

President of the European Council  
Mr. Charles Michel

Dear Mr. President,

The EU Turkey Civic Commission (EUTCC) welcomes the increasingly critical attitude of the international community towards Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his AKP-MHP government. The chorus of criticism, demands, and recommendations regarding Turkey share the common theme – there is a strong and ongoing erosion of democracy within Turkey, and the Turkish leadership and government, through its actions within the country's borders and abroad, systematically abuse and disregard international law and human rights conventions. Turkey has long ceased to be a constitutional state, and the country's judicial, legislative, and executive powers are now under Erdogan's unchecked control. Erdogan and the AKP-MHP government have shown themselves to be a threat not only to Turkey's citizens but also to neighboring states and the broader region, with Turkey now acting as a major destabilizing force in various countries.

Although Turkey is a member of the European Council, NATO, and the OSCE, and a candidate for membership of the European Union, the AKP-MHP government constantly violates the rules and guidelines of these organizations. In the recent past, all these organizations have been forced to hold several meetings and pass various resolutions concerning Turkey's actions, with these steps only to be ignored by Erdogan and his government. The EUTCC strongly believes that urgent action must be taken, otherwise Turkey's destabilizing policies will create new conflicts and deepen ongoing strife.

The Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT) of the Council of Europe published two reports on Turkey on 5 August 2020, including a discussion of the conditions of the Imrali Island prison where Kurdish political leader Abdullah Öcalan has been held since 1999. The CPT noted that the treatment of prisoners at Imrali had not improved since the organization's 2016 visit and asserted that *"such a state of affairs is not acceptable and clearly contravenes various relevant international human rights instruments and standards."*

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) Standing Committee has strongly condemned Turkey's new crackdowns on political opposition and civil dissent over recent months and urged the Turkish authorities to "take meaningful steps" to improve standards in the fields of democracy, rule of law and human rights.

Over a period of just two months, the European Parliament (EP) passed two resolutions regarding Turkey's expansionism and intervention in the Mediterranean Sea and Cyprus and criticized the Turkish government for human rights abuses within the country. The EP highlighted that Turkey, as a member state, stands in opposition to the rules of the NATO. The first report was issued on 17th September 2020, and the second on 26th November 2020.



## EU Turkey Civic Commission

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The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has decided for the release of prominent politicians and activists including Osman Kavala and Selahattin Demirtas and has repeatedly called on the Turkish government to implement these decisions. Although the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe has urged Turkey to implement the court orders of ECHR, the Turkish government has insisted on disregarding these rulings.

Persecution of the members of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) continues unabated. The Council of Europe's independent legal experts of the Venice Commission and the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe recently called on Turkey to repeal decisions to sack pro-Kurdish mayors, which it said had undermined democratic self-government in southeast Turkey. At present, government trustees occupy the positions of a total of 48 out of 65 municipalities won by the HDP in the March 2019 local elections. Furthermore, the HDP Local Administrations Commission reported that 84 municipal council members and 9 provincial general assembly members have been dismissed. Of the 37 co-mayors detained, 18 are still under arrest. According to the data prepared by the Legal Commission of the HDP, 22,321 HDP members were detained from 24 June 2015 to 25 September 2020. The number of those imprisoned during the first two years of this period alone was 3,647.

Earlier this year, the AKP-MHP government discussed plans to withdraw Turkey from the Istanbul Convention on domestic violence against women. Indeed, increased persecution of women and femicide have become central policies of the Turkish government, manifested in various ways. The prohibition of women's marches and arrest of women's rights defenders are hallmarks of the misogyny of the AKP-MHP government. Rapes committed by members of the Turkish Armed Forces in Kurdish areas go unpunished, and Kurdish women's organizations are under constant threat of arbitrary closure.

Erdogan's actions are also placing Christian communities in greater peril. Turkey's Christian minority has faced increased intimidation following Erdogan's decision to convert Hagia Sophia back into a mosque, and Turkey's participation in the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict has fanned the flames of anti-Christian hatred, with Armenian Christian communities within Turkey and abroad being targeted by radicalized, fascist supporters of the AKP and MHP.

Turkey's various campaigns of military aggression and unprovoked intervention in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, the Mediterranean, and Armenia-Azerbaijan have forced NATO, the Arab League, the EU, the OSCE, the UN to continuously focus on de-escalation. The current Turkish AKP-MHP government aim to create chaos, destabilizing the region and exacerbating existing conflicts.

On 15 September 2020, the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry on Syria reported on numerous war crimes committed by armed groups under Turkey's control in areas of Syria under Turkish occupation. These include, among others, the Kurdish regions of Afrin and Serekaniye/Ra's al-Ayn, and called for Turkey to take action against these armed groups, who have been implicated in kidnappings, torture, and looting of civilian property and potentially unlawful deportation. Furthermore, Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated that violations and abuses in areas under the control of Turkish-affiliated armed groups is rife, and called for the Turkish authorities to act.

Turkish air strikes and drone attacks on Kurdish regions in Iraq and Syria continue, often using the unconvincing pretext of targeting the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). These attacks routinely kill civilians, destroying homes and farmland, and forcing people from their homes. The Kurdish question is at the core of his anti-democratic stance and disregard for international law.

It is obvious that the Turkish government will continue to disregard the decisions, calls, and implementation of resolutions of any international legislative, judicial, or executive institutions. Within Turkey, no such institutions with a degree of independence from Erdogan even exist. Turkey's strongly centralized, authoritarian regime has no checks or balances within Turkey, and any forces of opposition face intimidation, detention, or violence.

The EUTCC believes that the time has come for the EU and its institutions to take serious measures against the current Turkish government, as criticism and recommendations so far have had no effect. The AKP rose to power backed by the EU, who initially viewed Erdogan and his party as a model of what many referred to as “moderate Islam” and many believed that Erdogan and the AKP would be pioneers in the spread of moderate Islam across the Middle East. However, particularly after the beginning of the Arab Spring protests and the outbreak of the ongoing conflict in Syria, Erdogan and the AKP openly embraced authoritarianism, radicalism, and a policy of military expansionism. 18 years after the AKP’s rise to power, there is nothing left that could be considered moderate Islam, and no desire by the AKP to protect any sort of democratic framework. Rather, the AKP and its leader have assumed a leading role as a force of militant pan-Islamism, eliminating any vestiges of democracy within Turkey and actively destabilizing countries throughout the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe. Now, the only option left for addressing the authoritarianism and aggression of Erdogan and the AKP is a comprehensive program of legal, political, and economic sanctions.

Based on this letter and the international calls, decisions and resolutions for peace and democracy in Turkey, the EUTCC calls upon the EU member states and the European institutions to:

1. Take diplomatic, political and legal measures to compel Turkey’s AKP-MHP government to comply with international law by immediately and unconditionally withdrawing all Turkish military forces currently active outside of Turkey, and end Turkish military intervention and incursions into Syria, Iraq, Libya, Cyprus, the Caucasus, and areas of the Mediterranean Sea outside of Turkey’s recognized maritime borders. As a first step, we call for the suspension of the Customs Union agreement between the EU and Turkey and a halt to all arms exports to Turkey.
2. Assert that the resolution of the Kurdish question is essential to the establishment of a stable, democratic and peaceful Turkey, as the Kurdish question is one of Turkey’s primary internal issues and, with ongoing Turkish military incursions into Syria and Iraq, an important external issue as well. An EU initiative for a political dialogue process between the Turkish government and Kurdish forces should be initiated as soon as possible.
3. Enable Abdullah Öcalan to participate in a political dialogue process with the Turkish government.
4. The lifting of all restrictions on Kurdish parties and representatives, in light of the decisions of the European Court of Justice and the Belgian Court of Cassation finding that the PKK is not a terrorist organization, is a vital step that can be taken to facilitate a process aimed at achieving peace.
5. Urge Turkey to release all political prisoners including elected officials and members of the HDP, to respect the decision of the electorate, and to reinstitute the mayors who have been replaced by the government-appointed trustees.

Yours sincerely

Prof. Dr. Kariane Westrheim  
EUTCC Chairperson

#### Reports

Nr. 1: CPT: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/cpt/-/council-of-europe-anti-torture-committee-publishes-two-reports-on-turkey>

Nr. 2: <https://pace.coe.int/en/news/8067/pace-strongly-condemns-new-crackdowns-on-political-opposition-and-civil-dissent-in-turkey>

Nr. 3: UN report

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=26237&LangID=E>

<https://hdpeurope.eu/2020/11/over-22-thousand-hdp-members-arrested-since-2015/>