Analyses OSW

CENTRE FOR EASTERN STUDIES 9.03.2016 www.osw.waw.pl

Another stage of the fight with the media in Turkey

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On 4 March, a court in Istanbul issued a ruling to take over the board of administration of the Feza Publications Media Group, whose properties include Turkey's biggest newspaper *Zaman* (which sells more than 600,000 copies), the English-language *Today's Zaman* and the Cihan news agency. The court's verdict was justified by allegations that it was supporting a terrorist group, which is how the authorities consider the movement focused around Fethullah Gülen, a Muslim preacher and businessman to whom the group is linked. The takeover of one of the largest opposition media groups in the country was greeted with protests by its supporters, who gathered in front of the editorial offices of *Zaman* in Istanbul; the police used pepper spray and water cannons to disperse them. The court's judgement has been sharply criticised by the opposition, international organisations (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International) and the US Department of State. Prime Minister Davutoğlu declared that the seizure of Feza Publications has no connection with the government, and that the judgement was handed down by an independent court.

Commentary

- Feza Publications is closely associated with the émigré businessman Fethullah Gülen, a former ally of the ruling party. Gülen is the creator of a commercial empire covering media, business and education, the goal of which is the education of modern Muslim state elites. Since the corruption affair of December 2013, in which media linked to Gülen accused members of the government, as well as then Prime Minister (now President) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of corruption, Gülen and his followers have been considered a terrorist organisation. His community has been accused of attempting to overthrow the government. Gülen's movement is thus the target of consistent resistance; those of his supporters who have been employed in a variety of public institutions have been tried and dismissed, and media controlled by the movement have been taken over by the authorities.
- The takeover of Feza Publications is another instalment in the fight against the opposition media in Turkey. Last autumn the Koza Ipek holding, which is also linked with the Gülen movement, was taken over in the same way and on the basis of similar allegations; it owned two newspapers, two television stations and one radio station, among other properties. As a result, the newspapers reported a drastic decline in sales, and eventually went bankrupt. *Zaman* had been a sharp critic of the government, including on the issue of media takeovers. It was the last important medium of the

conservative opposition. After the designated trustees take control over it, it may share the fate of the newspapers belonging to Koza Ipek.

- The latest takeover of the newspapers took place one week after a ruling by the Constitutional Court that the detention in custody of two journalists from the newspaper *Cumhuriyet*, who had been charged with spying and disclosing state secrets, was illegal. Moreover, this judgement was announced three days before the EU-Turkish summit on the migration crisis. The current phase of the fight against the opposition media can therefore be understood as a demonstration of the government's strength, both in domestic and international terms.