European Parliament critical of slowdown in Turkey's reform process

In adopting a report on Turkey's progress towards accession, MEPs stated that they were critical of the slowdown in the reform process. Relations with Cyprus and Armenia, as well as restrictions on freedom of expression and religion, figured prominently in the report adopted by 429 votes in favour to 71 against with 125 abstentions. MEPs nevertheless welcomed some recent steps by the Turkish government in the fields of combating torture, fighting corruption and extending women's rights.

The report reiterates the Parliament's position that negotiations with Turkey are an "open-ended process, and [do] not lead a priori and automatically to accession while recalling that "the EU's capacity to absorb Turkey while maintaining the momentum of integration is an important consideration in the general interest of both the EU and Turkey."

MEPs called on the government in Ankara to recognize the Republic of Cyprus, withdraw its forces from the island and lift its embargo on Cypriot vessels and aircraft. The report reminds Turkey that a lack of progress in implementing the Ankara protocol "will have serious implications for the negotiation process, and could even bring it to a halt." It also calls on Turkey to refrain from "tension-prone military activities."

Significantly, the EP rejected a provision that would have otherwise called the acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide a "precondition" for Turkey's European Union accession. MEPs nevertheless stress that, although the recognition of the Armenian genocide as such is formally not one of the Copenhagen criteria, it is indispensable for a country on the road to membership to come to terms with and recognise its past. The House calls in this respect on the Turkish authorities to facilitate the work of researchers, intellectuals and academics working on this question, ensuring them the access to the historical archives and providing them with all the relevant documents. MEPs urge Turkey to take the necessary steps, without any preconditions, to establish diplomatic and good neighbourly relations with Armenia, to withdraw the economic blockade and to open the land border at an early date, in accordance with the resolutions adopted by Parliament between 1987 and 2005, thereby fulfilling the Accession Partnership priorities and the requirements of the Negotiation Framework on 'peaceful settlement on border disputes' which are both mandatory for EU accession.

The House, at the same time, called for the abolition of the "xenophobic and racist" Talat Pasha committee. MEPs urged Turkish authorities to "fulfil their commitments regarding freedom of religion," since they noted an "absence of progress" in this area since the last EP report.

Parliament condemns PKK terrorist violence
The House welcomed "the opening of broadcasting in Kurdish" while nevertheless noting the continued intimidation of civil society representatives in the South East of the country. The report "strongly condemns the resurgence of terrorist violence on the part of the PKK" and "calls on the PKK to declare and respect an immediate ceasefire." It also pleads for "a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue following Prime Minister Erdogan's encouraging statement last year:"

Despite the recent acquittal of the novelist Elif Shafak, the EP remained troubled by the remaining barriers to freedom of expression in Turkey. It called for the abolition or amendment of those provisions of the Penal Code which threaten European free speech norms -- such as Articles 216, 277, 285, 301 (which foresees punishment for "denigrating Turkishness"), 305 and 318. The Parliament also expressed its "serious concern" about the "non-respect for women's rights" and the high role of the military in Turkish public life.

The European Commission announced last week that the publication of its next annual report on Turkey's progress towards accession will be delayed by two weeks, until 8 November.

**Debate - 26 September 2006**

Ahead of the vote on the report by Camiel EURLINGS (EPP-ED, NL) on Turkey's progress towards accession, MEPs debated the issue and expressed a wide range of views, many being critical of the slowdown of the reform process in Turkey. MEPs pointed out that Turkey still had a long path to tread before accession.

Opening the debate, rapporteur Camiel EURLINGS (EPP-ED, NL) described his report as "fair but tough" and said its basic conclusion was that the EP regretted the "slowdown in reforms" in Turkey, although he did compliment the Turkish government on its 9th reform package.

Freedom of expression was the first problem area Mr Eurlings highlighted, saying that Article 301 of the Penal Code [on "insulting Turkishness"] must be changed or abolished. This was important not just for the EU but for Turkish people. Freedom of religion was another issue. Confiscated property must be restituted to monasteries and churches and they must be allowed to start training clergy once more.

Turning to the situation in south-east Turkey, the rapporteur made a point of strongly condemning PKK violence but called on Turkey to try to find a political solution. As to Cyprus, Turkey must fulfil its commitments and implement the Ankara Protocol before the end of 2006 which had sought to find a way of "normalising relations" with Cyprus.

On the sensitive subject of the Armenian genocide, Mr Eurlings stressed that he wanted to preserve his own wording in paragraph 50 of the resolution, saying that recognition of the events was not a criterion for accession, although Turkey should seek to "come to terms with its past" by allowing inquiries into the events.

Minister for European Affairs Paula LEHTOMÄKI, speaking for the Council Presidency, said: "Every debate provides a good opportunity to increase awareness of Turkey's accession process, to engage the citizens of the EU Member States and of Turkey in this process, and to support the Turkish government in its accession path. I can assure you that the Presidency will take due note of the views of the European Parliament.

The Presidency shares the European Parliament's concerns regarding Turkey's reform process. Turkey needs to give new impetus to the pace of the political reform and vigorously pursue the reform process. Full and effective implementation of the reforms is of utmost importance for Turkey to ensure the irreversibility and sustainability of the changes. Concrete results are required.

We also share your views on Turkey's limited progress in such crucial fields as fundamental freedoms and human rights. Even if Turkey has made significant progress compared to the situation five years ago, further tangible reforms are necessary especially in the areas of freedom of expression, freedom of religion, cultural rights, women's rights, and combat against torture and ill-treatment. In the revised Accession Partnership, most of these issues are defined to be among the short-term priorities that Turkey needs to meet without delay.
At present, the Presidency looks forward to the adoption of the ninth legislative package with a view to being able to address some of the outstanding issues. We reiterate that the new laws need to be fully in line with the EU standards.

In the area of freedom of expression, in particular, the Council expects immediate action to avoid legal action being brought against people who have expressed non-violent opinions and thus violated certain provisions of the Turkish Penal Code. As for freedom of religion, we expect that Turkey fully and without delay implement the legislation that provides for the rights of non-Muslim religious minorities in compliance with the European standards.

Like the Parliament, we are equally concerned about the tense situation in south-east Turkey. The Presidency has condemned the recent bomb attacks in several locations in Turkey as irrational acts of terrorism. Terrorist activities can never be justified. This is a complex entity of issues that we closely monitor as a part of the ongoing reform process. Turkey needs to swiftly develop a comprehensive approach to help reduce regional disparities with a view to enhancing the economic, social and cultural opportunities of all Turkish citizens, including those of Kurdish origin.

In addition to the Copenhagen political criteria, Turkey’s progress in meeting the accession criteria is measured in relation to the requirements clearly set out in the Negotiating Framework - including the implementation of the Additional Protocol to the Ankara Agreement, which is an essential element of the advancement of the negotiations. Turkey must apply the Protocol fully in its relations with all EU Member States and remove all obstacles to the free movement of goods, including restrictions on means of transport. The opening of negotiations on the relevant chapters depends on Turkey’s implementation of its contractual obligations concluded with the EU Member States. Failure to implement these obligations in full will affect the overall progress in the negotiations.

We will make sure that the progress made on the key issues, set out in the Declaration of the EC and its Member States on 21 September 2005, will continue to be monitored this year.

Compliance with the Union’s standards and membership criteria requires hard work and continuous efforts and determination. Our message is clear and consistent. We attach particular importance to Turkey’s accession process, and I can assure you that the Presidency will do its best in order to facilitate further progress in the negotiations.

The Union will continue to support Turkey in its efforts, but progress will depend on Turkey’s performance. The accession process will proceed provided that Turkey respects its commitments to the carrying out of the reforms and satisfies the existing obligations.

Enlargement Commissioner Olli REHN agreed that the momentum for reform had slowed. Progress had been made but the negotiations were "an open process" with no automatic guarantees. "The integration of Turkey would be of mutual benefit", he said, adding "the EU needs a prosperous and stable Turkey".

However, he highlighted freedom of expression as a problem, especially Article 301 of the Penal Code, which he said "violates European standards". He went on "I cannot imagine a Member State of the EU which does not respect the fundamental principle of freedom of expression".

On freedom of religion, he supported Mr Eurlings position on church property rights and the current restrictions on the training of clergy. Turning to south-east Turkey he, like Mr Eurlings, condemned the PKK but called for a government policy not purely based on security considerations. Regarding Cyprus, the Ankara Protocol must indeed be implemented, he said, though an end to the economic isolation of northern Cyprus could not be linked to this.

In conclusion, he told the House, "it is in our mutual interest that Turkey pursues its transformation". It could serve as a bridge between Europe and Islam, thus helping Europe to cope with "the greatest challenge of our time". Ultimately, however, it was up to Turkey to take reform further. Indeed the Copenhagen criteria should perhaps be called the Ankara criteria, as "they are there for Turkish citizens, not to please
*the EU*.

**Political group speakers**

Speaking on behalf of the EPP-ED group, German MEP Elmar BROK stressed the issues of human rights, minority rights, freedom of religion and of expression. These, he said, were "preconditions" for EU membership. We must clearly *spell out the facts*: Turkey must fulfil the criteria. So far it had not even implemented the Ankara Protocol. He also emphasised that the financial aspects of the negotiations must be dealt with and that the EU had *no financial leeway* under the Financial Perspective.

For the Socialists, Jan Marinus WIERSMA (NL) argued that the EU "needs Turkey as a partner*. The negotiation process was the best way to build better relations with the country and there must be no ambiguity: the aim of negotiations was to achieve Turkish membership. He supported rapporteur Camiel Eurlings on the Armenian genocide: Turkey should "recognise" what happened but this could not be a *sine qua non* for membership as it was *"not part of the Copenhagen criteria"*.

Andrew DUFF (ALDE, UK) on behalf of his group, stressed that EP’s role was *"to promote parliamentary democracy in Turkey"*. This meant encouraging Turkey’s modernisation not putting up *"spurious blocks"* to the process. Turkey’s candidature was a *"defining moment for the EU"*. If there were a *"train crash"* in Cyprus, there would be two trains involved: one carrying *"Turkey’s efforts to create a viable reform of European Islam, where the prophet meets the Enlightenment",* the other carrying Europe’s efforts to develop a strong common foreign and defence policy, to which Turkey could make *"an extraordinary contribution"*.

On behalf of his group, Joost LAGENDIJK (Greens/EFA, NL) said there was a big problem with one point of the Eurlings report in its present form: the paragraphs in which, following amendments instigated by lobby groups, recognition of the Armenian genocide by Turkey was described as a precondition for Turkey to join. He backed Mr Eurlings’ effort to reinstate his original wording on this point. More generally, he stressed the importance of being *"critical but fair"* towards Turkey. The EP must *"support people in Turkey who are fighting for the same things as us"*.

For the GUE/NGL group, Vittorio AGNOLETTI (IT) said that his group favoured Turkish membership of the EU. Nevertheless, there had to be a political and diplomatic resolution to the Kurdish question. The Turkish government had labelled the whole Kurdish people as terrorists. He urged the Turkish government to talk to the PKK and he also condemned the 80 writers and journalists being held under Article 301 of the Turkish penal code.

For the UEN group, Konrad SZYMAŃSKI (PL) said that he welcomed the critical report. Turkey still had a long way to go before it could join the EU he said, namely Turkey must respect the rights of the Christian minority. He also compared Ukraine to Turkey saying the former had a much better record on human rights and prospects for membership.

Bastián BELDER (NL), for the IND/DEM group, also welcomed the report but stated that the freedom of religion could not be exercised in Turkey. He criticised the so-called *"deep-state"* for entering all facets of society.

Andreas MÖLZER (AT), a non-attached MEP, said that progress on reform had been slow in Turkey. The EU had extended the deadline for the recognition of Cyprus, but Turkey had still not done this. The political reality was that Turkey was not ready to join because of Cyprus, the non-recognition of the Armenian genocide and the Kurdish question.

**British and Irish Speakers**

Seán Ó NEACHTAIN (UEN, IE) said: *"May I say at the outset, that I am a member of the European Parliament high level contact group that is dealing with forging closer relations with the Turkish community in
Northern Cyprus. I am clearly aware of the sense of isolation that many Turkish Cypriots feel, in light of the rejection of the Annan plan. In fact, I believe that the European Union, together with the United Nations, should continue to work in building peace and reconciliation on the island of Cyprus.

But, Turkey too has serious obligations. For example, I do believe that Turkey must open its ports and airports to Cypriot ships and plans. This is an obligation that Turkey will have to honour, in accordance, with the accession negotiations dealing with the Customs Union chapter. I also feel that Turkey is going to have to look at repealing clause 301 of it's penal code. It is clear that significant efforts are still needed in the field of human rights and fundamental freedoms within Turkey."

Gerard BATTEN (IND/DEM, UK) questioned why Turkey wanted to join the EU in the first place. May be he said, they wanted to join "the other parasite nations" living off the British and German taxpayers. Turkey, he said, should think about the impact of accession on itself; it would mean, he said, losing control of its own destiny.

Charles TANNOCK (EPP-ED, GB) said that his party was in favour of Turkish membership of the EU. However, the EU had to consider its absorption capacity and potential impact on the structural funds. Mr Tannock also highlighted the risks of unrestricted free-movement of Turkish workers into the EU. Some studies, he said, had shown that Turrkey was one of the most anti-American and anti-Israeli countries. In particular, Mr Tannock criticised Turkey's support for theocratic Iran. Mr Tannock also pointed out the problems relating to the recognition of the Armenian genocide and Cyprus. He said the negotiations with Turkey would be "lengthy".

Simon COVENEY (EPP-ED, IE) stated that he had spent the previous week in Turkey with the Human Rights subcommittee. He welcomed the draft report as "tough but fair". On the Armenian issue, he said, that it should not be a new pre-condition for accession. Mr Coveney said that he supported the principal of Turkish membership, nevertheless he was particularly concerned about the freedom of expression including Article 301 of the Penal Code and resolving the Kurdish question.

Glenis WILLMOTT (PES, UK), like several other speakers, argued that "the European Parliament needs to be frank" with Turkey about the "serious problems" relating to freedom of expression, reform of the security services and implementation of human rights legislation. However, criticism must be "balanced, fair and honest". The prospect of EU membership "has empowered modernisers and human rights defenders in Turkey". And it would be "wrong to establish new preconditions for membership that were not applied to other members". In conclusion, she said "an EU with Turkey will entrench multiculturalism" and help understanding between different religions.

Response to the debate - Council

Minister LEHTOMÄKI, replying for the Council, said that the debate had been very thorough and highlighted the many challenges for both Turkey and the EU. Turkey, was undoubtedly an important strategic country. Enlargement would be carried out on the principal of equal treatment and merit. It was important for Turkey to ratify and implement the Ankara agreement which would allow trade with Northern Cyprus and the access of Greek Cypriot ships into Turkish ports. There also had to be a solution found at the UN level.

Response to the debate - Commission

Standing in for his colleague Olli Rehn, Development Commissioner Louis Michel said the debate had set out the main issues clearly and the Commission would take it into account in its report on Turkey due for publication on 8 November. The Commission's report would be rigorous, objective and based on a wide range of data, including Parliament's views.

He stressed that in areas such as Iran, Iraq, the Middle East, the dialogue between civilisations and the energy crisis, "Turkey is a key player and an indispensable ally" of Europe.

It would, however, have to meet all the obligations - no-one would be waving a magic wand. The Commis-
sion would be pushing the process forward but it was important to point out that “Turkey does not have to be evaluated today”. Negotiations were very much “an evolutionary process” and it was unfair just to take a snapshot of the current state of affairs.

On the Armenian genocide, Mr Michel emphasised that this had never been a precondition and to impose it as such now would amount to “moving the goalposts”. What mattered was “freedom of speech” and a process of “internal awareness raising and conciliation”.

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