

'How nice the EU can be to Turkey' from Die Zeit (25 November 2004)

Caption: On 25 November 2004, the German weekly newspaper Die Zeit welcomes the European Commission's decision to recommend that the Twenty-Five open negotiations for accession to the European Union with Turkey but emphasises the difficulties which still need to be overcome.

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Just how nice can the European Union be to Turkey?

The accession negotiations will be starting this year. But the problems have already begun

By Joachim Fritz-Vannahme for ZEIT.de

Audacious or foolhardy — how best to qualify today's 'Yes' from Europe to the start of accession negotiations with Turkey?

Audacious it certainly is to be dreaming today of a country on the Bosphorus which in 2014 would have left torture (whether 'systematic' or otherwise) behind; would be promoting Kurdish culture rather than merely tolerating it; and would have taken leave of marital mores which have been a thing of the past in Europe for the last 50 years.

Audacious too to dream of a Europe which in the year 2014 would be equipped, psychologically and economically, to incorporate a new member which carries with it a population larger than that of any established member and which even at that time will still be poorer than all the other EU countries, quite simply because even breathtaking growth rates cannot do enough to make up in a decade the huge deficit in relation to the European average.

Foolhardy on the other hand, indeed endlessly foolish, was the decision taken by the Union in the winter of 1999, when the 15 Member States, meeting in Helsinki, recognised Turkey — after just a few minutes' discussion — as a candidate for the candidacy process, resubmission date, December 2004.

At that time the Union was facing its largest ever enlargement, by ten new members. It was facing this prospect full of hope but basically without a clue how to proceed. No one could really know what sort of rejection phenomena might perhaps be released. And at the very same time the Heads of State or Government were already reaching out well beyond Europe's traditional boundaries. Their interlocutor at that time was not reform-happy Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of the Islamic AK Party but rather the socialist nationalist Bülent Ecevit. And his government feared nothing more than the incantation 'reform'. At that time Europe's interlocutor was a regime which got on perfectly well with torture, capital punishment and repression.

So the EU decision of 1999 was foolhardy. Today's decision is audacious. The decision taken at Friday's EU summit in Brussels signifies the following: the European Union and Turkey kick off negotiations in October 2005 with the aim of accession in ten or fifteen years. And both sides also know that things can go wrong. The negotiations may stall if the reform process in Turkey is reversed. They may fail altogether if Turkey gives up or if the Union decides the demands on it are too great. Translated into simple terms, that is the essence of the final declarations from the EU Summit. The negotiations will, Europe's politicians explain appeasingly, almost ritually, be nothing if not difficult.

Just how difficult became clear in Brussels even before the formal start of negotiations. Witness the Cyprus question, on which additional talks on the Friday lasted from 1.00 p.m. until well after 4.00 p.m. Is it conceivable that a country could join the Union without recognising one of its members? Well, apparently it is, for that is exactly what is happening at this historic moment.

Admittedly, Erdoğan promised to go to the island and drink 'a coffee of peace' with the Cypriot Head of Government. Granted, artful diplomats dreamed up the idea of appending non-binding signatures to an old customs agreement, which through subtleties of detail would come to embody a sort of recognition of Cyprus by Turkey. What on Thursday still sounded like an ultimatum — Turkey must sign and must do so here, today, end of story! — had by the delayed end-of-play on Friday been somewhat toned down: the EU would settle for a promise from Turkey.

This may help Erdoğan deal on the home front with a Kemalist military and a refractory state machine which are having to adjust to the idea of recognising Cyprus and hence conceding a beginning to the end of

the occupation of northern Cyprus. All the same, the procedure is an unworthy one, above all for the EU Heads of Government, who are basically turning a blind eye — or once again playing fast and loose with their principles. Before the real negotiations begin, Turkey now has time to take the issue off the table — or to create of its own doing the first incident on the road to the Union.

For here is a fabulous opening for all the Turkey-sceptics in the European establishment — the Austrians and the Danes are not alone, they are merely the most outspoken. The Turks are delivering free to their door the first solid argument for pulling the plug on the negotiations. The sceptics will thus find it comforting, and their audacious opponents disquieting, to know that Turkey is still a long way from joining the club.