

To the Turkish people from their European friends

In recent days Turkey's citizens have been carefully watching the reactions of politicians across Europe and the United States to the memorandum by the Turkish military issued on April 27. In these fraught circumstances, it is vital to send an unambiguous message to Turkish society. We strongly regret this intervention that could harm Turkey's progress as well as its relations with the European Union.

The EU decided to open negotiations with Turkey as a result of a striking sequence of reforms that led the European Commission in 2004 to declare that Turkey substantially met the so-called political Copenhagen criteria. One of these criteria is respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. Another is a functioning democracy, including as a basic principle, full civilian control over the armed forces. The intervention by the military on April 27 throws Turkey's compliance into doubt.

The Turkish military justified this by the need to defend "Turkish secularism." However, the threat to secularism has been overstated. In fact, Turkey has undertaken a number of important reforms, in sectors ranging from women's rights to education, which provide legal protection for secular values. Much remains to be done - including removing the penal code's restrictions on freedom of speech and working to close the gender gap - and we call on the Turkish authorities to vigorously pursue the reform path. But Turkish legislation has never been closer to European standards than today, and many of these changes have been brought about under the current government.

We believe that it is up to the Turkish political process, and to Turkish civil society, to express the preferences of the Turkish public. Large demonstrations, challenges of political decisions in courts and political campaigns are all acceptable tactics in democratic politics. We understand those who are concerned about the concentration of power, but this should not be taken as an excuse for the military to limit democratic government.

Finally, we call on European governments to reaffirm the promises and commitments that the EU has made in the past. Turkey still has much to do before it meets European standards, but by showing solidarity with Turkish democrats, the EU can now help to keep the process on track.

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