

Diana Wallis: "We should thrive on EU's diversity"

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Diana Wallis, Vice President of the European Parliament, speaks to journalists from Bulgaria. This special interview is given to Radio Bulgaria, PROBG and Europe Gateway on April 14 2010 on the occasion of the public presentation in Brussels of the book "Europe 2020 - Civic Vision", edited by experts of the European Institute Foundation and its partnering organizations within the project "Interacting with the European Parliament" with the financial support of EP's DG "Communication".

Mrs. Wallis (ALDE, UK) has been a MEP since 1999. She is Member of the Parliament's Bureau, of the Committees on Legal Affairs, on Petitions, as well as to the Delegation for relations with Switzerland, Iceland and Norway and to the European Economic Area (EEA) Joint Parliamentary Committee. Mrs. Wallis is also Substitute Member to the Delegation for relations with Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro and Kosovo.

Q: You are co-author of a book entitled *Forgotten Enlargement* that is about the accession of Iceland, Norway and Switzerland. How you see Europe in 2020; do you see any of these three countries as future members?

DW: Well, suddenly the position now looks quite interesting and encouraging from the point of view of Iceland because you know that they have submitted a formal application. The application has been acknowledged by the Commission and we now may wait for the Council to make a formal decision to accept the application. Things look as though they are moving forward. So Iceland looks a possibility and indeed it is conceivable but it is up to the Icelandic people, at the end of the day, that you could see in 2011 Iceland and Croatia joining together. Because you have to bear in mind that Iceland has actually accepted all of the internal market – a key through its membership in the EEA. So it is a membership process that might be quite quick but there will be a long conversation about fishing and fisheries. So I think Iceland is a clear possibility within the coming years. That then raises the question for Norway because the EEA becomes a rather impoverished organization with just Norway and Liechtenstein.

Q: Now in the context of this vision for Europe in 10 years, how do you see the possible accession of some of the Balkan countries such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia?

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DW: Well, clearly, we have the process with Croatia that is nearing completion, hopefully. From my own point of view, I would love to see all those countries almost come in together as it were and clearly Croatia will be the first but for the rest of them I think it is important that there is an element of balance which they do proceed. It is clearly going to be very difficult for some of the countries involved but all of them have that aspiration and we need to recognize it and we need to help them move on.

Q: In this sense, now that there is a global economic crisis running, do you think that a possible EU enlargement would affect the economic situation of the union and would perhaps deepen the crisis instead of solving it?

DW: It is clear that the financial and economic crisis affects the union as much as it affects elsewhere. We have our problems in Greece but not only Greece. But a crisis normally, in my view, is something that helps people pull together in order to solve the crisis. And that to me is what Europe offers - both for its members and for those that want to join us. I mean that's evident for Iceland but it could also be clear elsewhere. Clearly, economic difficulties should not be the only reason that provokes a country to join us. I am a great believer and let's be optimistic that the crisis produces change and it can produce almost, in my view, a new dynamic to move forward. If it produces a response which means we close our doors then I think that would be very, very sad.

Q: So you think that the European Union should remain open - how do you see Turkey as a possible member?

DW: I look at it in two ways. First of all, Turkey has been wanting to be associated with the EU or at least its predecessors since the time of the Treaty of Rome was signed. That's a long time to be knocking on the door. And likewise, I feel that we should be clear with Turkey and we should treat Turkey like any other applicant. That means that if Turkey reaches the economic standards, the human rights standards, we should be going at a good speed. So I would be positive towards Turkey but clearly there are other voices that are more reticent. I believe that having Turkey as part of the European Union helps us, helps Turkey, helps that region of the world and it means that the European Union is not a rather exclusive Middle-European Christian club but something much more diverse. I think that is something much to be wished for.

Q: And what about the difference in terms of culture between Turkey and the rest of EU?

DW: I think we should thrive on EU's diversity. One of my first loves is law but always the United Kingdom and Ireland are at odds because we have a very different tradition of law. Our legal system is founded on the common law while the rest of Europe has by and large a continental system. But we managed to overcome those differences and so with many other differences. I think that difference can often be Europe's strength.

Q: Well, in this sense then if you just picture the future, the next 10, maybe even 20 years knowing the situation now with all its difficulties, how do you see Turkey becoming a member and probably when?

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DW: I am not going to speculate on the when but I think that Turkey should be a member for all the reasons I've mentioned and I look forward to that day.

Q: What do you think about the issue of gender equality related to Turkey where women have to wear headscarves and walk a meter behind their husbands or men?

DW: Less than an hour ago (*The interview was taken on 14 April 2010*), I had a meeting in this very office with women from the Turkish Parliamentary committee on gender equality and women's issues. So they are doing their best within their own system and with help from us to raise these issues, to try and promote change in their country. You only have to look around the EU at the moment. Look at the big campaign that we are running on domestic violence started by the Spanish presidency. Europe doesn't have always such a positive story to tell about gender issues as well. So I think together we can help much better resolve these issues. But to point at one country and say you have a real problem here... Yes they have a problem but it was interesting to listen to those Turkish women. They were saying "our experience from talking to colleagues from Spain was that it was through the accession process that many of the problems related to gender inequality started to be solved." So they are obviously looking at the accession process to the European Union as being a helpful way of solving some of their own internal problems. I think that has often been the case with many countries.

Q: If Turkey becomes a Member State, do you think it would be interesting to see some women with headscarves here in the European parliament?

DW: I don't have a problem with that, as long as those women make their own free choice. That is important.

Q: What are your impressions of the work of the Bulgarian MEPs?

DW: I think we had some amazing colleagues from Bulgaria, who were working very hard and made a huge impact, some of them who were with us literally for a very short period. I think of my former colleague Bilyana Raeva who was a very active member. But there were many others, she was just one I happened to know well. There are plenty of Bulgarian members who have contributed much to the life of this institution.

Q: Do you think that in the feasible future we will see a European President who is a woman?

DW: If we don't there's going to be trouble, let me put it that way.

Q: In this context how do you feel as a woman at this position? Is it more difficult being a woman or would it have been easier being a man?

DW: You are referring to the fact that I am a Vice President of the European Parliament. Clearly I am very pleased to have been elected to that role for a second time. I think everything you come to do a

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second time; you do it with more experience. I am very pleased to be where I am from the perspective of my country because I am the first British woman who has held this role for many years. I think that's important. But it is still the top one that eludes us. That's where we've got to make a difference ultimately. I am not saying it should be me but it should be another woman at some point in the future. This is absolutely critical. We can't leave it as it is with a male colleague after male colleague after male colleague taking the top role and saying that there aren't women who can do this because there certainly are and it is a great shame. The parliament made, in a sense, a huge move when the first president of directly elected parliament was a woman. Since then we've only had one other. That's two and that's not enough. I know we have to balance a lot of things such as people from new member states as well as geographical balance but I think we could remember gender occasionally and a bit more often.

Q: So gender is still a strong issue in the European parliament?

DW: Yes, I think so. The other issue of course is the leadership of the political groups. Two main groups – men. My own group – a man. It is not to say that they are not good but sometimes it needs to be a woman.

Q: Actually gender should not be an issue at all.

DW: It should not be! However men sometimes are a little better at organizing themselves.

Adapted by Delyan Zahariev, Radio Bulgaria.