

Press Release

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Democratic progress must be strengthened by constitutional and legislative reforms, declares PACE President in Ankara

Strasbourg, 15.01.2008 - "I praise the strong commitment of the Turkish authorities to continuing democratic reforms," declared René van der Linden, President of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), at the end of his official visit to Turkey (Ankara and Konya) from 13 to 15 January 2008.

"The parliamentary and presidential elections in 2007 confirmed the stability of Turkish democracy and resulted in a more pluralistic and representative Parliament with an increased participation of women and MPs from the South-East of Turkey," said the President. "However, discussions must continue on lowering the ten per cent threshold for the Parliament, which remains the highest in Europe."

"The democratic reforms must be stabilised and strengthened by corresponding constitutional and legislative measures, as called for by the Assembly upon the closing of the monitoring procedure in 2004."

"These measures must, among others, strengthen the guarantees of the freedom of expression and religion, the independence of justice, the fight against corruption and establish an effective Ombudsman's office."

In this connection, Mr van der Linden urged the Turkish authorities to change Article 301 of the Criminal Code to bring it into conformity with Council of Europe standards. "I was encouraged by the commitment of the President of Turkey to make progress on this issue, as he also declared in his speech before the Assembly in Strasbourg in October 2007," said Mr van der Linden.

The continuation of the reform process is the best way to achieve progress in accession negotiations with the EU, he continued. "If Turkey fulfils its democratic commitments, the EU must also keep its promises as regards Turkish membership in the EU." The PACE President invited Turkey to fully use the potential of the Council of Europe and its instruments, including the expertise of the Venice Commission.

"As a democratic Muslim country, Turkey plays an indispensable role in promoting inter-religious and intercultural dialogue. This has been demonstrated by the joint initiative of the Prime Ministers of Turkey and Spain on an 'Alliance of Civilisations', now holding its first Forum in Madrid. The Council of Europe and its Assembly, bringing together representatives from different cultures and religions, is a natural partner in this Alliance."

Finally, the PACE President stressed the Assembly's potential for contributing to a solution of the Cyprus issue. He cited the historic meeting of religious leaders from both communities, held under his auspices in February 2007, as well as the fact that the Assembly is the only European institution to associate elected representatives of the Turkish Cypriot community in its work, as concrete examples of the Assembly's contribution so far.

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The Parliamentary Assembly brings together 318 members from the national parliaments of the 47 member states.

President: René van der Linden (Netherlands, EPP/CD); Secretary General of the Assembly: Mateo Sorinas.

Political Groups: SOC (Socialist Group); EPP/CD (Group of the European People's Party); ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe); EDG (European Democratic Group); UEL (Group of the Unified European Left).

"I chose Turkey for my last official visit as PACE President to underline the importance of this country for the future of Europe. Turkey will play an increasing role, both in economic and geopolitical terms, and it is in the interest of all to have Turkey as a partner committed to European values," concluded Mr van der Linden.

During the visit, Mr van der Linden met in Ankara with the President of the Republic, Abdullah Gül, the President of the Grand National Assembly, Köksal Toptan, the State Minister for Economic Affairs, Mehmet Şimşek, the Chair of the EU Harmonisation Committee, Yaşar Yakış and the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Murat Mercan. In Konya, he met the Governor and the Mayor.