



Conference of European Churches • Conférence des Églises Européennes • Konferenz Europäischer Kirchen • Конференция Европейских Церквей

## ***The relationship of the EU to Turkey***

Public statement

5 October 2004

The relationship of the European Union to Turkey is an issue of immense importance for the Union. The possible accession of Turkey to the EU will influence, not only the political set-up in the Union and Europe as a whole, but also the living conditions of the many EU citizens and people who live on the continent. This is the reason why the Conference of European Churches (CEC), which gathers Churches of Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant traditions from all over Europe, feels the need to express its position on this development through its Church and Society Commission.

After extensive consultation of the CEC Member Churches, we declare that for the Churches in Europe the issue of religious differences is not an obstacle to continuing improvement of the relationship between Turkey and the EU and even for Turkey's eventual membership in the Union. **For the Churches the accession of Turkey to the EU is, in other words, not a question of religious differences.** Turkey's eventual membership in the Union may have even potentially good effects on the positive development of the relationship between religions and cultures in Europe and may put a foundation stone in a bridge between the Christian and Muslim worlds.

The EU is to be seen in its self-definition, which corresponds to the understanding of Churches, a space of unity and diversity on different levels. The EU is for the churches an area of encounter of people of different nations, races and religions. **The EU is a multi-cultural community** of peoples and societies, in which Christians, Muslims, Jews and people of other religions co-exist and tolerate one another. **Churches make a major contribution to this.** In the Charta Oecumenica, the document signed by the Presidents of CEC and CCEE (Council of Roman Catholic Bishop's Conferences in Europe) in 2001, Christians in Europe committed themselves to deepen the relationship with other religions, to conduct themselves towards other religions with respect, and to work together on matters of common concern (Charta Oecumenica III/10,11). Interfaith dialogue is for the Churches an issue of substantial importance.

Churches and other religions in Europe are recognised by the respective EU Member States, and also by the Union itself, as a specific and distinct part of civil society. Legal provisions are one aspect of this recognition. Churches and religions contribute to the development of society through their various activities, as e.g. diaconal and charitable institutions, work for peace and reconciliation and many others (see e.g. the EU Constitutional Treaty, the conclusions of the EU Presidency in December 2003 and others). **Churches and religions in Europe are a part of public life.** The EU Member States and Churches and religious communities in the EU share a vision of a tolerant attitude between Churches and religions.

Geneva  
(General Secretariat)  
P. O. Box 2100,  
150 route de Ferney,  
CH - 1211 Geneva 2, Switzerland  
tel: +41 22 791 61 11  
fax: +41 22 791 62 27  
e-mail: [cec@cec-kek.org](mailto:cec@cec-kek.org)

Brussels  
Ecumenical Centre  
rue Joseph II, 174  
B - 1000 Brussels,  
Belgium  
tel: +32 2 230 17 32  
fax: +32 2 231 14 13  
e-mail: [csc@cec-kek.be](mailto:csc@cec-kek.be)

Strasbourg  
8, rue du Fossé des Treize  
F - 67000 Strasbourg,  
France  
tel: +33 3 88 15 27 60  
fax: +33 3 88 15 27 61  
e-mail: [csc@cec-kek.com](mailto:csc@cec-kek.com)

We expect that **any EU future Member State will share this vision and express it in their attitude towards the Churches and all religious communities residing in its territory.** The major indicator of the internal situation, stability and social cohesion in all EU Member States and the EU candidate countries is the relationship between ethnic and religious communities. Although we take note of the fundamental changes in Turkey in recent years, unfortunately, we still observe many problems in this sphere.

The EU is a community of States and nations in which **values** of justice and peace, solidarity and pluralism, reconciliation and tolerance, freedom of speech and mutual respect are declared by the documents the EU committed itself to and effort is underway to make them an integral part of everyday life. At the present stage, we do not see the same expression of these values in Turkey.

There are still reports about torture in prisons, problems of acceptance of freedom of speech, as well as of oppression against minorities. Honest elaboration of history, particularly that part of it which concerns the relationship of Turkey with its neighbouring states and which includes recognition of wounds and offences inflicted, is a precondition to healing of memories and to true reconciliation in society. This has not yet been reached. The relationship with the Armenian minority is, in this respect, of special importance.

At the present reality there are also reported **discrepancies between agreed rules and their implementation.** Level of adopted standards has to be achieved in the reality of everyday life and maintained. Stability is one of the basic criteria, which must not be undervalued. In judging the readiness of any EU candidate country for the eventual start of accession talks, the EU has set basic preconditions. If the EU wants to maintain consistency with its own criteria, it **must avoid in the evaluation of all candidate countries any possible inclination to double standards.**

Churches in Europe raise in this respect the deep **concern about the situation of Christian minorities.** In spite of promises from the side of Turkey's responsible authorities, the Christian communities in the country still have to face many problems in terms of legal recognition, property rights and development of education curricula. In our evaluation, the problems are not only of legal character. Going beyond that is the lack of an open and fair attitude to traditional religions and ethnic minorities.

We recognise that the present Turkish understanding of the role of the state as guarantor of the laicistic system means to perpetuate the system of state-organised religion, in order to put limits on extremist Islamic groups. On the other hand, this system hinders the life of other religious groups, including Christian communities. For us, it is a sign of an intrinsic instability and a demonstration of the **limits of religious freedom in the country.**

The Union itself has to face a number of internal challenges. After enlargement by 10 new Member States and further envisaged enlargement in two years time, the **stability of the Union** needs to be the top priority. This new situation needs to be fully discerned and mastered. A thorough discussion concerning the finality of the Union and its vision is an essential request for the future of the Union.

Of equal importance is the Union's task to manage first, in a satisfactory way, the practical implementation of **an acceptable model for the cohesion of the society** now already living in the Union's territory. Social, political and cultural integration of immigrant communities living in the Union's territory is, in this respect, of major and ever-increasing importance. Actual life has shown that an improvement in immigrants' material condition on its own does not solve the problem of their cultural and social adaptation.

The decision about starting EU accession talks with Turkey will have far-reaching consequences for the future existence of the Union. The risk of taking this substantial political decision without sufficient support from the Union's citizens may lead to **increasing the distance between the EU and its citizens**. We encourage the EU to pursue with deeper intensity the wide-ranging debate about European identity. Ethnic, cultural and religious factors on which human relationships are built are its essential components. Involvement of civil society, citizens and peoples of Europe is of crucial importance for its successful outcome. Churches in Europe are ready to play their part in this debate.

Churches in Europe desire the values of reconciliation, peace, and solidarity between nations and peoples as well as within all societies in Europe to be the principal driving force in the future development of the continent. Deepening the relationship between the EU and Turkey is, in this respect, the process in which all need to cooperate.