

Statement made by Tony Blair on the outcome of the Brussels European Council (London, 20 December 2004)

Caption: On 20 December 2004, in the House of Commons in London, Tony Blair, British Prime Minister, emphasises the historic decision taken at the Brussels European Council to open negotiations with Ankara for Turkey's accession to the European Union.

Source: PM's statement on the European Council (20 December 2004). [ON-LINE]. [s.l.]: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, [29.04.2005]. Available on <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page6817.asp>.

Copyright: Crown copyright is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office and the Queen's Printer for Scotland

URL:

http://www.cvce.eu/obj/statement_made_by_tony_blair_on_the_outcome_of_the_brussels_european_council_london_20_december_2004-en-67c46c3e-da70-4842-8d58-d64eb9de9e3e.html

Publication date: 23/10/2012

PM's statement on the European Council (20 December 2004)

With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement on the European Council that took place in Brussels on 16/17 December.

I should begin by congratulating Prime Minister Balkenende and the Dutch Government for their handling of the Council, and indeed their entire Presidency.

I also want to congratulate the Presidency for achieving the historic agreement to begin accession negotiations with Turkey. This is a hugely important and welcome moment for Europe. Turkey lies at the intersection of three areas of strategic importance to Europe – the Middle East, central Asia and the Balkans. So a stable and democratic Turkey will help strengthen our influence and role in all three areas. Turkey is an important and trusted NATO ally. It will take over the ISAF lead from us in Afghanistan in 2002 [sic], and replace EUROCORPS in Kabul next February. Turkey is a strongly growing economy which, as a market of 70 million people, imports over 40 billion Euros worth of goods from the EU each year. Our own trade with Turkey is over £4 billion a year and is growing at 30 per cent annually. Turkey beginning negotiations to join the EU shows that those who believe there is some fundamental clash of civilisations between Christian and Muslim are wrong. Muslim, Christian and other religious faiths can work together in democratic, tolerant and multi-cultural societies. Turkey's membership is of fundamental importance for the future peace and prosperity of Britain, Europe and the wider world. The European Council agreed that Turkey should begin negotiations on 3 October 2005, during the British Presidency. Before this happens, Turkey will need to complete its latest reform package. And the Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Erdogan, confirmed during the European Council that he was ready to sign, before 3 October, the Protocol to the Ankara Agreement extending the EU/Turkey Customs Union to the 10 new EU member states. This does not constitute formal legal recognition of the Republic of Cyprus. The accession negotiations thereafter are likely to last at least a decade. Turkey's performance, including in relation to respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights, will be closely monitored. And we will want to see a satisfactory track record of implementation before each of the negotiating chapters is closed. Moreover, there is the option of long transition periods, derogations, or even, permanently available safeguards, should these be required.

It is worth emphasising how much Turkey has achieved under Prime Minister Erdogan's leadership. He has taken through 9 separate packages of legislative and constitutional reform, bringing the military under civilian control, improving minority rights, abolishing the death penalty, significantly improving freedom of expression, liberalising the economy and reforming the penal code. These reforms must continue, but this House should recognise the extraordinary progress that has been made. And the developments in Turkey over the past two years, following the reforms across central and eastern Europe of the last decade, demonstrate the influence and power of the European Union as a motor for change, and a force for good.

There were other significant decisions at this European Council. We confirmed the conclusion of accession negotiations with Bulgaria and Romania. Both should join in January 2007. We decided to begin accession negotiations with Croatia on 17 March 2005, subject to their full co-operation with the International Criminal Tribunal. We decided on several new areas of action and co-operation in the fight against terrorism. We welcomed the agreement reached with Iran on nuclear issues and future co-operation, following negotiations conducted by the UK, France and Germany. If, however, this process is to succeed, as we all want, Iran must sustain its full suspension of all enrichment related and reprocessing activities. The European Council confirmed its full backing for next year's elections in Iraq, and its commitment to support these, finance UN protection, and provide continuing reconstruction assistance. The violence and terror directed against Iraqis wanting to have free elections should make us re-double our efforts to ensure democracy defeats terror and those elections take place. Whatever the original disagreement over the conflict in Iraq, that is a unified European position today. We also committed ourselves to support, financially, technically and politically, the democratic transition in the Occupied Palestinian Territories; and we reaffirmed our commitment to achieving, through the Road Map, a negotiated two State solution. And finally, we committed ourselves to helping to ensure that the re-run of the elections in Ukraine is free and fair, including through sending a substantial number of observers.

Mr Speaker, at this European Council, we achieved an historic British objective with the decision to begin accession negotiations with Turkey during the British Presidency next year. If evidence is needed of the benefits of positive engagement and leadership in Europe, here it is, and I commend it to the House.