



RESILIENCE:
For Media Free of Hate and Disinformation

HATE AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES IN THE ONLINE MEDIASCAPE IN TURKEY

Sinem Aydınli

TURKEY

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Turkey, in addition to the repressive legislation that imposed tight restrictions on social media, the government's temporary access blocks on the social media platforms and complete access blocks on some online news content have been ongoing since October 2020. At the same time, as indicated in the bianet Media Monitoring Reports and in bianet news articles, journalists who do not support government policies have been detained or even arrested due to their online activities, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

There are neither governmental organizations nor a self-regulatory body established by civil society to render hate speech in social media visible in Turkey.

On 1 October 2020, Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Suppression of Crimes Committed by Means of Such Publications, interpreted as "silencing dissenting voices"¹, came into force. It has been argued that "the bill will further strengthen the regime's ability to censor online content" and some think that "surveillance has remained a concern"² in Turkey, where some critical journalists use social media as a space in which they can do their work after the crackdown on press freedom.

Nevertheless, the new rules and restrictions enshrined in this law do not apply to countering the dissemination of hate speech and disinformation in online media in Turkey. Furthermore, there are neither governmental organizations nor a self-regulatory body established by civil society to render hate speech in social media visible in Turkey. Only the reactions of some users (depending on the subject, it can sometimes be from most of the public) and the opposition raise awareness of the hate speech in pro-government online media via counter actions such as twisting the narrative in posting and commenting on posts in which hate speech appears. With this report, our aim is to identify patterns and examples of hate and disinformation narratives in various new media forms in order to indicate what is needed to improve the ability of civil society to respond, develop counter-narratives and debunk disinformation.

¹ Turkey's new social media bill aimed at "silencing dissenting voices and making money". 22 July 2020 Available at: <http://bianet.org/english/politics/227842-turkey-s-new-social-media-bill-aimed-at-silencing-dissenting-voices-and-making-money> [Accessed on: 17 October 2020]

² See note above

Based on the first country report in the Resilience project entitled “Hate and Propaganda Media in Turkey: Affiliations, Models and Patterns”,³ four target groups, namely migrants, political opposition, journalists, and women were chosen in the focus on analysis of hate narratives in online media and the typical elements of these narratives were evaluated. The next part provides more detailed information about the methodology and the selection of target groups, cases and time period. The following four chapters are dedicated to each target group. The concluding part summarizes the main findings of the research and signals the urgent need to combat hate language in Turkey. At the end, we list several recommendations for further action in countering hate speech and disinformation in online media in Turkey.

Focusing on the hate speech and disinformation in online media in Turkey, this report, based on research carried out from August to October 2020, is a follow-up to the first report within the Resilience project.⁴

2. METHODOLOGY AND TARGET GROUPS

The media samples were selected for each target group in the period between June 2019 and June 2020. We identified samples of (1 or 2) online media and a social network in relation to a certain case (event) chosen within a specific period of time and we collected the data for a period of one or two weeks following this period depending on each target group.

OVERVIEW OF THE SELECTED CASES AND MEDIA SAMPLE

Table 1

GROUPS	CASE (EVENT)	TIME PERIOD	ONLINE MEDIA	SOCIAL NETWORK
Syrian refugees	Turkey's operation in Northern Syria	9–21 October 2019	BBC Turkish YouTube Channel	Twitter
Political opposition	News regarding the adaption of a book (Devran) by imprisoned former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party, Selahattin Demirtaş (HDP)	11–17 January 2020	Medyascope and T24 YouTube Channel	Twitter
Critical journalists	News concerning Can Dündar's unlicensed property	9–16 May 2020	haber7.com	Twitter
Women	The discussion about the Istanbul Convention	11–18 May 2020	Akit TV YouTube Channel	Twitter

³ *Hate and Propaganda Media in Turkey: Affiliations, Models and Patterns* Available at: <https://seenpm.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Resilience-research-publication-1-TK-ENG.pdf> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

⁴ See note above

First, we analyze the language of hostility against Syrian refugees through the comments under the BBC news videos published on their YouTube channel during Turkey's operation in Northern Syria launched on 9 October 2019. For this, we needed more time (almost 2 weeks) to point out that the language of enmity against Syrians had been increasing as the news of the deaths of Turkish soldiers in Syria began to break in Turkey. In addition to this, we also analyzed the comments under the #Syrians hashtag, based on the data set of tweets⁵ (over 40K), used by Ozduzen & Korkut & Ozduzen (2020) as the #Syrians hashtag trended as the number one item in October 2019.

Regarding the second target group, "political opposition to the government", the analysis is about the news on 11 January 2020 regarding the adaption for the stage of a book (Devran) by imprisoned former co-chair of the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) Selahattin Demirtaş. In addition to analysis of the news published in online editions of the newspapers, we evaluated the comments under the news video published by online news portals T24 and Medyascope.

The third target group is the "journalists" in Turkey, where 33 journalists and media workers had already been sentenced to a total of 63 years and 11 months in prison as part of journalism or political cases as per the TMK in 2019⁶. One of them was Can Dündar, who was also targeted in an armed attack in 2016. This time, we exemplify the language of enmity used against him through an analysis of the news published on 9 May 2020 by some pro-government media about his allegedly "unlicensed property" by evaluating the news article published on a pro-government online media outlet, haber7.com, and the comments below the piece and also by scrutinizing the tweets by pro-AKP trolls and some influencers on Twitter.

Lastly, we exemplify the discriminatory narratives against women in terms of the discussion around the Istanbul Convention in May 2020, when criticism and allegations regarding the Convention increased in Turkey, causing disinformation concerning its purpose to manipulate public opinion about women's rights. While evaluating the columns published via online editions of some newspapers and tweets by these journalists, the comments under the article and the tweets are also analyzed in relation to the hashtag #notoTheIstanbulConvention.

5 We would like to thank to Cansu Özduzen for providing this data set of Tweets which is basis of their analysis in Ozduzen & Korkut & Ozduzen (2020)

6 Medya Gözlem Raporu BIA Media Monitoring 2019.

Available at: <https://bianet.org/5/100/218959-the-ends-justify-the-means-in-purging-critical-media> [Accessed on: 17 October 2020]

3. Case 1: HOSTILITY AGAINST SYRIAN REFUGEES

There were 3.7 million Syrians under “temporary protection” in Turkey in 2019.⁷ It is seen that the representation of Syrian refugees comes to the fore although Turkey hosts asylum seekers from Afghanistan, Iraq and other countries. Syrians were the second most frequently targeted group in Turkey’s media with 760 hate speech items in 2019 as reported by the HDV’s “Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in Media 2019 Report.” Some nationalist and racist media outlets also fed the feeling of hostility toward their settlement in Turkey.

In news articles following a cross-border military operation northern Syria officially known as “Operation Peace Spring”, launched on 9 October 2019, Syrians were targeted over their presence in Turkey, as the negative Twitter perception of Syrians in Turkey during the operation rose by 95% in the immediate aftermath of the military operation (Ozduzen & Korkut & Ozduzen 2020). The government has claimed that the aim of the operation is to “prevent the creation of a terror corridor across our southern border, and to bring peace to the area named as a safe zone”⁸ where it is believed that they will return in the future.

We firstly analyzed three news videos published by BBC Turkish on their YouTube channel during the period between 9–21 October 2020. The first [1] and second [2] present general news about the operation. The third one, published on 21 October, was entitled “Operation Peace Spring: How Syrian refugees at the border view the ‘safe zone’” [3], meaning that it is a news video concerning Syrians’ views on the operation. The comments below the news articles of the first two days have a more aggressive tone against Syrians as they mentioned that *the Turkish soldiers are at war for Syrians but Syrians are here in Turkey*. [4]

The video published on 21 October included the views of Syrian people living at the border on whether they would like to go back to their home. Some say *yes, we will go after the security zone is established by the government* [5] and some mention *not going back to Syria as they have a comfortable position here in Turkey*. [6] Although Syrians in this video openly support the AKP and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s position towards themselves, the comments below the video mainly show a great deal of hostility against them: “Best of you,... we should [f..k], so we do not have any Syrians here.” [7]. Referring to the person in the video who mentioned not leaving Turkey, one says “but who wants you?” [8] “I do not want these ISIS leftovers, bigoted religious lazy guys in my country. You should all leave and go to that safe zone”. [9]. “We gotta kill them one by one, otherwise they will not go” [10] “I do not want my homeland to be an Arab homeland.” [11]

7 Syrians in Turkey According to the Directorate General of Migration Management Data. 25 July 2019 Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/migration/210842-syrians-in-turkey-according-to-directorate-general-of-migration-management-data> [Accessed on: 17 October 2020]

8 Operation Peace Spring starts in N Syria: Erdoğan 9 October 2019 <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/operation-peace-spring-starts-in-n-syria-erdogan>

Users add negative attribution targeting Syrians because of who they are by saying *they are those who sold their country and came here* and the insult also goes along with their comment: “classic arabic opportunism” [sic] [12] and “here is the arab nation.”[sic] [13] In order to humiliate them, they also refer to them as “self-centred freaks who do not have a sense of love of the motherland”. [14] The users blame them for the financial difficulties in the country, saying that it is why they believe they should go. So, they say “they got us in trouble” [15], “we work like donkeys, we feed Syrians before making ourselves full”. [16] “When I hear words such as Syria and Syrian, I instinctively hate them now. The Turkish nation does not have to suffer this economic and sociological disaster anymore.” [17] Even worse, in order to find a way to “sweep” them from the country, one says “the only way is genocide” [18] and another says “we send away them by f..king”. [19]

Users add negative attribution targeting Syrians because of who they are by saying *they are those who sold their country and came here*.

Secondly, we analyzed the comments with the #Syrians hashtag on Twitter for a two-week period. The sampled data set of tweets mostly affirms that they were not welcomed in Turkey and instead of Turkish soldiers who were fighting in their country, they should have gone and fought for themselves. Some of the tweets are as follows: (1) “While Syrian youth are enjoying prosperity in my country, I do not want my soldiers to be martyred for them!”; (2) “While the Syrians breed like rabbits, our young people are being killed one by one. I don’t want Syrians in my country, nor do I want to pay for their war.” (3) “Syrians increase more when they are being touched like acne, but they still increase when they are not being touched.”

These comments also point to the use of language that reinforces the militaristic discourse with implicit hate. If there is war, some must be killed, Syrians must be the ones who fight for Syria and be martyred: (4) “There are enough Syrian young people on the streets of Istanbul. Now, it is their right to return to their own land and fight and to be martyred for their lands, if necessary. [...] Our children should not fight for Syria while there are young Syrians around.” The discrimination against Syrian refugees features a strong emphasis on national identity.

Moreover, some comments under the #Syrian hashtag disseminate disinformation in relation to their ostensible “privileges”, claiming that “Syrians” have more rights than the population of the host country, i.e. Turkey. This prejudice feeds the entrenchment of the separation of “us” and “them”, causing the racist and discriminatory messages to reach audiences via Twitter. It is also seen that Syrian refugees were targeted in the columns and news articles simply for their presence in Turkey. Examples can be seen as follows: (6) “Brave confession from the Syrian boy: While the Turkish soldiers are fighting in Syria, we, Arabs, have a hookah and are enjoying our days”, (7) “I am an educator, we have 35 Iraqi and Syrian students, believe me, they use the latest phones, wear luxury clothes such as original Adidas and Nike shoes. I bought YTL 35 fake Adidas. Who are the citizens of the country, us or them?”

Some comments under the #Syrian hashtag disseminate disinformation in relation to their ostensible “privileges”.

It is not only individual comments that disseminate hate speech under the #Syria hashtag; retweet chains of news articles by the nationalist media camps feed the perception of Syria as a threat. For instance, a news article [20] written by nationalist *Sözcü* newspaper columnist Murat Muratoğlu, who opposes the AKP government, has been retweeted (2.3K) under the hashtag #Syrians; in it, he states, “So these people are a threat against Europe, and not against us? If it’s such a bad thing, why do we do this to our own people? We have been living with millions of Syrians, with whom we have scared Europe, for years”. Again, they were stigmatized as threats to Turkey’s security and they were thus perceived as the source of tension in Turkey.

They believe that instead of Turkish soldiers, Syrians should die.

MAIN NARRATIVES ON SYRIAN REFUGEES

Table 2

MAIN NARRATIVE	Syrians should return to their country and they should fight for it	
SUB-NARRATIVES	The general expression “Syrian” used commonly to refer to Syrian refugees	They do not welcome Syrians, accusing them of “having sold their country”
	They argue that while the Syrians “breed like rabbits”, the young people of Turkey are “being killed one by one”	They believe that instead of Turkish soldiers, Syrians should die

Although they did not directly disseminate hostility against refugees, some comments imply that they dehumanize Syrian refugees as they are only quantitative entities that could have been sent to European countries: (9) “Bro, take 500 thousand Syrians in the morning and evening on an empty stomach” (10) “the Netherlands have suspended exports of weapons to Turkey for the summer my daughter, or 500 thousand Syrians (to be sent) to Netherlands”.

All exemplify how hostility based on territorial superiority and economy-oriented hate speech became the most egregious form of communication in engaging with the refugee identity in Turkey mostly during the period of the military operation. Comments similar to those mentioned above disseminate hate to their potential audiences via online media platforms.

4. Case 2: POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Specifically, since the coup attempt in 2016, the Anti-Terror Law or Suppression of Terrorism Law (TMK) is being utilized against the political opposition to the government in order to suppress critical voices, and its vague definition of terror and terrorist acts has resulted in the investigation of political opposition and journalists, along with writers, lawyers, academics, and civil rights activists. The alleged crimes related to the TMK have strengthened the argument that political opposition does not work in the best interest of Turkey and its people, i.e. they are working against their country. In the context of this research, it can be noted that, during the AKP term, politicians of the opposition have been targeted over their alleged links to terror crimes. For instance, the state actors mostly link the democratically elected Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), which won 12 per cent of the national vote in the parliamentary election in 2015, with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). This basically shows how the political opposition is being targeted by the language of enmity and hostility which eventually facilitate their criminalization. In order to exemplify this, we chose a case related to the HDP: A theatre play was adapted from a book by Selahattin Demirtaş in January 2019. This case was not only about Demirtaş and the HDP but also the main opposition party, the CHP, as Dilek İmamoğlu, the spouse of its Istanbul Mayor İmamoglu, and CHP Istanbul Chair Canan Kaftancıoğlu were among those who watched the play.

This example shows how opponents of the government were targeted in discourse because of their alleged links to the PKK.

We chose the interpretation of this case by the state actors at first. Following the adaptation of Demirtaş's book for the stage as a closet drama on 11 January, Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu targeted the people who watched the play in his speech on 12 January with the following comment: "You can't clean the blood on your hands with theatre plays."⁹ This case continued with the targeting not only of the pro-Kurdish political opposition, but also the CHP. For example, President Erdoğan included this case in his general evaluation meeting, referring to the attendees who had watched the play, such as Dilek İmamoğlu and Kaftancıoğlu: "In addition to the head of the main opposition and his delegation, they watched a play adapted from a book written by a terrorist in a theatre."¹⁰ So, following the comments of state actors in Turkey in the week after the play was staged, the pro-government media targeted not only Demirtaş but also the main opposition party, the CHP. This example shows how opponents of the government were targeted in discourse because of their alleged links to the PKK. The same discourse is seen in the online editions of AKP-friendly media and other online media

9 Interior Minister Targets Audience of Theatre Play Adapted from Demirtaş's Book. 13 January 2020 [online] Available at <https://bianet.org/5/94/218500-interior-minister-on-theatre-play-adapted-by-demirtas-s-book-you-can-t-clean-the-blood-on-your-hands-with-plays> [Accessed on: 15 October 2020]

10 "Erdoğan, Demirtaş'ın kitabı için, 'Bir teröristin yazmış olduğu kitap' dedi" 16 January 2020 Available at: <https://www.gazetefersude.net/erdogan-demirtas-in-kitabi-icin-bir-teroristin-yazmis-oldugu-kitap-dedi> [Accessed on: 15 October 2020]

platforms in which we evaluate the users' comments below the video published by independent online media Medyascope and T24 and the play's echoes on Twitter.

Nedim Şener, a columnist from *Hürriyet* daily, penned an article entitled "Bu Fotoğraf Projedir" (This picture is a project) [21] about this adaptation, targeting Demirtaş by pointing his links to the PKK. While citing Demirtaş's previous comments on the PKK, he also created a discourse on the ostensible connection of the CHP with the HDP to make the CHP a target like the HDP, i.e. he criminalizes and discredits those attaching themselves to the political opposition to the government. Like Şener, in their pieces published in the online editions, Korkmaz [22] from *Yeni Şafak* and Övür [23] from *Sabah* simplify their meanings to easily govern the readers, thinking that by targeting Demirtaş with the concept of terrorist, they will eventually imply that the political opposition is not working for the best interest of the country, but rather, they are aiming to support 'terrorism.'

On 12 January, a news video concerning the play including a short interview with Demirtaş's spouse, Başak, was published on Medyascope's YouTube channel [24]. In addition to comments labelling Demirtaş and the attendees "terrorists" and "terror-supporters", some commenters wanted Demirtaş to die: (1) "May God dry your blood" and (2) "You were trying to portray a bloody murderer, a monster who killed thousands of Kurdish and Turkish people as a dove of peace to our people. This nation does not buy this."

Another video about the play was published on T24's YouTube channel again on 12 January [25]. The same terror rhetoric appears in most of the comments generating the language of enmity against not only Demirtaş but also İmamoğlu: (1) "Aren't you ashamed to sit with the terrorists? They also went to watch what he wrote. Especially you, Dilek İmamoğlu (spouse). I will not vote for your spouse again", (2) "Again CHP: [...] Atatürk's party goes to watch the terrorist's theatre" (3) "The more terrorists there are, all of them have come together." Furthermore, the users legitimize their arguments with reference to the PKK and imply their possible death with dropping a bomb on them: (1) "PKK's top executives came together and I wonder why a bomb wasn't dropped." (2) "When you drop a bomb, you will clean it all up."

In addition, yekvucut.com, one of the platforms belonging to Bosphorus Global (BG), which aims to counter critical coverage of the AKP published in the international media, supported this argument through terror discourse and published via its Twitter account [26] the claim that "İmamoğlu supported the effort of the terrorist Demirtaş convicted with the terror charge to be acquitted with the 'play'."

The political opposition is claimed to be supporting the terrorists.

MAIN NARRATIVES AGAINST THE POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Table 3

MAIN NARRATIVE	Political opposition to the government does not work in the best interest of the country	
SUB-NARRATIVES	The political opposition is claimed to be supporting the terrorists	They seem to be of the opinion that “the political opposition should be all punished”
	The political opposition is regarded as if they themselves are terrorists	It is thought that they are working against Turkey

As the state authorities bring criminal prosecutions against the Government’s political opponents, primarily some pro-government media target them, based on the arguments alleged by the state actors by targeting them in the same way. Supported by some media outlets, “serious backsliding continued on freedom of expression” and thus dissemination of opposition voices negatively affected by this situation, as mentioned in the Turkey 2020 Report¹¹ by the European Commission.

5. Case 3: CRITICAL JOURNALISTS AS OPPOSITION TO THE GOVERNMENT

According to the 2020 BIA Media Monitoring Report (BIA MMR), at least 89 journalists and media workers face seven aggravated life sentences and a combined total of 760 years and 3 months in prison on charges such as “propagandizing for a terrorist organization” and “insulting the President of the Republic.” Many cases are pending trial. According to the 2020 Turkey Report by Human Rights Watch, “executive control and political influence over the judiciary in Turkey has led to courts systematically accepting bogus indictments, detaining and convicting without compelling evidence of criminal activity individuals and groups the Erdoğan government regards as political opponents. Among these are journalists, opposition politicians, and activists and human rights defenders.”¹²

In this political environment, critical journalists perceived as political opponents to the Government are not only criminalized with terror-related charges but they are also targeted by both the authorities and the organizations having close ties to them, as seen in the 2019 SETA report. As shown by bianet’s Media Monitoring Database, criminal cases and the conviction of journalists were still happening at the time of writing.¹³

Among journalists critical of the Government, Can Dündar was arrested on 26 November 2015, on charges of “obtaining and disclosing confidential

11 Key findings of the 2020 Report on Turkey. 6 October 2020
Available at https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/country_20_1791
[Accessed on: 15 October 2020]

12 Turkey: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/turkey>

13 <https://mediamonitordatabase.org/> [Accessed on: 15 October 2020]

information of the state for purposes of political or military espionage” due to his news on National Intelligence Organization (MIT) Trucks allegedly carrying weapons to Syria, published in the *Cumhuriyet* newspaper with the headline “Here are the weapons Erdoğan said do not exist”; he was released on 26 February 2016. Dündar was acquitted by the court in May 2016 after he was targeted by an armed attack in front of the courthouse in Çağlayan. In 2018, the decision in the trial for Dündar was reversed and Dündar went abroad. Recently, on 7 October 2020, the court ruled for the confiscation of his properties and declared him a “fugitive” as he had failed to appear in court. HRW states that this “symbolizes the relentless persecution of critical voices and constitutes a new form of attacks on journalists through the seizure of their private property and their families as reprisal for their legitimate work.”¹⁴

In order to exemplify the hostility toward him, we chose the news story about his “unlicensed property” which was seen as “illegal” as “criminal as he is” by some pro-government online media before the confiscation order. We take this as an example of the idea that “critical journalists deserve everything bad that happens to them” by evaluating the news piece published in haber7.com and the comments below the article, as well as by analyzing the tweets by the pro-AKP trolls and some influencers on Twitter.

A news piece published in haber7.com, a pro-government web-portal, titled “Can Dündar’ın villası da kaçak çıktı! Ağaçları katletmiş...” [Can Dündar’s villa was also illegal. He slaughtered the trees ..] [27] on 10 May. Among the users’ comments [28], they use the word “traitor” as a description for Dündar in order to humiliate him: (1) “they are all traitors”, (2) “would the state confiscate the properties of traitors?” (3) “All their possessions are illegal, like themselves”, (4) “Why is this traitor’s property still not confiscated?” Referring to his reports as “espionage”, they say “There are things like espionage and betrayal are in them”, “Espionage against the country, and being a person of property. This only happens in Turkey.” Some of them follow the narrative that “foreign powers” want to destroy Turkey and say “these are intelligence officers of the foreign powers posing as journalists”. Dündar was also targeted directly: (5) “We have all the opportunities, but now we discover that the traitor’s building is fugitive. Why haven’t we hit the head of these traitors until now?” and “... this country hates people like you”. The last comments exemplify the hostile language indicating the aim that: He should be physically removed. The case of “fugitive” property became a medium to them which facilitates dissemination of their use of the language of enmity.

The case of “fugitive” property became a medium to them which facilitates dissemination of their use of the language of enmity.

Selman Ögüt, having a close connection with the BG, where Ögüt’s brother, Süheyb Ögüt (spouse of Hilal Kaplan, a columnist of the pro-government *Sabah* daily) is Global Affairs Chair, pens articles regarding Dündar at certain times.¹⁵ Following the news indicating that his property is unlicensed, he

¹⁴ Turkey: Press Freedom Under Attack 14 October 2020. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/14/turkey-press-freedom-under-attack> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

¹⁵ For example, in July 2017, he wrote a piece entitled “Can Dündar Vatan hainidir” [Can Dündar is a

mentioned this on his Twitter account and, at the time of writing, the tweet had generated 1.2K retweets, including 115 comments. [29] Through the comments posted by accounts accompanied by Turkish flag (and still some of them by the green dot), we see that the main narrative centres on “what a traitor Dündar is.” Users commenting below Ögüt’s tweet were also using the hashtag #MilliHesaplarBurada [milliaccountsarehere] as an identification. Some call on the government to seize his property—which has finally happened after almost four months and this news was broken mostly by pro-government media outlets. They are seen as traitors.

While some power networks such as pro-AKP trolls are also active on this subject as they are being motivated to produce hate language and are targeting and threatening the perceived enemies of the AKP by reversing the discourses with manipulation, they¹⁶ also target other journalists they also believe to have “unlicensed” property, along the same lines as the narrative they used against Dündar.

MAIN NARRATIVES AGAINST CRITICAL JOURNALISTS

Table 4

MAIN NARRATIVE	Critical journalists deserve punishments because they do not defend the national unity		
SUB-NARRATIVES	They are seen as traitors	They believe that those journalists should be humiliated	They assert that they should all be physically removed because they are enemies of this country

Dündar is not the only target in the narratives containing the language of enmity. This is a micro projection of the general situation which was experienced by almost all critical journalists through different word choices: They deserve everything bad that happens to them.

6. Case 4: WOMEN AS THE DEFENDERS OF THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

According to news published on bianet, “the Istanbul Convention has been targeted by certain groups and circles in the country since summer 2019.”¹⁷ Known as the “Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence”, it is blamed for destroying the family institution and tempting new generations into Western culture, although it aims to prevent violence targeting women and to penalize those inflicting that violence.

traitor] Available at: <https://www.internethaber.com/can-dundar-vatan-hainidir-1790700y.htm>

¹⁶ For example, some of these troll accounts are available at: <https://twitter.com/debuffer2>, <https://twitter.com/THEMARGINALE/status/1260618547799212033?s=20>, <https://twitter.com/melihhesatacil>, https://twitter.com/AK_suHandan/status/1263095671982305282?s=20

¹⁷ Manhood attacks, women defend: A chronology of the Istanbul Convention. 17 August 2020. Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/print/229140-manhood-attacks-women-defend-a-chronology-of-istanbul-convention> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

Criticism and allegations directed towards the Convention increased in Turkey after former AKP MP Mehmet Metiner claimed that it was a mistake for Turkey to pass the Istanbul Convention in Parliament on 6 May 2020; accordingly, we exemplify the news articles published in online media, and two broadcasts published on the Akit TV YouTube channel and users' comments left below it in the period between 11–18 May 2020, when the discussions increased after Metiner's comment. It can be said that the disinformation narrative towards the Convention clearly demonstrates the pattern and power of statements directed against women in the media and social networks in Turkey. As reported by teyit.org, "according to the allegations against the Istanbul Convention in the headlines of newspapers such as *Sabah*, *Yeni Akit* and *Milli Gazete*, the 'hidden aim' and 'true face' of the convention is hidden from everyone. There are questionable things about Turkey's admission process and agreement, and the convention "threatens the Turkish family structure."¹⁸

The disinformation narrative towards the Convention clearly demonstrates the pattern and power of statements directed against women in the media and social networks in Turkey.

On 11 May, Dilipak¹⁹ from the *Yeni Akit* daily, who is infamous for his hateful and targeting statements against women, penned an article entitled "How the family survives" [30] and noted that the Convention gave a legal framework to a disgrace (he is referring to LGBTI+s), and none of this is as important and fundamental as this threat to the future of the family and young people. The users' comments [31] below the article not only support his arguments but also target the HDP with links to terrorism making the connection: "The HDP is abducting young girls [and taking them] to the mountains [...] you do not think about those girls." [32]. "What did the head of terrorists do to the girls the hdpkkchp abducted" [33]. To defend family institutions, one comment read: "family means state, no state without family" [34]. They also see women responsible for the destruction of family: "There are women who go and live with other men without being divorced from their husbands and have children who are illegitimate. Nothing can be done". This hurts society a lot" [35]. "People are involved in high-conflict divorces and the money goes to women but the debt to men" [36]. The prevailing view among the users can be seen as the following: "The Istanbul Convention should be cancelled. It is for the destruction of society and family; it is against our family structure". [37]

On 11 May, on a programme called "Derin Gerçekler" on the topic "Sebepler ve Sonuçlarıyla İstanbul Sözleşmesi" [Causes and Results of the Istanbul Convention] [38], three men were talking about the Convention. Dilipak was one of them, and he described the Convention as a "disgrace" and "stupidity" on the YouTube channel of Akit TV, a channel related to the *Yeni Akit* newspaper. Supporting his argument, the comments below the YouTube video make Islamist references and interpret the Convention as playing a

18 İstanbul Sözleşmesi hakkındaki efsaneler ve gerçekler. 13 May 2020. Available at: <https://teyit.org/istanbul-sozlesmesi-hakkindaki-efsaneler-ve-gercekler> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

19 In one of his pieces, he calls the defenders of Istanbul Convention "prostitutes" See Dilipak, A. "AKP'nin Papatyalari" 27 July 2020 Available at: <https://www.yeniakit.com.tr/yazarlar/abdurrahman-dilipak/akpnin-papatyalari-33008.html> [Accessed on: 16 October 2020]

role in the destruction of the family without offering any legal or reasonable arguments. Similarly, on 16 May, the programme *Ters Kutuplar*, also with the topic “Sebeup ve Sonularıyla İstanbul Szleşmesi” [39] was broadcast on Akit TV’s YouTube channel. In a video presentation shown before the discussion started, they targeted the Mor atı Foundation, an organization founded to combat violence against women; in particular, they criticize the interpretation of a professor opposed to the Istanbul Convention. They call the foundation “pervert”, “Mor Gang”, and “gay supporters”. While showing the website in the presentation, they zoom in on the phone number and the address section of the foundation to make it a target. Among the comments [40], the same narrative is evident in relation to the international donors: “Financiers of factious people like Soros have spent billions themselves and tried to use all news channels and social media and women’s organizations in the same direction.” Moreover, to support the professor, they refer again to those who defend the Convention as “carrion”.

User comments containing hate speech can also be found under the posts of some media outlets other than hate media organs. For example, on 12 May 2020, the Deutsche Welle Twitter account shared an article titled “Why the Istanbul Convention is targeted”. [41]. The comments below it include twisted rhetoric about the convention: “Violence against women since the Istanbul Convention” and “A convention of transition to fagote”. Journalists had also been posting on Twitter under the hashtag #istanbulszleşmesinehayır [nototheidstanbulConvention], with supposedly religious references to protect the institution of the family. A video by Akit TV entitled, “İstanbul Szleşmesi 9 yıldır yuva yıkıyor” [the Istanbul Convention has been destroying the family for nine years] [42] was also published on Twitter under the hashtag #istanbulszleşmesinehayır, noting that “the convention was specifically designed to destroy humanity”, “It destroys the concept of honour”, and “LGBTI+s have been gadding about in the streets of Istanbul.”

MAIN HATE NARRATIVES ON WOMEN DEFENDING THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION

Table 5

MAIN NARRATIVE	With the rights the Convention provided for the women, they will be reason for the destruction of the family structure		
SUB-NARRATIVES	The convention is not appropriate for this society because it defends “gender rights”	The Convention is against the family structure because it also legitimizes homosexuality	The Convention is openly against the honour, tradition and religious values of this society

This case is also selected as one which exemplifies the disinformation narrative causing incomplete or misleading information concerning its purpose to deceive public opinion about the Convention with a set of baseless views through the comments disseminated in online media. All of this ultimately vilifies women and their rights.

7. THE CURRENT SITUATION PROVING THE NEEDS

As mentioned in the introduction, there is no monitoring mechanism for rendering hate speech online and on social media visible. There is also no established self-regulation by civil society in Turkey. International organizations such as HRW and Amnesty International periodically call on Turkey to make hate speech against certain groups visible in general.

The law, which includes new regulations on social media, was mainly regarded as curtailing human rights.

On 11 July 2020, Twitter disclosed 7,340 accounts in Turkey attributed to the youth wing of the AKP, some of them known to be pro-AKP trolls. In 2019, Turkey is in third place, just after Russia, in terms of sending legal demands to Twitter.²⁰ However, it ranks 11th amongst the countries that have requested the removal of hate content from YouTube.

Web portals such as freewebturkey.com and @engelliweb [blockedweb] on Twitter allow us to see blocked content that is critical of the AKP as they list the increasing amount of content and websites that are banned in Turkey. It is known that “at least 347 news articles”²¹ were blocked in the third quarter of 2020. In addition, there was one incident of short-term disruption to social media platforms and messaging apps during Turkish military attacks on northern Syria in February 2020.

In 2019, access to 130,000 URL addresses, 7,000 Twitter accounts, 10,000 YouTube videos and 6,251 Facebook posts was blocked pursuant to Law No. 5651, as indicated in the report by İFÖD.²² In this case, it is not surprising that Turkey ranks third in the world for VPN use.²³

The law, which includes new regulations on social media, was mainly regarded as curtailing human rights in the online sphere and “a dramatic escalation of internet regulation in Turkey” by many rights-based international organizations such as Freedom House.²⁴ Although the Government claims that the measures prescribed by the law will be similar to those in Western countries, this was also regarded as the following: “Turkey’s courts and regulatory bodies lack the independence necessary to prevent abuse of the law. In practice, the law could, therefore, serve as a new tool to silence critics online.”²⁵

20 Removal Request July-December 2019: <https://transparency.twitter.com/en/reports/removal-requests.html#2019-jul-dec>

21 At least 347 news articles censored in three months Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/print/232003-press-freedom-in-turkey-at-least-347-news-articles-censored-in-3-months> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

22 Turkey banned 130,000 web addresses in 2019 Available at: <https://bianet.org/english/print/226856-report-turkey-banned-130-000-web-addresses-in-2019> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

23 Türkiye 2019’da dünyada en çok VPN kullanan 3. ülke oldu: VPN nedir? Available at: <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/07/01/turkiye-yasak-dinlemedi-dunyada-en-cok-vpn-kullanan-3-ulke-odu-internet-erisim> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

24 Turkey: Passage of Social Media Law Curtails Human Rights Online 30 July 2020 Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/article/turkey-passage-social-media-law-curtails-human-rights-online> [Accessed on: 26 October 2020]

25 See note 12

8. CONCLUSION

This report shows through four different case studies as the samples for each target group the dynamics of motivation and dissemination of hate and disinformation narratives in online media. This thereby provides a general understanding of how different forms of expression emerge, interact, and potentially construct an online mediascape of hate content. Although new regulations on social media have come into force in Turkey, they do not include any legislation regarding hate language used in online media and communication platforms. This report thereby argues that a self-regulatory mechanism is needed in order to combat hateful messages and disinformation disseminating online.

As the target groups analysis shows, hate content which may seem to be directed solely at an individual or specific group can more generally broaden out into hate speech by the dominant group that targets “others” associated with negative traits. ‘Stereotyping’, ‘prejudice’, and ‘discrimination’ overlap with “Othering” when we specifically analyze the language of hostility in terms of hate speech.

Considering the comments made on content posted in online media, it is important to point out that comments containing hate language mostly take place in independent media that do not directly produce hate content. Secondly, hate speech includes profane language against Syrian refugees. Thirdly, hostile language towards political opponents of the government and critical journalists goes along with death threats and humiliation, respectively. Those who use the language of enmity towards the political opposition and journalists critical of the government derive their power from the state actors’ positions towards them. It seems that it is mostly the state actors lighting the fuse. The discourse of terror accompanies the hate speech. This shows how mainly political opposition to the government is targeted and being criminalized by alleged terror charges. Lastly, when it comes to the discriminatory language against “women”, we see that users are tagging the state actors on Twitter when they want to target those defending the Istanbul Convention while publicly commenting on the issue.

In Turkey, it is not only the judiciary that arbitrarily defines the limits of freedom of speech; the implementation of the TMK in Turkey also extends to political opposition, critical journalists and human rights defenders. The government’s control of the media and communication also conflicts with the fundamental principles of freedom of speech. That is because their decisions in relation to sanctions are arbitrary and neither guarantee the rights of the most vulnerable members of society nor protect them from being targeted by hate speech.

This all points to the urgent need for a monitoring and regulatory mechanism, independent from the state, for online media, in order to combat accounts targeting voices critical of the government. This mechanism also helps to

Although new regulations on social media have come into force in Turkey, they do not include any legislation regarding hate language used in online media and communication platforms.

This all points to the urgent need for a monitoring and regulatory mechanism, independent from the state, for online media.

render visible the judiciary's different interpretations of the boundary between hate speech and freedom of expression. Otherwise, the social polarization in Turkey will inevitably increase, as the online media and communication platforms play their part in contributing to the climate of hostile language and disinformation with baseless arguments.

9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- A self-regulatory body should be founded and developed by civil society, mainly by the rights-based civil society organizations that are able to monitor online media in order to render hate speech and disinformation visible. They should publish "Social Media Hate Watch" reports yearly, monthly, weekly, and even daily.
- CSOs monitoring the media should establish a voluntary support mechanism in order to contribute to the efforts of independent fact-checking platforms countering disinformation and to work together with these platforms.
- A glossary and guidelines should be prepared together with journalists, academics and NGOs monitoring hate speech in the media to avert the hate language in the media.
- Media literacy campaigns by civil society organizations should be encouraged to react against hate content. For example, on a weekly basis, they could publish online information cards to raise awareness of hate language.
- Monitoring efforts should not be limited to the media organizations known to generate hate content; the online media accounts and Twitter accounts of the platforms that claim to publish and broadcast independently should also be monitored. This will help to monitor users' comments there for possible hate speech and comments that can lead to disinformation.
- A team of volunteers can be formed from CSOs in order to monitor the platforms that are open for users' comments such as YouTube and Twitter on a daily basis and prepare monitoring reports accordingly.
- These reports should be shared with the government, Parliament, law makers, local authorities, media regulatory bodies, professional associations, media literacy educators and fact-checking platforms to be able to develop common strategies and policies.
- Within the frame of discussions to be held on online media and social media, a type of filter can be developed to "ensure word selectivity" on platforms which allow users' comments; such a filter can help to set a barrier against the use of some words embedded in language.
- The option to remove readers' and/or viewers' comments for some news articles and/or videos published by independent media may be considered.

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This publication is a part of the RESILIENCE project research component. The second series of research reports examines HATE AND DISINFORMATION NARRATIVES in Albania, Bosnia and Hercegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey.

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