European Economic and Social Committee

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Can Dündar: "Do not leave Turkey alone. Erdogan is not Turkey"

Exiled Turkish journalist debates media freedom and human rights with EESC

Following recent developments in Turkey, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) invited Turkish journalist Can Dündar to its Plenary session on 26th April. The former editor-in-chief of the Turkish newspaper Cumhuriyet, currently living in exile, called on the EU to stand beside Turkey and the Turkish people in support of media freedom, human rights, rule of law and democracy. The EESC debate also assessed recent developments in Turkey and discussed EU-Turkey relations.

EESC President **Georges Dassis** said: **"***Your fight is our fight and this appeal for us to defend democracy and freedom is important. I hope it will be heard by our governments, national parliaments and the European Parliament. We will be there to support you*.**"**

"*Please do not leave Turkey alone. Turkey represents the largest prison for journalists today*", said **Can Dündar**. "Europe may need Turkey, but if it still attaches a great importance to freedom of thought and press, it should support Turkish people. Europe shouldn't give up its values in the interest of short-term benefits or goals".

Dündar, who was one of the 5 finalists of the 2016 Shakharov Prize, was arrested in November 2015 after his newspaper reported on Turkey's intelligence service smuggling arms to rebels in Syria. In May 2016, he was sentenced to five years' jail for "revealing state secrets", and survived an assassination attempt that same day. Still facing an arrest warrant in Turkey, he currently lives in exile in Germany.

"*Through this debate today, we would like to honour the courage of the 150 journalists remaining in jail, the 2,700 journalists who have been dismissed, and the 170 media organisations who were closed down*", remarked EESC Workers' Group President, **Gabriele Bischoff**, welcoming Mr Dündar. *"A German journalist, Deniz Yücel, is also imprisoned – and we urge the Turkish authorities to free him. The EU must develop clear criteria for its future relations with Turkey as regards human rights, freedom of speech, freedom of association and rule of law."*

EESC Various Interests' Group President, **Luca Jahier**, said "*Turkey is its people, the living force of its society. It is this Turkey that we have to continue working with. We hope to return to a Turkey that is democratic, open to the future, and that respects liberties and the rule of law separation of power – and it is the role of civil society, academia and the media to keep open these avenues of communication and support*."

EESC Vice-President **Gonçalo Lobo Xavier** stated "*we urge Turkey to work with international journalists' organisations and UNESCO, OSCE and the Council of Europe on working with journalists and insuring, in the interest of Turkey, that press freedom is at the heart of its policy*".

"*Even though the situation in Turkey is difficult, I would like to stress that the EESC will have to continue to have regular contacts with Turkish civil society organisations in order to demonstrate to them our support, and convey their concerns to the EU institutions*" said **Dilyana Slavova**, President of the EESC's External Relations Section.

During the debate, Dündar recommended that EU politicians defend democracy and rule of law and make it a requisite for investing in Turkey. He advised that during official visits to Turkey, they visit jailed politicians and lawyers in Turkey who are stigmatised and risk to be forgotten. "*Relations with Turkish civil society need to be bottom-up – via local authorities and civil society, as European governments have been taken hostage by their relations with Turkey*".

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EESC relations with Turkish civil society
Since 1995, the EESC hosts the EU-Turkey Joint Consultative Committee (JCC), which has been active in liaising with civil society and pushing for Trade Union rights and Women rights in Turkey. The 35th JCC meeting was held on 5 and 6 December 2016 in Ankara, and the next one is scheduled for 18-19 July 2017 in Brussels.

EESC opinions
The EESC has recently issued opinions on the role of civil society in Turkey and the enhancement of EU-Turkey bilateral relations, and is expected to adopt an own-initiative opinion on Turkey's role in the refugee crisis.

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The European Economic and Social Committee represents the various economic and social components of organised civil society. It is an institutional consultative body established by the 1957 Treaty of Rome. Its consultative role enables its members, and hence the organisations they represent, to participate in the EU decision-making process. The Committee has 350 members from across Europe, who are appointed by the Council of the European Union.