

**Speech by Mr Verheugen, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands at the Bosphorus Conference 2008 organised by the British Council, the Centre for European Reform (CER) and the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV)**

**"Turkey and the EU: Building Ties of Mutual Benefit"  
Friday 10 October 2008**

## **1. The world in turmoil**

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be present at the fifth Bosphorus conference. I congratulate its organisers on reaching this milestone.

I thank our hosts for their warm welcome. Istanbul always thrills me, its past as well as its present. My dear colleague Ali Babacan and I held our second Turkish Netherlands Conference in Ankara this morning. The conference is an expression of our excellent bilateral relations which will pass the 400 year mark soon.

The outrageous terrorist attacks in south eastern Turkey have shown once again how important it is to cooperate internationally in the fight against terrorism. I would like to reiterate that The Netherlands stands firm beside Turkey in the fight against the PKK. My thoughts are with the relatives and friends of the victims of the recent terrorist attacks.

We meet against the backdrop of an unparalleled global financial crisis. Governments the world over are working around the clock to safeguard the interests of their citizens and to restore confidence in the financial system, which is the backbone of the global economy. This is no small task. It requires ingenuity, political courage and some unusual interventions - interventions that could hardly have been dreamt of a month ago. And yet they are happening. In the Netherlands, the government decided to take over two banks and an insurance company which we considered to be of crucial value to the broader health of our economy. We also decided to provide a safety net for private savings of up to €100,000. We did this together with our colleagues from the European Union. I must say that the degree of cooperation and coordination within the EU is at an all-time high right now - contrary to reports in the press suggesting the opposite. And rightly so. Cooperation is absolutely vital: with our economies as closely connected as they are, we must work together to solve our problems. It is simply a matter of: united we stand, divided we fall.

One thing that has struck me over the past few weeks is how adaptable we are. This crisis demands drastic action - well, we have taken drastic action. I would say that this adaptability is the virtue of democratic societies with an open economy: pragmatism always trumps dogmatism. To those who believe that this crisis spells the end of capitalism, the end of the West even, as some fear and others seem to hope, I would say this: we will weather this storm, as we have done in the past and will do in the future. We will sort out these problems in our tried-and-tested democratic way. The press can report freely; our oversight authorities will investigate; if there has been any wrongdoing, our courts will pass judgement; our parliaments will debate and call for inquiries; our citizens will weigh our actions. They will cast their votes at the next elections. This is the heart and soul of democracy, this is how we work. Democracy, unlike other political systems, thrives on adversity. We do not run away in the face of challenge; challenge is what makes us better. This crisis will force us to improve our way of doing things and to emerge stronger than before. In that sense, I fully agree with the Turkish State Minister for the Economy Mehmet ?im?ek who said that the current crisis could be turned into an opportunity in the long term.

## **2. EU-Turkey relations**

Earlier this year, the Rhone Congress Centre in Amsterdam and the Kunsthal in Rotterdam presented a selection of cartoons by Osman Turhan, who works for Zaman, an Istanbul-based daily newspaper. With a keen sense of sardonic humour, Turhan offers a striking illustration of the complex relations

that exist between Turkey and the EU. In his cartoons, the EU is depicted as an almost unassailable fortress: strong and forbidding. The road to that fortress is not easy to find. Quite the opposite. And in Turhan's imagination, it is littered with barricades that impede access. Turhan's cartoons have recently been collected in a book entitled *Türkofobi* (or 'Turcophobia'). Clearly, Turhan feeds the perception that Turkey is not welcome in the European Union. Today, I would like to show that the message of his cartoons is misleading.

The EU is not a fortress. Turkey is welcome in the European Union. But only when all the requirements for Turkish membership have been met. For me, the reasoning is straightforward. The Netherlands will honour its commitments if Turkey satisfies all the accession criteria. We will not go back on our promise, but it is Turkey that holds the key to accession. It is a position I sum up as 'strict but fair'.

Negotiations on accession started in October 2005, a year after the green light had been given under the Dutch EU Presidency. There can be no misunderstanding about our commitment nor about what needs to be done; the requirements are clear. These criteria are not intended to barricade the road to Europe - as Osman Turhan would have us believe - but to make sure that Turkey will be ready for Europe; to check that Turkey is built on the same strong foundations that supported fifty years of European integration. The Copenhagen criteria demand a stable democracy and a constitutional state that guarantees the rule of law, human rights, and the rights of minorities. These values go to the very heart of the European Union and cannot be watered down in any circumstances. They are not bargaining chips.

Before the EU makes another move, we will need to see the full implementation of the reform agenda. Unfortunately, we have witnessed a delay in the reforms over the last two years. Especially in the area of freedom of expression, freedom of religion or belief, and the position of minorities, progress has fallen short of expectations. This worries me, because these freedoms form an integral part of Europe's basic rights, as does the respect afforded to cultural and religious diversity. Article 301 of the Penal Code has been amended, but we need to see to its implementation. The Law on Foundations has been adopted, including its bylaws. These are all crucial steps along the long and winding road of reform. Hopefully, the National Plan for the Adoption of the Acquis will be presented soon. I expect this Plan will provide a solid basis for further reforms. The Netherlands stands ready to assist Turkey in these reforms, but ultimately, the ball is in Turkey's court. A solution will have to be found to the question of Cyprus as well. Now that negotiations have been resumed, I would plead with both parties to engage constructively and with a clear view to the future.

Accession should not be turned down for the wrong reasons. I believe it is entirely wrong to advance cultural or religious arguments against Turkish membership. I believe that Turkey's supposedly 'un-European' character is a fiction, based on a poor understanding of both Europe and Turkey. Because the histories of Turkey and Europe have long been intertwined. Turkey still bears the marks of the Greek, Roman and Byzantine cultures which, among other influences, have profoundly shaped modern Europe. The legacies of the Enlightenment and liberalism took root in Turkey back in the nineteenth century. Following soon after a number of western European states, Turkey adopted its first constitution in 1876 and held elections for the first Ottoman parliament. Parts of Europe still bear witness to the influence the Ottoman Empire once exerted.

So let me be clear: culture or religion is absolutely not what the discussion should be about. The discussion should be about the extent to which Turkey will be ready to join the EU. To quote the acclaimed Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk: 'geographically, we are part of Europe. But politically?' His question is also our question. It's a question to which Europe's citizens will demand a clear answer.

### **3. Turkey's geopolitical strength**

Ladies and gentlemen,

When I was at school - back in the sixties - my geography teacher taught me that the official boundary between Europe and Asia - between West and East - was the Bosphorus, which runs right through Istanbul, the only city in the world that belongs to two continents. I overlooked the Bosphorus today

and for a brief moment I thought of my geography teacher again. Today, I don't see the Bosphorus in terms of division, but as a bridge connecting different cultures.

It is hard to overstate Turkey's strategic role in a volatile region with unresolved disputes. The recent war between Russia and Georgia has once again demonstrated Turkey's important geopolitical position. As a regional power, and the only NATO member in the area, Turkey can make a substantial contribution to peace and stability. In Afghanistan for example, where Turkish forces make a substantial contribution to the ISAF mission. Turkey is also mediating between Afghanistan and Pakistan. I also greatly appreciate Turkey's diplomatic efforts to launch the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), a platform to facilitate communication, cooperation and political dialogue between the countries of the region. Stability in neighbouring countries is an interest that the EU shares with Turkey. In June, the European Council decided to ask the Commission to present proposals on a possible Eastern Partnership, with six of the European Neighbourhood Policy countries: Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Council will discuss the modalities for such a partnership when it meets in December. I feel it is important that the European Union intensifies its relations with these countries, to promote stability in the region - I am certain you would agree.

In that respect, Turkey has served as a bridge between Europe and Islamic countries in the Middle East, the southern Caucasus and central Asia. For instance, Turkey is helping to normalise relations between Syria and Israel and is brokering talks between Israel and the Palestinian authorities. And as a democratic country where the vast majority of the population practises a moderate form of Islam, Turkey disproves the notion of a clash of civilisations, and shows that Islam and democracy are compatible.

I warmly welcome recent initiatives to normalise Turkey's bilateral relations with Armenia, as illustrated by President Abdullah Gül's visit to Armenia last month. This was the first visit to Armenia by a Turkish leader in the two countries' history. I appreciate the political courage shown by both President Gül and President Sargsyan in the face of heavy public opposition in their home countries. Besides normalising current relations between Turkey and Armenia, I would also encourage a debate between the two countries about their common past, in which all legal barriers to an open and free dialogue should be lifted as soon as possible. What is needed is a sincere debate, in which all participants can speak their minds freely, without fear of criminal charges. Only then will both nations be able to come to terms with their shared past.

Turkey is also a vital link in Europe's energy supply chain. It is the main outlet for westbound oil and gas from the Caspian Sea, which contains the world's third-largest oil and gas reserves. The Bosphorus and Dardanelles are important supply routes for Europe's energy needs. The Nabucco project, a European initiative to build a gas pipeline from the Caspian Sea to Europe via Turkey, was conceived with these needs in mind. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the second longest oil pipeline in the world, carries one million barrels of oil per day to fuel European economies. These large investments illustrate Europe and Turkey's shared interest in an adequate and efficient supply of energy.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Ladies and gentlemen,

The relationship between Turkey and The Netherlands is an extremely valuable one. The negotiations on accession will continue to unfold. But it is important not to focus exclusively on these negotiations, which will have their inevitable ups and downs. Because we need each other in so many respects, we must continue to improve our partnership across as wide an area as possible. In today's world, we both stand to benefit from close relations. I hope this conference will reach the same conclusion, and will help further cement a close bond.

Thank you.