

Dinner speech  
of the Ambassador of the Netherlands in Berlin,  
Dr. Nikolaos van Dam,  
on the occasion of the conference

## **A Soul for Europe**

Friday, 26<sup>th</sup> November 2004

Meine sehr verehrten Damen und Herren,

da so viele der heute Abend hier Anwesenden deutsch weder sprechen noch verstehen, bitte ich um Ihr Verständnis, dass ich meine Ansprache diesmal auf Englisch halte.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

After a long day of in depth discussions on "*A Soul for Europe*", I have the pleasure of welcoming you here in the new embassy of the Netherlands, designed by Rem Koolhaas, one of the most famous architects in the world, who also happens to be Dutch.

In a few minutes I would like to invite you to visit the upper sections of the embassy building by following the passage way, called the "traject", which meanders through all its levels, so as to give you the opportunity of obtaining an impression of its architectural merits by yourselves.

As you all know, the Dutch Presidency of the European Union approaches its end next month.

Various subjects are high on our political agenda. To mention just two of them: the new financial framework of the EU, also called "Agenda 2007", and the decision concerning accession negotiations with Turkey. Agenda 2007 and Turkey, both concern the future of Europe. The first one economically, the second one geographically and above all politically.

As the final EU position on Turkey has not yet been agreed upon, I would like to restrict myself to some rather personal observations about Europe and Turkey.

When in 1964, forty years ago, I travelled for the first time to Turkey with the Orient Express from Amsterdam to Istanbul, I felt fascinated when I spotted for the first time in my life the view of real minarets. After crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border, village mosques started to appear in the thinly populated Turkish countryside. It reached a climax when I visited the splendid Sultan Ahmet, or Blue Mosque, in Istanbul. I was convinced that I had entered the completely different cultural world of Islam and the Middle East. Looking across the Bosphorus towards the east, I felt excited by the idea of being able to see parts of Asia.

About thirty years later, I entered Turkey again, but this time from a completely different direction and angle, and my experiences were accordingly different. After having spent by then many years of my diplomatic career in the Middle East, in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Libya and Iraq, I was posted to Ankara in 1996, just after having served more than five years as an ambassador to Cairo. This time I was - at least in my own perception - not entering yet another part of the Middle East, but I had the feeling of returning to Europe again, through the doors of Turkey. What struck me upon my arrival was that Turkey - at least in Ankara - did not very much look like a Middle Eastern country, let alone a Muslim one. Ankara was in my view a modern city with modern so-called western people.

Only in front of our embassy we would see lines of more traditional Islamic looking people from the Turkish countryside applying for visa to the Netherlands.

When visiting Turkish ministers and political party leaders in Ankara during the month of Ramadan, I was hardly aware that Turks were fasting. In fact, many of them did, but one would not be aware of it. Islam was for most of them, so to say, a private religion. In public, Islam was hardly present, at least not so much in Ankara.

In that period, just like today, we had lengthy discussions on whether or not Turkey was a European country, and to where exactly it was that the geographic boundaries of Europe extended in the east. To make a long story short: it became very clear, to me at least, that Europe does not have sharp geographic, let alone cultural boundaries. Neither does the Middle East, certainly if one takes the dimension of culture and religion into account. To me, Europe starts and ends somewhere in Turkey, whereas the Middle East starts and ends somewhere in those parts of Europe which were once under effective Ottoman Turkish control.

Although the Middle East and Europe are in various respects clearly distinguishable from one another, they are now so intermingled due to population movements that they cannot any longer be fully separated. Recent developments in Europe, including in the Netherlands, underline this.

Both sides try to impose their cultures and views on the other, often out of full conviction that this is the right thing to do. Muslims from the Middle East want to live as Muslims in Europe without any restrictions, taking the point of view that the democratic systems here should not create any obstacles to them. On the other hand, many Europeans are convinced that it were better for the peoples in the Middle East to have democratic systems similar to our own.

We apparently consider it to be crucial that democratic elections are to be held in Iraq or in Afghanistan, and to have a referendum to confirm a new constitution in Iraq. But on the other hand: some of us are hesitant when it comes to having our own people decide in a democratic way by referendum whether or not Turkey should be allowed to join the European Union.

Upon my farewell from Ankara, early 1999, I was told that I was leaving for the biggest Turkish city outside Turkey, called Berlin. Here I experienced that the Middle East and Islam are, just as in many other European cities today, just around the corner, if not in one's own street.

As part of the many changes in European society, the perception of our youngsters of their social environment is changing as well, just because they are born in a rather different ethnic and cultural set-up, never having known anything else.

What we need today is a strong policy of social integration. Learning the official language of the country is an essential key to success. With some serious effort we could achieve a much better mutual understanding.

Let me end by giving an example, which may sound somewhat idealistic.

Shortly after the arrival of my family in Berlin, I saw a young girl on German television speaking perfectly German. Her name was Fatima, and in my view she was undoubtedly of Turkish origin. When I asked my daughter Emma, who herself for several years grew up in Turkey, to guess where this girl Fatima was from, she replied to my surprise without any hesitation that the girl was German.

Ladies and gentlemen,

I want to end by wishing success to the participants to the *Berlin Conference for European Cultural Policy* as well as to the follow-up conference *Forum Amsterdam: European Identities*, organised by Felix Meritis.

Thank you.