

LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE REPORT

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FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN TURKEY 2019-2020

Burak Bilgehan Özpek



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INTRODUCTION

Indexes that measure scores of democratization in countries all agree that Turkey has become authoritarian in recent years. Years later, for the first time, Freedom House removed Turkey from the category of partly free and identified it as a nation with lack of freedom. Right at the beginning of 2010, Polity IV index which suggested that reaching a consolidated democracy in Turkey was imminent, detected a dramatic decline regarding freedom and announced that Turkey is no longer a democracy. According to Polity IV, Turkey is an anocracy. In other words, it is a non-democratic regime in which a rapid shift towards authoritarianism is observed. Thus, measuring press freedom in Turkey is no longer exciting. In the years when the country was abandoning democracy, the texts written with the subject of press freedom were extremely important and contained signals that could give an idea about the future of democracy. Especially after the Gezi Park Protests in 2013, this issue was brought to the agenda and it was highly discussed in the following years. Nevertheless, at the point reached, the condition of freedom for press ceased to be a signifier, it started to be accepted as an out-and-out reality. Whether the press in Turkey is free or not is no longer a subject of heated debates. There is a conspicuous truth which has gone beyond discussion.

In recent years, we have created two reports in which freedom of press in Turkey was evaluated. These reports encompassed the information which belonged to the years 2015 and 2016. We had used two variables to perceive the amount of pressure on press organizations and journalists in

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these reports. The first variable, being described as “legal framework”, was demonstrating the pressure that the public authority was applying on press organizations and journalists leaning on its monopoly of violence.

The arrest of journalists, seizure of media institutions, broadcasting bans and social media restrictions had been handled within this framework. This will be one of the parameters we will use in the report which is aimed to be published this year. However, it must be said that the outcome of our research will not be surprising, it will only help us to have a good grasp of the details of the existing oppressive atmosphere. The second parameter was the economic dependency relation between the government and media organizations, which we called it as “dependency framework”. In fact, this was an initiative that distinguished our reports from other studies. The reason for this, we could argue that the relation between advertising policy of public institutions with the market economy was incompatible, and we could claim that the media owners’ broadcast policy was determined under the shadow of the tenders which were won in other sectors thanks to the favour of the political power. In other words, arbitrary distribution of economic resources without any legal pressure was an indicator of restricted press freedom. As the institutions are losing their transparency, the resources from which we can collect data are running out over time; even so, we will use the “dependency framework” in the report we are publishing this year as well.

In addition to these two frameworks, there is another parameter we want to add to the year 2019 report. We decided on this particularly due to being under the influence of the concept of populism, which has been widely discussed recently. Defining Turkey as a populist authoritarian regime brought along with our acceptance that populist administrations can implement their power- establishing strategies through media manipulation. In Schedler’s words, authoritarian regimes want to destroy the relationship between citizens and information flow as much as possible. Xavier Marquez also drew attention to this issue, claiming that the public debate is deliberately corrupted by the government, and that the aim of the experts who spread conspiracy theories alongside the press organizations to bring false news to the agenda is to confuse the public up to the maximum level. From a similar point of view, Jan Werner Mueller claimed that populist administrations dragged the public debate onto an emotional and moral field in full measure and kept it away from rationality.

Therefore, in this year's report, we will add the quality of the public debate. The polarizing language in the media, the number of fake news and the prevalence of conspiracy theories will be the concepts we will use while trying to understand the state of above-mentioned parameters. In the last part of the study, positive developments in terms of media freedom will be discussed and some solution suggestions will be presented.

1. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Especially after the Gezi Park Protests, the pressure on journalists and media organizations increased, and the judicial institutions started to act by supervising the political agenda of the government. With the end of the Solution Process, after the June 7, 2015 elections, this situation further expanded and reached its peak after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016. Presidential impact on the bureaucratic system has dramatically increased immediately after Turkish citizens approved the Presidential system by going to the poll at the State of Emergency. The main point that makes this situation problematic in terms of freedom of expression is that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the Chairman of the Justice and Development Party at the same time. Thus, the legal entity of the state and the political agenda of the AK Party have been mixed into each other. In other terms, any discourse or policy that may harm the political future of the AK Party turns into a crime against the state or a threat to national security. This structural change is the main reason why Turkey is mentioned in the category of non-democratic countries.

a. Closed Down Media Organizations

Although 2019 was an unfortunate year for media organizations, this situation alongside being unfavourable in respect of democracy, accommodated favourable developments as well. Atilla Sertel, a parliamentarian of journalist origin and member of the Republican People's Party (CHP), made a general assessment for the year 2019 from the point of press freedom in his speech and claimed that economic problems put media organizations in a difficult situation. Since the summer of 2018, when the economic crisis started, some newspapers which were published in national scale such as *Vatan* Newspaper, *AMK* Newspaper, *Habertürk* Newspaper, *Star* Newspaper and *Güneş* Newspaper, have ceased their publish. Among these newspapers, *Vatan*, *AMK* and *Habertürk* claimed that they

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During this period, 34 Television Channels, 6 News Agencies, 29 Printing Houses, 20 Magazines, 53 Newspapers and 37 Radio Stations were liquidated

acted with an economic rationality, citing the increasing paper and operating costs as a reason for their closure. On the other hand, the win of Istanbul Municipality by CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu after the local elections in 2019 put the economic situation of the pro-government *Star* and *Güneş* newspapers unstable.

These two newspapers, which survived mainly thanks to the advertisements they received from municipal companies, were closed after the elections. Interestingly, the total of 203 thousand readers of both newspapers, did not turn to other newspapers after these newspapers were closed and stopped reading newspaper. This situation strengthened the allegations that these newspapers inflated their circulation in order to collect more advertisement fee from the Press Advertisement Agency. Hence, the above-mentioned two newspapers, financed entirely by public funds and motivated to legitimize governmental policies, were closed. This circumstance does not indicate an adverse situation regarding press freedom. On the contrary, it is seen as favourable considering more efficient use of public resources.

On the other side, it has been observed that the economic crisis has affected many local newspapers. The president of Journalists Federation of Turkey Yılmaz Karaca announced that 125 out of 1150 local newspapers ceased publish due to financial difficulties in the year 2019. The economic crisis experienced in 2018 was felt thoroughly in 2019.

At this stage, it should be stated that the State of Emergency, declared on 20 July 2016, ended on 19 July 2018. According to BIANET data, many media organizations had already been closed down during this period. To give exact information, 34 Television Channels, 6 News Agencies, 29 Printing Houses, 20 Magazines, 53 Newspapers and 37 Radio Stations were liquidated. A total of 179 media outlets were closed by enactment of the “provision of law” on the grounds that they were affiliated with or linked to FETÖ and the PKK. The movable properties and other assets of these media outlets were transferred to the treasury and it was decided not to pay any of their debts back. During this period, 34 Television Channels, 6 News Agencies, 29 Printing Houses, 20 Magazines, 53 Newspapers and 37 Radio Stations were liquidated

b. Arrested Journalists

According to an announcement made by Journalists' Union of Turkey on April 7, 2020, 85 journalists and media workers are in prison. Among them are journalists who are well-known to the public such as Ahmet Altan, Baris Pehlivan, Baris Terkoglu, Murat Agirel and Ercan Gun.

More surprisingly, the arrests focused on the Gülenist Community and the Kurdish media after July 15, penetrated to Kemalist and nationalist writers. Six journalists were arrested giving the justification that they disclosed state secrets and opposed the MiT law. The indictment against the imprisoned journalists, prepared on 24 April 2020, demands that they be sentenced to imprisonment from 8 to 19 years.

c. On-line Media Outlets to Which Access is Denied

According to the Web Filtering report published by the Association of Freedom of Expression in 2019, until this year a total of 245,825 website have been blocked in Turkey. In 2018 alone, this number was 54,903. Of the websites blocked in 2018, 3,306 were associated with news content. Blockage of news content was put into action through 658th decision made by 159th judge at the criminal court of peace.

The most positive development of this period is that Wikipedia, whose access was blocked by the Information Technologies and Communication Authority on April 29, 2017, was reopened with the decision of the Constitutional Court on December 26, 2019. Thus, it can be inferred that the Constitutional Court has received less of the government pressure observed on the local courts and bureaucracy.

d. Media Blackout

It is possible to impose a media blackout in two ways. The first is courts, that is through the judicial power; the second is through the executive power, that is, the Presidency. The conditions in which the courts may impose media blackouts were regulated in the Article 28 of the constitution. Periodical or non-periodical publications and broadcasts may be confiscated with the decision of the judge in cases where an organization gets involved in the investigation or prosecution of the crimes indicated by the law. Furthermore, in the cases that protection against the country and nation's indivisible unity, national security, public regulations, general mo-

rality, and prevention of a crime are objectionable to delay, the involved institution can be terminated with the decree of the related legal authority.

According to the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) data, 197 broadcast bans were imposed by the courts between 1 January 2019 and 21 April 2020, when the report was written. The most remarkable one among all was the decision that banned reaching any information about the course of events and casualties, particularly during the Syrian operation, to the citizens.

On the other side, according to RTÜK's data, among the media blackout imposed by the Presidency, is the latest Çorlu Train Crash in 2018. The turbulent period that Turkey passed through after June 7 includes events such as terrorist attacks and the assassination of Karlov.

It is necessary to mention that the media organizations which are not listed in the traditional media and step forth as alternative sources of news. News and analysis websites could not escape out of the government's radar, either. According to the news of Deutsche Welle dated May 3, 2020, it has been stated by many experts that internet news were victims of the political climate. Blocking of access to websites such as Independent and SkyNews Arabia after Saudi Arabia's terminating Anadolu Agency and TRT broadcasts, the liquidation of Oda TV, which focused mainly on the government's connections with religious orders, blocking access to Sputnik after the conflict in Idlib, Syria in February 2020 show how arbitrary these processes were and merely shaped by political motivations.

e. Broadcasting Penalties

Broadcasting penalties issued by RTÜK are one of the most obvious examples of authoritarian regime pressure. Between January 1, 2019 and April 20, 2020, RTÜK imposed a total of 1734 broadcasting suspensions, fines and warnings to broadcasting institutions. The most striking of these penalties is the one given to Fox TV, the most-watched main newscast of the country. Based on the article 8/1 / b of the Law No. 6112, "broadcasting services cannot incite hatred and enmity in the society or create feelings of hatred in the society through spreading race, language, religion, gender, class, region and sect differences", Fox TV was punished with both a fine and a three-day broadcast suspension on the main newscast. RTÜK members did not justify their decision, and only attributed it to the law article.

Table 1. Sanction Decisions Implemented by RTÜK from 01.01.2019 to 15.05.2020

Broadcasting Company	Sanctions	Total Number of Sanctions	Broadcasting Company	Sanctions	Total Number of Sanctions
A Haber		0	Halk TV	10 administrative fines 3 broadcast suspension penalties (12 programs in total)	13
Kanal 7		0	Tele 1	8 administrative fines 3 broadcast suspension penalties (10 programs in total)	11
ATV	1 warning	1	Fox	7 administrative fines 1 broadcast suspension penalties (3 programs in total)	8
Ülke TV	1 warning	1	KRT	3 administrative fines 1 broadcast suspension penalties (2 programs in total)	4
TGRT Haber	1 administrative fine	1	Total		36
Total		3			

Similarly, the morning news program on TELE 1, an opposition broadcaster, was the subject of a 3-day broadcast suspension due to the comments of the presenter Can Ataklı. RTÜK's structure was discussed in detail in the reports published in previous years. The situation has not changed. The reflection of the power distribution in the parliament to the RTÜK administration, turned this institution into a contrivance that controls the media on behalf of the political institution. Consequently, direct suspension penalties are imposed on dissenting news bulletins without even needing to be justified. This marks a brand-new stage for authoritarianism. The reason for this is that RTÜK can use the practice of broadcast suspension once it considers the comments made by the news anchors strengthen the political opposition relating those criticisms to inciting hatred and hostility. From this point of view, it is predicted that similar applications will increase in the upcoming period.

Table 1 shows the sanctions imposed by RTÜK between January 1, 2019 and May 15, 2020, pointing to the unfair distribution of these decisions between pro-government and opposition media. These numbers reinforce

The reflection of the power distribution in the parliament to the RTÜK administration, turned this institution into a contrivance that controls the media on behalf of the political institution.

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the expectations put forward in paragraphs above. Considering these numbers, it should be stated lastly that RTÜK has turned into a structure acting outside the legal framework and it is appropriate to treat this institution in this way. Although a pro-government writer stated that he could kill a few families he had previously identified on his living complex, in a situation similar to the July 15 coup attempt in May, RTÜK's President Ebubekir Şahin remained completely unresponsive, and did not take a stand to apply any sanctions on this issue clarifying that his priority was the instructions of President Erdoğan. This attitude is significant in terms of showing that institutions operate with the instructions of the political will, rather than the rules imposed on them by the legal framework.

f. Social Media Restrictions

According to the reports of Twitter Transparency, which are prepared in 6-month periods, during the first half of the year, Turkey ranked first worldwide in demand for content filtering. Turkish courts filed 388, and other authorized officials demanded 5685 content filtering. Twitter responded positively to only 5 percent of these demands. Since the report for the second half of the year has not been announced yet, it was not included in this study.

However, it should be noted that social media restrictions are not only demanded by the state. Especially accounts described as "trolls" and attracting attention with their pro-government views act almost like social media patrols. These people resort to tactics such as suppressing, intimidating and dissenting opinions, as well as reporting twitter users to the Police Department.

It is claimed that discourses causing problems such as social polarization, distrust among identity groups, emotionalization and degradation of public debate are also deliberately organized by people called trolls. From this point of view, while the government is trying to put a formal pressure on Twitter on one hand, it also exerts a psychological pressure on users through trolls.

2. ECONOMIC DEPENDENCY

The issue of media financing is an important indicator for understanding how free the media is and how loud alternative voices are against the official

views of the political will. As Frederich Hayek points out, if having political freedoms legally is not fed by the economic independence of citizens from the state, freedom cannot be put into practice and the political paradigm cannot be questioned. For many academicians, governments' control over the media is a distinctive sign of illiberal democracies. It would not be wrong to say that in such regimes the media functions as a consent producing mechanism, manipulates the relationship between citizen and reality, and serves as a propaganda machine for governments. Having control over the media is the result of authoritarian governments' desire to have democratic legitimacy. And it must be noted with regret that it plays a role in deepening the conflict between democracy and civil liberties.

Media in Turkey can finance itself through the circulation / ratings, advertising or Press Advertisement Agency. However, there is another income item that surrounds and includes all these income items.

In our study, we will try to understand whether the arbitrary use of public resources by the political authority affects the circulation (for newspapers), advertising and Press Advertisement Agency revenues. Thus, we will be able to identify how the government indirectly controls the media.

a. Circulation

In recent years, newspaper sales in Turkey has declined considerably. Even though the reason for this is shown as digital transformation, decreasing trust in the media and the readers' inability to find newspapers expressing their attitudes also contributed to the low circulation. For example, while *Hürriyet* Newspaper had been continuing its activities under Dogan Holding, sales of dealers were determined to be around 300 thousand as of year 2016. After the newspaper changed hands and was transferred to a holding close to the government, dealer sales of it dropped to 60 thousand.

Despite this decrease, it is claimed that the announced circulation figures do not reflect the truth. Journalist Emin Çölaşan claims in his column in daily *Sözcü* that the circulation figures are inflated through purchases made by public institutions and do not reflect the truth. The website called Medya Günlüğü (Media Diary) became aware of this problem in 2016 and published a study revealing the difference between the announced circulation and dealer sales. They claimed that this difference was due to the

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purchases made by public institutions or organizations affiliated with the public. The difference between the announced circulation of newspapers and dealer sales according to this study is shown in Table 2;

Table 2. Announced Circuits and Newspaper Vendors' Sales Figures of Newspapers

Newspapers	Circulation announced	Real circulation
Hürriyet	335,000	302,000
Posta	300,000	273,000
Sabah	304,000	204,000
Sözcü	291,000	265,000
Habertürk	206,000	156,000
Milliyet	140,000	70,000
Yeni Şafak	112,000	25-28,000
Takvim	106,000	36,000
Güneş	103,000	23-33,000
Akşam	103,000	10-15,000
Vatan	102,000	37,000
Star	102,000	20-25,000

As can be seen in the table, there is a big gap between the dealer sales and the circulation of the newspapers such as *Sabah*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Takvim*, *Güneş*, *Akşam* and *Star*, which publicly support the government. The reason for this difference is thought to be purchases made by institutions managed by the state such as municipalities, public institutions and Turkish Airlines. The fact that strengthens this surmise is that after the acquisition of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality by the candidate of the Nation Alliance, Ekrem İmamoğlu, *Star* and *Güneş* Newspapers were closed for financial reasons.

To better understand this situation, we compared the circulation between January 1 and July 1, 2019. The reason for this was to determine whether there have been any changes in the circulation figures of newspapers before and after the local elections. It should be marked that in the past 6 months, the Nation alliance won metropolitan municipalities such as An-

kara, Istanbul, Antalya and Adana. The question to which we are looking for an answer is whether there is a correlation between this political change and the fluctuation in the newspaper circulation.

Table 3. Circulation of Newspapers on 1 January 2019 and 1 July 2019

Newspapers	Circulations on 1 January 2019	Circulations on 1 July 2019
Sabah	285,210	267,448
Sözcü	265,736	279,575
Hürriyet	265,655	218,990
Posta	211,383	169,529
Türkiye	133,129	128,828
Milliyet	131,330	126,386
Takvim	113,914	106,804
Yeni Şafak	110,438	102,482
Akşam	105,631	102,666
Güneş	106,437	101,856
Star	101,526	101,731

Taking a close look at Table 3, there is a relation between the handover of municipalities and newspaper circulation. The reason for this lies under the fact that with the renewal of the Istanbul Municipality election, the local elections were completed as of June 23, 2020, Ekrem İmamoğlu received his certificate on June 27 and started his duty. As a result of this change, circulations of the pro-government newspapers namely *Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, *Posta*, *Türkiye*, *Milliyet*, *Takvim*, *Yeni Şafak*, *Akşam* and *Güneş* dropped by eighteen thousand, forty six thousand, forty two thousand, three thousand, five thousand, seven thousand, eight thousand, three thousand and five thousand, respectively. On the other hand, the circulation of daily *Sözcü*, known for its closeness to the opposition, increased by 14 thousand. This relation between political changes and circulation figures shows how effective the state power and the political will can be at financing the media.

b. Advertising Revenues

We cannot limit media organizations to newspapers only. In fact, people's opinions are mostly shaped by televisions. If we exclude lately shining channels that provide paid services, people do not allocate a financial resource to watch television. Television channels that provide community with this service seek to finance themselves with advertising revenues. Thus, channels that attract more people's attention are expected to have higher advertising revenue. In other words, television channels prepare interesting content in order to help companies and citizens meet each other, and they can finance themselves as long as they can provide this interaction.

In a well-functioning market economy, television channels are expected to survive with advertising revenues. As a result, channel owners and employees do not have any responsibility before political authority. They are accountable to citizens and companies. On the other hand, in illiberal democracies, governments exercise their control over the media indirectly using economic instruments. For this reason, the easiest way to catch the control that the political power establishes over the media through economic tools is to detect the disproportionality between the rating level and advertising revenues of a channel. After detecting this, the relationship between institutions and companies which ask for advertisement with the political power can be examined and a conclusion can be reached.

In the reports we published in the past years, we analyzed the advertising policies of public-affiliated companies and found that pro-government channels were given more advertisements despite being less watched. However, the Wealth Fund, which was established in 2016, has incorporated many public-affiliated companies, and since then it has become impossible to access the data of these companies. The Wealth Fund is chaired by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Deputy Chairman is Berat Albayrak, the Minister of Economy, and the fund is excluded from the audit of the Court of Accounts. The fund is audited by private audit firms rather than the Court of Accounts. According to the news in the media, the private audit firm KPMG found the Fund-affiliated companies faulty, and did not give full marks to them due to transparency issues.

Some companies and institutions which are in partnership with the Wealth Fund are as follow;

- ◆ BOTAŞ
- ◆ Ziraat Bank
- ◆ Halk Bank
- ◆ Türk Telekom
- ◆ Turkish Airlines
- ◆ PTT
- ◆ Republic of Turkey State Railways
- ◆ Turkey Maritime Organizations
- ◆ TPAO
- ◆ Turksat
- ◆ Borsa İstanbul
- ◆ Eti Mining Operations
- ◆ Tea Enterprises

As a result of the decision taken, television channels have ceased to share advertisement expenditure data with other measuring and reporting organizations since 2018.

As can be seen, companies affiliated with the fund are the main engines in sectors such as banking, transportation, and communication being the backbone of the economy, and it is estimated that they have significant advertising budgets. Until the year 2018, researches conducted by Nielsen Turkey could report advertising expenditure in television channels, and could learn the amount of budget that above-mentioned companies allocated to advertising as well as the channel's name.

This situation was discussed in detail in our report published in 2016. Nonetheless, in 2018, a decision was taken by the Television Monitoring Researches Agency (TIAK) not to report advertising expenditures anymore. TIAK is a joint stock company formed by the Association of Advertisers, the Association of Advertising Agencies and 21 television channels. It is understood that as a result of the decision taken, television channels have ceased to share advertisement expenditure data with other measuring and reporting organizations since 2018. Therefore, while we reach the data on ratings published by TIAK, we can access the data on neither the number of advertisements given nor the company and television channels' name. When this issue combines with the transparency problems in regard with the expenditures of the Wealth Fund members, it becomes very difficult to reach the information whether the political will distributes the advertising budgets of the public subsidiary companies fairly and according to market conditions. However, persistently avoiding transparency and blocking data flow in spending advertising budgets is quite meaningful.

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c. Press Advertisement Agency

This institution intermediates the publication of official classified ads and advertisements of public institutions and organizations in newspapers and magazines. The budget allocated by the Agency for these activities reached 466 million TL by the end of 2019. This figure includes both national and local newspapers. The latest data of the Press Advertisement Agency that can be accessed from open sources belong to the 2017 annual report. This report was outlined by the Independent Turkish Service, and the amounts of advertisements and classified ads allocated to national newspapers were published in it. (See Table 4)

Table 4. Advertisement Revenues of Newspapers (2017)

Newspapers	Official Classified Advertisement Revenue	Official Advertising Revenue	Total
Sabah	TL 7,104,752	TL 13,733,688	TL 20,838,430
Hürriyet	TL 7,042,554	TL 11,418,688	TL 18,460,720
Yeni Şafak	TL 6,326,423	TL 5,569,166	TL 11,865,720
Posta	TL 7,058,064	TL 3,998,962	TL 11,057,027
Milliyet	TL 6,307,532	TL 4,169,538	TL 10,477,071
Star	TL 6,342,717	TL 2,195,565	TL 9,258,283
Akşam	TL 6,346,799	TL 2,654,518	TL 9,001,317
Türkiye	TL 6,206,228	TL 2,171,110	TL 8,377,338
Takvim	TL 6,355,200	TL 1,883,283	TL 8,238,483
Sözcü	TL 6,455,620	TL 1,933,319	TL 8,388,940
Yeni Akit	TL 4,959,601	TL 3,057,103	TL 8,016,704
Güneş	TL 8,813,748	TL 1,205,271	TL 7,019,020
Yeni Birlik	TL 5,456,343	TL 598,076	TL 6,054,419
Milat	TL 4,971,659	TL 662,204	TL 5,633,863
Aydınlık	TL 4,993,025	TL 55,679	TL 5,048,705
Yeni Çağ	TL 4,742,539	TL 24,330	TL 4,766,870
Diriliş Postası	TL 4,152,659	TL 304,910	TL 4,457,570
Karar	TL 3,970,949	TL 144,223	TL 4,115,173
Cumhuriyet	TL 2,037,401	TL 1,747,901	TL 3,785,302

Milli Gazete	TL 1,998,780	TL 309,154	TL 3,307,934
Korkusuz	TL 1,304,761	TL 3,264	TL 1,344,025
Yeni Asya	TL 1,200,243	TL 8,173	TL 1,208,956
Birgün	TL 1,063,036	TL 397,782	TL 1,460,819
Evrensel	TL 432,515	TL 101,286	TL 533,801
Total	TL 112,679,138	TL 59,067,975	TL 171,747,113

When these figures are taken into consideration, it is noted that the daily *Sözcü*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Evrensel*, *Birgün*, *Korkusuz*, *Yeni Asya*, *Milli Gazete*, *Yeni Çağ* and *Karar*, which publish along opposition lines to the government, received a total payment of TL28,911,827 from the Press Release Agency. The remaining TL142,835,286 was allocated to pro-government newspapers. In other words, 16.9% of the budget allocated for national newspapers by the Press Advertisement Agency was paid to the anti-government newspapers while 73.1% of it was received by the pro-government newspapers. It would not be wrong to say that not only are allocated payments independent of newspapers circulation, but also political motivations are effective in this process.

Since the above data is for 2017, we analysed the circulation figures of *Sözcü* in the first week of this year. At this week, *Sözcü* had an average circulation of 273,246, ranking fourth after *Hürriyet*, *Sabah* and *Posta*. Despite this, *Sözcü* earned less than 6 newspapers that were read less than it and was able to be the tenth on the list of the Press Advertisement Agency.

Similarly, *Akit* and *Karar* Newspapers with almost the same circulation figures (51 thousand) were subjected to different treatments. While *Akit*, which radically defends the government, had an income of 8,016,704 TL from classified ads and advertisements, the received share of daily *Karar*, addressing dissenting and moderate conservatives, was approximately 4,115,173 TL.

The detection we previously carried out regarding the reliability of circulations is also encountered here. Media outlets with unreliable circulation, called nylon newspapers, can receive more classified ads and advertisements than they deserve from the Press Advertisement Institution. However, the main problem is not only the numbers were exaggerated, but even with considering these numbers, it is seen that Agency distributes resources arbitrarily. This arbitrariness reached its peak in 2019 and 2020,

As a result of political motivations and possible political career enthusiasm of the Press Advertisement Agency directors, they do not act objectively and in accordance with the law while allocating available resources to newspapers.

when 3 opposition newspapers were completely excluded from this distribution system. Classified ads and advertisements flow to *Evrensel* and *Birgün* Newspapers, which are the voice of left politics in the media, were suspended intermittently in September 2019. The Agency accused *Evrensel* of bulk purchasing and *Birgün* of delayed recording the 'Print and Dealer-Return Books', which are required to be kept in electronic environment according to the Article 52 of the Regulation on Public Classified Ads and Advertisements and Periodicals to Publish these.

The penalty imposed on *Birgün* was abolished on February 25, 2020 thanks to the efforts of international non-governmental organizations and journalistic societies. Even so, such penalties have been continuing for *Evrensel*. Moreover, the Press Advertisement Agency started to apply classified ads and advertisements penalties showing the contents of newspapers as reason. The Agency imposed a penalty of cutting classified ads on *Evrensel* Newspaper, citing the article titled "Does Government Pledge Martyrdom Among Its Citizens?" by İhsan Çaralan, as the justification without providing any prosecution investigation. The Agency claimed that "Principles of Press Ethics were violated" and started an ex-officio investigation of the article. The Agency also claimed that this article was contrary to fact, using statements like "Journalism, which is a public service ... cannot be used against the public welfare" and "Unjust attributions beyond the limits of criticism cannot be made in publications which address individuals, institutions and layers of society."¹

Similarly, on May 22, 2020, *Cumhuriyet* was punished by the Press Advertisement Agency for reporting on the unlicensed building allegedly owned by Fahrettin Altun, the Presidency's Director of Communications. Accordingly, it was announced to the public that no advertisement would be posted in *Cumhuriyet* for 35 days. These examples show that the Press Release Agency tries to punish and educate the media by cutting the classified ads and advertising allowances for the contents that may be against the government. The only legal basis for the penalties imposed by the Agency is the principle of public welfare. It uses its authority quite arbitrarily to decide what the public welfare is, and interprets this principle even more intemperately than the prosecutorial power. Therefore, as a result of political motivations and possible political career enthusiasm of the Press

¹ <http://susma24.com/evrensele-basin-ilan-kurumundan-yine-ceza/>

Advertisement Agency directors, they do not act objectively and in accordance with the law while allocating available resources to newspapers.

Finally, it is worth noting that the annual activity reports of the Press Advertisement Agency are not included in the website.

3. POLARIZATION

While authoritarian governments control the media, they aim to manipulate not only the flow of information but also the nature of public debate. By doing this, they aim to avoid meeting citizens and alternative voices and interpretations in society. Especially in illiberal and populist authoritarianism, where the power is determined by elections, every moment of life passes under the pressure of a high-pace politicization. It is necessary to hold the people united supporting the administrative power at all times. The main reason for this is that creating a mass of faithful and loyal supporters and making this mass reach majority is the guarantee by which authoritarian administrations act arbitrarily during their term of office and do not pay the price for this in elections.

Creating a fanatical mass of supporters requires replacing citizens' tendencies to think and act rationally with feelings and reactive behaviour. Thus, public debate is shaped around normative and moral discourses rather than the scientific and technical discussion of any particular phenomenon. The objectivity of science and technique is sacrificed to the subjectivity of morality. This is a deliberate policy because it makes it impossible to put forward a phenomenon in order to criticize government policy towards a rational point of view, taking into account its possible consequences. Since it focuses on parameters such as rationality, cause-effect and cost-benefit, it has to be far from valour. This means that a rational argument needs not eloquence but data to be persuasive. These types of arguments prohibit the public debate from being the playground of the camps that try to suppress each other and define it as the meeting space of the views that nurture and develop each other.

On the other hand, placing the public debate on a moral axis creates a battleground for subjective moral conceptions that cannot reconcile with each other. The question of which concept has higher moral priority is a difficult issue to resolve, and it is unlikely to be discussed in depth in the public sphere, especially on popular television channels. Thus, television screens

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are flooded with writers, academicians and politicians who defend moral positions with the most superficial heroic discourses. Under authoritarian governments, the quality of public debate is deliberately lowered. This is a strategy developed to exempt the government's reaction from any technical, scientific and rational responses to a particular phenomenon.

This strategy does nothing but deepen social polarization. This is how a bipolar society that is alien to each other, unable to reconcile and fed by each other's losses emerges. As long as one of these poles constitutes the majority and supports the government, authoritarian system has no problem with this picture. Consequently, the media transforms from a platform where different opinions can produce the maximum benefit through interactive communication, into a theatre where one part of the society constantly accuses the other of immorality.

Government control over the media has been covered by many academic studies. Unfortunately, no systematic research has yet been done on the government's use of this effect to create polarization and reduce the quality of public debate. However, lately, in terms of both traditional media and social media, this issue has come up frequently. The most remarkable study on this subject was published by Faruk Bildirici in 2020. Bildirici examined the columns of 6 journalists known for their proximity to the government and found that these articles used strategies that could be expressed by concepts such as alienation, antagonizing, baseless accusation, over-generalization.²

The 6 journalists mentioned in the article (their names will not be given in this report) were presented with examples by Bildirici to be inclined to create us-vs-them discrimination which nurtures populism, to engender an opposition between social groups, to publicly humiliate an ideology, an opinion or identity group, to criminalize those who oppose the official policy of the government and to expose them as traitors. The language used by the authors encourages people with different views to hate and humiliate each other, rather than fostering social peace and harmony.

In June of the year 2020, the social media platform Twitter, moving from a similar point, concluded the investigation carried out on many accounts associated with Turkey. Twitter's statement was as follows:

² <https://farukbildirici.com/blog/detay/Kutuplastiran-yazarlar-tablosuna-degerli-katkilar-1>

“In early 2020, we detected accounts which were employing coordinated inauthentic activity, primarily targeted at users in Turkey. Based on our analysis of the network’s technical indicators and account behaviours, the collection of fake and compromised accounts was being used to amplify political narratives favourable to the AKP and demonstrated strong support for President [Recep Tayyip] Erdoğan. We are disclosing 7,340 accounts to the archive today. Technical signals point to the network being associated with the youth wing of the party and a centralized network that maintained a significant number of compromised accounts. As a result, the network we are disclosing today includes several compromised accounts associated with organizations critical of President Erdoğan and the Turkish Government. These compromised accounts have been repeated targets of account hacking and takeover efforts by the state actors identified above.”

It has been determined that polarization strategies are carried out in an organized manner on social media platforms.

The Internet Observatory (SIO) affiliated with Stanford University, working with Twitter, analysed the resulting data and prepared a report on this issue. According to the report;

- ◆ 7340 accounts have been closed and 60 per cent of these accounts had over 100,000 followers.
- ◆ The contents of the tweets sent by these accounts are similar and they work in coordination with each other.
- ◆ These accounts started to increase especially after the Gezi Protests in 2013. The AKP government hired 6,000 people for disinformation.
- ◆ These accounts interacted with President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan 1.7 million times.
- ◆ The aforementioned accounts produce content not only to support the AKP, but also against the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the People’s Democratic Party (HDP) and aim to portray the opposition parties as related to terrorism.
- ◆ In foreign policy, tweets are sent intensively on issues such as Syria, Libya, Qatar and Palestine, and it is aimed to support the government’s policy in domestic politics.

As seen in the SIO report, it has been determined that polarization strategies are carried out in an organized manner on social media platforms. Accordingly, mercenary troll accounts were opened, opposition parties were shown to be associated with terrorism, and the image of common belief

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Especially with the transition to the Presidential System, the legal framework has become largely composed of the instructions given by the Presidency. This paved the way for the President, who is also the Chairman of AKP, to silence opposing and alternative voices for the authority of his party.

was given to it, and alternative voices were suppressed. What is more, the radicalism level of AKP sympathizers has been raised and social polarization has been deepened.

CONCLUSION

While writing the 2019-2020 media freedom report, we added polarization strategies that threaten social peace to the legal framework and economic dependency criteria we addressed in the past years. Undoubtedly, we will see more systematic and comprehensive academic studies on polarization in the coming period. Together with these studies, the situation of media freedom in Turkey will emerge more clearly. However, at this stage, what should be said about Turkey is clear; the situation is not very promising.

Especially with the transition to the Presidential System, the legal framework has become largely composed of the instructions given by the Presidency. This paved the way for the President, who is also the Chairman of AKP, to silence opposing and alternative voices for the authority of his party. The authoritarian character of the republican laws has been replaced by arbitrary and unpredictable instructions. Furthermore, due to transparency issues, we are no longer able to obtain the required data in order to detect economic dependency. With the establishment of the Wealth Fund, a parallel budget has emerged, and this budget is neither subjected to legal audit nor open to public access. Even this case alone is a proof of how economic instruments can be used to control the media. On the other hand, the quality of public debate is low, and pro-government journalists who deepen social polarization have a great influence. It is quite common in both traditional and social media to use polarizing language which divides the society into camps and destroys the civilized dialogue between them. This situation not only does poison civilized debate ambient, but also undermines the nature of public debate.

From January 1st of the year 2019 until June 21, 2020, the date this report was completed, the state of media freedom in Turkey maintained its negative outlook and it has been increasingly worsening. The fact that social media platforms are still open, the internet media meet with more and more viewers, and many metropolitan municipalities were won by the opposition party candidates in the last local elections, therefore, the inability to transfer money to pro-government media organizations through

the municipality are the developments that can be considered positive of the period we left behind.

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