

Stiglitz at Davos Blasts Turkey's Blacklisting of Professors

Isobel Finkel

is_fink

January 21, 2016 — 4:21 AM EST

Updated on January 21, 2016 — 7:42 AM EST

- ▶ More than 1,100 professors investigated after signing letter
- ▶ Nobel Prize winner plans to raise issue with Turkish officials

You can't become a knowledge economy by going after your brightest minds.

So says Joseph Stiglitz, a Nobel Prize winner in economics, speaking after Turkey's highest education authority last week announced an investigation into more than 1,100 academics. They had signed a petition calling on the government to redouble efforts for peace in the southeast, where for months the military has been fighting an insurgency in largely Kurdish cities.



Joseph Stiglitz

Photographer: David Paul Morris/Bloomberg

The petition was signed by international academics, including Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Judith Butler of the University of California, Berkeley, and faculty members at Turkey's top universities. By the end of the week, professors in Turkey were subject to police raids, several had lost their jobs and at least a dozen were detained, according to press reports.

That pressure will have a "chilling effect," according to Stiglitz, who said he intends to raise the issue when

he meets Turkish officials at the World Economic forum in Davos, Switzerland. He's attending a dinner Thursday with Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. He'd been scheduled to appear on a panel with Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Simsek, the country's top economic official, but Simsek instead attended a talk by Davutoglu.

Brain Drain?

"This will lead to an exodus of academics," said Stiglitz, a professor at Columbia University in New York. In Davos, he said in a phone interview, policy makers are focusing on how to arrest a slowdown in some of the world's biggest economies. "One of the ways you do that is by becoming an innovation economy. How can you achieve that without academic freedom?"

The crackdown on universities reflects increasing government influence over Turkey's military, law enforcement, media and judiciary. It's accelerated since Recep Tayyip Erdogan became president in 2014 after serving as prime minister for more than a decade.

Turkey's government is "sending a clear message that dissent on key matters is not tolerated," Wolfango Piccoli, co-president of Teneo Intelligence in London, said by e-mail on Jan. 15. "By conflating dissenting remarks with terrorism and security, the government is able to minimize and sideline any critical view and actually sustain support for its crushing down on freedom of the media and speech."

Terrorist Listing

Erdogan Tuesday repeated his view that the "so-called" academics were supporting terrorism and siding with the PKK, whose fight with the Turkish state has escalated, bringing urban warfare to southeastern cities. The PKK is also listed as a terrorist organization by the U.S. and EU.

Those who stand with "mass murderers" have "committed the same crime," Erdogan said on Jan. 15, calling on Turkey's judiciary and universities to take action against academics who signed the letter.

The office of the Turkish prime minister didn't immediately respond to requests for a response to Stiglitz's comments.

Parliament Control

It's through expanding the powers of his presidency that Turkey's economy will soar, Erdogan has said, as he looks ahead to a debate on altering the constitution to enshrine stronger powers for his office. The party he founded regained control of parliament last November, under Davutoglu's leadership, with 49 percent of the vote.

Davutoglu says one of his government's priorities is raising the value of what Turkey produces, with the help of the nation's institutions of higher learning. Aziz Sancar, a professor at the University of North Carolina's medical school, was one of three recipients of the Nobel Prize in chemistry last year, the first time a Turk had received a scientific Nobel.

"We're going to incentivize the production and export of high value-added, high-tech products," Davutoglu said in a meeting with foreign companies in Istanbul Friday. "With cooperation between universities, the public sector and business world, we aim to increase high value-added production."

Priority Questions

Erdogan has devoted airtime to the dissenting academics in each of the public addresses he's made since a bomb blast blamed on Islamic State killed 10 people in central Istanbul earlier this month. While Turkey is at the epicenter of challenges that are topping the Davos agenda -- the migration crisis, the fight against Islamic State, the slowdown in emerging markets -- it's undermining itself with a focus on "fake" issues, Stiglitz said.

"In the context of the turmoil in the Middle East, the broad sentiment here is one of criticism for Turkey's actions, when the priority should be dealing with ISIS," said Stiglitz, formerly chief economist of the World Bank.

That's hurting the image of Turkey, a NATO member and the Middle East's largest economy, he said: "Ten years ago it was viewed as a new model for progressive, Islamic parties in the region. Now no one's saying that."

Before it's here, it's on the Bloomberg Terminal.

• Davos WEF • Turkey • Joe Stiglitz • Davos • Ahmet Davutoglu