

Media Manipulation as a Foreign Policy Tool Turkish Media and Competitive Authoritarianism

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Abstract: *Today, Turkey seems to apply a twofold foreign policy strategy, with a “special mission” assigned to the Turkish media. Officially, the government follows a conciliatory, low-profile policy, while, at the same time, it uses Turkish media in order to “persuade” people that Turkey is a leading regional power that, quite often, ignores the concerns of its neighbours and seems ready to use any means necessary, including the use of military force, to defend its interests. The government sought to increase its popularity and acceptance among the conservative and nationalist voters and, with public opinion at its side, to legitimize its well-covered foreign policy agenda.*

Keywords: *Turkey, Turkish media, Turkish Foreign Policy, Competitive Authoritarianism*

Short Biography: *Nikolaos Stelgias was born in 1982 in Istanbul (Turkey). In 2011 he successfully completed his doctorate in the History and Political Science Department of Panteion University (Athens). He is a historian and a journalist, specialized in Turkish and Turkish-Cypriot affairs. Currently is employed by “Kathimerini” newspaper as a correspondent in Turkey and in Cyprus (for Turkish-Cypriot community affairs).*

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1. INTRODUCTION: PRESS MANIPULATION IN TURKEY

According to Levitsky and Way competitive authoritarian regimes are civil regimes in which democratic institutions are widely viewed as means or tools to gain and possess power, but within these regimes fraud and civil liberties violation are widespread, while state institutions and media (public and privately-owned) are so abused that these regimes cannot be described or characterised as democratic¹. Competitive authoritarianism is a hybrid regime, in which the characteristics of a democracy and an authoritarian regime coexist. Although democratic institutions are sufficiently respected and produce political competition, at the same time, they are violated in such a degree that this political competition is rather unfair, since opposition parties are seriously handicapped when they try to challenge or compete government official during elections, in the legislature, in courts or other public service institutions². In competitive authoritarian regimes, privately-owned media act like government’s semi-privatised subsidiaries³. Using both public and privately-owned media, competitive authoritarian regimes can communicate whatever they want to the public. Downgrading the importance of statements, arguments and policy initiatives of the opposition, these regimes sought to impose their own views, opinions and policies to the public.

¹ Levitsky, Steven & Way, A, Lucan. “Competitive Authoritarianism: The Origins and Dynamics of Hybrid Regimes in the Post-Cold War Era.” Stanford University, <http://iis-db.stanford.edu/evnts/4396/Levitsky-Way-Stanford.pdf>, Accessed 10 December 2014, page 4.

² Ibid., pages 6-7.

³ Ibid., page 12.

Since 2002, when the Party of Justice and Development (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi: AKP) came into power, slowly but gradually began to acquire the characteristics of competitive authoritarian regimes, as defined by Levitsky and Way. Turkey's move towards competitive authoritarianism is more obvious in the field of media. Within 12 years, AKP managed to control Turkish press. Indeed, AKP's government manage to control certain media groups or impose its priorities and theses to privately-owned mainstream media. Using justice as an effective control tool, AKP's government imposed limitations to all kinds of media (printed, digital or social). For example, in 2013, just few days before local elections, the government was heavily criticised in international media for banning local press and the use of Twitter.

In this article we will discuss media manipulation in Turkey as a way to serve Turkish foreign policy needs and objectives. As mentioned before, Turkey seems to apply a twofold foreign policy strategy, with a "special mission" assigned to the Turkish media. Officially, the government follows a conciliatory, low profile policy by presenting itself as the side that seek dialogue, compromise and regional cooperation. At the same time, however, uses its influence in Turkish media in order to communicate a quite different kind of messages to the public. These messages describe Turkey as a country, which basically ignores its neighbours and is ready to use any means necessary, including the use of military force, to defend its interests. The government sought to increase its popularity and acceptance among the conservative and nationalist voters and, with public opinion at its side, to legitimize its well-covered foreign policy agenda

2. CASE STUDIES

Ankara's strategy in Syrian Civil War is a good example, which illustrates the abovementioned strategy. Officially, Ankara supports Syria's transition to democracy and argues that Damascus should become a democratic regime, which recognises and respects civil and human rights, as well as the rights of all national and religious minorities of Syria:

"Foreign Minister Davutoğlu maintained that no one must be allowed to exploit this exercise for individual agendas or taking more lives. He also said that the sovereignty, independence, unity and territorial integrity of the Syrian State must be preserved and the future Syria must be democratic, pluralistic, and respectful of human rights and of the rule of law in which every citizen must enjoy full equality before the law regardless of their religious or ethnic background"⁴.

Unofficially, however, privately-owned media, which are more-or-less controlled by the government, suggest a quite different future for Syria. What they actually promote is Ankara's preference towards the Syrian Movement of Muslim Brotherhood (İhvan). For these media, only this Sunnite conservative movement is the only moderate political force that can establish democracy in Syria:

"The Turkish foreign policy thinks that organizations like ISIL are the result of the exclusionist attitude of the West and Gulf Countries against İhvan. In this sense, Turkey thinks that all the absolute military precautions will carry an opposite meaning without lending a hand to moderate actions and without a new political construction light, and thus, doesn't want to be part of this"⁵.

The same strategy can also be seen in the case of Cyprus, where Ankara's official policy is to support a federal solution based on the United Nation's initiatives:

⁴ "Foreign Minister Davutoğlu: A brighter future is awaiting the Syrian people. Turkey stands with them in this journey." Turkish Ministry of the Foreign Affairs, 2013, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/foreign-minister-davutoglu-a-brighter-future-is-awaiting-the-syrian-people_-turkey-stands-with-them-in-this-journey.en.mfa. Accessed 10 December 2014.

⁵ Bayramoğlu Ali. 2014. "Even excessiveness has a limit..." Yeni Şafak Newspaper, 23 September 2014, <http://english.yenisafak.com/mobil/columns/alibayramoglu/even-excessiveness-has-a-limit-2004647>. Accessed 10 December 2014. In an article, published in 2013, Akşam Newspaper's editor claimed that in Syria the West has no other choice but to cooperate with the branches of Muslim Brotherhood, because these branches are part of the only organized political and military party of the Syrian opposition, which is ready to govern Syria. Ulutaş, Ufuk. 2013. "Suriye'nin Organik Cepheleeri" ("The Organic Fronts of Syria"). Akşam Newspaper, 13 September 2013, <http://www.aksam.com.tr/yazarlar/suriyenin-organik-islami-cepheleeri-c2/haber-244265>. Accessed 11 December 2014.

“Referring to the sixty-ninth session of the United Nations General Assembly which opens on 16 September, Davutoğlu said, “Bring in that assembly both parties together, if necessary hold them in one room for days. But, let peace and stability come to the island and the East Mediterranean”⁶.

In contrast with this line of action, almost all media in Turkey receive, perceive and understand quite differently the event and developments taking place in Cyprus. The Turkish press claim that due to Greek-Cypriot intransigence now is the time to discuss other possible solution models. In other words, Turkey should seek partition:

“Where do we go from here? Perhaps the easiest option for everyone would be if the Greek Cypriots apologize and return to the negotiation table, promising to halt exploitation activities until the UN-backed peace plan has been achieved. If not, Turkey and the Turkish Cypriots may look into seeking recognition for the KKTC (Turkish Republic of the Northern Cyprus) - a viable option that should be considered by the international community. It's either that, or another four decades of the status quo”⁷.

Comments published in Turkish media regarding the role played by the United States and the West during the Gezi Protests help us understand even further this strategy of media manipulation. In various meetings with their European, American, and German counterparts, members of the Turkish government stress the importance of close cooperation between Turkey and the West:

“The Turkish president, on his part, said it was important for Germany to support Turkey's EU membership in line with the pledges made to the country, adding that Turkey and Germany had historical ties of friendship and alliance”⁸.

At the same time, however, Turkish media suggest or claim that Western forces were behind the clashes and street fighting that took place in cities all around Turkey. Moreover, they claim that their aim was to overthrow Turkish government:

“(…) Germany is responsible to answer certain questions about what has been happening in Turkey for a year. Germany is causing a serious security problem in Turkey, since it builds relations with those circles within itself and drawing blood to the Alevi-Sunni separation”⁹.

Apart from Syria and Cyprus, another example can be seen in the case of the Turkish-Israeli relations. Since 2010, relations between the two countries deteriorated rapidly. In 2013, following an American initiative, Turkey and Israel began to discuss ways in order to re-establish good relations and close cooperation. Now, according to Turkish officials, “the Turkish-Israeli

⁶ “Turkish PM Calls on His Greek Counterpart to Set Peace in Cyprus”. Daily Sabah Newspaper, 16 September 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/nation/2014/09/16/turkish-pm-calls-on-his-greek-counterpart-to-set-peace-in-cyprus>. Accessed 10 December 2014.

⁷ Karpazlı, Ertan. 2014. “Cyprus Problem! Here We Go Again!” Daily Sabah Newspaper, 20 October 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/opinion/2014/10/20/cyprus-problem-here-we-go-again>. Accessed 10 December 2014. In November 2014, referring to the statements made by the Turkish-Cypriot leadership, Akşam claimed that the time has come for Turkish-Cypriots to discuss and develop alternative plans. “Rumlar Anlaşma Düşüncesinde Değil (“Greek Cypriots Do Not Want Solution”). Akşam Newspaper, 8 November 2014, <http://www.aksam.com.tr/siyaset/rumlar-anlasma-dusuncesinde-degil/haber-352494>. Accessed 12 December 2014.

⁸ “Erdoğan Holds Joint Press Conference With Merkel”. The Journal of Turkish Weekly, 25 February 2014, <http://www.turkishweekly.net/news/147555/erdogan-holds-joint-press-conference-with-merkel.html>. Accessed 10 December 2014.

⁹ Karagül, İbrahim. 2014. “Tailored terror and the German impact”. Yeni Şafak Newspaper, 23 September 2014, <http://english.yenisafak.com/mobil/columns/ibrahimkaragul/tailored-terror-and-the-german-impact-2004025>. Accessed 10 December 2014. Few weeks after the huge demonstrations in Gezi Park, “Habervaktim” news site claimed that these protests were orchestrated by the West. According to the site, with Turkey under civil unrest and conflict, the West sought to end AKP’s rule. “Batı Gezi’yi Kullanarak Boyun Eğdirmek İstedi” (“Using the Gezi Protests Western World Tried to Press Us”) Habervaktim News Site, <http://www.habervaktim.com/haber/334510/bati-geziyi-kullanarak-boyun-egdirmek-istedi.html>. Accessed 12 December 2014.

relationship is closer to normalization than ever”¹⁰. However, several media in Turkey, more-or-less, describe Israel as a threat to all humanity:

“Israel, with its establishment, applications and inconsonance towards the humanity family, is in real terms, an issue of humanity. This is an intellectual problem, which feeds the extreme ends of the human race. Because of this, Israel’s administration is a variation and deviation in the history of mankind. In this way, it is the common issue of humanity. Everyone that directs the Israeli state and its politics will become the target of hatred one day. We come face to face with even bigger threats. Today, the country, that shows itself to people living in a tiny region like Gaza, with its oppressions, is a nuclear power. This mentality, this variation might target humanity tomorrow with that nuclear power. This is a possible thing for the mind structures of this idea, which formed the Israel state, and, the ones who are administrating today. This threat is not only for Palestinians, but also for whole humanity”¹¹.

3. CONCLUSION: A MISSIONARY ROLE FOR TURKISH MEDIA

Today, Turkey seems to apply a twofold foreign policy strategy, with a “special mission” assigned to the Turkish media. Officially, the government follows a conciliatory, low-profile policy, while, at the same time, it uses Turkish media in order to “persuade” people that Turkey is a leading regional power that, quite often, ignores the concerns of its neighbours and seems ready to use any means necessary, including the use of military force, to defend its interests. Within this framework, Turkey has a double role to play. In one hand, is a mighty, regional power able to impose its foreign policy agenda to its neighbours, while, on the other hand, is a victim of western aggression.

Silencing or widely ignoring different opinions, especially of the opposition, media in Turkey promote an aggressive foreign policy, in compliance with Ankara’s aspirations to be a leading country in Middle East. For AKP and its government, Ankara is willing and ready to impose a regime change to a neighbouring country (Syrian case), divide a neighbouring nation (Cypriot case) or confront the West (Gezi Protests case) and Israel.

AKP’s government, heavily supported by media in Turkey, try to legitimise its foreign policy agenda. The aim is to increase its popularity and acceptance among the conservative and nationalist voters.

Used as instruments or tools, Turkish media greatly contribute to the strengthening of AKP’s electoral basis, while, at the same time, impose what is described as “uniformity of opinion” in Turkish society, especially in foreign policy issues. In other words, Turkish media not only have accepted, willingly or unwillingly, the role of being just another government’s spokesman but also contribute to the establishment of a competitive authoritarian regime in Turkey.

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¹⁰ Daloglu, Tulin 2014. “Davutoglu says Turkish-Israeli relationship nears normalization.” Al Monitor, 10 February 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/02/davutoglu-says-turkey-israel-relationships-normalizing.html#> Accessed 10 December 2014.

¹¹ Karagül, İbrahim. 2014. “Gaza is a mutual shame and Israel is a deviation” Yeni Şafak Newspaper, 23 September 2014, <http://english.yenisafak.com/mobil/columns/ibrahimkaragul/gaza-is-a-mutual-shame-and-israel-is-a-deviation-2004243>. Accessed 10 December 2014. According to “Habervaktim” editor, Israel is a “terrorist” and “Zionist” state, while words are not enough to blame this “dangerous” state. Karakaya, Hasan. 2014. “Terör Devleti Siyonist İsrail Yazdıklarımız Ad Bile!” (“Are Words For The Terrorist, Zionist State of Israel Are Not Enough!”). Habervaktim News Site, 4 August 2014, <http://www.habervaktim.com/yazar/66263/teror-devleti-siyonist-israil-icin-yazdiklarimiz-az-bile.html>. Accessed 12 December 2014.

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