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Media Sources Shared on Facebook and Networking by Erdoğan and the AKP in Turkey[1]

The Justice and Development Party (AKP) and its leader Erdoğan represent the culturally heterogeneous periphery against the old ruling elite in Turkey. After almost two decades in power, Erdoğan and the AKP subdued the mainstream media while they aim to realize the same scenario with respect to the social media. Social media are spaces for governmental or pro-governmental propaganda, but also for the expression of political dissent. Politicians in Turkey have been using various social media platforms more effectively since the 2010s. This research reveals that the great majority of the content shared by Erdoğan and the AKP Facebook (FB) accounts belong to their own media production teams. The shared sources are disseminating pro-government propaganda. The Erdoğan FB account has a more intensive network than the AKP FB account. We also found that the main promoters of these two FB accounts were using pseudo names, which might indicate that the main promoters were political trolls.

Keywords: Facebook, AKP, populism, Erdogan, network analysis, media, Turkey, Twitter

Introduction

This research studies media sources shared on Facebook (FB) and networking by the populist Justice and Development Party (*AKP*) and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey in 2019 and 2020. To be more specific, this research covers posts that were sent by two FB accounts for 12 months between April 2019 and April 2020. Studying the social media posts of Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB pages in this period allows us to capture and cover a variety of events that had a profound effect on the Turkish national context during this period.

First and foremost, this time span covers the most recent and probably the most contentious local elections of the modern Turkish history. In March 2019, Turkish citizens went to the ballot box to elect their new mayors across the country. The results were disappointing for the *AK*P government and Erdoğan as the *AKP* candidates lost the elections to the opposition candidates in Istanbul and Ankara, which were two major strongholds of political Islamists since the 1994 local elections. The winning margin in the case of Istanbul was especially too close (a little more than 20,000 votes in a city with 8.6 million eligible voters). The *AKP*, how-

ever, rather than conceding the defeat, asserted that the elections in Istanbul were ridden and consequently pushed for snap elections. Despite the lack of hard evidence, the High Election Council accepted the *AKP*'s plea for snap elections. The High Election Council scheduled the new elections for June 2019. This decision however, polarised a political landscape that was already one of the most polarised in the world (Somer 2019). The government also used the mainstream media as well as various social media platforms to disseminate the discourse that the election in Istanbul was ridden by the opposition while the opposition and its supporters mostly turned to social media platforms to voice their views as they had little to no access to major media outlets in Turkey.

The second major event of the period was the Covid-19 pandemic, which have started to spread across the globe by early 2020. On 11 March 2020, the Turkish Minister of Health announced the first positive Covid-19 case in Turkey. Nevertheless, the discussion on the Covid-19 pandemic started weeks before the announcement of the first positive case. While the mainstream media and the pro-government accounts on different social media platforms defended the view that the government had been extremely successful in its fight against the Covid-19 pandemic, the opposition, through social media and also through some media outlets that were marginalised by the government, argued that the *AKP* government was hiding the true scope of the pandemic in Turkey. Therefore, the pandemic in Turkey was characterised by a polarised media landscape where the pro-government media and social media accounts defended government actions as well as argued for the government success in dealing with the pandemic while the opposition asserted the view that the government was not transparent about the severity of the pandemic in Turkey.

The *AKP* has been in power since the November 2002 elections in Turkey. This fact makes the *AKP* the longest ruling populist party in Europe (Yabanci and Taleski 2018). Among major political parties in Turkey, only the *AKP* could be considered as a populist party, since it is the only party, which features the core characteristics of populism (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). Indeed, populism has been a defining feature of the *AKP* government and its leader Erdoğan's policy-making since the party was founded (Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar 2018; Yabanci and Taleski 2018, Aytaç and Elçi 2018). Their policy style demonstrates several populist features such as (1) a strong anti-institutionalist character (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), (2) an anti-establishment discourse (Park, 2018; Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar, 2018); (3) antagonization that benefits from pre-existing divisions within the society (Selcuk, 2016; Park, 2018), (4) a persistent emphasis on national will as well as association of national will with Erdoğan (Selcuk, 2016; Yabanci, 2016; Castaldo, 2018), and (5) the mobilization of masses for political goals of the party (Castaldo, 2018; Ozpek and Tanriverdi Yasar, 2018).

Rather unsurprisingly, an analysis of parliamentary group speeches of political leaders in Turkey between 2011 and 2019 (N = 569) reveals that Erdoğan is significantly more populist than other political leaders (Elçi, 2019). Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, CHP), is the least populist among political leaders. While the leader of the Nationalist Action Party (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, MHP), Devlet Bahçeli also benefits from a Manichean discourse; the co-leaders of the Peoples' Democratic Party (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, HDP) use an anti-elitist discourse (Elçi 2019).

Aytac and Elci (2018) suggest that a sociocultural divide inherited from the Ottoman Empire, which pitted the ruling elites of the "center" against a culturally heterogeneous "periphery" has contributed to the rise of populist politics in Turkey. The parties representing the periphery have argued that Turkish politics is based on a struggle between "the people" and the Western-oriented secular "elites," who were controlling major state institutions despite their poor electoral performance (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). The *AKP* and its success in Turkish politics represent the victory of periphery over this Kemalist center. Because the *AKP* has been in power for almost two decades, supporters of this party have emulated the core premises of populism since the exclusion of periphery by the Kemalist elite has ended after the *AKP* consolidated power (Aytaç and Elçi 2018). The symbolic declaration of the consolidation of the *AKP* power came when a hyper presidential system, which was introduced in July 2018, resulted in the concentration of power in the hands of the president at the expense of the parliament and other state institutions (Verza and Mat 2020).

Mainstream Media and the *AKP*

The mainstream media was a significant instrument used in February 1997 post-modern coup when the Kemalist elite led by the military forced the resignation of the Islamist Welfare Party (RP) government (Aslan 2016). This was a major factor determining the attitudes of the *AKP* towards the mainstream media in Turkey, as the leading members of the *AKP* were also the members of the RP party back in 1997. Hence, the *AKP* remained suspicious of the acitivities of the mainstream media from the beginning. Because the *AKP* government felt threatened by the mainstream media even after coming to power in November 2002, one of its goals was to create its own media organizations while also trying to transform the mainstream media's ideological orientation (Bulut and Yörük 2017).

The *AKP* government have claimed the control of the mainstream media in Turkey gradually (Coskun, 2020). It used a carrot and stick policy in acquiring the control of the mainstream media outlets. Those supported the *AKP* government and its agenda were rewarded with lucrative state contracts and official advertisements in their newspapers while those following a neutral or a more critical line were punished via censorship, tax penalties and even prison terms. One of the most illustrative cases happened in 2009 when the Dogan Media Group was punished with 6.8 billion TL (USD 4.5 billion in 2009 exchange rates) as the newspapers and broadcasts owned by this media group continued criticizing the *AKP* government (Hürriyet, 2016). This harsh penalty forced the Dogan Media Group to sell two of its major newspapers, Milliyet and Vatan, to the pro-government Demiroren Group. As the pressure on the Dogan Group had continued over the years, it had no choice but to sell its remaining newspapers (foremost *Hürriyet*) and the broadcasts (*CNNTurk, Kanal D*) to the Demiroren Group for only USD 916 millions in 2018.

The *AKP* government's control over the mainstream media has been undisputed since 2018. Moreover, as of 2020, no major news outlet in Turkey can afford to stand above the partisan fray (O'Donohue, Hoffman and Makovsky 2020). For example, the pro-government Turkish newspaper *Yeni Şafak* with a circulation over 100,000 copies contributes to the production, dissemination,

as well as the mobilization of the populist discourse of the *AKP* government clustering around the politics of the definition of "the people", which is defined by the *AKP* and its leader in the first place (Kaptan 2020). In the few past years, the Turkish society have also become more polarized along party lines in following main sources of news and the media brands, with opponents of *AKP* moving from TV (which is still the major source of information) to social media platforms and other online news sources (O'Donohue, Hoffman and Makovsky 2020). It is under these circumstances that the social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook (FB) acquired more significance for actors opposing the government and its policies. There also emerged two contrasting and opposing realities of Erdoğan and the *AKP* government in social media platforms; namely anti-Erdoğan (opposition) and pro-Erdoğan (supporters) communities (Keskin 2020). Following section provides additional key specific features of the use of the social media in Turkey.

National Context

Newman (2020) explains that digital media are widely used and have become an alternative venue for critical voices though television is still the most important source of news for the majority of Turkish citizens. Moreover, printed media is losing its significance in Turkey. Kizilkaya and Utucu (2021) reports that daily circulation of best selling newspapers in Turkey has dropped below 200,000 while digital media has continued to expand its overreach in Turkey. As of 2020, 83% of the people in Turkey had access to the Internet and 72% of the society used their smartphones to access to the news or social media in Turkey (Newman 2020). Yanat (2017) argues that despite the fact that TV still remains as the main news source (47%) that online sources, including social media, are at the top of the list of sources of news used weekly by Turkish citizens. Furthermore, the share of online sources, including social media, (39%) as main news source is only second to TV while the shares of printed media (6%) and radio (6%) has decreased significantly.

These figures demonstrate the changing nature of journalism and social communication in Turkey. Already in 2014, more than 90% of the Internet-using population aged between 15 and 64 owned a FB account while more than 70% of the same age group also used Twitter in Turkey (Parks et al. 2017). Social media platforms in Turkey are spaces for governmental or pro-government propaganda, but also for dissent against the *AKP* government as it is exemplified by proliferation of important critical activist platforms and journalism outlets including but not limited to *diken.com.tr; Otekilerin Postasi* (The Post of Others), *Capul TV* (now *Hayir TV*), *T24, 140 Journos*, and *sendika.org* (Yeğen 2015 and Yesil (n.d.) in Bulut and Yörük 2017, p.4094). Indeed, though still lagging behind the digital reach of pro-government media (47.8 million users) digital reach of independent media in Turkey has increased to 33.5 million users in Turkey (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021). Furthermore, independent media outlets have continued to expand their digital reach in Turkey while pro-government media outlets digital outreach has stalled (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021).

Despite these figures, social media and digital media remain important for the *AKP* government. In fact, the most famous case of using the social media for helping a populist leader in

power to protect his office was in Turkey when a faction within the military attempted a coup d'etat in July 2016. Erdoğan, rather than yielding, answered this challenge to his government with an appeal through the Internet and *Facetime*. While the state TV was overrun by the putschists, private broadcasts such as *CNN Turk* and *A Haber* eagerly broadcasted and encouraged citizens to take it to the streets in order to challenge the putschist takeover. Following this, several pro-government social media accounts echoed the rallying call of Erdoğan. Opponents of the coup flooded social media platforms with commentaries and images as well as live videos (Abutaleb 2016).

Others noted a more frequent use of social media by politicians in Turkey since 2010 (Kuyucu 2018a) way before the failed coup attempt in 2016. Bulut and Yörük (2017) argue that Twitter has become one of the major instruments in Turkish politics. Tellingly, the party with the most visibility on Twitter before 2011 general elections was the *AKP* (Kuyucu 2018a). The *AKP* has relied on a polarizing discourse using a large pro-government (and acting on behalf of the establishment) troll army on Twitter. Twitter trolls, allegedly serving the people, fetish 'the national will' and demonise any 'enemy', who dare challenging the political and cultural transformation propagated by the *AKP*. The result of this process is a digital culture of lynching and self-censorship (Bulut and Yoruk, 2017). Pro-*AKP* journalists also act like social media trolls and openly target journalists, academics, and artists, who are critical of the policies and the discourse of the *AKP* government. Moreover, these trolls serve as raider troops for the new AKP policies or discourses in Turkey. Hence, Turkey is a case where political online trolling is a major factor in determining and manipulating the agenda (Bulut and Yörük 2017; Karatas and Saka 2017). Before the general elections in 2007, YouTube also played an important role in Turkish politics. The Supreme Electoral Council banned election campaigns on televisions, thus parties moved their election propagandas to YouTube. Almost 10,000 videos with political content on YouTube was streamed millions of times. Videos streamed on YouTube included party leaders' meetings with the people, specially-crafted cubes, campaign songs, electoral promises and other images criticizing political rivals (Kuyucu 2018a).

Three largest parties (*AKP, CHP* and *MH*P) and their leaders in Turkey actively use FB, Twitter and Youtube (Darı, 2018, in Kuyucu 2018a). The *AK*P and the *CHP* official social media accounts have around 10 million followers whereas these three party leaders' personal social media accounts have over 30 million followers (Kuyucu 2018b). Erdoğan alone had around 13 million followers on Twitter as of April 2018. Only in April 2018, Erdoğan's social media posts received 714,624 likes and 155,655 retweets (Kuyucu 2018b). On YouTube, the total number of visits received by these parties' accounts was around 78 million. Despite this high volume of activity on social media, political parties in Turkey prefer a one-way communication rather than devising a more interactive communication style with their voters. Most recently, the *AKP* and the *CHP* have begun using mobile phone apps in order to sustain communication with voters. In the case of the *AKP*, the prominent position of the leader is more obvious as this party has also developed a separate app featuring Erdoğan (Yalçınkaya 2018 in Kuyucu 2018a).

Elections and Social Media

Before the general elections of 2011, politicians and political parties in Turkey used social media platforms to promote their activities and their election promises (Bayraktutan et al. 2012, in Kuyucu 2018a). The analysis of the use of Twitter before the general elections in 2015 showed that the then-*AKP* leader Ahmet Davutoğlu mostly tweeted about his party´s activities whereas Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu shared mostly electoral promises, and Devlet Bahçeli tweeted messages on various matters. Among these three leaders, Devlet Bahçeli had the lowest number of followers on Twitter but he was tweeting most frequently (Silsüpür 2016 in Kuyucu 2018a). A further analysis of the use of Twitter by these three parties in the 2015 general elections revealed that they used their accounts generally to disseminate news about the party or to make announcements (e.g. location and time of meetings) (Celik and Aktas 2017 in Kuyucu 2018b). Therefore, in Turkey politicians' and political parties´ use of the social media was mostly for propaganda or dissemination of their activities, which did not leave much room for interaction with followers (Bulut and Yörük 2017).

In 2021, the state legislated that after October 2020, social media platforms with over one million Turkish daily users should open offices or appoint a legal representative in Turkey (DW 2020). The authorities have also introduced a ban on advertising if social media companies fail to appoint a legal representative. In case social media platforms fail to comply with the new regulations, the last step declared by the state authorities is to narrow the broadband used by social media platforms, a decision that could seriously slow down the visitor traffic if imposed. Although this attempt to regulate the social media somehow follows general regulatory trends elsewhere, in Turkish context it may have more serious consequences on the nature of political debate and freedom of expression. This is because the *AKP* government has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness in developing various surveillance strategies that include legal and technical restrictions, such as blocking access to social media platforms, requesting content removal and prosecuting and detaining Turkish social media users on charges of insulting government officials (i.e. Erdoğan) or supporting terrorist organizations (Karatas and Saka 2017). Hence, opposition concerns that the *AKP* government may use the new regulations to curb online dissent against its rule is not without any base.

Indeed, as Parks et al. (2017) suggest, social media users in Turkey operate under the government's strategy of "networked authoritarianism". To control the public sphere on social media, the *AKP* government relies on digital vigilantism (Trottier 2017 in Parks et al. 2017), trolling and lateral surveillance (Marwick 2012 p.7, in Parks, Goodwin and Han 2017). Nevertheless, some authors suggest that these governmental strategies did not help their efforts to control the media landscape in Turkey and contributed to growing levels of distrust towards the media and increasing fragmentation (and polarisation) in the ways in which Turkish citizens get their news (O'Donohue et al. 2020). Opposition voters, rather than getting their news through channels controlled and promoted by the *AKP* government, gravitated towards sources that were beyond the government's grip. Research shows that independent media outlets beyond the *AKP* control receive 16.5% more interactions on social media and they are more successful than pro-government outlets in different dimensions such as follower growth, the number of viral content, and number of engagement on Facebook (Kizilkaya and Utucu 2021).

Despite lagging behind the opposition actors on these dimensions, the importance attributed to social media platforms by the *AKP* government did not wane. As the analysis below demonstrate, Erdoğan and the *AKP*, rather than sharing media content produced by other bodies, choose sharing content produced by their own media teams. In this respect, one does not observe diversity in the number of sources shared by these two accounts.

Analytical Part 1: Sources Shared by Populist FB Accounts

In this part we study the types of media sources that are preferred by the populist *AKP* government in Turkey. We focused on the source type, whether it is registered or not, whether it is public or commercial, and regardless of the level of transparency in its ownership. We attempted to understand the type of media sources preferred or ignored by populist movement in Turkey. The analysis was carried out on FB data (Mancuso et al., 2020; Marincea, 2020), downloaded with the CrowdTangle app developed by FB.
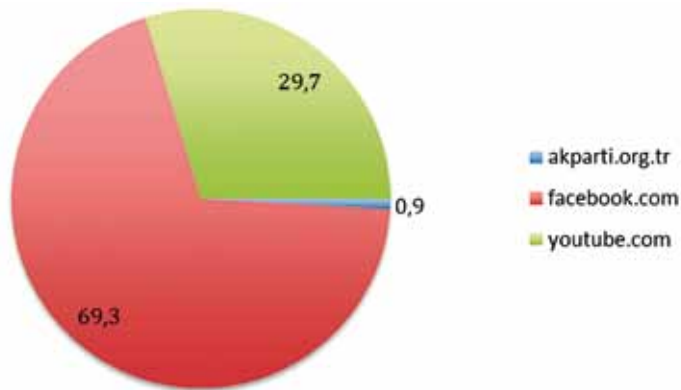
Source Type

The analysis demonstrates that the media sources preferred by the *AKP* government and Erdoğan do not demonstrate diversity. The analysis actually reveals that the great majority of the content shared by these two FB accounts belong to Erdoğan's or the *AKP*'s own media production teams, which is digitally produced and broadcasted only on their FB, Youtube and Twitter accounts. That is Erdoğan and the *AKP* frequently benefit from their own media production teams to disseminate their discourses and views on different matters. This finding is actually in line with Weyland's (2017) major argument on populism, which suggests that populist leaders prefer direct communication with the people by bypassing traditional media instruments.
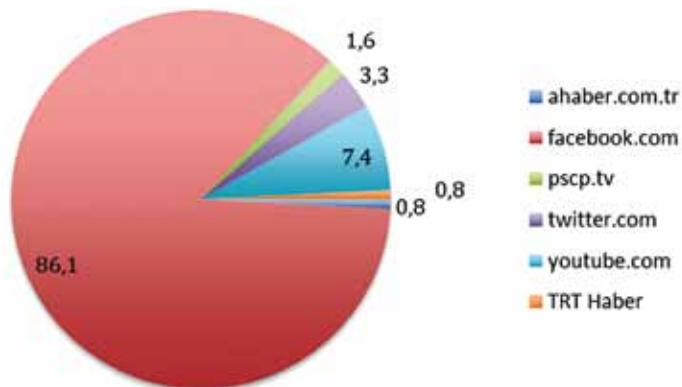
Figure 1: Diversity of Channels
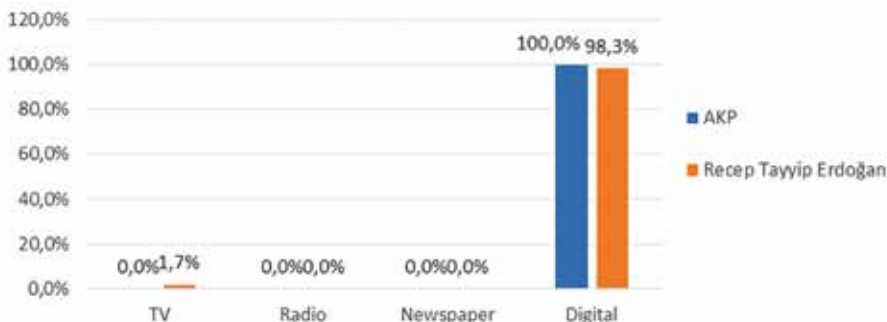
Source: Own compilation

Figure 2: Main sources shared by the *AKP*

Source:
- ■ akparti.org.tr
- ■ facebook.com
- ■ youtube.com

29,7
0,9
69,3

Source: Own compilation

Figure 3: Main sources shared by Erdoğan

- ■ ahaber.com.tr
- ■ facebook.com
- ■ pscp.tv
- ■ twitter.com
- ■ youtube.com
- ■ TRT Haber

1,6
3,3
7,4
0,8   0,8
86,1

Source: Own compilation

Indeed, when one explores the diversity of channels used by the *AKP* social media accounts, there is no variety as all media content is digital, which is produced either by the *AKP* media team or other accounts directly associated with the *AKP*. In fact, there were only three links that were not produced by the *AKP* media team. The first one belongs to Binali Yildirim who was the previous *AKP* leader and handpicked by Erdoğan in 2014 to lead the party after Erdoğan forced resignation of the then-prime minister Davutoğlu (the leader of the *AKP* between August 2014 and May 2016). The second one was Mehmet Ozhaseki's account. Mr. Haseki was the *AKP* candidate in Ankara in the March 2019 municipal elections. The last one belongs to the Ministry of Treasury and Finance, which is also controlled by the *AKP* government. Accordingly, the *AKP* social media account abstained from sharing media content produced by private or public media companies.

Analysis demonstrates that the situation is not very different in the case of Erdoğan FB account. There were only two external links that the Erdoğan FB account has shared, one belongs to *A Haber* and the other one belongs to *TRT Haber*. *A Haber* and the media company owning *A Haber* are strictly pro-Erdoğan. The CEO of the media company that owns *A Haber* is the brother Berat Albayrak – Erdoğan's son-in-law. *TRT Haber* is the public television broadcast, which lost its constitutionally protected impartiality and became pro-Erdoğan under the *AKP* government. The rest of the media sources shared by the Erdoğan FB account are digital and produced by Erdoğan's own media team, who always follow Erdoğan during his daily chores.

Figure 4 below shows types of digital sources shared by the Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB page.

Figure 4: Types of digital sources shared
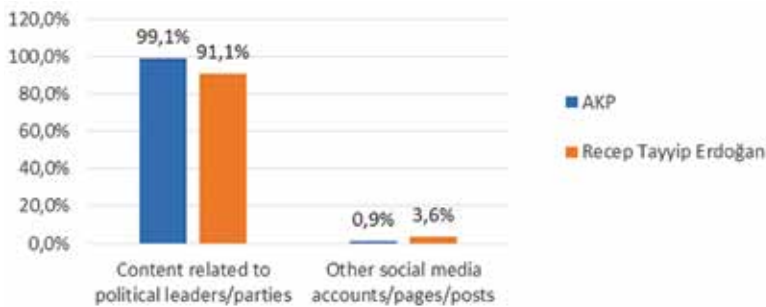
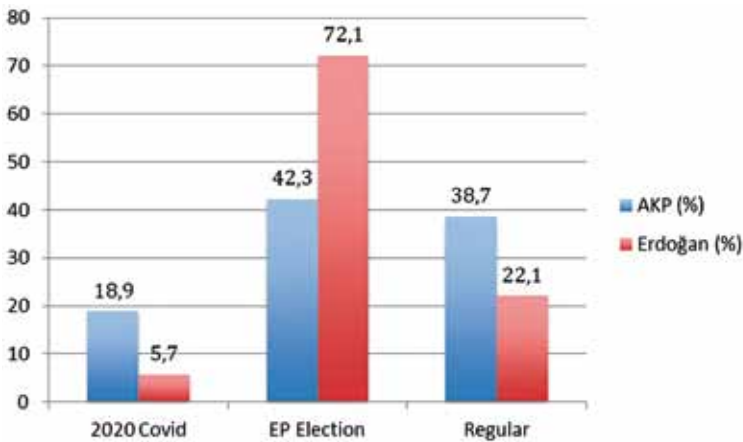**Source:** Own compilation

Media Registration

As the great majority of media content shared by the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB account were produced by their own media teams, they are not officially registered as media companies. The only exceptions to this rule are *TRT Haber* and *A Haber* that were shared by the Erdoğan FB account, which only comprise 1.6% of 122 posts of all his posts.

The dominant political/ideological orientation of the media sources shared

In terms of ideology of the media sources shared by the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB accounts, it would be difficult to make a conclusive assessment. It is clear that *A Haber* shared by the Erdoğan FB account is a right-wing broadcast, which has been generous in its promotion of conspiracy theories allegedly targeting Erdoğan's rule. For example, *A Haber* suggested that the most recent student protests over Erdoğan's top-down appointment of a new rector to the Boğaziçi University, one of the leading universities in Turkey, were attempts to incite a second

Gezi against Erdoğan government in Turkey (A Haber 2021).[2] Its content was seen as the most extreme broadcast among two groups of party supporters, 67% of CHP voters viewed the pro-government media outlet *A Haber* "very unfavorably" whereas only 8 % of *AKP* voters thought the same (O'Donohue et al. 2020). The state broadcast *TRT Haber*, which was supposed to be an impartial body according to the Turkish constitution, has also lost its impartiality under the *AKP* government. Therefore, *TRT Haber* has become another broadcast that is strictly controlled by the government. The rest of the posts shared by the *AKP* FB account (111/111 posts) and the Erdoğan FB account (120/122 posts) were content produced by their own teams. As these social media teams are responsible from disseminating the propaganda of their patrons (Erdoğan and the *AKP* respectively), one can suggest that these media sources are following the ideological orientation of the populist *AKP* government (Çınar 2018).

Figure 5: Electoral vs. non-electoral coverage, event vs. regular period

Source: Own compilation

Neither the *AKP* nor the Erdoğan FB accounts had changed their primary media sources in the municipal elections period when compared to the no-election periods. Quite similarly, they continued sharing digital sources produced by their own media teams during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Two exceptions to this rule (*A Haber* and *TRT Haber* sources shared by the Erdoğan FB account) were shared in the regular period where there was neither the municipal elections nor the Covid-19 crisis. Furthermore, the role that the public media plays is quite marginal in these two FB accounts. Only one post shared by Erdoğan included content produced by the public broadcast *TRT Haber*.

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2   To this date, the 2013 Gezi Protests remain the most widespread protest wave against Erdoğan and his government. Millions of people took it to the streets in June 2013 after the government's decision to raze a small park in the famous Taksim Square in İstanbul. Gezi Protests lasted for weeks throughout Turkey. Erdoğan defined this protest wave as a coup attempt against his rule.

One notable finding is that both the *AKP* and Erdoğan FB accounts shared substantially more media content during the local elections. As explained at the beginning of the article, this period coincided with the highly controversial snap elections in Istanbul after the *AKP* government declined to accept the election results in March 2019. The new elections in Istanbul were scheduled for June 2019 and in this particular period; the *AKP* organization and Erdoğan were campaigning hard to win the snap elections.

Analytical Part 2: Network analysis of sources that share populist leaders' posts

Our network analysis studied several aspects of the networks of Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB accounts. First, we analyzed whether there were disproportions between the two networks (ex. one much bigger than other). Second, we studied the network reciprocity – the degree of interconnection between these FB accounts and other accounts. Third, we explored the degree of centrality, which basically refers to the overlap between the networks of the *AKP* and Erdoğan. Finally, we were interested to learn which social media accounts were the connectors between the two, and if there were any reciprocal sharing.

We conducted the network analysis with the FB pages of Erdoğan and the *AKP*. Based on the CrowdTangle data (CrowdTangle Team, 2020; Mancuso et al, 2020) analysed with NodeXL, the research team constructed a directed graph. In the center of the analysis were two main vertices: the FB pages of Erdoğan and the *AKP* (See Figure 6 below). This network represents all public pages that have shared posts from these two social media accounts between January 2019 and April 2020. Red arrows, though very few in numbers refer to reciprocity between accounts.

Figure 6: Facebook Populist Network in Turkey
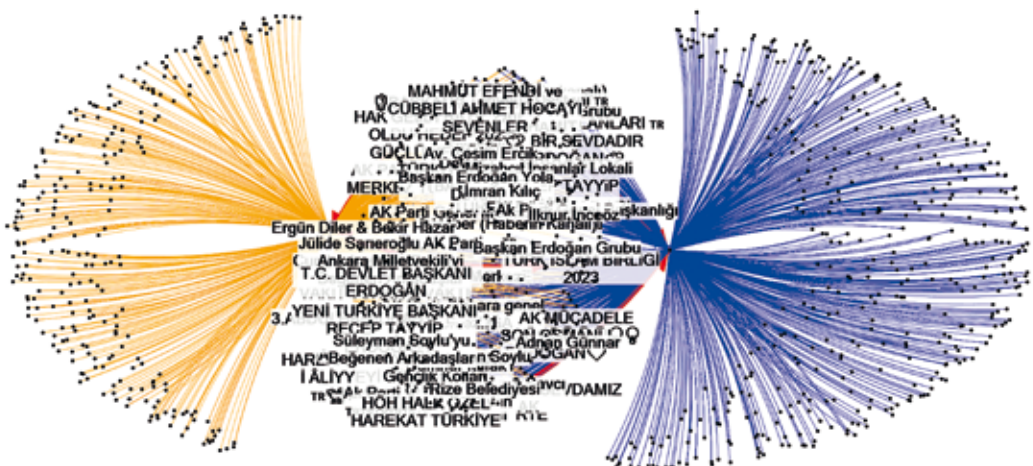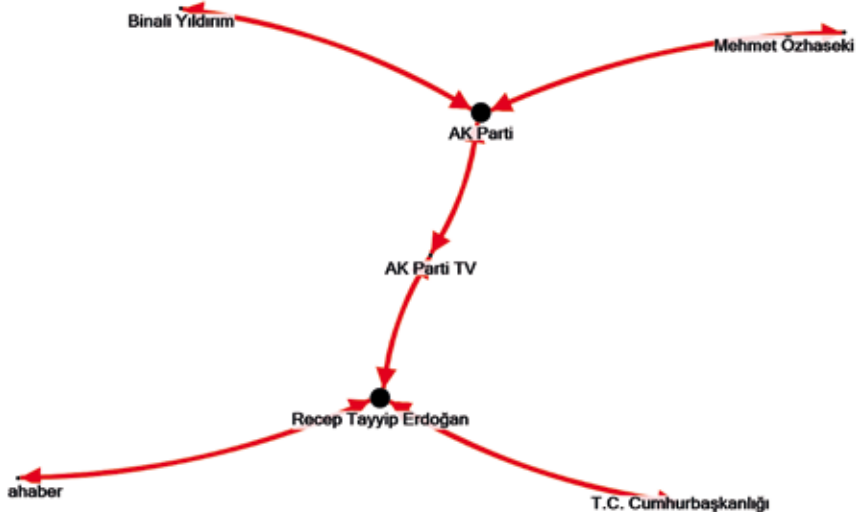

Source: Marincea, 2020

An exploration of Figure 6 reveals that the Erdoğan FB account has a more intensive network than the *AKP* FB account. This finding confirms the literature on populist communication, which argues that leadership is central to populist strategy (Weyland, 2017). This finding also confirms the previous research arguing that Erdoğan is the most important figure of the populist movement in Turkey (Yilmaz and Bashirov 2018).

Reciprocity Network

In the entire network, there were only six reciprocal connections. The Erdoğan FB account had three reciprocal connections with the *AK Parti TV, T.C. Cumhurbaskanligi* and *AK Parti TV* accounts. These three accounts are affiliated either with Erdoğan or the *AKP* directly. Hence, the Erdoğan FB account only reciprocated with those accounts closely associated with his social media team and his party.

Similar to the Erdoğan account, the *AKP* FB account had three reciprocal connections. Again, the *AKP* FB account only reciprocated with FB accounts affiliated with the party. *AK Parti TV* is the social media account, which shares media content produced by the *AKP* media team. Binali Yildirim is the ex-leader of the *AKP*, who was handpicked by Erdoğan himself to look after the *AKP* once Erdoğan fell apart with the then party leader Davutoğlu.[3] Mehmet Ozhaseki served as a minister in the previous *AKP* Cabinets and he was the *AKP* candidate in Ankara in the March 2019 municipal elections. Currently, he is the deputy leader of the *AKP*.

**Figure 7:** Populist Pages' Reciprocity Network

Source: Marincea, 2020

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[3]   Ahmet Davutoğlu was also chosen by Erdoğan himself to lead the AKP after he was elected as the new president of Turkey in 2014.

Network Centrality

There is a wide overlap between the pages sharing the Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB posts (see Figure 8 below). To give an instance, the account named REIS2023 shared the *AKP* posts 102 times while sharing the Erdoğan posts 178 times. This overlap between two accounts is not unexpected given that Erdoğan is the most important figure of the *AKP*, who enjoys a complete control over the *AKP* policies and the party discourse.

Figure 8: Pages Sharing Erdoğan (Blue) and the *AKP* (Orange)
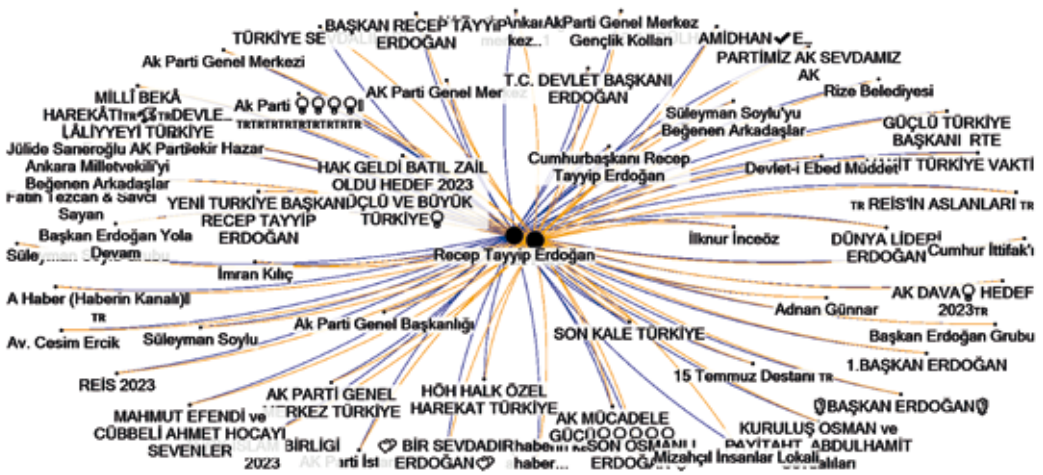
Source: Marincea, 2020

One important finding is the fact that the Erdoğan FB account remains more popular than the *AKP* FB account. Of 53 main promoter accounts which both shared the *AKP* and the Erdoğan posts, the Erdoğan posts were shared 3,023 times while the *AKP* posts were shared 1,885 times. Another significant finding is that the main promoter accounts that shared posts from the Erdoğan and the *AKP* accounts were mostly accounts using pseudo names. As a matter of fact, of 53 accounts only ten (18.9%) belonged to real people or public entities. The rest were accounts acting under pseudo names. The *AKP* has been using online political trolling as a means to drive the post-truth politics because the social media became trustworthy and gained more popularity after the Gezi Protests (Karatas and Saka 2017). The *AKP* uses social media accounts using pseudo names to disseminate its views and to manipulate the public opinion in Turkey. This may be one of the reasons why the majority of the FB accounts sharing Erdoğan and the *AKP* posts did not belong to identifiable people or institutions.

Conclusions

Social media users in Turkey suffer from the governmental strategy of "networked authoritarianism". In particular, the *AKP* government relies on digital vigilantism, trolling and lateral surveillance (Parks et al. 2017) in its attempts to control and suppress online dissent. Despite its heavy control over the use of social media in Turkey, the government has continued criticizing social media platforms for inciting terrorism, causing disinformation or trying to fray above the rule of law (Sozcu 2021). Ironically, the social media was one of the mechanisms that helped the *AKP* to stop putschists overthrowing the government in the failed military coup in 2016.

As the analysis revealed, the *AKP* and the Erdoğan FB accounts ignored mainstream media or the public media in their posts. More importantly, their own media production teams created the media content that were shared by these two accounts. In this respect, we can suggest that the populist movement in Turkey has preferred to eliminate intermediaries in its communication with the media. Furthermore, we found that the main promoters of the Erdoğan and the *AKP* FB accounts were acting under pseudo names, hinting that the main promoters were political trolls used by the populist movement in Turkey to disseminate its views and control the political agenda.

Regarding our findings, one particular recommendation of this research would be encouraging social media platforms to regulate social media accounts in terms of their ownership as well as the content these accounts share. Indeed, in 2020, Twitter suspended 7,340 accounts that the *AKP* was using for manipulation and political trolling (Evrensel 2020). However, as the experience of the Trump presidency in the US revealed, FB was more lax in its control of the political content that its users share. This negligence contributes to a social media environment where post-truth propaganda and disinformation could disseminate without any obstruction. Following Verza and Mat (2020), we also recommend other policy actions such as more investment in fact-checking organizations as well as more support for independent online news outlets that indeed became increasingly more important for freedom of expression and information in Turkey after the mainstream media lost its independence in the face of government interventions.

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