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The Newsroom as an Open Air Prison: Corruption and Self-Censorship in Turkish Journalism

by Yavuz Baydar

Joan Shorenstein Fellow, Fall 2014

Columnist, blogger, co-founder of the Platform for Independent
Journalism (P24)



HARVARD Kennedy School

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Discussion Paper

Foreword

Freedom of expression in Turkey is, sadly, in a very bad state. What can I say other than that it has hit a new low? A lot of friends tell me, "He and she are fired from this or that newspaper." I have never seen any country where so many journalists are being fired...even the journalists who are closest to the government. That's the first point. Second, and this is the worst, there is fear. Everybody is frightened, I can see that. People want to say some things, but fear being fired. This is not normal. The pressure makes those who speak boldly more important. Courage comes to the fore, rather than creative thinking. Respected institutions in the world like Freedom House have been saying this, but let me also say: Freedom of expression in Turkey has hit a new low.

Orhan Pamuk, Turkish novelist, 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature,
December, 2014

2014 – The Annus Horribilis of Turkish Media

The year 2014 will go down as the *annus horribilis* of Turkish journalism. It began in the wake of two police operations in the last days of December 2013, massive graft probes into the affairs of four ministers of the majority Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. Those touched by the scandals included a number of businessmen with close connections to the government, bureaucrats and bank managers, but also Bilal Erdoğan, the son of then-prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Of even greater concern is that the investigations appeared to suggest that senior government figures were engaged in sanctions-busting against Iran, and that these senior figures had links to financiers who laundered funds for al Qaeda.

The files compiled by law enforcement and prosecutors were a burning fuse: They claimed to expose a vast network of organized crime, with evidence of bribery, abuse of power and widespread corruption at the very highest echelons of power.

Corruption of the nation's media was at the very heart of these allegations. A critical part of the probe – backed by legal wiretappings – concerned consortia to co-finance media entirely in favor of the AKP government. This joint effort, in which businessmen benefitting from government contracts paid into a common slush-fund, gave rise to the term “pool media.”

The appendices to this study go into great detail in presenting chapter and verse documentation of how the Turkish media has fallen into the malaise of self-censorship and complicity with government interference. In that sense they are germane to this introductory essay, which tries to establish the background of why this has happened. It describes the traumatic background of the situation and how a crippled media now face a historic test.

This is no less a matter than of restoring credibility to institutions that have been subjected to years of political pressure and which have worked to undermine their own public interest function.

A turning point in this process was the parliamentary elections of 2011 – which led to a sweeping victory for AKP – and became a license to accrue yet more power and silence the opposition.

Yet another landmark was the blackout implemented by the media itself on the story about 34 Kurdish villagers bombed to death in the Iraqi border village of Uludere/Roboski by Turkish fighter jets in late 2011. That silence became a dress rehearsal for the media surrendering its role as the watchdog of the public interest as the Fourth Estate.

Yet if alarm for the independence of the Turkish press was already high, concern reached code level orange soon after the outbreak of the summer 2013 demonstrations to protect Istanbul's Gezi Park. Protests spread to 78 of the 81 provinces in Turkey. The degree of self-censorship became so intense that the mainstream Turkish media itself became the subject of demonstration and open ridicule. Undeterred, Erdoğan declared that critical media – domestic and international – was part of a conspiracy to topple him and his government from power.

After that, the demonization of independent journalism continued full throttle, with predictably dire consequences. The government attempted to criminalize reporting and commentary contrary to its own interest, in effect normalizing a form of an “emergency rule.” Journalists who tried to resist, defend their independence and professional dignity, or defy the pressure to relinquish their integrity started to be arbitrarily fired or dispatched to professional limbo. Some of them, in despair, found jobs in partisan media. Others have been seeking new channels online to continue to fight for the survival of their profession.

The graft probe was, undoubtedly, the story the press needed to investigate and the one the public needed to hear. But after faltering on coverage during the Uludere/Roboski bombing and Gezi Protests, Turkish media entered into what can be described as mass-paralysis. Mighty media owners in the center realized with horror that even minimally critical coverage of corruption would mean severe consequences for their large-scale business interests. As a result, the

developing story of high-level corruption, a dream for any decent journalist anywhere in the world, was declared by the news management to be an area surrounded by “barbed wire.”

While the staunchly loyal pro-government media declared the legal probes to be yet another coup attempt, frightened media owners of the traditional center were keen to increase the pressure on their newsrooms, to ensure that “stories of public interest are not leaked to the public.”

Thus, 2014 began with a self-censorship more institutionalized and internalized than ever before. Media owners took their lesson from Uludere/Roboski and the Gezi Protests: the bulk of the Turkish population got their news from television and this was where self-censorship mattered the most. Only a few channels, often partisan in their opposition to the government and with scarce resources, even began to cover the story.

Blocked by political and institutional pressure, Turkey's core of dedicated and defiant journalists practiced their craft online, more intensely than before. Social media and independent news sites began to fill the vacuum. When the details of the graft probes began to leak onto the Internet, the government's reaction was to shut down YouTube and Twitter. However, this proved to be technically difficult and in the end legally unsuccessful. Yet Erdoğan was undeterred, and the AKP government continues; the Internet remains a target and vulnerable to government interference.

Turkish journalists' battle for freedom, independence and even constitutional rights have been met with a series of defeats. Apart from the systemic purge in the media industry, between 2013 until the end of 2014, the government imposed over twenty news blackouts on important stories, on various grounds including national security. This was a normalization of censorship. Intimidation of journalists followed on a daily basis. An opposition source told the media that the number of journalists prosecuted by Erdoğan on grounds of “defamation” was 110 in the past 10 years.

2014 ended the same way it began: Almost on the anniversary of the two graft probes, on December 14, 2014, two of the remaining critical media outlets –

Zaman and STV – were raided and their top managers arrested. These two outlets are connected to the Gülen Movement, which is affiliated with Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish cleric – based in Pennsylvania, U.S. – who preaches a globalist, science-based, tolerant “social Islam.”

Erdoğan, keen on conspiracies against his power, sees the Gülen Movement as responsible for the graft probes, but so far has been unable to come up with credible proof of a plot.

Ekrem Dumanlı, the editor-in-chief of *Zaman*, who was briefly under arrest after the raid on December 14, said that when he asked the judge if the reason he was arrested was for some articles he wrote, the judge's response was, “yes.”

The final incident of 2014, at the end of December, symbolized comprehensively the perilous state of media freedom: Journalist Sedef Kabaş was charged with up to five years of imprisonment, because of a single tweet she wrote that was critical of a court decision.

Imprisonment Declines – but Freedom is Not Increasing

The current state of Turkish journalism, grave by international standards, has consequences both domestically and internationally. At its most basic, the weaker Turkish journalism becomes, the weaker Turkish democracy becomes, and the more difficult it becomes to forge a consensus at home and earn respect abroad.

The notion ideal of journalism as a check on irresponsible, corrupt or unfettered exercise of power has begun to evaporate. As a critical mass of journalistic outlets become embattled, investigative reporting, more crucial than ever before, is on the verge of extinction.

Fear has gripped newsrooms in media outlets. At media conglomerates, which constitute approximately 80 percent of the entire sector, news reporting is polluted by mass-compliance with an aggressive and arrogant government. News has been transformed into sheer stenography, dictating what the powerful recite.

The concept of public broadcasting, too, has become an anomaly. The AKP, with Erdoğan at its helm, has hardened its grip on the national broadcaster, TRT. It exercises full control over its editorial decisions, and has turned its back on all

calls for reform to turn it into a public service broadcaster – an essential step for democratization of the country.

The lack of freedom has cast a dark shadow over journalistic practices. For the last seven to eight years, Turkey has become associated with the incarceration of a large number of journalists. There followed a thaw between 2002 – 2008, under AKP rule, when the media felt more free and independent. It fiercely engaged in the demythification of the powerful military, and broke taboos. This was mainly thanks to Turkey's accession process to join the European Union.

Subsequently, however, journalists found themselves again in the courts and jails for professional conduct and the opinions they expressed. Pressure from the political executive, combined with arbitrary interpretations of laws such as the Penal Code and Anti-Terror Law, led to renewed incarcerations.

In other cases, implementations of the articles, such as article # 301 (insulting Turkishness) or # 216 (denigrating religious values) of the Penal Code, did not necessarily lead to detentions but had a sufficiently chilling disciplinary effect on journalism.

In 2010, Turkey had at one point 104 journalists in jail, a large majority of whom were Kurdish, or who did not hide their sympathies for various political causes. Turkey was declared the “world's worst jailer of journalists,” for the second year running in 2013, followed closely by Iran and China. These three countries accounted for more than half of journalists imprisoned in the world that year.

As far as the influential international NGOs which monitor journalism were concerned, none of those imprisoned in Turkey had committed crimes of violence. Despite calls by the European Court of Human Rights, the AKP government dragged its feet to amend the laws, and refused to draw a fine line between the fight against terror and freedom of expression and the press. The former has been widely used to restrict the latter.

Yet, the relative good news, probably the only one in this otherwise depressing picture, is that since 2011 the trend has been downhill. At the end of 2014, the

number of jailed journalists was down to seven (according to the Committee to Protect Journalists) or 19 (Reporters without Borders).

The trend is partly due to domestic outcry as well as international exposure, and partly because the AKP government seems to have advanced somewhat in its so-called “Kurdish Settlement Process” by negotiating with the PKK.

Whether this trend continues is hard to predict. Turkey soon may end up as a country where no journalist is in jail or, depending on the cyclical nature of imprisonment as the punitive measure in the country, one may again witness a rise of those cases, targeting specific groups.

In fact, the appeal of putting journalists behind bars is diminishing for authoritarian leaderships in Turkey and elsewhere, especially in countries that hold free elections. In emerging democracies, many of which are illiberal, elected leaders have found much more cunning ways to stifle the media, using more devious methods to strip journalists of their traditional watchdog role, for which independence and freedom are crucial.

Turkey stands out as the prime example of such a pattern. While the number of jailings has fallen to single digits, the number of firings since late 2013 has skyrocketed.

This is what makes Turkish media's *annus horribilis* as of the end of 2014 so unusual: Following the Gezi Park protests in June, those who lost their jobs (fired and “forced to resign”) approached 1,000 by the end of November.

What is even more hair-raising is that many of those who were fired, were also labeled “toxic” – because of their adherence to basic values of journalism – and not recruited elsewhere.

In other cases, journalists attempting to exercise their independence, freedom and conscience have been subjected to various forms of mobbing. Some have simply quit their jobs, not to return. Except for those in a small group of independent newspapers, the rest have been forced to work in what I call “partisan” media – the mirror image of the pro-government press, also highly editorialized, which sees its obligation as attacking the government rather than informing.

Diversity of opinion and free debate have been supplanted by AKP propaganda. Replacements in the media are now recruited by the “merits” of acquiescence or loyalty to Erdoğan.

This ongoing process cannot be described in any other way than a purge: The Turkish media industry is systematically losing its qualified workforce, and what remains of ethics is vanishing altogether.

Even with a low number of journalists jailed, even when no journalist is imprisoned, it would still be impossible to claim that Turkey’s journalism is free. Turkey has developed ways to establish a media order, arguably more visible than any other country, where much of the media industry is kept on a leash, obstructed from informing the public of what it needs to know.

For decades, as a quasi-democracy, Turkish society was run under a regime of tutelage by the once-powerful military elite, whose management philosophy was simply based on treating the citizenry as children – unable to make decisions for itself. Thus, a “shadow elite” has run the country, allowing the elected government limited power and excluding them from major aspects of politics, such as national security.

When the AKP came to power, the hopes that this system would finally be defeated in favor of democracy were high. Those hopes exist no longer. Despite tangible progress up until 2010, Erdoğan shifted direction and simply adopted the model of his predecessors; applying state instruments he now controls for a new form of tutelary system. At its core is the principle that challenges to his authority should be met with rigid political and social engineering. The answer to growing unrest in Turkey in the past three to four years is to be seen in this political shift.

Turkey's mainstream media is structured and managed on a micro level by watchdogs. Since the powers – military or civilian – are over-sensitive to the independence of journalism, their automatic choice has always been to enforce control at the level of management. The political powers, often in collusion with the media owners, have no interest in editorial independence. Thus, it is either the owner themselves, or their special appointees who act as de facto editors in

chief, or the loyal editors they hire, who oversee the newsroom operations. News that might cause a disturbance does not make its way to the pages or TV screens.

Legal Protections for Turkey's Fourth Estate

Independence, freedom, diversity and safety of journalism – four naturally linked criteria – are affected by far more than the Turkish laws that only regulate freedom of expression. The conditions protecting a democratic role for the Fourth Estate are found in Turkey's constitution and legal codes.

Regarding freedom, relevant laws include Turkey's Criminal Code, the Press Law, the Internet Law, and the Law on the Supreme Board of Radio and Television (RTUK).

For public service journalism, one should take into account the law that defines the role of the national broadcaster, TRT.

Regarding independence and diversity of the media, one should examine the Law on Public Procurement, Competition Law, the Law on Trade Unions and Collective Bargaining, the Law on Public Advertising and the laws regulating banking.

Instead of singling out the problems of one or two laws it is important to see the big picture, which as a whole is full of malpractices and problems.

Based on the evidence of leaked recordings and personal accounts, we know that Erdoğan and his close circle in power have mastered ways, using many of those laws, particularly those about finances, to stifle the media. This has been done by establishing an “unholy alliance” with a group of business people with huge interests in businesses other than media.

With these business groups on board, Erdoğan has simply raised the stakes to enforce dependence: In return for lucrative public contracts, all the media moguls in Turkey have to put their media outlets in the service of power. It is a system based on corruption that also requires full complicity of those responsible for editorial content. If Erdoğan or his aides do not call the top managers and

editors of the media to publish propaganda or censor undesirable content, the owners themselves do so on a daily basis.

The majority of the media, controlled by about five large media groups, is as of 2014, infected with the gangrene of widespread, internalized self-censorship.

The top managers and editors (who receive astronomical salaries) act regularly as gatekeepers in reverse, with the consent or subtle approval of the political powers. Their duty is to censor all the news that is otherwise fit to print and throw it into wastebaskets. Gezi Park and the two massive graft probes showed clearly how efficient this method has been for stripping journalism of its tools.

The success of this “dirty media order” is due to several factors. First, by abandoning the reform process and shelving the *sine qua non* project of a democratic constitution, Erdoğan has been able to use existing oppressive legislation laws to consolidate his power. These include measures passed by previous governments on the subject of media ownership and cross-ownership, and financial dependency on the state, all of which have worked to his advantage.

While “taming” the old-guard secular owners with various threats, including tax fines, he also managed to create a new class of pro-AKP conservative media bosses, who are forced to co-finance media outlets – called “pool media” – in order to benefit from large-scale public tenders. This has created an immense concentration of media outlets that report in favor of the AKP, making the mainstream media submissive and partisan.

Second, by not opening the EU negotiations chapter #19 on Social Policy and Employment, the AKP made all journalists easy prey to be hired and fired arbitrarily in the hands of ruthless media moguls. Today, only 4.5 percent of employees in Turkey's media sector “dare” to be union members, and it is only about 1.5 percent among journalists.

Lack of collective rights means no job security. No job security means no editorial independence.

Self-censorship is, without a doubt, a sophisticated form of self-imprisonment for any journalist. If physical imprisonment is an outmoded tactic to control the media in a country like Turkey, it has been replaced by newsrooms that now operate as open-air prisons.

This state of affairs is not, of course, unique to Turkey but is a phenomenon that has developed for the last two decades, particularly after the collapse of communism, in societies trying to achieve some sort of stasis and democratic order.

How the Demise of Turkish Media Harms Democracy

In other EU accession states and in other parts of the world, elected leaderships build alliances in order to create a new media that will give priority to their own, rather than public's, interests.

In Turkey this phenomenon reached a critical phase, and 2014 has become a critical year for Turkish media. The collective plight of a key profession in a key country commands the attention of media professionals, analysts, academics, political parties, foundations, NGO's, international media monitoring organizations, and bodies like the EU and Council of Europe.

Turkey has undergone a major social, economic and political transformation since 2002. It offers an exciting story for the world to follow. The reform process, the dynamics of which were endorsed by Turkey's accession process into the EU, meant that the country has engaged in its own version of *glasnost*. As the screws and hinges of the oppressive old order dominated by the military were loosened, all the genies were let out of the bottle. In a new, relatively free domain, social groups were emboldened by the fact that some media organizations had launched bold, investigative reporting that sparked free debate.

For all the expectations raised, however, democracy as a final destination still seems far away. The reform process not only came to a halt, but since early 2014, shows visible signs of reversal.

Following a long series of election victories over its 12-year long rule, the AKP has had excessive concentration of power and almost complete control over the

state apparatus. This has partly been due to the absence of a tangible challenge from the opposition parties. President Erdoğan has, since the general elections in June 2011, acted with a free hand in changing the system into an autocracy. This, a large segment of independent observers agree, is in a process in the making. In what can be seen as a typical power grab, Turkey moves ahead in a slow-motion coup from being an illiberal democracy to one-man rule, similar to Russia.

Until approximately 2011, the media was instrumental in bringing down the old order, pushing for peace between Ankara and the PKK, and preparing the society to cross the critical threshold of democratic transition and to adopt a new, civilian, democratic constitution, based on a broad consensus.

It is a different climate now. The bombing death of 34 Kurdish villagers in Uludere/Roboski was a sign of business as usual – that the press had a patriotic duty to cover up the state's misdeeds. The rough handling of the press after the Gezi Park protests and after two massive graft probes came as proof that an open display of authoritarianism was an acceptable reaction to a threat to the government's authority. The widely shared fear at home and among Turkey's friends and allies abroad is that a government which had started down the path of reform has lost its way entirely.

In 2014, Turkey is country where all the social segments, except a clearly favored majority of Sunnis, are kept in limbo: insecure, mistrustful, frustrated. This raises concerns about a long period of either instability, or, if Erdoğan is successful, an iron rule, where rights and freedoms will be shelved.

In no other sector is this worrying trend reflected more clearly than in the media. The rise or fall of democratization is highly dependent on whether Turkish media can find a way out of the quagmire into which one man's will and ambition has driven it. Can the press resume its role of informing its own public, and continue to tell and analyze Turkey's story?

Recommendations for Turkey and the Global Community: Steps toward a Free Press

Turkey is a complicated case. The ways the powers that have developed over the decades to keep media in a yoke are equally complicated. As a result, finding solutions will be particularly difficult.

As a NATO ally, Turkey has been traditionally tied to more than 30 Western institutions. It is a member of Council of Europe, having committed to the European Treaty of Human Rights, which even its constitution refers to as binding. It is – despite the apparent frostiness in relations – still negotiating full membership with the European Union, with which it has more than 45 percent of its trade. The accession process has contributed to a closer adoption of the Copenhagen Criteria, although certainly insufficiently at many points. All of this means that Western bodies, allies and organizations still have some leverage to potentially have a positive influence on the conditions of journalists and the structure of media ownership.

Domestically, the picture is gloomier. Reflecting the deeply-internalized “culture of intolerance for objection and dissent,” where even a single debate sounds like a matter of life or death, and in the absence of reaching consensus, Turkish parliament has never been an oasis for freedom and rights. In many cases, opposition parties joined the yes vote and even contributed when the AKP passed laws restricting press freedom. At the moment, there is still no opposition party that carries a pro-freedom agenda for the press.

The AKP, initially operating as a coalition for reform, changed character in 2011, as Erdoğan assembled a large group of aides and deputies who would no longer argue and negotiate, as was the custom between 2002-2010, and left behind all the projects which would bring Turkey closer to an EU membership and a place in the top 10 of world economies. Reformists are now pushed into the cold, at the periphery of the party, which is now a monolithic structure where everything is decided by one person, Erdoğan. This is despite the fact that he, when elected president, had to abandon the party membership. So, all indications

are that there will no longer be any surprise moves from the AKP in favor of media freedom and independence – to the contrary.

Equal blame for the media's quagmire is on the owners. They value money and profit above all. Despite challenges and opportunities in the past decade, we have seen no media owner rising up to courageously defend the values of the profession, the integrity of the companies they own, and the honor of their employees, the journalists. Instead, they joined forces with the government powers, and did whatever they were told by Erdoğan, or they felt they had to do.

The judiciary in Turkey has traditionally ruled in favor of the notion of “protecting the state from the citizen.” As a high number of rulings show, it has been restrictive of, and in favor of punishment for freedom of expression and the media. The politicized character of the judiciary has not faded over the years; on the contrary, there are strong signs in 2014 of courts losing more of their independence, due to pressures from the ruling party.

Last but not least, we have Turkey's suffocating journalists as part of the problem: divided, engaged in infighting and polarized.

Most of them are enslaved by their unshakeable perception that journalism is only a means for a political mission instead of a social one, and they have been unable to build coalitions to fight for better conditions for the profession. Also, as some recent studies show, some do not believe that journalism has any value in Turkey at all.

2014 has painted a gloomy picture. Is there a way out for Turkish journalism? There are many reasons to be cautious. There are signs that the fight for a proper democratic order, in which the independence and freedom of the media is secured, will be an arduous one. Hopefully, Turkish society in general, and Turkish journalists in particular, have a strong collective memory of civilian resistance against authoritarianism.

Meanwhile, the following recommendations will remain useful, because social and political change in Turkey and the surrounding areas are fluid, and do not lack promise.

To the President of Turkey:

Show respect for the integrity of journalism. It is a profession bound by strong ethics, honor and holds a crucial social role for the flourishing of democracy. The main responsibility of journalism is to cover power structures critically. Stop bullying and intimidating media institutions and their professionals. Their conduct is, and will continue to be, based on independent, free reporting and comment. Critique is not equal to defamation of a political leadership. Embrace the entire Turkish media, without any discrimination. Display leadership to bring all the political parties and civil society groups together for a new, democratic constitution.

To Parliament, the Turkish Grand National Assembly

Turkey's 550-seat General Assembly must recognize that a free and independent Fourth Estate is essential for any democracy to develop and survive. It is therefore essential for each and every deputy, regardless of political affiliation, to question and resist the efforts to stifle media freedom in Turkey.

Parliament's urgent task should be to seek and reach consensus for a democratic constitution that guarantees a free and independent media in Turkey, without any conditions.

The political class must accept that the same standards of protection against insult and libel designed to protect the dignity of private citizens do not apply to those who engage in the rough and tumble of public life. The onus is to protect the individual from the state, not the state (and those in its employ) from the citizen.

To the Government of Turkey:

The dire problems facing journalism in Turkey require bold steps and a comprehensive reform package. If the Kurdish Peace Process is to be completed, the Anti-Terror Law should be abolished. The articles in the Penal Code on criminalizing terrorism must be amended using wording that leaves no doubt

between incitement to violence and the freedom of the media and expression of non-violent ideas.

There are approximately 20-30 articles, some “dormant” and many others constantly enforced, in various laws (The Penal Code, Internet Law, the Press Law, Anti-Terror Law, TRT Law, Law on Supreme Board of Radio-TV and the Law on Intelligence Agency, MIT) banning, restricting or punishing journalism. The political parties must find a common ground and abolish them.

The umbilical cord that makes corporate media owners severely dependent on the government and bureaucracy must be cut. The media owners must be banned from participating in public tenders. Cross-ownership must be sharply restricted, in order to establish diversity and fair competition in the media sector. Laws endorsing alternative models to current ownership structures, particularly to support local media, must be developed.

The Turkish government must ensure that transparency about media ownership is provided to the citizenry. It must properly follow the guidance of the series of recommendations issued by the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and the current Right to Information Act must be properly implemented.

In a conference in November 2013, Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society were addressed with a call for transparency of media ownership.

Presented by Mark Thompson, it stated, in short, the following¹:

The availability of accurate and up-to-date information about media ownership is an essential attribute of a democratic and pluralist media system. Market power cannot be understood or assessed – or effectively regulated – if media authorities and citizens do not know who owns the media in their society. Excessive media concentrations cannot be addressed – or even be identified – unless ownership is fully disclosed.

Public knowledge of owners' identities helps to ensure that abuses of media power can be assessed, publicized, openly debated, and even prevented. It ensures that people can be accurately informed about the interests and influences behind the news presented for their consumption, and that media markets can operate fairly and efficiently, especially towards new entrants.

Media regulators and the public need, then, to have access to information about who owns – and therefore is able to influence – media outlets. This has been recognized by the European Parliament, by the European Commission's High-level Group on Media Freedom and Pluralism, and by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. Above all, this need has been recognized by the Council of Europe. For the Committee of Ministers has led the way in drawing attention to the importance of media ownership transparency, and in urging action to ensure that this is achieved.

The Committee of Ministers first addressed this topic in the [Recommendation on Measures to Protect Media Transparency](#) of November 1994, which underlined the need for media authorities to have the “information which enables them to know the reality of media ownership structures.” The ministers put this need in the context of the possible harmful effects of media concentration. And they recommended governments to consider legislating in order to guarantee media transparency.

In 2007, the Ministers returned to this issue in their [Recommendation on Media Pluralism and Diversity of Media Content](#), which reaffirmed that member states “should adapt” the regulatory frameworks and “adopt any regulatory and financial measures called for in order to guarantee media transparency.” This recommendation was also made in the ministers' 2007 [Declaration on Protecting the Role of the Media in Democracy in the Context of Media Concentration](#). Two years ago, the [Recommendation on a New Notion of Media](#) reaffirmed that

“Regulatory measures may be required with a view to guaranteeing full transparency of media ownership.”

The solution to this problem lies through the adoption of a mandatory legal framework for transparency of media ownership in each country. Broadcast, print and comparable online media should be required to submit sufficient information to a national media authority to allow identification of their beneficial and ultimate owners, back to natural persons. This information should be available to the public in a fully accessible format, free of charge, in a regularly updated and centralized database.'

In the EU accession process there have been three key chapters that the Turkish government has refused to open. Those are: “Public Procurement” (# 5), “Competition Policy” (# 8) and “Social Policy and Employment” (#19). They are all related to the problems surrounding journalism and the media industry in Turkey. The government must address these chapters immediately in order to be able to block media moguls from lucrative contracts and provide better job security to media professionals.

In order to establish a proper public service broadcasting system, the TRT Law must be amended, so that it is granted independence, or sufficient autonomy, and must hire management that is keen on pursuing values of journalism, and not political propaganda.

The Turkish government must amend laws to abolish ministerial supervision over TRT and Anatolian Agency.

The Office of Prime Ministry must cease its involvement in the process of issuing press cards. The right to issue press cards must be left to a joint board of journalist organizations and trade unions.

The government must prevent the system of accreditation from being abused to discriminate against parts of the media seen as critical or oppositional.

To the Judiciary of Turkey:

Prosecutors and judges must stop engaging in indictments and rulings in favor of punishment for the conduct of journalism. The argument is often that the laws passed by parliaments must be followed, no matter how restrictive they may be. There is a role for the judiciary to set precedents in a pro-freedom spirit. Indeed, in a unique turn, the Constitutional Court of Turkey displayed such a stance, overruling the so-called Twitter ban in the spring of 2014. The guiding text for the entire judiciary in cases related to freedom of the media is very clear: Article 90 in the Constitution of Turkey states that “In the case of a conflict between international agreements in the area of fundamental freedoms duly put into effect, and the domestic laws due to differences in provisions in the same matter, the provisions in international agreements shall prevail.” It is sufficient that the judiciary, in cases that may lead to bans, restrictions or punishment regarding conduct of journalism, simply refer to that article, and most problems can be avoided.

To the Media Proprietors in Turkey:

As employers in a key sector, you determine whether or not Turkey will be able to preserve a free, independent, vibrant, bold, critical, and open journalism. Greed is your enemy. In this sector, credibility, public trust and prestige are often measured more highly than money, or at least on equal terms. Being a media owner means laying claim to the ethical basis of journalism; to its core of conscience and its role to hold powers accountable in the name of the public interest. You should have the courage to stand up against the political pressures of Turkey’s leadership and refuse to be accomplices in imposing censorship. You should resist encouraging self-censorship in the newsrooms, stop firing people on the basis of threats by government power. Stand on the side of your employees, in their defense of the profession, and adhere to managerial systems based on merit, quality and honesty in conduct.

To the Journalists of Turkey:

If there is a way out, much of it depends upon how you act. For decades, a large part of you have been engaged in a type of journalism, which you regarded as a tool for a political cause you sympathized with. The trap of partisanship has polluted the content you provide for the public. You have been sharply divided within, polarized, mistrustful, and hostile to each other across ideological and ethnic lines. A persistent source of acrimony has been the divide across religious and secular lines. You have never been able to unite behind the causes of freedom of expression, and freedom and independence of the media. Divided and hostile to each other, deprived of a common platform for struggle, you have noted one defeat after another. If there has been a sense of despair in the face of mass firings since last year, you should also seek part of the reason amongst yourselves.

It may be time to change all that. Whichever political inclination or ideological sympathy you identify with, start reaching out and talk to each other across the board. Talk about the conditions and what you can do to improve them. Work to build a common ground, by being inclusive, to be able to come out in unified voice. Remember that you have a double challenge: the government *and* the media owners. If they are unified in collaboration, so you must be.

To the European Union:

It is essential that the EU maintain its emphasis on freedom and independence of the media as a key barometer of Turkish democracy. Even if/when there are no more journalists in jail, the EU must continue to monitor all of the structures that impose self-censorship. It must encourage Turkish governments to revive the spirit of reforms, and open chapters 5, 8 and 19 of the EU accession process without delay. It is also of vital importance that the EU provides greater resources in support of media independence and help develop new business models for alternative media, particularly in the digital domain.

To the United States:

Freedom House concluded in its report, titled '*Democracy in Crisis: Corruption, Media and Power in Turkey*'²:

The European Union and the OSCE have raised strong concerns about government pressure on Turkey's media, and the EU's warnings against governmental overreach have been pointed. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the United States. The Obama administration has been far too slow to realize the seriousness of the threat to Turkey's democracy. US criticism of the Turkish government's recent actions has come from the State Department spokesperson and White House press secretary, not from the high-ranking officials who need to be engaged in responding to a crisis of this scale. Where European governments and institutions have been specifically and publicly engaged with the government over the crisis, the Obama administration has avoided the difficult issues. It is time to speak frankly and with seriousness about the growing threat to democracy in Turkey, and to place freedom of expression and democracy at the center of the policy relationship.

By avoiding direct confrontation on the highest level, on the most fundamental freedoms and rights, which are vital for the US and which should be equally important for Turkey's struggle for a decent democracy, the American administration seems to have fallen into a pattern, reminiscent of its relations with Turkey during the Cold War. Then, the alliance was based on a pattern, which did not give any emphasis to the freedoms and advancement of democratic values, but on sheer political-military-economic cooperation. If there is a tangible level of anti-Americanism in Turkey among various segments, its roots are in the sense of being cheated. This pattern should not be repeated, because it proved to be a failure. An alliance today should be based on a holistic approach, if Turkey is not to be lost forever, drifting east.

As Freedom House suggested:

There are long-term steps that the US should support to encourage reform in Turkey, including negotiating a free-trade pact to parallel the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership between the US and EU. Such an agreement must require that Turkey commit to transparent procurement practices. In addition to strong rhetorical defenses of a free Turkish press, the United States and Europe should also marshal investment and development funds to support the growth of independent Turkish media. Most important, with Turkey's government proposing new steps every day that would reverse democratic gains, the US should elevate Turkey's democratic crisis to a matter of bilateral importance and engagement. The crisis is real and Turkey is too important in its own right, and in its relations with other countries, for more denial or deliberate inattention.

Like the EU, the United States can use economic negotiations to support greater government accountability and transparency. The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the US and the EU offers an opportunity to increase free trade with Turkey as well. Turkey's customs union with the EU means that Turkey has a high stake in the outcome of the TTIP, but cannot participate in negotiations. Turkish business leaders and the government are rightly concerned that they not be ignored in the process. The US government should begin parallel negotiations with Turkey on a free-trade pact to accompany the U.S.-EU TTIP, and make transparency and accountability in the public procurement process and all business and financial dealings a central component of these negotiations.

In addition, the independent media support agencies in the US, as well as new media companies, must seek ways to provide resources in support of media initiatives and business partnerships in Turkey.

To the International Media Monitoring Organizations:

The case of the Turkish media is very important and revealing in what it demonstrates about tools of oppression. While the coverage of freedom has been front and center due to waves of jailings during the 1990s and since 2009, the problem of independence has unfortunately escaped much of your attention. This happened, despite the fact that Turkey and the Balkans had started sending alarm signals about greedy media moguls as the “voluntary chief censor” since the early 1990's. Most of the warnings from local monitors were ignored as governments built “unholy alliances” with media proprietors (even including shady mafia figures in some countries) and corrupted journalism. We are now in a new media order in Turkey, where the practice of journalism itself is involved in self-imprisonment by exercising en masse self-censorship – and the media sector itself is part of the corruption. *A corrupt journalism industry cannot cover and report corruption in a credible way.*

Perhaps it is time establish a broader criteria to monitor the dangers journalism is facing, in addition to jailings (as they are still as important as before). All of a nation's laws that are linked with media freedom, independence, diversity and ownership structures must be taken into account holistically. Media monitoring organizations must operate based on the assumption that as long as self-censorship succeeds, today's shrewd authoritarian leaders will resort to jailing journalists less frequently. This is a much more complicated problem to monitor and solve.

Appendix I

This section recounts key incidents of the pressures by Erdogan and the AKP on media proprietors and managers; journalists and news outlets in episodes - lined up in non-chronological order - which are turning points in the recent years; more direct and brazen than ever before.

'Yes, Prime Minister!'

September 13, 2014.

*Turkey's newly elected President, **Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, finishes a three-hour long meeting with a 'hand-picked' list of media representatives in Beylerbeyi Palace in Istanbul.*

What makes the gathering peculiar is concealed in a statement by a senior media manager of Star Media Group, who, as he on his way out, is met by a group of 'junior' TV reporters who ask what the invitees were told by Erdoğan:

'Well, because the meeting was closed to the press, I am not in a position to tell you what the esteemed President had said...' was his reaction.³

When the secular mass daily Hürriyet - not among the invited - issued the list of participants in its report the day after, the picture became clear: all of the 17 top managers, proprietors and chief editors are affiliated with the staunchly pro-government media groups.⁴

This was not the first time a meeting like this took place.

*After a sweeping victory in local elections in **March 30, 2014**, Erdoğan - then prime minister - prime minister had set the precedent to establish an 'organic' media.*

Joined by his two deputies and several advisors, he had assembled a group of 24 top media figures in another palace, which was - as reported later - 'closed to the press'.⁵

After years of denigrating the role of journalism, Turkey's powerful ruler had finally managed to establish a pattern, which now paves the way to subordinate the Fourth Estate of Turkey entirely to the Political Executive.

The secrecy surrounding the meetings, making a significant and growing part of the media 'confidants of power', rather than the servants of the public interest, were now questioned by the constantly diminishing segments of the independent media.

*But **Erdoğan** did seem less and less bothered by what he sees as 'jarred voices'. He had now the journalism industry in Turkey in his iron grip.*

May 28, 2013.

Soon after his 'red carpet' visit in Washington DC, Prime Minister Erdoğan encountered the most spontaneous mass protest ever during his 11-years long rule.

*When a small group of young activists had decided to settle down in 'Occupy Wall Street' fashion in a park at the large **Taksim Square** in Istanbul, the rapid response of the police was not only to chase them away, but also burn their tents down.*

This was a spark which led to a series of days that shook Turkey. People from a large spectrum of ideology, age and social affiliation soon had joined forces, marching in streets, clashing fiercely with the riot police.

*Soon, the mass protests had spread to all but two of the 81 provinces, with **Taksim Square** as the epicenter of what later was described as the cultural mass resistance leaving a deep scar in the nation's psyche, cementing sharp polarisation and preparing a u-turn to the 'old order' - of oppression.*

There were, at that moment in time, around 15 privately owned national TV channels, along with seven others which belonged to the state broadcaster TRT.

As I wrote, in an Op-Ed in the New York Times, in July 19, 2013:⁶

'As the social unrest reached a peak on May 31 with clashes between tear-gas-happy police officers, and protesters spreading through the heart of the city, the lack of even minimal coverage by seemingly professional private news channels presented the residents of Istanbul's upscale neighborhoods near Taksim Square with a moment of truth. They could see, hear and smell the truth from their

windows, and they quickly realized how their TV channels had lied by omission. As the city center turned into a battlefield, 24/7 news channels [opted to air documentaries about penguins](#) or to go on with their talk shows. One channel, Haberturk TV, only 200 yards from the now famous Gezi Park, had three medical experts discussing schizophrenia — an apt metaphor for the state of journalism in Turkey.'

The protests shook and rattled the AKP government, a blend of conservative, nationalist and some liberal-minded ministers.

As some reports suggested later, **Erdoğan** interpreted the protests as part of an international conspiracy, aimed at toppling him from power.

The meeting with the U.S. President Barack Obama weeks before had not gone that 'well'; exposing harsh exchanges and sharp disagreements on the regional policy issues, mainly on Syria.

He may have seen, some reports said, a link also between this and the protests.

Perhaps therefore, when some key ministers met him the day after that violence-filled May 31, to explain that 'police brutality is not us, this should not be the AKP', **Erdoğan's** resistance remained very stiff.

Yet, although furious, he agreed after long talks with them to riot police pulling off from Taksim Square. He then flew to **Morocco** for an official visit.

June 4, 2013.

Despite a relative softening and a public apology by **Bülent Arınç**, a co-founder of the AKP and the Deputy Prime Minister, protests continued.

All the three parties in the opposition, **Republican People's Party (CHP)**, **Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)**, pro-Kurdish **Peace and Democracy Party (BDP)** accused Erdoğan of serious human rights violations; of denying the people rights to express their views and exercise the freedom of assembly and demonstration in public spaces.

Tensions were very high.

*Having arrived in **Morocco** with his close circle of aides, Erdoğan's mind was on Turkey. While zipping through Turkish TV channels in the hotel room, his rage suddenly peaked when he saw Devlet Bahçeli, the leader of the right-wing nationalist opposition party, MHP, blasting his critique on him.*

He grabbed the phone and called Fatih Saraç, top manager of the private TV channel Haberturk (which was the one airing the live expert show on schizophrenia during May 31 protests).

The following conversation took place:⁷

Erdoğan: These people are one of a kind. It's necessary, I must call them one by one and talk... Listen, Fatih, at this very moment...

Saraç: Yes, Prime Minister!

Erdoğan: I am now in Morocco watching TV at the moment.

Saraç: Yes, sir!

Erdoğan: Now, the statements of Bahçeli and these news tickers on his talk that I've been seeing...

Saraç: Oh, oh, understood, sir. Consider it done!

Erdoğan: And it is constantly, as a subtext, kept on there... About the primary duty of President, to arrange negotiations, and to put things in order etc.

Saraç: Sir, understood, sir!

Erdoğan: ...and to take steps for the serenity in the country...

Saraç: Yes, sir!

Erdoğan: I mean, Bahçeli keeps saying that, and this goes all the way on news tickers...

Saraç: Yes sir. Understood. Right away!

Erdoğan: Now, you say understood, but one really wonders, why such a thing... Such things, still, why does one have to...

Saraç: It is taken as an order, respectable sir! Right away!

Erdoğan: You have to do this thing, immediately.

Saraç: I do it now sir, right away!

Telephone is hung up.

Saraç instantly calls an editor - called Abdullah - at the Haberturk TV.

Abdullah: Yes?

Saraç: Abdullah, pull the news piece out of broadcast! And also the news ticker.

Do it!

Abdullah: (Perplexed) Excuse me?

Saraç: My dear fellow, very urgently, pull this Bahçeli news out of the air.

Abdullah: Ok, we do it now!

Saraç: Quickly.

Abdullah: Yes it's done!

Saraç: OK, greetings.

Abdullah: But... There is also this news ticker.

Saraç: Take that away too, for God's sake!

Abdullah: OK!

July 14, 2013

The Gezi protests ended, but its aftershocks continued, with a fierce debate and calls for resignation. Still fuming, Erdoğan watched the TV channels.

He felt fully reassured about the TRT, the state broadcaster, over which he had established editorial control. But he wanted to know how the other channels were reporting.

He paid particular attention to TV, because he knew very well that over 80% of the Turkish public followed the 'news' mainly from there.

As he watched Haberturk, he went ballistic once again. It was the same Devlet Bahçeli, pestering in a press conference.

Haberturk TV was airing it live.

The following telephone conversation ensued:⁸

Erdoğan: Fatih? Is that you? It is me here.

Fatih: Yes, Prime Minister?

Erdoğan: Fatih, are you watching this press conference at all?

Fatih: (Agitated) Oh, sir, I am at home now, just a minute. Sorry, ehm, do you mean Haberturk, sir? That one?

Erdoğan: Yes, Fatih!

Fatih: Oh no sir, just putting it on now...

Erdoğan: Well, this man...

Fatih: Yes sir, the insufferable...

Erdoğan: Look Fatih, do you, I mean, DO YOU have any bloody idea at all what you guys are doing? Are you all out of your mind? This bugger appears there, issuing a manifest, as if Turkey was finished, collapsed, entirely out of control.. And you are airing this LIVE?

Fatih: Oh, sir, I am having it cut off right away, sir. Immediately, as you tell me sir!

Erdoğan: What is this?.. It's been on a while.

Fatih: Yes, but sir...

Erdoğan: It has been 20-25 minutes already! Bloody 25 minutes!

Fatih: Just, just give me three minutes sir; I'll have it cut.

Erdoğan: What the heck is going on there?

Fatih: Right away sir! I'll tell them immediately!

Erdoğan: This is a disgrace! The bugger has been cursing at us [me] all the way. How can you let it go on like this?

Fatih: With all due respect, sir, it's for having statements aired by all the parties in parliament, for the record...

Erdoğan: What for? Why on earth would you do that? For the record? Why should you be under any obligation? Well, look at this man, listen to him, as if the whole country is out of control.

Fatih: Yes, prime minister!

Erdoğan: He tells as if traitors have taken over the country, as if we are in cooperation with them. This press conference is unacceptable...

Fatih: Yes sir, fully understood sir!

Erdoğan: Bloody hell!

Erdoğan: Right away sir! My deepest apologies, dear sir!

Whereupon, the top manager, in sheer panic, called the news editor and made it very clear, that 'our honorable elder is very sad.'

The editor tried to resist a bit, but the press conference was soon taken off air. Saraç was, however, not fully relaxed.

Unable to reach Erdoğan again, he called his son, Bilal Erdoğan, and told him: *'I am very saddened to see our dear sir sad, please tell him that.'*

These conversations are part of many telephone recordings that were included in the graft probes against the family of Erdoğan and his four ministers.

Then, some time after, the most remarkable thing happened:

Their authenticity was bluntly confirmed by him months later (in February 11, 2014) during a joint press conference with the prime minister of Spain, Mariano Rajoy.

When asked, Erdoğan said:⁹

'Yes, I did call. It is very clear, and I did remind them. I told them that I, as the Prime Minister was being insulted in news tickers and by that speech. And they did whatever is necessary... If saying this is wrong, I don't know... But, I am in a position to teach them such things. Because the defamations were not that ordinary.'

For all those who over the years monitored the dark, deep background of the state and media relations in Turkey, these conversations (there were many others in the same spirit) came more as a penultimate confirmation, undeniable evidence of what they tried to raise the alarm bells about for years: media and journalism in Turkey were being pushed into the abyss.

June 3, 2013.

The penguin documentary in CNN Turk and the medical live show on schizophrenia at Haberturk in the night of May 31, when Taksim Square turned into an urban combat zone, were enough to cause a 'wake up' moment for the public.

As many 'mainstream' channels were suffocating under censorship in the days that followed, the sentiments soon turned into a **social rage against the media outlets**.

The main competitor to those two channels, NTV, part of Doğuş Group, would soon find itself as the news subject, when its high-tech, elegant, impressive headquarters soon became a target for mass protests.

'NTV's newsroom was tense and unhappy even before Gezi,' wrote Mustafa Dağistanlı, a former desk editor with NTV channel, in his much-acclaimed book on Turkish media, '5 Ne 1 Kim?' (5 What 1 Who?).¹⁰

'Everyone knew that journalism had no home there. There were some who volunteered for the non-journalistic activity, but the overall sense was that the staff simply felt it had to put up with the hardship. Gezi only multiplied the sentiments.'

'The real burden was on the channel's poor reporters who felt that they needed to establish a balance between the streets and the newsroom. The broadcasting vehicle was destroyed by the crowds. The curses cast at the media were unbelievable. Some demonstrators were shouting the worst swearing words at the colleagues. I heard one of them roaring: 'You son of a bitch! Don't you feel shame for being on their payroll?'

'It was all the same for the other outlets. A friend of mine from another channel told me that there were also demonstrators who objected to those molesting.'

'Adding to the pressures outside, there were also pressures in the newsroom. Nermin Yurteri, the news coordinator, was paying attention to each and every news story. She was taking out many parts, adding new ones. The situation was far too extraordinary to be left to the desk editors. Those were asked to help only in minor issues. Everything that would appear on the screen was sensitive, because there came constantly telephone calls directly from the government circles to her. '

'Protests escalated to a boiling point on Monday, June 3. when thousands of demonstrators gathered before NTV building in Maslak district. Demonstrators waved banknotes and drummed on kitchen pots. 'Will you air news stories if we pay enough, NTV?' they shouted, accusing it for having sold out.'

'Cem Aydın, the top manager of Doğuş Media, and Ömer Özgüner, NTV's chief editor came downstairs with some others. They were watching the crowds. There were some security guards outside. The crowd was not physically aggressive; people acted calmly. They started to walk towards the main gate as the guards pulled in. Managers went upstairs and continued watching. Somebody from the staff asked Ömer whether police will be called. 'No, not that' said Ömer. 'We thought of that too, but we have to do something about airing this live, or people will just crash through the glass wall and enter in.'

'The protesters demanded to make a statement to be aired live. In the end management accepted it and hastily it was aired. Also, something that never happened did happen then. It is as a rule always the reporter that holds the microphone but it was then handed to the representative of the demonstrators. And the live statement received a lot of support from the NTV staff. Some high managers even climbed up the chairs and applauded the demonstrators. This showed how the disgruntlement had spread to the management. They had realized that they could not continue with the same editorial line. The overwhelming reactions against the media which refused to cover Gezi events were most clearly manifested against Doğuş Group and its affiliate NTV in form of hatred.'

For some days, NTV returned to somewhat normal in terms of embrace journalism. Cem Aydın, the top manager, assembled the staff, and promised that a fair and comprehensive coverage will be done, in order to regain the confidence of the viewers.

When asked by a reporter, 'what if the pressures continue, for how long can you resist?', his response 'in that case I will not continue, myself.'

But the tensions were far from being over.

'Erdoğan returned to Istanbul from Morocco, his plane landed 01.45 a.m. on Saturday, June 8,' Dağıstanlı went on:¹¹

'Thousands of AKP supporters were there to welcome him, but more importantly, the entire cabinet was there, with no minister missing. Erdoğan addressed the crowds by a venomous rhetoric. His swords were sharpened and he signalled a campaign against Gezi protesters.'

'But the government was not used to new editorial lines, and there was no reason for good journalism! The telephone calls continued. 'How can you show the demonstrators live?' they were asking. As the pressure again became unbearable, she talked to Aydın. He in his turn talked to (government's spokesperson) Hüeyin Çelik. The new editorial policy seemed impossible to defend. Prime minister had flown into rage. And in the evening of June 12, Aydın talked to (the proprietor) Ferit Şahenk, and said 'that's it for me' he said, grabbed his jacket and left.'

The protests did not remain limited with rallying outside the NTV headquarters. As the newsroom was shattering, many viewers had already set up a network, in order to expand action into something unique. Rage now focused on Garanti Bank, an affiliate of Doğuş Group. In a matter of days, people en masse closed down their bank accounts to manifest their dismay with the way, proprietor Ferit Şahenk and his team had 'managed' NTV. According to the CEO of Garanti Bank, Ergun Özen, depositors had shut down accounts worth approximately \$ 25 million, as of June 4, 2014.¹²

Gezi protests had shown that there would be ways for the public to inflict collateral damage to corporate media proprietors for what they see as deceit to the role of honest journalism.

In the international media circles, the action against Garanti would be seen as food for thought: the public had 'invented' a way to inflict harm to a media it regarded as deceitful.

October 20, 2011

The defining event to give the segment of Turkey's journalist corps, which despite oppressive conditions over the decades remained devoted to the values of good journalism, an 'orderly, respectful stand' to the power was a large-scale meeting, which some years before had taken place at the Prime Ministry Building in Ankara.

In hindsight, it would not only raise the alarms to SOS level, but also contain all the basic elements which helped explain the inevitable demise of the profession.

The campaign for the general elections in the early summer of 2011 was a nasty one. The AKP, led by Erdoğan, came under constant attack by the two opposition parties, CHP and MHP, but the antagonism that developed between the BDP, the political wing of the PKK, soon was acrimonious.

Although a number of reports suggested that Erdoğan days after the elections would declare the launching the process for peace talks with the PKK, Turkey instead was shattered by a series of severe clashes between the PKK and the Turkish Armed Forces, resulting in heavy casualties.

The tipping point was when reportedly 250 PKK rebels crossed the Iraqi - Turkish border in October 17 and attacked the military and police posts in Çukurca, a Kurdish town at the farthest southeastern corner of Turkey. The clashes led to 24 soldiers being killed.

This was one of the heaviest tolls the ethnic conflict had caused in its decades-long history.

Apparently frustrated by the extensive media coverage of the bloody incident, and anxious that it may lead to a decline of votes for his party, Erdoğan had asked his team to rapidly organize a meeting with all the media proprietors and chief editors to discuss the ways of disseminating 'news on terror'.

Special invitations by telephone calls went to all those picked up by name.

In any democracy, regardless of the gravity of the situation, such an invitation would politely be rejected by the media, and could even be seen as a scandal to intervene in the domain of duties and responsibilities of the Fourth Estate.

But, in October 20, more than 35 prominent figures of the sector, including all the major media proprietors were present at the table.¹³

There were some news outlets - from independent, partisan left and Kurdish media - that were not invited, but, my official sources say, none of those invited had refused or 'asked to be excused' to attend.

Erdoğan was accompanied by his two deputy ministers, two vice chairmen of the AKP and a large team of advisors. After a brief introduction, in which Erdoğan thanked everybody for 'full participation', the meeting was declared to be off-the-record.

But, given the nature of the topic, which had to with censorship at various levels, some colleagues refused afterwards to respect that rule, due to their dismay. A few of them made it known that they had recorded the event secretly, as soon as they became aware of its uniqueness. Their recordings and notes helped later verify the course of the discussions and the positions taken by the individual media figures.

I spoke to two sources, whom I will call as Source A and Source B.

The table was so huge that, as Source A said, 'it was almost impossible to see who was sitting at the other end.'

My source, a colleague who stands out from many others present due to his known stand for integrity, asking due to the nature of the meeting to remain anonymous gave me the following account:

'It was a strange gathering. We were asked to sit by the alphabetic order. Situation was uneasy. Soon the issue became clear: The main question was how to filter and censor the news about terror, clashes and bloodshed. Although Erdoğan and his ministers were rather cautious towards journalists present, I was soon shocked to see how media bosses and their editors were more royalists than the king. It was obvious Erdoğan wanted to see as little as possible the stories of violence and TV coverage of funerals of soldiers and officers. But he soon sensed that there was enough willingness to self censor, in order for him to be appeased by this media elite.'

'Soon, an editor in chief at Haberturk channel, who is now one of Erdoğan's chief advisors, took the word. He said: 'Esteemed Prime Minister, I propose all the participants of the media present here, that we take a joint decision on three key points.'

'He suggested that all the TV channels would limit the coverage of funerals with three minutes; that none of the people who refused to call PKK rebels terrorists

would ever be invited to TV or newspaper stories to comment on the events. He added that 'some journalists' who sometimes go to PKK bases to interview rebel leaders should be banned from doing so.'

'When Erdoğan interfered, agreeing that, 'yes, they go to PKK's dens and nests, and write also books to make money, for glory, some journalists nodded approvingly, others remained silent.'

It was only Yasemin Çongar, then managing editor of independent daily Taraf, who raised her hand and responded:

'Prime minister, I am in difficulty to correlate what you just said with a democratic discourse. All the conduct of such journalists are fully open, and public. I object to what you imply...'

This was enough to send winds of chill throughout the room.

Source B, still active in mainstream media, told me:

'What some editors in TV seemed to expect, and they kept asking these questions, was, to know exactly how many minutes and seconds they would be allowed to broadcast. They wanted to have the time slots by Erdoğan, all they wanted to do was to shake off all sorts of responsibility from their shoulders. It was as if they wanted these words in the presence of their employees so that they have no headaches later on.. But, Erdoğan would not go as far as my colleagues, I would give that to him in fairness. 'It is all up to you, you know our sensitivities' he would say.'

Then the meeting took another sharp turn, when Aydın Doğan, proprietor of powerful Doğan media, asked for a word.

Source A remembers his intervention still with amazement.

'Doğan began to talk with full of praises to Erdoğan. Then he talked in detail about how right he was about the concerns, mentioned in extent 'our common national interests', and how he had seen that no other country had allowed propaganda of terror in their media and so on. And in the end, he spilled the beans: Dear Prime Minister, Doğan said, there are owners present here, and we have a national branch of WAN, World Association of Newspapers, so I suggest we build a council to oversee the incoming news stories, which meets regularly, and I would

wish that you personally chair these meetings. I would be happy to host them, and if there are any objections, others may very well do it...'

'There was no word at all to the proposal of establishing a censorship mechanism to from any of the editors, journalists who were present. The only exception was the editor of Zaman, Ekrem Dumanlı, who raised his hand and said: 'This is something that we as Zaman group never would accept. Do not count us in it.'

'My colleagues sitting at my both sides were whispering to me how uneasy they were feeling, but none of them spoke out, they just looked pathetically at each other. When we talked after the meeting, their excuse for their silence was 'how could we dare say anything in the presence of our bosses? If I said anything, it is possible he would be angry with and God knows what else..'

In an article published the following day in Taraf, Yasemin Çongar wrote:¹⁴

'What surprised me much more than the recommendations of the prime minister to pay attention to the line between the people's right to know and to allow PKK propaganda' was, the shared sense of volunteering for self-censorship among my colleagues.'

I asked Çongar how she would summarize the meeting in Ankara.

She said:

'In that room there was a government set to oppress the press, but there was also a large group of proprietors willing to accept it and, also journalists informing on their colleagues to the powers.'

Indeed, this landmark meeting would once more blow-up the root causes of the decline witnessed in the state of journalism. As the power kept 'owning' its repressive culture, the employers and the high level employees, recruited to the posts by astronomic salaries, strengthened it by way of voluntary submission.

The meeting in Ankara set a powerful precedent for enhancement of self-censorship to systematic level. It would add immense amount of grout to cement a media order based on enslavement to politics and financial greed.

Its first 'mass product' was to be presented two months later.

December 28, 2011, 9.37 p.m.

Two F-16 jets of the Turkish Air Force stroke with missiles at what is believed to be a group of terrorists at the Turkish - Iraqi border.

The air raid resulted, as it became clear the day after, in what was described as a 'massacre' of 34 Kurdish villagers, many teenagers among them, believed to be smugglers, in the vicinity of Uludere / Roboski border settlement. ¹⁵

According the statements issued later by the authorities, no terrorists were found among them.

That night, soon after the bombing, the Internet was abuzz. But not the conventional media. For about 14 hours the story was either ignored completely by the TV channels, or mentioned by utterly timid tickers as 'bomb incident in Uludere'.

It was as if a 'curfew for news' was declared in the 'mainstream' media.

Following morning, veteran journalist Ayşenur Arslan, then the host of the morning news show in CNN Turk channel - a joint venture between Turner and Doğan Media Group - had on her way to the the channel already discovered, while surfing online, that something of a grand scale had taken place the night before.

She found out more from her colleagues in the newsroom as she arrived, that a mass killing had taken place. Although social media was by then exploding with details and comments, the CNNTurk staff was told 'from above' that the incident would not be reported nor mentioned.

But Arslan decided to discuss the story with her host, a columnist of high reputation, Can Dündar. As two of them entered the studio, she had also a fresh official statement by the governor of the province, published by Anatolian News Agency, minutes ago.

The communique mentioned at least 20 dead, and that a local crisis desk was established to find out what really happened.

When the two journalists start discussing the issue, Arslan was told through the earpiece that 'this incident is not to be mentioned, so stop it!' But her guest, DüNDAR, continued to mention the details he had gathered through the Internet. Arslan would later recall that she 'at that very moment wanted to walk out of the studio.'

When they left the studio, a fierce row broke with the editor.

Arslan argued that she had the governor's statement, as an official confirmation, but was told in response, 'What should the governor know? We would not go in with the story until the top military command issues a statement.'¹⁶

CNN Turk had to wait until noon, until the General Staff in Ankara issued a communique. Only then the story was 'allowed' on air, many hours later.

'Curfew' was respected by all other 'mainstream' channels and TRT, which is a state broadcaster.

'The audience has never been stupid' wrote Mustafa Dağistanlı, a former desk editor with NTV channel, in his much-acclaimed book on Turkish media, '5 Ne 1 Kim?' (5 What 1 Who?).¹⁷

He told about the turmoil that shattered NTV channel that very morning:

'The viewers have the ability to judge how the news are delivered in TV and if they see manipulation, they curse loudly. When big incidents like the one in Roboski happen, many of them call also the channels...'

'In mainstream media, all those who respond to such calls are also cursing just like those who call. But they are in a horrendous state, because they convulse in despair, they know that the institution they work for forces them to do something they don't believe in.'

'In the newsroom all those who had to respond the calls that day were shouting in stress at each other, asking, 'What am I supposed to tell these people, tell me something reasonable so I can tell them, I feel horrible!' Feeling helpless, journalists were talking to each other: Whoever they may have been - terrorists, smugglers, peasants.. - 34 people had been bombed. From whichever vantage point, it was news, period. Even if one person had been killed, it was a news story. People out

there had found out, they knew all about it, it had spread about, but neither their own nor the other TV channels were airing it.'

One desk editor had told Dağistanlı: 'I had never heard so much swearing at me in my life. The citizens were calling, telling that 'Internet sites are shattering with this story, and you don't...' We at NTV were waiting for CNNTurk (to air it), Haberturk TV waited probably at us, as SkyTurk channel also was. Every channel was waiting for the other to air it! Was there anything at us warning that 'this will not be on air' I don't really know, but everybody was in standstill. And people call and shout curses, saying 'Let me be damned if I ever watch your channel again!' They are right, how many hours had passed. Many people were grumbling in the newsroom, but everybody knew that they needed to be paid their salaries. The work as it is had to be done...'

Some reporters had reached the 'scene', Uludere / Roboski village, towards the afternoon the next day.

One of them told later that 'there was an incredible rage among the local people against what they see as media blackout.'

He was faced with fierce questions by the relatives of the deceased, like 'how dare you come here?'

It was impossible for the burdened reporters to explain that it was their superiors and employers who were imposing self-censorship not them.

February 2012

As is the usual practice in Turkish media, there were strong voices of dissent in the days and weeks following the incident.

It exposed, beyond the censoring of the news, that the employers would not tolerate critical voices in the outlets they owned.

First in line to be fired was the popular, leftist columnist Ece Temelkuran, who was told by the management of Haberturk daily that her column would be discontinued.

"Including my emotionless thank you, "The newspaper's owner has decided... Er... not to... renew your contract... I am sorry."

the phone conversation lasted less than a minute,' she later wrote for the Guardian.¹⁸

In a related incident, another columnist, Nuray Mert, was fired, from daily Milliyet, on February 13, 2012.

According to reports the reason was her critical stance regarding the government policies vis a vis the Kurds. Soon after, the political talk show in NTV channel she participated was also cancelled.

The patterns set by Ankara meeting for systematic self-censorship, almost coordinated, had become clearly visible during the Uludere / Roboski incident.

But for the urban, middle class, staunchly Kemalist-Republican elite of Turkey, known for its chronic allergy about 'all things Kurdish', demise of the media did not yet seem to hit the nerves.

It would be the same attitude of refusal and denial to the core values of journalism during the Gezi Park protests and the spreading urban unrest in its aftermath, which would work as a wake up call, that seemingly glamorous conglomerate media of Turkey, with glittering, high-tech newsrooms and studios fails greatly to inform the public, regardless of class, income level and social affiliation.

Trauma of Gezi would follow, soon.

It is April 2011.

Turkish media was shaken by the breaking news story that two dailies, Milliyet and Vatan, were purchased by the Demiroren Group, whose subsidiary, Milangaz, is one of the top liquefied petroleum gas brands.¹⁹

It was reported that the former proprietor of the dailies, Aydın Doğan, Chairman of Doğan Media Group, was paid 48 26 million dollars respectively for the deal. The underlying reason for the sale was reported to be the 'persistent political pressure' over the Doğan family.

The public faces of the Demirören family were the father and son, Erdoğan and Yıldırım Demirören.

According to the leftist daily Sol, their company, built 55 years ago, also owned the largest oil distribution company, Azpetrol, and the large-scale factory, Azerelectroterm.

But Demirören Group was best known for a controversial shopping mall project in the middle of the historic Pera district of Istanbul, which, various press reports by documents consituted, ended with a building that was completed with a number of breaches of the original project.

Today, the building, which is perceived to be an insult to the historic fabric of the area, is boycotted by the large groups of city activists.

Far more than Vatan, which had a shorter background, the sale of Milliyet came as another landmark of Turkish media's demise.

Founded in 1950, it was a flagship newspaper run by a legendary editor, Abdi İpekçi, who from his recruitment as the editor in 1954, worked intensely to raise the standards of journalism. Until his assassination in 1979 by Mehmet Ali Ağca (who would later try to kill the Pope, John Paul II), Milliyet remained the most prominent centrist quality newspaper of Turkey.

Since the purchase by Aydın Doğan, it had despite a series of editorial backlashes managed some of its 'reference daily' value, with the reputation of a strong brand, seen as the symbol of considerable integrity of journalism. Professionalism prevailed, and Milliyet also made history when its then editor, Umur Talu, introduced in 1999 the first news ombudsman ever in Turkish press history.

The Demirören family had not been in media business before. Neither was the family known for any sympathy for free journalism. This raised the suspicion in

independent media circles that the takeover was a coordinated affair between the then Prime Minister Erdoğan and Erdoğan Demirören, the father.

'Milliyet was purchased by the Prime Minister's consent' claimed Metin Münir, a senior columnist of the newspaper, who some months after the purchase had lost his job.

Münir, also a former chief editor, was known for his secular, anti AKP stance and critical opinion articles.

Soon after he was fired, he told the independent news site T24: ²⁰

'Demirören is a pro-AKP businessman, and a conservative. His true intention is to appease the prime minister and make friends with the government for the sake of his companies outside the media. If the newspaper is not moved towards the right, it will lose prime minister's support. Demirören and his men would not allow that. Millions of dollars were paid solely for making the newspaper pro-AKP; not to let it continue with the pieces critical to the government.'

Münir also confessed in the interview that he was censoring his columns severely.

'On a lot of subjects I applied self-censorship. I was working in Milliyet by one tenth of my capacity only. Because in Milliyet, and in Turkey in general, a lot of issues have become forbidden to investigate and written about. This process, I claim, will continue to be worse.'

It would.

Later in 2013, the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, while responding to questions by a colleague, would reveal that the 'father' Demirören soon after having purchased Milliyet had visited him, and asked him:

'Whom would you, prime minister, advise I appoint as the editor in chief?'

Erdoğan was also on the record telling that he had 'recommended' Demirören a former spokesperson of the prime ministry, Akif Beki, but 'they could not agree' he added.

The 'government friendly approach' of the proprietor being self explanatory, things would indeed turn worse in Milliyet, soon.

February 28, 2013.

Milliyet's scoop under the headline 'The Imrali Minutes' was to send shockwaves.

'Imrali' referred to the island where Abdullah Öcalan, the founder and leader of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), was held jailed since his capture in Kenya 1999. He was convicted to lifetime imprisonment.

Much had happened since then.

But the most dramatic turning point was when Erdoğan had declared in late 2012 that a 'peace process' with the PKK would begin from January 1, 2013.

The declaration meant that radical twist in Ankara's policies did take place and the PKK, declared a terrorist organisation, would be negotiated with.

Milliyet's scoop was based on a leak to the veteran, respected Kurdish reporter, Namık Durukan. It was a long transcript of 'secret' talks that took place on the island between Öcalan and a delegation of Kurdish deputies, who are deputies with the BDP, the political wing of the PKK.

Spread over two pages in the middle, the minutes touched a wide range of topics that constituted the core of the peace negotiations.

It was explosive stuff.

In the day of publication, the usual governmental machinery of intervention was set in motion, once more.²¹

It did not take many hours before the telephone of Derya Sazak, then editor-in-chief of the newspaper, rang.

At the other line was Erdoğan's Chief Advisor, Yalçın Akdoğan (who is now Deputy Prime Minister with Ahmet Davutoğlu's government).

Sazak recalled in his book, titled 'Batsın Bu Gazetecilik' ('Damn With This Journalism'):²²

'Speaking harshly, he told me: 'You are sabotaging our peace process, how is this possible? You will have to account for your actions.' His words were nothing if not full of threats. I told him that, on the contrary, the process was being normalized, but he kept on insisting, 'No, this is sabotage.'

Meanwhile, Hasan Cemal, senior columnist of Milliyet, and a writer of several books on Kurds and a highly personal account on the Armenian Genocide, apparently aware of the gathering political storm, was busy writing a piece for the next day.

Published in March 1, its title was referring to 'conditions ripe for a peace' and was full of praise for the scoop.

As the criticism from the ruling AKP and pro-government press escalated, and accusations for 'sabotaging the process' rained on Milliyet for simply printing the story, Cemal - known also for his bold, unrelenting professional stance as the editor in chief of daily Cumhuriyet during the years following the military coup in Turkey - followed up with a staunch defence of journalism in another column.

Titled, 'Prime Minister, History's Hands Again Rest On Your Shoulders...' (an attribution to Tony Blair and Irish Peace Process), Cemal responded to the accusations of 'sabotage' with the *following defence*:

'It's no use at all to chase the question of who leaked the story to Milliyet. Let the 'sabotage' or 'provocation' be bygone words. This attitude has no place in journalism and its very core: reporting.

One can even say that it's those who cry 'sabotage' about such a big story telling the self explanatory truth that serve those who intend to sabotage (the process). To publish a newspaper is one thing, to administer a state, another. Let's not mix them with each other. Let nobody interfere with the other's business...'

'I know that there is sometimes a thin line between the two and storms erupt. In the USA, because of Bay of Pigs incidents, Vietnam War, Pentagon Papers or Watergate, many esteemed colleagues were over and over were accused of treason. Later, however, the newspapers and journalists place were given a place in history for serving democracy and peace...'

The very day the column was published, Erdoğan addressed the crowds at a rally in Balıkesir. He had read the piece, which he had seen as a challenge to his person. He was apparently outraged.²³

He told the crowd:

'There is this newspaper... It comes out with this headline! With this, it reports from Imrali. I have always told you, that some parts of the media have never been siding with us. Some affiliated writers of this media write that there is a difference between ruling a state and printing a newspaper... But, if, and if you ever had the tiniest sympathy for this nation, if you ever wanted to have a contribution to the settlement process, you would not be allowed to, you would never publish this news...'

'If this is the journalism that you intend to conduct, then damn such journalism!'

The outburst was enough to drag the newspaper into a crisis. It was the day the proprietor, Erdoğan Demirören, had panicked.

He asked the editor-in-chief, Derya Sazak, to immediately fire Hasan Cemal and another columnist, Can Dündar, who had also been critical of Erdoğan.

Sazak later said in an interview:²⁴

'He made me feel the full weight of the pressure on Milliyet from the government. In fact, he told me, 'Do you know, I cried for the first time in my life.'

'I had no idea then that that the crying episode was directly related to a telephone call that had taken place between him and former Prime Minister Erdoğan. That phone call, which was broadcasted from a recording, was made by Demirören to the prime minister to soften him a little. How embarrassing in the name of journalism! Just think: your newspaper signs off on such big success, with headlines that make it into all the big news sources, the Internet and on TV and radio.'

'And in the middle of such journalistic success, the owner of your paper calls the ruling party head to apologize, saying: "I'll find out who's responsible for all this, fire them and then get back to you on this. The story that brought everything to an end for me was the Imrali journals. It was the beginning of the end for me.'

Hasan Cemal was then given a two-weeks 'mandatory' leave, in an apparent attempt to 'cool off' the tension.

Back from the 'exile', Cemal filed his column two days before his deadline and soon received a message from then editor in chief that the piece could not be published, and that he had to file a different one.

Cemal responded that 'until this piece is printed, he will not file another one.'

The impasse resulted in a decision to discontinue with Cemal's columns in Milliyet, and meaning in practice that he was fired.

The rejected column - published in various online news sites soon after the censorship became known publicly - was titled, 'On journalists and journalism'.²⁵

Cemal began by mentioning Erdoğan quoting his column two weeks before, in order to attack the very spirit of journalism and went straight into the heart of the matter:

'In this country, the relations between the power and media has been problematic. Because the focal circles of the power have always tried to keep media and journalists in control by drawing their own 'red lines', by applying economic, legal and political tools of pressure. It has never changed. And, the business activities of media proprietors outside the media have also strengthened the hands of the political powers. Namely, the business dependency of the media proprietors to Ankara, combined with the extraordinary economic might of the powers in the capital and with the second-rate quality of the judiciary, gave the political powers free room to 'play' with the media in general.'

'Also, one should keep in mind the role of the journalist circles, in particular the journalist elite, that helped derail - or that could not keep in right track - the relations between media and powers. The media managers and prominent columnists failed to defend journalism against the structures of power and their employers; did so by not being able to defy the proprietors. They fell short of building strong professional platforms. I can not underline this strongly enough. Personally I do also have failing grades about it in my 45 years long career.'

Significance of the firing was the fact that the subject was a senior journalist whose reputation within and beyond Turkey's borders were undisputed.

70-year old Cemal losing his column inevitably sent chill waves within the journalistic community that 'a dam is broken now, and much worse is to follow.'

Yet, the story of Cemal's departure- certainly with a big news value- was ignored completely in the media as no TV channel except one - Sky360 - took up the issue.

But its two hosts, Doğan Akin and Murat Sabuncu - also well-known journalists - who had commented critically about the firing were soon fired themselves from the TV channel.

In the influential daily Hürriyet - owned by Doğan family - three opinion columnists who defended Cemal were severely censored.

In March 6, 2014, an audio recording posted on Youtube, confirmed that Demirören the proprietor indeed ended up crying after a dramatic telephone conversations with Erdoğan. It is apparent that the dialogue took place in the very day scoop was published by Milliyet. None of the details of the transcript below were denied by the parties involved.²⁶

Erdoğan Demirören: Did I upset you, boss?

Tayyip Erdoğan: Well, you turned everything upside down. A disgrace it is...

ED: When can we get together, you and I?

TE: Well, why should I ever get together with you? What for? How can such a disgrace be allowed to take place?

ED: That's why we have to find who leaked all this..

TE: Leave aside the leaks, who leaked it. Whoever leaked it, leaked it to you. It's another story. Is your newspaper's duty to do such a provocation?

ED: It would never ever come to our minds, my esteemed prime minister.

TE: What do you mean cometo your mind, it did, didn't it? What else did I expect? The headlines are designed like that already and then you say it did nor cross our minds. Just to sell three or five more copies, your man commits this lewdness, whoever he is, and you still defend them, like, it did not cross your mind...

ED: I am not defending anything, I was trying to deal with this all night...

TE: For God's sake, do you ever deal with the headlines of this paper...

ED: I ask respectfully your permission, give me half an hour...

TE: Well, we (meaning, I) have devoted so many half hours to you. This is a shame, how can such a thing happen? And from now on I will not take a person from your newspaper with me in my visits abroad... I talked also to this Derya person, so did my friends, and we had apparently entered a fine period for settlement (with the PKK), we call it solution process, we take risks, we do this and

we do that, and this vile, disgraceful, shameless bugger. He wants to undermine the process, and you sir, you are supposed to be his boss..

ED: Well, what do you want me to do?

TE: What I want is you do what you have to do to all of these crooks. You have to ask them how they can give such a headline. If someone did a disgraceful thing to you, would you keep him there for a second?

ED: I won't.

TE: You'd give him the boot.

ED: Let me tell you that...

TE: We take all these risks, this and that and the headline yesterday is very hard to swallow...

(Conversation is cut off and followed by a second phone call..)

ED: My dear Prime minister, I shall do whatever is necessary. I shall not let you...

TE: It's your call, however you do it...

ED: I promise you that...

TE: Derya (Sazak, the chief editor) is the one foremost responsible for this, and the other, shameless one reported... Whoever leaked it to him...

ED: I will, today..

TE: If he is a do-gooder, he should tell you who leaked it, and we deal accordingly. If that person is someone from my team I will do whatever is necessary, but if he is from BDP, let him reveal to you, so even then we can make him pay...

ED: I will present to you whoever it has been leaked from, until this evening...

TE: Fine.

ED: Fine?

TE: Fine, fine.

ED: Don't get upset.

TE: Fine.

ED: Alright.

TE: Good day to you.

ED: (crying intensely) How on earth did I get enter into this business!!

TE: Let's hope for the best...

ED: (Crying) Thank you!

The aftershocks were powerful. Following the tension of Gezi Park protests, Derya Sazak, Milliyet's editor in chief, and its popular columnist, Can Dündar, were also fired in the end of July, 2013.

Dündar gave some details of his firing later in an interview:²⁷

'This process (of firing) began a year before. Then, I received a phone call, for the first time in my life, from the boss. Yes, it was Erdoğan Demirören who told me that he did not like my column that day. 'You write very harshly, I don't want such writing' he said. I responded that it is the way I write, and should he wish, I would stop working there. Then the editor in chief at that time interfered and solved the crisis, but I already had a mark on my name that day. A year somehow had to pass. What made me a target more than anything else was my writings and comments during Gezi protests. The frustration escalated. They first tried to deal with the problem by giving me time off. Then I was sent to Egypt to ease the crisis. But it made things worse, because what I wrote from there was also disliked. So I had a final talk (with the proprietor) who called me to notify me that 'we can no longer work with you'. I said that I had guessed it. He responded that he had guessed that I had guessed it. Something like that...'

September 2010

Subjected to several lawsuits and repetitious verbal assaults of Erdoğan, Turkey's once powerful, and at times arrogant, media proprietor, Aydın Doğan, felt that he had to 'give in' to power. Daily Hürriyet, a centrist-nationalist newspaper with top circulation, continued to raise its voice through opinion columns that infuriated the Prime Minister.

Unable to exert full control over the columnists, he felt he had to establish an in-house censorship system to 'soften' the content; to 'tame' the views.

Following the appointment of a new editor-in-chief for the newspaper, Enis Berberoğlu, the mechanism soon was in full action:

A columnist, who also appears in the masthead as 'publications advisor', Doğan Hızlan, was appointed as 'supervisor' of columns.

Everybody in the newspaper knew what it meant.

Cüneyt Ülsever was one of the columnists who felt the heat. He was eventually fired.

Here is his story:²⁸

'A new era had begun for me in September 2010 in Hürriyet which I worked with 13 years' he recalled. 'This happened when Hızlan was appointed as the chief censor. He would from then on almost every time, whenever I wrote my column, call me and try to interfere by saying something like this: 'My dear Cüneyt, can we rewrite this piece like this?' He was very kind, highly cultivated, but I could never ascribe him this role. He would surprise me each and every time. His interferences were without any exception on all the criticism I directed at the government. But he would go as far as all the simple, trivial points. Our conversations became more and more bizarre. Everybody in the newspaper knew that what Hızlan's mission was conduct censorship.'

'Following September 2010, Hızlan attempted to interfere at least 17-18 times my columns. Two of my columns were not published, without even notifying me. Perhaps, if I had abided by what Hızlan had told me, and wrote in the way he wanted me to do, I would face no problems... And one day I was summoned by Enis, editor in chief, 'We reduced the number of your columns from four in the week to one' he said. I did not say anything. In the following column I wrote about what happened in Hürriyet, and it was refused to be published. Following week, I filed the same column, it was refused again. When I realized my goose was cooked, I called Enis, for times, but never got a response. I called also Hızlan who had called me every day, he did not either. Neither the editor, nor my chief censor did have the guts to tell me that I was fired.'

March 2010

The first worrisome signs of Erdoğan trying to take the entire mainstream media in his grip can be traced back to the early days of 2010.

The year before was filled with tension for his party, yet when the closure case against the AKP was overruled by the Constitutional Court in the summer of 2009, his self-confidence was reestablished soon. He may have been emboldened by the ruling to a degree that he decided to target the media, particularly the news outlets of the Doğan Group, the strongest of them all, which Erdoğan saw as the prime antagonist. But he saw dissent increasingly as part of conspiracy and plotting.

It was early 2010 when he started to address media owners more directly, calling them 'to take under control your columnists'.

He was apparently angered by some pundits who were critical about the economy, and put the blame on them when the stock exchange index had fallen by 6-7 points.

He said:²⁹

'Now I am calling the bosses of those newspapers. Do not come to me and say 'What can I do, he is a columnist, not under my control'. You must tell him: 'Man, you are responsible for what happened. Why? Because nobody has a right to cause tension in economy. It is you, the boss, who pay the salaries of the columnists, so you have no right to whine when you come to visit me.'

This was enough to cause an uproar among columnists, and in a following statement, Erdoğan said, unapologetically:³⁰

'When I talked about their bosses, columnists took offence.'

He talked about how keen the media owners to visit him and express the wish that they want 'stability'.

He said:

'All they did was to complain about (inner) tensions. But no media boss has a right to complain about the newspaper he owns. They should not come to me and complain. It is their company, it is their shop. What should happen if the shop owner is not happy about his shopman?'

This was the introduction of the term, used to describe the media proprietors: 'Shopkeepers'. From then on, many journalists would use the term to highlight the conglomerate media as the 'shopkeepers' media'.

Erdoğan's anger peaked when a columnist had criticized that the then Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, accompanied by Emine Erdoğan, his wife, had visited Myanmar.

Pundit's argument was that there were so many other problems in the neighborhood.

Erdoğan was very loud, attacking Aydın Doğan, though without mentioning his name, when he addressed a crowd:³¹

I am just saying to his boss: Shame on you! How come do you still keep those people employed as columnists? It is you who have given such people column spaces, people who have no aims, no passion. These are people who are foreign to our people and its history.'

As verbal attacks escalated from then on, Turkey's media proprietors, neither as individuals nor as a group (they have a national branch of World Association of Newspapers - WAN) reacted. All they did was to keep silent, as some of them only chose some high level columnists timidly object to growing accusations.

This, too, showed that there was something seriously wrong in the culture of moguls who had been operating in a key sector, whose professionals were supposed to bound by minimum of ethics.

News ombudsman declared 'persona non grata' - and fired

As of early summer in 2012, Erdoğan's assaults had consequences to encourage further hate speech within the media. A daily at the margins, called Akit, with Islamic fundamentalism visible in its editorial line, started publishing news stories and comments, apparently based on leaks from some intelligence service sources, to inform upon some prominent liberal and leftist columnists, known as staunch proponents of the then newly launched peace process between the government and the PKK.

The publication campaign was soon decoded by those targeted as a deliberate attempt to endanger their lives, and at best, their freedom. The accusations were written in a language colored by anti-Semitism and Kurdophobia.

It had by then become Erdoğan's routine practice to invite a small group of chief editors to his airplane for domestic or international destinations, and although some were selected on rotational basis, Akit's editor-in-chief who also was the chief columnist, was the regular guest in almost all of them.

He seemed to be privileged, and untouchable.

When the hate campaign proved to be a pattern, I had a sense of urge, to intervene, as a media observer. The event which triggered most to move was a well-attended meeting between Erdoğan and a media association, called 'Medya Derneği', in August 16, 2012 at the Istanbul offices of the Prime Ministry.

'Medya Derneği' was established in late March 2010, with the initiatives of conservative groups of proprietors, sponsored by the 'conservative capital' 'encouraged' by Erdoğan to enhance their existent spheres in the media sector, representing a large pro-government segment, including also outlets of Zaman and Ipek media groups, associated with the Gülen Movement - a moderate Islamic sect whose spiritual leader is a USA based, reclusive cleric, Fethullah Gülen.

One of the objectives of Medya Derneği was declared to be 'to enhance the media freedoms and defend the diversity in the sector.'

The meeting came, as a follow up of Erdoğan's attacks to various columnists and as Akit's hate speech campaign caused unease about job safety of many others.

It was expected that some colleagues, at least, would bring these issues up, and demand that they stop. Yet, as it was admitted by the representatives of Medya Derneği later, none of the participants did so, let alone asking questions to Erdoğan.

It was as if the patterns set after the meeting in Ankara, in the autumn of 2011, was now norm, and they were now followed up by new ones to format 'his master's voices.'

So, when the tiny, independent, liberal-leaning newspaper Taraf approached me to comment on the gathering in Istanbul, I argued that the apathy among my colleagues was unacceptable.

I extended also series of criticisms to Erdoğan for his intolerance to the press, adding that 'no freedom of the media means no freedom for the society.'

The long interview in Q and A format was published the day after under the headline on Taraf's front page: 'Erdoğan should be asking himself: why have I changed?'³²

Even though I was an independent news ombudsman whose position and role was guaranteed by a strong contract in daily Sabah, I sensed after the Taraf interview, that I had become 'marked' and increasingly isolated.

I was not surprised.

In many aspects, the dramatic story of daily Sabah has all the ingredients and the clues of the ordeal of Turkish media.

Sabah was founded in İzmir by Dinç Bilgin in April 1985 and soon after moved its headquarters to Istanbul. Bilgin had a strong foresight to introduce IT technologies to the media sector, was highly competitive and rapidly established Sabah as a leading liberal news outlet, which was supportive of Turkey's economic liberalization under the late Turgut Özal. His rise, however, was followed by a tragic end, when his business collapsed due the financially tumultuous '90s, marked by a profound corruption that swarmed the media proprietors and the crash of banks they had built; leading to several legal processes. Like some of his harsh competitors, Bilgin had lost all his assets, and was jailed for a period. In 2011 he was sentenced to nearly five years of prison for irregularities in Etibank he owned during the 1990's.

In a recent interview, Bilgin summarized the pattern which derailed the media sector of Turkey and polluted journalism severely then.³³

"[In the '90s] there was a huge competition between Sabah and the Doğan Group. Promotions were distributed, encyclopedias, cookers... This and that led to the promotion of prime ministers. They supported Mesut Yılmaz, and we backed Tansu Çiller. They won. Meanwhile, the press started to rot; it went fully out of control. The media became more powerful than ever before. Coalition governments were very weak. The media built an alliance with the military and the judiciary. This gave the media unacceptable, illegitimate power before the governments... "

'After 1995 there was a kind of looting in Turkey. Let us say a public tender on energy distribution was on the agenda. One of them [the tenders] went to the Ihlas [media] Group, the other to Show TV and the third to another group. It had become annoying. Managers of my newspaper were frustrated that we were unable to get a share. They'd say, 'Boss, let us do this or that business.' I resisted a lot, but the economy had changed shape between 1995 and 1997, and each media group then had its own bank. This was the beginning for Sabah to enter financial relations with the government. When you have a bank ... you lose your freedom. This is what happened and marked the end of journalism in Turkey.'

He also shed light in the same interview, giving examples of journalism falling victim to corporate interests:

"For instance, when there was an investment in GSM stations, coal or nuclear energy; this revealed immediately the 'positions' in the press. One can easily foresee which paper would publish which 'story.' One of them praised, say, the GSM stations, as the others warned of cancer risks. Journalists then developed a reflex to defend the business interests of the proprietor. One could assume that no good things may happen to those who write against those interests, but 'putting the brakes on' like that killed journalism."

After a period of being seized by the state, Sabah Group and its affiliated media outlets was sold in 2001 to a billionaire, Turgay Ciner, whose company is mainly in the business of mining and energy.

But citing a legal document that surfaced long after, that had not been disclosed to authorities, and referring to a 'secret deal' between Bilgin and Ciner, the government seized the newspaper once more in 2007.

Soon after, Sabah Group was sold to Turkuvaz Media Group of the Çalık Holding, whose CEO, Berat Albayrak, was Erdoğan's son-in-law. In a controversial move, two state banks, Vakıf and Halk, stepped in and shared \$ 750 million of the \$ 1.1 billion purchase in April 2008.

Berat Albayrak's brother, Serhat, was appointed the director who led the entire media operations.

The new proprietor, Ahmet Çalık, pursued initially a cautious line, and respected a non-interference in editorial decisions.

There was a reason for caution: at the time of the purchase, Sabah had a highly qualified, and devoted team of journalists, who had gone through hardship to keep the newspaper's head above the water, and were known to be highly sensitive to their professional integrity.

Gender equality in the newsroom, collective spirit and the decision to hire an independent news ombudsman were its key features to keep up the fight.

Yet, after the appointment of a new chief editor, in 2009, changes gradually crept in. Independent-minded editors were either fired or sent to passive duties, and each new appointment showed a clear pro-AKP tendency.

The staff noticed that challenges became harder, as time went by. By the summer of 2012, Sabah had far left behind in full its well known center-left/liberal profile and had replaced it with a position as, the critics repeatedly pointed out, the AKP's toughest mouthpiece.

The strong legal contract, however, gave its news ombudsman a space to continue his self-critical scrutiny and to allow readers' open criticism of what they see as growing pro-government bias in the regular Monday columns.

Despite the self-censorship turning into a daily routine by, approximately, the beginning of 2012, no attempt for interference to censor, in part or in whole, the ombudsman's column was noted. Yet it was obvious that the new management preferred to ignore the criticism the ombudsman's weekly column conveyed, week after week. Ignored by the decision makers within, columns turned into some form of medical reports of a deteriorating health of a once impactful institution.

Something else, too, had essentially changed: Ombudsman's office was visited much more frequently by the staff, who vented its frustration with massive censorship fuelled with aggression.

Attempts to block it were to no avail. Submission to the will of political power and the proprietor was complete, by early 2013.

It was a story in in May 6, 2013, two weeks before the Gezi Park protests, which marked the beginning of the end for me as the news ombudsman of Sabah.

The story in question was a front-page report about a Justice and Development Party (AKP) meeting and contained also the results of a public-opinion poll, which Sabah reported, as commissioned by the AKP and presented to the Prime Minister, Erdoğan.

The figures were irrelevant. What mattered for the ombudsman was the written objection of the polling company, KONDA, which confirmed conducting the survey, but said it was not commissioned by the AKP.

It was a seemingly simple correction, but had to be put on record so as to not mislead the reader.

After the article was sent to the editors in the late-edition hours on Sunday, I had to handle busy telephone traffic.

The reporter of the story — the correspondent who regularly covers the AKP — had already seen the early edition and “alerted” his superiors, apparently 'all the way up'.

As ombudsman I came under repetitious pressure to modify the content of the piece in those late hours of the evening, but, as until then, no external intervention was allowed to creep into the article.

But the next day, a senior editor knocked on my door.

'I am just a messenger' he said apologetically, before he relayed a message from 'upstairs' - Sabah's top management - to me:

“Ombudsman Baydar should better stop slamming this newspaper. Either he gives up those constant attacks or he should go elsewhere to write.”

I responded to the visitor that I would continue do my job exactly as it was defined in my contract; since it was what I was employed to do.

It was the most serious friction I had had in my endeavor as the news ombudsman, a post I assumed in November 2004.

The message was a flare signal that the “countdown” had started for the ombudsman in a move going beyond even the many existing testaments of the upside-down course the Turkish media had taken.

I continued to do my job.

Following a series of threatening statements and moves by Erdoğan Government - attempts to ban abortion, tearing down the iconic movie theatre 'Emek', humiliation of urban youth in speeches linked with the plans to restrict alcohol consumption, banning the May 1 demonstration in Taksim Square and the acrimonious debate on constructing a mall in the midst of it - which were perceived as intervention in lifestyles, Gezi Park protests broke as a form of massive cultural resistance on May 28.

Sabah failed so badly in its coverage of the events that the readers virtually went mad.

I weeded out the insults and curses from the inpouring concrete criticism and dedicated three straight articles to the issue. Each article heightened the tension in the building and led to further isolation of the news ombudsman. The only attempts to break the isolation was the occasional whispering in the corridors, often by the reporters to me: 'Thank God there is this column, it saves our honor, or whatever is left of it.'

In May and June 2013, I had private meetings separately with the Sabah Media Group chairman and the editorial coordinator as well as some editors.

At the meetings, I emphasized the following points:

“If high-quality journalism is the priority, Sabah should pay attention to editorial independence and ethics and present the reader with ample, accurate and objective news. A news ombudsman supervises only these principles. Sabah is a mass-circulation daily with 30-year liberal credentials. It has a very diverse readership — Turks, Kurds and Alevis, believers and seculars, urbanites and villagers, the young and the elderly. It can never afford and sustain partisanship, and government-guided reporting is destined to backfire with its traditional readers. In line with my duty, I will continue to share reader complaints and my comments in my column. The column will remain open to any statement, correction or apology you may address to the reader. Criticism is good. To perceive criticism as slamming or attacking does not mesh with professionalism.”

On Sunday, June 23, I wrote a column on how *Sabah* and the Turkish media in general demonized the international media and proclaimed it a conspirator in the wake of the Gezi Park events.

The *Sabah* editor, however, rejected this piece, even though he did not have that authority (the contract makes it clear that the column is 'autonomous' since it conveys the views of the readers and news ombudsman).

Following this sanction, which was so scathing to the paper's institutional structure, I took two weeks off.

Then, upon the request of *The New York Times*, I wrote an extensive commentary about the negative effects of media ownership by conglomerates on editorial independence, and total absence of investigative journalism, coining the term 'newsrooms as open air prisons' in Turkey, which *The Times* published in July 19.

On Sunday, July 21, upon my return from a two-week 'vacation', I filed *Sabah* a new ombudsman's column. The article spoke to how the relations between the readership and the newspaper staff and between the chief editor and news ombudsman should be. It emphasized the importance of independent self-regulation and self-scrutiny. It explained why censoring the previous article had been wrong.

This article, too, was rejected, without any explanation.

Two days later, I was told I was fired on grounds that I had "insulted" the newspaper on various platforms, primarily *The New York Times*.

It was July 23. Just a day before the traditional 'press freedom day' of Turkey: 'Celebrated by the Turkish Journalists' Association (TGC) year to mark the lifting of censorship in Turkey. It was the 105th anniversary.

Irony was self-explanatory.

For many colleagues, Gezi protests and the failures of the media became a powerful test of devotion to truth and good conscience.

It set a pattern of resistance for the honor of the profession, which led to more than 250 journalists losing their jobs. It included a vast array of them: chief and

desk editors, columnists, reporters, cameramen. For some, even a couple of critical or ironical tweets were reason enough to terminate their job contracts.

From July on the number of fired journalists would continue to rise geometrically, reaching, a year later, almost a thousand. This included all the ranks - from chief editors to photographers and assistant reporters.

November 19, 2013

Among the approximately 20 competing private news channels in Turkey, TV8 was one which stood out remarkably, by its 'distance', critical content and dissenting views until Gezi protests erupted.

The conditions, however, started to change when its proprietor, Mehmet Nazif Günal, became one of the five business partners in a consortium, which had won the public bid to for the construction of a giant airport in Istanbul, with a value exceeding 20 billion euros.

Gürcan Çilesiz was the editor in chief of the channel.

Here is his story on how the entire news operation of TV8 was shut down overnight and staff fired en masse.³⁴

'Imagine: here you have a prime minister who makes the boss of a newspaper cry just because he gets furious with its news story. He places his men in newspapers and TV. Yet it's not enough: he acts as if he is the supreme editor in chief. He interferes with the live broadcasts of the channels, has the headlines changed, and decides who will be allowed to appear on TV programs. He commissions headlines for the newspapers. And whenever he falls short, his son or advisors accomplish the mission' he told.

'All of these were well known by us in the sector. But for the millions of others the bitter truth surfaced by the audio leaks and phone records, during the 'December 17 process' (graft probes against the gov't ministers and Erdoğan's relatives). These records showed us also how recklessly the government used the

public tenders to finance the media which acts as its mouthpiece. It was by Erdoğan's personal orders (the leaks showed) a demand to save a media group which was in financial hardship. We all witnessed how a 'pool' was established for the bosses who win public bids, to funnel a total of 630 million dollars.'

'Four of the five bosses who had allocated this money, we learned, were the partners of the consortium that was given the airport bid. But the name of Mehmet Nazif Günal was not there! Why? Because he was given a different check to pay. This check was to be paid by closing down the news operations of TV8, which had refused to surrender to power pressure, and it was to be sold by a half amount of its market value. The political power which was intolerant of media in opposition was able to get whatever boss to buy media groups and sell others. In the end it has always been the power that wins and independent journalism and the country itself that loses.'

'We were appreciated by the viewers a long time. But the proprietor did not feel the same way. He felt uneasy about the stance of our newsroom. Gezi protests started soon after the airport bid, and his discomfort from then on became very visible. TV8 was often one of the targets of government's rage. But the proprietor did certainly wish his relations with the government get damaged, now that he had won this grand bid. So, he openly tried to impose censorship, but met resistance. He thought the newsroom now exceeded his authority. By selling the channel, he thought he got an opportunity to get rid of us altogether. We and the viewers had to pay the dear price for independent journalism: around 50 people were fired together in November 19, 2013. They were all jobless when the last news program was aired that day. Not only them, but also 150 media workers at the channel were also fired.'

December 2013

Work conditions much harder than ever before, Turkish media at the end of its 'year of living dangerously' would be confronted by another massive test for accomplishing its professional role.

Turkey was shaken when the police in the early morning of December 17 raided the houses of various ministers, businessmen and bureaucrats, as part of a massive graft probe, involving tens of millions of dollars, on the basis of money laundering and bribery. At the core of the probe was the suspicion and evidence on the breach of the embargo over Iran.

It was followed by a second wave a week after, and this time, it was alleged, it had to do with another businessman linked to Al-Qaeda.

Part of the graft files also included accusations that a group of businessmen had formed a 'pool' to finance the Sabah Group's media outlets, which, if true, reminded of mafia-like methods.

The government reacted fiercely. Soon a publication ban on the December 25 probe (which involved Erdoğan's son) was issued.

The judiciary was in apparent turmoil, and harsh steps were taken to 'retake control' over the jurisdiction of the prosecutors and the police.

The material partly made public, partly leaked, was so powerful that, it exposed what the Turkish public had learned during Gezi protests: the conglomerate media resorted to even more silence, by playing, as a colleague put it, 'the three monkeys'.

Caught unprepared, and fearful of consequences, main TV channels were again busy in self-censorship.

Even when the main opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, played a recording leaked out of the graft probe loud in a public meeting in Parliament, the appearance - clearly having news value - were shied away by all of them.

A dramatic episode, one again exposing the failure of the journalism was on public display when Erdoğan Bayraktar, one of the ministers whose son figured in the graft probe, appeared live on telephone line on NTV, and while declaring his resignation called Prime Minister Erdoğan also to resign, because 'he knew everything'.

The newsroom of the NTV was apparently so much in shock for the obvious scoop the minister offered, that it never returned to the subject. The fear had by

the end of 2013 had much more deeply settled in the DNA cells of the conglomerate media.

But, the professional resistance continued wherever it had found the opportunity. Columnists and reporters, realizing the immense wave of accusations inherent in the two probes, raised their flags.

And more of them paid the price.

Spring, 2014

Murat Aksoy, writing regular columns in the pro-government newspaper, Yeni Şafak, joined the ranks of the sacked, soon after he voiced dissent about the way the graft probes were handled by the government.³⁵

“Prior to Gezi protests I had written about the negative reactions I got from conservatives about AK Party projects involving youth; about the missed opportunities right before Gezi; about how the AK Party was not successfully representing the majority of society. When Gezi happened, my criticisms hit a peak.”

Yet, he could keep his position for some months, as tensions around him escalated.

But he felt that his days were numbered.

The tipping point was December 25, as two ministers resigned and Erdoğan did a major reshuffle of the cabinet, replacing another 10 as a consequence of the second graft probe, which surfaced that day.

“That very night I was invited to a program at CNNTurk channel. Expressing my views on the developing story, the resignations of two ministers, one of whom also had called the prime minister to resign, and the fact that the police had refused to obey the orders of prosecutors in the second raid, I called it a state crisis and argued that a solution might be to declare early elections. I realized afterwards that what I said in the TV had upset the newspaper's management. More interestingly, a columnist with daily Sabah, somebody I had known earlier but not seen for 6 years happened to call me that night and said in clear terms that 'he had watched the

program together with a high level person from the AKP, and although he did not doubt that I am a democrat-minded person, what I said was wrong.'

'I went to the newspaper building the following day, wrote my column there, and filed it. Soon, the managing editor called and told me that they would not print my piece. he said the reason was what I said in the TV program... There was no longer any tolerance for diverse views.'

'And in a post-Dec.17, 2013 column I wrote something like, 'All these steps are being taken so that the AK Party can protect itself.' And this is the essence of what I said on a television program after the Dec. 25 operation. I said something like: "This is a state crisis. What the AK Party needs to do is follow up on this." The next day, I wrote a column, but was told they wouldn't be using it. Then I went on a break, and when I returned, I was told I no longer had a job there.'

Nazlı Ilıcak, a prominent conservative columnist with Sabah daily was also feeling the heat in late December.³⁶

'I had begun to criticize the government more and more intensely after 2011. I guess we should see Gezi events as a real cornerstone in all of this.'

'I started to get regular warnings from the head managers of the newspaper already then. But when the whole Dec. 17 bribery and corruption situation emerged, everything changed. In fact, on the very first day, I said, "Hey, Tayyip Erdoğan is not involved with these guys." When I heard the names of the four government ministers implicated in all of this, I thought to myself, "Tayyip Erdoğan will come out now and talk about (his respect for) the independence of justice. This is how I guessed he would behave.'

'But one day later, publicly, the prime minister said, "The parallel state set a trap for us." Of course, right at that moment I realized that he was trying to hide something, and I wrote a column about this, criticizing it. That column never made its way into the paper, and right after that, I got a call from the newspaper's

editorial board, simply saying “We can no longer work with you.” I have no idea whether a phone call from on high was made to the newspaper about my no longer working there, but the owner of the newspaper was the older brother of the prime minister's son-in-law. There was probably not even any need for a phone call; these people have telepathic means of communication!

March 30, 2014

If Gezi was perceived by Erdoğan as a massive global conspiracy, 'The parallel state' had by the mid-January 2014 become a term to describe a new enemy. In Erdoğan's mind the two consecutive graft probes were part of a new 'coup attempt' (the former was Gezi) against him and the government. The culprit this time was the so-called Gülen Movement, the moderate Sünni religious sect, whose spiritual leader, Fethullah Gülen, had chosen to live in self-imposed exile in Pennsylvania, USA.

'Gülenists' - as they are often described - were during the most of the decade under the AKP rule were in alliance with Erdoğan, but had begun to fall out of sympathy as they felt 'overstepped' by the party policies, losing the influence in bureaucracy and growing disagreements on issues related with the Kurds, Alevis, regional foreign policy etc. First signs of the cracks were visible when Gülen openly criticized the Gaza Flotilla incident, accusing the Islamist aid organisation, IHH, backed by Erdoğan, of inciting violence. In the deep background of the collapse of the links were also the rift based on the antipathy of Gulenists for what they saw as political Islamism and its exclusive policies in Turkey. Some other observers, however, argued that the hard core of the rift was about a power struggle.

Gezi protests had provided Erdoğan to intimidate successfully the conglomerate media. This time, the rage focused on the media outlets affiliated by the Gulen Movement, Zaman and Ipek Media Groups. They were the ones, this time, which stood out in terms of reporting, and covering the leaks. Very soon, they were joined by Taraf; staunchly secular daily, Cumhuriyet, anti-AKP popular 'broadloid' Sözcü, as well as number of partisan newspapers on the leftist flank, such as Birgün, Evrensel and Sol. There was a big void at the TV, but the news hungry public still had the chance of following their coverage.

And, now, with a new 'culprit' behind the graft probes 'identified' by Erdoğan, journalists suspected of a link with Gülenists in the mainstream and pro-government media found themselves as subjects of a spreading 'witchhunt'.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of how far the it went was to be found the story of Yasemin Taşkın, the Rome correspondent for the Sabah, one of the most respected international correspondents in Turkish media: She wound up losing her job because of an interview with Fethullah Gülen that her husband, Marco Ansaldo, did for the Italian daily, La Repubblica.

Taşkın told me:

'With the December graft probes the conflict between Erdoğan and Gülen clearly surfaced. As the municipal elections approached in late March 2014, my husband told me that he wanted to interview Gülen. And in doing so, he probably never thought any harm would come to my career or myself.'

'Normally no one would expect such a thing. So he went ahead and did the interview, and it was published in March 28, only two days before the elections.'

La Repubblica interview was by noon that day among the top news in internet in Turkey. It was of course mentioning the name of my husband, and colleague, Marco Ansaldo.'

'The same afternoon I received an email from Sabah's foreign desk editor. He wrote in an embarrassed and discontented tone, that the newspaper's editorial board had decided to bring an end to 'our working relationship'. He was keen to stress to me that he himself did not know the reason behind this decision, and that no one had told him anything. But whoever had called him had mentioned the interview that my husband had done with Gülen as the reason. It was said, "It would have been better if Marco had not done that interview."

'When I talked later with the human resources section I was told that even they were kept uninformed about the decision, that they had learned it from the Internet.'

It was an irony of history - a tragicomic *deja vu* - for Taşkın.

She had been subjected to similar treatment before, and it is a telling episode how profoundly intolerant and unprofessional Turkish media environment has been.

'It was about 15 years ago... I was then the Rome correspondent of Anatolian Agency. When the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan had to leave Syria then, he ended up Rome. Suddenly, my husband and I were in two news outlets, whose affiliated countries were at cold war with each other. Marco was then intensely accused by Turkish media of pro-PKK bias, and as example it was told that he had not used 'baby killer' adjective for Öcalan; that he had called him a 'Kurdish leader'., etc...'

'So, as a consequence I was told by the agency I was 'assigned' to a remote Eastern Anatolian town, deliberately proposed, so that I would not be paid

severance. It meant they wanted to fire me. I refused to move there, and remained with no job for over a year in Rome.'

May 12, 2014

The attention of the global journalism organisations reached new heights as the patterns of firings turned into an 'enforced exodus' in Turkish media, as what a colleague of mine called 'silence of the lambs', referring to the submission of the media moguls, deepened.

All the reports, rising in quantity, expanded its scrutiny on the aspects spanning over journalism in conventional as well as online media outlets.

What infuriated Erdoğan more than any other report was the one published by the Freedom House, which had lowered the status media freedom in Turkey from 'partly free' to 'not free'.³⁷

Soon enough, the Freedom House was turned into a target of demonisation by the government, and a hate campaign was launched in the pro-government media, going as far as accusing its global rankings for being part of a Jewish conspiracy, pointing out its then chairman, David Kramer.

When the frenzy in Turkey hit a peak, Gönül Tol, a Washington-based Turkish pundit, writing regular columns for the staunchly pro-government daily, Akşam, decided to conduct an interesting test.

In a column she filed in the following days, she argued that the report could certainly be criticized. Yet, after lining out certain points,

Tol attacked the hate campaign, underlining that the bringing in the issues such as the nongovernmental organization's director is Jewish was unacceptable.

The critics of the report, which focused on the religious identity of a person who inherited it from birth and has a limited role in its development, shows the

problems of Turkish political culture that sees everything through the perspective of identities, Tol argued in her column.³⁸

'Let's test the report,' she concluded:

“If this column is published as it is, without being blocked by the editor, press freedom in Turkey could be freer than what the Freedom House report suggested.'

Akşam refused to publish the piece.

'A newspaper is not the right place to conduct an experiment,' was the argument voiced afterwards by its editor, Murat Kelkitlioğlu.

Tol had to hand in her resignation a couple of days after.

Appendix II

This section recapitulates briefly the history of struggle of Turkish journalists against the decades-long oppressive orders in Turkey. It recounts how a key element for editorial independence, namely the membership of journalist unions and collective rights were severely curbed under the alliance of political power and media proprietors. It includes a series of narratives 'from within': Turkish journalists, under increasing pressure, explain how they see their current milieu and working conditions and reason whether or not there is a 'way out' of yoke.

Purge, suffocation, despair

'New managers of the newspaper were the party commissars.'

Tuğçe Tatari, Fired journalist

Since 1860, Turkish journalism has often been marked by oppression, and a continuous struggle against censorship. Its 180-year long history was shaped by many Ottoman and Republican intellectuals—who, inspired by enlightenment and Western ideologies and a resistance towards despotic rulers, had created a strong legacy for press freedom.

The fight for an independent, free and diverse media had succeeded at various periods of time - all short lived. The years between 1908-1913, and the period between the end of the WWI and the foundation of the Turkish Republic are noteworthy in this context.

But, since the foundation of the republic, in 1923, censorship and taboos have been the rule, and freedom exercised has remained an exception.

According to a recent³⁹ report by the Freedom House, *“During nearly five decades of military “guardianship” (punctuated by coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980), the Turkish military and their bureaucratic allies enforced a set of red lines restraining discussion of ethnic identity, religion, and history outside the narrow bounds of secular nationalism. In 1997, leading media outlets supported the*

military's efforts to undermine the coalition led by the Islamist Welfare Party, which eventually led to the collapse of the democratically elected government in what is often called the "post-modern coup."

The core of the pro-freedom legacy in the press, however small, proved to be resilient. Despite censorship by the state, military and government, there have always been critical, oppositional, fearless segments of press and journalists... until today.

From early on, a 'centerfield' was built up, by three major newspapers: Hürriyet, Milliyet and, from mid-1980's, Sabah. Until the end of the 1980s, the press was dominated by families - Karacan, Simavi, Demirkent, Bilgin etc – who operated at the time as publishers.

This changed radically during the 1980's. With the new liberal economic policies launched by late Turgut Özal's Motherland Party (ANAP) tectonic shift on media structures took place.

'Family ownership in the market was replaced by corporate holding companies (albeit still with a strong family component) that benefited hugely from their close relationships with the government.'

This was a powerful game-changer. Before 1980, media has been largely under the control of the military tutelage, operating within the red lines, keeping close to the state, but with an element excluded: the lure of money and greed.

The shift of ownership conditions meant new forms of business management, which brought corporate interests from public interest, demanded unconditional loyalties from the employees of media outlets, with top media managers recruited with astronomic salaries and the pursuit of professional qualifications abandoned.

The continuity and consistence in newsrooms became measured by the submission of its top editors to the proprietors, who quickly developed a habit of interfering with editorial decisions.

Whenever it suited or endangered their business interests, and their 'financially sensitive' relations with the political and bureaucratic powers in

Ankara, the new business class ruling over the 'centerfield' of the media, began to aggressively encourage, and often enforce, new conditions for self-censorship.

If the self-censorship is now a solid newsroom culture in Turkey today, those chiefly responsible are, without a doubt, these business families which, driven by greed and worship of power, recklessly and ruthlessly constructed a working model to perfection to suit their interests.

By 2014, this culture, having spread like an epidemic, became the cause for what many Turkish journalists describe ' a state of suffocation'. The growing perception in Turkish media community is the sense of 'having come to the end of the road', 'hitting rock bottom', and 'being driven into total paralysis'.

This was a sense never experienced before.

The story of Turkish media, a sector which employs around 15000 professionals, since 2007 on has been its most dramatic and most destructive.

Often on arbitrary basis in their execution, uninterrupted, clearly motivated on political concerns, and increasing in numbers, the firings have overwhelmed the legal investigations and jailings as a form of punitive measures.

Because it has been seen increasingly as a very useful tool to strip journalism of its critical, scrutinizing public service role, it is now replacing incarceration, or threats thereof, as a method to paralyze it.

Directing the political pressures via private media ownership, the state, government and regimes often, shrewdly, cunningly, shake off the accusations and criticism, simply by arguing that it is the free market that rules and employers exercise their rights to hire and fire, as in the other sectors.

According to the latest BIA media monitoring report, there have been 384 journalists fired or 'forced to resign' in Turkey between July 2013 and June 2014.

Another report, titled 'Press For Freedom', and sponsored by the EU, allege that only in the first half of 2014, more than 980 journalists lost their jobs.

A list recently compiled by the main opposition party, CHP, puts the number of 'dismissed' journalists in the past 12 years under the AKP rule at 1863.

A careful scrutiny of the lists point out to a **sector purge**: most of those who lost their jobs - and there are also many others who terminated their professional life in journalism by shifting to other professions or early retirement - are professionals who gave utmost priority to journalism as public service rather than ideology, partisanship or activism.

The trend leaves little doubt: a key profession is standing on its last legs, bent severely under political pressure and intolerance for its very nature, on the verge of a meltdown of its human resources, being dismantled of its genetics, vital for the build-up and the stability of a democratic society.

In its report on working conditions in 2014, **Turkish Press Council** stated⁴⁰:

'While the unemployment in general is around 8 % in Turkey, it is around 20 % in the press. The media is divided mainly into two parts: pro-government and pro-opposition. The economic pressures over the latter is now at unbearable levels, as it refuses to submit over the powers. Some newspapers choose to reduce staff, while some media groups are merging the outlets within, to resist pressures. Yet, for some of them these constitute pretexts to fire staff.'

Uğur Güç, chairman⁴¹ of **Turkish Journalists' Union**, said:

'We've experienced this in the past, but once Gezi occurred, the whole situation became even worse. The goal driving all this is ultimately to get journalists under control, allowing the government to control the media. It's never been this clear and out in the open before. In the wake of the 1990s, some media bosses would even change their publication policies accordingly. But the media world, even then, never experienced pressure so extreme as it does today. The point at which we have arrived is one where either the prime minister passes on the message of what he wants, or actually makes the phone call himself and has someone fired. Not only

this, but once a journalist has been fired, there's a record on that person, and he or she can no longer find work anywhere else either.'

'Crashed under a system of exploitation, their future between the lips of the powers and proprietors, the situation the journalists is the greatest obstacle before the media freedom in Turkey'.

One of the three trade unions, **Disk/Basın İş**, membership in 2009, was 21.8 %. It is now down to only 4.7 %.

The third one, **Türk-İş** informed:⁴²

'The total number of registered journalists in Turkey is 15.630. Of those, only 2.200 are members of the unions.'

Disk/Basın-İş summarized in a recent report the past 12 years under the AKP rule as a constant retreat of the media professionals:⁴³

'While the new power took a grip and created its own monopoly, employees in the sector have been stripped steadily of their job security. Employees experienced the suppression of the AKP heavily through arrests, censorship, self censorship and dismissals.'

'AKP's moves to cripple the line of work in media began after Abdullah Gül's election as President and its victory at the following elections (in 2011) by 47 %. As TRT and the High Board of Radio and Television (RTUK) was taken over by the AKP, some outlets which publish material against thne AKP were shut down, its editors jailed, and some companies were subjected to fines. AKP managed also to change the media structures to its own advantage. What made it easy for the AKP was the fact there was no company that solely focused on media activities, that the media owners had investments in sectors like construction, tourism etc. The risks of not being able to be granted public bids in areas other than media, simply tied the proprietors' hands.'

Reflections at Home

The 'state of suffocation' led many journalists to self-reflection. In the aftermath of Gezi protests, some books - partly confessional, and largely self-critical - started to be published.

Yet the scarce number of these books comes as proof that others who are in key positions in the media, still prevail in a culture that is reminiscent of 'culture of omerta' - attributed to the high-level members of the mafia, for keeping silent, taking the secrets to the grave.

The despair covering the sector has to with a pressure, that has become even more systemic than before. Earlier, media proprietors enforced dismissals of professionals either by the voluntary cooperation or consent of their top editors, who were gatekeepers in a reversal sense: being paid for sheer loyalty to the 'boss', they worked as the chief censors of news stories and commentary seen as 'undesired', and employed editorial teams who would not 'cause trouble' by attempting to defend basic values of journalism.

In the past two years- newspapers such as Hürriyet, Radikal, Milliyet and Haberturk show that the grinder of firings now reached at the level of chief editors. It is now a more aggressive, 'top-down tailoring' of the media institutions.

It is the 'iron will' of one person, Erdoğan, which drives the project to the point of full subordination of the media to the political executive. Modern Turkey has not experienced such accumulation of power in one elected party, and lately in one single person, except, briefly in the second half of 1950's.

What makes the rule of the AKP, now in its twelfth year, particular, is that it brings together three elements first time ever in its 91-years long republican history as tenets of power: constant majority voter support, usage of religion in politics and overwhelming control over the state institutions.

As a result, three professional segments, whose core values are based on independence, feel the pressure: media, judiciary and the academia, and in that order.

The widely shared concern is, if the Fourth Estate collapses, it would take Turkey, at best, a decade or two to return to democratization process.

'I have never experienced such bad situation during my 30-years long career,' said **Mustafa Dağistanlı**, a former foreign desk editor with the NTV channel:

'There are two periods that can compare to this: The oppression during Sultan Abdulhamid II between 1876-1908 and the one-party state period following the foundation of the republic, between 1923-1946. But mind you, none of these periods had anything to do with democracy. None of the leaders at that time preached it either. Many people would remember the period between 1950-60 under hegemonic Democrat Party (DP) rule, which was the beginning of pluralism; yet it was not worse than the one we witness now. Yes DP had also established control over press then and had tied some of it to its power. Even the most veteran journalists had been jailed. Censorship was intense, yes, newspapers were unable to publish news from time to time; but whenever censored, they could at least show, by blank pages etc, that they were repressed. During current AKP rule even this is banned; nobody dares to tell the public that there is censorship. The AKP created a new media capital around loyal businessmen. This it did by the cheap credits from the state-owned banks; by establishing 'pools'. And it has now roughly two thirds of the newspapers and TV channels. These constitute the voluntary supporters of the AKP and its ideology... An example of how grave the situation is concealed in news analysis and reports by our foreign colleagues: many Turkish journalists speak of political oppression only on the basis of anonymity. This is self-explanatory enough, I think.'

Umur Talu was twice editor-in-chief of **Milliyet**, first during early 1990s and early 2000, before he was fired, due to his staunch resistance to political attempts to enforce concentration of media ownership. He was also the main author of the Ethical Code of the Turkish Journalists' Association (TGC).

He agreed with Dağistanlı⁴⁴:

'Earlier, of course, it's been bad. There was a heavy self-censorship during the military coup periods, under emergency rules, legal and illegal ways of censorship, and under red lines. It was not this bad, but it was certainly that bad. But never has

it been this bad, because under the disguise of 'democratic process' part of the media is financed by the 'pools, the other part of the media is dirty as a sink. An era ruled and 'resolved' by one man only: a period in which the lists to fire people journalists, name by name, are openly in circulation. But there is also a new element: A brand new social media and a public space that resists to a pressure no matter how hard the pressure becomes.'

Ergun Babahan, a former editor-in-chief with **Sabah**, concurs⁴⁵:

'It's never been this bad. Because even in the most gloomy days during the periods of military tutelage, the newspapers still had some maneuvering space. Today, everything from the headlines, columns, sports pages, to leisure and lifestyle sections, all the areas are under the influence, if not the control, of Erdoğan. Not a single piece of criticism is tolerated, the determination to have journalists in reporter levels fired at the top. Erdoğan surely has to thank media proprietors who have exploited the state resources, and who remain fiercely dependent to the government, for all these measures...'

Pınar Türeñç was one of journalists who lost her job when she criticized Erdoğan during his reign as Mayor of Greater Istanbul. 'I was the first in the line' she told me. Perhaps therefore, she does not surprised. Yet, she is disappointed when she points out at the apathy of the Turkish society⁴⁶:

'There has never been, not even during the periods shadowed by the military coups, such a media, in terms of siege, vulnerability to interferences, and lack of job security. Arrests and jail, internet bans, loss of jobs, discriminative accreditation practices, interventions in the judiciary, copy-paste headlines, selective distribution of public ads, wiretappings of journalists... Only a single one of them would be sufficient to make western societies to rise up...'

'Has our situation ever been good?' asked Faruk Bildirici bitterly when I posed the question. Experienced in the Turkish capital, and as one of the journalists

defending investigative reporting, he has been serving as a successful news ombudsman for daily Hürriyet.

He elaborated on his own question⁴⁷:

I am a journalist with 34 years of experience. The period that I've been through can only be compared to the era following the military coup in September 12, 1980. However much restrictive and obstructive those days were, so are these days under the AKP. I know it is not that uplifting to compare a 'democratic' period with the one marked by a coup, but it's the simple truth. In those days our main problem was the censorship; today, the main problem is, in addition, 'conquest' of the overwhelming part of the media institutions, and normalization of the self-censorship. There is not a single reason for this. Turkey's failure in its democratization, many unresolved issues in our profession, structural problems in the sector, monopolization trends, lack of efficient professional organizations etc. But none of them had as powerful an effect as the attitudes of the AKP government and its policies. Fundamental reason behind the media in a straitjacket, its loss of editorial independence, thus falling short of fulfilling its functions are its deliberately oppressive, hegemonic, alienating policies, based on total disrespect for media freedom.'

Mehveş Evin has, over many years, been on the lead for promoting professional values, and monitoring the developments in the world. She agreed broadly, yet reminded that when in the 1990's the Kurdish journalists and newspapers did suffer oppression, their plight was ignored by the media which complains now⁴⁸:

'Yes, the AKP implements a reckless oppression, and censorship like no other predecessor before. In the early days, these took place discreetly, behind the closed doors. Yet, in the history of our media, freedom and independence have steadily been problematic. The media during the 1990's was highly loyal to the General Chief

of Staff and the capital. It was used as a instrument to design politics. The media groups complaining today were largely silent when in those days Kurdish journalists were kidnapped and killed, and newspaper buildings bombed and when the conservative-religious media outlets were refused accreditation. Today, we should say, despite massive oppression by the government and its interventions, there is a relatively diverse media environment. We owe it to the internet and social media. But, the media has not been free before, and is not free today.'

Soon after they came to power, the AKP launched a series of reforms and started the accession negotiations with the EU. It meant that Turkey had to take steps to adopt the Copenhagen Criteria, which ensures basic freedom and rights. But, in the past four years, there was not much left of the reform process, and the siege of media advanced further. What was the underlying reason for Erdoğan's change of mind to exercise full control?

Süleyman İrvan, an academic from Ankara and a former news ombudsman, argued that the AKP under Erdoğan regarded media as an organic extension of political power⁴⁹:

'The AKP government, which has a powerful voter backing, sees the media not as a democratic mechanism as a watchdog, but a tool for strengthening its power. The basic logic is this: The government always does the right thing, and therefore receives a popular support. Thus, media should adopt its publications accordingly. The government not only demands such an order for the media companies, but also creates a domination of the sector by the help of businesspeople who are loyal. Their media outlets act as PR agencies of the power. The media proprietors who stay out of this are frightened by open or discreet threats, and demands are constantly made that critical journalists are dismissed. The issue of editorial independence is slightly more complicated. It is blocked both by the demands of the political authority and the media proprietors plus advertisers.'

Faruk Bildirici saw a cunning calculation behind easing the conditions of media, as a way of strengthening AKP's political influence⁵⁰:

'AKP was rather weak vis a vis the establishment when it came to power. It used the EU process as a leverage to gain power. And yes, in those early years, there was a relative sense of relief in media. Such as the coverage of military tutelage, Kurdish issue, Cyprus and the so-called 'deep state'. But the relief itself never allowed space for criticism for the new leaders. The breaking of taboos was allowed to a degree that it helped enhance the AKP's hegemonic domain.'

Mehveç Evin agreed with the analysis and added that when the chief prosecutor's office opened a closure case against the party, its leadership launched a tactical game, which succeeded⁵¹:

'When the AKP came to power in 2001 the military and the Kemalist-Republican segments still had the ability to topple it. Remember that the party closure case was opened as late as 2008. AKP did take certain steps in order to look sympathetic, and to appease the international community and democrats at home. Meanwhile the tutelary system of the military and bureaucracy was liquidated. The AKP did need time to accomplish those. AKP did become stronger by every election, which meant more 'bastions' conquered and at the end, it all made Erdoğan say: I don't need anyone anymore. The more he realized that he could change anything that he touched - education, legal system, freedom of expression etc - he raised the stakes.'

Umur Talu argued that what turned the AKP away from seeking alliance and support from reformist circles was the sense of invincibility, and self-confidence, through consecutive elections⁵²:

'There was chaos in 2001. First there was a big earthquake, followed by an economic crisis and the liquidation and discrediting of the central powers. Such periods are of uprisings and liberation. If course, unless, fascism takes the

opportunity to precede it. So, AKP rose under such winds and it was first a period marked by embracing of the masses, inviting people to speak out, enlargement of domestic alliances, block against a military coup, and abroad, a period of credibility for the EU. Maybe they themselves believed in it. But later, particularly after 2010, it turned into a party which proved its strength after consecutive elections and referendums, no longer in need for diverse support, based only on its loyal segments in the party itself and in the media. It was marked by a performance from then on, with a desire of state whose face turned from Europa towards the Middle East. How could one expect democracy, anyhow, from a single man ruling all by himself?

For Sezin Öney, a columnist with daily Taraf, it is even gloomier, since the AKP, she argued, may be abusing the media to get rid of all the competitors for good⁵³:

'Erdoğan's goal is absolute power, and to stay there ever after, for decades. Most probably it was his goal from the very beginning. The stronger he became, the bigger was his goal. Let's say that it was a snowball effect, which now turned into an avalanche... Once you have such a goal, the democratic change of the political power becomes something that has to be prevented. AKP acts like a merchant who no matter what the conditions are keep competing. The power of the media is crucial to beat all the competitors for good. Why does the AKP act this way? Because it doesn't know any better; because it can...'

Süleyman İrvan agreed that for Erdoğan media remained only tool, as long as it did not dispute that nothing mattered for legitimacy than the voters. Otherwise, the media should be attacked as a group of elitists⁵⁴:

'I believe, Erdoğan saw media as an arena for hegemony and battle. I never thought that he had any notion of establishing a democratic media order. The main reason, as far as I can see, is Erdoğan's populist, anti-elitist stand. According to him, people understand him and his policies, but the elitist journalists refuse to.

That's why, what needs to be done, he believes, is crashing them, instead of bothering to convince. Erdoğan equals the democracy with the ballot box. Thus he is the most democratic person, because he is the one constantly emerging from the ballot box.'

Yasemin Taşkın is an experienced journalist, having long served as a foreign correspondent. She thought that Erdoğan had to clash with media because it now stood between him and the maximum control of power⁵⁵:

'We all know that even then there were people fired because they were seen as responsible for the stories that disturbed Erdoğan. But they were so few that it did not draw enough attention. But now there is something like a mass purge. Media freedom is now at top risk because it clashes with Erdoğan's ambition to grab absolute power, and single ruler. It's natural. Media is the most potent propaganda tool. Even in a country like Italy, Berlusconi managed to stay in power for 10 years. It would take the economic crisis to make him lose power.'

Doğan Ertuğrul worked, as a conservative-leaning editor, with pro-government media, until he resigned in protest. He called the order that he thinks Erdoğan wanted to build what he calls, 'Erdoğanism'.

He placed the media as part of a large interest circle that now ruled Turkey:

'AKP shaped an own brand of ideology. We can call it Erdoğanism -- or Akpartyism. All the business circles, media, judiciary and bureaucracy are tied to the power by an embilical cord. Actually, this is the Turkey in a nutshell, which Tayyip Erdoğan dreams about. At the moment there is a large power circle which is engaged to benefit jointly from all the political and economic advantages of the power.'

Dr Şahin Alpay, a renowned liberal columnist with Zaman and Today's Zaman dailies, a keen media observer and a political scientist with Bahçeşehir University in Istanbul, wrote that, what happened during the 'third term' of AKP power, that is from 2011 elections on, leaves no doubt that the pressures on the media increased⁵⁶:

'The main problem with the media in Turkey is that the Erdoğan government is silencing critical voices in state-owned or controlled media on the one hand, and in media owned by big companies that are highly dependent on government favors in their businesses, which stretch to a large number of fields. It may be argued that it was not at all different during previous governments, but previous governments were based on coalitions and competition between media tycoons seeking favors from different government parties allowed the media a certain breathing space. There is no doubt that government pressure on the media has significantly increased, especially during the third term of AKP power. Whereas in the past bosses used to run their media outlets through editors they appointed, nowadays they seem to be directly involved in the business of hiring and firing journalists.'

Mustafa Dağistanlı⁵⁷ disagreed with the view, voiced by some of his colleagues, that the journalists enjoyed enhanced freedom and independence during the first two terms under the AKP rule, that is, between 2001 and 2011:

'When I was the desk editor with the NTV channel between 2002-2006 I used to say: I support and applaud the appetite of the AKP to have Turkey as part of the EU, but I wonder why it never talks about the state of the media, and power-media relations? I never thought that there was a sense of relief in the reporting of the news. Exception being, perhaps, on the Kurdish issue. But not even that. Whenever the government did launch 'openings' in the issue the language of the media became liberal; whenever it took steps backwards it became hostile, threatening. Even this itself explains the state of the media. This is also noteworthy: AKP complained a lot, before coming to power, of the corrupt relations between the governments and the media and said then that these relations should be reformed. As a matter of fact it had a sweeping victory the (2001) elections despite the enmity of the media and its publications that had nothing to do with journalism. This offered us a chance,

perhaps, then that the relations could be reformed. But it did not happen. Power corrupts; and the AKP rapidly got corrupt. Even in its earliest years there were a bunch of corruption allegations. These were not 'supposed to be written about. Ever. And they rearranged the media even in a worse way than before. The irony is, the AKP, which had proven that it won the polls in spite of the media, showed that it needed the media manipulations. All the power structures work the same way, but it is the main characteristic of the oppressive governments.'

Abdullah Bozkurt, Ankara Bureau Chief of daily Today' Zaman, saw a strong linkage between the two massive graft probes which involved Erdoğan's family, some AKP ministers and the growing pressures on journalism. He explained in an article⁵⁸:

'The answer lies in the mentality of Erdoğan himself, who sees no way out of the current debacle he put the government in. For the state-controlled media to be effective as a propagandist mouthpiece machine for Erdoğan and his allies, the independent media must be kept in check and placed under constant pressure. For that, the Erdoğan regime employs every tactic in the book to discredit the free and independent media including introduction of selective accreditation rules and controlling the reporting activities of the independent media.

The goal is to manipulate the media by creating a fear factor for the remainder of media groups that are still allowed to cover press briefings and interview government officials. The government wants to restrict the national coverage to friendly and propagandist journalists.

Moreover, with the unrelenting campaign of criticism against the press, both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu hope to discredit the media as a public interest group that scrutinizes the wrongdoings in government. They want to portray the media as an obstacle to the agenda of change in Turkey in a bid to prevent the opposition from making use of critical newsbytes. Erdoğan's verbal attacks against the press have already escalated into concrete actions such as politically motivated tax investigations, licensing difficulties, limiting advertisements and more.

As a result, the independent Turkish media now faces various forms of harassment, interference, intimidation, financial pressure and threats from the government.

All in all, the growing press freedom woes in Turkey are simply a reflection of Erdoğan's best-known secret goal: the ultimate consolidation of power to perpetuate his rule. Erdoğan and his allies in the government do not realize that the genie is out of the bottle in Turkey and that it will be difficult to reverse the democratic path Turks have been pursuing for decades.

In addition, Dağıstanlı⁵⁹ pointed out in detail what Bozkurt touched upon--tightening the grip on the public broadcaster, TRT, as well as one of the oldest, well-established media institutions of the republic, the semi-official Anatolian Agency; both with a wide network and enhanced coverage.

'What The AKP did went largely unnoticed. It turned the public-sponsored broadcaster, TRT, and the Anatolian Agency (AA) into sheer propaganda moutpieces. TRT is financed by the citizenry and has been managed arbitrarily, but it has the largest coverage area in Turkey.

AA is very important in a sense that the entire local media gets its main news bulks from it. AA fulfills also a role as some form of compass, a correctional tool for the big media. We know that the big TV channels, NTV or CNNTurk, wait for the AA's stories in critical developments, even if they have their reporters in the field. So, now, the 'poison' (because both are now sources of very manipulative content) pollutes everything around.

The management of AA is busy for some time to denigrate the international news agencies and also the respected media outlets, by resorting to lies. This is also another dangerous dimension. Because, by doing so it the very truth, the search for truth, and those institutions are aimed at losing credibility before the large segments who vote for the AKP. Turkish media not only damages itself, but also tries to do the same outside.'

Is it all about a ceaseless drive for absolute power, for an order in which accountability and transparency will have no place at all? Is it all about political corruption, stretched further and further, with media proprietors as key players? What, in the big picture, do the Turkish journalists see, when they line up the main areas of problems? To what extent are the journalists themselves, their culture, are parts of the problem?

Talu, whose career was largely focused on the observations over the sector, was keen on holding a mirror on the professional conditions⁶⁰:

'The primary problem is the media's own structure: authoritarian, based on loyalties and business interest-oriented. Second issue has to with the journalists' remarkable indifference on the internal and external freedom of the profession.

Only in the third place I would count the authority of the state and government.

Fourth is the 'culture of obedience' in the sector, that jointly constitute the main feature of seemingly confrontational militarist-republican and authoritarian-democrat flanks of the media and its deep penetration into the media proprietors, journalists, markets, readers, viewers and the politics.'

Evin lamented that in an environment falling victim to corruption, religious domination in politics and the AKP's populist resentment for what it sees as elitism leaves no room for a free media⁶¹:

'Diversity of opinion and press freedom are threats to those who seek absolute power. Second main obstacle is money. The more corruption, and the more disrespect for the rule of law, the less desire for a free media. Third factor is the dream of establishing a state which sanctifies political Islam. Fourth is the prevailing sense of the AKP as the underdog: it wants to take endless revenge from a media that it believes humiliated it until it came to power.'

Mehmet Altan, a well-known liberal pundit and an academic, referred to the republican traditions of Turkey, which he saw as pushing parties towards an appetite for absolute power and reinforcing the culture of intolerance. He said in an interview⁶²:

'There are three fundamental issues: First, each and every power wants to shape a monolithic, non-diverse society according to its ideology. Since a society based on one doctrine, a single notion; a society whose individuals are acting in the same typology, will resemble a flock of cattle, it will be very easy for the shepherd to herd. Unfortunately the politics of Turkey has never been liberated from this dream.

Second, the dominant idea here is that the state is the ultimate boss which controls the flow of money. When the state is the sole boss, its resources turn into a bag which whoever comes to power wants to use. This, of course, leads to the endless stories of corruption in this part of the world. Each and every power creates its own rich. And it tries to silence the media to prevent the people from finding out the huge corruption.

Third one has to with a local politics which has not been based on any principles, and that its policy implementation is based on pomposity and lies... As long as these three elements are all out there, media freedom remains utterly distant. To achieve this goal, governments must abandon their lust for creating a monolithic society, give up the practice of using the state resources as a distribution mechanism and stop using a pompous political rhetoric..'

Bildirici⁶³ placed the politics on top two levels, complaining about a key missing element: a common ground for journalists to establish a solid front:

'There are four main obstacles for a free and independent media in Turkey. First, the policies of the AKP. Second, the failure of democratisation. Third, the issues media ownership. Fourth, the chronic problems of professionalism and lack of solidarity.'

Turkish journalists' indifference to the ordeal of their colleagues is a well-known fact. When combined by a polarization of political leanings, and a widespread notion of journalism as a 'missionary conduct' alongside ideological, religious and ethnic identities, the divides within the sector are apparent.

Dağistanlı pointed out the large income gaps at the media that led to hierarchy building over the decades⁶⁴:

'This situation has led managers (journalists) suppress those downstairs (also journalists) till it was taken as a norm; so that it became acceptable in the end and has been met with silence ever since.

Opinion columnists have been seen as more important than the news reporting itself. Many newspapers's fame is linked to its columnists. Censorship during the AKP rule first targeted the news stories. But when this started to happen many of them kept silent, did not seem to bother about the censorship. Because many of them thought that they were writing wonderful opinion pieces, what was the necessity with the news anyway? As long as they were not censored, there was no problem. They therefore fed the culture of censorship rising, supported it somehow. And they, I'd say up to 90% of them, were being paid high amounts of money, for pieces that would never be accepted, for example, to an British newspaper.

But soon it was their turn, and when they lost their columns, they cried censorship! But by then there was almost nobody left inside.'

Can Dündar is a columnist with daily Cumhuriyet. Until last year he was writing columns in daily Milliyet and was a host at NTV channel. He was forced to leave both positions last year.

He added⁶⁵:

'It's our collective shame, for all of us, that in a period our media has been under such a siege there has not been a group of colleagues who said 'we can no longer bear such pressure' and quit together. We could do this in NTV... If we could do this, we would all be somewhere else. We could at least leave a mark behind... Turkish media lost its ability to act in solidarity.'

Tuğrul Eryılmaz, a veteran editor, also had to leave his position at daily Radikal, after years of successful publication of its op-ed supplementary.

In an interview, admitting that 'one should not expect a media in a country different than its political climate. It defines one's journalism and news outlets,' Eryılmaz raised one of the most chilling dimensions - or, consequences - of the systemic oppression: the human factor.⁶⁶

'... each and every human being does not have the same breaking point. In our case, we are speaking about thousands of people. Some who have wives, kids, husbands, debts, credit deficits; others who drink alcohol, or pray, whatever... We speak about journalists of different profiles. They want to test and measure whose breaking point is at what level... Either by direct political intervention, or by the orders of the proprietors, who sense which journalist is disliked by the government, people lose their jobs one after another.

Be it the government pressure, be it the proprietor doing what's expected of them, it doesn't matter, the consequence is the same... It's out of control now. Absolving some 25 % of my colleagues, who insist on doing their jobs properly, the rest of us, altogether succumb to the pressures in order to protect our jobs.

Journalism is to give voice to the voiceless; to monitor the powers on behalf of them. There are no more any journalists who work this way. At the earliest stages, has surrendered their profession to the capital holders and then to the powers. I am feeling under much heavier pressure now. Yet, I had thought that I would be finding myself under much more democratic conditions; how naive!

Sometimes I was changing the wording of the articles that comes from the deputies or academics. Because, I know, that I will run into trouble, will be taken off the job you keep. People are fired with the snap of the finger. Nothing happens to those at the top.'

'The only way out is, digital journalism. It's the only hope for us; social media and reporting online. This has raised the possibilities to expose lies in a shorter time, paves way for free communication. It looks easier as a option for editorial independence, since it sets a stop for biased journalism fed by lucrative checks by the owners...'

When asked about future prospects, and whether or not there is a way out, gloom prevails among many journalists.

Pınar Türeñç said that media freedom is inseparable from the process of democratization; that it can only be measured by the freedoms in general. She added⁶⁷:

'I don't see any way out for a free and independent media. To make a change, we need to act together, in organisations, in trade unions...'

Evin agreed that there might not be a way out any more⁶⁸:

'There is no culture of joint action her no cooperation. Everybody understands journalism as a job wrapped up in ideology. Our most fundamental values are dead. Having principles is crucial but they are badly worn out. Having the know-how of journalism is also a hard one; there is a corrupt culture and shallow knowledge. In our media, ignorance is widespread. Many people around me consider a collective structure without a boss. They believe that it is a way to re-embrace editorial independence. Maybe. So long there are no achievements, but maybe something like this can be a beneficial way out...'

Appendix III

This section highlights the main elements of the complex methodology of the Turkish government, under the leadership of Erdoğan, to oppress and subordinate the significant portions of the media. It explains how Turkish parliament remains reluctant to pursue a pro-freedom agenda for the citizenry, for dissent and for journalism. Further more, it in a detailed account, it clarifies the consolidation of a 'media order', endorsed by an alliance building between the political executive and its branches in the buraucracy; and the media proprietors with a large scope of business interests in other sectors, stripping the journalism off its historic role. It also recounts how the expected reform to turn the the national broadcaster, TRT, into one devoted to public service journalism, is entirely abandoned and, on the contrary, shaped as a government mouthpiece.

Tools of oppression

Even a quick look at the state of freedom and independence of the media in Turkey would suffice to realize that the methodology of the political powers -- often in liaison with the employers in the so-called 'mainstream', central bulk of the sector -- is so multilayered, and sophisticated that it is impossible to reduce its problems to measures that are based on incarceration, even though it remains a dark and persistent part of the ordeal.

As Vanessa H. Larson noted in her article, titled 'Either With Us or Against Us', in Foreign Policy magazine⁶⁹:

'The grim media climate in Turkey today is the outcome of a confluence of problematic legal, financial, and political dynamics.'

Indeed, the complexities are vast and they all lead to censorship and/or self-censorship.

Employment of strong-arm tactics to obstruct the media, to fulfill its role as observing the developments on public interest, in order to inform the society accurately and fairly; provide a platform for a free debate based diversity of opinion and act as a check on power, increasingly varied in the past seven years.

Those can be listed as below:

- **Firings and stigmatisation:** Since late 2012, it has become the most implemented method of liquidation within media. Its effects will be long lasting, since those who are fired tend not to be employed elsewhere, due to their defence of the professional values and practices.
- **Imprisonment:** A conventional measure seemingly inherited from the past decades, it is being applied to silence dissent, in particular on 'partisan' media, with almost exclusive focus on Kurdish publishers, editors and reporters.
- **Legal investigations, prosecutions:** Hundreds of Turkish journalists, including cartoonists, are facing (prospects of) trials. The main part of the legal inquiries launched against them is based on charges on defamation and insult. Other charges on the rise are those based on 'threat to public order' and blasphemy. Overwhelming portions of inquiries and prosecutions in those and similar cases lead, at worst, high fines and prison sentences suspended on condition 'not to be repeated'. This, certainly, is the chief source of chilling effects and deterioration.
- **Publicity bans:** Imposed both by courts and the regulatory, High Board of Radio-Television (RTUK) the bans have since early 2013 have become increasingly frequent, and turn into a rule, rather than exception. Bans relate to events on acts of terror, killings of security staff and corruption cases.

- **Blocking of websites:** the Turkish government has blocked more than 50,000 websites and a legal amendment passed in parliament on Sept. 8 gives Turkey's telecommunications regulator, the TIB, even broader powers. The TIB is now authorized to order the blocking of websites -- within just four hours and without requiring a court order -- in the name of protecting "national security" and "public order." The law further authorizes the TIB to collect all Internet traffic data, paving the way for unprecedented surveillance online.
- **Physical Attacks:** Journalists, newspapers and website offices were subjected to attacks and harassment on legally murky circumstances. Türkiye 2010'dan 1 Kasım 2014'e kadar 401 medya temsilcisi haber peşindeyken saldırıya uğradığı bir ülke.
- **Demonisations, impediments and deportations:** These implementations are relatively new, disrupting a long period of fine conditions for foreign media representatives. Two Azerbaijani journalists were deported last year, as two others reported some forms of legal harassment. A correspondent with the CNN was arrested while reporting live from Taksim Square in Istanbul. Facing a wave of threats, correspondent of Der Spiegel had to leave Turkey temporarily.
- **Wiretappings:** The National Security Organisation has wiretapped journalists, using false names on the warrants in order to avoid judicial scrutiny. The perception among Turkey's journalists of being illegally 'monitored' is very high.
- **Accreditation bans and barring from coverage:** These measures, also inherited from the past times, are on the rise. Media outlets critical of the government see their accreditation credentials increasingly being cancelled from state institutions, celebrations of national days, political rallies etc. In other cases, Anatolian Agency which is now acting as a propaganda mouthpiece for the government, is given exclusive access to certain events, while competing agencies are being blocked.

- **Intimidation and threats:** President Erdoğan continues to attack journalists, domestic and international media institutions, often by name. His attacks follow both news stories and opinion columns. They are seen as the main cause for firings and dismissals.
- **Mobbing:** Many journalists who are seen as 'undesired' by the management for 'disagreeing' with Erdoğan and government policies face mobbing, if not fired. The most common form is psychological pressures and isolation. In some cases they are either passed over to passive duty or 'exile'.
- **Tools of authoritarian control:** Despite some progress with the reform process, the AKP is keen on maintaining two mechanisms which no doubt belong to the early days of the republic, then ruled under one-party system. Both TRT and Anatolian Agency are subordinated by a ministry, which on paper is defined as 'responsible'. In addition, it is still the Directorate General of the Press and Information under the Office of the Prime Minister, which in cooperation with the Turkish Journalists' Association issues the so-called 'yellow press cards', and reserves the right to approve or reject the applications. These cards are officially regarded as the only legitimate ID documents to prove whether or not one is a journalist, nowadays frequently used as a pretext to refuse the right to access and cover events.

a) Mangle of law

A constant element of suppression is the restrictive legislation of Turkey. It reflects a strong, pervasive, recurring 'institutional memory' of authoritarianism. It is also self-explanatory of the persistent culture of intolerance for dissent and criticism widely adopted by the elected political class, judiciary and bureaucracy.

Despite the massive social push for change, there is currently no political party in Turkish parliament, which has been pursuing a solid, vocal pro-freedom agenda. During the past decade, there have even been sad examples of cooperation between the AKP and the two opposition parties, CHP and MHP, on the approval of the laws - such as the Internet Law and Anti-Terror Law. In various cases of amending legislation in favor of the media freedom, there has not been enough mobilisation of the civil society by the opposition, and the articles awaiting reform (such as the notorious # 301, which criminalizes 'insulting Turkishness') fell victim to an acrimonious, tactical fighting between those parties. The tiny pro-Kurdish party has also fallen also remarkably short on adopting a comprehensive pro-freedom stance, limiting its actions to the laws which limit the debate on the Kurdish issue.

The failure of the opposition to unite behind a new, democratic constitution and a struggle for freedoms, is one of the reasons that meant, what the HRW describes as Turkey's 'human rights rollback'⁷⁰.

'Today, the situation in Turkey is more complicated than ever' wrote Eugen Schoulgin, Vice President of PEN International, in a foreword to the PEN report, titled 'Free Expression under a Shadow'⁷¹:

'It even looks as if the neighbouring Arab states have influenced Turkey more than vice versa. The military has been pushed back into the barracks, but the atmosphere between the secularists and the religious society are more tense than ever. The judiciary continues to misuse its own laws. The Anti-Terror Law, which gives the authorities the possibility to hand down ridiculously heavy sentences, remains largely unchanged, and the conflict with the Kurds – after a period of relative calm (the so-called Kurdish Opening) – has reached a new critical point as events in Syria unfold.'

For a long time, it has been the incarceration of journalists that has kept the attention and concerns of the world at a high level. Because of its acuteness and severity, this has occupied the agenda continuously.

At one point of time, in 2010, the number of jailed journalists in Turkey reached a record number: 104, according to the data assembled by BIA. The graphic, however, points out a constant downhill trend since then.

CPJ announced in November 2014 that the number of journalists in jail is now down to seven.

According to BIA Media Monitoring, which cooperates with the Reporters Without Frontiers (RSF), however, as of November 2014, there were still 19 journalists in jail (most of whom are serving prison sentences, on charges related with 'terrorism'). BIA estimated that 12 of those are reported to be Kurds, the rest are Turkish journalists with leftist affiliations. Other sources claim the number to be around 25, as of November 2014.⁷²

After approximately 15 years, what has remained of the so-called judicial reform process today is an impasse due to political interferences and manipulations of power. It is an immense trauma for the rule of law,' said Erol Önderoglu, experienced monitor of media freedom violations.

He added:

'The fall of the jailed journalists from 104 in 2010 to 19 after four years is not a result at all of the government making peace with the media freedom. It happened in order to silence the reactions from abroad to keeping journalists for years pending verdicts.'

'The role defined by the media proprietors in the cantankerous political climate of Turkey and thrust of the government for a polarizing media do not at all mean that a new campaign of arrests will not follow in the future.'

Vanessa Larson wrote⁷³:

'The government has long used overly broad anti-terror laws to crack down on members of illegal Kurdish or leftist groups perceived as threatening the state. Officials often conflate journalistic work sympathetic to these causes with "propaganda" for them or with membership in these groups.'

'The high number of imprisoned and detained journalists in Turkey is a direct consequence of overly broad and aggressively applied antiterrorism laws, combined with a judicial system that too often sees its role as protecting the state, rather than the individual.'

'Flagrant abuses of due process and fair trial are common. Even after several rounds of reform, the antiterrorism laws make it possible to prosecute journalists for producing "propaganda" for terrorist organizations or "aiding" a criminal organization with a low burden of proof. The definitions of "terrorism," "terrorist organization," and "propaganda" continue to be so open-ended that interviews with PKK leaders or descriptions of PKK activities, as well as other "armed" or "terrorist" organizations, could easily be used for prosecution of journalists... These fundamental ambiguities in the law and the history of their use should be remembered when Erdoğan describes the Gülen movement as an "organization" that has committed "treachery."

'Media Freedom is kept under permanent threat of laws and their enforcement,' said Fikret İlkiz, an expert lawyer with vast experience on free speech and freedom of media issues.

According to İlkiz, clauses # 26, 27 and 28 in the constitutions falls severely short of the definitions set by the Article 10 of the European Treaty of Human Rights.

He underlines that the Anti-Terror Law remains the biggest hurdle before the media freedom in Turkey. The Internet Law and the Law on the High Board of Radio-Television (RTÜK), İlkiz mentions as other sources of censorship. Further on, he lines up the Article # 3 of the Press Law - limited to print media - and the articles # 125, 214-217, 220, 285, 288 and 301 as the ones which continue to keep journalism 'shackled' in its practice.

A revised law on the National Intelligence Agency (MIT), adopted in April, increases government surveillance powers and unfettered access to data, protects intelligence personnel from investigation, and increases penalties for whistleblowers and journalists who publish leaked intelligence.

The major paradox that often escapes the attention has to do with the Article # 90 of the Turkish Constitution. It says:

'International agreements duly put into effect have the force of law. No appeal to the Constitutional Court shall be made with regard to these agreements, on the grounds that they are unconstitutional.'

Turkish parliament, with an AKP majority went even further. It added a phrase into the article in May 7, 2004, in order to encourage the courts to rule in liberal, pro-freedom spirit:

'In the case of a conflict between international agreements, duly put into effect, concerning fundamental rights and freedoms and the laws due to differences in provisions on the same matter, the provisions of international agreements shall prevail.'

Until recently, when the Constitutional Court overruled the ban on twitter, almost no lower court successfully preferred to have acted so.

b) *'The Unholy Alliance':*

Government & Media Proprietors vs. Journalism

'Media owners have substantial investments in other sectors. The presence of such economic and financial relations between the government and media owners through processes of privatization, and the issuing of concessions, privileges and royalties undermine media independence.'

Aslı Tunç, academic.

'There is no credible newspaper left. It's about a put-up job between media owners and government. Bosses are afraid. They employ self-censorship and fire people. They don't make proper money from newspaper or TV channels. The fear of

losing public tenders make them smarmy. Actually, many of them don't even want to enter media sector. They find these outlets, as it were, on their lap.'

Pelin Batu, fired columnist

Hrant Dink, a Turkish-Armenian colleague, and a dear friend, was assassinated heinously in broad daylight, in the cold afternoon of January 19, 2007. The crime scene was only meters away from the offices of the courageous, taboo-breaking, reconciliation-seeking, bilingual newspaper he printed, AGOS.

From its inception until that dark day, Hrant was the heart and mind of AGOS: he was its dynamic publisher who also wrote its influential editorials.

The heinous murder caused an immense trauma for the reformist portions of the nation. People, young or old, urban or rural, of all possible affiliations, suddenly had a *deja vu* of the dark days that they hoped had passed.

The realization that the hatred, intolerance and ignorance remained spurred masses to pour out to the streets of Istanbul. This was a manifestation reminiscent of an act, which took place in Ankara after the murder of another prominent journalist, Uğur Mumcu, exactly 14 years before.

Hrant was a publisher. In a sense, he was regarded as the manager and owner of AGOS.

When I was inside the church, where his coffin laid, awaiting the painful ceremony of funeral, my eyes sought desperately, whether or not any Turkish media proprietor, publisher or chief editor were present. With the exception of three editors -who were also his acquaintances - of minor outlets, there were none.

Days after the funeral, it would take me some efforts to persuade the two top media managers of the newspaper I was working for as a news ombudsman to pay a visit to AGOS's offices and pay condolences. Rather unwillingly and uneasily, they accepted to come with me.

If the sense of awareness for the defence of the professional honor and solidarity among Turkey's journalists is problematic, it is far worse among the proprietors of the conglomerate media: there is none. I have never experienced,

in my professional career, spanning over three decades, a proprietor - let alone many as a group - coming out in open declaration of solidarity with journalists and in bold defense of journalism in the interests of the public in general.

Osman Ulagay, a colleague who decided in 2010 to go into a 'self-imposed exile' away from journalism after his column was refused, pointed out to the same phenomenon in a recent interview⁷⁴:

'In 2010 when I decided to stop writing columns, a number of people working in the media and particularly the Doğan Media Group were main targets. In a speech in February, Erdoğan urged the media bosses to take measures against dissident columnists. He even implied that they should fire critical journalists.'

'I wrote a column where I invited the bosses to respond to this call by the prime minister. They did not want to publish that column so I realized there was no reason for me to keep writing for that paper.'

'The suppression of the political powers over us, has always been present' wrote Doğan Akin, Editor of the independent website, T24.⁷⁵

'But this country has always had a media ready to buy suppression. The fear of power, which they subscribed to, was there yesterday, and is here also today.'

'What does buying the fear mean? The answer is in the fact that almost all the news channels and newspapers in Turkey go with losses. Media proprietors announce constantly that they lose money. In huge business deals, wide open to public authority; in every sector spanning from energy and construction, mining and transportation, banking and tourism, are buying these losses for the sake of stability of their corporations! Without a doubt, the influence they gain through the media outlets convert somehow into profits that overwhelm the losses.'

'This is the very architecture of the media order, which is defined by journalists fired, TV programmes discontinued, balcak out of news, deeply biased stories... And the journalism left to those who have not lost their jobs, programmes and columns, is surely limited; very seriously restricted.'

Pelin Batu, a young columnist and TV pundit underlined the role of the media bosses, and also delivered a critique to the most powerful media proprietor in

Turkey for over two decades, Aydın Doğan, of Doğan Group, in a recent interview with daily Bugün⁷⁶:

'Because of their own interests of profit and insolence, we are left with no credible media in this country. Each and everyone of them wants to keep close, so as not to anger the one up there. Aydın Doğan may have claimed that he has lost his fortune because of this but the people lost because of them their right to access to the truth.'

Media bosses apply self-censorship and say that 'this and this can be nuisance for us, let's kick them out'. An elderly in the media whom I respect highly told me: 'We are delivered some lists with the names and told that we should not hire these. In short, they have black lists now.'

There is no doubt that Erdoğan and the AKP government is not acting alone to establish fear and to turn self-censorship in the mainstream media into daily practice, as operational norms.

More than ever before, the media proprietors have enthusiastically joined the 'coalition of the willing' which, in Turkish media as the laboratory of horror, meant a challenge to all journalists who defend ethics and devotion to the social role of the profession. No matter where they seem to stand politically, they in unison are in the service of the powers, subjecting the structure of the sector to systematic destruction.

The AKP's expansive control over the media through an 'unholy alliance' with the employers goes through two ways.

First, by keeping intact the financial ties of the large media groups, whose proprietors are not affiliated with the AKP ideology, to Ankara bureaucracy and, whenever possible, to increase their dependency to the political executive by a 'carrot and stick' policy. 'Carrots' in this case mean lucrative contracts, public tenders and business licenses.

'Sticks' mean exclusion from financial favors and pervasive tax inspections. These groups include Doğan, Doğuş and Ciner groups.

Second, often by way of seizures of some media groups, endorsing a group of business people, who are affiliated with the AKP, either by ideology, piousness, kinship or cronyism. They are invited to enter the media enterprises, an area they know nothing about, often rather unwillingly. It is an unwanted activity, since it comes as part of a 'package' with other lucrative business contracts, through public tenders, but the media outlets mean no profits at all.

Many owners of powerful companies described this, according to Freedom House, 'as a burden rather than a privilege - a levy that must be paid to ensure continued access to government contracts.'⁷⁷

'An increasingly common phenomenon is a game of "pass the can," where holding companies bear the cost of running a pro-government media group for a time and then try to transfer ownership to another beneficiary of government favor as quickly as circumstances allow.'

The result is an atmosphere of complicity, censorship, and outright stenography on the part of a large segment of the media. It is no longer unusual for multiple newspapers to run the same headline when the political stakes are particularly high.'

In its recent report, titled 'Media Barometer, Turkey 2014' (Medya Barometresi, Türkiye 2014), Istanbul branch of Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), underlined the emergence of conglomerates which are directly linked to the government, the so-called 'pool media', as the establishment of what it describes as an even more dangerous 'monolithic ideologisation' and pointed out the following⁷⁸:

'While the capital owners in the past entered into the sector in order to gain advantages in its business activities, and for this provided a pro-government media content, the current political classes in power are now busy encouraging all those willing to bid for public tenders to also own media outlets, in order to create a media exclusively in support for the government policies.'

At the very core of the 'dirty media order' of Turkey is the merger between the desire for absolute power of politicians and sheer greed of the business people.

'Money is the government's most important tool for controlling the media' underlined Freedom House⁷⁹.

'The prime minister's office controls the allocation of billions of dollars in privatized assets, housing contracts, and a public procurement process that allows rewarding favored companies, including those with media arms.'

Vanessa⁸⁰ Larson:

'Almost all the major newspapers and TV channels are owned by around 10 large holding companies that make their real money through extensive business interests in other sectors, such as construction, energy, mining, and tourism.'

'These conglomerates are in fierce competition for lucrative state contracts... with bidding often less than transparent, favorable media coverage often helps pave the way for deals.'

'So it comes as little surprise that 12 years of AKP rule -- the longest period of single-party governance in recent Turkish history -- have left few mainstream media organizations in a position to maintain their editorial independence.'

Caleb Lauer, a Canadian colleague based in Turkey since 2006, wrote in a blog titled 'Editor-in-Chief' for the Caravan website⁸¹:

'Keeping journalists well-behaved helps these massive firms get in on the billions of dollars' worth of state contracts and privatisation tenders the government awards each year—many of them directly through the prime minister's office.'

'Doğuş Holding, which owns a television channel that was harshly criticised for censoring its coverage of the Gezi Park protests, is now building additional lines for the Istanbul metro, a cruise port, and several power plants.'

'For its part, the government is well aware that doing business with corporations with a stake in the media effectively manages coverage in its favour.'

The key instrument for the government to keep the 'umbilical cord' of power with the eager business people is the public procurement system, as highlighted by the Freedom House⁸²:

The role of public tenders and privatization in maintaining government influence over media cannot be overstated. The prime minister's office controls billions of dollars in projects per year as the chair of the Privatization High Council (OIB). The PM has final say over privatization approvals, creating a clear incentive for diversified holding companies to avoid all conflict with his office.

An even larger amount of money flows through the public procurement process. In 2012, the government issued \$46.2 billion worth of contracts, with key holding companies with media outlets eagerly bidding.

Billions more are distributed through the Housing Development Administration (TOKI), also run by the prime minister's office. Defense industry procurement, also overseen by the PM through the Defense Industry Executive Committee, is another major source of patronage and pressure.

Over time, these procurement practices have become even less transparent. In the last two years, amendments to procurement law placed tenders in multiple sectors (including defense, security, intelligence, technology, and railways) outside the purview of the watchdog Public Procurement Authority (KIK) that is responsible for issuing monitoring reports on public tenders.

A change buried in the fourth judicial reform package in 2012 also reduced criminal charges for bid rigging in public tenders.

The Court of Accounts, which is charged with monitoring and reporting to parliament on government spending, was defanged by June 2012 legislation that limited the court's autonomy to pursue audits.

The Constitutional Court overturned the legislation in December 2012, yet the Court of Accounts has been unable to audit public institutions for the last two years and will not be able to do so for at least three more because of an amendment that exempted state institutions from providing account details.

Rethink Institute wrote⁸³:

'The tools that then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan employed to create a loyal media, in essence, are not much different from those of earlier governments...However, the extent and intensity of their use can only match that of Turkey's single-party years (1925-1950). The cross-ownership of media outlets by large conglomerates, starting in the 1980s, further exacerbated the problem.'

Freedom House underlined the asymmetry in the ownership structures in its report⁸⁴:

'A small number of wealthy holding companies own nearly all of the country's most important outlets in both television and print. Many companies are dependent on government favor, and even those with limited direct dealings with the government would find it hard to operate in the face of active hostility.'

Rethink Institute highlighted what the expansion of ownership meant for influence based on self-interest⁸⁵:

'For those huge holdings, owning media outlets became vitally important to preserving and growing their investments in other sectors; being in the media sector provided them with a competitive advantage in benefiting from privatization of government assets and public tenders.'

'Currently, there are four large media groups in Turkey which control the sector: Doğan, Kalyon, Doğuş and Ciner,' told Ceren Sözeri, an expert scholar on the issue:

'The share of revenues in print is led by Doğan Group by 58 %, followed by Sabah, which takes 20 %. In TV, after some sales and take-overs, Doğan Group leads by 30 %, followed by Doğuş 20 %, Kalyon 20 % and Ciner 12%.'

The key part in the media, from the state and government's point of view, is the TV.

All the data available over the years show the same pattern in terms of 'news consumption' in Turkey:

Over 85 % of the public across the country receive the news via private TV channels and the national broadcaster TRT. Almost all networks have their own news operations and regular news bulletins, including the major entertainment channels. In addition, there are more than 18 privately owned 7/24 news channels in the country, somewhat unique in the world in terms of quantity.

It is this segment, so-called 'audiovisual mainstream' which has been the prime target of the AKP, which by simple political logic sees the control over the screens as the control over the masses' political choices.

As the Uludere/Roboski bombing incident, Gezi protests and the graft probes cases showed, the control over the segment is as much as fairly complete -- through direct or indirect political interventions, phone calls, public threats, publicity bans, harsh censorship measures by the High Board of Radio-TV (RTUK), a widespread self-censorship and fear cringed in the newsrooms.

In addition, the content of the public debate programs, political talk shows etc. have been watered down severely: those pundits and experts, columnists and scholars who have been 'suspected' of the critical views have been in the past three years 'cleansed' out of the screens, no longer invited. In the so-called audiovisual mainstream of Turkey today, the possibility of criticizing President Erdoğan directly is minimal, if not non-existent.

Print, not directly regulated by state, is slightly more complicated - and from the point of view of political influence - in terms of exerting full control.

Yet, many newspapers in the so-called 'mainstream', which, according to Freedom House, regardless of their political leanings, can reach an audience beyond the true believers of one ideological group, are also under attack⁸⁶:

These papers include Hürriyet, Milliyet, Sabah and Akşam. A key aspect of the government's efforts to control the media has been to focus most of its attention and pressure on these "mainstream" outlets.

The government-backed sales of Sabah and Akşam to pro-government business groups and the forced sale of Milliyet to a pro-government business group to pay off the Doğan Media Group's tax penalties reduced these papers' independence.

In the most flagrant cases of Sabah and Akşam, the papers have become mouthpieces for the government, what some call 'Erdoğanist' media.

With the AKP winning by a large margin every election, general or local, Erdoğan, emboldened by victories, and decreasingly tolerant for dissent, accelerated the steps to launch a powerful tool to create his own loyal media, in addition to the submissive proprietors from the non-AKP camp.

As the AK Party has consolidated power,' Freedom House wrote, 'it has used the government agency responsible for sales of defaulting companies to transfer control of some of the country's most important media outlets to supporters.'

Aslı Tunç, an academic with Bilgi University, said that the pro-AKP media had controlled only 20 % of the sector ten years ago:

'Media companies are split into 'proponents' and 'opponents' of the government. It is argued that the government has facilitated the establishment of 'proponent' media organizations by providing easy credit, and also by indirectly threatening 'opponent' media owners by opening tax-related procedures against them. The Savings Deposit Insurance Fund's (TMSF) intervention has changed the ownership of various media companies during the last decade. As a result of this, groups previously unengaged in media activities have stepped into the sector.'

The state agency in question was and is the Savings Deposit and Insurance Fund (TMSF) whose acts explain much of the sectoral reformatting that has taken place.

Rethink Institute explains⁸⁷:

'One of the mandates of the TMSF is to recover debts owed to banks and financial institutions; to do that, the agency sometimes took over the assets of companies having payment difficulties, but it had to sell them as soon as possible. In the 1990s, most major media groups had a bank; many of them went bankrupt

during the crisis of 2001 and their assets, including media outlets, were appropriated by the government.

In this way, TMSF, and therefore the government, became an important player in shaping the media sector.

The AKP administration's first project to create its own media was the Star Media group in 2004. The daily Star was launched by the Uzan family in 1999. Due to a case of immense financial fraud, which caused an international dispute between Uzans and, among other companies, Motorola and Nokia, involving \$ 4.8 billion which the Uzans lost. After the bankruptcy, the assets of Star Group were seized by the Savings Deposit and Insurance Fund (TMSF).

Then it was sold to Ethem Sancak, a businessman with close ties Erdoğan. Sancak later launched a new TV channel, Kanal 24, to the group. Financial difficulties led him to build a partnership first with Fettah Tamince, and to sell his majority shares to a former AKP deputy, Tevhid Karakaya, in 2010.

Azerbaijan's state oil company, SOCAR, bought 50% of the Star group in 2010, but the details of the agreement were not disclosed to the public. Tamince in 2014 bought back SOCAR's shares and in two weeks sold them back to Murat Sancak, the nephew of Ethem Sancak.

'The high turnover in ownership and lack of transparency in the transactions justifiably raised questions about the real owner of this media group,' argued Rethink Institute.

The case of Star daily would later develop into a pattern, in which political executive would use its means to gain control over other media groups, told Rethink Institute⁸⁸:

Similar to Star daily, the Sabah-ATV group was taken over by TMSF due to bankruptcy in 2007. In 2008, the group, renamed Turkuaz Medya, was sold to Calik Holding for \$1.1 billion.

The sale was controversial, as Calik Holding was only able to raise \$450 million and the rest was secured as loans from two state-run banks, Vakifbank and Halkbank.

Ahmet Calik, the chairman of the holding, was known to have close ties with the government. The relationship with the government did not end there; the holding's CEO at that time was Berat Albayrak, President Erdogan's son-in-law, and the group's media unit was headed by Albayrak's brother.

Facing financial difficulties, Calik wanted to sell their media assets in 2013 and sought international investors. American companies News Corp., Time Warner Inc., TPG Capital, KKR & Co. and the Abraaj Group from Dubai were interested.

But Calik's holding halted the search, and two months later sold the company to Kalyon Group, which was a member of a consortium that won the public tender to construct Istanbul's newest airport.

Leaked documents and wiretaps from the corruption probe of December 25, 2013 revealed the underlying reasons for the company's decision. According to the documents, then Prime Minister Erdogan had others things in mind regarding the group. He wanted to keep it in loyal hands.

According to the agreement, the Kalyon Group was to pay \$630 million to buy the Turkuaz Group, which would also take over Calik Holding's \$750 million debt with Vakifbank and Halkbank.

However, the Kalyon Group did not have the capital to pay the \$630 million. Erdogan allegedly assigned then minister of Transport, Maritime Affairs and Communications, Binali Yildirim, to pool money from businessmen who had recently won important government tenders.

In exchange, these businessmen were supposedly promised they would receive favors on future government projects. Because of the way the money was raised, some opposition journalists call these pro-government media "pool media" to differentiate them from others that had a pro-government stance due to ideological affinity with the AKP.

In a phone interview with journalist Ismail Kucukkaya, one of the involved businessmen, Nihat Ozdemir, admitted that he had given \$100 million to help the Kalyon Group purchase the Turkuaz Media Group. But he said he had given it as a loan, and in return bought shares from Kalyon's other investments. ,

Cukurova Media Group, which includes two national TV channels, one digital pay-TV operator and two daily newspapers, changed hands in a similar way. The TMSF seized control of the group in 2013 due to unpaid debts of parent companies.

Then the two daily newspapers, the digital pay-TV operator and one of the TV channels were sold to Ethem Sancak, who was the owner of the pro-government Star daily newspaper and the Kanal 24 news channel, but he exited from the sector in 2010.

In 2012, Sancak explained his brief exit from the media sector: “I made media acquisitions because I wanted to support the AKP government at a time when it had little media support. Now the pro-Erdogan establishment is prominent in the media sector. Entering the media sector was a mission for me.”

The TMSF sold the remaining TV channel to Ciner Holding without an open tender; the sale was challenged in court. A year later the TMSF seized the channel again after the court’s decision to stop the purchase.

The AKP government used financial tools to reward loyalties and punish dissent. The most important case was the tax evasion fine imposed on various Dogan Group companies in 2009⁸⁹.

The fines amounted to more than \$3 billion in total. The Dogan Group challenged these penalties in court and won one of the earlier cases, which cancelled \$516 million of the fine. The wiretaps leaked in 2013, revealed that Erdogan was closely following the court decisions.

In the recordings, Erdogan allegedly ordered then minister of justice Sadullah Ergin to make sure that the higher court overturned the lower court decision on the cancellation. The Dogan Group reached a negotiated settlement with the finance ministry in 2011, agreeing to pay \$590 million in total fines.

However, the Dogan Group had to sell two major newspapers, Vatan and Milliyet, and a television station to raise the funds.'

c) TRT and AA:

In the full service of the government

The AKP used its power, exceeding the given legal framework, to transform the national broadcaster, Turkish Radio Television Corporation (TRT), and the country's largest news supplier, the semi-official Anatolian Agency (AA) - two traditional news institutions affiliated with the republic - into full-fledged mouthpieces of its power.

The directors of the two institutions were carefully selected and appointed among the most staunchly loyal bureaucrats, with almost no knowledge or experience over journalism.

Most certainly, neither TRT nor AA was operating as genuinely autonomous, let alone an independent institution prior to the AKP coming to power. Both were under the considerable influence of the tutelary powers, led by the military, which saw them mainly as subservient to the interests of the state, rather than the public.

TRT was also often seen as an institution open to appointments and recruitments by whichever party came to power, and throughout the decades was subjected to overemployment, partisanship and internal polarisation.

Both served as the endorsers of the taboos, and were bastions of the official discourse, polluting the content of the news they disseminated.

Not surprisingly, when Turkey under the AKP accelerated its pace toward EU membership in the first half of the 2000, a chief expectation among the steps to fulfill the Copenhagen Criteria was to radically reform the TRT, in practice was operating as a state broadcaster, into one fully devoted to public service journalism.

The reform was seen as a necessity, since the EU accession process had unleashed social change. A lid was lifted above the large segments of suppressed citizenry: Turkish society as a whole was introduced its own 'glasnost'. The EU process was a tool for transformation long overdue.

Consequently, for its peaceful transition to democratic order, the already existing infrastructure of the TRT for unbiased news and open debate on all the key issues, was seen as *sine qua non*.

Its financial sources provided a grand opportunity. As noted by a EU report:

'The state broadcaster TRT is financed from four sources: 1) An advertising income, making up 3% of the budget, primarily due to the low PSB TV viewing ratings; 2) A 2% levy on the electricity bills of households and industry, contributing 45% of the budget; 3) A levy on the private purchases of consumer electronics contributing 24%; 4) Sales of programmes, tickets, DVDs and CDs, sponsoring and other commercial incomes contributing the remaining 28%. The amount of the two levies is decided by the parliament, but not for a guaranteed period of time. The staff of TRT numbers approximately 7,600. This seems adequate, taking into account that TRT runs 14 TV and many radio channels.'

Yet, as time passed, no reforms were undertaken.

When the law on TRT was passed by the AKP-dominated parliament in June 2008, the end result was only the consolidation of the old order, made even more organically extended to the hegemonic political power: simply put, a propaganda mouthpiece.

The EU task force noted⁹⁰:

In practice, TRT, is not a public service institution but a state broadcaster, firmly controlled by the ruling party, AKP. This party managed to strengthen its grip over TRT during the last decade of uninterrupted rule in the country. Experienced journalists who are familiar with the inner situation in TRT told the research team that as by now the AKP single-handedly runs the country since 10 years, it has managed to extinguish in TRT almost completely leeway and niches for non-controlled reporting that existed in previous times of coalition governments.

In his book, Mustafa Dağıştanlı, depicts the TRT as a totally non-transparent, secretive, non-accountable institution, used by its management for employing 'militant journalists' in the service of the AKP, and a nest for partisanship.

Absolute censorship reigns supreme in the newsrooms, argues Dağıştanlı, quoting an anonymous source⁹¹:

'There is a unit within the prime ministry, which controls all the news texts broadcast by the TRT channels, including also those posted at IST internet sites... One Sunday we were called by the Prime Ministry office, and asked why the news text on Erdoğan was 900 bytes and (opposition leader) Bahçeli's was 2100. How was it possible, we were asked. So, such issues are handled by that unit. All the texts after being broadcast also are sent to them and were used to keep files on each and every staff member. The files are seen as useful for preparing lists for liquidation. There might be, God forbid, some people who may escape the control, or remain there as 'sleepers' and cause trouble (!)'

Although the current law underlines the 'impartiality' of the TRT, its notoriety as a mouthpiece reached a historic height in the autumn of 2014 when the Supreme Electoral Board (YSK) issued penalties to stop broadcasts on more than 25 occasions.

All of them had to with the pro-Erdoğan bias during the municipal elections in March 30, 2014 and the presidential elections in August. In two cases between August 6 and 8, YSK noted that while Erdoğan was given 5 and a half hours of coverage, zero time was devoted to his two contestants.

In its report, FES pointed to the fact that the current law does not allow the existence of a 'public radio-television' and added⁹²:

'As a consequence neither the alternative and oppositional voices nor the various ethnic, religious and cultural identities were represented sufficiently in TRT... Because of limited representation in the community media, weakness of the independent/ alternative media and the ambiguity of the legislation of licensing and operation of the privately owned media, TRT, as a state-controlled public broadcaster, stands out as an important player in Turkish media environment. How the TRT's role as public service institution would be defined remained a

problem along its history. It has constantly been used as a tool for social engineering throughout. While it has been regarded as an instrument for the authoritarian modernism, it has now been utilized for establishing conservatism as the government envisages it. The major reason for this is the structure of its board, which is appointed by the government either directly or through the Supreme Board of Radio and TV (RTUK), also controlled by the government. Much of TRT's staff has been changed during the past decade.'

Similar changes also took place in the Anatolian Agency, when Kemal Öztürk, a former press advisor to the then Prime Minister Erdoğan, in February 2011 was appointed as its director general.

Ever since then, the AA, one of the most established news institutions of Turkey with a vast network of correspondents at home and abroad, was, many anonymous sources say, turned into a propaganda tool, with tectonic changes in staff; and its personnel stripped of collective rights.

Appendix IV

This section aims to put the increasingly complex methods of oppression of the media, now seemingly under consolidation, into a broader context; taking into account the 'developing story of the demise of Turkish journalism' as the most powerful, visible example, which in itself contains all the characteristics, threatening the media freedom and independence, particularly in emerging democracies, where elected leaders tend to choose the path to authoritarianism.

New world media order and global diagnosis

'President Erdogan's new style of media censorship is less brutal—and much more effective.' -

Jacob Weisberg, *Slate*

The condition of the journalism industry and the state of the media sector in Turkey has never left the radar screens of the international monitors, institutions or individuals, for decades.

It is natural. First of all, for political, social, economic and cultural reasons, Turkey stands out from many of its neighbours as a key country, whose direction and progress has powerful impacts, both in terms of its domestic stability, as well as of its role and position in the region and the world.

Secondly, Turkey since the end of the WW1 has been closely tied to Europe, and the West, by its affiliation through more than 30 international institutions. For almost a decade it has been a negotiating partner with the EU - despite the fact that the process has remained bumpy. It has for long been linked to the European Court of Human Rights, since it had signed the European Treaty of Human Rights.

All these fundamental factors and many others combined, and given all its puzzling complexities, Turkey has been under keen observation. It has always

remained in what can be termed as 'the grey zone'. It is a country in democratic transition, although it has lost much of its speed in the past seven years.

The EU accession process meant that the AKP had to open a Pandora's Box a decade ago and invite the society into what can be described as a 'Glasnost a la Turque', which has meant that all the segments of the society voice a need for a new democratic constitution, rule of law, justice for all, proper checks and balances, reconciliation, recognition of suppressed identities, and equal treatment.

Given its extremely diverse social fabric, with a state structure still awaiting radical reform, and its citizenry pushing for a change, Turkey has remained much more open than many countries in north, south and the eastern side of its borders.

So, it is no surprise that its media freedom and independence remains also under constant scrutiny.

The state of journalism in Turkey will be a defining measure of its success - or failure; whether or not it will be able to take its long overdue position in the first league of democracies.

It comes as no surprise, either, we have seen a record number of reports on this issue in the year of 2014, and it is highly likely that those continue into the coming years. The higher the alarm bells rang about the conditions of journalists, the more attention and concern it generated.

They are all justified, and welcome, because some key events - such as the Uludere/Roboski incident, Gezi Park protests and the graft probes involving the government - have proven that the conditions now border on what I call the 'suffocation of the profession'. For the first time in history, many journalists in Turkey are driven into the sense that they are as professionals are being declared as redundant, as 'species facing extinction'.

Gag orders, mass firings, newsrooms as 'open air prisons', jail and prosecutions, banned websites numbering around 60000, and a complete lack of public service broadcasting are all glaring symptoms of the sectorial malaise in its advanced stages.

Welcome as they are, also the content of the international monitoring over Turkish media is crucial to have a glance at. It is crucial not only because they are highlighting a country whose destiny is important to pay attention to, but also because what sends out as SOS signals about its media is identical with many others in the region and the world.

As this discussion paper argues, what is taking place in Turkish media - in terms of freedom, independence, content, structure, ownership, ethics and social role - has turned the country into laboratory study of sorts where almost everything in the sector is going wrong.

In a pessimistic view, it can be said that Turkey embodies all the negative prospects threatening emerging countries ruled under 'authoritarian capitalism' and defined as 'illiberal democracies'. What currently is happening to Turkish journalism can be harbinger of what may happen in a larger scale in other countries.

Therefore, what is being observed, analysed and concluded in all the reports about Turkey will, hopefully, help us understand what is happening with the media elsewhere.

'As recently as last year, Turkey ranked as the world's [top jailer of journalists](#), ahead of even Iran and China. [On a mission last week](#) (October 1-4, 2014) with the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), I was pleased to learn that the list of those imprisoned has shrunk from more than 60 to an apparent seven' wrote Jacob Weisberg, editor-in-chief of the Slate Group⁹³.

'That was the good news from a long day in Ankara. The bad news is that despite a diminished risk of criminal prosecution, media freedom in Turkey has deteriorated in other respects. Journalists we met with in Istanbul described a pervasive atmosphere of fear and self-censorship, a polarized, highly partisan media environment characterized by growing government control and fewer independent voices. The overall picture was of a new style of media censorship that is less brutal, less visible—and much more effective.

'The decline of press freedom in Turkey mirrors developments in [Russia](#), [Hungary](#), and Venezuela, [where neo-authoritarian regimes](#) have

used parallel techniques to control domestic coverage, intimidate foreign correspondents, and censor the Internet. As in Turkey, the survival of opposition publications creates the appearance of a free press. Independent media, meanwhile, is being squeezed out of existence.

John Wihbey:

'Taken together, events in the realm of Turkish media illustrate a subtle and insidious pattern, one that redefines how press freedom may be undermined in the twenty-first century. The case of Turkey has profound implications for many other developing countries, whose precarious media ecosystems may face the same kinds of threats to independence and whose rulers may take a page from the Erdogan playbook.

Simply put, global press freedom is no long just about jailed journalists and shuttered press outlets. Rather, governments can use invisible systems of control, through behind-the-scenes influence on ownership, personnel and editorial decisions, to fundamentally remake news media in the image of the government."

The problem of media self-censorship in Turkey is one of the most overt and glaring examples of its kind, but is by no means an anomaly. The fact that international diagnosis of the problems in Turkey places less emphasis on the repercussions inside media houses, and the atmosphere of fear being created as a result of tremendous but subtle pressure on journalists, has global implications because this trend exists in other countries. There are of course, the stories from China, North Korea, and Iran which we know, and the more subtle stories from Russia and Ukraine that are talked about more often. But there are more examples that are not always closely examined.

In many parts of the world, the developing trend is based on finding shrewd ways of controlling media, silencing critique, by resorting less and less to jailing, and increasingly innovating methods to make the media owners accomplices of curbing journalism, enforcers of strict self-censorship.

In Eastern Europe and the Balkans, self-censorship is now on the march to a common pattern; media ownership structures in many of those countries are being manipulated by political leaderships that suffer from the same profound allergy to an independent media.

'Across Eastern Europe, local oligarchs and investment groups — some directly connected to their countries' political leadership — are snapping up newspapers and other media companies, prompting deep concerns among journalists and others about press freedom' reported New York Times, in a detailed news analysis, titled '**Oligarchs in Eastern Europe Scoop Up Stakes in Media Companies**'⁹⁴.

'It is just one of an array of developments across the region raising questions, a quarter century after the fall of the [Berlin Wall](#), about progress toward Western standards of democracy and free speech. As in Russia, there are increasing worries about a potentially dangerous concentration of power in the hands of people who have managed to acquire both wealth and political influence and are increasingly extending their control to media outlets.'

In [Slovakia](#), a German media company sold a substantial stake in the nation's last serious, independent newspaper to a well-connected investment group that had been among its investigative targets.

[Andrej Babis](#), an agriculture and fertilizer tycoon, not only owns the [Czech Republic](#)'s largest publishing house and several important media outlets, he is the government's minister of finance.

In [Latvia](#), opaque disclosure laws obscured who controlled much of the country's news media until a corruption investigation of one of the country's richest businessmen revealed that he and two other oligarchs were [the principal owners](#).

In [Hungary](#), beyond outright state ownership of much of the news media, top associates of Prime Minister Viktor Orban control significant chunks. Chief among them is [Lajos Simicska](#), who went to school with the prime minister and whose construction company has profited lavishly from state contracts, although the two are said to be feuding of late.

In [Romania](#), the leading television news station, the right-wing [Antena 3](#), is only part of the vast media empire owned by the billionaire [Dan Voiculescu](#), the founder of the country's Conservative Party. In August, Mr. Voiculescu was sentenced to 10 years in prison on money laundering charges.

Several oligarchs control the media companies in [Bulgaria](#), regularly ranked in last place among European Union nations in the World Press Freedom Index. That includes a former lawmaker, [Delyan Peevski](#), whose New Bulgarian Media Group — ostensibly controlled by his mother, though opponents charge that he holds the real power — has been closely linked to governments controlled by several parties.'

The situation is similar in the Balkans, where the media seems free, compared to the conditions of the Cod War, but not independent.

Remzi Lani, Executive Director of Albanian Media Institute, summarized it as follows, in his brilliant analysis, titled, *Lost in Transition*⁹⁵:

'The media in the region are not faced any longer with government pressure to the extent that they were up until a few years ago. Now the media face capitalistic trends and financial pressures such as foreign capital, distribution, transparency, ownership, labour policy and corruption. Hence, a media proletariat is now a new emerging phenomenon in the Balkans.

Nowadays bosses and editors pose more of a direct or immediate threat to journalists than governments do. Therefore, the hot issues in the region are now focused on the relations between media organizations and their employees, the labour market, professional unions and media ownership. This is an agenda that needs to be faced.'

Matthias Barner, Head of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS) Media Program, South Eastern Europe, wrote⁹⁶:

The media in South East Europe often simply repeat what the politicians say. There is little in the way of analysis and not enough real scrutiny. It is a form of press release journalism with a lot of what is said simply being reproduced for

consumption. By doing this the media is helping to create a very superficial information culture. This not only shapes the information behaviour of the population at large but also compromises the professional identity of the journalists.'

'A lot of media owners like to hire young, inexperienced journalists who they think will be nicely compliant. Many of them are afraid to lose their jobs and so there tends to be widespread self-censorship amongst journalists, either because of harassment or because they lack a sense of professional identity.'

In India, the largest democracy in the world with a booming press, comes under fire every single election cycle for a preponderance of 'paid news', whereby media outlets turn into propaganda machines for candidates, and a nexus of tangled government and business interests make proprietors extremely risk averse. The biggest news proprietor in India has said on the record that he is in the advertising business, not the news business, and a crumble of unions has made journalists vulnerable to being removed from their news organizations by their proprietors, and therefore timid in their coverage.

The Philippines, too, has witnessed a rise in self-censorship in media. According to the Philippines Social Sciences Review, "Media repression takes on various forms and at various levels, and it is normalized by the state to preserve itself. The state further colludes with corporate interests to silence critics and crush dissent by fostering an order where individuals are encouraged to practice self-censorship. In capitalist media production where journalists and artists are employed, self-censorship becomes necessary to survive."

(Surveys showed that even in the USA, journalists and news executives hold widespread concern over commercial pressures. More than 40 per cent of journalists admitted shaping their stories to suit company interests, according to a report by the Columbia Journalism Review.)

Such examples can be extended, as the pattern threatening the very core of journalism, its values, practice and social role is transformed into a new shape: whereas the criteria of freedom maintains its position regarding the dictatorships

and the countries where democracy is non-existent, independence as a prime criteria is on the rapid rise in semi and even full-democracies, while measuring the state of the profession and the sector.

So, with regard to a 'new media order' in the service of the power and greed, the questions such as the ones below become at least equally important about those on the quantity of journalists in jail, or those facing charges:

- Is the self-censorship a form of self-imprisonment? When it reaches the stage of being internalized by the staff; enforced systematically by the employers of the media sector, is there be any further need for the political rulers to impose imprisonment?
- If the political powers establish a lucrative 'transactional partnership' with the media moguls through public procurement and 'behind the closed doors' deals, with the proprietors acting as chief censors in the media, is there any further need for state-enforced censorship?
- Why is investigative journalism coverage of corruption and abuses of power practically non-existent in countries like Turkey, Korea, Indonesia, in Eastern Europe, in the Balkans, in Egypt and beyond?
- When an oppressive government, or a regime defined by authoritarian behavior releases all the journalists from jail, are we all invited to believe that the state of journalism in that specific country is back to normal? If not, how should one continue to measure the conditions?
- Should there be - or not be - a clear distinction and sub-categorisation, when monitoring, between 'the critical-independent journalism', and 'journalism blended with activism, opposition, partisanship'? Does the latter fall in the category of dissidence, 'freedom of expression' rather than 'freedom of the media', which are different from each other?
- Is it morally correct that a political leadership which jails journalists is more deserving to be scrutinized and exposed than the others which have chosen more craftily to develop ways to turn the media into compliance to the powers, establish systems that 'normalize' self-censorship and obstruct

the public from to be informed and be participant in debates properly, independently and in diversity?

These are vital questions, which need to be asked more often and more vigorously in today's world, where in many parts authoritarianism is a temptation for the elected leaderships.

Thus, some major international institutions may need to revisit their criteria, now seemingly falling behind the times, and broaden the ways they observe the conditions in given countries.

Many experienced, dedicated, non-partisan journalists in Turkey have not concealed their concern, from time to time, that the reports and analysis by the influential and resourceful international monitors have focused disproportionately on the jailed journalists - while most certainly agreeing that no journalist should be in jail for professional conduct - and often missed the 'big picture', namely failed to highlight the cunning dismantling of the media sector from its very DNA, and downplayed the role of media concentration, non-transparent ownership, its financial dependence to the political executive and job security issues.

Some argued that while jailing and prosecutions can often be cyclical - as the constant downfall of the jailed journalists from 104 to one digit numbers in three years - the destructive structural changes in the media will have far deeper, long term, lasting consequences for the credibility, influence and democratic position of the Fourth Estate, which can - as the case of Turkey and some countries in the Balkans show - delay or even block the democratic transition.

In this context, many reports over-focusing on the number of jailings has become an overly simplistic way of quantifying the state of press freedom in countries, and ignores the long-term structural dangers threatening the journalism in emerging democracies.

The broad diagnoses of the root causes behind the deepening ordeal of journalists and the media organizations in Turkey by various international

organizations provide an example worth to study. In the past two decades they have seemed to be split in emphasis between the two major issues:

- **Freedom:** Legal issues of misinterpretations of existing laws in order to prosecute and imprison journalists; and adaptation of the exclusive, quantitative analysis of those jailed as the prime, in some cases, ultimate criteria.
- **Independence:** Issues of monetary funding and ownership structures, where the government and related entities are able to either arm-twist media outlets with tax penalties, or provide loyal outlets with financial cushions at a time when journalism is facing major losses

Major international organizations have given more emphasis to the more overt pressures on journalists as being the main problem in Turkish journalism—much of the global narrative surrounding media in the country focuses on more on overt incidents like jailing of journalists, threats and calls for blanket bans on websites, Twitter etc.

While CPJ, IPI, RSF and Representative of the Freedom of the Media of the OSCE have operated in a more limited domain of criteria, with the emphasis on freedom, and less on independence, Freedom House has shown the most astute understanding of the subtle dangers and root causes of self-censorship.

Things are changing, however. The regular, annual Progress Reports by the EU on Turkey, have shown a shift of focus on ownership and self-censorship.

The most recent 2014 progress report talks about polarisation of society and the media, which prevents self-regulation and the establishment of common rules for professional ethics, or professional solidarity because of the weakening of trade unions⁹⁷:

“Numerous dismissals of journalists, as well as the high concentration of media ownership in the hands of business conglomerates with interests going far beyond the free circulation of information, continued to lead to widespread self-censorship

by media owners and journalists, including on issues of public interest, such as corruptions allegations.

Key provisions of the Turkish legal framework and their interpretation by members of the judiciary continue to hamper freedom of expression, including freedom of the media.

The ownership structure of the Turkish media, dominated by large industrial groups, combined with at times intimidating statements by high-level officials and warnings by the authorities, also makes self-censorship in the media widespread, as shown when mainstream media failed to report on the June protests. This environment has also led to dismissals and resignations of journalists.'

Changes are also being noted on the independent international monitors. RSF seems to have broadened its criteria, as the CPJ and IPI mention more clearly, albeit timidly, the role of the media proprietors and non-transparent ownership issues, in their reports.

It is a new world, in which the rules of the game are changing, and to which most of these organisations should adapt to. Following the example of Freedom House, they can begin with revisiting their criteria, and make the problems very clearly understandable to the global public.

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⁸⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/report/special-reports/democracy-crisis-corruption-media-and-power-turkey#.VIOPJmTF9LY>

⁸⁵ <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Diminishing-Press-Freedom-in-Turkey-Turkey-Task-Force.pdf>

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⁸⁷ <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Diminishing-Press-Freedom-in-Turkey-Turkey-Task-Force.pdf>

⁸⁸ <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Diminishing-Press-Freedom-in-Turkey-Turkey-Task-Force.pdf>

⁸⁹ Final Report

⁹⁰ Final report as above

⁹¹ Mustafa Dağistanlı, *'5Ne, 1Kim'* (2014)

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