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Information Warfare and Media Control: The case of Turkey

This paper examines the role of mainstream and social media within the context of information warfare, which is utilised by authoritarian regimes to intimidate their adversaries and manipulate international public opinion through elaborate disinformation campaigns. The first part presents the wider impact caused by the control of public and social media by president Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s government and its influence on the suppression of freedom of expression and the crushing of opposition and dissent in Turkey. The second part focuses on the information operations carried out by the Turkish state and affiliated instruments against EU members Greece and Cyprus, that, on one hand, seek to project, locally and internationally, the alleged legitimacy of arbitrary Turkish narratives and, on the other hand, intimidate the two states and misinform the international community. It also examines the utilization of Turkish TV series and documentaries as propaganda tools, both for internal consumption as well as the projection of Ankara’s neo-Ottoman perception of a regional power with global impact.

Within a political marketing and communication context, mainstream media may be said to include electronic outlets, such as television and radio broadcasts, World Wide Web (W3) platforms and printed sources such as newspapers and magazines, while the social media include online web sites and applications like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and

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LinkedIn, to name but a few. Admittedly, communications happen to be instantaneous and

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realities. In both post-Ottoman periods – Kemalist (1923-2002) and Islamic (2002-present) – public information was used, by the Turkish governments, for the promotion of a strong national identity, rich in ethnic pride, and as a misinformation/disinformation tool for the conditioning of the international community about Turkish national interests and geopolitical



the suffocating governmental control over the Internet and the social media, over time strangled all forms of freedom of speech and public dissent in Turkish society. Members of the political opposition, many journalists and editors, hundreds of civilians and government employees, were imprisoned under contentious anti-terrorist legislation. In 2017, the Turkish state prohibited access to Wikipedia’s website, while, according to a 2018 report by the Turkish Freedom of Expression Association, it blocked 408.494 websites, about 7.000 Twitter accounts, 40.000 tweets, 10.000 YouTube videos and 6.200 Facebook posts. In 2020, the Turkish parliament approved a law on the strict regulation of the Internet and social media, aimed at strengthening absolute state control over Internet platforms and users’ personal data in Turkey. Thus, the television turned into the most influential medium in Turkey, especially for people over 35, while the acquisition of CNN Turk in 2018, by a businessman-friend of Erdogan, has established state control on almost all television organizations.

The gradual fall of main television stations and broadcast outlets to pro-government hands and the state control of the Internet provide significant benefits to the AKP government. Ensuring the absolute domination in the producsigni.8 (dom2267lm2267l(stations)-1ciGal)-127.9 (of

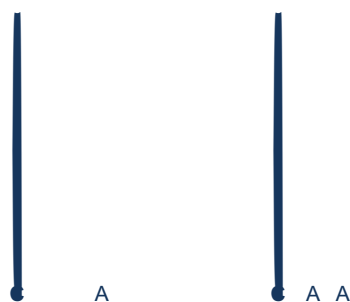


explosion, in a special edition of the *Istanbul Ekspres* newspaper, which set off the pogrom against the Greeks of Constantinople on 6-7 September 1955.

In the last decade, the targeted channeling of fabricated “news” – falsified, distorted or fake – through state and privately-controlled mass media organizations, reproduced by foreign, often pro-Turkish, news outlets, has systematically turned against Greece and Cyprus. A characteristic example pertains to Ankara’s attempt to disguise its instrumentalization of illegal migrants against Greece, during the pre-planned Evros crisis in March 2020. The Turkish effort focused on discrediting Greece – especially after its successful repulse of multiple forced entry attacks by thousands of irregular migrants that were allegedly instigated by the Turkish authorities – with an elaborate disinformation campaign launched against Athens; it included fake news about the alleged abuse and murder of migrants in Evros river as well as falsified accusations regarding alleged pushbacks of illegal migrants in the Aegean islands.

Turkish information warfare operations also aim at provoking fear, insecurity and panic in Greece and Cyprus, to undermine the morale of the two societies and the determination of their politico-military leaderships to address effectively Turkish provocations. Ankara is using its hard power, as well as the size of the country and its population, to intimidate its perceived opponents, who live in a state of permanent uncertainty. It is worth noting that the creation of an atmosphere of fear, has been used for decades in order to justify war or even terrorist acts. Surprisingly, Turkish information warfare actions are amplified by the media in Greece and Cyprus, which re-generate, often with exaggerations, anything that is broadcast in Turkey, failing to filter the validity and truthfulness of the “news”, artfully cultivated by

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S e V J , !"#%#6"&, -4 : \$.2\$; &)&4)' . < "#\$! "#\$! 1' (-4"\$@.G'. : \$.2\$5#<)# : A#"\$QRS:\$TUVV\$&&, 8\$) "#9#4)'16)-. , \$.2\$)"#L'##(\$; . : : 1, -)7\$, \$4)&, A1/(Ne Y , NY: G ee W , 2005).
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Ankara, either officially through state instruments or unofficially by affiliated organisations inspired by nationalistic zeal.

One such example regards a major article by pro-Erdogan daily *Yeni Safak*, in August 2018, which stressed the alleged need to create an independent Turkish naval base in the occupied territory of the Republic of Cyprus (RoC), like the British sovereign bases on the island, to protect Ankara’s interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. In addition, it underlines the potential use of the Lefkoniko airfield as an air base for the Turkish Air Force, that would supposedly reduce Turkey’s response time in military operations and humanitarian missions. The “news”, which were reproduced in panic by the Cypriot media, created a sensation and intensified the feeling of fear and insecurity, which Turkey has been skillfully cultivating regarding the energy exploration program of the RoC in its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). Part of Cypriot society considered the article as a threat signal that required the intensification of the defense effort while another part as a conformist warning for a compromise solution regarding the unresolved Cyprus Problem to avoid any war-related adventures. A similar article appeared also in *Daily Sabah* the following year, in December 2019, the republishing of which maintained the feeling of insecurity on the Greek-Cypriot side and deprived the use of logic in the interpretation of such “news”; that is, the fact that Turkish warships have been docked at the occupied port of Famagusta since 2011 while the proximity of the island with air bases in mainland Turkey does not dictate the creation of a permanent air base at Lefkoniko in occupied Cyprus.

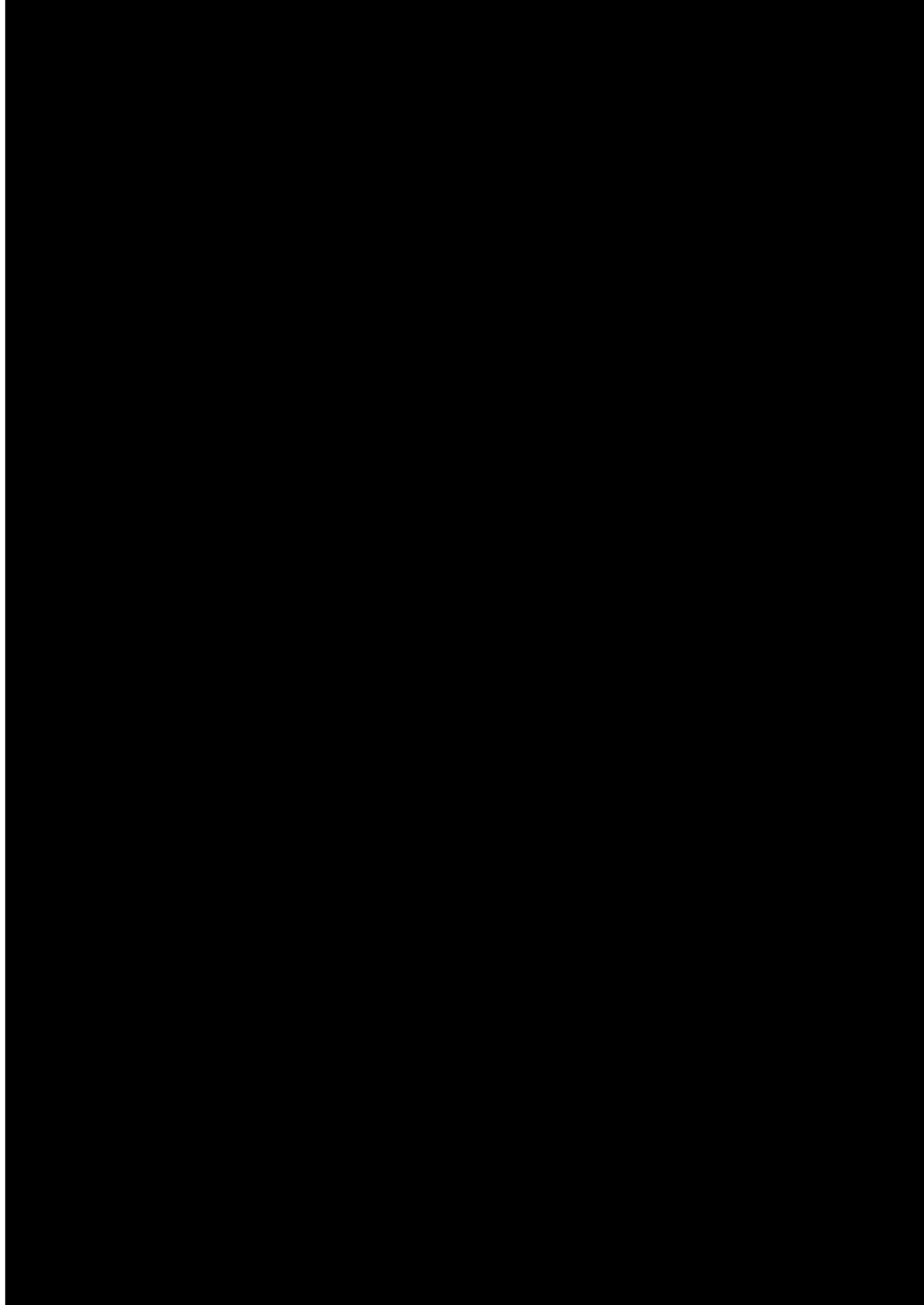
Television has, diachronically, constituted a dominant instrument in political communication and Ankara has been effectively using it as a tool, during the last 15 years, to manipulate or condition internal and international public opinion. Turkey’s cultural penetration in countries of interest in the Middle East, the Balkans, Islamic countries in Asia and Africa, but also Greece, has systematically been cultivated through the distribution, at

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low cost, of Turkish TV series to foreign broadcast channels. Specifically, Turkish drama TV series comprise one of president Erdogan’s successes abroad, given they are currently broadcast in more than 100 countries. The global portrayal of an enhanced image for Turkey and the promotion of Turkish culture as well as the historical past of the once glorious Ottoman Empire, through the use of dramatic TV series and the adoption of modern marketing techniques, effectively serves Ankara’s current foreign policy ambitions.

However, apart from the communicative projection of Turkey on the international stage, particular TV series and documentaries target exclusively Greece and Cyprus, aiming – with historical distortions and untrue narratives – at the creation of negative impressions for the two countries on an international front. The deconstruction of the liberal and democratic nature of their political systems and their societies, constitutes one of the objectives of the information operations carried out openly by Turkey against Greece and Cyprus during the last fifteen years. In the context of the Turkish series “Warrior” (*Savasci*), which was shown in Turkey and abroad for the fifth consecutive year (2017-2021), the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974 is included in one of the episodes. Viewers watch a select group of Turkish soldiers carrying out attacks on the island, with footage showing symbols of the Turkish





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abroad as contradictory, creating confusion about Ankara’s real intentions. The deliberate creation of ambiguity and confusion has become an important tool for the Erdogan government, which has developed information warfare operations into dominant pillars of



24 November 2015, by a Turkish F-16 fighter jet; an action that put the North Atlantic Alliance in a very difficult position. Ankara, to counter-balance Moscow’s potential reaction, invoked Article 5 (Collective Defense), which provides that “an armed attack against one or more of them [NATO members] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all”.

Turkey, in its relations with Cyprus and Greece, has always relied on various imaginative and illegitimate arguments or dogmas, such as the “Blue Homeland”, which it cultivated systematically and persistently, through methodical and long-term information operations. Its revisionist and illegal claims are usually supported by threatening government rhetoric and skillfully crafted maps and state documents, that are accompanied by extensive disinformation efforts to deconstruct the internationally recognized legal rights of Greece and Cyprus.

One recent example of aggressive information operations aimed at deconstructing the legitimate arguments of its adversary and manipulating international public opinion, is the Greek-Turkish crisis in the Eastern Mediterranean, between July and October 2020, that brought the two NATO countries to the brink of war. When Ankara, for four months, carried, illegally and provocatively, seismic surveys in the Greek-claimed continental shelf of the Eastern Mediterranean. The provocative operations of research vessel *Oruc Reis*, which was accompanied by a massive armada of Turkish warships, were, simultaneously, supported by a cover up information campaign regarding the illegal, de facto actions of Turkey against Greek sovereign rights. Ankara, launching an extensive campaign of disinformation, accused Athens of aggression and illegal claims, while the state-controlled Turkish press skillfully sustained a climate of confrontation with inflammatory broadcasts, misleading articles, and inaccurate commentaries, such as the *Yeni Safak* headline that “Greece is preparing the islands for war”.

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The reaction of Nicosia and Athens to the Turkish information operations of intimidation and disinformation is almost non-existent, due to the prevailing political assumption that serious, non-threatening, status quo state actors and EU members, deviate from political correctness when they engage in respective information operations entailing counter-propaganda and counter-misinformation campaigns. In addition, the absence of formal national security strategies in the two countries and of suitable governmental structures or private organizations that could defend their internationally-recognized rights in the international stage – hence, the diachronic absence of a national narrative on the Cyprus Problem and the Aegean dispute, after almost half a century of Turkish occupation in Cyprus and revisionist claims in the Aegean Sea – encourages the unconstrained communications strategy of Ankara against Nicosia and Athens.

Nicos Antoniadis points out that up until today, all governments in Cyprus “operated on the basis of a defensive ‘tactic’ and not on the basis of a useful strategy that would have a substantial result”; consequently, Nicosia has locked itself in an “international game of ‘hypnosis’ brought about by our defensive stance”. In political marketing, he continues,

the weak and small player follows the strategy of sudden counterattacks. It is not appropriate, neither to enter in the arena at a time when the beast, that is, the strong player, is rampaging (see Turkey), nor is it ever going to gain power, or even a share in the ‘political market’, if it is constantly defending itself, without having a plan on how to win. [...] the (correct) small player must wait in the corner, but also, to counterattack when the big player is thrown or ‘bleeding’. And the [small player] returns to his corner to prepare for the next counterattack.

Fletcher points out that some of the most innovative digital diplomats come from smaller countries, where “the weak always has weapons, as long as he realizes it”. The Republic of Cyprus, as a small European state that is threatened by Turkey, can make strong use of the digital sphere of influence that it may potentially develop, at least as an anti-propaganda tool, to counter Turkey’s propaganda against Cyprus and Greece.

Nicos Antoniadis, *How to Win the Cyprus Game*, p. 350. See also, 25 June 2016, <https://www.bucsis.com/2016/06/25/nicos-antoniadis-how-to-win-the-cyprus-game/>.
Fletcher, *The Weak Always Has Weapons*, p. 82.
Nicos Antoniadis, *How to Win the Cyprus Game*, p. 350. See also, 25 June 2016, <https://www.bucsis.com/2016/06/25/nicos-antoniadis-how-to-win-the-cyprus-game/>.
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