

## **EU Talks Turkey**

**Western Mail – October 2005**

THE European Union's success has always lain in its unique ability to draw countries towards peace, democracy and co-operation through the magnetic pull of prosperity and stability. This week we witnessed a climax of this process as EU countries gave the go-ahead to embark on a new and uncharted phase of development.

On Monday, 18 years after it first applied to join the European Union and after days of fierce wrangling, Turkey was finally allowed to open formal negotiations on becoming a member. The move has divided public opinion, both here and in Turkey. Indeed not since the break-up of the Ottoman Empire 100 years ago have Europeans agonised so much over the "Turkish question".

At the European Parliament last year I voted in favour of starting these formal negotiations. For someone who as a young member of Amnesty International wrote countless letters to Turkish leaders appealing for them to improve their human rights record, it was a difficult decision. But I believe it was the right one.

For the EU to have slammed its door on Turkey, and thus symbolically the Islamic world, at this terrorist-infested moment in history would have been tragic. Turkey's membership talks should be seen more as an opportunity for reform and progress than a threat. Moreover, Monday night's decision marked the beginning, not the end, of what will be a long, difficult process of negotiation for Turkey. Success is by no means guaranteed.

Turkey still has to travel a long and bumpy path of economic, social and environmental reform. It is a poor country. Its current average income per head of population is a mere \$2,790 compared to \$5,270 in Poland and \$28,530 in the UK. Infant mortality rates are telling: 41 deaths per 1,000 births, a rate twice as bad as either Bulgaria or Romania, and far higher than recent EU entrants such as Poland and Slovenia.

The country's recent social reforms also leave much to be desired. Little progress has been made on women's rights and not enough is being done to tackle "honour killings." Earlier this month acclaimed Turkish novelist, Orhan Pamuk, was charged with the "public denigrating of Turkish identity" and faces prison merely because he claimed certain topics were off-limits in Turkey. There also remains a long way to go on relations with Cyprus, Armenia and Turkey's 12m Kurds.

The EU has opened the door for Turkey, but it is just an opening. If they fail to make up sufficient ground on the economy, social and environmental reform, the door will remain closed.

But despite the difficulties and the challenges that lie ahead, there remains good reason to work towards Turkey's entry into the EU.

Of course, there are those who argue that Turkey is not "European enough", meaning that it is "too Muslim". But the doomsday-style prophecies of a "clash of civilisations" are misplaced. Though Turkey's people are mainly very religious, it is a fiercely secular democracy that has historically enjoyed a close relationship with the West.

Turkey is a founding member of the United Nations, a member of NATO, the Council of Europe, the OECD, and an associate member of the Western European Union. Modern Turkey is also a fundamental part of our lives as modern Europeans. Thousands of Brits holiday in Turkey every year. Belly dancing is the fitness fad of the moment and kebabs have long been an essential ingredient of many a British night out.

We cannot ignore the benefits a closer alliance would provide. Turkey lies near the unruly Caucasus republics, the hotspots of Central Asia and, of course, the Middle East. It is a leading regional power that exerts a stabilising influence on those countries, and it is in Europe's long-term interest that Turkey should be firmly anchored into the EU.

Acting as a bridge between Europe and the Middle East, Turkey's inclusion in the

European Union would be a real boost to our security and will help close down a busy and prosperous black market route from Asia. Currently 65% of UK asylum applicants and 80% of the UK heroin supply comes through Turkey. Common EU standards on law enforcement will turn this situation around.

It is in our own strategic interest to give Turkey a fair chance to demonstrate whether it is capable of meeting the EU membership conditions.

And make no mistake, if Turkey meets all these conditions it will be quite a different Turkey from the Turkey of today.

It will be a Turkey where the EU's policies and standards are implemented and where the principles of democracy and human rights are a daily reality. A Turkey where the rule of law is firmly rooted in its society and state. A Turkey where European values successfully coexist among a predominantly Muslim population.

Such a Turkey would prove an invaluable crossroads between East and West, Islam and Christianity.

**Eluned Morgan is Labour MEP for Wales**