



# TURKEYSCOPE

## INSIGHTS ON TURKISH AFFAIRS

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### How Erdoğan Controls Turkey's Information Space

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As people around the world are struggling to cope with the coronavirus pandemic, many Turkish citizens do not appear alarmed. Why would they be? Every day, their health minister delivers the good news on television that more people are recovering from the deadly virus than dying of it; and their president vows a return to normal socioeconomic life in a matter of [weeks](#).<sup>1</sup> Few Turkish people are aware that Turkey actually has one of the [highest](#)<sup>2</sup> number of cases in the world—a fact only reported by foreign press agencies. Even fewer share the *New York Times*' [analysis](#)<sup>3</sup> that Turkey's official infection numbers might not match reality.

Certainly, Turkish citizens who recognize the COVID-19 threat have tried to speak up. But their warnings, unwelcome by the government, have had short shelf-lives in the Turkish information space. Since the pandemic hit Turkey in mid-March, authorities have launched criminal complaints against [hundreds](#)<sup>4</sup> of citizens for sharing posts about the pandemic. The detainees include a prominent news [anchor](#),<sup>5</sup> several medical professionals, and hundreds of social media users posting about the pandemic. And Ankara has warned that it is investigating thousands of [social media accounts](#)<sup>6</sup> for allegedly seeking to “manipulate” the public through “misinformation” about the pandemic.

Turkey intensified its crackdown because President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan does not want negative news about the pandemic to damage his political image, provoke public unrest, and ultimately push the currency into a crisis. But information control is nothing new for the Turkish president. In fact, it has been a hallmark of his rule—at the core of his effort to centralize and consolidate power.

For Erdoğan, a populist ruler in a majoritarian democracy, public image is a top priority. He is obsessed with keeping tabs on the public pulse and retains a close network of pollsters. Having entered national politics in 2002 as an Islamist outcast, by 2011 he came to win nearly 50 percent

of votes—exceptional for a Turkish politician. Erdoğan sees himself as a “man of the people” and frequently invokes the “people’s will” to justify controversial policies. Even as his popularity has waned—his party polled under 40 percent in the last election—he has continued to boast about his election results as proof of his broad support and legitimacy.

Many authoritarian leaders project this image by rigging elections—manufacturing consent where it does not exist. This has not exactly been Erdoğan’s *modus operandi*. While his government stands accused of some election fraud, the voting process in Turkey remains by and large free. Rather than fixing results, he allows elections to proceed—but with an unfair playing field heavily tilted to his advantage.

Indeed, Erdoğan relies on a different tactic to project an image of popularity: manipulating public opinion through the information space. He does not simply command news cycles with his optimally televised busy schedule. He literally dominates the public discourse through media ownership, unrelenting censorship and repression, and the strategic circulation of propaganda and disinformation.

### *Media Ownership*

The most immediate way to shape information in Turkey is through traditional media. A significant majority of Turkish people get their political news from television. The average citizen watches [3.5 hours](#)<sup>7</sup> of television a day, and most tune in to the news shows—which reach some [20 million](#)<sup>8</sup> viewers at prime time. Newspapers are the next most popular source of information, although they have a smaller audience. Turkey’s thirty newspapers reach only about 1.7 million readers per week. [The top three newspapers](#)<sup>9</sup> have fewer than 200,000 each. That said, many Turks spend as much time on news websites as on social media.

Erdoğan has been on a mission to overtake Turkey’s TV and newspaper conglomerates. Over the past decade, his family and private sector allies have come to [acquire and control](#)<sup>10</sup> more than 90 percent of Turkey’s news channels and newspapers. This control affords Erdoğan a key edge in shaping the public discourse in his favor. The evening news programs of pro-Erdoğan channels, such as [ATV](#),<sup>11</sup> [compete](#)<sup>12</sup> with the independent FOX TV as the most-watched programs. The two top-selling newspapers, *Sabah* and *Hurriyet*, are now owned by pro-government moguls. The most-visited news websites are also pro-government channels: CNN Turk and NTV.

These media companies continuously reinforce Erdoğan’s worldview and self-projected image as an embattled leader molding Turkey into a global power. Their approach varies: The myriad tabloid papers with their virulent language complement a handful of established newspapers like *Hurriyet* and channels like CNN Turk, which toe the government’s line but with a semblance of professionalism. Still, under Erdoğan’s shadow, major news outlets merely reproduce the

government's press statements, and generally refrain from reporting on domestic challenges to his rule.

Monopolizing traditional media has a second benefit for Erdoğan: media professionals' self-censorship. Erdoğan's financial leverage over the majority of media outlets means that any columnist, reporter, presenter, editor, or producer who strays from the dominant narrative draws the spotlight and potentially Erdoğan's retribution. This knowledge promotes self-censorship among media professionals who think twice before drawing unfriendly attention. Often, editors or producers interfere with the work of reporters if they consider it politically sensitive—lest it draw the ire of a prosecutor or pro-government columnist.

### *Censorship and Repression*

Despite Erdoğan's vast control of media networks, thousands of independent journalists in Turkey work daily to highlight the government's abuses of power and assaults on human rights. In recent years, Ankara has stepped up its efforts to suppress, harass, and silence such critical voices through a strict censorship regime built through numerous laws and regulations that allow the authorities to criminalize journalism, shut down websites, and police social media.

Since 2015, Turkey has been the [largest](#)<sup>13</sup> jailer of journalists in the world. [Currently](#),<sup>14</sup> more than 100 media workers are in prison. Most of them are accused of membership of, or making propaganda on behalf of, a terrorist organization—often in reference to their coverage of groups deemed “terrorists” by the government. Journalists—just like ordinary internet users—are also targeted for their social media posts if critical of the government. Erdoğan himself has [launched](#)<sup>15</sup> numerous lawsuits against journalists for libel. Beyond silencing critics, these lawsuits also have the effect of inducing self-censorship among other independent or critical journalists. With independent media companies under increasing pressure as more outlets are folded into Erdoğan's empire, critical coverage may amount to a declaration of war with Ankara.

The censorship regime is led by two agencies: Turkey's official radio and television watchdog, RTUK, and the anti-cybercrime department of the national police, which leads the government's social media probes. Together, these agencies monitor, remove, and probe all non-print content—broadcast and digital—at the behest of Erdoğan's government.

RTUK oversees all broadcast content on Turkish television and radio channels and uses this power [frequently](#)<sup>16</sup> to fine or suspend independent broadcasters. Last summer, the pro-Erdoğan parliament [granted](#)<sup>17</sup> RTUK sweeping oversight over all online content as well, including news sites and streaming platforms like Netflix. Even before this, RTUK commonly blocked websites, including Wikipedia, Facebook, and YouTube. Last August, it [blocked](#)<sup>18</sup> 136 websites, including the popular independent daily Bianet.org. This February, after a high-casualty attack against

Turkish soldiers in Syria, RTUK [blocked](#)<sup>19</sup> Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Whatsapp, along with other websites, for several hours. Ankara reportedly is now [seeking](#)<sup>20</sup> ways to require foreign social media companies to appoint a local representative responsible for blocking accounts or removing content per Turkish court orders.

Meanwhile the anti-cybercrime department [boasts](#)<sup>21</sup> that it is monitoring 45 million social media accounts. Its relentless policing of the web earned Turkey top place in the number of legal demands submitted to Twitter in 2019—and second in court orders against Twitter. Its vigilance intensifies during national crises: After Turkey’s February 2018 incursion into Syria, it [detained](#)<sup>22</sup> 845 people for opposing the war on social media. Similarly, police detained [hundreds](#)<sup>23</sup> of social media users during the pandemic—and put thousands of others under watch. These practices are designed to instill self-censorship in the digital media space.

### *Propaganda and disinformation*

The Turkish government not only censors the online information space, but also seeks to [command](#)<sup>24</sup> it. Erdoğan’s government and financially powerful friends flood Turkish social media with bots and trolls who propagate his message and bully others who counter it. The president’s office now has an [army](#)<sup>25</sup> of trolls working full time to ensure the broader dissemination of pro-Erdoğan messages. These social media trolls act as shadow police in the digital space, guarding the dominance of Erdoğan’s worldview by bullying all undesired voices.

This media ecosystem is prime for breeding disinformation. In recent years, Erdoğan and his supporters increasingly have resorted to disinformation to slander their critics. Anti-Western conspiracy theories [form the bedrock](#)<sup>26</sup> of these efforts, as propagandists [tap into](#)<sup>27</sup> long-held suspicions among Turkish society and invent Western efforts to undermine Turkey. In turn, Erdoğan casts his power grabs, heavy-handed security policies, and assaults on free expression as a necessary response to a slew of terror groups he asserts threaten Turkey with alleged [support](#)<sup>28</sup> from the West. His media tirelessly circulate this message with unsubstantiated allegations.

A telling example is the pro-Erdoğan media campaign to depict the 2013 Gezi Park mass protests against the government as a Western-led plot—after Erdoğan and his advisors called it such. To that end, a Turkish daily [manufactured](#)<sup>29</sup> a fake exposé of CNN International anchor Christiane Amanpour that made her appear to admit to ulterior motives for her coverage of the Gezi protests. Some Turkish newspapers [alleged](#)<sup>30</sup> that the protests had been a secret plot by Serbian activists. Most prominently, pro-Erdoğan [newspapers](#)<sup>31</sup> and [columnists](#)<sup>32</sup> spread unfounded rumors that the protests were funded by the liberal American philanthropist George Soros—a claim that Erdoğan’s media and [senior officials](#)<sup>33</sup> have repeated for years, even [jailing](#) an innocent Turkish philanthropist for nearly three years based on it.

These disinformation campaigns are part of a larger trend in Turkish government propaganda. Columnists and media commentators frequently blame domestic woes on Western actors—pinning an earthquake on a French research ship or the coronavirus on the CIA (as recently argued on [CNN Turk](#)).<sup>34</sup> The most dangerous fake news crafted in pro-Erdoğan media are those claiming U.S. support for Turkey’s declared enemies. These stories not only paint the United States, a treaty ally, as seeking to destroy Turkey. They also present U.S. officials—including President Barack Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and former U.S. envoy to Ankara John Bass—as culprits, without evidence, turning them into open targets.

In Turkey’s tightly controlled information ecosystem, with so few alternatives to government-controlled outlets, such propaganda goes largely uncontested. While few independent dailies cover the government’s shortcomings, their voices are drowned out in an information space dominated by pro-Erdoğan voices. Meanwhile, pro-Erdoğan media continues to demonize critics and discredit independent journalists and outlets as supporters of those “traitors” or “terrorists.”

Erdoğan’s outsized influence over Turkey’s information space compounds the vast presidential powers already afforded by the constitution. As long as the president dominates the media through ownership and censorship, he can drive the public debate. By flooding TV channels, newspapers, and social media with only those who toe his line, he seeks to project his messages to an audience broader than his political base, and to sway public opinion. His social media trolls and the fake news of his tabloids attract even greater viewership; their conspiracy theories are sowing anti-western and anti-democratic sentiments. The social damage of years-long propaganda and disinformation could take years to heal.

Turkish citizens already have a hard time participating in their country’s governance. Other than elections, they have few avenues to affect policymaking: Their parliament has become a rubber stamp for Erdoğan’s decisions, and their parliamentarians face lawsuits for simply performing their duties. The [major political changes](#) that Erdoğan has introduced make Turkey’s eventual return to a democratic system a challenge. But even if and when Turkey’s post-Erdoğan rulers ultimately make the necessary structural reforms, it will take equal effort to undo Erdoğan’s social engineering policies, starting with his dominance of the information space.

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## Notes

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