
Reform Necessary For Turkey Regardless Of EU Negotiations Pace

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/PanARMENIAN.Net/ A delegation of 15 members of parliament from 10 different countries led by Tchetin Kazak (Bulgaria), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Democratic Governance of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly's Committee on the Civil Dimension of Security visited Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey on 24-27 March 2008, NATO press office told PanARMENIAN.Net.

In meetings with government and parliament representatives, EU officials and independent experts, they discussed some of the main issues on Turkey's domestic and foreign policy agenda, including the EU accession process, Turkey's regional ambitions, secularism in Turkey, the Kurdish issue, and the fight against terrorism,

Turkey's accession process to the European Union featured prominently in the discussions. Turkish officials regretted the delays in the negotiations, claiming that the official reasons put forward by the EU were mere excuses, hiding the opposition of certain European leaders to Turkey's membership aspirations, a position which they denounced as short-sighted and in contradiction with earlier commitments made by the EU to Turkey. Officials clearly rejected any suggestion of a privileged partnership in lieu of membership.

Additionally, they pointed out that the EU's hesitations risked alienating the population's support for Turkey's membership in the EU.

Officials regretted the suspension of negotiations over 6 chapters due to Turkey's refusal to open its ports and airports to Cypriot ship and aircraft, and denounced the contradictions of the EU's approach towards the Cyprus issue. They stressed that it was the Greek Cypriots who rejected the EU-backed Annan peace plan, while Turkey had played a constructive role, courageously convincing the leaders of the Turkish part to support the plan. They also emphasized that the EU had not fulfilled its part of the deal and still refused to open trade relations with the Turkish-Cypriot authorities. In this context, Turkey found it difficult to offer more concessions at this point. Nevertheless, officials expressed renewed hope for an early settlement of this issue following the recent leadership change in the Republic of Cyprus.

Parliament and government officials reaffirmed Turkey's unwavering commitment to reform, which they emphasized is necessary for Turkey regardless of the pace of EU negotiations. Both officials and independent experts also stressed that Turkey's geostrategic position as a bridge to Eurasia and the Middle East should be regarded as a major asset for the EU. Turkey considers its relations with Europe on the one hand and with its neighbors to the East and to the South on the other, as complementary and mutually reinforcing; each of these enhances the attractiveness of Turkey for the other.

Hilmi Guler, Turkey's Minister of Energy, also emphasized Turkey's ambition to become a major energy hub and presented plans to develop existing East-West and North-South corridors. He was convinced that with these new energy routes, Turkey could greatly contribute to enhancing Europe's energy security

The visit came at a challenging moment in Turkey's political life, amidst evidence of an ongoing struggle between supporters of the ruling AKP party

and secularist forces. The latest signs of this struggle included tensions surrounding the election of Abdullah Gul to the Presidency in 2007, the controversy connected with a decision to lift the ban on headscarves in universities, and legal action aiming to ban the AKP and bar its main leaders from political activities.

Asked about the potential outcome of this legal action, Mustafa Aydin, professor at TOBB University, explained that the problem was not with the judges, but with the law, which provided tools for the judiciary to take action against political parties.

Amendments to the constitution were now being considered in order to prevent any similar move in the future, which would further damage Turkey's democratic development.

Another major domestic challenge relates to the situation of Turkey's Kurdish population. Journalist Cengiz Candar explained to the delegation that this was an extremely sensitive issue in Turkey, where the existence of a "Kurdish issue" as such has never been officially acknowledged

Rather, the focus has been on promoting economic development in Turkey's Southeast and on fighting PKK terrorism. In contrast, Mr Candar argued that terrorism is only a by-product of the Kurdish question, and resolving this question would isolate the PKK and undermine its support base. According to Mr Candar, the creation of an autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq, while it could not serve as a direct model for Turkey, should prompt the current government to consider ways to address the political claims of Turkey's Kurdish population. One way would be to engage with the Iraqi province of Kurdistan. Such a gesture would send a positive message to Turkey's Kurdish population, amounting to a de facto acknowledgement of the Kurdish identity. Mr Candar also suggested that, having received a strong mandate from the population in the 2007 elections, the government should deliver on its promise of a democratic and civilian constitution, and, in this context, promote a new definition of citizenship.

While federalism is not an option for Turkey, the government should also consider measures granting greater self-government powers at the municipal level.

Commenting on Turkey's recent military intervention in Northern Iraq against the PKK, several speakers emphasized that the stability of Iraq is of prime concern for Turkey. While pointing out that many areas in Northern Iraq remain outside the control of federal or even regional authorities, they generally welcomed recent signs of a deepening co-operation with Iraq, as well as with the United States, in combating PKK terrorists based in Northern Iraq.

Government officials confirmed that the fight against terrorism is one of Turkey's main priorities at home and abroad. Deputy Prime Minister Cicek explained to the delegation that terrorism remains a serious threat for Turkey. Efforts focus in particular on the PKK, whose actions, according to one official, have claimed the lives of some 35,000 people of various nationalities, ethnicity and belief in the past 25 years. Mr Cicek called for greater international co-operation in the fight against terrorism, regretting the inconsistencies exhibited by some of Turkey's allies in their approach to this issue, which, in some cases, has undermined Turkey's own efforts. He denounced in particular the improper or incomplete application of the principle "prosecute or return" and the safe haven provided to known terrorists - including members of the PKK - in some European countries.
