



**OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting 2013  
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**Working Session 4  
Turkish Government Should Cease Intimidation of the Media**

Freedom House expresses its grave concern over the declining state of media freedom in Turkey, and calls on the government of Turkey to realize its potential for building an inclusive democracy by fulfilling its political and legal commitments to freedom of expression. We would like to stress that these concerns are not exclusive to Turkey. Several countries represented in this hall have more restrictive and punitive environments for the media than Turkey. The reason we focus on Turkey today is because of Turkey's great potential for democratic development and our own recent research in the country on this subject. The events of the past few months in Turkey have demonstrated that the absence of a free press and restrictions on free assembly contribute to social tension.

After more than 10 years of AK Party rule in which the economy has boomed and the military has been removed from politics, Turkey faces a critical inflection point when the government must show its commitment to pluralistic, inclusive democracy. Democracy cannot function without a free press.

International organizations, including and especially the OSCE, have thoroughly documented and tracked the imprisonment of large numbers of journalists in Turkey. The vast majority of these are held on charges relating to supporting or propagandizing for terrorist organizations or armed groups. These imprisonments are the direct consequence of vague and arbitrarily applied anti-terrorism laws that are used to criminalize normal and universally protected acts of speech. Freedom House supports the recent reforms introduced to these laws through the fourth judicial package, but notes that they did not go far enough. There remain several important ambiguities and oversights that still permit overly broad interpretations that restrict freedom of expression. We call on the government of Turkey to ensure that the reforms are implemented in practice, and that they continue beyond what has been already adopted.

Beyond the anti-terror laws, however, in recent years another troubling pattern has solidified – the use of overt political pressure on owners and editors of mainstream media outlets to censor and remove journalists who

discomfort the government, especially the Prime Minister. This pattern intensified this summer during and after the Gezi Park protests.

In the past several years dozens of journalists have been fired from mainstream newspapers, including some of the most prominent names in Turkish media – people like Hasan Cemal, Can Dunder, Nuray Mert, and Yavuz Baydar. In multiple cases, journalists say that their firings were due to direct pressure from the Prime Minister's office. Those who continue at their newspapers say editors tell them to withhold criticism of the government, and talk of “lynching campaigns” against them in pro-government outlets and on social media when they write critical pieces. This type of pressure is corrosive. As Mr. Lambrinidis said in the opening session, it has “a chilling effect.”

This political intimidation is enabled by the government's leverage over holding companies that rely on government tenders in construction and other industries for business and rein in their media outlets for fear of losing those contracts. Media outlets that criticize the government can be hit with punitive tax measures and sold to more compliant owners, as most famously happened to the Doğan Group in 2007-2009, when it was forced to sell *Milliyet* and *Vatan*. Even at mainstream newspapers considered to be independent, editors now keep critical stories off the front pages, burying them in reduced format in back pages.

This atmosphere of intimidation extends to academia as well, where professors report that presidents fear student protests on their campuses, lest they be blamed and dismissed by the government, which controls their appointment. Conservative liberal commentators, including many who previously supported the AK Party as the best way to break decades of military guardianship, appear to be the new and special targets of intimidation. From columnists to TV announcers to editors to owners to academics, everyone fears the phone call from the Prime Minister's office, telling them, “The Beyefendi is not happy with you.”

Freedom House is well aware that the lack of independence in Turkey's media did not start with this government. There is a long history of government pressure on the media, and of media complicity with government objectives, that predates the AK Party and has contributed to the current atmosphere of mistrust towards the media.

But even if this problem did not begin with this government, it can end with this one. This crisis in Turkey's media is fundamentally political in nature and can only be solved by a change in thinking from Turkey's political leaders to enable, not repress, pluralistic public discourse. The technical shortcomings in Turkey's media legislation and institutions -- including the anti-terror laws, the process of allowing holding companies with media interests to bid on public tenders, and regulations affecting the independence of the state broadcaster

-- must be remedied. But it is equally critical that the government cease privately intimidating and publicly denouncing critics in a way that increases the polarization and division in Turkish society.

Turkey is a vibrant and dynamic country, diverse in its political culture, its religious history, and its ethnic composition. In order to realize its democratic potential internally and as an important global actor, and to navigate the grave challenges that have emerged across its region and along its borders, it must embrace a media that reflects the opinions of all its citizens, and not only those who support the government.

Freedom House calls on the government of Turkey to cease intimidation of dissent and to allow a free media to flourish.