
EU Calls For Freedom Of Press In Turkey

asbarez.com - 4/12/2013



A session of the European Parliament in Strasbourg

BRUSSELS (Today's Zaman)-The European Parliament (EP) is gearing up to tell Ankara that an independent press is vital for democracy amid growing concerns in the EU about the widespread occurrence of self-censorship by media owners and journalists in Turkey.

The draft European Parliament report, seen by Today's Zaman, underlines that freedom of expression and media pluralism are at the heart of European values and reiterates concern at the fact that most media outlets are owned by and concentrated in large conglomerates with a wide range of business interests.

The repeated point in this year's draft emphasizes the lack of the tradition of consensus in Turkish politics and deepening polarization.

The report, written by the Dutch Christian Democrat Ria Oomen-Ruijten, also expresses concerns about the limited coverage of the May-June Gezi Park events by Turkish media and the dismissal of journalists who criticized the government's reactions to such events. It also highlights the large number of journalists currently in pre-trial detention.

Also the EP's rapporteur on Turkey, Oomen-Ruijten calls on the EU and Ankara to make the accession process more credible. Turkey has only been able to close one chapter in the eight years of accession negotiations. Almost half of the 35 chapters are blocked by the Greek Cypriots and the French.

The draft, the last one to be written by Oomen-Ruijten, as she will not run again in the May EP elections, is close to the EU Commission Progress Report in terms of its tone, the way it criticizes the government and praises achievements. The first debate on the draft will be held next week in Strasbourg and it is expected to be brought to the Plenary Assembly for the final vote in the end of February.

Recalling that Turkey is a strategic partner for EU, the draft acknowledges the reforms achieved in the last 12 months but strongly underlines the need for further reforms and the promotion of dialogue, in a veiled criticism vis-a-vis the government's manner of handling Gezi Park incidents. The EP

draft also indicates strong support of the initiative taken by the government to sort out the decades-long Kurdish issue.

The report also reminds the government that not all the constitutional amendments approved in the 2010 referendum have been implemented and underlines the "urgent need" for the adoption of laws on military justice and the protection of personal data.

EP sources have told Today's Zaman that the delicate balance in tone struck in the draft report may not remain in the final version, as most of the EP members would like to give the impression that they are tough on Turkey when they go into their elections in May. EP elections will be held in 28 member countries at the end of May.

The rapporteur will once more underline in this year's report the importance of checks and balances and the need for the Turkish Parliament to be at the epicenter of the political system.

Implicitly referring to government's plans to change the structure of the Supreme Board of Judges and Prosecutors (HSYK), the Dutch Christian Democrat Oomen-Ruijten will call on the authorities not to diverge from the Venice Commission criteria. The Venice Commission has made it clear that it is content with the current functioning of the HSYK despite some minor problems and also called on the government not to backtrack on the structure of the Council.

While commending the parliamentary Constitutional Reconciliation Commission for reaching consensus on 60 constitutional amendments and calling on the members of the commission to carry on their work, the rapporteur apparently has not included the recent dissolution of the commission in her draft. She also calls on the government to consult with the Venice Commission on the drafting of the new constitution.

On Syria, while the report welcomes Turkey's assistance to huge numbers of refugees, it will also call on Ankara to prevent the flow of arms to foreign fighters implicated in human rights violations.

On the Kurdish issue, the draft underlines the EP's strong support of the government's initiative to strive for a settlement of the Kurdish problem on the basis of negotiations with the terrorist Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). It "encourages the government to devise the reforms directed at promoting the social, cultural and economic rights of the Kurdish community on the basis of adequate consultation of relevant stakeholders and the opposition."

The report also calls on the Turkish authorities to cooperate closely with the European Commission to assess which programs under the Instruments for Pre-Accession (IPA) could be used to promote sustainable development in the Southeast within the framework of negotiations on Chapter 22.

While the EP welcomes the democratization package announced by government at the end of September and the adoption of the fourth judicial reform package, it asks the government to consult the opposition and relevant civil society organizations in the preparations for the implementation of legislation.

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