

In this edition of Türkiye in Focus, we delve into the following topics:

- Researcher H. N. Keskin conducted an interview with Asst. Prof. Muhammet Koçak on the Türkiye-brokered spy swap deal between Russia and the West.
- Türkiye has moved to join South Africa's genocide case against Israel, with insights from researcher İhsan Faruk Kulavuz on the matter.
- Instagram has been banned, prompting discussions on freedom of expression and censorship as Meta managers engage in talks with Turkish authorities.
- Researcher Şeymanur Yönt provides an analysis of the new import taxes.

Türkiye Mediated the Biggest Prisoner Exchange between Russia and the West in Recent History. Interview with Asst Prof. Muhammed Koçak



Muhammed Koçak

In a groundbreaking operation, the Turkish government orchestrated the largest prisoner exchange since World War II, involving 26 individuals from seven nations, including Russia, the United States, and Germany. The Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MIT) led the intricate negotiations and logistics, culminating in the successful transfer of prisoners at Ankara's Esenboğa Airport. This operation underscores Türkiye's key role as a mediator, showcasing its diplomatic prowess and bolstering its reputation for managing complex international exchanges. This remarkable event further cements Türkiye's status as a vital player in global diplomacy. Our researcher, H.N. Keskin, conducted an exclusive interview with Muhammed Koçak, an assistant professor at the National Intelligence Academy, who highlighted the significance of Türkiye's role in this momentous operation.

Q: What is the importance and impact of prisoner exchange operations?

A: Prisoner exchange operations are most commonly conducted during wartime, including periods such as World War II, the Cold War, or conflicts involving prominent figures such as agents, spies, or soldiers. To illustrate, during the Second World War, the Germans proposed an exchange of Stalin's son for high profile German captives from the USSR.

Such exchanges have two principal consequences. Primarily, they function as a mechanism for de-escalating the conflict. In such instances, both parties emerge from the exchange with some form of gain, which is a positive outcome. In the context of conflicting parties, this mutual gain represents a step towards de-escalation. Secondly, such exchanges benefit the individuals directly affected by the war, including military personnel, wounded combatants and political prisoners. Similar to the practice of prisoner exchange, during wartime, there are often pauses to allow the warring parties to collect their wounded and deceased. These situations help alleviate the suffering of those affected by the conflict.

In conclusion, prisoner exchanges can de-escalate conflicts and have a positive impact on the lives of those affected by war, including military personnel and political prisoners.

Q: What is the importance of this exchange for Türkiye-Russia-US relations?

A: Any discussion of relations between Türkiye, Russia and the United States must take into account the specific characteristics of each bilateral relationship.

For Türkiye, this episode represented a significant achievement, as it showcased its capacity to engage in diplomatic dialogue with both major powers, namely the United States and Russia. Türkiye assumed the role of a mediator between the two na-



(Mostafa Bassim - Anadolu Agency)

tions, a responsibility that probably no other country could fulfil. The ensuing success illustrates the geopolitical importance of Türkiye and its strategic autonomy within NATO, benefiting not only Türkiye itself but also the United States and its allies.

With regard to the state of relations between the United States and Russia, this exchange does not signify a de-escalation of tensions. Although there is no indication that a full-scale war between the United States and Russia is imminent, the United States is providing support to Ukraine against Russia and has imposed economic sanctions on Russia. Consequently, despite the exchange, the potential for conflict between the United States and Russia remains high.

Regarding Türkiye-Russia relations, Türkiye has demonstrated that it is an actor that is respected and trusted by the current Russian administration. This respect and trust are crucial for Türkiye's diplomatic and strategic positioning.

Q: Why is it significant for Türkiye to be the host of these crucial international diplomatic events?

A: This event is of considerable significance for Türkiye for several reasons.

Firstly, it serves to enhance Türkiye's prestige on the international stage. The role of intermediary in facilitating a high-profile prisoner exchange is one that no other country could have played, thereby underscoring Türkiye's unique position as a NATO member and U.S. ally that also engages with Russia on numerous issues, including the peacebuilding process in Syria.

Secondly, this event serves to enhance Türkiye's soft power. The visibility of this exchange, which involved high-profile figures and took place in Türkiye, provided significant soft power benefits, thus adding to Türkiye's international prestige and influence.

In summary, prisoner exchanges have the potential to de-escalate conflicts and benefit affected individuals. For Türkiye, acting as the platform for such an exchange serves to underscore its strategic importance, enhance its international prestige, and boost its soft power.

Türkiye to Back South Africa's Genocide Case Against Israel at ICJ

On August 7, Türkiye submitted its petition to support South Africa's case against Israel at the ICJ. Researcher İhsan Faruk Kılavuz shared his thoughts on this issue:

"After the Presidential Cabinet Meeting, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that Türkiye would officially apply to The Hague to intervene in the genocide case brought by South Africa against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ).

Ankara had been planning this intervention since South Africa initially filed the case. Following an extensive and meticulous preparation process, it submitted its official application for intervention on 7 August under Article 63 of the ICJ Statute, allowing states not to direct parties to a case but to have signed the UN Genocide Convention to intervene.

Türkiye's request to intervene highlights its dedication to fulfilling political and legal responsibilities on the international stage, carrying notable legal and political ramifications. The comprehensive and carefully prepared document, developed over a long period, is anticipated to impact the case substantially. This document offers a detailed legal framework that supports South Africa's claims and interprets the relevant articles of the Genocide Convention in light of Israel's actions in Gaza since 7 October 2023. It presents compelling evidence to the Court, aiming to demonstrate that Israel has committed genocide and other war crimes through its military operations in Gaza.

Türkiye aims to prevent Israel from achieving impunity under international law by citing precedent-setting decisions from international judicial bodies, particularly the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in similar past cases. Within this context, Türkiye's application refers to the ICJ's 19 July recommendation that recognises Israel as the occupying power in Gaza. Additionally, Türkiye highlights the Court's previous provisional measures, emphasising that Israel must cease its attacks on Gaza and open the Rafah border crossing for humanitarian aid.

Türkiye's request for intervention is also expected to encourage other countries in the region to join the case and increase international political pressure on Israel. Countries such as the Palestinian Authority, Spain, Ireland, Belgium, Egypt, Mexico, Colombia, Nicaragua, Libya, Maldives, Chile, and Cuba have already requested participation in favour of South Africa.

This intervention, alongside broader regional peace efforts, is likely to motivate other countries to address violations of international law in Gaza more actively and defend Palestinian rights. This collective effort aims to create a united front, increasing pressure on Israel to comply with international law and humanitarian norms. Ultimately, Ankara's efforts in this significant legal challenge bolster South Africa's position as the plaintiff and signal a broader international commitment to justice and accountability."

Instagram Ban Sparks Controversy in Türkiye

On Friday, August 2, Turkish social media users found themselves unable to access Instagram, as the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK) had blocked the platform. Initial reports suggested that the ban was in response to Instagram's removal of a post by the Turkish Communication Presidency about İsmail Haniyeh. This followed a wave of content removals and restrictions on posts related to Palestine, especially after Haniyeh's assassination, sparking widespread concern among Turkish users.

However, the Minister of Transport and Infrastructure later clarified that the ban was due to Instagram's failure to address a catalogue of crimes, such as child abuse and incitement to gambling. Just five days later, the gaming platform Roblox was also blocked, with the Minister of Justice Yılmaz Tunç citing concerns over content that could lead to child abuse.

The bans have ignited debate, with some viewing them as politically motivated efforts by the government to curb freedom of expression. Conversely, social media platforms like Instagram are often criticized for their own censorship practices, particularly highlighted by the removal of Palestine-related posts, which has drawn global criticism.



(Didem Mente - Anadolu Agency)

Instagram also plays a significant role in Türkiye's informal economy, facilitating untaxed economic activities. Trade Minister Ömer Bolat noted the challenges this poses, but the ban has also disrupted significant trade conducted via the platform.

Ongoing discussions between Meta and Turkish authorities have yet to resolve the issue, but the mutual negative impact suggests a resolution may be on the horizon.

New Import Taxes in Effect

We asked researcher Şeymanur Yönt about the new tax regulations on imports:

"Starting August 21, Türkiye's customs law will be amended to lower the value threshold for import taxes on goods received via postal or express courier services and to raise the import tax rates. Previously, import tax applied to items valued up to €150. The new amendment reduces this threshold to €30. Additionally, the import tax rate has been increased from 20% to 30% for goods from EU countries, and from 30% to 60% for goods from other countries. Certain items, including cosmetic products, books, kitchenware, and electrical devices, will also incur an extra 20% tax.

It is important to note that such import tax applies to products sent to real persons. Therefore, products received by legal persons, such as companies involved in e-commerce or

manufacturers, are not covered by this amendment. Moreover, the import tax applies to purchases made not in commercial quantities or of commercial nature. Therefore, for example, a manufacturer's bulk purchase of raw materials will not be subject to this tax.

Türkiye's recent import tax increases may offer immediate benefits, such as boosting domestic revenue and reducing the trade deficit, but these advantages are likely to be short-lived and could have detrimental long-term effects. The policy may create barriers for consumers and small businesses and does not address fundamental structural issues within the economy. To achieve sustained economic growth and effectively support domestic industries, Türkiye should replace these short-term measures with long-term structural reforms, such as investing in education, innovation, and infrastructure.

Highlights

- The Steel Dome project, which aims to integrate the systems protecting Türkiye's airspace, has been announced..
- Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan paid a visit to Egypt. He met with the Egyptian president and his counterpart. President Erdoğan also paid a visit to Cairo in February. The normalisation process between the two countries continues.
- The women's national volleyball team will play the bronze medal match against Brazil at the Paris 2024 Olympics on Saturday, August 10.

Recent Publications by TRT World Research Centre

- Meta's censorship: Freedom is a 2-way road by Burak Elmalı
- Olympic outrage: Paris ceremony sparks global backlash by Dr Tarek Cherkaoui



Send us leads and feedback at:

turkiyeinfofocus@gmail.com