of the western Balkans. Croatia will start membership negotiations next year and Macedonia has applied. It is widely recognised that the soft transformational power of the EU is the single strongest force for reform and reconciliation in this war-torn region.

Many parts of the Balkans are as underdeveloped as parts of Turkey, and in some ways will represent even more of an integration challenge. Here we also encounter the critical issue of different cultural traditions. I lived for two years next to a small mosque in Sarajevo. For me, the Bosnians of Muslim faith were as European as those of Orthodox, Catholic or Jewish faith. This diversity has sometimes fed civil strife, it is true, but ultimately it is a source of richness.

The same can be said for Europe as a whole. It is the diversity of traditions that is the ultimate strength of the Europe we are trying to build. Muslims neither can nor should be excluded from this.

If the 100m people of the Baltic states, central Europe and the eastern Balkans represent the EU's first big enlargement, the 100m people of Turkey and the western Balkans should be seen as the second. A possible third - and in all probability final - phase would cover the countries between the present Union and Russia.

For the time being, we need a comprehensive strategy for the next enlargement, encompassing territory from Drvar in north-west Bosnia to Diyarbakir in south-east Turkey. That the enlargement and western Balkans portfolios will be brought together in the Barroso Commission is an important step in this direction. The European Council should take matters further and ask that a unified strategy be developed. In all probability, this will require a level of assistance and intervention on the EU's part beyond what the previous enlargement required.

Although it may be ambitious, it is not unreasonable to think of this strategy in terms of a decade, which is how long it took central Europe to achieve membership. It should be a core objective of the incoming Commission, as well as of its successor in 2009.

Throughout Europe, there is pressure to submit this coming enlargement to some form of popular endorsement. The demand is not unreasonable in itself, although the motives for it can sometimes be questioned. A democratic union requires the consent of its citizens for such big developments.

One possibility would be for the European Parliament to delay final ratification of this next enlargement until after the June 2014 elections, thus making that election a de facto referendum on the issue. Europe's political parties would express their views on the issue and commit themselves to accepting the verdict of the new parliament.

To aim for completion in 2014 would both allow ample time and underline the historical significance of the process. After all, it was with the events of June 1914 in Sarajevo that our continent entered that new Dark Age which did not end until 1989. Our task since then has been to bring together what had been taken apart and create the conditions for a renaissance of peace and prosperity.

Many doubts have been expressed about the wisdom of this vision and Union's capacity to achieve it. Historical fears of Turks at the gates of Europe go hand in hand with primitive populism of the worst sort. But voices such as those of Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, Helmut Schmidt or Angela Merkel are in another category. Their concerns require an answer in the form of a coherent grand strategy for the entire region. For the Commission, few tasks will be so important, or so difficult.

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