



Cuneyd Zapsu

Cuneyd Zapsu, a successful and wealthy businessman from Turkey, was among the founders of the AKP in 2001 and became one of the closest advisers of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Zapsu was born in 1956 in Istanbul, but had to spend part of his childhood in Munich, Germany. His father, active in the ruling Democratic Party, had to leave Turkey following a military coup in 1960. (The coup resulted in the prosecution and execution of the DP's senior members.) In the second half of the 1960s, the family returned to Istanbul. Zapsu attended the German High School there and later studied business administration in Istanbul and Munich.

After finishing his studies in Munich in 1979, Zapsu established a successful business importing hazelnuts from Turkey. In the 1980s he returned to Turkey and became involved in the family business, Azizler Holding, which mainly exported hazelnuts. Later on, he also owned the supermarket chain BIM for a while.

In the late 1980s, Zapsu met Tayyip Erdogan. As he told ESI, the two men took an immediate liking to each other. Zapsu, he recalls, felt that Erdogan could become a national leader. In August 2001, Erdogan, Zapsu and other Turkish personalities founded the AKP. When Erdogan became prime minister in 2003, Zapsu became his main adviser for relations with the US and Europe. Zapsu told ESI that his knowledge of English and German, as well as of what he calls the “Western mentality,” was a decisive factor. Since he was familiar with Erdogan’s way of thinking and his manner of speaking, Zapsu often served as an interpreter during the new prime minister’s meetings with Western leaders.

Zapsu is intimately familiar with Turkey's recent history and all major decisions that Erdogan has taken since the AKP came to power in 2002. However, he insists that his primary motivation in life has been business and that he only “assisted” Erdogan. His family has been in politics for generations, however. His father was politically active until the 1960 coup; his

grandfather, Abdurrahim Zapsu, was a respected political and religious leader among the Kurds, for which he was persecuted by the new Republican regime in the 1920s and 1930s; another member of the family, Musa Anter, an intellectual and writer, was an emblematic figure in the Kurdish struggle; he was murdered in 1992.

Since 2008, Zapsu has focused on business again, mostly advising companies from the US, Germany, Russia and the Gulf, including private equity and energy firms, on investing in Turkey. He is a member of the board of directors of the International Nut and Dried Fruit Council, an association of businesspeople active in this sector. He is also a member of the World Economic Forum, the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (TUSIAD) and the Turkish American Business Council. Zapsu lives in Istanbul and is married with three children.

In his interview with ESI, Zapsu talks about the last ten years of Turkish history: about Turkey's economic recovery, the challenge of providing education to Turkey's youth, the AKP's fight against bureaucracy, the struggle to change Turkey's image, the EU accession process, what many Turks perceive as the EU's double standards, Germany's role, his relationship to Erdogan, and the need for a visa liberalisation process with the EU.