Report on Turkey's progress towards accession

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report by Camiel EURLINGS (EPP-ED, NL) on Turkey's progress towards accession. MEPs remained committed to accession as the goal of EU negotiations with Turkey, but said that both in Turkey and in the EU important reforms were needed in order to achieve this outcome.

The report welcomed the start of the accession negotiations with Turkey, but expressed regret that the reform process in Turkey had slowed down over the last year. It went on to look at the current situation with regard to democracy and the rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities, and regional issues and external relations. The committee noted "persistent shortcomings" in areas such as freedom of expression, religious and minority rights, the role of the military, policing, women's rights, trade union rights and cultural rights, and urged Turkey to "reinvigorate" the reform process.

The report recognised the improvements in legislation resulting from the Turkish Government's efforts since 2002 as regards the policy of zero tolerance towards torture, but stressed that more effective implementing measures were needed. It also noted that certain progress had been made in the area of women's rights following the introduction of the new Penal Code, but said that further efforts were needed to eradicate discriminatory practices and violence against women.

The committee said that the drafting of a new Constitution was "a further and probably necessary reflection of the very fundamental nature of the changes required for EU membership". It also reiterated the need for Turkey to comply with the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. With regard to freedom of religion in particular, MEPs deplored the absence of progress and reiterated Parliament's previous calls to the Turkish authorities to fulfil their commitments and to take concrete steps to eradicate obstacles facing religious minorities. While respecting the sensitivities of a country with a large majority of Sunni Muslims, the report nevertheless reminded Turkey of the important cultural and historic heritage "handed down to it for safe-keeping by the multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious Ottoman Empire".

Looking at the situation in the South East, the committee strongly condemned the resurgence of terrorist violence on the part of the PKK and expressed concern about the tensions in this region, which constituted a serious threat to peace and stability. The Turkish Government, for its part, was urged to pursue a democratic solution to the Kurdish issue, inter alia by promoting the political dialogue and the economic and social development of the South East region, possibly using EU pre-accession assistance.

MEPs also called on Turkey "to take concrete steps for the normalisation of bilateral relations" with Cyprus "as soon as possible". They referred in this context to the Council declaration of 21 September 2005 (which said that continuing negotiations would depend on Turkey opening its borders to Cypriot vessels and airplanes and that the situation would be reviewed in 2006). Regarding Cyprus itself, the committee welcomed the meeting between Mr Papadopoulos and Mr Talat, which led to the agreement of 8 July 2006.

Turning to other issues, the committee called on Turkey to recognise the Armenian genocide as a precondition for accession. And it called for a lowering of the threshold of ten percent of the votes below which political parties cannot enter the Turkish parliament. MEPs also repeated that negotiations do not lead automatically to accession and said that whether or not negotiations are successfully concluded, Turkey must remain "fully anchored in European structures."