‘Disagreement over Turkey’s membership becomes more radical’ from the Europe Daily Bulletin (7 January 2005)

Caption: On 7 January 2005, Ferdinando Riccardi, Editor-in-Chief of Agence Europe in Brussels, sets out the arguments of those in favour and those against Turkey’s accession to the European Union.

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Disagreement over Turkey's membership becomes more radical

Before concluding my reflection on the Turkish membership issue early next week, I feel it is useful to take account of several striking stances published during the festive period which show that, far from coming closer, the positions held by European political leaders are becoming more radical. I have chosen Guy Verhofstadt, Belgium Prime Minister, as champion for the cause of Turkey's membership, and MEP Jean-Louis Bourlanges as adversary, as they represent conflicting views in an effective and brilliant way, whilst both are in favour of consolidating European integration.

Advantages of Turkish accession, according to the Belgian Prime Minister. Guy Verhofstadt expressed the radical view during an interview with the Brussels daily, Le Soir, that the EU will, with Turkey, reach the necessary dimension to play an autonomous and important role in the world. In response to those who state that Turkey's membership will make "*the political role of Europe weaker*", he said: "*I believe the contrary is true:* the EU's role in the world will be enhanced due to Turkey's geostrategic weight and size". He believes accession by Turkey also holds other major advantages: "*We must keep our eyes open! Negotiation is the best way to put pressure on so that Turkey is a State that respects human rights and the main humanist principles. Should Turkey be allowed to slide into Islamic fundamentalism? (...) Why did we enlarge the Union toward the Mediterranean countries? Because we wanted to anchor Spain, Portugal and Greece in democracy. This will also be the case for the Balkan Republics, to put an end to the cruelty of the nineties. It is exactly for these same reasons that we should do this with Turkey (...) If a State wants to accept our values, making them prevail in its society, then why should it be refused membership?*"

What about the problem of Cyprus? If Cyprus is not recognised, membership negotiations cannot begin, Mr Verhofstadt acknowledged. But "*this is a crucial issue on the ground that cannot be resolved by legal arguments alone. Let us imagine that the EU demands recognition of Cyprus and that Turkey refuses. We split up and do not begin accession talks. And the problem is not solved! Let us try to look at things from a more positive angle: yesterday, there was a war over there. Today, Cyprus is in the EU, negotiations are to begin with Turkey, and it truly looks as if a solution might be found*". What about the impact that Turkey's accession would have on the EU? The prospect of a sort of "steering group" (although this term is never mentioned) does not cause the prime minister concern. He believes: "*Rapprochement between a number of countries on the basis of mechanisms foreseen in the constitutional treaty is the stuff to be found in history books. It already exists, and single currency and the Schengen Area are examples of this. We have begun to do the same with defence*". Turkey's membership to the EU would in no way prevent evolution of this kind.

The end of European ambitions, Jean-Louis Bourlanges says. The Chairman of the European Parliament's Committee on Citizens' Freedoms and Rights holds quite a different view. He believes, opening membership up to Turkey "*is a fundamental break in the history of European construction. Turkey's planned membership* tolls the bell for two ambitions which, over the past fifty years, have been the foundation of our undertaking: *political affirmation of a unity of civilisation and common ability to act in a federal manner. The Union will have the vocation to become a region UN with provisional or arbitrary frontiers, condemned by its divisions to function in an intergovernmental way (...). Massive cultural, economic and social heterogeneity in the future EU will prevent it from becoming a united and democratically organised political community, and the Institutions - including the Commission and Parliament - will be transformed into as many closed areas provided for national rivalry and confrontation between States*". Mr Bourlanges also considers it inevitable that "*major common policies - agricultural and regional policy - will be brought into question*". In his view, Europe's weakness does not lie in "*its insufficient extension but in its lack of cohesion*". He sees "*the way the Christian club is portrayed as an evil*" as no more than a subterfuge for hiding the truth and the truth is that "as a whole" the heads of government have "*accepted the idea of transforming the EU into an intergovernmental club*". With Turkey, we shall have an "*insipid, distorted and quarrelsome*" Europe.

I wish to recall: a) the comment made by Valéry Giscard d'Estaing in his concision worthy of the historians of Ancient Rome: "*It is an unfortunate decision that Europeans will regret as it will interrupt the integration process advocated by the Founding Fathers*"; b) the stance taken by the former European Commissioner, Karel Van Miert, along the same lines as Mr Bourlanges; and c) the declaration by Bernard

Bot, Dutch Foreign Minister and EU Council President at the time, according to whom Turkey will help provide the Union with the necessary weight for being "*the political power that we hope to become*" in terms of population and military and economic power.

(Ferdinando Riccardi)