



Media and Democratic Backsliding: Lessons from the Turkish Case

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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Summary

- There has been a global trend towards democratic backsliding in various new and established democracies across the world since the 2010s.
- The Freedom House Freedom in the World report for 2022 noted that there have now been 15 consecutive years of decline in global freedom and that the long democratic recession is deepening.
- In Turkey, the AKP came to power in 2002 at a time marked by a relatively pro-European Union and pluralistic outlook in politics. The democratic backsliding in Turkey has been more obvious since 2007 and the start of the AKP’s second term in power. It deepened especially after the 2016 coup attempt and the transition to a presidential system in 2017.
- This democratic regression has also impacted on the media sector globally, especially through various coercive and non-coercive media capture strategies.
- Media concentration has been ongoing in many countries for many decades with a concomitant negative impact on media freedom, leading to a gradual decline in free and independent media. Current forms of media capture are considered more impactful than earlier methods, due to the rise of business structures that operate in tandem with state authorities to capture media outlets.
- In Turkey, and across those countries in which media capture is prevalent, the mainstream media is vanishing as a result of polarization; two distinct journalisms are emerging in their place, one of which is based on a propaganda model and erodes media and press freedom.

Introduction

According to the [Freedom House report] figures for 2021, nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced democratic deterioration.

Democratic backsliding has become a popular concept over the last decade in reference to a process of democratic reversal that is visible in many countries around the world. The Freedom House (2022) report noted that the countries that experienced a deterioration of their democratic processes “outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin” since the records first remarked on the negative trend in 2006. According to the figures for 2021, nearly 75 percent of the world’s population lived in a country that faced democratic deterioration. The report also noted that the impact of the long-term democratic decline has become increasingly global in nature, being seen in both new democracies and dictatorships as well as in western and established, long-standing democracies. The Freedom House report (2022) also noted that the “proportion of Not Free countries” is the highest it has been over the past 15 years. Turkey ranked 32 out of 100 countries in the Freedom House report (2022) and was listed among the “not free” countries.

In its current form, democratic reversal is now being undertaken by elected incumbents. The checks and balances on executive power are being removed, and there is a constant decline in the rights which citizens typically enjoy.

Problems with democratic governance were ongoing throughout the 20th century, when they generally manifested themselves in the form of democratic regression through military coups or electoral fraud. However, the current forms of democratic decline are considered to differ qualitatively from these earlier periods. In its current form, democratic reversal is now being undertaken by elected incumbents. The checks and balances on executive power are being removed, and there is a constant decline in the rights which citizens typically enjoy.

Democratic backsliding: a global trend

Democratic backsliding has been going on for more than decade in both old and new democracies, where it is implemented through a number of methods or strategies. Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt state in their work *How Democracies Die* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2019) that polarization is the major danger currently faced by modern democracies, and that it transpire as a “consequence of the rise of populist and demagogic leaders”. Leaders of this type tend to abuse their constitutional power to impose their decisions on other authorities and civil society, including the media and the business community.

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In its current manifestation, democratic backsliding can usually be seen to take place in three steps or methods, which can be applied at the same time or incrementally: The first involves targeting referees of the state, such as the judiciary. The second lies in targeting political opponents and parties, the mass media, opposition and business leaders, NGOs and representatives of civil society. The third and final pillar relates to changing the rules of governance through changes introduced to legislation, the constitution, or the electoral system. Usually, the elected incumbents employ the principle of “the public good” when targeting the judiciary, media or civil society through these strategies. One of the factors that contributes to democratic backsliding is the issue of polarization, which is to say the emerge of a clear divide between “good guys and bad guys” in politics, media and civil society. There is a direct link between democratic backsliding and declining media freedoms, and polarization aggravates the declining in the media’s watchdog function.

Media Capture and democratic backsliding

A number of factors have fed into the limitation of media freedom. The global financial crisis that began in 2008 was a primary factor in the increased vulnerability of the media. In the days of financial difficulties, oligarchic structures and other business elites began to buy media outlets in many countries. The term “media capture” refers to the ways in which media outlets become subject to, or captured by, powerful elite or class interests. In media capture, the first issue is the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few members of the economic elites. In Turkey, this process had already begun in the 1990s. A high concentration of media ownership is associated with low levels of political accountability, biased reporting, and corrupt relationships between governments and media owners.

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Marius Dragomir states that “media capture has its logic and its components: politicized regulation, concentration of ownership, but the current media capture is a different phenomenon. Currently, groups of interests of elites are taking control of parts of media”. In its current form, different “variants of media capture” are seen in different countries. Countries such as China and North Korea constitute a distinct non-democratic category. There are also post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe, where the media, after a period of democratization and pluralization in the 1990s, has slowly deteriorated. The issues of media concentration has existed in many countries for many decades, with problems stemming from the politicization of regulation in many countries. As Marius Dragomir states, in the webinar the current forms of media capture are considered more influential than their predecessors in previous decades, due to the rise of business structures that operate in tandem with state authorities in the capturing of media outlets. In addition to this process, in recent years the “propaganda model is rising because of the overwhelming and unprecedented rise of the role of governments in the media in various ways: by funding the media outlets, by controlling media outlets, setting up media outlets, governing media outlets”. The current logic of capturing media is usually seen one or two years before elections in various countries, when companies close to the government start to buy more media outlets, or governments begin to spend more money on media. Media capture is a strategy employed purely for “electoral purposes”, to ensure that the media outlets help to ensure the elections are won. If the aforementioned elites lose the elections, they will lose access to these resources, so the current forms of media capture is generally a phenomenon for ensuring electoral victory and its own continuation.

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In Europe, similar examples of media capture are seen in countries such as the Czech Republic and Poland, but as Dragomir states: “The most extreme examples of media capture are seen in Hungary and Turkey.” Egypt is another example of extreme media capture, where the intelligence services are heavily involved in capturing the media. Media capture, whichever model is used to effect it, has long term implications for media freedom.

In a study conducted in over one hundred countries (Dragomir, 2019), a correlation was seen across various countries in four areas relating to media capture: “regulation; state funding which is spent preferentially with media outlets in—usually—the form of state advertising; control of state media or public media; and the control of private ownership”. Of these, the control of private ownership is the most important, because it is the most difficult to achieve. Media capture can occur by means of direct and indirect mechanisms: The direct control mechanism is the actual taking over and closing down of the media organization, with its assets transferred to state institutions. Indirect capture mechanisms include state subsidies, bail outs, the preferential distribution of state advertising, tax

breaks for media owners, cheap credit from state banks, privatization deals and state subsidies; these are important tools, which undemocratic actors also make use of.

Media Capture and Media Freedom in Turkey

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Changes in media ownership go back even further in Turkey, to the late 1980s and early 1990s, a period which was also marked by a series of coalition governments. Press freedom was heavily curtailed in the early 1990s. Starting in the late 1980s, businessmen began to buy up media companies, gradually forming conglomerates. The intricate relationship between the media and political elites that has impacted on media independence in Turkey’s media system has been documented over multiple decades. However the concept of “media capture” was only introduced recently in analyses of the AKP’s increasing dominance of the media through coercive and/or non-coercive measures in the form of “legal suppression”, “acquisitions”, and “financial re-structuring”. Media capture is a concept used to refer to the ways in which political leaders and the media function “symbiotically”, with media owners providing supportive news coverage for political leaders in exchange for financial benefits such as government advertising in their outlets.

A couple of turning points or key dates in Turkey’s democratic regression can be identified since the AKP came to power in 2002. As Işın Eliçin stated in the webinar, in the early 2000s there was “relative freedom of the press” despite the earthquake and the economic crisis. The country’s official designation as a candidate for EU membership in the early 2000s created a vibrant atmosphere in the public sphere, giving rise to hopes of a more prosperous, pluralistic and democratic Turkey. There were 24-hour news channels, and media professionals were able to provide “critical” and “live” coverage of important events. In the light of Turkey’s ongoing bid for EU membership, media professionals shared the hopeful vision of the general public for a more pluralistic, democratic and prosperous Turkey. They were able to fulfill their watchdog function” in a far freer and more critical way.

When the AKP came to power, it capitalized on the economic and banking crisis of 2001. It set up the TMSF [Saving Deposits Insurance Fund] as a government agency operating under the prime minister’s office in order to take over the banks that collapsed (along with the TV channels and newspapers they controlled). These assets were sold after market evaluations, changing the media landscape considerably. During this period, businessmen sympathetic to the AKP were encouraged to pool their resources to create media holdings that backed the AKP government. In March 2007, the Merkez Group’s media assets (the ATV TV channel, five newspapers including *Sabah*, and eleven magazines) were confiscated due to a breach of its contract with the TMSF. These assets were later sold to the pro-AKP Çalık Group in December 2008. When Çalık withdrew from media at the end of 2013, their assets were sold to the Kalyon Construction Company, owned by Zirve Holdings, ensuring that it remained in the hands of a pro-AKP group.

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The year 2007 marked the first critical turning point in Turkey’s democratic backsliding and increased media capture. This coincided with the beginning of the AKP’s second term, when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s power over the executive ranks of the party began to increase. Pressure on the media increased that year in the form of conglomerate pressures (tax fines), judicial suppression, the dis-accreditation of journalists in mainstream media, online banishment (internet censorship), and surveillance. In addition, the process of Europeanization slowed down after 2007, intervention in the media began to differ qualitatively from earlier periods, and new strategies were employed to capture the mainstream media through coercive and non-coercive means. The media owned by pro-

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AKP businessmen was charged with acting as a counterweight to the eight established major mainstream media groups. These media companies were also referred to as “pool media”, because they pooled their resources. While tax credits were given to government-friendly media, these were withheld from critical media outlets. In 2009, tax levied on the Doğan media Group by the Ministry of Finance coupled with tax evasion charges were used to silence the Group, formerly the largest conglomerate in Turkey. The period 2008–2011 saw politicized investigations, into Ergenekon, Sledgehammer and other purported coups, used to criminalize or silence political opponents.

The year 2007 was also turning point for the media globally, with the global recession marking the start of a decline in the media that would last for over a decade. Research shows that a combination of the financial crisis, the slashing of advertising budgets, the sale of media companies, and the rise of new technologies (such as the web-based advertising model and social media companies becoming major players in advertising markets) had a major impact on the related issues of democratic reversal and media capture.

As Işın Eliçin reflected, 2007 was a critical year for Turkey, because “From that point on, media professionals began to lose their freedom, first gradually and later faster, because the editors on the TV channels and newspapers were put under increased pressure from the owners and political circles”.

The media capture strategies which employed various forms of judicial and economic pressure were complete by the time the AKP secured a third term in the elections of 12 June 2011. In the period that followed the Gezi protests (May 2013) and the corruption scandal of 13–25 December 2013, the AKP began to implement further measures to control possible threats stemming from media and digital communication outlets, shutting down news outlets affiliated to the Gülen movement, such as *Zaman* newspaper and Samanyolu TV. The two-year period from the Gezi Park protests to the general elections of 7 June 2015 witnessed a significant reconfiguration of the political as well as the media system. The other key turning point was the transition in 2017 from a parliamentary to a presidential system in Turkey. The criminalization of NGOs and civil society actors as terrorists or enemies of the state also began in this period. The latest example is the ongoing imprisonment of Osman Kavala on a life sentence, and the imprisonment of other media and civil society actors in May 2022 on the charge of attempting to depose Erdoğan and his government during the Gezi protests. After the acquisition of the Doğan Media group, a major mainstream media conglomerate, by pro-government Demirören Holding in 2018, more than 90% of Turkey’s media outlets are owned by pro-government businessmen.

The governing party and its proxies aim to delegitimize the digital-borne outlets as foreign-funded, the so-called “fondaş media” (media that receives funds), or even as “traitors working with western agents” to destabilize Turkey.

The Implications of Media Capture and Possible Solutions

In the aftermath of the Gezi protests and 2015 elections, citizen, freelance and veteran journalists alike utilized digital platforms—new media tools, forms and formats—in an increasingly entrepreneurial approach. Digital-native platforms—in the form of news portals, citizen-based initiatives, fact-checking ventures—plus news academies established by professional organizations, all responded swiftly to the captured mainstream media in Turkey. However, digital-native outlets such as Medyascope, Duvar and Diken have not been able to establish a viable revenue model to ensure their sustainability as independent media outlets, and rely in the main on public support through crowdfunding or, in some cases, foreign funds and grants.

Controlling, silencing or de-legitimizing the media are viewed as methods employed by autocratic regimes.

The governing party and its proxies aim to de-legitimize the digital-borne outlets as foreign-funded, the so-called “*fondaş* media” (media that receives funds), or even as “traitors working with western agents” to destabilize Turkey. A report by the SETA think-tank reveals that foreign news outlets such as the BBC News Türkçe and Deutsche Welle have been discredited in a similar way. These outlets brought plurality back to media in Turkey in the Turkish language. Yesil has argued that polarization in Turkey is central to democratic backsliding, and an increasing tribalism is evident not only in politics, but also in different media camps in Turkey. This is why digital-borne outlets have a role to play in the building of a vibrant, diverse and pluralistic media system, and helping to reduce polarization in Turkey.

Controlling, silencing or de-legitimizing the media are viewed as methods employed by autocratic regimes, and that is why the experts in the webinar highlighted the importance of such digital-born media outlets fighting efforts to delegitimize and criminalize journalism. Marius Dragomir suggested that elections and a possible change of government will not immediately solve the problem of the captured media system that has existed for over a decade and already done immense damage to independent journalism. Which is to say that the first step towards a solution lies in measuring the impact and understanding the extent of the phenomenon.

Işın Eliçin states that digital-born outlets such as Medyascope are ready to go mainstream, as they do not consider themselves anti-government and strive instead for pluralistic content and output. However, she highlighted the risks of greater polarization in social media, and in particular those efforts that seek to delegitimize such outlets. Also, in order to overcome the problem of sustainable revenue models, she suggested that audiences should support such outlets through donations, sharing, watching, and liking content on digital platforms.

Marius Dragomir suggested that, as we have seen in the examples above, the policy is part of the problem in certain parts of the world, because it is controlled by the elites. In his view, large-scale interventions are needed via donors who support independent media by supporting grassroots organizations and local audiences.

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