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Turkey's Media and the Rise of Misinformation

Turkey's Information Battle: Politics, Media Control, and Misinformation

About the Article

Question: How has Turkey's politics shaped its information ecosystem? Argument: AKP/Erdoğan control media and manipulate narratives. Conclusion: Media is regulated, polarized, and limits press freedom

About the Author

As a dedicated Radboud University Premaster Business student, **Liam von der Wiede** am passionate about expanding his academic knowledge and skills in International Politics, and Business Administration. Moreover, he is proud to be a member of the 22nd United Netherlands Delegation, where he engages and improves his skills in diplomacy, international relations, and teamwork. His experiences have deepened his interest in learning languages and getting to know people with diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Focused on developing soft skills, particularly in teamwork, leadership and negotiation.

1. Introduction

In March 2025, mass protests erupted in Istanbul. Two million participants went to the streets and called for the release of the imprisoned mayor of Istanbul, and opposition party candidate, Ekrem Imamoglu (Michaelson 2025). While the immediate reason for this protest was the imprisonment, it must be seen as a broader historical reflection of what many critics see as democratic backsliding within Turkey (Toksabay and Erkoyun 2025). Over the past two decades, the systematic erosion of institutional checks and balances has undermined the judiciary, executive, and legislative branches of governance. Yet it is perhaps the press that has experienced the most profound transformation, especially after the Turkish 2022 Disinformation Law. Since then, the Turkish media landscape has been increasingly reshaped under government-led constraints on freedom of the press, and the growing influence of both domestic propaganda and foreign disinformation campaigns. As such, Turkey offers an important case for examining how disinformation, democratic resilience and media freedoms interact with democratic governance. Therefore, this article will grapple with the question: In what ways has Turkey's political evolution in the last 20 years shaped its information ecosystem and the control of public narratives? The paper argues that the AKP, the ruling party, and the president effectively reshaped the Turkish media landscape, undermined critical political discourse, oppressed the opposition, and consolidated political power. Foreign actors, while gaining prominence, are only of secondary importance. First, the paper will introduce the political background of Turkey over the past 20 years. Then it will elaborate on the rise of the information age, with a particular focus on social media and the COVID-19 infodemic. Next, it discusses how the AKP and President Erdoğan increase their state control by controlling the information landscape. Lastly, the paper will shed light on the importance of foreign actors and their impact on the Turkish information ecosystem.

2. Political Background

Before 2001, Turkey witnessed a series of difficulties, including continuous political unrest, financial crises in 2001, and economic turbulence (Kubilay 2022, 2-3). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) was founded in 2001 and successfully took advantage of this widespread public frustration and presented itself as a party of political stability and economic reform (Kubilay 2022, 2-3). By appealing to conservative and centrist voters, the AKP gained broad popular support among Turks and won all national elections since 2002, which made Erdogan prime minister in 2002 (Yeşilada 2016, 21; Esen 2024, 7). When Erdoğan became prime minister, the presidency was largely symbolic while both the judiciary and the military were still powerful political actors. In the next decade, Erdoğan reduced the influence of the judiciary over politics through institutional reforms (Esen 2024, 12). Even though these changes were framed as efforts to strengthen civilian governance, they were highly contested and critics argued that it weakened judicial independence and limited media pluralism. In 2007, a constitutional amendment was introduced that allowed direct presidential elections, which set the stage for Erdoğan's 2014 election victory as Turkey's first popularly elected president (Yeşilada 2016, 23; Esen 2024, 12). Later, in 2016, a failed military coup served as a turning point and enabled Erdoğan and the AKP to justify a constitutional referendum on transitioning Turkey to an executive presidential system. Moreover, it gave the government the possibility to detain more than 77,000 people and suspend about 150,000 civil servants and military personnel (BBC 2019). With the support of the majority of the public, the new system was enacted in 2018 and created a presidency with unprecedented political power over the executive and judiciary branches (Kersting and Grömping 2021, 224; Esen 2024, 14). Together with the AKP's parliamentary majority, the new system effectively centralized power around Erdogan. Turkish politics was therefore transformed from a parliamentary system limited by judicial and military oversight into a personalized presidential system supported by party control (Esen 2024, 15).

3. The Information Age

In the middle of the political transformation in Turkish politics, social media became increasingly more popular in the mid-2000s. The rise of social media marked a dramatic shift in how people across the globe, and also in Turkey, receive and share information. While the internet had already existed for some time, the widespread adoption of platforms such as WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter (now X) in the 2010s fundamentally changed the political and social landscape globally. Initially, it was seen as a democratizing force that would allow collective organization and resistance against authoritarianism. A prominent example is the Arab Spring in 2011, in which protestors organized themselves through social media to call for democratic reforms across the MENA region. However, over time, social media evolved into something that could also endanger democracies, and again, Turkey was no exception. In Turkey, platforms became saturated with partisan content, bots, and trolls (Kirdemir 2020, 6), while emotional appeals rooted in anger and fear contributed to escalating polarization. The digital sphere not only increased the competitive and polarized tendencies of traditional media (Kirdemir 2020, 4) but also further undermined public trust, already weakened by longstanding structural problems within Turkey's media system (Yurdakul 2020, 4). Social media helped to spread rumors, xenophobic narratives, and disinformation campaigns. Even more, it left Turkish society fragmented and vulnerable to manipulation in an increasingly volatile information ecosystem. This newly emerging breeding ground of social change was followed by the global COVID-19 health crisis that hit Turkey hard and exacerbated the ongoing political turmoil. Not only did the entire world and Turkey fall into a pandemic, but also an infodemic (Kirdemir 2020, 12). The pandemic negatively influenced the already fragile Turkish information environment to a significant extent in that it accelerated mis-, dis-, and malinformation flows of any kind (Yurdakul 2020, 3). Before and during the spread of COVID-19 in Turkey, many cases of false

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False information spread to
manipulate public opinion**

information seen in other countries also appeared on Turkish-language platforms. Prevention and cures, the nature of the virus, conspiracy theories relating to origins and nature of the pandemic, false claims about 5G communication technology, biological weapons, and grand conspiracies to control or curb the world population were the most frequent narrative types in this category (Kirdemir 2020, 15). Examples of these sorts of false information included that COVID-19 could be cured with garlic, vinegar, herbal cures, and saltwater, that only Asians could get coronavirus, or that it was caused by Chinese culture or race (Kirdemir 2020, 16). This multi-dimensional misuse of information from various actors harmed the Turkish information environment, since it undermined trust in traditional media outlets, which had to grapple immensely with the flood of misinformation. An additional problem is that fact-checking is still rather new, or not as popular (Yurdakul 2020, 11; Kirdemir 2020, 18; Bek 2025, 222-223), leading to a situation where misinformation almost spreads completely unregulated. Often enough, Turkish media outlets were taking over false narratives and also published them online; all in all, at much higher rates than media outlets in most other countries (Kirdemir 2020, 14). Besides, this rise of misinformation also intensified the political polarization in Turkish politics along party lines. Fake accounts, trolls, and bots took over online discourses on social networks and shaped political narratives. The outcome was a self-reinforcing feedback loop between three factors: polarization, toxicity, and false information. Each factor fueled the other two, thereby creating a vicious circle: greater polarization encouraged the spread of false information; false information deepened polarization; and both drove increasingly toxic discourse (Kirdemir 2020, 6-7). In sum, the COVID-19 pandemic showed how an already fragile information environment, combined with political polarization, was highly prone to any form of mal-, mis-, and disinformation and fundamentally hurt Turkish public discourse.

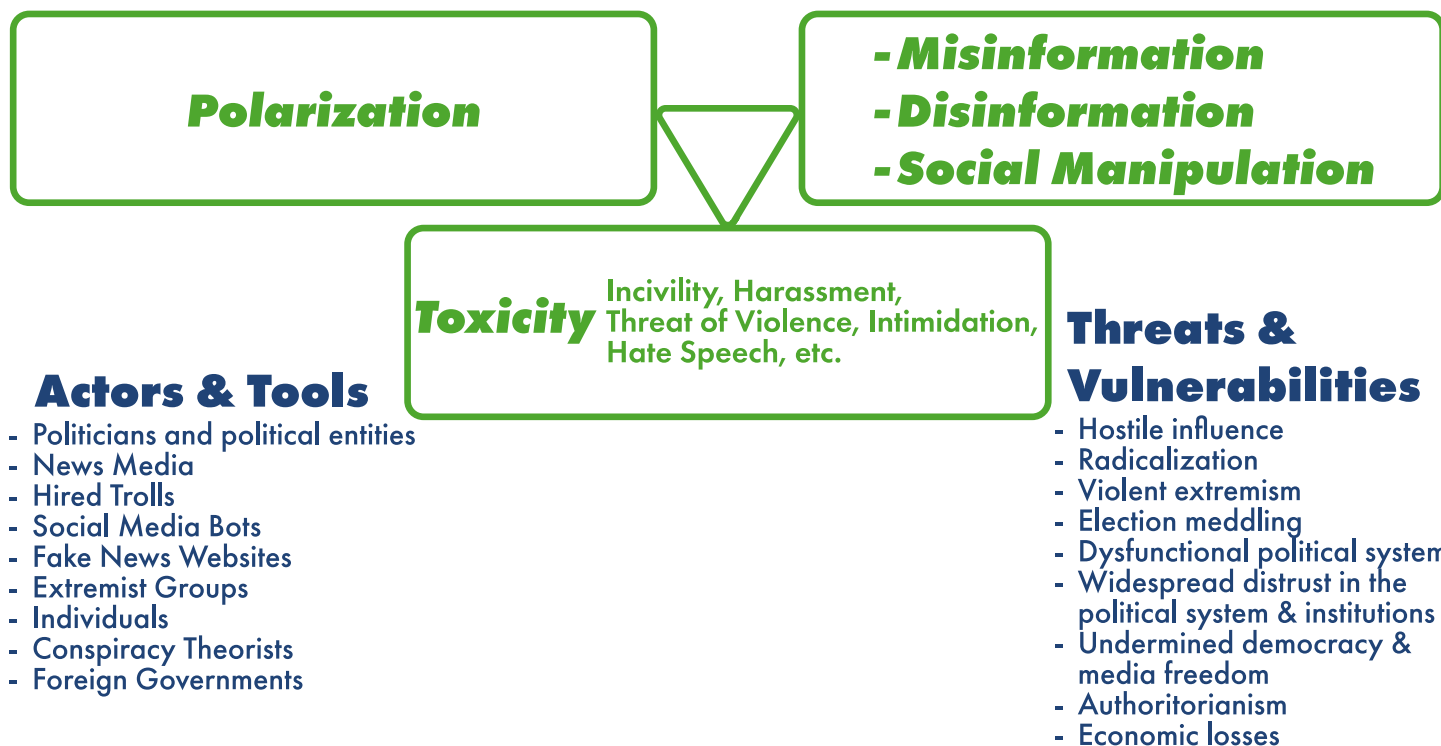


Figure 1: The self-reinforcing system of false information, polarization, and toxic discourse in Turkey (Kirdemir 2020, 7)

4. Autocratization of the Information Landscape

Since the early 2010s, the AKP government has increased its control over the press and social media. While in the early stages, social media was declared as a „source of evil“ by Erdogan and other AKP politicians, later it was used to shape public narratives with the help of trolls (Bek 2025, 220). In 2013, during the military coup, where Fethullah Gülen, a clergyman and previously a friend of Erdogan and the AKP, was arrested, the government revealed that FETÖ, the terrorist organization that tried to overthrow the ruling party, promoted disinformation and propaganda on social media to create chaos within Turkey (Bek 2025, 222). Critics, therefore, argue that disinformation is used to portray enemies of the party clearly, at the same time, when the AKP is also using social media as its domain of influence (Bek 2025, 222). With the rise of COVID-19, the Turkish government blocked, in 2020 alone, 467011 websites, domain names were blocked, 22554 news articles were blocked, and 15,832 news articles were deleted (Bek 2025, 225). Moreover, the Free Web Turkey project reports that in 2021, around 11,050 URLs, domain names, and social media posts were blocked, while 49 news websites were banned (Free Web Turkey 2022). In 2022, five media representatives were

detained, 20 media representatives were attacked, and 126 media representatives went to court between July and August (Bek 2025, 225). With the enactment of the Amendment to the Press Law (number 7418), published on the official government website on October 13, 2022, a major change in press freedom appeared. Article 29 stipulates that anyone who publicly publishes false information concerning the internal and external security, public order, and public health of the country with the aim of creating anxiety, fear, or panic among the public shall be punished with imprisonment of 1 to 3 years (Turkey 2022, art. 29). Additionally, Articles 3 and 4 state that news websites and social media platforms need to store news content for a certain period of time and make it available upon request (Turkey 2022, art. 3, 4). While the government claims that this law is in place to protect the public from disinformation, critics argue that the law must be considered as criminalising journalism and limiting freedom of information, since it is unclear what mis-, or disinformation, or even danger means, and is only up to the courts to decide — the same courts that are overly represented by the AKP and its allies (Bek 2025, 225). On the other hand, Erdogan and his allies continue to spread

misinformation themselves. During the 2023 national election, which Erdogan won once again, a widely circulated video depicted Kılıçdaroğlu encouraging people to vote, followed by an endorsement from Karayılan, a co-founder of the PKK, which helped the AKP to spread their narrative that the opposition party is working together with the Kurdish terrorist organization (Andi et al. 2025, 7; Bek 2025, 225). The same narrative was used to crack down on the opposition candidate for the upcoming election in

2028, Imamglou, who was arrested in March 2025 due to alleged support for the PKK, and „several financial crimes“ (Fraser 2025). The arrest enflamed nationwide protests, which led to an even more crackdown on opposition voices (Aslan 2025). Today, Turkey has experienced around two decades of democratic backsliding, alongside polarization. About 90% of all news outlets are controlled directly or indirectly by the government, while social media is now regulated by the new Disinformation Law (Andi et al. 2025, 7). When it comes to press freedom, Turkey ranks globally in 159th place, on the same level as Sudan and Venezuela (RSF 2025). Moreover, it is one of the six most rapidly autocratizing states worldwide, aside from Brazil, Hungary, India, Poland, and Serbia (Boese et al. 2022, 990).

5. Geopolitics and Foreign Influence

Turkey is at the center of many regions, with various state and non-state actors that have various interests. It borders not only countries in the Caucasus, such as Armenia and Georgia, but also in the Middle East, such as Syria, Iran, and Iraq, and Europe, including Greece, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. Moreover, it borders two seas: the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. On top of that, Turkey upholds a complex web of relationships with various parties, which especially concerns security and economic partnerships. On the one hand, Turkey is a key NATO partner with one of the biggest armies in the alliance (Turak 2024), has close ties to Washington, and provides military equipment to Ukraine (Notte and Kane 2022, 5). On the other hand, Turkey does not shy away from following its own security interests even against allied Greece in the Mediterranean or the US when it comes to the Kurds in Syria (Notte and Kane 2022, 5). Moreover, it also has strong economic partnerships with Russia and refrains from joining Western sanctions against Russia (Notte and Kane 2022, 4). With Turkey also being on the rim of many contemporary wars, such as in Ukraine, Syria, or Israel, it seems trivial that Turkey is also impacted by foreign disinformation campaigns that try to steer political narratives inside the

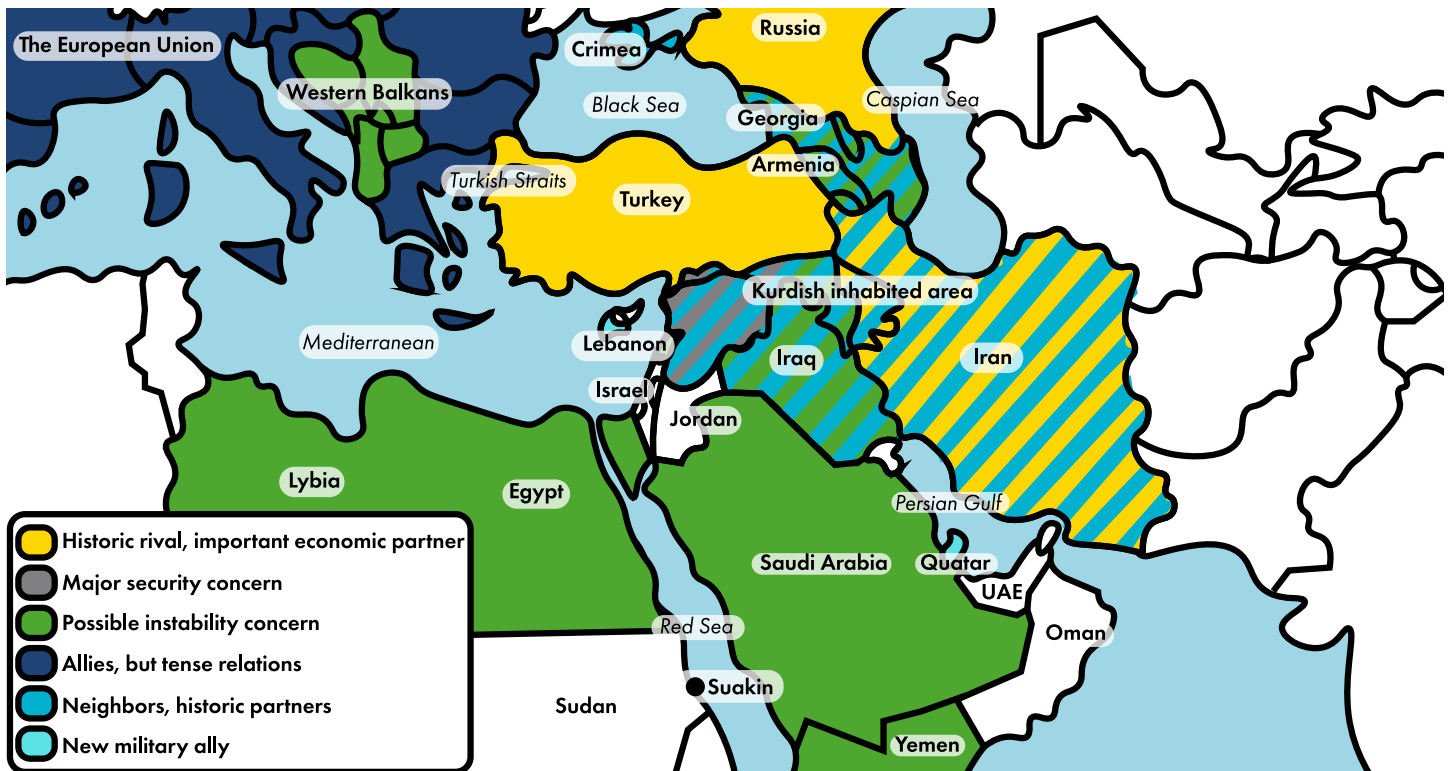


Figure 2: Strategic Geopolitical Map of Turkey and its neighboring countries (Uzunköprü 2019) Source: Geopolitical Intelligence Services

country. „The most frequent sources of such campaigns and narratives, as discovered by social media monitoring outlets so far, originate from the Middle Eastern or Russian entities (Kirdemir 2020, 9).“ The best case for such a disinformation intervention occurred in 2015, when a „Russian aircraft violated the Turkish airspace by about 2.19 kilometers“ and got shot down by Turkish authorities, killing one of the two pilots (Ünver 2018, 14). This event led to a high polarization within the internet, in which two narratives appeared: Narrative A focused on blaming Russia for violating Turkish airspace, and Narrative B focused on blaming Turkey for shooting down the jet outside of Turkish airspace. After a week, however, a new narrative was coming up that presented Turkish government officials, including Erdoğan’s family, as being involved in smuggling oil from ISIS during the peak of the Syrian war (Ünver 2018, 17; Costello 2018, 4-5). This narrative, although proven to be incorrect, was highly effective in its reach and impact. Even Western media outlets took up the narrative, portraying Turkey as an untrustworthy NATO partner (Ünver 2018, 17; Kirdemir 2020, 9-10). Besides, other Turkish military operations in the region (Ünver 2018, 22-23; Kirdemir 2020, 10), as well as other events such as the military coup in 2016, or the assassination of the Russian ambassador in Turkey, became subjects to manipulative campaigns by various actors, most importantly Russia (Castello 2018, 8-9, 11). Russian trolls by the Internet Research Agency were also involved in promoting „opposition to President Erdogan and Turkey in general“ and made jokes about „Erdogan planning the refugee crises“ (Harry Collins et al. 2022, 152). All in all, however, research remains unclear on whether the Turkish information ecosystem, since it is so infected with originated mis-, dis-, and malinformation, is more or less prone to Russian disinformation (Ünver 2018, 44; Kalthil 2020, 37)

6. Conclusion

To summarize, Turkey’s political evolution over the past two decades has strongly reshaped its information ecosystem. The AKP and President Erdoğan have been able to centralize control over traditional and digital media, crack down on press freedom, and criminalize dissent through the 2022 Disinformation Law. This created an environment where opposition voices are suppressed and public narratives are controlled. The rise of social media and the COVID-19 infodemic supported the spread of misinformation, strengthened political polarization, and undermined public trust in traditional media outlets. While the 2022 Disinformation Law was framed as a measure to combat harmful misinformation, the law effectively criminalized critical journalism and constrained press freedom. By controlling both traditional and digital media channels, the AKP has created a highly regulated information environment in which political power and public perception are increasingly inseparable. It also enabled the government to suppress critical opinions, as illustrated by the arrests of prominent opposition figures and the nationwide crackdown on media outlets. With Turkey’s unique strategic position in foreign and security affairs, it appears to be, from time to time, a target of information attacks from foreign actors, such as Russia and Middle Eastern entities. However, with Turkey having a largely infected information environment itself, it remains unclear what the concrete impact of those attacks is. Future scholarship is needed on the effects of disinformation on the 2023 national election.

Turkey’s government controls media to shape public opinion and suppress dissent

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