

Visa liberalization for Turkey must not turn into a sell-out, say EP

MEPs denounce HR violations in Turkey

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USPA NEWS - European Parliament voiced serious concerns about Turkey's lack of progress in meeting the EU's preconditions for liberalizing its visa regime for Turkish nationals, as required by the 18 March deal between the EU and Turkey to help stem the flow of migrants into the EU.

Dutch Defense minister Jeanine Hennis-Plasschaert for the Council recalled that the March 18 statement accelerated an existing process, following a roadmap approved in 2013. "It is not just a present to President Erdogan or a concession, but something from which we all will benefit millions of European tourists and millions of Turks, including human rights activists." She nonetheless recognized that "Turkey has a lot of homework to do." The Council working party on visas had begun its legislative work on the Commission proposal that morning, she reported.

Commissioner Dimitris Avramopoulos also acknowledged that Turkey still needed to make progress, but said he was "optimistic" that Ankara would "give a final push" to the necessary reforms by the end of June. "We are not watering down our standards", he assured to MEPs. For his part, Mariya Gabriel (EPP) voiced her group's support for the March 18 agreement, but said that Turkey must meet all criteria for visa liberalization before Parliament's vote. "We need to take time to finalize details, examine the Council's position and have safeguard mechanisms in place," she said.

Tania Fajon (SL) said that the EU should not make promises without ensuring that all its requirements are fulfilled. The antiterrorist legislation and data protection issues, among others, need to be dealt with," she added, warning that "we can't allow exceptions, because that will have a boomerang effect." And Helga Stevens (ECR) said that conditions for Turkey should be especially stringent, it being a candidate member state, without any double standards. She felt "ashamed of the irresponsible behavior of the Commission towards a dictator."

The criteria for visa exemption must be fulfilled, insisted Sophie in't Veld (ALDE). Europe is "being subjected to President Erdogan's blackmail, because we are weak and divided." She regretted that EU leaders "make deals with dictators" instead of agreeing a common European refugee policy. Marie-Christine VERGIAT (GUE/NGL) said that President Erdogan aims to campaign for and install an authoritarian regime. "I'm in favor of visa liberalization but not on any condition and not by closing our eyes to what is actually going on in Turkey," she concluded.

Rebecca HARMS (Greens/EFA) pointed to a growing number of democratic and human rights violations in Turkey and said that the EU must not depend on Turkey, but take responsibility, together with the UN, to find solutions to the refugee crisis. "It is a mistake to mix refugee strategy and neighbourhood policy", she added. Fabio Massimo CASTALDO (EFDD) criticized the "illegal agreement" between the EU and Turkey and warned that President Erdogan "cannot be our friend". Finally Marine Le PEN (ENF) described the idea of giving visa-free access to Turks as "absolutely crazy", adding that President Erdogan was using migration as a weapon against the EU.

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