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Propaganda and Manipulation in History.  
An Interdisciplinary Approach



## Propaganda and Media Manipulation in AKP's Turkey The Case of the “Gezi Resistance” and the Castigation of Free Speech

Cezarina Chirică

**Abstract:** *Ever since the beginning of its first term in 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been influencing the media in order to curtail and circumvent independent journalism in Turkey. This repression on media freedom in the last fifteen years indicates democratic regression in Turkey. A free press is vital to any democracy, allowing for constructive public debate while also holding government accountable. Nonetheless, rather than establishing a secure and independent space for the press, the government has formed an environment that is contentious and even threatening for journalists to report opposing views. In addition, the unruly government proceedings toward news media have primarily been led by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, now the President of Turkey, establishing an intimidating, powerful media autocracy. This article explores Turkey's current state of declining freedoms of the press as the government has employed different strategies to suppress the media's role in Turkey, including approaches of controlling media monopolies, alongside the incarceration, intimidation and dismissing of journalists. It also provides an illustration of the government's media surveillance through different backgrounds and occasions, confirming not only its obstinacy of government criticism, but also its apprehension of the media's power to induce anti-AKP sentiments.*

**Keywords:** media, propaganda, AKP, manipulation, Erdoğan

## Introduction

More evidence from the past decade shows that the pace of democratization, which was used as one of the main political arguments for the strengthening of the AKP, was rather rhetorical, than a real policy on the agenda. Various groups that constitute political opposition became the target of government control and oppression. In parallel, there have been serious attempts by the government to reduce the existing human rights laws, women's rights, the right to free expression, the freedom of the press, and efforts to politicize the judiciary. Despite the fact that these shortcomings were highlighted in the reports of international bodies, such as the European Commission, the Council of Europe and the UN, Erdoğan continues to give speeches handling these issues, which in turn have accentuated public weariness.<sup>1</sup>

The same government adopted controversial laws that no longer followed the objectives of European integration. On May 24<sup>th</sup> 2013, the Turkish Parliament voted the text of a law restricting the consumption, sale and advertising of alcoholic beverages, which sparked a lot of criticism from the Turkish population. The adoption of this law was seen as the beginning of a state Islamization plan initiated by Erdoğan, who was subsequently accused of authoritarian drift.

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<sup>1</sup> Gareth Jenkins, *Erdogan, the AKP and the Repercussions of the Gezi Park Protests*, July 3rd 2013, accessed on June 25th 2017 at <http://www.turkeyanalyst.org/publications/turkey-analyst-articles/item/49-erdo%C4%9Fan-the-akp-and-the-repercussions-of-the-gezi-park-protests.html>.

This drastic limitation of alcohol consumption was just one of the measures taken with the aim of more or less concealing the return of Turkey to the traditional Islamic model - the project to ban abortion, encourage natality, reorganize primary education in order to re-open religious colleges, the project of building a large mosque etc.

Erdoğan's pro-Islamist propaganda, who wanted to form future pious generations, especially by reopening religious colleges and introducing more optional religion classes into school curriculum, irritated those bound to kemalist secularism. More and more questions arose about the existence of a hidden program of the Islamic government of the Turkish state. Under Erdoğan's rule, Turkey has moved further away from Europe, investing in recovering the glory years of the Ottoman Empire. The aggressive policy of the current president has long been characterized as “neo-Ottomanism”<sup>2</sup>. It is true that the accession negotiations with the European Union have also begun under Erdoğan's rule, but, following his many contrived decisions, the confidence of the Turkish population in the European institutions has diminished drastically.

### **The “Gezi Resistace”: The Ups and Downs of Press Freedom**

I have chosen the case of the Gezi Resistance in order to show how the street demonstrations that dominated Turkey in the summer of 2013 were, by their nature, examples of propaganda resistance.

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<sup>2</sup> Metin Heper, Sabri Sayari, *The Routledge Handbook of Modern Turkey*, Abington, Routledge Handbooks, 2012, p. 177.

I would begin with the current definition of the Turkish state as “Kemalist”, “secular” and “nationalist”,<sup>3</sup> three fundamental concepts in the 1982 Constitution, the one still in office, but imposed by the junta led by General Kenan Evren after the military coup in September 12th, 1980.<sup>4</sup> The coup established the so-called Kemalist elite at the top of the political hierarchy in Turkey, a fanatical defender of the concepts mentioned above. This “establishing” strengthened these elites in the bureaucracy of the state, including education, the armed forces and internal security forces, including police and constabulary.<sup>5</sup>

Since 1960 until now, Turkey has experienced three direct military interventions when the military has taken power into its own hands (1960, 1971 and 1980)<sup>6</sup> and another military intervention in 1997, in which case the army, with the tacit support of some public and private institutions and civil social groups, forced the Welfare Party government (AKP’s predecessor) to resign. It is important to state that the Turkish army only intervened when the secular republic seemed threatened.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Constitution of the Republic of Turkey 1982*, accessed on June 3rd 2017 at [https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution\\_en.pdf](https://global.tbmm.gov.tr/docs/constitution_en.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Mesut Özcan, *Understanding The “New” Turkish Foreign Policy: Changes Within Continuity, Is Turkey Departing From The West*, International Strategic Research Organization, accessed on June 8th 2017 at [http://www.usak.org.tr/images\\_upload/files/makale7-2011.pdf](http://www.usak.org.tr/images_upload/files/makale7-2011.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>6</sup> Antonello Biagini, *Storia della Turchia Contemporanea*, Milano, Bompiani, 2002, p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> Radu Gabriel Safta, Călin Felezeu, *Turcia contemporană între moștenirea kemalistă și Uniunea Europeană*, Cluj-Napoca, CA Publishing, 2011, p. 74.

On May 28th 2013, in the wake of population discontent with the plan of the Turkish Government to grub up Gezi Park in order to build a new mosque, a series of protests against Prime Minister Recep Erdoğan began in Istanbul. The PM was criticized for his pro-Islamist propaganda during his two mandates.<sup>8</sup>

What initially began as an environmentalist movement in the Taksim Square was subsequently expanded in 79 of the 81 provinces of Turkey. Police estimated that 3.5 million people took part in the protests known as the “Gezi Resistance”.<sup>9</sup> The authorities’ response to this democratic civil initiative was brutal. The Turkish Police aggressively reacted to these peaceful demonstrations, using tear gas and water cannons in a non-discriminatory manner on citizens to restore order. Figures from an Amnesty International report show that about 6,000 demonstrators were indicted with charges such as participation in unauthorized protests, resistance to the police, damaging public property, helping the wounded, exchange of information and opinions about the protests on social media networks, and even terrorist offenses.<sup>10</sup> Following the intervention of the authorities, 11 people were killed and more than 8000 were seriously

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<sup>8</sup> Gezi Direnişi Zaman Çizelgesi, May 27th 2013, accessed on June 13th 2017 at <https://line.do/tr/gezi-direnisi-zaman-cizelgesi/3to/vertical>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> \*\*\*, “Adding Injustice to Injury, One year on from the Gezi Park Protests in Turkey”, *Amnesty International*, June 4th 2014, accessed on June 9th 2017 at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/for-media/press-releases/adding-injustice-injury-one-year-after-gezi-park-protests-2014-06-04>.

injured. Subsequently, the Turkish government has banned public gatherings in Taksim Square.<sup>11</sup>

Over the years, the Turkish government maintained its influence over the media by suspending media groups critical of the government through heavy fines and by reselling them to companies that were supportive of the AKP and Erdoğan.<sup>12</sup> In turn, the government rewarded these companies by providing them long term government contracts. This was the case for the most dominant media groups in Turkey, Sabah-ATV and Doğan Media Group, as the AKP realized after its second reelection that it needed its own propaganda apparatus in order to promote itself and a way to silence critical voices from the opposition.

In a speech delivered on June 6th 2013, PM Erdoğan did not seem at all affected by the violent protests, answering journalists in an aggressive manner:

*Demands cannot be made through illegal means. If you say: 'I will hold a meeting and burn and destroy', we will not allow that. We are against the majority dominating the minority and we cannot tolerate the opposite.*<sup>13</sup>

For many Turks who protested against Prime Minister Erdoğan and his Cabinet, media silence equated to practical censorship in the ten-year term of office of the Ankara Executive. During the Gezi protests, t-shirts,

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>12</sup> Ahmet Insel, *Turcia lui Erdoğan. Între visul democrației și tentația autoritară*, București, Ed. Corint, 2017, p. 56.

<sup>13</sup> \*\*\*, "Erdogan defies Turkish protesters", *The Guardian*, June 6th 2013, accessed on June 16th 2017 at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/06/erdogan-defies-turkish-protesters-live>.

hats and penguin suits filled the streets, and the penguin became a symbol of the protesters' frustration and Turkish media's self-censorship efforts, after one of the country's main news television stations, CNN Turk, broadcasted a documentary about penguins during the violent clashes between demonstrators and law enforcements. At the same time, the national news channel, NTV, chose to broadcast a cooking show. "Our audience felt betrayed",<sup>14</sup> Cem Aydin, executive director of NTV, said after a meeting with his staff. After the meeting, many anchors resigned as a protest against the intentional ignorance of the events in the country. A survey by Bilgi University specialists showed that 84% of people who walked the streets of Istanbul said they were dissatisfied with the lack of media coverage of events in Taksim Square and other public areas.<sup>15</sup>

Over the years, Erdoğan has made a habit of denigrating the media every week in the General Assembly during his televised speech. Whatever issue was on top of the agenda in Turkey, he always expressed his discontent with the media, targeting individual columnists and media owners alike. His targets sometimes included international outlets as well. During his second mandate, he condemned CNN, BBC, and Reuters for their Gezi Park coverage.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> \*\*\*; "Taksim Square story exposes flaws and threats for Turkey's media", *Huffington Post*, accessed on June 23rd 2017 at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/committee-to-protect-journalists/taksim-square-story-expos\\_b\\_3405021.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/committee-to-protect-journalists/taksim-square-story-expos_b_3405021.html).

<sup>15</sup> Freedom House, *Turkey - Freedom of the Press 2014*, accessed on June 21st 2017 at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/turkey>.

<sup>16</sup> \*\*\*; "Survey Reveals That Journalists Recognize Media Censorship", *Hürriyet Daily News*, published on August 10th 2013, accessed on June 23rd 2017 at

One of the main complaints of the Gezi demonstrators was precisely the restriction of press freedom, alongside the increasingly authoritarian and Islamic position of the Ankara government. Critics say Erdoğan's government has tried to control the media by introducing very high tax rates and confiscating the assets of the news trusts that are critical to his administration. Those who own many of the media companies also have businesses in other sectors of activity, such as energy, banking or mining. The government denied any political motivation in initiatives that hindered the management of media organizations. One thing, however, is certain: many of the press companies have adopted, over time, a more respectful and even more obedient attitude towards government policies, especially if they held television stations. Moreover, controversial journalists, considered "troublesome", were forced to resign quietly, unsuitable news was tuned down, and Erdoğan sued the caricaturists and journalists who criticized him.<sup>17</sup>

The Gezi Resistance marked a milestone for the independent media in Turkey. Although it will take years before they establish themselves as true alternatives, this breaking news moment provided a perfect opportunity for them to get brand recognition. For example, Halk TV, a mostly ignored news network affiliated with Turkey's main opposition party, has emerged almost out of nowhere as the most watched news channel, merely for covering the protests. *Sozcu*, a twenty-page sensational daily lacking

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<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=survey-reveals-that-journalists-recognize-media-censorship-2013-08-10>.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew Finkel, *Turkey. What Everyone Needs to Know*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 51.



fundamentals such as a newsroom, increased its circulation by more than fifty thousand after the massive protests, surpassing *Hürriyet*.

But the Gezi Park protests also led to unprecedented mass firings, exemplifying the AKP's increasing suppression of the media. The total number of journalists fired due to coverage of the protests varies as the Gezi firings have continued throughout the fall of 2013. The Turkish Journalists' Union reported 59 fired journalists on July 26th 2013, but other media employees cite much higher numbers.<sup>18</sup> When NTV Tarih, a history magazine owned by NTV, published a special "Gezi Edition", the entire staff was dismissed and the magazine closed down. Even after the protests in November, TRT news owner fired two employees who had supported the protests via social media. However, the AKP and its supporters claim that the firings are not related to coverage of the Gezi protests. Can Dündar from *Milliyet*, one of Turkey's most prominent columnists, was also fired as a result of the Gezi protests. After his columns were not published for weeks, the owner of *Milliyet* informed him of his dismissal in a phone call. Dündar wrote on his personal blog, "I was expecting it for a long time, it wasn't a surprise... I'm not the first and I won't be the last."<sup>19</sup>

Another example of mass propaganda was the fact that after tens of thousands of people went to Istanbul's Taksim Square, on the front page of *Sabah*, one of the best-selling newspapers in Turkey, Prime Minister

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<sup>18</sup> Human Rights Watch, *Silencing Turkey's Media. The Government's Deepening Assault on Critical Journalism*, accessed on June 26th 2017 at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/12/15/silencing-turkeys-media/governments-deepening-assault-critical-journalism>.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

Erdoğan was praised for his campaign against smoking. *Sabah* is owned by Calik Holding, a group whose executive chief is Erdoğan's son-in-law.

The large number of imprisoned journalists in Turkey is a direct consequence of overly broad anti-terrorism laws, including Article 314 of the Turkish Criminal Code<sup>20</sup> and the Turkish Anti-Terror Law. For example, the Turkish Anti-Terror Law makes it a crime to “print or publish declarations or announcements of terrorist organizations.”<sup>21</sup> The nature of these poorly-defined laws leaves them exposed to abuse by prosecutors and judges, who have aggressively applied them through their own interpretation.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the denunciation of journalists in Turkey indicates the flaws of the Turkish legal system in addition to the government's willingness to use the courts to imprison critical voices of Turkish society. In 2014, Freedom House reported that there are more than 4,000 lawsuits pending against journalists in Turkey.<sup>23</sup>

Nevertheless, while the media has fallen rapidly, social networks have thrived. Turkey's protests are largely coordinated through Twitter and Facebook, where the Turks are the fourth largest community in the world.

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<sup>20</sup> \*\*\*, Penal Code of Turkey, accessed on June 19th 2017 at [http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/6453/file/Turkey\\_CC\\_2004\\_am2016\\_en.pdf](http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/6453/file/Turkey_CC_2004_am2016_en.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> \*\*\*, *Anti-Terror Law, Act No. 3713: Law to Fight Terrorism*, accessed on June 19th 2017 at [http://www.opbw.org/nat\\_imp/leg\\_reg/turkey/anti-terror.pdf](http://www.opbw.org/nat_imp/leg_reg/turkey/anti-terror.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Max Hoffman, Michael Werz, *Freedom of the Press*, Center for American Progress, May 14th 2013, accessed on June 21st 2017 at <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/TurkeyPressFreedom.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> Freedom House, *Turkey - Freedom of the Press 2014*, accessed on June 21st 2017 at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2014/turkey>.

“Social networks are extremely important in our work. It is the way we disseminate information”<sup>24</sup> says one of the first activists who set up their camp in Gezi Park in Istanbul. According to a study published on June 1st, after the midnight of May 31st, more than 3,000 tweets were made per minute from the Turkish Twitter accounts. What is unique in this particular case is how Twitter was used to disseminate information about ground demonstrations. About 90% of all tweets came from citizens residing in Turkey, the rest being signs of solidarity with Turkish people living outside the country. As the Turkish press did not escape the control of Erdoğan’s government, nor were the actions on social networks overlooked. Erdoğan classified Twitter as a “threat”<sup>25</sup> and, moreover, the Izmir police detained 25 people accused of using social networks to spread false information about the anti-government protests. In this way, Erdoğan tried to suppress criticism with the propaganda machinery running at full speed.

Democracy means the rule of the people. As a result, when corporate interests and religious misconceptions begin to dominate the Government, we can no longer speak of a democracy. In fact, when only a limited elite of elected politicians is delegated to speak for the rest, it no longer represents the rule of the people, but of its representation.

During the protests in Gezi, people did not just oppose to the physical destruction of the park for the economic and spiritual gain of the government, but also stood against the idea of being deprived of spaces in

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<sup>24</sup> \*\*\*, “Gezi Direnişi Zaman Çizelgesi”, *Line.do.tr*, May 27th 2013, accessed on June 13th 2017 at <https://line.do/tr/gezi-direnisi-zaman-cizelgesi/3to/vertical>.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmet Insel, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

which to publicly express their ideas, opinions, anger, and dissatisfaction. German philosopher Axel Honneth defined the public sphere as “the place of social struggles and oppositions, not a homogeneous and unitary space.”<sup>26</sup> This definition reflects the state of public space in Turkey during the Resistance in Gezi. Therefore, it is important to see that the struggle during the June Resistance is at the same time a struggle for claiming the public sphere by mobilizing the citizens.

In “The Open Society and Its Enemies”, Karl Popper supported the idea of an open society as a means of defending against totalitarianism, redefining the concept of democracy in a rather arbitrary way. In short, Popper proposed redefining democracy as “a barrier against tyranny.”<sup>27</sup> The Turks tried the same thing during the 2013 protests: the overthrow of the one who could cause the most damage to society. Democracies regard dictatorships and tyranny as irresponsible and, as a result of people tolerating them, they only become an accessory to injustice. Therefore, the Turks refused to be accomplices in the antidemocratic slippages of their country and counteracted their own direct democracy to the pretend democracy proposed by Erdoğan’s authoritarian neoliberal state.

Although Erdoğan claimed to aspire to Western standards, under his rule Turkey became an eurosceptic state that still gives signs of a return to Islamic values. Moreover, as a result of the government's actions against the demonstrators, both the European Commission and the European

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<sup>26</sup> Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 73.

Parliament intensified their opposition to Turkey's efforts to join the European Union. Limiting freedom of expression and non-observance of the citizens' right to protest have prompted European officials to draw the attention of the Turkish Government to the continuation of the reform process in order to maintain these rights and freedoms in conformity with the values of the Union.

### **The Consequences of Free Speech: The Reprehension of Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak**

“A sword won't cut without inspiration from the pen.” (Turkish saying)

Article 301 of the Turkish Penal Code punishes any public insult to the Turkish nation, state, government or parliament, with imprisonment between 6 months and up to 3 years.<sup>28</sup> If the Turkish denigrator happens to be in another country, the penalty increases by one third. So far, both Orhan Pamuk (winner of the 2006 Nobel prize in Literature) and Elif Shafak (Turkey's most admired female novelist) have been accused under Article 301, but have not been convicted due to lack of evidence.

Orhan Pamuk was accused of publicly denigrating Turkish identity after an interview he gave to the Swiss newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* in February 2005 in which he made the following statement:

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<sup>28</sup> \*\*\*, *Penal Code of Turkey*, accessed on June 19th 2017 at [http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/6453/file/Turkey\\_CC\\_2004\\_am2016\\_en.pdf](http://legislationline.org/download/action/download/id/6453/file/Turkey_CC_2004_am2016_en.pdf).

*Thirty thousand Kurds and a million Armenians were killed in these lands and nobody dares to talk about it. Therefore, I do. And the nationalists hate me for that.*<sup>29</sup>

His trial began on December 16th 2005 and by the end of January 2006, the Ministry of Justice dropped the charges arguing that “the amended Penal Code does not authorise a criminal proceeding”.<sup>30</sup>

The fact that Pamuk won the Nobel Prize that same year has turned him into a spokesman for the Armenian cause and, at the same time, he became one of the first targets of the Turkish government in its fight against freedom of speech. The campaign against him intensified so much that Pamuk had to leave the country. He did not celebrate the fact that he was at that time the first Nobel laureate in Turkey because his works were burned in the streets at nationalist marches all over the country.

For years, Pamuk refused to talk about politics. Not only for his own safety, but the expectations that he should represent all the progressive political causes in Turkey were overwhelming. “Not only do I have to fight the government, but I have to be careful of what the people want”<sup>31</sup>, he said in an interview with Agence France-Presse. Not many authors have dared to oppose such censorship, which is why a lot of people expected Pamuk to

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<sup>29</sup> \*\*\*, *The Case of Orhan Pamuk, English Pen*, published on December 15th 2005, accessed on June 14th 2017 at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2005/12/15/the-case-of-orhan-pamuk/>.

<sup>30</sup> The Kurdish Human Rights Project, *Freedom of Expression in Turkey*, last updated on July 2006, accessed on June 14th 2017 at <file://Freedom%20of%20expression%20briefing%20paper.pdf>.

<sup>31</sup> Philippe Alfroy, *Orhan Pamuk - Anxious Observer of the New Turkey*, published on February 15th 2015, accessed on June 13th 2017 at <https://www.dawn.com/news/1163604>.

stand for this cause. “I’ve sometimes even worked for six years on a book, but the only thing journalists wanted was to talk about Islamism.”<sup>32</sup>

More recently, Orhan Pamuk was surprised to note that the interview given to *Hürriyet*, explaining the reasons for his opposition to the measures taken by AKP, did not appear on the journal’s pages. In the interview, Pamuk said he would vote “No” at the referendum on amending the Constitution which was held in Turkey on 16 April 2017. He accused the newspaper, known to be close to the Turkish government, of refusing to publish the interview due to political interests. The *Hürriyet*, which is part of the Doğan Holding Press Trust, has abstained at the moment from commenting on the writer’s accusations. This episode illustrates very well the self-censorship of the Turkish press and the growing pressures on the media, especially after the AKP came to power. Pamuk is one of the most prominent critics of the regime imposed by Erdoğan, his postures disturbing both politicians and Islamists over time.

“The Bastard of Istanbul” is the novel for which Elif Shafak was accused of “denigrating Turkishness”, according to art. 301 of the Turkish Penal Code. The accusations were based on the words of one of her fictional characters. She risked being sentenced to three years in prison, but the charges have been eventually withdrawn in September 2006, due to lack of evidence.<sup>33</sup> The political substrate of the book, which Shafak manages to capture quite well in analyzing the connection between the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>33</sup> Richard Lea, “Aquittal for Turkish Novelist”, *The Guardian*, published on September 21st 2006, accessed on June 19th 2017 at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/sep/21/turkey.world>.

Tchakhmakhchian family (Armenian) and the Kazanci family (Turkish), is the Armenian genocide of 1915, which has not yet been recognized by Turkey. The book is significant for having drawn attention to the assassinations and to the Turks' inconclusiveness towards them, and for what it has divulged about freedom of speech.

Nine years after this episode, Elif Shafak has begun receiving threats following an exclusive interview for *Der Spiegel*.

**SPIEGEL:** *Many in Europe are unsure how to view Erdoğan. Is he an authoritarian ruler, an Islamist, a nationalist or a failed democrat?*

**Shafak:** *I would call him an authoritarian politician who is very divisive. This is a society of the baba, the father, the patriarch. It starts in the family, continues at school, on the street. In every aspect of life, including football, the Turkish society is baba-oriented. And our mentality in politics is not that different. I think this is a big part of the problem: Our politics is very masculine, very aggressive, and it's very polarizing. And the pace of this development has increased in recent years. Erdoğan is, in my eyes, the most polarizing politician in recent Turkish political history.<sup>34</sup>*

**SPIEGEL:** *If Turkey is like Russia, are there also similarities between Erdoğan and Vladimir Putin?*

**Shafak:** *Erdoğan has changed a lot since he came to power. In the beginning, he used to talk about being all-embracing. No longer. It's no secret that he wants to change the constitution in order to have a presidential system, and I am sure he will do everything he can to get there. I am very worried about this concentration of power, and it's not only because of Erdoğan. We have the ballot box, but we don't have the culture of democracy. The government says: You see, we have the majority, we're entitled to do anything we want. But that's not democracy, that's majoritarianism.<sup>35</sup>*

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<sup>34</sup> Juliane von Mittelstaedt, Christoph Scheuermann, *We've Forgotten How to Laugh*, published on December 10th 2015, accessed on June 14th 2017 at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/turkish-author-elif-shafak-on-society-under-erdogan-a-1066223.html>.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*.



In Shafak's opinion, the situation of the Turkish press shouldn't be overlooked. Given that there have been numerous abuses in Turkey, under the leadership of Erdoğan, who is increasingly taking in power, there is a need for a voice to present the truth behind the political game. The Turkish territory becomes inaccessible to the national and international press, whose only task will be to reflect the events from the outside.

In a public petition, more than 80 writers, intellectuals and artists in Turkey have expressed concern about the polarization of Turkish society following the rhetoric of the government led by Recep Erdoğan, saying that the law on "denigrating Turkishness" is an insult to free expression.

A month after the Gezi protests broke out across the country, Turkish intellectuals warn of the dangers of increasing polarization and tension in Turkey. Thus, a hundred personalities, including writers and artists, signed the petition published as an advertising page in most local newspapers last Saturday. Named "Kaygılıyız" which means "We are concerned", the petition took a plea against what they called "deep divisions that form inside of the society".<sup>36</sup>

"There is a surge of rage and hate in the air, and there are persistent attempts to underestimate, attack, insult, accuse and stop artists."<sup>37</sup> Although it does not explicitly refer to the government, the text makes it clear to understand who is the one targeted, given that a note from a statement by Erdoğan appears in it.

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<sup>36</sup> Ugur Cakan, "Kaygılı ve endişeli misiniz?", *Change.org*, accessed on June 23rd 2017 at <https://www.change.org/p/ayd%C4%B1n-sanat%C3%A7%C4%B1-ve-akademisyenler-kayg%C4%B1%C4%B1-ve-endi%C5%9Feli-misiniz>.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*.

Turkey is a country where a single tweet against the government is enough for a sentence of months in prison. Foreign journalists begin to be traced if they come from big cities. Every contact is kept under observation and Turkish collaborators risk arrest and even their lives if they choose to help. “Erdoğan cannot tolerate that a foreign newspaper can offer a different version of reality and characterizes it as corrupt and malicious.”<sup>38</sup>

## Conclusions

Still in the process of joining the European Union, Turkey seems to simulate its fundamental values, such as the rule of law and freedom of expression, perpetuating an authoritarian regime in which rights exist only in theory. This was materialized in the status of the European press gulag won by the Turkish state, according to the *Reporters Without Borders* report. In their ranking, Turkey ranks 155 out of 180 in terms of media freedom in the world.<sup>39</sup> At the moment, there are 240 arrested, 24 convicted and 109 wanted journalists in Turkey.<sup>40</sup> Another way of oppressing the press can be noticed by the fact that it only reflects the position of the

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<sup>38</sup> Juliane von Mittelstaedt, Christoph Scheuermann, *We've Forgotten How to Laugh*, published on December 10th 2015, accessed on June 14th 2017 at <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/turkish-author-elif-shafak-on-society-under-erdogan-a-1066223.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Reporters Without Borders, *Turkey 2017*, accessed on June 23rd 2017 at <https://rsf.org/en/turkey>.

<sup>40</sup> Stockholm Center for Freedom, *Freedom of the Press in Turkey*, accessed on June 23rd 2017 at <http://stockholmcf.org/updated-list/>.

government, while the impartiality and objectivity are being removed by a regime that turns more authoritative day after day.

The failed state coup on July 15th 2016 led to the dismissal of 2,500 media employees, the closure of 130 media outlets, the arrest or detention of over 200 journalists.<sup>41</sup> Around 50,000 people were arrested or suspended from office in a despotic attempt to neutralize supporters of Erdoğan's political opponent, cleric Fethullah Gülen - suspected of being behind the coup. Moreover, the state of emergency on July 15th was maintained for about six months and the suspension of applying the provisions of the European Convention on Human Rights was ordered. These facts can only prove how precarious the concept of democracy in Turkey is, regardless of the attempts of this state to imitate the European model.

President Erdoğan, who has been warring for years with the press, has become less and less tolerant of criticism from public opinion, thus censorship and pressures on journalists, and the persecution of political opponents became a constant government policy. According to figures published by the Committee for the Protection of Journalists, the number of journalists in prison now stands at 240, with Turkey “rivaling” with China and Iran in the category of respect for freedom of expression.

In Turkey, each electoral period is marked by increased censorship and media abuse. Reactions from government officials of the United States and the European Union are not delayed, but without too much effect on Erdoğan's conduct. Turkey is the keystone of power and stability in the

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<sup>41</sup> Ahmet Insel, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

Middle East, the main organizing factor of the region's geography and politics, so great Western chancellors rarely allow themselves to adopt a position that could harm the “Turkish partner”.

The post-Gezi experience had contradictory impacts. On the one hand, the government revealed the fear of autonomous press and, on the other hand, previously unconnected civilian groups in Turkey formed new alliances. This development was an important and valuable experience from the Gezi protests and provided new opportunities for mobilizing activism in Turkey.

It should be noted that through measures such as imprisoning journalists, cartoonists, photographers and the restrictions on accessing certain sites (such as Twitter, Facebook or Youtube), Turkey is moving away from the goal of EU integration. Freedom of expression must be respected in order for a democracy to function effectively.

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