

ELECTORAL MANIPULATION STRATEGIES IN TURKEY DURING THE AKP RULE

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Abstract. This article analyses strategies of electoral manipulation employed by the regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey. Three long-term methods and three short-term methods are examined, the former being unequal access to resources, media and law, and the latter being election fraud, intimidation of opposition, and vote buying. The text argues that the Turkish government employs primarily long-term strategies, but short-term ones are also present and thus should not be ignored. State resources are being siphoned to municipalities controlled by AKP and regime-friendly businessmen who then provide donations and other favors for the party. State media and media regulators came under the regime's control, resulting in minimal coverage of the opposition in both public and most private media outlets. The takeover of the judiciary and vague definitions in the Anti-Terror law and other laws were used to suppress opposition politicians and journalists. It also allowed the regime to take control of bodies overseeing elections, leading to malpractice. Intimidation of opposition had a form of both legal prosecution and physical attacks and focused primarily on pro-Kurdish parties. Vote buying in Turkey seems mainly to be a form of rewarding voters of the ruling party, not an attempt to persuade swing voters.

Keywords: Turkey, Erdoğan, AKP, authoritarianism, electoral manipulation, repression, media, judiciary, electoral fraud

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1. Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power in Turkey in 2002. The party initially promised reforms and democratization, but gradually, its practices became increasingly autocratic. In the present day, Freedom House (2024) lists Turkey as a ‘not free’ country, and Turkey’s political system is categorized as a majoritarian democracy, personalized hybrid regime, competitive authoritarianism, or electoral authoritarianism (Kubicek 2016, Baykan 2024, Berk and Gümüşçü 2016, Sözen 2008). This regime dominated by President Erdoğan, his party, and their allies is characterized by an intensifying crackdown on civil society, academia, media, and political opposition. The current article employs a single case study approach (Gerring, 2017: 28) to examine the various strategies of electoral manipulation employed by Turkey’s government in order to stay in power, with the aim of understanding how they were implemented and how effective they were.

2. Electoral manipulation strategies

Electoral manipulation strategies are manipulative and repressive techniques used by incumbents in hybrid and authoritarian regimes to undermine democratic elections (Schedler 2013: 77). The selection of strategies analyzed in this article was based on the current state of theoretical knowledge. They can be distinguished into long-term and short-term strategies. Long-term strategies are usually subtle, while short-term ones are usually the incumbent’s reactions to the current political situation, and their impact is obvious and immediate.

The former group was outlined by Levitsky and Way (2010: 9-12) in their extensive study of democratic, authoritarian, and hybrid regimes and democratization in the post-Cold War period. It comprises restricted access to resources (the incumbents use state resources for their benefit and to gain influence in the private sector while denying resources to the opposition); restricted access to media (limited access and biased reporting in both state and private media); and restricted access to law. These strategies aim to create an uneven playing field, meaning that 1) the state institutions are widely abused for partisan ends by the incumbent; 2) incumbents are thus systematically favored at the expense of the opposition; and 3) the opposition’s ability to organize and compete in the election is severely handicapped.

The latter group consists of election fraud (a situation when the administration of elections is biased in favor of the incumbent, allowing various forms of electoral malpractice), intimidation of opposition (criminalization of the opposition politicians, as well as physical attacks and harassment), and vote buying (‘persuading’ voters with gifts and financial rewards). These strategies have a direct impact on elections but are usually used alongside other long-term strategies (Schedler 2013: 99, Simpser 2013: 27-29, Schedler 2002: 41-46, van Ham and Lindberg 2015: 525).

3. Access to resources

AKP's control of public funds and government institutions also facilitates access to private resources. More than 20 years in power allowed the party to create a vast network of patronage and friendly companies that challenged the traditional dominance of secular businessmen. While corruption and clientelism have always been present in Turkey, under AKP, it reached new levels, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Erdoğan's regime privatized public assets worth 62 billion USD and made numerous amendments to the public procurement law that expanded the executive's control over the public procurement system. The government was given the power to negotiate contracts directly and in privacy without opening them to public bidding or external auditing. Thus, it could distribute the state's financial resources to its network of dependent companies, primarily in the construction, energy, and defense sectors (Tahiroğlu 2022: 3-5). The list of AKP-related enterprises is long, however, five companies in particular, profiting off rigged public procurements and tax evasion stand out – Kaylon Group, Cengiz Holding, Kolin Construction, Limak Holding, and MNG Holding. These conglomerates thus earned a nickname – *beşli çete*, or “*The Gang of Five*” (Yıldız 2021). In exchange for a steady stream of revenue from state contracts and protection from the state's regulatory agencies and law enforcement, these businesspeople help AKP remain in power through various means. Some own large media companies who then act as pro-government propagandists (see Chapter 4), and others are accused of planting stories and bribing journalists to push the pro-government narrative. Those without influence in the media sector contribute to the party's efforts by making financial and material donations to AKP itself, its local branches, Erdoğan's presidential campaign, or to some of the charities, schools, and non-governmental organizations linked to the ruling party. They also employ members of AKP in their businesses, mobilize other employees to attend pro-government rallies, and press them to vote for AKP – some construction companies allegedly forced their workers to take photos of their ballot before casting the vote and threatened them with dismissal should they be unable to provide evidence that they voted AKP (Arslantaş and Arslantaş 2020: 8).

A study by Cammett and Luca (2018) shows that Erdoğan's regime utilized strongly centralized public finances to manage and target public resources provided to local administration. Provinces where the support for the AKP was high received significantly higher financial support, primarily in the form of subsidies for private companies and investments in the education sector. In contested provinces, the government spent more on infrastructure investments. On the other hand, provinces whose population supported opposition parties received the lowest amount of spending from the central government in most of the budget categories. These policies aim to reward support for AKP in its strongholds via subsidies and facilitate socialization efforts through spending on education; to improve the government's image in contested provinces via the development of infrastructure; and punish opposition strongholds by diverting resources from them. The latter tactic was employed openly by Erdoğan during the campaign before the March 2024 local

elections. The President urged the voters in the Hatay province, devastated by the February 2023 earthquakes, to vote for the ruling party if they want to receive full support from the central government (Duvar English 2024c).

Moreover, provincial governors (local officials appointed by the government) distributed goods on behalf of the AKP government and took part in the electoral campaign on behalf of the ruling party during official functions in both the 2015 and 2018 elections (Esen and Gumuscu 2015, Evrensel 2018). Following the devastating February 2023 earthquake, some governors and municipalities controlled by AKP intervened in the distribution of aid to the victims in order to promote the ruling party. The delivery of the aid was either delayed, or the aid was rebranded as an election giveaway by an AKP-controlled municipality (Duvar English 2023, Turkish Minute 2024a).

AKP also abused its access to the state databases and sent personal letters to specific segments of population, such as first-time voters and Turks living abroad. The party's penetration of the state administration also manifested in numerous cases of public employees removing opposition campaign posters, confiscation of propaganda materials belonging to the opposition parties, and banning of opposition rallies in towns and city districts by local authorities that were under the control of the AKP (Esen and Gumuscu 2016: 1587-1588).

The OSCE observation reports on Turkish elections show that beginning with the August 2014 presidential elections, Erdoğan and other AKP officials began appearing at public events during election campaigns, basically turning them into pro-government rallies. Similarly, inaugurations of large infrastructure projects were also incorporated into AKP's campaigning, often breaching Article 64 of the Basic Law stating that during the last ten days of the electoral campaign, it is forbidden to organize ceremonies and make speeches related to previous works and services performed by public institutions (OSCE 2014: 13, OSCE 2018: 15, 16, OSCE 2023: 18). President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, for example, had speeches at the celebrations of the anniversary of the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul (organized by the Istanbul municipality) in May 2015 (Berk and Gümüüşcü 2016: 1589). Saturday prayers in the Istanbul Hagia Sophia Grand Mosque just one day before the May 2023 Presidential and Parliamentary elections were led by Erdoğan (France24 2023). Such events allowed AKP to conduct the electoral campaign and boost its visibility at the taxpayer's expense.

In March 2015, the Turkish Parliament approved the establishment of the Confidential Service Spending, or the 'discretionary fund' item in the government's budget. This fund is at the disposal of President Erdoğan and can be used as he sees fit – intelligence and security services, political, social, and cultural purposes, or extraordinary services. The fund does not have any administrative or legal oversight (Middle East Eye 2015). Although details on how the funds are spent have never been made public, opposition lawmakers point to spikes in spending before elections take place, suggesting that the Presidency is misusing the allocated budget for election campaigning (Duvar English 2024a).

4. Access to media

The state-owned Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (*Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyon Kurumu*, TRT) is the national public broadcaster founded in 1964. Although it was expected to act impartially, the TV stations and radio channels comprising TRT have always been criticized for presenting only the position of the government. TRT is funded by both public and commercial revenues. The public sources of finance comprise a broadcasting fee from the sale of television, radio, music sets, and other electronic devices; a 2% of the electricity bills paid by consumers; and a share allocated from the state budget. Changes to the Radio and Television Law (No. 2954) adopted in 2008 centralized the TRT's structure, and removed the representatives of academia, professional organizations, and non-governmental organizations from its board of directors (Tunç 2015: 2-3). The Presidential decree 2018/2 placed the control of TRT under the Directorate of Communications of the Presidency. Another presidential decree adopted in July 2021 replaced the entire TRT board of directors. Mehmed Sabı Sobacı who became the new director general of the TRT is a former employee at the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (*Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, SETA), a pro-government think-tank (Media Ownership Monitor 2021b).

During the campaign before the June 2015 parliamentary elections, 46% of the *TRT 1* channel's airtime was dedicated to AKP (excluding the airtime dedicated to President Erdoğan himself, Kox 2015); this trend continued also into the early elections in November of that year (Baser and Öztürk 2015). Before the June 2018 Presidential elections, TRT devoted 67 hours of airtime to Erdoğan, while the opposition candidate, Muharrem İnce, received only 7 hours (Toksabay and Kucukgocmen 2018). The ratio changed even more in favor of Erdoğan before the May 2023 elections – Erdoğan benefited from 32 hours of airtime, while his opponent, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, only from 32 minutes (Serhan 2023). Between the 1st of January and the 10th of February 2024, TRT's *Haber TV* channel provided 1945 minutes to mayoral candidates of AKP, while Özgür Özel, Chairman of the main opposition party CHP, received only 25 minutes in the run-up to the March 2024 municipal elections (Turkish Minute 2024c).

Turkey transitioned to a liberalized market economy in the 1990s, prompting the expansion of the private media sector. However, it quickly became characterized by clientelism and cross-ownership. Media ownership became viewed as an instrument and bargaining tool for securing investment and favors in other economic sectors such as construction, telecommunications, energy, etc. and acquiring political influence. Media power became one of the tools used to put pressure on politicians and acquire lucrative contracts (Yanatma 2021).

During the 1990s, when Turkey was ruled by unstable coalition governments, four large industrial conglomerates – Doğan Holding, Çukurova Holding, Bilgin Holding, and Uzan Group, dominated the private media landscape. For example, by the time AKP came to power in 2002, Doğan, Çukurova, and Bilgin owned 84% of daily newspapers. However, AKP actively intervened in the media sector in order

to undermine their position. Media outlets and companies owned by conglomerates sympathetic to Turkish opposition, such as Doğan Holding, Koç Holding, and Boydak Holding, were subjected to tax audits and considerable fines. Then, the government utilized The Savings and Deposits Insurance Fund (*Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu*, TMSF), an agency established for collecting debts of bankrupt banks and companies, to confiscate the media outlets owned by the Çukurova, Uzan, Bilgin, and other holdings, and facilitate the transfer of media ownership to pro-government businessmen (Ibid.). Doğan Holding was pressured to sell two of its prestigious newspapers, *Milliyet* and *Vatan*, in 2011 to pay a 1 billion USD fine, and in March 2018, it was forced to sell all its media outlets to the pro-government conglomerate Demirören Holding (The Times of Israel 2018). During the AKP reign, six conglomerates emerged as the major owners of radio, television, newspaper, and online outlets who also happen to profit off winning public procurements: Kalyon Group, Demirören Holding, Doğu Group, Ciner Yayın Holding, Albayrak Yayın Holding, and İlhas Holding (Media Ownership Monitor 2021a). Kalyon Group, one of “The Gang of Five”, founded Zivre Holding in 2013 as its media branch. It owns 5 newspapers, including *Sabah*, *Yeni Asir*, and *Takvim*, 15 magazines, 4 TV stations, including *ATV* and *A Haber*, 6 radio stations, and 4 online news portals. Demirören Group owns 3 newspapers (*Hürriyet*, *Posta*, and *Milliyet*), 2 TV channels (*Kanal D* and *CNN Türk*), and the *DHA* news agency. Doğu Group established the Doğu Yayın Grubu as its media branch back in 1999. It comprises 4 television stations (including *NTV*, *CNBC-e* and *Star TV*), 7 online portals, 4 radio stations, and 3 licensed monthly magazines. Ciner Yayın Holding established the Ciner Yayın Yatırımları as its media branch. It owns the online portal *HaberTürk* (formerly a newspaper), 3 TV channels (*HaberTürk TV*, *Show TV*, and *Bloomberg TV*), and 2 radios. Albayrak Yayın Holding owns the *Yeni Şafak* newspaper, 7 magazines, 2 television channels, and 5 online news portals. Finally, İlhas Holding owns the *Türkiye* newspaper, the *IHA* news agency, 2 TV stations, and several internet news portals (Media Ownership Monitor 2021a). In total, Reporters Without Borders (2021) estimate that pro-government conglomerates control about 90% of Turkish media outlets. This transformation of the media sector in Turkey is a result of not only targeted fines and confiscations but also credits from state banks for friendly businessmen and awarding lucrative public tenders from the government in exchange for investments in pro-government media.

Similarly, to the state-owned television and radio, the dominance of the private media sector by pro-government conglomerates had an impact on the coverage of political parties in private outlets. In 2002, the visibility of AKP and CHP on television was more or less similar. In 2011, AKP received 50% more coverage than the opposition, and in 2015, it received 4,5 times more visibility (Yıldırım et al. 2020). Another study showed that before the 2015 elections, pro-government TV stations such as *NTV* and *ATV* dedicated one-third of their live coverage to the AKP, while the opposition received only a fraction. *CNN Türk* (at the time still belonging to the Doğan Holding) provided greater access to the opposition parties (Kox 2015).

Politicized access to media and resources is reflected also in the volume of political advertisements. Obviously, the majority of political ads during the 2015

elections campaign belonged to the AKP, while the main opposition party, CHP, had only 19%. AKP was the only political party that was allowed to advertise on *ATV*, a TV station owned by Kalyon Group. The party also owned 91% of political ads broadcasted by the state-run *TRT* (Ibid.).

Private media outlets that retained independence are under tight scrutiny by state regulators, particularly the Radio and Television Supreme Council (*Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu*, RTÜK) and the Press Advertisement Agency (*Basın İlan Kurumu*, BİK). RTÜK is a regulatory body tasked with overseeing radio and television broadcasts. In practice, however, it became a tool for the government to suppress dissent and maintain a favorable media environment for the ruling party, primarily through imposing fines, suspensions, and broadcast bans on non-compliant outlets. The council's nine members are selected by the parliament, and there is a quota system ensuring proportional representation of political parties in the council according to the number of their MPs, meaning that the Council is dominated by AKP. Major independent news channels such as *Halk TV*, *Tele 1*, and *Fox TV* have faced substantial fines and broadcast bans for airing content critical of the government or for providing a platform to opposition voices. Surges in issued fines and suspensions coincide with elections, ensuring that independent media cannot cover or influence public perception during these crucial periods (Demir 2024). The Press Advertising Agency is responsible for the fair distribution of public advertisements to newspapers. Under AKP, BİK's allocation of ads became highly selective. Media outlets aligned with the government often receive a disproportionate share of public advertisements. BİK's powers were misused to punish opposition outlets by revoking newspaper's rights to receive public ads, thus reducing their revenue (Yanatma 2021: 10-14).

Over time, social media in Turkey also gradually came under tighter control of the state. The Internet Law adopted in 2007 (Law No. 5651) was the first Internet-specific regulation in Turkey. While it defined important concepts related to internet governance and provided a list of 'internet' crimes, it also established the legal framework for banning websites. The Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (*Telekomünikasyon İletişim Başkanlığı*, TIB) was created as a state authority as the organization responsible for monitoring internet content and executing blocking orders issued by judges and public prosecutors (Coskun 2021). Until 2013, the law was used primarily to block YouTube and *Eksi Sözlük*, a popular Turkish social networking site. After the eruption of the Gezi Park protests in May 2013 and revelation of a corruption scandal involving the highest Turkish government officials, Erdoğan's regime realized that it needed a higher degree of control over the flow of information on the Internet. Between 2007 and 2024, the Internet Law was changed 14 times (Topçu 2024). The first amendment was introduced in February 2014 and allowed the TIB to block websites without seeking a court order ruling. While the change was justified by protecting the honor of individuals against disinformation on the Internet, in reality, it was used to block access to information about the corruption scandal. Additionally, the law now forced internet providers to store data on web users' activities for two years and provide it to the authorities when

requested. In 2014, an amendment to the Internet Law gave the Prime Minister, as well as Cabinet ministers, the authority to either ban a website or have specific content removed. The TIB would also be able to block access to the whole website if problematic content was not removed within four hours after a request from the TIB (Coskun 2021).

Following the 2016 coup attempt, the Erdoğan regime's grip on the media and the Internet tightened further. An emergency decree issued by the Presidency dissolved the TIB due to the presence of the members of the Gülen Movement (a religious congregation blamed for the coup attempt) in its leadership. Its powers were transferred to the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (*Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu, BTK*) and strengthened further. Other emergency decrees gave the Police access to the personal information of Internet users (Ibid.). In July 2020, amendments to the Internet Law obliged social media companies with more than 1 million daily users in Turkey to appoint a permanent representative with an office in the country who will act as a contact person for Turkish state authorities. These offices would then implement requests of BTK to block or remove content hosted on their platform. Furthermore, social media companies are now obliged to store user data in Turkey, meaning that Turkish authorities will have easier access to them. Gradually, all major international social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok, etc., complied with the new legislation due to the threats of substantial fines, advertising bans, and reduction of bandwidth (ARTICLE 19 2022). The latest tightening of screws came in October 2022, when the Turkish Parliament adopted amendments to several laws, including the Turkish Penal Code, the Internet Law and the Press Law. This so-called "Disinformation Law" defined the offence of 'publicly disseminating misleading information' under Article 217/A of the Turkish Penal Code (European Centre for Press and Media Freedom 2023). It imposed strict penalties of 1 to 3 years of imprisonment on anyone disseminating misleading or "untrue information concerning the internal and external security ... of the country." The formulation was deliberately vague so that the law could be applied broadly (Topçu 2024).

Following the October 2022 amendment of the Internet law, there are 25 state institutions authorized to issue or request blocking access to webpages, from the Presidency, the RTÜK, the BTK, or some Ministries, to the Directorate of Religious Affairs, Turkish Football Federation, and Jockey Club of Turkey (Akdeniz and Güven 2023: 4-9). Turkish authorities do not publish statistical data on blocked websites, making it hard to assess the impacts of internet censorship. According to a report by the Turkish Freedom of Expression Association, the number of blocked websites and domain names is 40 in 2007, 1017 in 2008, 5150 in 2009, 1733 in 2010, 7493 in 2011, 8701 in 2012, 19 732 in 2013, 38 441 in 2014, 34 941 in 2015, 34 941 in 2015, 44 960 in 2016, 90 056 in 2017, 94 601 in 2018, 61 383 in 2019, 58 872 in 2020, 107 714 in 2021, and 137 717 in 2022. The total number thus reaches 712 558, with 44 535 blocked websites annually (although it is obvious that there has been a considerable increase in the volume of blocked content after 2013). Aside from webpage URLs, profiles and content on social media sites Facebook, Instagram,

YouTube, or Twitter are also blocked under Law No. 5651 (Ibid. 144-152).

Finally, the Erdoğan regime employs online trolls to influence the discourse on social media. The so-called ‘AK trolls’ were created in response to the May 2013 Gezi Park protests, during which social media played a crucial role as a communication platform and organizing tool. A hacked email published by a hacker group Red Hack in 2016 revealed that Erdoğan charged his son-in-law, Berat Albayrak, with the task of creating a group consisting of programmers, graphic designers, and former members of the military trained in psychological warfare that would undermine the criticism of AKP government on social media. Initially, the trolls would be primarily bots active on Twitter that shared computer-generated content alongside hashtags that praised Erdoğan and his policies. Over time, the operation grew in both scope and complexity. Aside from bots, astroturf accounts and ‘retweet rings’. In June 2020, Twitter announced that it was suspending 7340 fake accounts that had shared over 37 million tweets from the platform. While this step dealt a blow to the AK trolls, their activities continue to this day. Most recently, so-called ‘influencer trolls’ emerged. They act as pro-government opinion leaders and often utilize fake followers to reach huge number of people (Akiş 2022). AK trolls used various tactics in cyberspace – bullying of government critics, spreading disinformation about opposition politicians or movements, and hacking and defacing social media accounts belonging to the government opponents. Topics that drew the trolls’ attention were primarily Turkey’s ‘culture wars’ – for example the campaign against gender equality and LGBT rights, Syrian refugees, the Gülen Movement, and other former allies of Erdoğan, and stoked the anti-Western sentiment (Saka 2021: 244-251).

5. Access to law

Although the 1982 constitution stipulated a parliamentary system, it also gave the presidency appointment powers to the Constitutional Court and the Council of State (the highest administrative court of Turkey). This allowed AKP to extend its power beyond the legislative and executive branches into the judiciary. The 2010 constitutional amendments included several democratizing measures, but in the case of the judiciary, it strengthened the executive’s influence over the Constitutional Court, as well as the High Council of Judges and Prosecutors (*Hâkimler ve Savcılar Yüksek Kurulu*, HSYK), an institution that controls appointments and promotions, as well as disciplinary mechanisms in the judiciary (Sözen 2020). The power of military courts was reduced, and the number of the members of the Constitutional Court was increased from 11 to 17, three of which were to be chosen by the Parliament (dominated by AKP). A 12-year term limit was also introduced for the Constitutional Court members, and individual applications to the Constitutional Court were made possible. The number of HSYK members was expanded from 7 to 22, and they would be elected by first-degree judges, public prosecutors, and members of the Justice Academy. This meant that HSYK would have seats for the first category judges and prosecutors, who would have majority control over members of the high

judiciary. In short, the 2010 constitutional amendments increased the size of these judicial bodies, revised their selection criteria, and enlarged the pool of candidates to alter the existing judicial hierarchy (Esen 2024: 10-11). Erdoğan was thus able to fill its ranks with people loyal to AKP, or its then-ally Movement of Fethullah Gülen. After the alliance with the Gülenists fell apart in 2013, they were purged from the judiciary and other state institutions (Castaldo 2018: 480). In 2014, amendments to Law No. 6087 on the Council of Judges and Prosecutors significantly increased the government's grip on the HSYK as it gave the Minister of Justice the power to reorganize its chambers. Furthermore, a huge number of anti-government judges and prosecutors were forcibly transferred to less-sensitive posts and replaced with pro-AKP cadres (Özbudun 2015: 46-48). HSYK also abused its authority to transfer judicial officials to new places of employment against their will. Thousands of judges and prosecutors who ruled against the government agenda were transferred to economically underdeveloped regions, away from their families, as a form of punishment and intimidation. The government also restructured the judiciary by establishing new bodies, such as the regional appeals courts and changing the size of the high courts in order to fill them with loyalists. In 2016, the number of members of the Court of Cassation and the State Council was cut in half, resulting in the dismissal of several senior judges. Following the unsuccessful coup attempt, tens of thousands of police and military officers, as well as public officials, were purged due to their alleged ties to the Gülen Movement. These included about 5000 judges and prosecutors, 2 members of the Constitutional Court, and 5 members of HSYK. Once again, empty positions were filled by pro-government loyalists. The only judicial body that maintained relative independence, even after the July 2016 coup and subsequent purges, was the Constitutional Court (Esen 2024: 13-14).

The takeover of the judiciary meant that it became another tool to suppress and intimidate the opposition via various legal mechanisms. Laws such as the Anti-Terror Law (Law No. 3713) and related provisions in the Penal Code contain broad and ambiguous definitions of terrorism and related offenses, which the government exploits to equate journalistic activities with terrorist propaganda. The vagueness of these laws enables the prosecution of journalists on tenuous grounds (International Press Institute. 2019: 5-13). Defamation and libel laws (Article 125 of the Turkish Penal Code), alongside laws criminalizing insulting the President of Turkey (Article 299), officials of Turkish state institutions (Article 301), and inciting religious or racial hatred (Article 312) also constitute a significant tool for silencing opposition politicians, journalists, and civil society in general. While there were 682 insult cases in 2014 when Erdoğan became the President, their number grew to 38 254 in just two years (Ibid. 13). By 2020, more than 160 000 investigations into alleged insults against the President were launched, nearly 39 000 people stood trial, and sentences including prison terms and bans on political activity were handed down in nearly 13 000 cases (Topcu 2020). Broadly defined anti-terror legislation allows the government to conflate journalism it considers favorable to banned groups with membership in terrorist organizations. As a result, dozens of opposition-leaning journalists were imprisoned and for years, Turkey has been among the countries

with the highest number of imprisoned journalists. Although by 2023, their number dropped significantly to just 13, there are 200 more who are under investigation or awaiting trial (Öğret 2024).

6. Electoral fraud

Elections in Turkey are overseen by the Supreme Election Council (*Yüksek Seçim Kurulu*, YSK), a body responsible for conducting elections, investigating irregularities, complaints, and objections, and deciding on them (Bozkurt 2023: 2). Its members are selected by the Supreme Court and the Council of State. The 2010 constitutional amendments increased the government's influence on its composition (Esen and Gumuscu 2016: 1586). Further changes were made in 2022 – instead of seniority, judges who are to be members of the YSK are supposed to be selected by lottery. This played into the hands of AKP, as by this time, the judiciary was mostly under the party's firm control. Since in 2020, nearly half of the 21 000 judges had less than 3 years or less of experience, they would not have been eligible to become YSK members. Switching the selection system to a lottery thus increased the probability that pro-AKP judges would be chosen (Schenkkan and Garipoglu 2023).

Eroding the independence of the YSK resulted in numerous rulings in favor of the AKP and its leader. Erdoğan was elected President in the August 2014 elections. Although the Turkish Constitution stipulated that the President should sever any ties with political parties and be impartial (Köker 2015), Erdoğan held rallies in the run-up to the June 2015 general elections under the guise of opening large construction projects. The complaints filed by the opposition parties were rejected by the Supreme Electoral Council and thus the President was able to contribute to AKP's election campaign (Yılmaz 2015). In May 2019, YSK annulled the results of local elections in Istanbul due to the alleged insufficient numbers of state officials in electoral commissions. This happened after AKP lost the prestigious post of Istanbul's mayor to the candidate of the main opposition party Ekrem İmamoğlu (Daily Sabah 2019). The body regularly rejects complaints of election fraud and requests for the recount of votes filed by the opposition while approving requests submitted by the AKP (Jones 2014, Sharma 2017) (Turkish Minute 2024b). According to the opposition, fraudulent practices in the May 2023 presidential and parliamentary elections comprised manipulation of vote counting and incorrectly recorded ballot box results in the YSK databases (Turkish Minute 2023a). In their forensic analysis of the 2023 presidential elections, Klimek, Aykaç, and Thurner (2023: 11-13) discovered statistical irregularities in favor of President Erdoğan. However, while in 2023, 2.4% of electoral units and 1.9% of electoral units may have been affected in the first and second rounds respectively, it is a significant decrease in comparison to the 2018 elections, when it was estimated that 8.5% of electoral units were affected. These shifts amounted to approximately 0.64% additional votes for Erdoğan which is much lower than the margin by which he defeated Kılıçdaroğlu (4.36%). Thus, the authors conclude that while electoral malpractices did occur, they ultimately did not impact

the result of the presidential elections.

According to Turkish law, members of the armed forces and security are allowed to vote in the local elections in the municipality where they are deployed, even if they are not registered locally. According to the opposition, about 47 000 soldiers and policemen deployed in the Kurdish-dominated southeastern provinces of Turkey cast their votes in the latest local election, leading to the loss of 2 provinces and some districts to the ruling coalition by a narrow margin (Mourenza 2024).

7. Intimidation of opposition

Politicized judiciary and security apparatus have been used by the AKP government to suppress the People's Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, HDP), a leftist pro-Kurdish political party that dominates Turkey's Southeast where Kurds comprise the majority of the population. The government accused HDP of having ties to the PKK and thus was able to submit the party's supporters, members, staff, and elected officials to anti-terrorism investigations. Between July 2015 and March 2018, more than 11 600 members of HDP were detained, and more than 3300 were arrested (Ahval News 2018), and arrests of the party's members continue until the present day (Bianet 2023). In May 2016, the Turkish Parliament adopted an amendment to the constitution that enabled the lifting immunity of MPs who are under criminal investigation. Subsequently, 40 MPs belonging to the HDP had their legislative immunity removed, and several of them, including co-chairs Selahattin Demirtaş and Figen Yüksekdağ, were put on trial on terrorism-related charges (Bianet 2022). Since then, several more lawmakers from HDP, as well as other opposition parties, have been threatened with the removal of immunity (Turkish Minute 2023b, Duvar English 2024d). Unable to succeed in local elections in the Southeast due to the predominance of the Kurdish population supporting HDP, the Turkish government began a policy of removing elected mayors belonging to HDP and replacing them with government-appointed trustees as a counterterrorism measure due to alleged funneling of municipal funds to the PKK. While in 2016, only a few mayors were replaced in this manner, following the March 2019 local elections, 48 of the 65 municipalities won by HDP had their mayors removed (Duvar English 2020). Following the March 2024 local election, only one mayor belonging to the People's Equality and Democracy Party (*Halkların Eşitlik ve Demokrasi Partisi*, DEM – a successor to HDP) was removed and replaced with a trustee (Duvar English 2024b). Finally, in March 2021, a lawsuit was filed by the state prosecutor demanding the closure of HDP and a ban on political activity for 687 of its members due to the party's alleged ties to PKK (Jenkins 2021). Although the trial is still ongoing, this move by Erdoğan's regime forced HDP's candidates to run under the Green Left Party list (People's Democratic Party 2023).

Aside from judicial abuse, the Turkish opposition has been subjected to violence as well. Offices belonging to HDP were vandalized on numerous occasions and during one such assault, a party member was killed (Shakir 2023). Attacks on other

opposition parties do occur (Al-Jazeera 2023, Daily Sabah 2023), but are much rarer. Despite the leniency of Turkey's authorities towards the perpetrators (Dri 2022), there is no evidence that these attacks are coordinated by the government. Media and journalists critical of the government are also targets of physical attacks (Buyuk 2023). In March 2015, a group of mobsters attacked the offices of the opposition newspaper *Hürriyet*, acting allegedly on the request of the AKP. This was pressure tactics aiming to facilitate the newspaper's sale to the pro-government Demirören Holding (Bianet 2021).

8. Vote buying

Vote buying means that individuals exchange their votes for money and/or other kinds of benefits. A study of the 2011 parliamentary elections has shown that in the case of Turkey, approximately one-third of the population was targeted with vote buying, usually less educated and urban people. The authors, however, conclude that AKP primarily targeted its supporters instead of swing voters (Çarkoğlu and Aytaç 2014: 562-564). This suggests that the phenomenon of vote buying is rather a form of redistribution of resources by the incumbents (see Chapter 3), and its role as a short-term electoral manipulation strategy is limited.

9. Conclusion

The main goal of this article was to analyze electoral manipulation strategies applied by the regime of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It employs both long-term and short-term methods of influencing elections, with the former being prominent. This may be explained by the fact that Turkey is still a candidate member of the European Union, a member of NATO, and its economic ties are primarily with Western countries, despite attempts of Turkey's government to lower its economic dependence on the West via development of domestic industries and deepening commercial ties with Russia or China and other countries who are not deeply concerned with the state of Turkey's democracy (Yılmaz 2022).

Long-term strategies are gradual and subtler and thus create less backlash, both domestically and abroad. Once it came to power, AKP gained access to public resources and began siphoning them to friendly businessmen. In exchange, these companies donated money directly to the party or organizations linked to it and pressured their employees to vote for AKP. Furthermore, the party changed the distribution of financial support to local administrative units in order to 'reward' those who came under AKP's control, deprive those under the control of opposition of finances, and improve the image of the government in 'swing' provinces by investing in infrastructure. Erdoğan and other figures of the party incorporated public events and opening ceremonies of large infrastructure projects into their election campaigns. Finally, there is a strong suspicion that the Presidential office funds are being spent on election campaigns. In the media sector, AKP turned

the state television and radio into propaganda outlets as it gradually reduced the airtime dedicated to opposition parties and candidates to a minimum. Alliance with large holdings allowed Erdoğan to dominate private media as well – the inflow of capital and support of state institutions allowed them to gain control of the absolute majority of radio, television, newspaper, and online outlets. Media who retained independence are under the scrutiny of state regulatory bodies who issue frequent fines and broadcast bans. Over time, online space also became tightly controlled by the state authorities. Fearing that it may serve as an alternative source of information and mobilization platform for the opposition, the Turkish government strengthened powers of the internet regulators. Website bans and removal of content from social media became a norm; the state also gained access to user data and even employed armies of online trolls to spin the narrative. The final long-term manipulation strategy employed was the takeover of the judiciary – the government gained control over the Constitutional Court, the State Council, and HSYK and established several new judicial bodies which allowed it to fill this branch with loyalists. Then, laws with broad and ambiguous definitions such as the Anti-Terror Law, or Defamation Law, as well as the criminalization of insulting the President of Turkey and state officials, were abused to prosecute opposition journalists, academics, politicians, and even ordinary people. Control over the judiciary, media sector, and to a lesser extent, state resources was achieved primarily via amendments of various laws such as the law on HSYK, the Internet Law, or the Public Procurement law. Equally important were the constitutional amendments adopted in 2010, the state of emergency declared after the July 2016 coup attempt that allowed the Council of Ministers led by the President to issue decrees (Yildiz 2019), and finally switch to the Presidential system following the 2017 referendum. All these milestones strengthened the influence of the executive on the other branches of government (particularly the judiciary, as the AKP had a majority in Parliament ever since it came to power in 2002).

Short-term strategies were employed by Erdoğan's regime as well. Control of the judiciary made both election fraud and intimidation of the opposition possible. In the former case, AKP-appointed judges dominated the YSK, who then made several decisions in favor of the ruling party – it allowed President Erdoğan to conduct a campaign despite the impartiality prescribed by the constitution, allowed unstamped ballots to be counted as valid during the 2017 constitutional referendum, cancelled the results of May 2019 local election in Istanbul, and finally rejected complains filed by the opposition regarding alleged manipulation of vote counting, incorrectly recorded ballots, and other malpractices. In the latter case, the judiciary was used to systematically disrupt the activity of pro-Kurdish party HDP and sabotage any open cooperation with other opposition parties who did not want to be associated with alleged supporters of Kurdish militants against whom the Turkish state has been struggling for decades (Coskun and Butler 2023). Thousands of its members, including MPs, were investigated and arrested, elected mayors were removed and replaced with government loyalists, and the party itself was threatened with a political ban. Although the remaining members of HDP regrouped under the banner of a new party, the regime may employ this or a similar strategy against it as well. HDP,

and to a lesser extent, other opposition parties are also targeted directly by violent attacks on their members and offices. These incidents are, however, isolated and do not appear to be organized by the government, although the attitude of the state apparatus towards them seems to be lenient. It should also be noted that persecution of HDP can be considered a continuation of policies of the Turkish state towards pro-Kurdish parties as predecessors of HDP, such as BDP, DTP, and DEHAP, also faced arrests of members and political bans (Medya News 2023). Finally, instances of vote buying appear to be present in Turkey, however, the author was not able to find detailed information on this strategy of electoral manipulation. Çarkoğlu and Aytaç (2014) concluded that vote buying in the case of Turkey was rather a strategy of distribution of rewards to government supporters rather than an effort to convince susceptible voters.

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