Address by Minister of State for European Affairs, Lucinda Creighton T.D.,

Item: 2012 Progress report on Turkey

European Parliament
Strasbourg 17 April 2013

SPEAKING POINTS

President,
Honourable Members,

On behalf of the Council, I would like to thank the Parliament for its work on this issue, and in particular your rapporteur Ms Oomen-Ruijten. Your resolution highlights a number of significant issues, and comes at an important point in EU-Turkey relations.

Turkey is both a candidate country, and a key partner for the EU. The Turkish economy contributes to the prosperity of the European continent. Turkey's active foreign policy is having a growing impact in the region, and there is intensified political dialogue between the EU and Turkey.

The EU-Turkey relationship goes back a long way. The range of areas in which we cooperate clearly illustrate the extent to which we share common interests. However, the EU-Turkey relationship has not achieved its full potential. This can only happen through progress in both the accession negotiations and in other dimensions of the relationship.

It is therefore encouraging that we now see renewed momentum in the accession negotiations, with the possibility of the opening of the important Regional policy chapter in the next few months. Clearly, the Presidency will do everything to encourage further progress, and this will also require significant effort from the Turkish side. We are encouraged by the co-operation we have received to date from Turkey, from the Commission and from our EU partners.
The "positive agenda" has played an important role in taking forward the relationship. It is clear however that the positive agenda is a complement to the negotiations. It cannot be a substitute for them.

Constitutional reform is key to making progress. As underlined in your draft Resolution, the Council strongly encourages Turkey's work on a new constitution, and welcomes the fact that this has been part of a broad, democratic and participatory process. This should help create a framework for further developments, not least with regard to the Kurdish issue.

On the Kurdish issue, we are encouraged by the latest positive developments under the Imrali peace process. The process is still in a delicate phase and the obstacles to achieving a breakthrough are formidable. However, the call by PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan on the PKK to lay down arms and to withdraw beyond Turkey's borders, as well as the positive reactions to that call, are encouraging and to be welcomed.

Work on the new constitution must continue to be wide-ranging and inclusive. But implementation in line with European standards is critical to ensuring progress in Turkey's efforts towards complying with the accession criteria.

Constitutional reform is not the only priority area. There have been a number of other positive developments, such as the establishment of an Ombudsman and a National Human Rights Institution. Progress has also been made in the area of women's rights and gender equality, through the adoption of the third judicial reform package, and in civilian oversight of the security forces. However we recognize that further work is needed.

We call on Turkey in particular to continue to improve the observance of fundamental rights and freedoms, both in law and in practice. We have serious concerns with regard to freedom of expression. We see large numbers of legal cases being brought against writers, journalists, academics and human rights defenders for expressing their non-violent opinions, as well as frequent website bans. The broad application of legislation on terrorism and organised crime also remains a serious concern, and it is essential that the independence, impartiality and efficiency of the judiciary be ensured. These issues must be addressed, not only through legislation, but also in the way existing legislation is implemented.

There are other important areas where more remains to be done. These include freedom of religion, property rights, trade union rights, rights of persons belonging to minorities, women's and children's rights, anti-discrimination and gender equality, and the fight against torture and ill-treatment.
There is one particular unresolved issue which has a direct bearing on both the accession negotiations, and EU-Turkey relations in general. We deeply regret that Turkey - despite our repeated calls - continues to refuse to fulfil its obligations with regard to the Additional Protocol to the Association Agreement. Our position on this is well-known. In the absence of progress on the full non-discriminatory implementation of the Protocol, the EU will maintain its measures from 2006, which will continue to affect overall progress in the negotiations. We also expect Turkey to make progress towards the necessary normalisation of its relations with the Republic of Cyprus without further delay.

I should add that the Council deeply regretted Turkey’s freezing of its relations with the Council Presidency during the second half of last year, as well as its statements on this issue, and its non-alignment with EU positions or statements in international fora. The Presidency is a key part of the institutional set-up of the EU, and should be respected as such.

I would also like to underline the importance generally which we attach to good neighbourly relations. This is one of the basic requirements for measuring progress on Turkey’s path to the EU.

I would like to conclude by referring to an important aspect of EU-Turkey bilateral relations, namely visa liberalisation. It is encouraging that you welcome the Council’s decision to invite the Commission to take steps towards visa liberalisation as a gradual and long term perspective, in parallel with the signature of the readmission agreement. The Council supports the launch of a dialogue on visa, mobility and migration between the Commission and Turkey. At the same time it is essential that the negotiated EU-Turkey readmission agreement is signed and concluded, as well as effectively implemented.

I would like to thank you for your attention.

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