

## Insights into Turkish Domestic and International Politics during January 2012

### Key Points:

- *Russia's Gazprom announces that the South Stream gas pipeline project will begin construction ahead of schedule in December 2012, putting NABUCCO in an increasingly precarious position.*
- *Turkey slips further down the rankings of the media watchdog, Reporters Without Borders, press freedom rankings, now 148 out of 178 countries. This development comes following the fifth anniversary of the killing of writer Hrant Dink and a ruling in the case of his death stating that it was not the result of organized crime.*
- *Former Turkish Military (TSK) Chief of Staff, Ilker Basbug, was arrested on charges of supporting websites that were part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government. The military remains quiet on the matter, indicating that the ruling AKP government has triumphed in keeping the TSK under full civilian control. But the wide swath of those accused of complicity in conspiracy investigations continues to draw criticism at home and abroad.*
- *Both houses of the French parliament pass a law criminalizing the denial of the Armenian genocide, with Turkish politicians voicing their outrage at the decision against a backdrop where relations between Paris and Ankara are at the lowest level in recent memory.*

**South Stream on a roll**

*On January 23, Gazprom announced that following discussions with Russian Prime Minister, Vladimir Putin, it had decided to 'fast-track' the start of the South Stream pipeline to begin in December 2012. Announcing the decision, Gazprom head Alexei Miller remarked that "We have a regulatory basis, great interest of the project participants in Europe, the required funds and the unique track record of delivering large-scale gas transmission projects offshore. The project is in great demand, people are looking forward to it and we are ready to launch it." Taking the Gazprom chief's comments into account, there are two different versions of the story regarding the announcements and the manner with which it is being absorbed in Brussels.*

The first is that Gazprom is attempting to jumpstart construction in order to get out ahead of the regulations of the impending third energy package which could challenge the Russian state-owned gas giant's ownership of energy supplies and their means of transportation. The theory being floated in the "pro-NABUCCO circles" is that Gazprom's new schedule is an attempt to grandfather clause itself in against the new regulations which mandate that suppliers cannot also control the means of transport. The gas supply disruptions off 2006-09 are still paramount in minds throughout the continent, with EU decision makers moving to gain some leverage over Gazprom should another dispute arise.

The second and less cynical position, however, is that Gazprom, well aware of the sluggishness in NABUCCO's development, has pushed up the construction in a concerted public relations move to highlight the contrasting state of progress between the two pipeline projects. There is likely truth in both theories, and is somewhat indicative of the way both projects have progressed thus far.

South Stream, backed by top-down centralized decision making from Gazprom headquarters and Russia's extensive energy supplies, contrasts sharply with NABUCCO's comparatively haphazard evolution process, and the lack of consensual support for the Brussels-endorsed pipeline project existing within the EU. In short, NABUCCO needs good news, and fast. Enhanced cooperation in the form of the recently agreed upon TANAP pipeline – a joint project between Turkey and Azerbaijan – appears to have put NABUCCO's future in an increasingly precarious position. Experts have suggested that Turkey is no longer fully supporting the EU backed pipeline, instead prioritizing TANAP due to NABUCCO's skyrocketing expenses and continued uncertainty over the control of supplies. However, as we mentioned in the last edition of the EGF Turkey File, Ankara largely rejects such allegations and the debate over Turkey's commitment to NABUCCO continues. As South Stream continues to extract deals and agreements from partners who had originally seemed to be assured partners of NABUCCO (EGF Turkey File, December 2011), the Russian project only seems to be picking up steam while the EU endeavour continues to flounder.

**Press freedom in retreat ?**

*The late January release of Reporters Without Borders' (RWB) 2011 World Press Freedom Index saw Turkey dropping 10 places, to 148 out of 178 countries, in terms of freedom of the press. The RWB position was hardly complimentary to Turkey, with comments such as:*

*"Far from carrying out promised reforms, Turkey's judicial system launched a wave of arrests on journalists that was without precedent since the military dictatorship...Under the pretext of combating terrorism, dozens were jailed before being tried, above all in the investigations into the Ergenekon conspiracy and the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union), an*

*alleged political offshoot of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). The unprecedented extension in the range of arrests, the massive phone taps and the contempt shown for the confidentiality of journalists' sources, have helped to reintroduce a climate of intimidation in the media."*

The report follows the fifth anniversary of the killing of Armenian-Turkish writer Hrant Dink. The case against Dink's killer, at the time a 17 year old youth, was recently ruled to have been the act of individual assailants angered by their perception that the author had insulted "Turkishness." A wide degree of public dismay followed the ruling within Turkey, in light of Judge Rustem Eryilmaz specifically stating that the killing was not the result of an organized conspiracy. CHP (opposition) party leader, Kemal Kilicdaroglu, condemned the ruling, asserting that the court was complicit in a conspiracy of state-sponsored murder. Turkey's prime minister, on the other hand, stated that while he disagreed with the judgment, the government had no say in judicial cases. Furthermore, members of the government, including President Abdullah Gul, insisted that for now, the case is still in the midst of its appeals process and the final verdict has not been reached.

Widespread criticism followed in the Turkish press, with AKP-skeptical Daily Hurriyet columnist Burak Bekdil drawing parallels to the Dink case and the ongoing crackdown on the Turkish deep state that has imprisoned journalists, opposition politicians and academics along with former and current military officials. Bekdil noted, "Turkish justice, notoriously capable of uncovering terror gangs from published and unpublished books, cartoons, anti-government slogans, posters, headwear, eggs, badges and every other trivial item, has been unable to uncover the gang that killed Hrant Dink." (Daily Hurriyet, January 25, 2012).

### **Erosion of military power or of democratization more broadly?**

*The power of the Turkish military (TSK) in the realm of domestic politics eroded further, perhaps permanently, with the arrest of former-Chief of Staff, Ilker Basbug, on January 6. Basbug, the highest-ranking officer to be arrested, is being held on suspicion of plotting a coup – a familiar charge directed at military officers and journalists over the course of the past year. The general, who retired in August 2010, testified in Istanbul for seven hours following his arrest for helping support websites allegedly aimed at undermining the authority of the AKP-lead civilian government. He released a statement to the press stating, "If I am being accused of bringing down the government with a couple of press statements and one or two Internet stories, this is very hard to swallow. If I had such evil intentions, as the commander of a 700,000-strong force I could have found other ways of doing it."*

Adding a strange dynamic to the Basbug arrest were comments made by President Gul on January 13, in which he stated that "My personal opinion is that the special clause in the Constitution, the one on the Supreme Council, has more validity. Gul also called for Basbug to be released on bail while awaiting trial, a stance which caught many AKP officials off guard. While no public schism appeared following Gul's remarks, it was rare to see such a high profile member of the ruling government take such a position in contrast to the AKP's stance on coup cases involving military suspects.

What is becoming more commonplace amongst everyday Turkish political life, however, is the lack of action on the part of the military itself. Having been the guarantors of the state's secular structure since the founding of the republic, the arrest of its former top officer along with the mass resignation of the Turkish General Staff in July 2011 appear to have led

to no ill effects whatsoever for the country's once fragile civilian democracy. The AKP leadership, many of whose leaders spent time in prison following the military's bloodless overthrow of the coalition government led by Islamist Necmettin Erbakan in 1997 appear to have quelled the generals with the numerous coup plot investigations that have left an estimated 300 military officers in jail. Many Turks, well aware of the history of the TSK's heavy hand in the country's domestic political scene, seem to accept the manner in which the AKP is justifying its assault on the military as arrests continue.

On January 25, Prime Minister Erdogan responded to criticism from Western critics who have viewed the detention of civilians as a consolidation of power by AKP officials, saying "It's hard for Western countries to understand the problem because they do not have journalists who engage in coup attempts and who support and invite coups."

Regardless, with the continued detention of more non-military suspects - namely journalists, academics and opposition politicians - suspicion is growing as to the validity of the charges. Indeed, it is difficult to tell where the truth lies in such accusations given the military's history of overthrowing governments which it has traditionally felt did not meet the standards of Turkey's Republican ideals. But as more critics of the AKP are swept up on charges that would be innocuous in most developed democracies in the world, it is becoming harder to accept the argument that we are simply witnessing the erosion of the power of the TSK in political life, as opposed to the erosion of democratization and political plurality more broadly.

### **The legacy of genocide**

With 24 senators abstaining, the French Senate voted to pass a bill making it a crime to deny the Armenian genocide on January 24, further inflaming tensions

between the two NATO allies. (All that awaits now is President Sarkozy's signature, unless one president of either house of the parliament asks for an investigation regarding its constitutionality in the subsequent 15 days).

The Turkish Foreign Ministry immediately released a statement following up on the prime minister's threats at retaliation for the law's passage during December, saying "we will not hesitate to implement, as we deem appropriate, the measures that we have considered in advance." French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe continued to try to plow a middle ground between the two countries, stating "I think this initiative was a bit inopportune. But the parliament has thus decided. What I'd like to do today is call on our Turkish friends to keep their composure."

Likely referring to the assertions by Prime Minister Erdogan of French genocide in Algeria, along with his charges that President Sarkozy's father was a participant in such crimes, Juppe went on to state his hopes that, "After this wave that has been a little bit excessive, I have to say I'm convinced that we will return to constructive relations - I extend my hand, I hope it will be taken one day."

There can be little doubt, as many Turkish commentators have accurately pointed out, Sarkozy's party is pushing ahead with the bill's passage in the run-up to his presidential election by playing to the 500,000 strong French-Armenian voting community that will cast ballots in April.

More so on the Turkish political scene, Erdogan is hedging to the right nationalists and the military, who are the most sensitive and reactive concerning the issue of the Armenian genocide. Through this lens, Erdogan's bluster on the issue should be viewed as a cunning political move to get ahead of political critics who might question the government's long held

stance on the issue, especially given the current corralling of the military.

But to many Europeans and other observers outside the Muslim world, his sudden concern with the plight of Algerians killed during France's colonial era comes off as duplicitous in its timing and its ferocity. The Turkish prime minister, by his nature, is an emotional character. But he is also an astute political actor, perhaps more so than many of his current contemporaries around the globe. His rage, while

likely genuine, is channeled for maximum affect and should be viewed in this context regarding the French legislation. French voters will be casting ballots for Sarkozy, not Erdogan, and with the need to shore up as much domestic support during the ongoing flare up in violence with the Kurds and the situation in Syria, Erdogan cares little of how his perception comes off in an EU dominated Europe that has done little to move Turkey's EU accession forward.

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EGF Turkey File  
Published by European Geopolitical Forum SPRL  
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