

EU-Turkey: In Istanbul on women's rights and gender equality

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Istanbul (7th November) - Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Füle started his visit in Turkey with meeting the Minister of Family and Social Policies Fatma Şahin on Thursday in Istanbul. They discussed the reform efforts to improve women's rights and gender equality. They also took part and spoke at the conference "Progress in women's human rights" where the Commissioner said:

'Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Looking at the list of speakers I am the only male voice you will hear today. But the question of violence against women and girls is not an issue for women and girls only. It is a shared responsibility of all of us to fight it. Only a few weeks ago we published this year's Progress Report on Turkey, and it has been well received across the board. Just two days ago, we welcomed a significant advance in relations between Turkey and the European Union: the opening of the negotiating chapter 22 on "Regional Policy". This is the first time in over three years that a new chapter is opened.

I hope that the positive momentum created by these events will lead to further steps, including the signature by Turkey of the readmission agreement and the launch in parallel of the visa dialogue, ultimately leading to visa free travel for Turkish citizens visiting Schengen countries. I also look forward to progress in the negotiations on the basic building blocks of any European Union accession process, namely the respect for fundamental rights and freedoms, which are set out in chapters 23 (Judiciary and Fundamental rights) and 24 (Justice, Freedom and Security).

This would provide a significant contribution to Turkey's reform efforts in line with the democratic aspirations of the Turkish people.

Recent developments in your country show what can be achieved with political will, courage and dialogue. To name just a few:

- the fourth judicial reform package adopted in April, which strengthens the protection of fundamental rights, including freedom of expression and the fight against impunity for cases of torture and ill-treatment;
- the peace process which aims to end terrorism and violence in the Southeast of the country and pave the way for a solution to the Kurdish issue;
- the measures announced in the September 2013 democratisation package which sets out further reform, covering important issues such as the use of languages other than Turkish, and minority rights.

The challenge now is to build on this progress.

Let me now turn to the topic for this conference. Women's rights and gender issues have been of paramount importance to this country ever since the foundation of the Republic. These issues are crucial to all Turkish citizens irrespective of their gender, and for the modernisation of Turkish society. No bird can fly on one wing. No society can advance if half of its members are less than fully part of decision making, educational achievement and the labour market. This also affects how the country is perceived internationally.

Turkey was the first country to ratify the Council of Europe Convention against Domestic Violence; the Istanbul Convention. We commend the efforts that Turkey has made in committing to this and other international efforts to prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence. I would like to underline once again the importance the European Union attaches to the promotion of women's rights and gender equality both in the Member States and in partner countries, in particular in the enlargement countries.

It is my pleasure to express particular appreciation for the initiatives undertaken by Minister Şahin during her term of office, notably through the adoption in March last year of the Law on the Protection of Family and Prevention of Violence.

Turkey's effort to ensure women's full and legitimate participation in society has been clear for many years. In 2009, a Parliamentary Committee on Equal Opportunities for Men and Women was established for the first time. The right to sixteen weeks of paid maternity leave was extended to many public servants. Training and other activities to enhance awareness of gender issues as regards public servants and health personnel took place. The Commission maintains its full support for such reform efforts.

Together with our Turkish counterparts we have implemented a number of successful projects through the Instrument for Pre-Accession assistance such as:

- the recently finalised project promoting women's employment; and
- projects supporting women's entrepreneurship and promoting gender equality in working life.

New projects are in the pipeline, and we are committed to further increasing our support in this area in the future.

But these efforts need to be advanced and consolidated. Turkey is not alone in the worldwide struggle for gender equality. The Europe 2020 Strategy set a series of targets that European Union Member States are committed to achieve and which might also provide inspiration for similar developments in Turkey. Five measurable European Union targets for 2020 will steer the process and be translated into gender-specific national targets:

1. for employment;
2. for research and innovation;
3. for climate change and energy;
4. for education; and
5. for combating poverty.

Priority is given to smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. By 2020: three quarters (75%) of the population aged between 20 and 64 should be employed, the share of early school leavers should be less than one in ten (10%), and at least four in ten (40%) of the younger generation should have a third level degree. Member States are required to achieve full equity in gender participation in the labour force by 2020. We invite Turkey to endorse the targets of the Europe 2020 strategy, and to further empower women to participate more actively in politics, to have increased access to education and be more actively involved in the labour market.

For this country, this means in concrete terms:

- Establishing an anti-discrimination and equality board to mainstream gender equality in the legislative process, as announced in September by Prime Minister Erdogan as part of the democratisation package;
- Achieving tangible results in the area of women's inclusion in politics;
- Making every possible effort to close the gender gap in education, especially in the Southeast, where it remains significant;
- Closing the gender employment gap by adopting adequate policies to create the conditions for women's access to labour.

Let me briefly recall the areas in which significant advancement is needed in women's rights:

First, Turkey needs to make sustained efforts to increase women's political representation. Compared with the European Union average and international standards, Turkey lags behind in terms of women's representation in political decision making at national, local and municipal levels. In the 2011 elections, women's participation in parliament increased approximately from 9% to 14% of its membership. This is still about a half of the European Union average.

Turkey needs to encourage the political representation of women, especially at the municipal level, where only 1% of Turkish municipalities have a female mayor. All parties need to place a sufficient number of female candidates in eligible positions. The government of Turkey has set moderately ambitious targets in this regard. In the upcoming municipal elections in March 2014, the Commission will be observing the efforts of the Turkish government to significantly raise the participation of eligible women candidates with deep interest.

Second, as regards women's access to education, there has been good progress in 2013, following a positive trend from previous years. The enrolment rate for girls in Turkey has been on a constant rise since 2010. Fewer girls leave school early. Furthermore, the gender gap in primary education has been reduced in recent years, not least due to the government's 2003 "Let's go to school" campaign. This is good practice that needs to be sustained and improved, in particular by ensuring that girls continue to attend school at a later age and by addressing the problem of school drop-outs.

The gender gap in access to education is narrowing but it remains sizeable in some

regions, especially in the Southeast. Female early school leaving rate remains high, still four times higher in Turkey than in the European Union, and low enrolment in secondary and tertiary education remains a major obstacle to Turkish women's educational attainment.

Third, as regards women's access to employment we encourage Turkey to take action to increase the participation of women in the workforce, particularly in rural areas. In Turkey, just over 30% of total female employment in 2012 consisted of informal, unpaid family workers in agriculture. Such workers often do not enjoy any social protection apart from that afforded by other family members. Informal work is in general more widespread for women in all labour sectors.

We are all aware that progress on women's rights also depends on a change in mentality and perceptions on gender. Such change cannot take place overnight, neither in Turkey nor anywhere else. More work is needed to break down stereotypes and change perceptions of gender roles in all spheres. It is already a few years since the Commission concluded that Turkey already has the overall legal framework that guarantees women's rights and gender equality broadly in place and in line with European standards. Turkey now needs to make sustained efforts to turn legislation into social, economic and political reality, along with the necessary change in mentality. And Minister Şahin, I appreciate your commitment and your steer on these issues. The European Union will be a solid partner and, whenever possible, also a resource for Turkey on this road.'