

## Too Hot for Turkish TV

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Articles & Testimony

It seems worryingly likely that Turkey -- a member of the European fringe, like Russia, and a country in accession talks with the European Union -- might become more like its northern neighbor than its western ones. On Sept. 8, Turkey's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government slapped Dogan Yayin, the country's largest media group -- it owns about half of Turkish media outlets, including CNN's Turkish affiliate -- with a record \$2.5 billion fine for alleged improper business dealings. Together with an earlier \$500 million fine, the AKP's latest charge brings the total penalty against the company to more than its net worth. If the AKP has its way with Dogan Yayin, it will erode Turkish press independence -- and start Turkey down a path of Russification rather than Europeanization.

The affair started in 2008, when Dogan Yayin papers, like *Hurriyet* and *Milliyet*, covered a scandalous court case in Germany. The German government had tried employees of a Turkish-German charity for illegally dispersing funds, including, possibly, to a top AKP bureaucrat responsible for media monitoring. The paper reported that the German court found the Islamist charity guilty, though the AKP refused to take action against the implicated bureaucrat, who later resigned of his own volition. In response to *Milliyet's* piece, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan characterized the newspaper's coverage as an attempt to defame his party, saying it constituted "media terror." He called on Turks to boycott Dogan Yayin papers.

At the same time, Turkish authorities started levying penalties on the company, and government-appointed tax police commenced a selective, one-year audit of Aydin Dogan, part owner of Dogan Yayin's parent organization, and his business. The officials charged the chairman with failure to pay sufficient taxes on the sale of \$570 million in shares to a German company. Charges multiplied with additional allegations of improper business dealings, and the total fine amounted to more than the market value of the entire company. The AKP's endgame is clear: Dogan Yayin will either go out of business, or the chairman will pledge his loyalty to the AKP. Turkish sources say the AKP has sent Dogan a list of journalists it considers "hostile," asking him to fire them in return for leniency.

Such behavior is disquieting, but not unexpected. Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has used legal loopholes to confiscate and sell independent media organizations to party supporters, changing the media landscape. In 2002, pro-AKP businesses owned less than 20 percent of Turkish media outlets. Today, pro-government partisans own around half.

Unless Dogan wins this battle now, the relationship between the AKP and media in Turkey will soon resemble that in Russia, where Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, a close friend of Erdogan, runs a state in which pro-government businesses or the state itself controls nearly all media outlets. Of the 26,000 newspapers, 16,500 magazines, 1,400 radio stations, and 2,200 TV stations in Russia, the number of independent media outlets is in the single digits. Russian authorities regularly raid publications' offices on flimsy pretenses and arrest journalists. Sometimes, even this is not enough: The flag-bearer of Russian opposition, *Novaya Gazeta*, has tragically lost four journalists in the past eight years under mysterious circumstances.

This near-absolute control of the media has allowed Putin to consolidate power in ways previously unthinkable. United Russia, Putin's party, regularly wins landslide election victories, most recently pulling in almost three-quarters of the 2007 vote. Putin's control of newspapers and TV broadcasts helped him consolidate power and prevent opposition groups from reaching a broad audience. Russians regularly hear one-sided stories about everything from U.S. policies to domestic challengers to the regime. The Russian media is technically free (in that it is not illegal to produce journalism), but it is not independent. Where there is no independent media -- as in Russia -- there is simply no viable opposition.

Turkey faces the very real risk of turning into Russia in this regard, due to the AKP's emulation of United Russia's practices. This is particularly galling because Turkey's media has helped Turkey -- and by extension the AKP -- negotiate political spasms over Islamism and secular government in the past. For instance, in 2008 a court challenged the AKP's right to exist, due to some of its "anti-democratic" and anti-secular practices. Even media outlets which regularly bashed the AKP for such abuses supported its right to represent the viewpoints of Turks and be part of the democratic process.

Now, Turkey faces a real challenge. If the country's media loses its independence, it will erode the credibility of Turkey's democracy. The media will continue to be "free," but the government will check its independence, forcing it into near complete subservience. Small, independent publications might survive, but mainstream political opposition will be effectively neutered, and Turkey will lose a crucial check-and-balance mechanism.

The AKP came into power seven years ago, promising to pursue accession into the European Union. Turkey watchers celebrated the party for shedding its Islamist pedigree and adopting a democratic, pro-Western stance. But the AKP soon realized that accession would require reforms that would erode its popular support. It took a majoritarian perspective of democracy, interpreting its popular mandate as a *carte blanche* to ignore checks and balances and crack down on dissent. Today, the AKP stands at a crossroads: It will take Turkey either to Russia or to Europe. Let's hope for the latter.

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