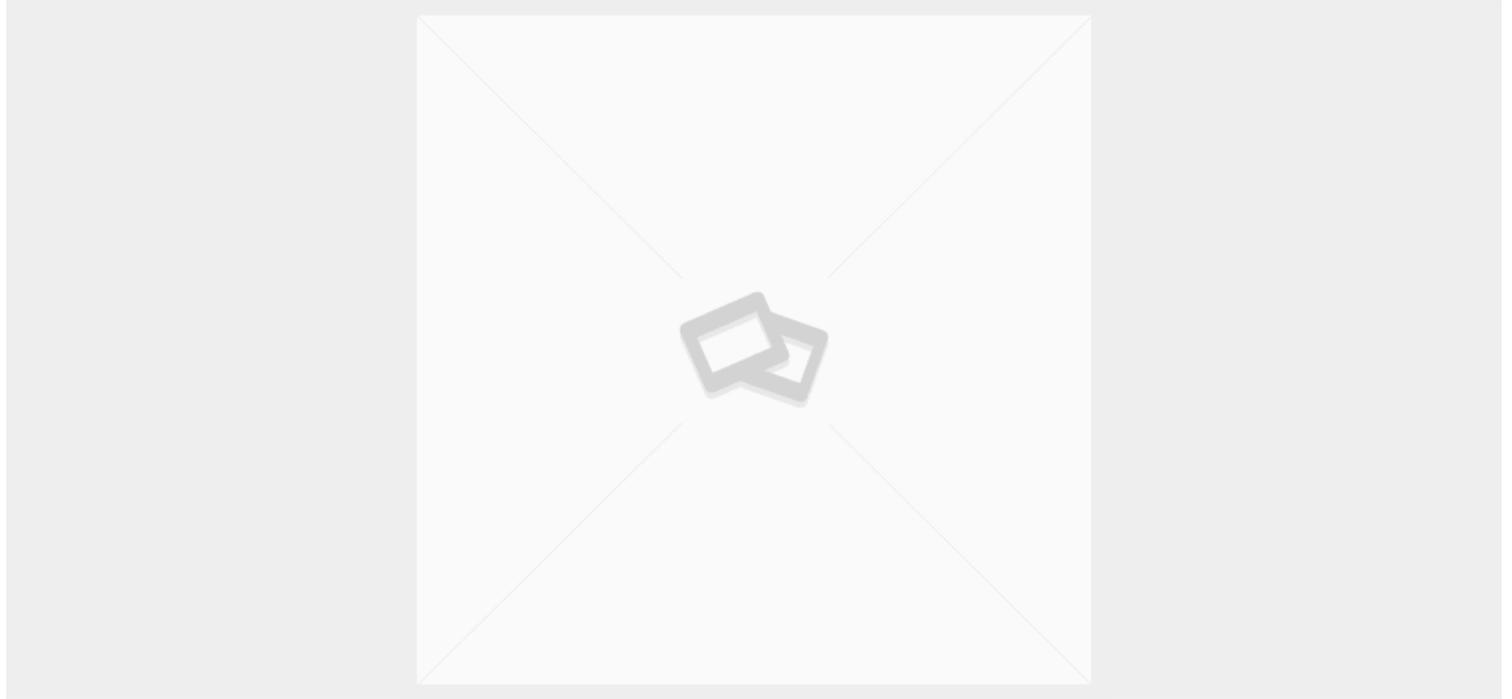


EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, TURKEY AND RECOGNITION OF GENOCIDE

Posted on December 11, 2008 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



By Tessa Hofmann, Germany, Nov. 10, 2007

Every year autumn brings the same procedure: The influential Foreign Committee of the European Parliament (EP) votes on a report on Turkey's progress towards admission into the EU, which is prompted by a non-legislative resolution of the House. This year's report and resolution, for the first time, did not use the word genocide. The Turkish media immediately jumped to the premature conclusion that a change had occurred in the position of the European Parliament.

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At that occasion, let us recall the European Union's ambivalent political position with regard to Turkey's entry into the EU and the Armenian genocide: On June 18, 1987, the EP issued its first resolution "On a political Solution of the Armenian Question," which not only qualified the "tragic events" of 1915-17 as a genocide according to the criteria of the UN Genocide Convention (1948), but stated at the same time that the refusal of the Turkish government to recognize the genocide committed by the Young Turks represented an insuperable impediment to Turkey's admission into the EU. Despite the fact that genocide recognition never became an official precondition at any stage of the EU's enlargement and that the recognition of the Armenian genocide was no exception of that rule, the EP continued to call on Turkey to recognize the genocide of 1915-17 as a matter of historic fact, giving two good reasons for its demand: 1) strengthening the democratization inside Turkey and 2) safeguarding regional stability, in particular in its neighbourly relations to Armenia.

Since 1987, the EP has annually repeated this demand in different wording, though in principle its reasoning has remained unchanged. Even if this year's resolution does not include the "g-word," the call on Turkey's obligation to recognize is still there because the European Parliament "reiterates its call upon Turkey to engage in serious and intensive efforts for the resolution of outstanding disputes with all its neighbours, in accordance with the UN Charter and other relevant international conventions, and including a frank and open discussion on past events; reiterates its call upon the Turkish and Armenian Governments to start a process of reconciliation for the present and the past, and calls on the (European) Commission to facilitate the Turkish-Armenian reconciliation while taking advantage of regional cooperation realised within the European Neighbourhood Policy and the Black Sea Synergy Policy" (Paragraph 22).

In 2004, I had the opportunity to discuss genocide recognition and other human rights issue with high-ranking officials of the EP in Brussels. One gentleman in particular was clearly upset with the expectation by Armenian NGOs, the Turkish media, etc., that the EP should confirm its 1987 resolution on the Armenian genocide annually, putting it the

following way: “What do people expect from us? We are not a kindergarten to be that foolish. We take our own decisions and resolutions more serious. And therefore they have not to be repeated year after year, in order to remain valid.”

But how binding are these non-legislative resolutions in the first place? As official Turkey continues to emphasize, genocide recognition is not a part of the EU’s Copenhagen Criteria (June 1993), which define the economic, political and legal framework of the EU’s negotiations with candidate states. So far, no candidate state has had to deal with its denied criminal past, nor past genocides or crimes against humanity, be it Croatia with her WWII genocide against Jews and Serbs, or Czechia with her post-war crimes against the German minority. In addition, there is a clear structural imbalance between the EP as the EU’s weak legislative body and the Council of Ministers as the EU’s nearly omnipotent “executive” that weakens the relevance of EP resolutions. In order to develop the EP into an effective political body, we need a politically unified Europe and a European Constitution, giving real power to the EP.

When I talked to the EP’s officials in 2004, I was also told that the EU prefers to focus on present aspects of human and minority rights protection. I always found this to be a doubtful position that ignores the truism that today’s present is the past of tomorrow. But does the EU indeed pay more attention to current human rights violations? Sadly, the answer is a resounding: No, not really. What is worrying in this year’s resolution is less its lack of explicitness on the Armenian genocide than its half-heartedness and vagueness towards the growing threat against Christian minorities in Turkey, be they indigenous such as the Armenians, Syriacs or Greek Orthodox, or the tiny “new” minority of approximately 4,500 ethnic Turks who converted to evangelical communities.

The year 2007 was an *annus horribilis* for them all, with the murder of Hrant Dink and the brutal torture of the slain Malatya Three as key events. The refusal of the current Turkish AKP Islamist government to abolish the notorious Article 301 of the penal code; the continuing application of this paragraph against dissident and/or Armenian journalists, Turkish protestants or other targeted minorities; the intentional cultural and religious “drainage” of ancient Christian communities despite their numeric irrelevance; the continued equation of non-Muslims with “internal enemies” that goes back to the genocidal last decade of Ottoman rule—all this was either mentioned in the EP’s resolution only briefly or was entirely ignored. Yes, the resolution does of course condemn the murder cases, but it does not mention that Arat Dink, the son of the victim Hrant Dink, and his previous partner Sargis Seropyan were prosecuted and convicted under Article 301, while simultaneously the inquiries in the Dink murder case underwent limitations and restrictions. No word is spent in this report on the numerous tribulations of the remaining 2,300 Syriacs in their ancient homeland Tur Abdin, where gradually their land, churches and cemeteries are taken over by Muslims. And if the desperate Christians seek for law protection and justice, their claims are either turned down or are randomly delayed by a judge who at the same time holds the office of a provincial governor. Nor does the resolution deplore the fact that for 10 years the teaching of Aramaic has been officially prohibited, by another governor of Mardin.

These problems are anything but new. Since the first half of the 19th century when Europe began to urge Turkey to introduce reforms and protect its Christian minority population, an infuriated Turkish elite and society have reacted with more oppression, because the decision-makers and administrators very quickly understood that European

demands were rarely followed by decisive action. It was this cycle that first led to anti-Christian hate and then genocide(s) in the last decade of Ottoman rule. The League of Nations' High Commissioner on Refugees Fridtjof Nansen and the German Protestant missionary and Armenophile Johannes Lepsius had both pointed out such mechanisms. Yet, almost 150 years after the failure of the Ottoman decrees on reforms (Tanzimat), Europe continues to repeat herself and her mistakes. How can Turkey be committed to reforms and minority protection if we do not insist on them?

The regular progress report of the European Commission issued on Nov. 6 and an 82-page strategy paper contained a similar blend of criticism and optimistic praise for the Islamist AKP government. The Commission reflected on the slowing down of the implementation of reforms since 2005, and on the restrictions on freedom of expression and the increase of legal prosecutions and convictions for the expression of non-violent opinions. The number of persons prosecuted almost doubled in 2006 compared to 2005, and there was a further increase in the number of prosecutions in 2007. More than half of these cases were prosecuted under the Turkish penal code and in particular under Article 301.

In contrast to the EP, the Commission's report noted that expressions of hatred against non-Muslim minorities in Turkey have gone unpunished. The killing of the Malatya three on April 18, as well as other attacks against clergy and places of worship of non-Muslims are reported as examples of how religious minorities are perceived as being threats to the integrity of the country. The report also underlined that the use of language to incite hatred against non-Muslim minorities has also gone unpunished. The dimension of this prevailing hatred and mistrust towards non-Muslims was confirmed by a recent opinion poll conducted by the Istanbul Bosphorus University and the "Open Society Institute." It found that 42 percent of the respondents expect ethnic non-Turks in Turkey to adopt Turkish identity, while only 29 percent accept that non-Turks have the right to use their native language and preserve their culture.

