

MEPs hail EU-Turkey deal but say human rights and freedoms must be respected

The 29 November EU-Turkey summit, aimed at reinvigorating the partnership and finding common responses to refugee crisis and Syrian war was very timely, said most MEPs in Wednesday's debate with Commission First Vice-President Frans Timmermans and Nicolas Schmit for the Council Presidency. However, in view of Turkey's human rights and democracy record, many argued that EU funding for Turkey must be thoroughly scrutinised and questioned the decision to restart EU accession talks with it.

The EU's relations with Turkey are of "special importance", not only because of the "pressing need" to find a political solution to the Syrian conflict, and tackle the refugee crisis and terrorism, **Nicolas Schmit** said on behalf of the Council Presidency. He stressed that the EU member states must step up checks at the EU's external borders and enforce decisions on the refugee seekers relocation within the EU.

European Commission First Vice-President **Frans Timmermans** underlined that the summit had "opened a new chapter of EU partnership with Turkey". Although it put new energy into efforts to speeding up the EU accession negotiations and visa liberalisation, differences on human rights and press freedom of press remained, he said and promised "to come back on this."

"The summit took place because we have a major refugee problem along the Western Balkans. But let us also admit that this is so problematic because one EU member state, Greece, does not implement Schengen standards on its external Schengen border," EPP group leader **Manfred Weber** (DE) said. "If we used all the border guards who are now doing duty inside the EU on the 190km border between Greece and Turkey, then this would be a better deal for Europe," he added.

S&D chairman **Gianni Pittella** (IT) said: "The agreement with Turkey is an opportunity for everyone, but not a blank cheque. For the S&D, membership negotiations must restart. Turkey needs the EU but we need Turkey, too, because it is a force for stability. Without their cooperation, we cannot solve the refugee crisis." "However, there are worrying issues like the fundamental rights situation".

For the ECR group, **Syed Kamall** (UK) welcomed the EU-Turkey summit and called for transparency: "Let's be clear vis-à-vis Turks about our relationship, vis-à-vis the EU citizens about what it implies and let's work together on a long term solution rather than on short-term

promises that will never been fulfilled".

ALDE group leader **Guy Verhofstadt** (BE) regretted that the summit conclusions made no mention of human rights or press freedom in Turkey. "Greece is saying no to border and coast guards, blocking the tool in the Council", he added and asked Greece's Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras be invited to explain his difficulties in finding a solution.

Speaking for the GUE/NGL group, **Takis Hadjigeorgiou** (CY) insisted that the Commission must "closely monitor how the billions of euro given to Turkey are used" and "react immediately if Turkey starts sending asylum seekers back to Syria". He shared **Rebecca Harms'** (Greens/EFA, DE) mistrust: "Turkey can't be a reliable partner when it comes to refugees; we need to address human rights issues more aggressively with Turkey," she said.

Nigel Farage (EFDD, UK) and **Marcel De Graaf** (EFN, NL) criticized visa free access as part of the EU-Turkey deal. "Do you want Turkey to join the EU?" asked Mr Farage, while Mr De Graaf warned of a "new Ottoman empire" and a "Turkish invasion".

Responding to MEPs, **Mr Timmermans** insisted that the agreement aimed to help those in need by allowing Syrians to work legally in Turkey and send their children to schools there and also by improving medical care for refugees. Offering them help in Turkey is "cheaper for EU taxpayers" and also "takes the smugglers away from the equation", he said, stressing that opening accession chapters 23 and 24 was the "best possible way to help Turks" to improve their human rights record.

Further information

[Video recording of the debate \(click on 02.12.2015\)](#)
[EU-Turkey summit conclusions](#)

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