

PRESS FREEDOM IN TURKEY

MARC PIERINI WITH MARKUS MAYR

The state of press freedom in Turkey is a stain on Ankara's democratic reputation, economic standing, and diplomatic position. Despite domestic and international criticism of the imprisonment and prosecution of journalists in Turkey and of the flawed Turkish legal system, the government has not responded decisively. There are profound political, economic, and ethical reasons for Turkey to improve its record on press freedom.

Key Themes

- According to independent estimates, Turkey currently has the highest number of imprisoned journalists in the world, but the government and civil society organizations strongly disagree about the exact number. This creates an antagonistic atmosphere that hinders constructive reform.
- The judicial system tends to equate criticizing government policies and sympathizing with radical ideology. Journalists who report and comment on sensitive investigations or court proceedings as part of their job can face judicial prosecution.
- Many imprisoned journalists are detained on charges relating to terrorist activities linked to Kurdish separatism.
- The government filters content online and blocks websites, seemingly targeting content that it deems unwanted or illegal.
- Large conglomerates control major media outlets, so economic interests cloud media decisions and undermine editors' and journalists' ability to provide truly independent, critical reporting.
- The government directly interferes at times in media affairs by lashing out at journalists or outlets in response to personal and policy criticism.
- A judicial reform package was adopted in mid-2012 to address some of these issues, but more drastic reforms are needed. A fourth judicial reform package should be adopted soon.

A Way Forward for Turkey

End the dispute over the number of imprisoned journalists. The government should reconcile its numbers with its international partners, such as the OSCE and the Council of Europe, and relevant domestic stakeholders.

Move ahead with a bold legislative reform process. Ankara must not water down the fourth judicial reform package that could help Turkey meet international press freedom standards.

Strengthen civil society's role. Turkish civil society should increase its internal collaboration and more actively engage the government and international partners on press freedom issues. The Turkish government should recognize civil society's role as an essential interlocutor in a modern democracy. And European partners must increase their support for key nongovernmental stakeholders.

Revive the EU accession process. Working toward EU membership provides an impetus for Turkey's reforms. The EU and certain member states must overcome their internal disagreements to ensure the revitalization of the accession process.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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