Turkey: Freedom of expression must be safeguarded

The situation of media and the freedom of expression in Turkey was in the focus of a special conference hosted by the European Parliament and the European Commission on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day. The conference brought together journalists and civil society representatives from Turkey and from across the European Union. A series of discussion panels provided a platform for opinions and contributions from NGOs, journalists, independent media organisations and EU institutions on the challenges impacting freedom of expression and the media landscape in Turkey today.

“Freedom of expression is at the very heart of democracy. A country can call itself democratic only if
journalists and media can work in a free and independent environment, acting as guardians for respect of the rule of law.” said Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament.

Turkey is among the countries where press freedom has deteriorated the most. In the last 10 years - despite the start of accession negotiations - Turkey has lost 55 positions in the World Press Freedom Index and now features among the worst performers worldwide. In 2017, 73 journalists were arrested in the country and 155 journalists, arrested after the attempted coup d'état in 2016, are still in prison. Amnesty International reports that 180 media outlets have been shut down after July 2016.

“This unacceptable situation makes it clear that Turkey is turning its shoulders to our core values. It will be hypocritical not to acknowledge this fact and not to draw the inevitable conclusions. Turkish authorities still have the possibility to reverse this trend. Our door remains open to Turkish people who should continue to be given an EU perspective", stressed Tajani.

A serious backsliding not only in the area of freedom of expression but also in the field of the judicial system, particularly with regard to the independence of the judiciary in Turkey belong among the key findings of the 2018 Turkey report published by the European Commission on 17th April.

“Citizens have a right to receive independent information which is vital for an open debate and democratic engagement. The discussions today again confirm the findings of the Commission’s recent Annual Report on Turkey. Despite the many appeals and recommendations of the international community, the crackdown on freedom of expression is ongoing at a large scale”, said Johannes Hahn, the European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations.

“Freedom of expression is fundamental for the European Union. It’s one of the indispensable cornerstones of democracy and as such must be safeguarded in any country willing to join us. We in the EU regard as our duty to react to any decline in the standards of media freedom, not only in candidate countries but in our Member States too” Commissioner Hahn said. The EU has decided to focus its annual financial assistance programme on support for human rights and notably freedom of expression, civil society and those EU programs that promote contacts with Turkey at the citizens’ levels. Commissioner Hahn stressed that it was of utmost importance to strengthen and expand credible journalism based on ethical standards.

Turkish journalists and activists shared their perspective and highlighted that Turkey was moving further away from the values that informed European democracy. They particularly addressed the issues of barriers to freedom of speech, inefficient business models and disinformation, underlining the need for greater support to young journalists, professional training, and support to quality journalism.

See also

2018 Turkey Country report
Speech by Commissioner Hahn at Conference on Press Freedom in Turkey, Friday, 4 May, European Parliament
Speech by Antonio Tajani, President of the European Parliament
Declaration by the High Representative, Federica Mogherini, on behalf of the EU on the occasion of the World Press Freedom Day
www.eeas.europa.eu

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