
OSCE'S THIRD CO-CHAIR FRANCE TO BE REPLACED BY TURKEY IN MINSK GROUP?

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5 February 2012 Today's Zaman After the French Senate passed a bill penalizing denying the 1915 killings of Armenians at the hands of Ottoman Turks constituted genocide, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, speaking in an interview broadcast by news channel CNN Türk on Jan. 28, denounced France's co-chairmanship of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Minsk Group. Although Azerbaijanis are in favor of replacing France as co-chair, finding France biased, Armenians are satisfied with the French role as a co-chair, claiming the country is non-aligned and impartial. Talking to Today's Zaman, Fazil Mustafa, an Azerbaijani deputy, says it is justifiable that Turkey calls into question the French co-chairmanship, underlining that France must be replaced by Turkey. Commenting on the French bill criminalizing the denial of the Armenian Genocide, Mustafa says that by passing the bill France revealed its biased and one-sided position, and added that the argument put forward by senior Turkish officials is reasonable.

France's position as a co-chair of the Minsk Group has been compromised. The country is not neutral, a prerequisite for any mediator. France supports Armenia in opposition to Azerbaijan, so the country must be made to give up its position. Following the approval of the bill in France's lower house, Turkish President Abdullah Gül announced that France should withdraw from the Minsk Group if the bill is approved by the French Senate and becomes law as this would mean that France is no longer neutral in the resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Gül's statement was recently restated by Davutoğlu, meaning the issue of the French co-chairmanship needs to be reconsidered. Considering the issue political rhetoric, Sabine Freizer, the Istanbul-based director of the International Crisis Groups Europe Program, in an interview with Today's Zaman commented on the chances of any changes in co-chairs, saying it is unlikely that Turkey will get France replaced. "I don't believe that Turkey will get much support from the OSCE states when it tries to link the problems of the Minsk Group with the passage of legislation in France that penalizes persons denying the genocide," she said. "France needs to get the support of all 56 participating states -- or at least of the country that chairs the organization at that time. It will also need the support of Armenia, Azerbaijan and the other three current co-chairing countries, the US, France and Russia," Freizer added. The OSCE, the world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization, works on the basis of consensus, so if Armenia, as a member of the OSCE, vetoes Turkey's co-chairmanship of the Minsk Group, Turkey cannot become the Minsk Group's co-chair. Richard Giragosian, director of the Yerevan-based Armenian Center for Regional Studies, considers the removal of France from the Minsk Group unlikely, especially as earlier pressure from within the EU failed to unseat the French. Freizer also stated that when the issue of replacing France as co-chair by another EU country was on the table, her team was in favor, saying that "the EU would be responsible for much of the technical [nation building] and financial support if there is ever a peace agreement." Hence, the expert thinks that any kind of change in the leadership of the Minsk Group will be difficult to pass. Praising Turkey's enthusiasm for the Minsk Group, Giragosian says an active Turkey within the Minsk Group "will play a greater and more direct role in the region

through this under-used format [Minsk group mediation]. According to Giragosian, if Turkey truly seeks to benefit from a new dynamic focus on the OSCE, it needs to reconsider the reconciliation process between Armenians and Turks. The quickest path toward garnering diplomatic dividends would be to re-engage and restart the normalization process with Armenia in a more sincere and resolute manner, he said. Commenting on the role of the Minsk Group in the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Mustafa says the Minsk Group seems to have failed as the conflict has remained unresolved for two decades and progress in the negotiations process has been minimal. Mustafa notes that questioning the French position in the Minsk Group could be a shortcut to the start of calling into question the group's very mandate. The Azerbaijani deputy considers the Minsk Group ineffective as it does not follow up on its commitments. Only France, but the Minsk Group in its entirety needs to be replaced. It is better that the Minsk Group be replaced by an international institution such as the UN so that the Minsk Group, with its biased member states openly supporting Armenia, does not ossify and that its impartiality does not become permanent, he said. Considering the Minsk Group format in many ways outdated, Freizer thinks that a serious discussion is needed on the value and effectiveness of the Minsk Group format. The Minsk Group was established in 1992 to encourage a peaceful resolution of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, which erupted in the late 1980s between Armenia and Azerbaijan. The Minsk Group has been mediating for 20 years between the conflicting sides, however, no positive results have yet been reached, making the Minsk Group an institution with an unfinished mission. Today's Zaman - Lamiya Adilgızı

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