

PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN TURKEY

AN ANALYSIS BY DIDEM TALI, IN COLLABORATION WITH
FREEDOM HOUSE AND RIWI

PREAMBLE BY NATE SCHENKKAN



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PREAMBLE

At the heart of the discussion of freedom of the press and freedom of expression in Turkey is a paradox. How can a country that for a decade has often been placed first in the number of imprisoned journalists worldwide, a country that has banned hundreds of media outlets, a country where the government, directly and indirectly, controls 90 percent of the media—still have vibrant public discussion? How is it possible for a society to be marked both by flagrant repression and impressive pluralism? The present report, based on a national survey of media consumption patterns and attitudes towards freedom of expression in Turkey, reflects this confusing picture.

The explanation lies in Turkey's modern history, and in particular, the ways in which the formation of a modern nation-state from the ruins of an empire entailed suppressing diversity and limiting debate, without ever fully eradicating it. Although freedom of expression in Turkey is now at its lowest point in more than 30 years, its alternately precarious and hopeful condition reflects a recurring tension between a centralizing state ever fearful of disintegration from within, and a diverse society that never stops trying to make itself heard.

The traumatic collapse of the Ottoman Empire shadows the Republic of Turkey, founded nearly 100 years ago in 1923. Like other empires, sustaining the Ottoman one had required incorporating diverse ethnic and religious groups through compromises, co-optation, and violence. The breakup of the empire, which occurred in multiple waves of nationalist secession beginning in the Balkans in the late nineteenth century, led to the rise of a new elite that saw the only future of the state in increasingly racialized terms.

After leading the war to regain control of the Anatolian part of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman officer Mustafa Kemal Atatürk embraced the challenge of transforming the territory that remained into a bureaucratic, centralized nation-state in emulation of the Western models he envied. This transition was premised on a radical narrowing of who could be considered a loyal citizen, with ethnic and religious differences treated as inherently threatening to the unity of the nation.¹ Although there were experiments in allowing controlled political competition during the early years of the republic, and with it critical media, each experiment ended quickly and with harsh repression.

It was not until after Atatürk's death in 1938 and after World War II that the Turkish republic exited its single-party era, as part of its turn towards a Western alliance now centered on liberal democracy as an alternative to the Soviet bloc. The surprising victory of the opposition Democrat Party in 1950 produced the first change in government since the republic's founding and a more open debate over core issues of public life. The DP's victory demonstrated that behind the monopolization of public life that defined the single-party era, there remained considerable dissent and diversity within Turkey waiting to be expressed. Despite the efforts of the state under Atatürk and his immediate inheritors, the Turkish Republic remained ethnically, politically, and economically diverse.

Yet even multiparty politics were still largely defined by what was excluded, with repression of leftist and ultranationalist positions continuing even after political competition had been allowed, and religion's role in public life strictly bound by secularism.² The military's self-assertion of its own "guardianship" of Atatürk's legacy made the limits of discussion real, resulting in military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980. Each coup imposed further constraints on public life, and none more so than in 1980, when all political parties were banned, dozens of people were executed, and new legal restrictions on speech and the press were put in place along with a new constitution.

Thus the norm of Turkey's history post-1950 is of a state where real political competition and real public debate were constantly emerging, only to face stark repression whenever they appeared to spill beyond the boundaries the military defined. This model finally began to unravel with the gradual liberalization of the economy in the dwindling years of the Cold War and then into the 1990s. New sources of wealth and new technologies gave rise to new opportunities for media

¹ Ugur Umit Ungor, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

² James D. Ryan, "The Republic of Others: Opponents of Kemalism in Turkey's Single Party Era, 1919-1950," (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2017).

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competition.³ Turkey's first satellite TV stations began broadcasting from abroad, and broader privatization bolstered an economic elite that invested heavily in the media to protect their investments in other sectors. Although the media in this period remained answerable to the military when push came to shove—as shown in the 1997 “postmodern coup” in which the military leaned on the media to help it oust the sitting government—a new popular media sector that might separate from the state was emerging.

A financial crisis in 2000 discredited the sitting coalition government and created an opening for the Justice and Development Party (AKP). The AKP's core had emerged from the Islamist party forced out of power in 1997, but the new party had widened its base to capture upwardly mobile Anatolian businesspeople that had been the backbone of the Democrat Party decades before, as well so-called liberals disenchanted with the military's repeated interventions and the state's rigid attempts to control what could and could not be discussed. The AKP's rise thus represented a significant challenge to the military and its ability to define the state.

In this context, the early period of the AKP from roughly 2002-2006 leaned heavily on political liberalization, including the breaking of taboos around religion and minority rights that had been enforced under military guardianship. The rights of women to wear headscarves in public institutions mobilized Islamic constituencies; discussion of Kurdish rights and a slight increase in the use of the Kurdish language appealed to the country's large Kurdish population, and even the most sensitive issues like the Armenian genocide that would reach urban liberals began to be discussed. At the same time, this liberalization remained constrained: leftist and Kurdish media in particular were subject to arbitrary arrests and closures under Turkey's strict anti-terrorism laws.

The new liberalization led to a complex dance between the media and the government—many media outlets embraced the relative freedom to speak, but there was also widespread skepticism of the AKP's motivations, due especially to its Islamist roots and alliance with the movement of Fethullah Gülen. The most influential “mainstream” media took advantage of newfound freedoms and economic growth to expand their audiences but maintained distance from the new government.

The liberalization was good politics for the AKP, though. It held together a fragile coalition between liberals and conservatives against the military and secular establishment that gave the AKP victories in elections in 2002, 2007, and 2011. It also gave the government credibility with the European Union and the United States. Without the threat of the Soviet Union on Turkey's borders, NATO's tolerance for the Turkish military's heavy-handed interventions had diminished. The AKP read the international politics of the moment well and cast itself as an equivalent to European Christian Democrats: a tolerant, center-right, pro-business party that could be trusted to reform in line with European best practices on the economy and democracy. The narrative that Turkey could be a model in reconciling Islam with democracy captured Western imaginations in the aftermath of 9/11, the global war on terror, and the invasion of Iraq.

The AKP was threading a very tight needle at home, however. As it pushed to have its co-founder Abdullah Gül enter the presidency, secularists mounted a passionate campaign against the government. In 2007, the party narrowly avoided a ban by the Turkish Supreme Court for violating the principle of secularism and faced down mass rallies around the country supported by the military and some media outlets. With EU accession diminished as a serious prospect due to deep opposition in France particularly, the government took an ever harder tack towards its opponents, including in the media. Reporting on corruption in a foundation linked to the AKP resulted in a 2009 multibillion-dollar retaliatory fine on the Doğan Group, the country's largest media owner at the time.

Meanwhile, the AKP used its leverage as the party in power to shift ownership of major media outlets to its allies, engineering bankruptcy sales to ensure media went to the “right” owners, and rewarding favorable coverage with massive state contracts, especially in construction, energy, and transportation. A signal moment came in 2007 when the

³ Dilek Kurban and Ceren Sözeri, [Caught in the Wheels of Power: The Political, Legal and Economic Constraints on Independent Media and Freedom of the Press in Turkey](#) (Istanbul: TESEV, 2012)

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Çalık business group led by Erdoğan's son-in-law (and now Minister of Treasury and Finance) Berat Albayrak took over the Sabah/ATV media holding company.

Most critically, beginning in 2008, the AKP defanged the military with a series of manufactured trials against its top leadership that swept up journalists and members of the opposition as well. The “Ergenekon” and “Balyoz” trials would eventually result in the imprisonment of hundreds of officers and the final eradication of “guardianship” as an institution. With the military under control, the AKP—increasingly dominated by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan—was finally alone in power.

The AKP's tightening grip on the media now became a fact of life. Erdoğan had become notorious for berating journalists he disliked both to their faces and in his speeches, and in media circles was known to call up editors and owners directly to tell them to change their coverage. Major outlets like the newspaper *Milliyet* fired well-known journalists like Hasan Cemal for coverage and commentary that the government disapproved of, and CNNTürk limited the range of its discussion programs.

These problems burst into international awareness in 2013. The Turkish media's hesitant initial coverage of the nationwide Gezi Park protests in June and July 2013 displayed for all to see how compromised Turkey's media had become. The government's backlash to the protests included a full-throated propaganda attack in its outlets, followed by a wide-ranging purge of others that had not yet come under full control. In December 2013, the arrests of government ministers and family members in a corruption investigation announced open conflict between the Gülen movement and the AKP. Erdoğan and the AKP furiously beat back the investigation, and then set out to eradicate the Gülen movement's influence, including in the media, with little regard for legal procedures, for example, by using the novel mechanism of appointing “trustees” to take over media outlets in what were de facto expropriations.

The irony of what followed is how firmly the AKP pivoted to embracing the traditional perspectives of the state once it was alone in power. Buffeted by its political miscalculations, economic mismanagement, and disastrous policies regarding the war in Syria, the AKP failed to win a majority in parliament in elections for the first time in 13 years in June 2015. Unable to form a government, the AKP relaunched the war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), opening another wave of repression against Kurdish and leftist outlets, as well as against academics and others who spoke out against the war. The shift worked. The AKP recaptured a majority in new elections in November 2015.

Then finally, the coup attempt of July 2016 provided the pretext for wiping the media slate clean. The Gülen movement bore much of the brunt, but the impact spread throughout society. Some 160 media outlets were summarily shuttered, and the number of journalists and media workers imprisoned ballooned over 150, as the government went after not only Gülen movement-affiliated media, but others as well.

Throughout this decade, social media and citizen journalism have offered some prospect of escaping from the AKP's watchful eye. But after an early period when the government appeared uncertain about how to deal with online and social media—marked notably by the blocking of Twitter and YouTube in spring 2014—the AKP developed a more sophisticated approach. A mix of tactics combining aggressive propaganda, forcing social media companies to filter content, occasional platform blocking, and frequent prosecutions of users has updated the Turkish state's practice of enforcing taboos for the digital age.⁴ The result is an online environment where information circulates, but users are often fearful of commenting on it; where some journalists still report, but know they are likely to be prosecuted if they do. A common Turkish joke in social media in response to someone posting critical news is to remind them that, “It's cold in Silivri”—a reference to the maximum-security prison outside of Istanbul.

With three years to go until the centenary of the founding of the republic, Turkey is haunted by the dynamic that has defined freedom of expression in the country for the last 100 years. The state continues to rely on harsh limits on speech in a country that is too large and too diverse, with too rich a tradition of dissent and opposition, for repression

4 Freedom House, *Freedom on the Net 2019* (New York: Freedom House, 2019), <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>

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to ever fully succeed. But other parts of the dynamic are new. With Gülenist media shuttered and with the mainstream media firmly under AKP control, media with a national reach are under state influence to an extent unprecedented since before liberalization in the 1980s. Additionally, the guardianship role that the military claimed for itself is gone. But because the military never allowed Turkey to develop its own democratic traditions, there are no legitimate checks and balances in place to constrain the state's power. Having come to power leading a movement that challenged the state's diktat over public life, now-President Erdoğan has become the very embodiment of the state. After more than a decade of consolidation, his media dominate the airwaves and the newsstands. And yet, like with Turkish leaders before him, his message is not unchallenged. As the following survey shows, Turkey continues to be a country where citizens are skeptical, critical, and eager for better media that better represents them. This is the paradox that makes Turkey still vibrant, and still worth supporting.

1. Introduction

1. INTRODUCTION

The heavy restrictions on the freedom of speech in Turkey are by no means a new problem. A young country founded less than a century ago, the Republic of Turkey has experienced its fair share of political clashes, military interventions, and surges in autocratic tendencies.⁵ In the late 20th century, the Eurasian nation survived two military coups, in 1960 and 1980, the latter of which went as far as banning the use of the Kurdish language from public and private life.⁶

However, more recently, after the failed military coup attempt of July 2016,⁷ President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who has been ruling the country since 2003, tightened his grip on the press and restricted the freedom of speech even further. In 2017, a controversial referendum granted Mr. Erdoğan a position of executive leadership,⁸ allowing him to make constitutional changes with potentially far-reaching implications.

As a result, over the last few years, civil liberties and freedom of expression in Turkey have continued to deteriorate.⁹ Developments such as the arrests of politicians, academics, and journalists, as well as increasing media and internet censorship, dramatically decreased Turkey’s democracy score.

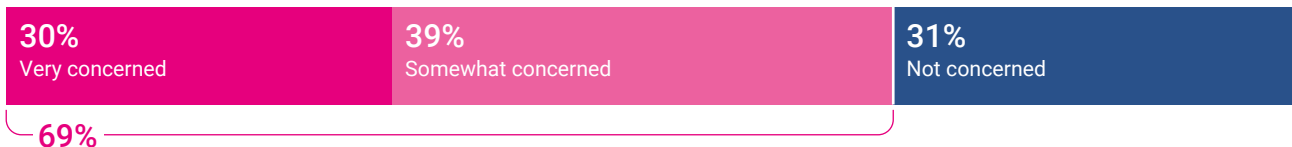
According to the World Bank,¹⁰ the bi-continental nation is an upper-middle-income country and among the world’s largest 20 economies. An established NATO and OECD member, Turkey took significant strides in areas like health and education in the last several decades. Nevertheless, Turkey ranked 110 out of 167 countries in *The Economist’s* 2019 Democracy Index.¹¹

As pressures and restrictions on the freedom of expression continue to plague the media, we surveyed internet users in Turkey to assess the perceptions and perspectives on it.

Our survey revealed striking results about censorship, shifting media consumption habits, and weakening trust in media—69 percent of the participants are concerned with the effects of censorship in Turkey. Likewise, 64 percent of all the respondents were concerned about their online activities being monitored by the government.

How concerned are you...

...with the effects of censorship in Turkey? (*unweighted*)



...about your online activities being monitored by the government? (*unweighted*)



5 Lily Rothman, "A Short History of Modern Turkey’s Military Coups," *Time*, July 15, 2016, <https://time.com/4408850/turkey-coup-history/>
 6 Human Rights Watch, "IX. Restrictions on the Use of the Kurdish Language," in *Turkey: Violations of Free Expression in Turkey*, (United States: Human Rights Watch, 1999), <https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/turkey/turkey993-08.htm#TopOfPage>
 7 "Turkey’s coup attempt: What you need to know," BBC News, July 17, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36816045>
 8 "Turkey referendum: Vote expanding Erdogan powers 'valid'," BBC News, April 17, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39618614>
 9 "Turkey," *Freedom of the World Report*, Freedom House, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2019>
 10 "Overview," *The World Bank in Turkey*, The World Bank, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview>
 11 "Global democracy has another bad year," *The Economist*, last modified, January 23, 2020, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/2020/01/22/global-democracy-has-another-bad-year>

1. Introduction

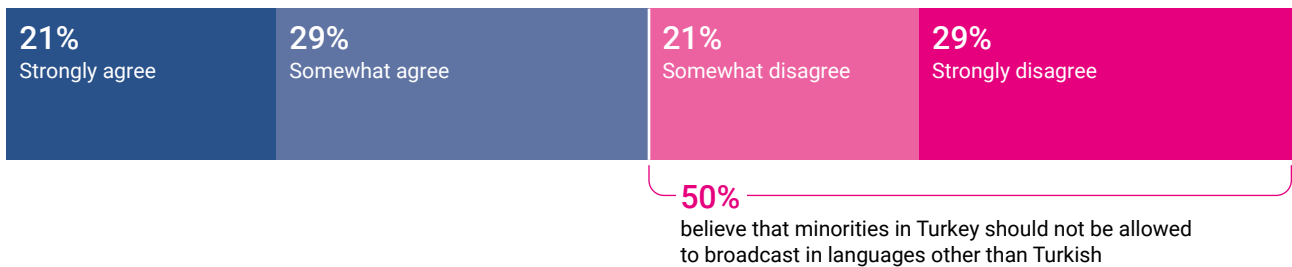
Largely due to the perception that the government is controlling the broadcast news tighter, 54 percent of all respondents prefer to get their news from social media and online publications, compared to 31 percent who still favor TV and radio.

What medium do you prefer to get your news from? *(unweighted)*



However, autocratic tendencies in Turkey that lead to these issues are not necessarily undemocratic: 50% unweighted percent of all our polled internet users believe that minorities in Turkey should not be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish.

Minorities in Turkey should be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish *(unweighted)*
for respondents who prefer to get news from online publications and social media



2. Methodology & Limitations

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Partnering with RIWI, a global trend-tracking and prediction technology firm, we reached around 2,000 randomized internet users residing in all 81 different provinces of the country. Participation was voluntary and did not offer any incentives for completing the survey. Participants were assured about the complete anonymity of the questionnaire, which gave them the option to exit at any time.

The survey was offered only in the Turkish language and comprised exclusively of multiple-choice questions. The responses gathered data on areas like the participants' demographic details such as age, gender, and region, media consumption patterns, as well as attitudes and perceptions on freedoms. However, they did not inquire about private details such as religion, ethnicity, economic, or marital status. Even though the survey did not delve into which specific political party the participants voted for, some of the questions attempted to assess the attitudes on autocratic tendencies.

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, around 75 percent of the population aged 16-74 had access to the internet in 2019, and around 88 percent of households had broadband internet.¹² However, this annual review does not specify how often internet users go online.

In Turkey, the high rate of internet penetration is a gendered one. While the proportion of males aged 16-74 using the internet was 82 percent, for females, this figure remained 69 percent.

Data collection for this survey from the approximate 2,000 overall respondents was completed in around one week. Hence, the findings of our survey might be biased towards individuals with regular internet access. It might exclude the perspectives of marginalized communities who do not have internet access for economic or cultural reasons. Likewise, it might not accurately represent the views of ethnic minorities with inadequate Turkish language skills.

Furthermore, the internet's gender gap in the general Turkish population is reflected in this survey too. Even though RIWI software weights the demographic data for balance and accuracy, an unweighted 67 percent of those who attempted to take the survey were male, in comparison to an unweighted 33 percent female respondents.

As this was a nation-wide survey with voluntary participation, questions had other demographic patterns and trends among the respondents. For instance, the respondents were overwhelmingly young, with 41 percent of them aged 14-24 and only 5 percent of them 65 or older. Hence, each figure will specify whether the weighted or unweighted data was used. It is also important to note that in a few instances, some numbers may not necessarily add up to 100 percent, due to rounding.

12 Turkish Statistical Institute, "Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Usage Survey on Households and Individuals, 2019," Press release, August 27, 2019. Turkish Statistical Institute. Accessed May 22, 2020. <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/PreHaberBultenleri.do?id=30574>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

3. CONSUMING MEDIA WITHOUT TRUSTING IT

One of the most striking findings of this survey has been the significant portion of respondents expressing that they lost trust in the news and felt that the quality of the news media in Turkey had declined over the last decade. However, with limited access to alternatives, they continued to consume the news, which they felt was poor-quality and biased.

Only 14 percent of the respondents expressed that they “completely” trusted the news in their preferred news medium. Similarly, 48 percent of respondents felt that the quality of the news media in Turkey had declined over the last decade, whereas a further 21 percent felt it stayed the same. This sentiment showed parallelity to how respondents felt about the progression of Turkish democracy: 45 percent of them thought that it declined over the last decade, whereas a further 24 percent felt it remained the same.

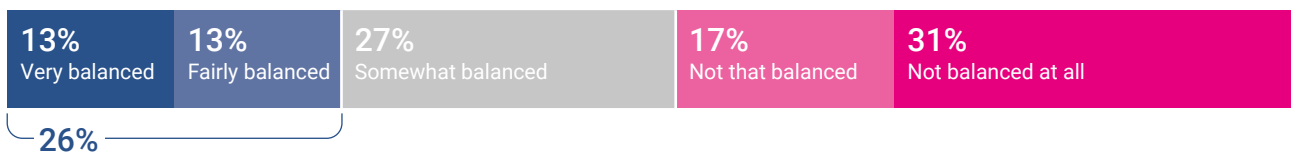
3.1. Internet Takes Over Broadcast amidst Accuracy Concerns

In many parts of world, including the wealthier economies like the US, TV still dominates the news consumption habits of the masses despite the growing influence and penetration of the internet.¹³ Roughly 6 billion people around the world have a TV set at home,¹⁴ whereas 4.5 billion people are online.¹⁵

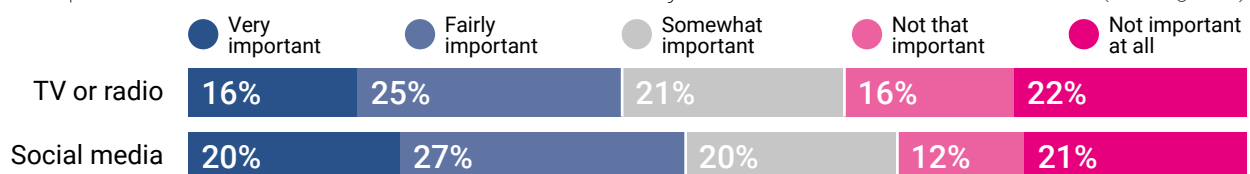
Turkey is the world’s second-largest TV exporter in the world,¹⁶ second only to the US. Hence, TV in Turkey has a monumental cultural significance. It is not uncommon for daily life and schedules in Turkey to revolve around TV series, where an episode can run up to 150 minutes,¹⁷ excluding advertisements. On average, Turkish people spend approximately 3.5 hours a day watching TV.¹⁸

Nevertheless, our survey revealed that people in Turkey are relying on TV less and less as a source of information. In a culture that otherwise cherishes the TV, only 26 percent of the respondents felt that broadcast news channels are

How balanced do you think the news from TV and radio are? *(unweighted)*



How important are TV or radio and social media for you as a source of information? *(unweighted)*



13 Amy Mitchell, Jeffrey Gottfried, Michael Barthel and Elisa Shearer, “Pathways to news” in *The Modern News Consumer*, (Pew Research Center), July 7, 2016, <https://www.journalism.org/2016/07/07/pathways-to-news/>
 14 Simon Kemp, “Digital 2019: Global Digital Overview,” DataReportal, January 31, 2019, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2019-global-digital-overview>
 15 J. Clement, “Global digital population as of April 2020,” Statista, April 24, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>
 16 “Turkish Delight: How Turkey Has Become The Second Biggest TV Exporter In The World,” *Haymillian*, April 25, 2020, <https://haymillian.com/turkish-delight-how-turkey-has-become-the-second-biggest-tv-exporter-in-the-world/>
 17 Jenna Krajeski, “Turkey: Days of Their Lives,” *Pulitzer Center*, March 30, 2010, <https://pulitzercenter.org/reporting/turkey-days-their-lives>
 18 “Turks watch TV for more than 3 hours a day: Report,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, December 18, 2018, <https://www.hurriyetsayim.com/turks-watch-tv-for-more-than-3-hours-a-day-report-139716>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

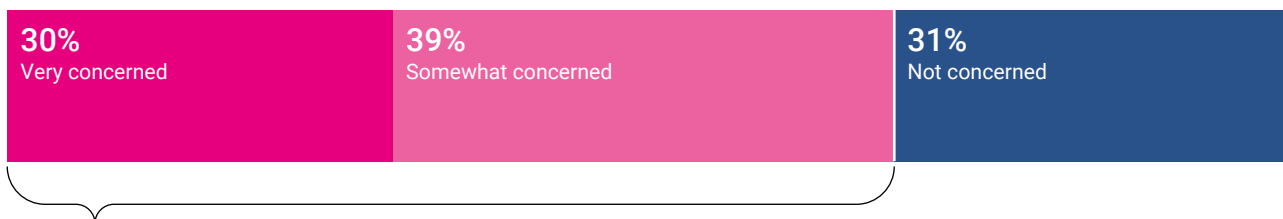
balanced. Forty-seven percent of the participants felt that social media was an important source of information to them, as opposed to 41 percent who felt the same about TV or radio.

More strikingly, 54 percent of all respondents prefer to get their news from social media and online publications, compared to 31 percent who still favor TV and radio. When these figures are weighted across the demographic groups, there is a slight decline in favoring the online sources for news. However, as 64 percent of the survey respondents were aged below 35, the rise of the internet as an information source in Turkey is unlikely to stop—especially given the environment of distrust to broadcast channels. (Please see **Section 4** on Demographics for further analysis of these divides.)

3.2. Censorship Impacts News Consumption and Production Patterns

Sixty-nine percent of the participants are concerned with the effects of censorship in Turkey. Within this group, the top concern was the usage of censorship to cover up the human rights abuses (35 percent), followed by the prevention of fair elections (26 percent). In the meantime, 31 percent of respondents did not feel concerned at all about the censorship.

How concerned are you with the effects of censorship in Turkey? *(unweighted)*



Which consequence of censorship are you most concerned with? *(unweighted)*
(of those who concerned)



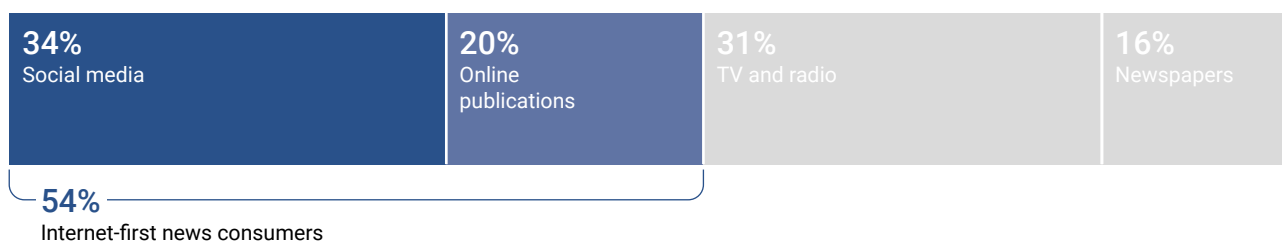
Even though President Erdoğan insists that the press in Turkey is free,¹⁹ there has been a global consensus about the deteriorating rights of expression in Turkey. Since 2013, Freedom House has classified Turkey as “not free.”²⁰ Similarly, Reporters Without Borders has ranked Turkish press freedom as 157 among 180 countries.²¹ The Eurasian nation has earned the notorious nickname of “the world’s largest prison for journalists”²²—more than 120 of them are still in jail, many of whom are held on vague reasons and waiting for trials.²³

19 Aykan Erdemir and Cenk Sidar, “Turkey’s bizarre witch hunt against the media,” *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/democracy-post/wp/2017/03/02/turkeys-bizarre-witch-hunt-against-the-media/>
 20 “Turkey,” Freedom House, last modified April 11, 2020, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey>
 21 “2020 World Press Freedom,” Reporters Without Borders, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://rsf.org/en/ranking>
 22 Beril Eski, “Turkey: The world’s largest prison for journalists,” *Amnesty International Turkey*, May 3, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/05/turkey-the-worlds-largest-prison-for-journalists/>
 23 “More than 120 journalists still jailed in Turkey: International Press Institute,” November 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-media/more-than-120-journalists-still-jailed-in-turkey-international-press-institute-idUSKBN1XT26T>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

Our survey revealed that the Turkish public has a strong awareness of the same issues too. As many feel they cannot rely on public or private broadcasters for balanced and accurate information, these worries also shift news consumption behaviors. Coupled with rising internet penetration, an increasing number of people turn to the internet for independent journalism. Our survey also reflected these tendencies, with 54 percent of all the respondents indicating they were internet-first news consumers.

What medium do you prefer to get your news from? (*unweighted*)



In Turkey, the internet is relatively more decentralized and more challenging to control compared to broadcast media. Especially as the mainstream media is under attack, the number of online outlets and citizen journalists who broadcast information using tools such as Periscope has grown exponentially. The Gezi Protests in 2013 accelerated these efforts and nurtured vibrant and thriving communities of independent outlets and citizen journalism.²⁴

However, the internet is far from a safe haven for opposing views. The intensifying censorship of the media since the failed military coup attempt of 2016 has been bleeding into the internet too. One of the most notorious examples of this was the Wikipedia block,²⁵ which started in April 2017. In December 2019, the Turkish high court ruled that the ban of a major information source like Wikipedia was a “violation of the freedom of expression,”²⁶ which paved the way for the ban to end in January 2020.

That said, other online bans and restrictions continue. Authorities have blocked over 245,000 websites.²⁷ In late 2019, a new regulation means internet broadcasting now falls under government control.²⁸ All broadcasters, including online ones, must apply for a license. Those that are refused a license or don’t apply can be blocked or face hefty fines.

The implications of this new regulation are yet to yield concrete results. Nevertheless, it can have an impact on online broadcasters of various capacities—from independent online TVs founded by journalists who lost their jobs due to critical reporting to individual Periscope broadcasters.

24 Aslı Tunç, “Can Pomegranates Replace Penguins? Social Media and the Rise of Citizen Journalism in Turkey,” *A Struggle for Turkey’s Internet*. Freedom House, 2014, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/Can%20Pomegranates%20Replace%20Penguins%20-%20Social%20Media%20and%20the%20Rise%20of%20Citizen%20Journalism%20in%20Turkey.pdf>

25 “Turkish authorities block Wikipedia without giving reason,” BBC News, April 29, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-39754909>

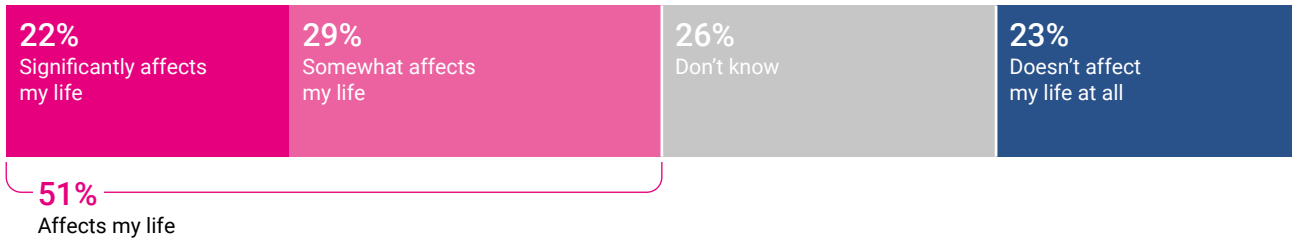
26 Bethan McKernan, “Turkey’s Wikipedia block violates human rights, high court rules,” *The Guardian*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/26/turkish-court-wikipedia-block-lifted>

27 Umar Farooq, “Turkey extends censorship rules to streaming services. Critics say political dissent is the real target,” *The Los Angeles Times*, August 21, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2019-08-20/turkeys-censorship-laws-against-immoral-material-set-to-include-streaming-services>

28 Dorian Jones, “Turkey’s New Internet Regulations Spark Fears of New Wave of Censorship,” *Voice of America*, October 8, 2019, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/turkeys-new-internet-regulations-spark-fears-new-wave-censorship>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

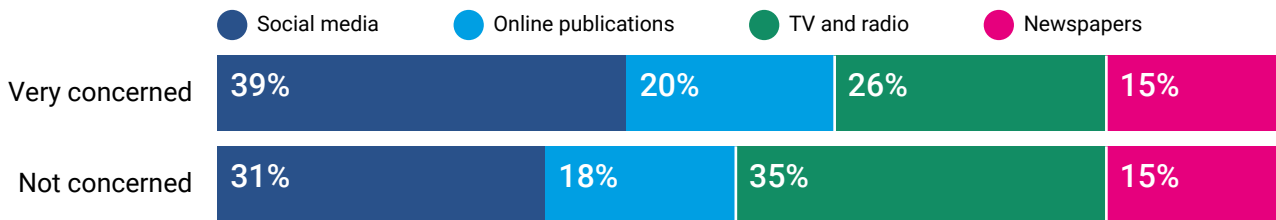
How does Internet censorship affect your life? *(unweighted)*



Fifty-one percent of all the people who participated in our survey felt that censorship impacts their day-to-day information consumption activities. While 23 percent of them felt censorship did not affect their lives, a further 26 percent stated that they were not sure about the implications of censorship in their lives.

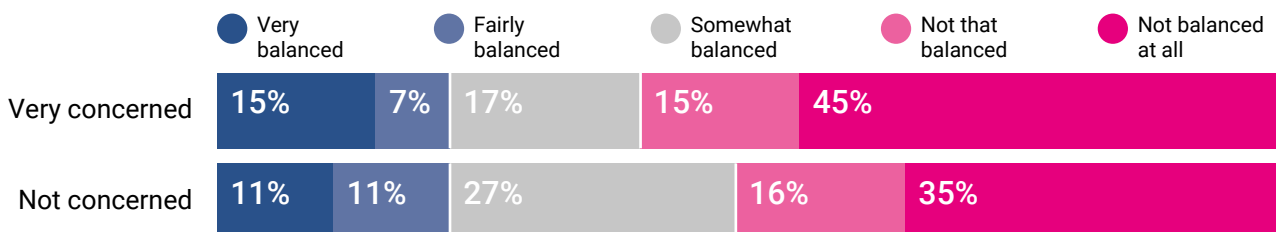
Attitudes towards censorship epitomize some other striking discrepancies within the Turkish public. Those who expressed that they were “very concerned” about censorship did not trust TV and radio. The majority of them (56 percent) relied on the internet as a source of information. On the other hand, the survey participants who expressed that they were “not concerned” about censorship, favored TV and radio as their most preferred media outlets.

What medium do you prefer to get your news from? *(unweighted)*
 depending on the answer to the question: How concerned are you with the effects of censorship in Turkey?



The TV and social media consumption habits of these two groups of opposite views are almost entirely asymmetrical: 28 percent of the “not concerned” participants consider social media as the most crucial part of their media diets, but 38 percent prefer TV and radio. In contrast, 37 percent of the participants who are “very concerned” about censorship favor social media, and another 28 percent of them still consume TV news. However, 59 percent of these consume broadcast news, despite believing they are not balanced.

How balanced do you think the news from TV and radio are? *(unweighted)*
 depending on the answer to the question: How concerned are you with the effects of censorship in Turkey?

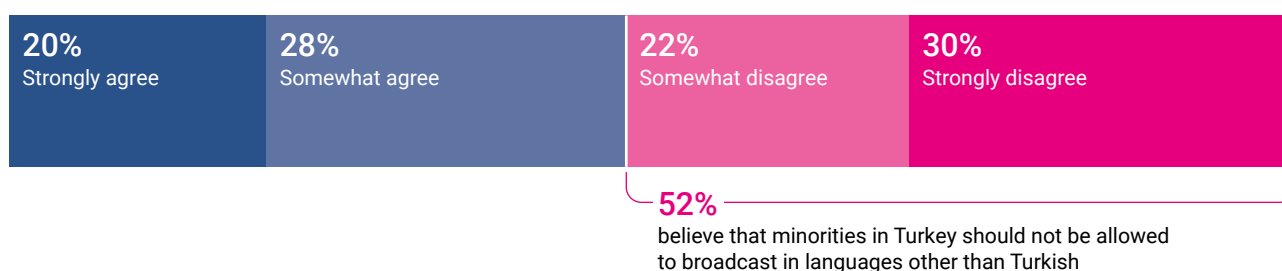


3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

3.3. Nationalism across the Political Spectrum to Support Censorship

48 percent of all our polled internet users believe that minorities in Turkey should not be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish. What makes these figures more salient is the fact that broadcasting and publishing in minority languages in Turkey is legal and not uncommon. It was Mr. Erdoğan's government that paved the way to this law by establishing the Kurdish and Arabic language services within the public broadcaster TRT in 2002.²⁹ However, after the failed military coup attempt of 2016, most of the other Kurdish language media outlets have been shuttered.³⁰

Minorities in Turkey should be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish (*unweighted*)



Hence, the government's restrictions are arguably not only a "top-down" approach. Turkey is one of the most nationalist nations in Europe.³¹ From far-right to far-left, across the political spectrum in the country, nationalism is one of the most deeply penetrated ideologies in the country.

Turkish nationalism is so ingrained in the public subconscious,³² even if nationalist leaders and power structures are questioned, nationalism itself is sacred and can never be criticized. Hence, it is not uncommon for these tendencies to generate power consolidations and mobilize public reactions to bake into media too.

Our survey revealed that despite the growing concerns about censorship and mistrust of media institutions, the autocratic tendencies that manifest in the restriction of press freedom are not coincidental.

Mainly due to nationalist urges, even if they are critical to the current government and concerned about other issues of the freedom of expression, a significant portion of the population supports these censorships and restrictions.

Many of the arrests of journalists, politicians, and academics occurred as they expressed opinions in support of the Kurdish culture, identity, and cultural rights.³³ Our poll reveals that the government's decision to imprison these individuals was not necessarily disconnected from public opinion.

29 "History," TRT, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.trt.net.tr/Kurumsal/tarihce.aspx>

30 Sahar Halaimzai, "Turkey: The repression of Kurdish Language and Culture must stop," *PEN International*, February 18, 2018, <https://pen-international.org/news/turkey-the-repression-of-kurdish-language-and-culture-must-stop>

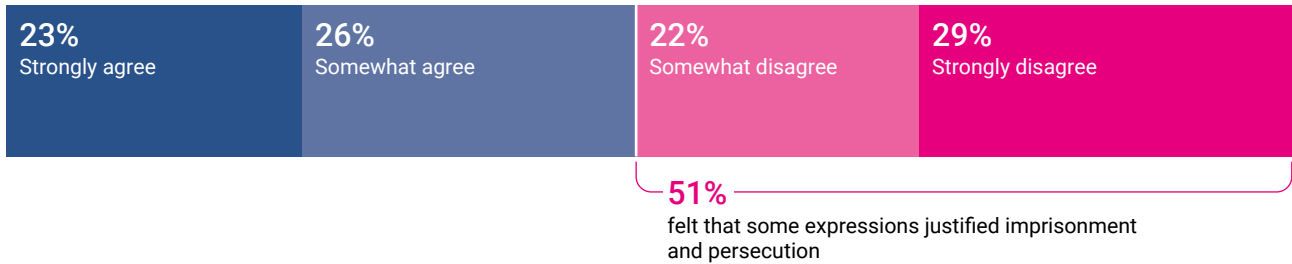
31 Pinar Çakıroğlu-Bournous, "How a 'New Turkey' Emerged under Recep Erdoğan," in *The Far Right in Government: Six Cases from Across Europe*, (New York: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2018), https://www.rosalux.de/fileadmin/rls_uploads/pdfs/sonst_publicationen/farright-ingovernmenten.pdf

32 Yahya Kemal Can, "Nationalism in Turkey: Roots and Contemporary Answers," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung: Istanbul, Turkey*, November 22, 2019, <https://tr.boell.org/en/2019/08/22/nationalism-turkey-roots-and-contemporary-answers>

33 "Turkey: Events of 2018," Human Rights Watch, last modified February 28, 2019, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/turkey#8e519f>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

No matter what they express, the arresting of academics, journalists, and politicians is unlawful (*unweighted*)



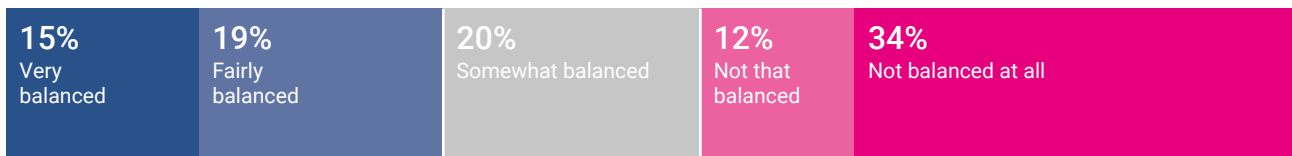
In our questionnaire, we asked if the respondents agreed with the following statement, **“No matter what they express, the arresting of academics, journalists, and politicians is unlawful.”**

Fifty-one percent of all the respondents disagreed with our statement, and they felt that some expressions justified imprisonment and persecution.

3.4. An Oligarchic Media Environment Leads to a Monophonic News Coverage

Our survey reflects these sentiments, as a large proportion of the participants are aware of the oligarchical structures in both public and private media outlets. News consumers are increasingly cynical of the concentration of media ownership, and it is a central reason why many lost trust in the news. When asked if they felt the news from pro-government outlets like *Demiroren Medya* or *A Haber* was balanced, the most dominant answer was “not balanced at all,” marked by 34 percent of the participants. On the other hand, 15 percent of respondents felt these outlets portrayed the news in a “very balanced” way.

How balanced do you think the news from pro-government media outlets (Sabah, Demiroren, A Haber, etc.) are? (*weighted*)



Throughout Mr. Erdoğan’s rule, the silencing of journalists from opponent media outlets and the concentration of the media ownership developed simultaneously and fed each other.

Turkey’s concentration of media ownership started to intensify after the military coup of 1980,³⁴ which is also when the country started to embrace neoliberal economic policies and opened itself to global free-market capitalism.³⁵

34 Serpil Karlıdag and Bulut Selda, “Relationship between Media Ownership and News Process in Turkey from the Political Economy Perspective,” *Journal of Media Critiques* 2, October 2016: 11-33. doi: 10.17349/jmc116101.

35 Fikret Şenses, “Turkey’s Experience with Neoliberal Policies since 1980 in Retrospect and Prospect.” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 47 (2012): 11–31. doi:10.1017/S0896634600001680.

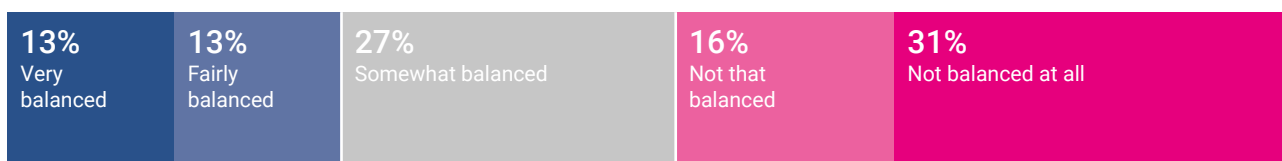
3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

According to the Turkish Statistical Institute, in 2018, there were 2,474 daily newspapers, 3,650 magazines, 899 radio stations, and 196 TV channels active in Turkey.³⁶ However, an analysis of Reporters Without Borders states that four companies owned a whopping 71 percent of all these outlets.³⁷ Other watchdogs noted the percentage of the government-controlled media to be as high as 90 percent.³⁸

Colloquially known in Turkish as *havuz medyasi* [pool media] or *yandas medya* [partisan media],³⁹ opposition supporters often express frustration about how the media oligarchs, who own these outlets, publish or broadcast pro-government content for financial gain.

The respondents had parallel feelings about the balance and accuracy in TV and radio. Thirty-one percent of them felt broadcast news was “not balanced at all,” as opposed to the 13 percent who felt it was “very balanced.”

How balanced do you think the news from TV and radio are? (weighted)



3.5. Self-Censorship Strains and Distorts Exchange of Information

People who took our survey expressed fear about the implications of their online behavior: 64 percent of all respondents were concerned about their online activities being monitored by the government.

How concerned are you about your online activities being monitored by the government? (unweighted)



The government’s tight grip of media has implications that go beyond the swelling numbers of journalists in jail, not only for media workers but also for regular citizens.

If a journalist working for one of these government-controlled outlets attempts to stray from the pro-government agenda, even if they do not end up in prison, they will likely lose their jobs. Alternatively, they might face safety risks such as threats or online attacks.

36 “Written media statistics announced,” Basın İlan Kurumu, last modified July 26, 2019, accessed May 25, 2020, <https://www.bik.gov.tr/yazili-medya-istatistikleri-aciklandi-2/>

37 “Media ownership and concentration,” Media Ownership Monitor: Turkey, accessed May 22, 2020, <https://turkey.mom-rsf.org/en/media/>

38 Jones, “Turkey’s New Internet”

39 u/[deleted]. “Why is the havuz medya called the havuz medya?” *Reddit*, July 29, 2015. <https://www.bibguru.com/g/chicago-red-dit-post-citation/>

3. Consuming Media without Trusting It

In November 2019, 45 journalists for the mainstream newspaper *Hurriyet*, who were members of the Journalists Union of Turkey, lost their jobs.⁴⁰ This was one of the larger purges since the pro-government Demiroren Medya acquired some of the prominent mainstream outlets like *Hurriyet* and CNNTürk in 2018.⁴¹

Prominent journalists representing opposing views might be targeted. For instance, Can Dündar,⁴² a veteran government critic, currently lives in exile in Germany after surviving imprisonment and assassination attempts. Even so, regular death threats are a part of his life.⁴³ Even though Mr. Dündar's case is of the more well-known ones, his experience isn't unique.⁴⁴

Under these pressures, many working journalists resort to self-censoring. This issue is prevalent and growing. One report described it as "overwhelming,"⁴⁵ as actions like re-tweeting or posting comments can land reporters in jail. The constraints result in monophonic news coverage, which fails to feed the public a diversity of opinions. Forty-three percent of the respondents felt that the mass media outlets in Turkey, both public and private, failed to represent a diversity of opinions.

The lack of diverse opinions available to the Turkish public is a double-edged sword. Journalists might be unable to explore a potentially "risky" area due to censorships self-inflicted and otherwise. Even if they do not, it might prove challenging for them to find experts and sources who will go on the record and make public statements on sensitive issues.

Even private individuals might hesitate to share their opinions online. Thousands of social media users went through investigations on suspicion of terrorist propaganda and insulting senior state officials, and some ended up in prison.⁴⁶ Mr. Erdoğan, who tapped into social media to mobilize masses to protect Turkish democracy on the night of the 2016 military coup attempt,⁴⁷ often takes legal action against social media critics,⁴⁸ with a harsh attitude towards those who allegedly insult him.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, people who expressed they were "very concerned" about it, could be among Turkey's most fervent social media users. Seventy-two percent of this particular group stated that social media was the most important source of information for them.

40 "Hürriyet Employees: We are Fired Because We are Unionized," English Bianet, November 6, 2019, <https://m.bianet.org/english/media/215445-hurriyet-employees-we-are-fired-because-we-are-unionized>

41 "Pro-Erdogan group agrees to buy owner of Hurriyet newspaper, CNN Turk," Reuters, March 21, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-dogan-holding-m-a-demiroren/pro-erdogan-group-agrees-to-buy-owner-of-hurriyet-newspaper-cnn-turk-idUSKBN1GX23R>

42 Constanze Letsch, "Turkish journalist Can Dündar jailed after surviving gun attack," *The Guardian*, May 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/06/turkish-journalist-can-dundar-escapes-attempted-shooting-outside-court>

43 Attila Mong, "For Turkish journalists in Berlin exile, threats remain, but in different forms," Committee to Protect Journalists, July 18, 2019, <https://cpj.org/2019/07/for-turkish-journalists-in-berlin-exile-threats-re/>

44 "Death threat reflects hate for outspoken journalists in Turkey," Reporters Without Borders, July 2, 2018, <https://rsf.org/en/news/death-threat-reflects-hate-outspoken-journalists-turkey>

45 Renan Akyavaş and IPI staff, "Self-censorship in Turkey is growing, journalists report," International Press Institute, November 16, 2017, <https://ipi.media/self-censorship-in-turkey-growing-journalists-report/>

46 "Three more social media users arrested for insulting Erdoğan," Turkey Purge, February 6, 2017, <https://turkeypurge.com/three-more-social-media-users-arrested-for-insulting-erdogan>

47 *Ibid.*

48 Matt Payton, "President Erdogan threatens to sue anyone who insults him," *Independent*, April 1, 2016, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/turkish-president-recep-tayyip-erdo-an-is-threatening-to-sue-all-who-insults-him-a6963521.html>

4. THE DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDES: MEDIA CONSUMPTION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Even though the respondents of this survey showed some concerns about freedom of expression issues and expressed dissatisfaction about the state of media in Turkey, the views differ significantly across demographic groups.

Some scholars of sociology and political science consider Turkey to be one of the most polarized nations in the world.⁴⁹ Since Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established the Republic of Turkey in 1923, a divide between Islamist and secular communities has strained the country. Other historical polarizations include the divide between Eastern and Western Turkey, or the rural and urban gap. More recently, globalization and access to education and information technologies have deepened the gap between young and older generations too.

Some manifestations of the polarized views across the country when it comes to the perceptions and attitudes towards freedom expression were visible in our survey as well.

Even though the general results of the survey broadly outlined some concerns about declining freedom of speech, some groups had significantly more autocratic tendencies. In contrast, others fostered a more progressive worldview.

4.1. Age

Even though this pattern is hardly unique to Turkey, one of the most dramatic divides when it comes to consuming and interpreting information in our survey has been among the young and old.

The Turkish population is a slowly aging, but a relatively young one. As of 2020, the median age is 31,⁵⁰ making those who were born in the late 1980s the largest demographic cohort of the country. However, fertility rates have declined from around 3.3 children per woman in the late 1980s to 2 children per woman in 2020.⁵¹

Predictably, younger members of the Turkish public dominantly rely on the internet, whereas those older than 55 tend to favor more traditional channels like TV and radio. Due to Turkey's ongoing demographic turn, the internet-dependence will likely boom even more dramatically in the next decades.

In alignment with this transition, newspapers have been on the decline. However, around a quarter of those aged over 55 consider newspapers to be a crucial source of information.

Nevertheless, a significant proportion of these two oldest cohorts in our survey are ardent social media users. Sixty percent of those aged between 55 and 64 consider social media to be a "very important" or a "fairly important" source of information to them, surpassing all the other groups.

These two oldest generations in Turkey are also the most cynical when it comes to the quality of media in Turkey. They are overwhelmingly more pessimistic compared to the younger generations. They tend to believe that mass media outlets, both public and private, are grossly biased. These generations have less trust in what they read or watch, even though they trust social media more than the younger generations.

49 Senem Aydin-Düsgit, "The Islamist-Secularist Divide in Turkey's Descent into Severe Polarization," in *Democracies Divided: The Global Challenge of Political Polarization*, ed. Thomas Carothers and Andrew O'Donohue, (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2019), 17-37, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/9780815737216_ch1.pdf

50 "Turkey Population," Worldometer, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/turkey-population/>

51 "Fertility rate, total (births per woman) – Turkey," The World Bank, accessed May 28, 2020, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?locations=TR>

4. The Demographic Divides: Media Consumption and Attitudes towards Freedom of Speech

People over 65 were outliers in our survey when it comes to their attitudes towards minorities: 59 percent of them believed that the only language of media in Turkey should be Turkish, whereas these figures lingered closer to 50 percent for other groups. However, support for minority-language media did not increase with each younger age cohort. Our survey did not spot any correlations between young age and more progressive views on multilingualism in the media.

4.2. Education

About 36 percent of the survey participants reported that they had a bachelor's degree or higher, which is significantly above the national average of 13 percent.⁵² [Page 5, Table A.1.1] A further 40 percent held high school degrees or completed post-secondary vocational studies.

While there were not significant divides across education levels when it comes to media consumption patterns, those with higher degrees were dramatically more concerned about the freedom of information in Turkey.

For instance, around a third of the two least-educated groups (those who only finished primary school or less) believed that the pro-government media outlets were "not balanced at all." The same figure was 50 percent for those with a bachelor's degree, and 59 percent for those with postgraduate degrees.

Likewise, these two most-educated cohorts were far more pessimistic about democracy and freedoms in Turkey. Almost half of them believed Turkey had become "much less" democratic in the last 10 years. In contrast, 31 percent of those with less than a primary school degree thought the country became "much more" democratic.

The contrasts between the least-educated cohort (who completed less than primary schooling) and the two most-educated cohorts were staggering. While 47 percent of the people in the former group considered social media news "very balanced," only 2 percent of respondents with a bachelor's degree felt the same. Furthermore, 41 percent of those with a master's degree or higher thought social media news is not "balanced at all."

These discrepancies among educational groups likely hint at a vehement issue of digital literacy in Turkey.

4.3. Gender

For this survey, there was a relative balance between male and female participants when it comes to their media consumption and attitudes towards freedom of speech.

However, the survey, which already had significantly fewer female participants overall, aligned with the statistics that women in Turkey are less digitized. They considered online media less important than men. Thirty percent of female respondents expressed that online publications were "not important at all," compared to 24 percent of the male participants.

Even though these differences are not conclusive, 52 percent of the females preferred to get their information from broadcast channels and newspapers instead of online resources, in contrast to 48 percent of males.

Furthermore, they had a slightly more optimistic attitude towards freedom of speech. Women tended to think public and private outlets, as well as social media, were moderately more balanced.

⁵² "Turkey" in *Education at a Glance 2019: OECD Indicators*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2019), 5. https://www.oecd.org/education/education-at-a-glance/EAG2019_CN_TUR.pdf

4. The Demographic Divides: Media Consumption and Attitudes towards Freedom of Speech

4.4. Region

This survey gathered data from 81 different provinces of Turkey. About one-third of the respondents resided in Istanbul. However, the answers were fragmented in smaller cities. In some cases, we did not have enough representative data samples from various provinces.

Hence, this report does not attempt to reach region-specific conclusions on each region's media consumption and their attitudes towards freedom of speech.

5. Conclusion

5. CONCLUSION

“Freedom of speech is the most important pillar of democracy,” Mr. Erdoğan said in May 2019, as published on the pro-government site, *Yeni Şafak*.⁵³ He defended his decision to further online censorship, adding, “Only ‘problematic’ parts of websites will be prohibited, instead of a full-access ban.”

However, our poll of around 2,000 internet users in Turkey tells a different story. The Turkish public is starved of crucial and high-quality information due to the government’s tightening grip on media.

Largely due to the mistrust from this grip, 54 percent (unweighted) of all respondents prefer to get their news from social media and online publications, compared to 31 percent who still favor TV and radio.

However, autocratic tendencies in Turkey that lead to these issues are not necessarily undemocratic—50 percent (unweighted) of all our polled internet users believe that minorities in Turkey should not be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish. 69 percent of participants are concerned with the effects of censorship in Turkey. Likewise, 64 percent (unweighted) of all the respondents were concerned about their online activities being monitored by the government.

Despite being a polarized society with wildly differing attitudes and perspectives on the freedom of speech, there is an increasing consensus that they cannot rely on mainstream media outlets to exercise their right to access information.

However, the significant public support to media control might be helping to perpetuate the vicious cycle of the limited freedom of expression in Turkey. 50 percent (unweighted) of all our polled internet users believe that minorities in Turkey should not be allowed to broadcast in languages other than Turkish. Hence, in one of the most nationalist countries in Europe, the autocratic tendencies are not necessarily undemocratic or top-down.

As internet connectivity in the country rises, digital media is starting to dominate news consumption habits. Nevertheless, online bans and restrictions are shadowing the beacon of hope the internet could be in Turkey. The members of the public who do not support Mr. Erdoğan have overall pessimistic and cynical attitudes on media and freedom of speech.

On the other hand, Turkey is undergoing a major demographic transformation with the advent of a well-educated and digitally savvy younger generation. Thanks to this demographic window of opportunity and increasing digitization, many of the dynamics that strained democracy and freedoms in Turkey might dramatically change in the upcoming decades.

Nevertheless, the current gap between the socio-economic progress and the deterioration of the freedom of speech in Turkey in the last few decades remains baffling. As highlighted by our report, the difficulties people of Turkey experience in accessing information, the rising concerns over censorship, and challenging conditions for press workers cast a pessimistic shadow on public opinions.

⁵³ “Erdoğan says freedom of speech is ‘most important’ pillar of democracy,” *Yeni Şafak*, May 30, 2019, <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/world/erdogan-says-freedom-of-speech-most-important-pillar-of-democracy-3482312>



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