I would like to share with you some thoughts about Turkey's European aspirations. I am well aware that there is an impressive degree of consensus in Turkey in favour of joining the European Union. In fact there seems to be close to unanimous support for the modernisation strategy. But there are concerns as to how Turkey is perceived within the EU. And it is true that EU-Turkey relations are increasingly a subject of public debate.

Contrary to the situation in Turkey, the public opinion in the EU is not unanimous in favouring a Turkish membership. It is in my view important for the political leadership in the EU and in Turkey to recognise and manage this political reality. There are those who are concerned about the religious dimension. Others have raised issues such as the capacity of the Union to integrate a country of the size and with the demography of Turkey, the economic development of Turkey and Turkey's geographical situation. We need to reply to these concerns.

The fact that Turkey belongs to Europe was recognised already in our Association Agreement of 1963. I know that the overwhelming majority of the Turkish people share the same values and objectives as other Europeans. They want to live in democracies based on the rule of law and the respect of human rights. Terrorist attacks in Turkey, as elsewhere, are intended to undermine such values. They will not succeed.

Since Turkey was granted candidate status in Helsinki in December 1999, it has made impressive progress towards meeting the Copenhagen political criteria. Candidate status has helped Turkey to embark upon a process of far-reaching constitutional and legislative reforms.

We have been impressed by the determination of the Turkish Government to carry forward these reforms. By publicly declaring that political reforms are first and foremost for the benefit of Turkey's own citizens, the current government led by Prime Minister Erdogan is following the footsteps of Turkey's march towards modernisation.

A major constitutional reform and seven legislative packages have been adopted in a very short period of time. It is noteworthy that many of the reforms have been adopted unanimously, with bipartisan support from the majority and the opposition.

In its successive reports, the European Commission has recognised the scope and significance of the reform process. These initiatives have addressed some of the most sensitive issues in the Turkish context, such as the abolition of the death penalty and the lifting of the ban on languages other than Turkish, which is a sign of the growing maturity of the Turkish democracy. The question of full democratic control of the military, including full parliamentary authority over the defence...
budget, is also being addressed. Turkey has ratified major UN Covenants on Civil and Political
rights as well as on Social and economic rights. Prisoners sentenced for non-violent expression of
opinion have been released. The legislation on fighting against torture has been considerably
strengthened and incommunicado detention has been abolished.

Looking back over the last couple of years, I can say that there has been a profound change in
the climate of our bilateral relations. We have moved a long way in terms of how we approach and
perceive each other. Whereas earlier we could not agree on Turkey's position with respect to the
Copenhagen political criteria, we now very largely share a common assessment of the situation,
including in the area of human rights. We have deepened our dialogue on the political criteria and
are discussing issues in detail, openly and without taboos.

In its November Report, the Commission highlighted those areas where more progress is needed
such as the strengthening of the independence and efficiency of the judiciary, the overall framework
for the exercise of fundamental freedoms, the full alignment of civil-military relations on EU
standards as well as the improvement of the situation in the South East.

We are pleased to hear that Turkey is committed to address its remaining shortcomings. I
understand that your Assembly is currently dealing with very important draft legislation such as the
penal code. The National Plan for the Adoption of the Acquis adopted by the government in July
2003 foresees a crowded agenda of legislative reforms in a wide range of areas related to the Acquis
communautaire.