
GERMANY'S STEINMEIER ANNOUNCES VISIT TO TURKEY, SUPPORT FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

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German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on Thursday said he would travel to Turkey next week for the first time since the July failed coup attempt amid tense relations between the two countries and mounting concern over a growing crackdown.

Speaking to parliament, Steinmeier said nothing positive would come from polarization and endless confrontation in Turkey, which he described as standing at a "crossroads" of whether it would advance democracy or not.

"We must ask if the Turkish government's approach is compatible with the minimum standards of the rule of law," Steinmeier said.

In addition to pursuing diplomacy, Steinmeier said Berlin would boost support for Turkey's beleaguered civil society.

"When the existence of civil society is threatened, then democracy is also threatened," Steinmeier said.

"That is our experience. We Germans know how important constitutionally guaranteed freedom is for journalism, culture and science. We also know how dangerous it is when these free spaces are closed off," he said.

German support for Turkish journalists

Germany's top diplomat said that he would put forward a package of measures that would "help persecuted scientists, cultural workers, journalists, who can no longer work in Turkey come to Germany to work."

Germany will also help online news media publish "independent and diverse" reports for a Turkish audience, Steinmeier said. It was unclear if this signaled Berlin would back the initiative of Can Dündar, former editor-in-chief of Turkey's largest opposition daily Cumhuriyet, to launch an independent news website abroad with persecuted Turkish journalists. One of Turkey's most prominent journalists, Dündar fled to Germany after facing possible prison time for publishing an article about Turkish weapons shipments to Syrian rebels.

Over the weekend, nine executives and journalists Cumhuriyet were arrested pending trial on terror related charges. According to Reporters Without Borders, bans have been imposed on 150

media organizations and approximately the same number of journalists put in prison. Hundreds of journalists have been left jobless.

Action over words

Steinmeier's announcement comes as critics call on Germany to move beyond words of concern and take concrete action amid a deterioration in the rule of law and backsliding of democracy in Turkey. Chancellor Angela Merkel has been accused by critics of appeasing Ankara to save an EU migrant deal as well as to preserve Germany's anti-"Islamic State" mission based at Incirlik airbase in southern Turkey.

In some corners of Europe, there are growing calls for the EU to halt accession negotiations with Ankara. On Wednesday, the EU issued a damning report on Turkey's accession process.

However, Steinmeier said Germany wanted to maintain close relations with Turkey and EU accession should remain open, but warned accession talks would end if Ankara reinstated the death penalty. Severing communication would not only impact the Turkish government, but also the people.

"When we close the door now and throw away the keys, then we will let down many people in Turkey who right now are looking for help from Europe and hope for support," Steinmeier said.

Erdogan's crackdown on suspects

Since the failed coup attempt in July, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has used state of emergency powers to purge the military, bureaucracy, media and education sector of alleged followers of the Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen, whom the government blames for orchestrating the coup. More than 100,000 people have been dismissed or suspended for suspected Gulenist ties.

The purge has since morphed into a broader assault on the opposition. Earlier this week, the leaders of the country's Kurdish opposition and some of its members in parliaments were arrested over alleged support for Kurdish militants, prompting Germany to summon Turkey's ambassador and warn that broad anti-terror laws should not be used to silence the opposition.

Meanwhile, Erdogan accused Germany last week of being a "haven for terrorists" over its refusal to extradite alleged members of the Gulen movement and the presence of organizations tied to the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Germany. At the time, Steinmeier described the Turkish leader's comments as "incomprehensible."

German-Turkish ties have been strained since the German parliament passed in June a resolution calling the 1915 massacre of Armenians a genocide. In response, Turkey prevented German lawmakers from visiting troops stationed at Incirlik airbase, only to reverse the decision after Germany said the resolution wasn't binding. The coup attempt added to tense relations between Turkey and the West as Ankara accused its allies of not sufficiently supporting the elected government.

The situation in Turkey is particularly important to Germany, home to some 3 million people of Turkish origin.

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