

Turkey: the 2013 progress report and beyond

In October 2013, the European Commission published an overall positive report on Turkey, followed in November by the opening of Chapter 22 (Regional Policy and Coordination of Structural Instruments) of the accession negotiations. However, recent domestic developments have given rise to serious concern and overshadowed progress achieved by Turkey up to then.

European Commission report

The **European Commission** (EC) published its 2013 [Enlargement package](#), including the [Progress Report on Turkey](#), in October last year. It concludes that the accession process remains the most suitable framework for cooperation with Turkey and points to progress through certain reforms made by Turkey during 2013.

On the **political criteria**, the Commission commends Turkey for continuing important reforms, such as the adoption of a [fourth judicial reform package](#) aimed at eliminating rulings against Turkey at the European Court of Human Rights, the September [democratisation package](#) (proposing among other things to lower the national electoral threshold, abolish the headscarf ban in public institutions and allow greater use of Kurdish languages), the establishment of the Ombudsman and National Human Rights institutions; and for the on-going peace process aimed at solving the Kurdish issue. In addition, the Commission stresses Turkey's role in its neighbourhood, in particular for its humanitarian assistance provided to more than [624 000 Syrian refugees](#). On the other hand, the report denounces the persistent polarisation of the political climate, condemning in this regard the use of excessive force by Turkish police on protesters during demonstrations in June 2013. It also finds that Turkish legislation, and its interpretation by the judiciary, continues to impede full respect for fundamental freedoms, in particular freedom of expression, including for a free press; and that more efforts are needed to protect the rights of women, children and people belonging to various minorities. Opening negotiations as soon as possible on the judiciary and fundamental rights, and justice, freedom and security chapters (chapters 23 and 24 respectively) could increase engagement between the EU and Turkey on fundamental rights. Finally, the report deplores Turkey's refusal to implement in a non-discriminatory manner its [obligations](#) toward all EU Member States under the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement (opening its ports and airspace for Cyprus). Consequently, the EU will maintain the [measures](#) agreed in 2006 (suspending negotiations on eight chapters and not closing any chapter).

Economically, the report considers Turkey a functioning market economy, although pressure on Turkey's financial markets and the lira shows the imbalances in the Turkish economy and the need for medium to long-term structural reforms. Concerning Turkey's **alignment with the EU acquis**, the report [registers](#) good progress in some areas, e.g. free movement of goods, financial services, energy, regional policy etc.; while more efforts are needed to align legislation and increase institutional capacity in others. Further significant progress is needed in the fields of the judiciary and fundamental rights, and justice, freedom and security.

The Council agreed to **re-launch accession talks** after three years of stalemate. On 5 November 2013, talks [opened](#) on a new chapter, on regional policy and coordination of structural instruments. It is the 14th chapter of the 35 to be opened. Turkey was allocated [funding](#) of about €900 million for 2013, under the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance. In December 2013, Turkey and the EU [signed](#) a [Readmission agreement](#) for clandestine migrants, [endorsed](#) by Parliament in February, and opened talks on **visa liberalisation**.

Stakeholder reactions

In its [Conclusions of 17 December 2013](#), the **Council** acknowledged the "important progress on reforms" made by Turkey, welcomed the opening of chapter 22 (regional policy), and expressed its strong support for the on-going peace process to settle the Kurdish issue. Turkey's active role in the region was also recognised.

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Nevertheless, the Council stressed the need for more efforts to improve respect for fundamental freedoms, and to consolidate the independence and impartiality of the judiciary. Finally, the Council deplored Turkey's discriminatory implementation of the Additional Protocol and the lack of progress towards normalising relations with the Republic of Cyprus.

The **Turkish Government** generally welcomed the report as [balanced](#) and as confirming the government's [determination for reforms](#). In particular, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan [characterised](#) it as more "well-intentioned" than in previous years, although still containing many incomplete or wrong assessments.

Commentators [confirm](#) the 2013 progress report was the most favourable to Turkey since 2009. One observer considers it a [barometer](#) of the state of relations between the EU and Turkey, and sees in the improved tone the Commission's will to secure the EU's long-term interests in relation to Turkey, even through diluting its criticism of the country's democratic record. The main [reasons](#) for enhanced EU-Turkey relations are said to be the instability in the region and a fragile economic situation, for Turkey; and Turkey's strategic importance and the need to preserve influence in a zone of instability, for the EU.

Recent political developments in Turkey

Since the Commission's progress report, Turkey has seen some worrying domestic developments: a high-level corruption scandal and the adoption of laws putting into question fundamental freedoms and the constitutional separation of powers.

Since mid-December 2013, the Turkish government has been mired in a **corruption scandal** that saw the [detention](#) of high-profile businessmen and three government ministers' sons, and the resignation of several ministers. Following the revelations, [hundreds](#) of police officers, judges and prosecutors linked to the investigation were removed from their functions. Recently, a [recorded](#) phone call (yet to be authenticated) was made public, placing the Prime Minister at the centre of the corruption scandal. [Public protests](#) and [opposition](#) parties (the Republican People's Party, CHP, and the Nationalist Movement Party, MHP) called immediately for Erdoğan's resignation and for early general elections if this recording is confirmed as authentic. Erdoğan [claims](#) this recording was fabricated and maintains the graft scandal is a conspiracy ("[judicial coup](#)") of a "parallel structure" (led by Fethullah Gülen) that has infiltrated the police and judiciary to undermine the government in the run-up to local (30 March) and presidential elections (August) this year. [Actions](#) leading to the release of some suspects in the investigation have prompted new criticism. Political instability has impacted the lira which has lost almost 9% of its value against the dollar since December.

Recent protests were also linked to a series of **disputed laws** proposed by the government and signed by President Abdullah Gül: a [controversial law on the judiciary](#) and a new [Internet law](#). Critics maintain the first bill ends the [independence of the judiciary](#) and the CHP party has [applied](#) to the Constitutional Court for its annulment. The Internet law has been [criticised](#) for infringing upon freedom of expression and the citizen's right to information, as it reinforces the government's control over the Internet, through giving a state-run telecommunications body the power to shut down websites within hours and without a court ruling. Some opponents have also alleged the law was an [authoritarian response](#) to the on-going corruption investigation. The Turkish parliament has however [amended](#) some of the controversial provisions. Another legislative proposal to expand the powers of the [National Intelligence Organisation](#) is strongly opposed.

During a recent visit to Brussels by Erdoğan and at [an EU-Turkey Ministerial dialogue](#), top **EU officials expressed their concerns** about the developments in Turkey, in particular with regard to the [judiciary](#) and internet laws.

However, positive developments have taken place in **Cyprus**, as the leaders of the island's two communities have decided to [resume](#) reunification talks, [under UN auspices](#), but also supported by [Washington](#), and with positive signals from [Turkey and Greece](#). The discovery in the Eastern Mediterranean of important oil and natural gas reserves is said to have [played a major part](#).

The **European Parliament** will [vote](#) on 13 March 2014 on a Motion for Resolution on the 2013 Progress Report on Turkey (drafted by Ria Oomen-Ruijten, EPP, the Netherlands) [adopted](#) by the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The resolution expresses MEPs' concerns over the new internet and judiciary laws, as well as over the high-level corruption allegations, and calls on Turkey, *inter alia*, to make progress on constitutional reform, to ensure an independent judiciary and to respect the rights of the people belonging to the Kurdish community. They also expressed their support for the opening of chapters 23 and 24 on the judiciary, and justice.