

# Turkey to reform further, foreign minister says

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**Source : EU Observer**

**Turkish foreign minister Abdullah Gul has pledged in an interview with EUobserver to change “in a few weeks time” a notorious penal code article curbing free speech, saying that Ankara will continue reforms even if the “climate” in the EU towards Ankara’s membership bid is currently not optimal.**

*“This article 301 overshadows Turkey’s reform progress. Both myself and Prime Minister Erdogan believe that we have to change this article,”* Mr Gul said referring to Turkey’s penal code article which punishes “denigrating Turkishness” and which has led to charges against journalists and writers like Nobel prize winner Orhan Pamuk.

Ankara has been repeatedly urged by the EU to revise or scrap “without delay” the article in order to ensure freedom of expression, but Mr Gul indicated that trials against journalists and novelists are also a matter of mentality within the ranks of Turkish prosecutors.

*“When we changed the whole Penal Code [in 2005], our intention was not to see any more problems because of the expression of thoughts. We made it very clear that [even if] we might hate it, we might not like it - expression should be free. But unfortunately, some prosecutors are opening files against writers and thinkers,”* he said.

*“Now we will change 301, in a few weeks time, before the elections. But we also need a change in mentality. And this cannot happen over night; it’s a process.”*

## **‘The EU has some problems’**

Last December 2006, EU leaders decided to temporarily suspend eight of Turkey’s 35 accession negotiation chapters due to Ankara’s failure to open up its ports to trade from EU member state Cyprus - seen by Mr Gul as an attempt by some EU member countries to “slow down” the speed of accession negotiations with Ankara.

But the Turkish politician stressed that Ankara will nevertheless continue to work to meet EU standards.

*“We made an assessment: The EU has some problems and these are not permanent. There will be a better climate, and by that time, we will already be in a different situation. We will use this time and make progress. Our commitment to the full process is not just rhetorical,”* Mr Gul said.

*“[EU] Negotiations are still going on, even if some chapters have been frozen. The German presidency has asked for our negotiating position on three other chapters without any benchmarks: economy and market policy, statistics and financial control. We have not slowed down our speed.”*

## **Strategic clout**

Meanwhile, Turkey is urging the EU not to underestimate the strategic clout it could offer to the bloc in

the Middle East and Central Asia in terms of security and energy supplies.

*"The question is this: is the EU paying enough attention to its future? Who is planning where the EU will be 30, 50 years from now? Is the EU going to play an important role in world affairs? Is the EU going to have a say in security issues or energy transport?,"* Mr Gul asked.

Whilst criticizing France for its "small politics" regarding Turkey, he acknowledged the support from new member countries like Poland and Romania.

*"They are our friends. The majority of the member countries are in fact aware of Turkey's importance and they are very helpful. Many member countries defend Turkey better than me, I noticed that."*

## **Armenian genocide**

Meanwhile, Mr Gul reiterated Turkey's views on the 1915 Armenian genocide - an issue which last autumn led to a political clash between Turkey and France.

Turkey denies that a genocide took place against the Armenians, while in France parliamentarians have been pressing for a bill which would penalise the denial of the Armenian genocide.

*"What happened in those years was a tragedy. But to call it a genocide, then we have to find another terminology for the Jews that were killed in Germany. It really offends us. Many people lost their lives, Turks, Armenians, Muslims, Non-Muslims. It was during World War 1 and in the Balkans, for instance, the Turks lost three million people."*

Mr Gul criticized French deputies as well as American politicians who want to pass a bill condemning the Armenian genocide in the US Congress.

*"Here it is a national issue, but there it's very much local. When I asked the people in France and the US about the "genocide", they didn't know what it's all about."*

*"Our offer was this: if you are really so interested in this issue, why don't we have a committee composed of historians, we asked them - we open our archives and let them study. But the Armenians are not forthcoming. The same offer is valid for the American congressmen and the French."*