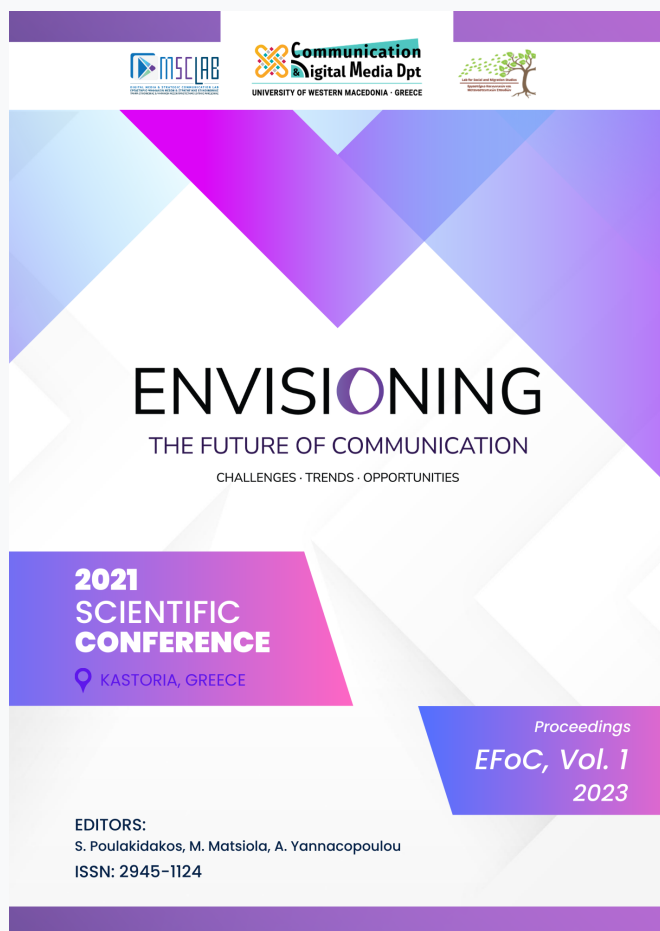


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## Media in Turkey during the period of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) takeover of power

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## **Media in Turkey during the period of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) takeover of power**

Nikolaos Liazos\*

### **Abstract**

Media ownership in Turkey is concentrated in the hands of a few large private groups, which are often part of heterogeneous conglomerates controlled by businessmen. In addition, companies use their influence to support the financial interests of their owners, by also seeking friendly relations with the authorities, which limits any free opinions. The media have also a strong influence on public opinion in Turkey. This research aims to highlight the radical transformation of the Turkish media from 2002, after the Justice and Development Party AKP, led by Recep Tayyip Erdogan, took over the power, to the present day. This kind of transformation on media has been aligned with the transformation of the Turkish society as well over the last 20 years. The Turkey's media has undergone a radical transformation since 2002 and this media transformation is reflected in ownership and control relations, as well as in the ideological approaches to media broadcasting. This research addresses the subject of this transformation, considering the social cohesion. It also examines the relations between power and the media from 2002 until today, which is analyzed in the context of the historical approach. The current paper focuses at the beginning on the change in the structure of media ownership and control during the period of the Justice and Development Party, based on the party's hegemonic strategies. Moreover, this paper explores how this change is reflected in the reporting news and aims to illustrate this change, by setting the media as a starting point. Finally, this study discusses how the change in the ownership and control structure of the media is also reflected in the sphere of ideology.

**Keywords:** Media freedom, policy, government, press freedom, Turkey.

### **Introduction**

The media in Turkey have been operating for many years under the control of the government and the manipulative relationships, created by the owners of the media owners with the government. Although it is well known that the media have never operated under the free and competitive market's conditions, the concentration of power in the hands of a single party or even a single leader in recent years has increased the pressure on the press more than ever. Moreover, the situation in the economic sector makes more effective the tools that the government will use against the owners of the media, while owners who support the government are rewarded with public tenders. On the contrary, the owners who oppose to the government are punished with taxes. The defamation cases that brought against journalists by the President and members of the government, have made a record level during the recent

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years, by giving the impression that they are intended to intimidate the very weak, in financial terms, opposition press. It seems that under these conditions, the profession of journalism has been influenced so much by this situation, that it stands powerless in front of the government, while at the same way, the owners of the media cannot operate with solidarity with each other, because of the political polarization (Sözeri, 2015:11).

In the current research, we study the role of the media in shaping and transforming the current reality of Turkey. Additionally, several changes have been observed in the capital structure of the media during the period of his rule AKP as government, which started in 2002. Our paper aims also to highlight the takeover of the media by the regime of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party. Erdogan's media policies implemented by the AKP since it took office in 2002, have been shaped according to the relationship it has established with the media owners, and this relationship has undergone a constant change and transformation in the course of its governance. In addition to other political, economic and cultural reasons, the transformation in the media is one of the one of the main pillars of the AKP's hegemony. The main role in maintaining this regime is played by the major media organisations, which are rewarded when they act in accordance with the government but are subject to heavy sanctions when they act in the opposite direction. In the media system established by the AKP, disseminating all kinds of opinions and news carried to the masses was under strict control. Thus, AKP has managed to maintain the support of the voters in every election it has participated in for 18 years (Aydın, 2015: 24).

### **Restructuring of the media in 2002-2007**

During the severe financial crisis that erupted in February 2001, one fifth of the media outlets in the media sector of the Central Bank's foreign exchange reserves evaporated and the Turkish lira depreciated by 50 percent. In the following period, more than 20 banks failed, 1 million people lost their jobs, and dozens of businesses closed (Yeşil, 2016:73).

The AKP emerged from this disaster and left its mark on Turkish politics. The people in the 2002 elections put the blame for the crisis on the politicians and in the elections, it wiped out the existing parties. Thus, the AKP received 34.3 percent of the vote, by gaining a comfortable power with 363 deputies in the parliament of 550 seats. To overcome the crisis that began in the 1990s, the AKP government undertook comprehensive economic and political economic reforms. At the same time, the neoliberal economic program implemented by the AKP, the government-maintained contact with the International Monetary Fund and the process of the democratization of the country has been accelerated and be in line with the goal of EU membership. While the AKP attaches importance to social consensus in this period, high rates of growth are being achieved and the start of the accession process is underway. Consequently, the negotiations with the EU are empowering the public support for the government. The main points about the ownership structure in the media during this period of consensus were the restructuring of the industry through Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) and the launch

of the foreign capital into media investments in Turkey. Noteworthy is also the government's agreement with fund owners that will help control media (Çam & Yüksel, 2015).

### **The role of the TMSF in the media**

When the AKP came to power in 2002, it initially had the support of the media. This positive atmosphere began to deteriorate after the second election victory in 2004, and the government's opposition to the Doğan Group increased, which was the country's largest media group. The AKP's response to this challenge was by pursuing a dual strategy. On the one hand, it forced the Group Doğan to shrink by imposing heavy tax sanctions and, on the other hand, it began to shape the mainstream media (Kurban & Sözeri, 2012: 54).

Before the AKP came to power in 2002, the largest media in the country, represented the mainstream and they were belonged to the Doğan, Çukurova, Uzan groups, Bilgin, İhlas and Doğuş. However, the crisis of 2021 had a serious impact on these powerful means. Thus, this situation paved the way for the disappearance of the Uzan and Bilgin groups (Adaklı, 2010a:561; Yılmaz, 2016:150). With the collapse of the economy, media groups faced significant decline in advertising share, which is their main income. The size of the national advertising market decreased from about 1 billion dollars to \$500 million and the banks, which were the source of 80 percent of the advertising revenue, were collapsing. In addition, 10 of the 25 failed banks are also media owners (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2012:306).

Meanwhile, the Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF), which seized its assets for the debts of failed banks, became suddenly one of the largest media conglomerates by taking control of three major newspapers, three national TV stations and a number of radio stations in the country. With the tenders conducted by the Deposit Insurance Fund Savings Bank Fund (TMSF) for the sale of these media, foreign funds began to enter the Turkish market, new local players started to enter the media, and some of the existing local players started significantly to increase their shares (Adaklı, 2010b:77; Yesil, 2016:83).

The Doğuş Group is also evolving, benefiting from the sales of the Fund Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF). banking and automotive sectors, the Doğuş Group in 1999 acquired NTV, one of the country's old and respected news channels. Later, it bought Kanal E and the popular music channel Kral TV, which was owned by the Uzans, through its Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) (Adaklı, 2010a, 564; Yesil, 2016, σ. 89). Doğuş Group bought also Kanal E, partnering with CNBC from U.S.A., and it changed its name to CNBC-E, which later transformed it to a financial channel. Doğuş Group increased more its market share when it acquired Star TV from the Doğan Group in the second term of AKP (Aydın, 2014:133, Yesil, 2016:89).

Group is also emerging as a new player in the Turkish media sector through the Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF). Operating in the energy and transport sectors, the group in 2005 first acquired the Sabah newspaper and ATV channel, the second largest media group in

the world, from the Insurance Fund Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF). The Sabah newspaper and the ATV channel, which both provide national coverage, form the basic backbone of this structure, which was formerly held by the Bilgin Group under the leadership of Dinç Bilgin. However, when in 2007 the sale was cancelled by the Deposit Insurance Fund Savings Bank Fund (TMSF), Turgay Ciner, the head of the Ciner Group, immediately bought television, website and radio HaberTürk, founded by Ufuk Güldemir, the prominent journalist of the 1990s. The HaberTürk newspaper joined the media group before the 2009 elections (Adaklı, 2010b:77).

Targeting the Doğan Group, the government passed the law, which came into force in 2011, regarding the media companies' market shares, which must be limited to 30%. The Group Doğan Group in 2005, which bought Star TV from TMSF, was sold to the Doğu. Subsequently, the Doğan Group was forced to sell Milliyet and Vatan to DK Gazetecilik ve Yayıncılık, a joint venture of the Demirören and Karacan. In February 2012 this company was taken over by control of the Demirören Group.

Another important point is that the liquidation of the Uzan Group by the Fund Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) was linked to the success of the of Cem Uzan's Youth Party in the 2002 elections. Similarly, the AKP, which noticed Cem Uzan getting 7 percent of the vote, and the media media as a threat and took action. More than 200 companies of the Uzan Group, which had significant investments in banking, media, energy and football, were seized by mid-2003 (Aydın, 2014:134).

### **Government's desire to control the media in 2007-2013**

The AKP's second term, which began in 2007, is very different from the first. The defensive position that was set by the government during this period for the social consensus has now been put aside. The AKP and its Islamist allies, especially Gulen, attacked the media. They tried to shape the military, the judiciary and the academic world, according to their own ideals and ideology (Aydın 2014:135).

From this period onwards, the AKP tries its best to secure its connection with pro-government media alongside the existing mainstream media, to exploit better the resources of the state. The AKP started gradually to control power in all social sectors, and that became the reason for the new media organizations to become the new mainstream sources of information (Aydın, 2014:134). The powerful media organizations of the 1990s were now in a deadlock between colluding with the AKP or being under the risk of punishment, which were threatening even their existence. Consequently, the harsh punishment of the Group Doğan by the AKP during this period, because it took part against the government, forced the other media owners to begin obeying to this new order (Sözeri 2015:12).

Two important events regarding the media of this era were the creation of the AKP's media, and the change of attitude from other media, in favour of AKP. Another important event was the overall reorganization of the ownership of the media with the new law passed in 2011.

The year 2007 was an important turning point in the AKP's approach to the media, while the government adopted an increasingly repressive stance towards the media (Akser & Baybars-Hawks, 2012:308). Thus, the year 2007 can be acknowledged as important for three reasons a) the General Staff published on the internet on 27 April 2007, an electronic memo against the AKP's efforts to elect the Abdullah Gul as president, because he was an Islamist; b) a lawsuit was filed on the AKP shutdown, and c) news that an army group was making plans for a coup in 2003-2004 was published in *Nokta* magazine (Aydın 2014:137).

When the presidential election turned into a crisis, the AKP decided to hold early elections and it significantly increased its votes, during the elections of the 22nd of July 2007, by electing 341 deputies, with a 46.7% share. The AKP's electoral victory provided an important advantage over its rivals. The legitimacy and strength of the government became undoubtably clear, and everyone should take that into account, also including the moguls of the media. With the conclusions that were drawn from these events, the AKP attempted on the one hand to reshape the state and social life, and on the other, it monitorised the arrest of several dissidents from the field of the army, the academia, and the political spectrum. A notable example of all these were the “Ergenekon and Balyoz” cases, that had left their mark during this period. Along the way, criticisms, lawsuits, and investigations began to target people who had nothing to do with the coups neither with nor opponents of the AKP. However, the response of the government and the media to these criticisms, by accusing these people of supporters of the coup. Into the framework of this settlement and restructuring of the Turkish society, it has been observed that changes in the ownership structure of the media (Alan, 2015).

### **The 2013-2016 period and the media crisis**

The year 2013 was a turning point as the AKP government has gone through two serious crises. Initially, the resistance that launched by a group of activists against the construction of shopping malls in Istanbul's Gezi Park in Istanbul Square Taksim Square in early June turned into mass street protests, where millions of people across the country protested the oppressive policies of the AKP. The AKP government, which claimed that these manifestations were led by foreign forces, were pursuing the overthrowing of the government. Thus, the government found solution, on increasing the police force, which led to further police violence and the suppression of these manifestations after a while.

The second major crisis was the corruption's investigation that had erupted in the last days of the year in December. As part of the investigation, the sons of three AKP ministers were arrested along with some other officials. After a while, shocking details of the raids appear have been published by the press. The distribution of the recordings of some interceptions

related to the corruption scandal from anonymous accounts on the internet, had further increased the pressure on the AKP. Some of these records were confirming the allegations of corruption (Yesil, 2016:111).

The AKP government accused members of the Gülen Movement, which had infiltrated into the forces of the judiciary and the police. It claimed that the recordings were fake, and this investigation was an attempted coup to discredit and overthrow the government. This crisis shook the hegemony of the AKP. The AKP's response was to intensify the pressure on the ideas and news circulating in the society, to further manipulate the media and to eliminate the media Gülen's media, which it accuses of corruption. The government shall establish a tight control over mass communications, accelerates its efforts to strictly regulate this sector as dissidents turn to the internet.

After the release of these scandals, Gulen's media began to blame the government. On the other hand, the AKP government accused Gülen, whose organization that had developed a media empire, has started to disintegrate with various interventions. In early 2014, 93 percent of sanctions imposed by the Broadcasting Council, were referred to the Gulen's media. After the failed coup attempt of the 15th of July 2016, all Gulen's media outlets were closed down by legislative decrees that were issued under a state of emergency. Famous journalists working there such as Nazlı Ilıcak, Ali Bulaç, Şahin Alpay were arrested (Sözeri, 2015:17).

## **Journalism and press freedom in Turkey**

Journalists in Turkey are fighting both against the media owners and against the government, which had increased its repression through legal regulations and lawsuits. In 2014, 18 criminal prosecutions against 20 journalists and 2 cartoonists were held, with the accusation of insulting the former Prime Minister and now President Erdoğan. In addition, in 2014, the government and the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan played an important role in the dismissal or coercion of 339 journalists, writers and media workers to resign. In 2013, 106 journalists, writers and media workers were fired and 37 were forced to resign.

The police raided the house of journalist Sedef Kabaş because of a tweet that was published in the last month of 2014. Kabaş was taken into custody and lawsuit was filed against her for "revealing the identity of the officers who involved in the fight against terrorism and targeting people in this way". Kabaş was also being prosecuted for making the police wait at the door during the arrest (Önderoğlu, 2015).

In this context, the roughly 18-year period of AKP's rule, it can be divided into three specific periods in which, AKP presented differences on media policy. In the first period, between 2002-2007, the government pursued social reconciliation, followed by the second period between 2007-2013, when the AKP attempted to restructure the media as well as the social order, and finally in the period 2013-2020, the AKP government faced different crises, that were also reflected in the media. For example, the AKP, during its first period of government, was quite

weak against the existing status quo in Turkey, and it pursued softer policies regarding the media, compared to the second and third period. However, over the time, the government policies for the media stated to change, as the government was strengthening gradually its status, by taking advantage of opportunities that provided by their political power, while at the same time, it became took a hard towards the opposition media. The government's relations with the media were constantly proceeding with the constant interaction with other social institutions such as politics, economy, education, and health.

The transformation of governance that has taken place in the key structures of the basic structures of the state under the AKP government, have been also shown to the political and non-governmental organizations and institutions, where there were significant developments in favour of the AKP. At the same time, the AKP changed its basic strategies of pressure that it implemented and exerted more than during its first period. The strategy followed by the AKP shifted over time from hegemony to almost totalitarian domination (Arslan, 2014:154).

The AKP's period, covering the years 2002-2020, includes efforts on the part of the government to change positions and maneuver the basic structure of the state, politics, society and non-governmental organisations, and institutions. From 2008, the political transformation that the government wants to impose throughout the structure of the state, with the power granted to it by both the state and the political scene, was also manifested in the media. During this period, the AKP's policies on media have been designed with strategies that followed throughout the course of its governance. In the strategies of conquering the media, the creation of business groups played a leading role affiliated with the government. The Savings Bank Deposit Insurance Fund (TMSF) was operated as a kind of reconstruction fund, the so-called media pool, which financed the purchase of media by entrepreneurs, the absorption of larger media with the entry of pro-government journalists, by making them into the mainstream media pro-AKP affiliates in this way (Alan, 2015b).

### **The media are being crushed under political and economic pressure**

During this period, several examples of strategies, that followed by the AKP governments, can be given. The strategies that followed were operating as a whole and they were also interacting with each other. Media organisations that belonged to the Doğan Group were added to the Demirören Group, and the Doğuş and Ciner Groups have been transformed based on the media's policy change that was taken over by the government between 2002 and 2020. A notable example could be the change in Hürriyet, Milliyet and Habertürk as a demonstration of this strategy. With all these changes into the field of journalists and media managements, it is difficult to find any news against AKP. This outcome became more obvious, especially after 2015, in the major media, which gradually forced to be silenced towards the government. This situation shows that the government was able to control, silence or make pro-government all the media that would stand against it, without changing the institutional structure of the media. The capture of the media has allowed the government to save money in terms of economy and



gain time in the process of controlling the media. The fact that television and newspapers consist of journalists and administrators affiliated to AKP, has resulted in the expansion of censorship in the media. The takeover of the major Turkish media by government not only saved the AKP from financial costs, but also ensured censorship practices in news production (Boratav, 2015:126).

The examples of selling of the media to parties affiliated to the groups and businessmen (such as ATV-Sabah to the Çalık Group, the seizure of Show TV, SKY Türk and Akşam, owned by the Çukurova Group), from the TMSF reconstruction fund and the transfer of Akşam and SKY 360 to the businessman Ethem Sanjak, who was close to the government, can be recognised as the takeover of these companies by the government. It should be noted that the silent coalition period of AKP with Gulen's organization was part of this strategic conquest of the media. Another example is the sale of Kanaltürk TV, which was one of the most important representatives of the opposition in the media sector until 2008, to the Koza Group, which was affiliated with the Gulen's organization. In this process, AKP conquered the media sector conquered, by utilizing different groups within the Islamic bourgeoisie. The entry of the capital and the Gulen organization, with the capitalists' groups pro-AKP represented by the Independent League Industrialists and Businessmen (MÜSIAD) facilitated the penetration of AKP into the media environment, which was mainly intensified between 2002 and 2013. After the 2013, and in parallel with the crises into the AKP coalition with Gulen's organization, AKP began this time to take over the media organizations, that were belonging to the Gulen's organization. After the failed coup in July 2016 and the declaration of a state of emergency, many media outlets of the Gulen's organization were closed down by legislative decrees and the assets from their technical equipment to the capital were transferred to pro-AKP organizations through the Insurance Fund. Thus, the process of conquering the media that began in 2002 continued with the use of Gulen's organization capital until the end of this political cooperation of the AKP-Gulen coalition. This crisis became deeper involving the media of the organization of the former government partner's organization which were closed. The possibilities that revealed by the state of emergency after the failed coup of 15 July 2016 to the government were not only used to conquer only the media's organization, but also during this period, the media of different sections of society were shut down one by one, and their assets were transferred to those who were affiliated with the government (Bora, 2017:509).

The formation strategy was mainly based on the bourgeoisie affiliated to the AKP, which was seen as one of the AKP's media policies. It is observed that many of the pro-government media organizations emerged between 2002 and 2020, with initiatives of groups represented by the Independent Association of Industrialists and Businessmen (MUSIAD) who were closed to the Islamist businessmen, by increasing their capital accumulation during the AKP period. These groups, which are reported to have increased their capital within the framework of clientelist economic relations, they have established with the authorities and at the same time have integrated into the media environment by receiving incentives from power. It is remarkable and

it can easily show the effect of the strategic formation of public opinion in the media. Between 2013 and 2020, the government faced several political crises, mainly in the sector of society. The fact that these crises almost toppled the government, could be identified in the Gezi Park events, during the Operation Corruption of 17 December 2013 and the failed attempt of the military coup on 15 July 2016, brought about the change of AKP strategies. In this process, the main strategy of the AKP was power shifted from hegemony to domination. The state of emergency that was declared after the 15th July of 2016, the country was transformed into a non-democratic state, by the government for its opponents. The crises, which arose from different centres during different times, made the government to suppress political opponents, non-governmental organizations and fundamental structures. The media is one of the sectors that have been affected the most by this period. The AKP applied the same policy of repression also to all the social political structures in the media sector, and it added two new strategies, which we explained above. These strategies of the government have become the main tool of domination in the media environment.

## Conclusions

The distinctive feature of this period in terms of the media into the Turkish society (especially in the period after the declaration of the state of emergency) is that the journalists were threatened, attacked, fired, arrested, and sentenced just for doing their job. In this period, many media outlets were closed down and their properties confiscated by the state. The state of emergency declared in July 2016, shows that it is not surprising that the media was one of the most important tools for the AKP's war against society organizations civil society organizations. In this period, where intimidation and suppression strategies implemented along with other strategies, the structure of the ownership and control of the Turkish media has completely changed. This change in the structure of ownership and control also shows how the conquest strategies, intimidation and suppression are related to each other.

It is important to note that the ideological practices of the media, which gradually transformed since the AKP came to power in 2002, adapted to the new reality. During its 18-year rule, the AKP changed/transformed the entire institutional and democratic experience of Turkey. This is also reflected in the professional principles of journalism. Journalists are employed not only for their professional profile in their domain of journalism, but also for their proximity with the government. Thus, the Turkish media became more monophonic in 2018 than it has ever been in the history of Turkey.

Behind this outcome, it is the Islamic bourgeoisie, which is the base of the AKP, as well as a part of the Western world bourgeoisie that took part in the government. Therefore, the main reason for the transformation of the media should be sought in the long-term change of the basic structure. The fundamental change in politics brought the AKP to power, which gained and secured the transformation of the media in its favour. The monophonic media, on the other hand, played an important role in overcoming all the crises the AKP faced. This dialectic

relationship between capital-politics and the media, which feed off each other, should not be seen as an independent element from the power that has completely transformed the Turkish society - the Islamic bourgeoisie. This relationship that the Turkish media have created with the capital and the politics, also shows how much weak and inadequate is the understanding that prevails in the prevailing communication studies for the comprehension of today's media.

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