

REFORM MONITORING GROUP MEETING (28 FEBRUARY 2010)

Dear Members of the Press,

We have just completed the 19th Reform Monitoring Group (RMG) meeting. Through the RMG, which we established in September 2003, we are able to address the developments in the EU accession process, review shortcomings, and evaluate the timetable and work to be undertaken in the forthcoming period.

Today, we have held a productive meeting with the participation of the Minister for EU Affairs and Chief Negotiator, Minister of Justice, Minister of Interior and Minister of Foreign Affairs, the chairmen of relevant committees of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA) and high level officials from relevant public institutions.

Regarding the support of the TGNA in the EU accession process, we have exchanged views with the chairmen of relevant commissions of the TGNA, who were our guests here today. We discussed special working procedures that may be adopted by the TGNA to enhance its current support.

We also had the opportunity to evaluate our road map for the EU accession process, in particular our EU Communication Strategy and issues to be focused on during the Spanish Presidency.

I would like to share with you briefly the issues that we have addressed in-depth today:

The RMG closely monitors the implementation process of the Judicial Reform Strategy and Action Plan which appears as a requirement for the opening of Chapter 23 "Judiciary and Fundamental Rights" to negotiations. After its approval by the government after a comprehensive consultation procedure, the Judicial Reform Strategy and its Action Plan have been sent to the European Commission in September 2009.

"Strengthening of the independence of the judiciary", "enhancement of the impartiality of the judiciary" and "restructuring of the Supreme Council of Judges and Prosecutors on the basis of objectivity, impartiality and transparency, according to the principle of broad-based representation in the light of international legal instruments" are issues that have been the subject of intense public debate nowadays. All of these issues are listed as short-term objectives in the Strategy and Action Plan.

The Judicial Reform Strategy and Action Plan were prepared well before and apart from the current debate. We have once more emphasized our determination for the implementation of the measures.

It is of vital importance to make the necessary amendments to the relevant legislation and in particular to the Constitution rapidly as in the past in order to continue to take significant steps in the areas of democracy, rule of law and human rights in Turkey.

To this end, we will submit a Constitutional amendment package to the TGNA as soon as possible, and a reform package consisting of amendments in different areas by the end of March.

We have been taking the necessary measures also in Chapter 24 on “Justice, Freedom, Security”, which is of utmost political significance.

The work carried out with a view to achieving a change in EU's current visa policy to ensure visa exemption for our citizens has also been addressed in detail.

For the purpose of attaining this objective, measures with regard to the preparation of electronic passports with biometric data, establishment of Integrated Border Management and conclusion of the Readmission Agreement have been addressed.

Negotiations with the EU on the Readmission Agreement have been continuing on a regular and realistic basis and with a balanced perspective on financial issues. Readmission Agreement will be concluded once both Parties agree on essential matters based on equity.

It is planned to finalize the work on the establishment of a new Passport Application, Issuance, Control and Distribution System and to initiate the use of electronic passports with biometric data in compliance with international standards in June 2010.

Efficient control and surveillance of the borders bears importance in many aspects including fight against terrorism, prevention of smuggling and illegal immigration. To this end, work on the establishment of a new Border Security Organisation is in progress. A draft law on this issue will be prepared within 2010. In order to ensure the coordination in the meantime, it has been decided to amend the Law on the Establishment of Integrated Border Management Coordination Board and of Public Administration Authority for Border Management.

Furthermore, Law on Foreigners and Law on Asylum, which will redefine the basic policies of Turkey in the area of migration and asylum will be prepared within 2010.

The Administration of Migration and Asylum will be established under the Ministry of Interior to be in charge of these issues.

In order to increase the interest in the EU accession process within all parts of the country and to ensure the active participation of every citizen in this process, deputy governors of 81 provinces have started to carry out their responsibilities as the EU Permanent Contact Point as decided in the 18th RMG meeting.

We are taking care of the current issues of our citizens of different faiths, with whom a constructive and consistent dialogue is ongoing in the framework of the RMG. Those communities represent our country's cultural diversity. Today we have discussed in detail the issues brought in the comprehensive meetings held on 12 February 2010, with the participation of citizens representing 11 different religious groups.

Ministry of Justice is carrying out a comprehensive study in the field of freedom of expression. With the aim of removing the remaining restrictions on freedom of expression, legislative changes that are in line with the European Convention on Human Rights and the rulings of the European Court of Human Rights will be realized if deemed necessary after the completion of this study.

The work on the institutionalization in the area of human rights has been assessed in its entirety. "Draft Law on the Establishment of an Independent Human Rights Institution" has been submitted to the TGNA. "Draft Law on the Establishment of the Commission for the Monitoring of Law Enforcement Bodies" to examine and investigate serious complaints such as torture and ill-treatment independently of the law enforcement bodies and "Draft Law on the Establishment of Anti-discrimination and Equality Board" to fight against all types of discrimination have been prepared by the Ministry of Interior.

In addition, a Task Force on Anti-discrimination will be established under the RMG. The task force, which will be composed of all relevant institutions, will prepare a framework law in compliance with the EU acquis that contains the definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, will make a study to increase the penalties for discrimination-motivated crimes and will initiate a national campaign on anti-discrimination.

It is agreed to accelerate the work for the enactment of the “Draft Law on the Protection of Personal Data”, in line with EU norms, which is still on the agenda of the Justice Committee at the TGNA.

A more liberal law on demonstrations and peaceful assembly will be prepared by the Ministry of Interior with a view to complying with the amendment made in 2001 to the Constitution in line with the European Human Rights Convention.

Strategy on the Fight Against Corruption, prepared under the coordination of the Presidency of the Prime Ministry Inspection Board, has been approved by our Government and has been effective as decided in the 18th RMG meeting. Comprehensive work is ongoing for the implementation of the Strategy.

Dear Friends,

I observe with pleasure that the RMG has a significant function particularly in the follow-up of the reforms and in the institutionalization of the EU accession process.

As you all know, I visited Spain on 21-23 February 2010 which holds the EU Presidency. I am pleased to say that my visit to Spain accompanied with 10 ministers, has been fruitful not only in terms of our bilateral relations but also in terms of EU accession negotiations.

Even though the Spanish Government had previously stated that bilateral summits would not be included on its agenda during its EU Presidency, it held the Turkey-Spain Summit as an exception. This fact clearly demonstrates Spain’s support to Turkey’s EU membership.

I had the chance to express to my dear friend Mr. Zapatero, the Prime Minister of Spain, our expectations regarding the progress in Turkey’s accession negotiations and opening of at least 3 or 4 chapters during their Presidency. I have assured him that on Turkey’s part we would intensify our efforts to realize this expectation and ease the work of Spain in this process.

Our Spanish friends declared that they would continue to support Turkey’s EU membership in the course of Spanish Presidency as Turkey’s EU membership would particularly contribute to global peace.

In view of these developments, I am pleased to observe that Turkey is receiving increasing positive attention at the global level, as is the case for its EU membership and that these views are spreading throughout the world.

I perceive the negative attitudes of some Member States as temporary.

I observe that there is a serious unease in Europe not only on Turkey's membership to the EU, but also over issues such as racism, intolerance, and xenophobia. I believe that this unease will be eliminated before getting worse through the measures adopted soon.

I should underline and reiterate once more that the reforms which we introduce in the EU accession process are primarily for our people, and for the peace and well-being of our country.

The steps we take on the way to the EU accession aim at providing our country with better standards and a functioning democracy under the rule of law and making it a more liberal and prosperous country.

We will benefit as a result of the implementation of these measures, not the EU or the member states.

It is in no way possible for Turkey to revert from progress, to lose what is gained up to now and to give up development, democracy, law and freedoms.

Turkey's EU objective is an indicator of will for change and desire for development of the Turkish nation.

The goal of attaining the level of the contemporary civilizations set by Atatürk, and the demands and expectations of our nation lead us to this ideal and vision.

EU membership is the target and direction to move in which our state and nation have set for us.

A democracy which lags behind the modern standards and a conception of law which does not conform to universal values are not and cannot be Turkey's destiny.

Turkey must introduce reforms which befit its vision and greatness and become a country at EU standards. Turkey's and our nation's interests are in this direction, in this route.

It should not be forgotten that each reform which is opposed with political and ideological considerations not only delays Turkey's membership to the EU but also causes our nation to be deprived of that right and standard.

If everyone demands more democracy, more justice and more freedom, everyone has to take on responsibility and make sacrifices.

If everyone desires an independent and impartial legal system which is in line with contemporary norms, then everyone has to work for achieving this objective leaving aside all their prejudices and ideologies.

Those who say that they support EU membership but then step aside and even create difficulties and obstacles to this end, definitely do not present a sincere attitude.

I have to underline one other issue. The reforms we undertake, the measures we take, are all carried out in a manner to meet the relevant criteria of the European Union acquis.

Those who criticize every step of the government as “civilian tutelage” are unfortunately not aware of the essence of those steps, nor are they of the modern world and of the EU to which we have been trying to be a member.

We are in a struggle to bring Turkey a democracy functioning at European standards. Similarly, Constitutional amendment, judicial reform and Democratic Opening are measures that we should take for the harmonization process with the European Union.

As Turkey delays the reforms in this area, it will not only postpone EU membership but also delay the process for its citizens to reach a more prosperous living standard.

It goes without doubt that a government that has put great support to the EU membership objective, would take care of universal, modern and democratic standards in every field; be it the Constitution, judicial reform or the Democratic Opening process. Every step we take is in line with this objective.

We are not in a position of individual priorities, private interests or ideological perspectives. Indeed we cannot be.

Universal standards are evident, modern norms are evident, European Union’s norms are evident. Our objective is to reach these standards for the sake of our people, for their benefit and for future generations.

Dear members of the press,

We have full determination and self-confidence. It is in our interest to proceed with this process. We will continue to undertake our share with determination.

I once again would like to hope that the 19th meeting of the Reform Monitoring Group will bring success to our country and nation.

I am grateful for the efforts of the relevant Ministries, institutions, Parliamentary Committees and those who contribute to this process.

I would like to thank you all for your participation.