



12.3.2020

MISSION REPORT

following the Mission to Turkey (Ankara and Mardin), 24-27 February 2020

Committee on Foreign Affairs

Members of the mission:

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Introduction

The AFET delegation visited Ankara and Mardin from 24 to 27 February 2020. It was the first AFET mission to Turkey since March 2015.

The main aim of the visit was to gauge the prospects for EU-Turkey relations and assess the situation on the ground, including with regard to recent developments in the field of the rule of law, freedom of expression and media, and human rights. The delegation also discussed regional issues and Turkish foreign policy, the situation of Syrian refugees in Turkey and the Kurdish issue. The visit took place in the context of the upcoming AFET annual report on Turkey in the framework of the accession process.

The delegation met with Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director for EU Affairs Ambassador Faruk Kaymakci, Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu, Chair of the Republican People's Party Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, as well as with the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Chairs of the EU Harmonisation and Human Rights Committees and of the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee. The Members also had meetings with the suspended mayor of Mardin, Ahmet Türk, the governor of Mardin, Mustafa Yaman, and various civil society representatives, including journalists, human rights lawyers and religious leaders. In Mardin, the delegation visited an EU-funded health project for Syrian refugees and the Deyrulzaferan Syriac Orthodox Monastery.

Just a few hours after the delegation left the country on 27 February, 34 Turkish soldiers were killed as a result of massive airstrikes in the Syrian province of Idlib. This event has had a substantial impact not only on the dynamics of the conflict in Syria, but also on EU-Turkey relations, particularly as a result of the Turkish government's subsequent decision to "open the gates" for refugees towards Europe.

Summary account of meetings

Turkey-EU relations and the stalled Turkish accession process were the main focus of the talks in Ankara. The AFET delegation stressed that while Turkey continues to be an accession candidate and a key strategic partner for the EU, tangible improvements with regard to the rule of law and fundamental freedoms are required to get the accession process back on track. The Members noted that despite understandable concerns regarding terrorism and security, there is an increasing unbalance between security and freedom in Turkey.

The Members repeatedly raised the situation of political prisoners such as Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtaş. They also criticised the Turkish government's widespread practice of suspending oppositional mayors on the basis of questionable evidence and replacing them with unelected trustees. The delegation met with the suspended mayor of Mardin, Ahmet Türk, and with the governor of Mardin, who acts as the trustee.

The delegation consistently passed the message that despite all differences and problems, the EU and Turkey must continue talking to each other and cooperate in areas of common interest, such as foreign policy, counter-terrorism, trade and migration. In that regard, the AFET Chair invited the Foreign Minister to address the full committee in Brussels or Strasbourg in the near future.

At the meetings in the Grand National Assembly, the Members stressed that at a time when many dialogue channels between Turkey and the EU are blocked, the EU-Turkey Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) could serve as an important forum for exchange. They urged their counterparts to look for a pragmatic solution that would allow the JPC to resume its work

as soon as possible.

With regard to the new enlargement methodology presented by the Commission on 5 February 2020, the Turkish government is concerned that it could lead to a stronger nationalisation and politicisation of the enlargement process and ultimately augment the risk of political blockages. There is also a widespread feeling that Turkey is increasingly being de-coupled from the other candidate countries. The MEPs were asked to maintain a credible accession perspective for Turkey as an incentive for reforms.

The delegation also visited an EU-funded migrant health centre in Mardin, one of 178 in Turkey funded through a EUR 300 million grant to the Turkish Ministry of Health under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. The Members acknowledged Turkey's commendable hospitality toward the 3,6 million Syrian refugees in the country. Most of the Syrian refugees are not expected to go back to Syria, even if and when the situation there will improve eventually. Instead, the alarming situation in Idlib risks leading to another large-scale inflow of refugees into Turkey.

In many meetings, the Turkish interlocutors called on the EU to continue supporting Turkey beyond the existing commitments under the Facility for Refugees in Turkey. The AFET Members emphasised the unprecedented levels of support provided by the EU and stressed that the EU will not leave Turkey alone.

Turkish foreign policy and regional issues, particularly the crises in Syria and Libya and the tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, also featured prominently in the discussions. As regards the latter, the Turkish side extensively explained its position regarding the delimitation of maritime borders and the need for a fair sharing of the eventual revenues flowing from the exploitation of hydrocarbon resources off the island of Cyprus. The MEPs reiterated the EU's position and called for progress on the settlement issue. They concurred that the unresolved conflict in Cyprus constitutes one of the main obstacles in EU-Turkey relations.

With regard to Syria, the Turkish interlocutors criticised the EU's supposed passiveness, which has allowed other actors such as Russia and Iran to fill the void. They urged the EU to use its military, diplomatic and economic capacities to contribute to a solution of the conflict. The Foreign Minister warned of an imminent catastrophe in Idlib. He emphasised that Turkey seeks a political solution to the conflict. The AFET Members called for urgent de-escalation, the establishment of a ceasefire and the effective protection of civilians in Idlib.

Conclusions and follow-up

At a difficult moment in EU-Turkey relations, the visit demonstrated the EP's willingness to continue engaging with an important partner. Building on the fact-finding mission of the new Turkey rapporteur, Nacho Sánchez Amor (S&D), at the end of January, the visit sets a positive tone at the start of the new legislature. It will hopefully contribute to an improvement of the relations between the EP and Turkey and allow for a more constructive cooperation in the future.

Despite a more positive atmosphere, it remains to be seen if substantial improvements in the internal political situation in Turkey and hence in EU-Turkey relations will materialise in the foreseeable future.

24-27/2/2020
Mission of the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Ankara / Mardin

Monday 24th February

Arrival of the AFET Chair and other Members in Ankara

- 17:45 Meeting with H.E. Mr Mevlut Cavusoglu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey
- 19:00 Meeting with Mr Ahmet Turk, dismissed Mayor of Mardin
- 20:00 Working Dinner EU-TR Relations (academics, NGOs, journalists)

Tuesday 25 February

- 9:00 Working breakfast with Ambassador Faruk Kaymakci, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and Director for EU Affairs
- 11:00 Meeting with the Minister of Interior, H.E. Mr Suleyman Soylu
- 13:15 Working lunch on Turkish Foreign Policy (Syria, Libya, East Med, etc) with academics - Think-tanks etc.
- 15:00 Meeting with Foreign Affairs Committee and the Chairs of EU Harmonisation and JPC
- 16:45 Meeting with Mr Cavusoglu, Chair of Human Rights Committee
- 18:10 Meeting with Mr Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, Chair of the Republican People's Party (CHP)
- 19:30 Press Conference
- 20:15 Sandwich Dinner

Departure from Ankara

Wednesday 26 February

Arrival in Mardin

- 11:00 Meeting with Governor of Mardin
- 12:30 Working lunch with CSOs, NGOs (working on human rights, freedom of expression etc)
- 15:30 Visit of EU-funded Project Health Center
- 17:00 Visit of Deyrulzaferan Syriac Orthodox Monastery and Meeting with His Eminence Archbishop Filuksinos Saliba Özmen, Metropolitan of Mardin and Diyarbakir, Saliba Özmen

Thursday 27 February

Departure