8-BIT IRON FIST: DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM IN COMPETITIVE AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES: THE CASES OF TURKEY AND HUNGARY

by
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ABSTRACT

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Keywords: Digital Authoritarianism, Populism, Competitive Authoritarianism, Democratic Backsliding, Democratization

This thesis examines the instrumentalization of digital authoritarian strategies under right-wing populists' regimes by comparing two cases, namely Turkey and Hungary, with each other as well as the existing Chinese and Russian models of digital authoritarianism in the literature. The theoretical framework is built on a cost-benefit evaluation for populists in employing strategies from the digital authoritarian toolkit as well as the populist anti-establishment rhetoric. Said two factors are taken as the key variables in explaining the gradual change in their regimes' media landscape. The findings suggest that blooming competitive authoritarian regimes under right-wing populism exhibit a hybrid model falling between its Chinese and Russian counterparts. Furthermore, both cases show that the development of the digital authoritarian regime follows a general pattern of the process starting from the incumbents' media monopoly, heightened by systematic persecution of individuals of opposition and strengthened by the employment of manipulation and disinformation tactics. Hence, empirical evidence for said cases support the main argument that despite being distinct examples, right-wing populists' approach to digital authoritarianism is a generalizable pathway motivated and restrained by comparable factors. Lastly, the model for competitive authoritarian regimes under right-wing populism exists on a continuum between the two main models of China and Russia and therefore constitutes a third typology of digital authoritarianism.

ÖZET

8-BIT DEMIR YUMRUK: REKABETÇI OTORITER REJIMLERDE DIJITAL OTORITERLIK: TÜRKIYE VE MACARISTAN ÖRNEKLERI

FATMA TIMUÇIN

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Dijital Otoriterleşme, Popülizm, Rekabetçi Otoriterlik, Demokratik Gerileme, Demokratikleşme

Bu tez, dijital otoriter stratejilerin sağ popülist rejimler tarafından araçsallaştırılmasını, Türkiye ve Macaristan olmak üzere iki vakayı hem kendi aralarında hem de literatürdeki mevcut Çin ve Rus dijital otoriterlik modelleri ile karşılaştırarak incelemektedir. Teorik çerçeve, fayda-maliyet değerlendirmesi üzerinden dijital otoriter araç setindeki stratejilerden yararlanma ve müesses nizam karşıtı söylemi temel almaktadır. Belirtilen iki faktör, popülistlerin rejimlerinin medya ortamındaki kademeli değişimi açıklamada anahtar değişkenler olarak alınmaktadır. Bulgular, sağ popülist rejimler altında gelişen rekabetçi otoriter rejimlerin Çin ve Rus muadilleri arasında konumlanan hibrid bir modele sahip olduğuna işaret etmektedir. Ayrıca, her iki vakada da dijital otoriter rejimin gelişmesi iktidardakilerin medyayı tekeline almasıyla başlayan, muhalif bireylere yönelik sistematik zulüm ile şiddetlenen, manipülasyon ve dezenformasyon taktikleri ile de güçlendirilen, genellenebilir bir süreç izlediğini göstermektedir. Dolayısıyla söz konusu vakalara ilişkin gözlemsel kanıtlar, birbirinden ayrışan örnekler olmalarına rağmen sağ popülistlerin dijital otoriterliğe yaklaşımının aynı faktörlerce motive edilen ve sınırlandırılan, genellenebilir bir yol haritasına sahip olduğu argümanını desteklemektedir. Son olarak, sağcı popülizm altındaki rekabetçi otoriter rejimlere ait modelin Çin ve Rus örneklerinin temsil ettiği iki ana model arasındaki bir süreklilik üzerinde var olduğu ve böylece dijital otoriterliğin üçüncü bir tipolojisini oluşturduğu da gözlemsel kanıtlarca desteklenmektedir.

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To my mom, for she makes everything brighter

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1. INTRODUCTION

The importance of the media in ensuring a democratic setting as well as its shortcomings in doing so has been touched upon many times in the literature (Aalberg and Curran 2012; Dahl 2008; Graber 2003; Page et al. 1996); but "little has been written on how the media work as the initiators or catalysts of public sentiments, how media content may voice sectional populist claims" (Mazzoleni et al. 2003, 2). Most of the recent work focusing on the media's instrumentalization by the government was triggered by the introduction of the digital age and "new media." Democratizing effects of the internet were a letdown for the field of political communication. The main culprit of this result was said 'populist claims,' or more generally, anti-democratic tendencies of governments. However, subtle strategies of altering the media landscape are harder to detect in digital media, shifting scholarly efforts to more observable instances of government intervention. Gradual alteration of media as a catalyst of public opinion in maintaining populist interests is much less investigated.

Democratization processes of the third wave could not live up to the expectations worldwide, giving way to a worryingly increasing number of competitive authoritarian regimes instead (Bermeo 2016; Diamond 2002; Levitsky and Way 2010). Free media was a fundamental factor in the process, given its role as the fourth pillar of democracy. While the accessibility of 'truth' is treated akin to an axiom of democratic settings, media's linkage to institutions of democracy is more indirect. For digital media especially, framing of "information" is vague, and its objectivity is challenged to a greater extent. Given that meaningful elections rely on an informed act of 'choosing' on behalf of the electorate, manipulation of information can also be regarded in a close-knit relationship with the intention of tilting the electoral field in incumbents' favor (Levitsky and Way 2002). The age of the internet was celebrated as an essential breakthrough in this regard. Compared to traditional media norms, the digital information age provided unprecedented speed and accessibility in information flow, which was supposedly free from state control. However, despite

political scholars' optimism, digital media has met the same hurdles as its predecessor just three decades after its debut (Rethemeyer 2007; Vanderhill 2015; Zhou 2015).The expectation of increased information flow's democratizing effect rested on the assumption that digital information would be free from government influence compared to its traditional counterpart. Instead, the digital age created a complex flow of information and disinformation (Diamond 2021; Tucker et al. 2017). As the literature on political communication suggests, a more considerable gain of this age was the opportunity of visibility, organization, and anonymity (Dahlgren 2000). Traditional media's institutive or corporate limitations were replaced with an unprecedented volume of individual users and small outlets of alternative information. Indeed, even the most oppressive regimes are unable to erase the entirety of offending content successfully. At the same time, each year, an increasing number of countries engage in punitive action, restriction, and manipulation towards the content of this sort (Deibert 2015; Shahbaz 2018). As a result, scholars in the field are taking the promised positive effects of the digital age with a grain of salt and approaching the matter with scrutiny in understanding how the increased opportunity for information accessibility evoked its inverse simultaneously.

Literature on digital authoritarianism aims to tackle the problems mentioned above, especially digital media's systematic violation to consolidate the incumbent's authoritarian rule. However, the literature was founded upon two models of blatant autocratic control -China and Russia-, and new practices are mainly discussed with resemblance to the two cases mentioned above (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). This phenomenon within contexts where a democratic structure is -albeit deficient- functional is worthy of our attention. If we look at the cases of increasing digital authoritarianism, those in which populist leaders prosper stand out for their mixed strategies of imposing state power (Clark et al. 2017). Continuously polarizing rhetoric of populists creates an atmosphere of 'debatable truth' for different factions within the electorate. Accompanying patronage networks provide the opportunity for media monopolies and state-backed outlets. Their effort to maintain the majority's support necessitates widespread media presence, spread their propaganda, and silencing opposition voices as they turn more authoritarian. However, the amount of control they can obtain and the timing, strategies, and tools they can utilize vary across cases.

This study aims to shed light on said variation and improve the literature's understanding of digital authoritarianism in democratic backsliding cases under right-wing populist leaders. As the current "state of the art" stands, digital authoritarianism is a concept most associated with the surveillance model of China with its facial recognition and AI-based technologies. It is also dubbed as the primary propagator

of digital authoritarianism, and there is increasing concern that this 'surveillant' type is what cases of democratic backsliding are headed towards (Abramowitz and Chertoff 2018). However, the author believes that the basic notion of the cost-benefit calculation from the incumbents' perspective is not exhausted. Taking a game-theoretical approach, the argument presented in this thesis stands for the increasing level of opposition threat and anti-establishment rhetoric as the primary motivators that build the expected utility of strategies of digital authoritarianism populists employ. As the costs, higher levels of digital authoritarianism necessitate a higher amount of technological infrastructure and economic capacity and the international pressure and backslash as the consequences of employing such strategies systematically. Hence, within a choice set constrained by their state capacity and international commitments, populists utilize the digital authoritarian toolkit in order to eliminate the opposition threat and reverse the establishment simultaneously.

This thesis' emphasis on right-wing populism is related to the expected propagation of digital authoritarianism on a global scale. In the aftermath of Arab Spring, the potential for opposition mobilization that would trigger a regime change was apparent. Although the Arab Spring fell short in democratizing the regimes it spread across; it has presented a clear threat for incumbents. In turn, regimes in Africa and the Middle East have resorted to banning sites, restricting access and employing manipulation tactics against online presence to limit the threat (Abrahams and Leber 2021). For populist regimes in close proximity, the threat was similar, whereas both the motivation and the means to prevent it were higher. Admittedly, it comes as a natural consequence that when the regime turns more authoritarian, cyberspace is handled in a more authoritarian manner as well. However, the key point many of the influential scholarly works in the literature highlight is the growing authoritarianism under the executive aggrandizement (Bermeo 2016) of populist leaders. Likewise to the democratic backsliding, it works in tandem with; digital authoritarianism is a gradual process for said cases. While they are not as autocratic as their Russian and Chinese counterparts, the populism aspect creates a tendency to follow the trajectory of digital authoritarianism to the extent possible. Media's - both traditional and digital - role as part of the conventional establishment paints a clear target for the populists' anti-establishment crusade.

The following thesis seeks to expand the universe of cases to include competitive authoritarian populist regimes with respect to their limited choice set compared to autocracies. In order to build a "populist" typology of digital authoritarianism that is comparable to others of this sort, cases of right-wing populist leaderships with regard to their strategies of digital authoritarianism are observed. Cases, namely Turkey and Hungary, were selected for their comparable relevance to the topic,

as both their leaders are criticized for their populist policies, constant violation of democracy, and gradual capture of the media. Nevertheless, they differ in other structural factors such as GDP, democratic and post-Soviet experiences, and EU European Union (EU) membership, making the comparison more externally valid. Right-wing populism is the key aspect and the main explanatory variable of the argument in building a third category of digital authoritarianism. Based on eight items, the argument follows both a historical narrative and categorization criteria for typologies of digital authoritarianism. The process starts with the a) capture of the state and media institutions in controlling media output, followed by b) changes in the legal framework and c) restriction of opposition content, and d) crony relationships creating a government-friendly media landscape. At the same time, e) persecutory action towards opposition individuals, f) employment of trolls, and g) delegitimization of the mainstream media completely reverse the mobilization potential of the media in the incumbents' favor. Through persecution, the government weeds out the threat and strengthens its popular support by manipulation and disinformation caused by trolls and constant delegitimization of free media. Lastly, h) surveillance equips the state with the tools of unchecked control over the population and media content. By taking right-wing populism as the main motivation for the gradual change in the argument, two outcomes are explored in their causal mechanisms: 1) within case shifts' generalizability as a third category of expanding digital authoritarianism for right-wing populist regimes, and 2) case level comparison between Turkey and Hungary in their variables of "cost," such as their capacity and commitment to the EU framework.

This thesis argues that the surveillant model of China is not applicable to populist regimes, whereas they opt for the systematic abuse of media ownership, restriction on content, and manipulation as they increase their control. Effective implementation of coercive surveillance is made possible with total subjugation of legislative and judicial arenas and the economic means to acquire surveillance tools a state should meet. This is no easy feat for competitive authoritarian cases scholars have now turned their attention to since the majority of them have much lower GDPs. Although the claim seems to be a straightforward byproduct of authoritarianism (as in, more authoritarian states impose more authoritarian digital policies), it contributes to the literature on two aspects. Firstly, because it is a new field, studies of descriptive nature are still needed to set the ground for testing parsimonious hypotheses. Second, and more importantly, cases of digital authoritarianism tend to be classified in their level of autocratic practice and proximity to the two models mentioned above, taking them as the two endpoints. Instances of authoritarianism are at the focus, while gradual development of the process is often overlooked. This

thesis aims to widen the scope by treating the new digital authoritarian models in a continuum existing between their Russian and Chinese counterparts. Strategies utilizing different parts of the digital authoritarian toolkit -surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and harassment, cyber-attacks, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution against online users- are available to some extent for democratic backsliding cases, but not in entirety due to remnants of democracy they carry.

On the other hand, right-wing populists systematically target democratic institutions limiting their strategies of state control. Although the increase in authoritarianism is rightfully attached to a shift to the Russian model aiming to reach the Chinese level of digital authoritarianism, the author believes that specific systematic differences make new digital authoritarian systems fit into neither of the categories. Analyzing competitive authoritarian cases under populists in their digital authoritarianism processes might help us highlight the mechanism behind increasing means of media control. Lastly, the classification of a transitionary type of digital authoritarianism would carry important behavioral, attitudinal, and policy implications in countering the rise of digital authoritarianism.

This thesis aims to offer a new perspective and third model in transition to digital authoritarianism. In the first chapter, a brief review of digital authoritarianism and populism literatures is discussed within the framework of strategies and practices they are associated with in controlling the media. The following chapters observe processes in their similarities and differences from two empirical cases: Turkey and Hungary. The concluding chapter offers a framework for transitionary cases of digital authoritarianism and suggestions for further research.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: POPULIST PLAYBOOK OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

2.1 From Manipulation to Surveillance: Digital Authoritarianism as a Threat to Democracy

Admittedly, the introduction of the Internet and its implementation into media has marked an unignorable milestone in the scope of communication. It has expanded both the availability of information and channels of perception. Accessibility has dramatically improved, whereas the cost of operation for new information sources has equally decreased. However, its revolutionary aspect came from the increased inclusivity and active participation. The passive mass, who were on the receiving end of information so far, became primary actors thanks to digital media -especially social media. Digital media was based on a fundamental principle in clear contrast with its traditional counterpart: expression of opinion and association with communities were based on individuality. Thus, exposure to varying opinions has increased. Another silver lining for political participation was the increased opportunity for mobilization. Anonymity, to a certain extent, became the norm. This quality made the "public" and "private" spheres overlap. Due to the sheer amounts of users, information flow in digital media is much harder to selectively control, making regulation and supervision a much more arduous task for the state apparatus. Such an effort can often backlash and give more exposure to the offending content, the so-called "Streisand Effect." One political example of such was the Tunisian government's blocking of access to YouTube and Dailymotion in 2007 because of content featuring Tunisian political prisoners. The move resulted in Tunisian people linking civil liberties videos over the president's palace in Google Earth, garnering attention around the situation in Tunisia and completely backfiring in silencing the opposition.

For the reasons stated above, the introduction of the "new media" was met with enthusiastic optimism in the literature. Its usefulness as a tool to let citizens voice

their opinions and integrate political participation into daily life was underlined and seemed to hold great promise to promote democracy (Diamond 2010). This opportunity was especially crucial for authoritarian settings. New media was dubbed the "alternative media" because of its ability to evade the governments' direct pressure on its actors. Offering an alternative to biased reporting renders new media more influential in affecting public opinion, making autocratic countries demonstrate higher levels of sensibility to online news than transitioning democracies (Kirkizh and Koltsova 2021). In the case of building popular support, tactics of traditional media manipulation are reported to be less effective in the age of new media (Lee 2013) as it overrides the availability heuristic. Unfortunately, the expected effect was initially overestimated as the literature did not take government response into account. Anti-democratic leaders came up with their own strategies in adapting to this novel setting, and authoritarian regimes resorted to systematic abuse of the extensive reach of new media (Lynch 2011). They have started to implement classic and subtle censorship (Bennett and Naím 2015) on the media in a systematic manner shaped by their circumstances. Classic censorship refers to removing and banning content or targeting the content providers or consumers themselves (King, Pan, and Roberts 2013). In its more severe form, intimidation, violence, and punishment towards journalists become common practices in limiting access to an unfavorable narrative. As a more direct and civil approach, governments can push for legal reforms in repressing freedom of speech. Moreover, subtle methods such as media monopolization, disinformation, and self-censorship due to arbitrary punishment are beneficial for authoritarian governments. Recruitment of "trolls" or bot accounts are used in further control of new media, creating a context similar to press' parallelism to incumbents' interests.

The arbitrariness of the rules of the game in the absence of a democratic setting is the main factor in rendering online platforms dysfunctional. Particularly under populism, 'thin-centered' ideologies of populists (Mudde 2004) greatly benefit from creating a polarizing narrative and retelling of this view from mainstream outlets. Authoritarian policies corroborate this dominating rhetoric by marginalizing the independent outlets and opposition voters who voice their opinions and those who do not abide by the mainstream media's account risk blocks or complete takedown of their content. Although improving, traditional approaches in penal codes offer relatively vague guidelines for online settings, allowing for judicial discretion on pushing for sanctions against outlets and users. Ad revenues and government bias increase the availability and visibility of some outlets over others. Furthermore, widespread trends of disinformation can be instrumentalized in manipulating what little alternative information is available. Regarding all the factors listed above,

political information in the contemporary world operates as "post-truth,"; where information is clouded by obscurity, facilitated deception and manipulation of the context (Bimber and Gil de Zúñiga 2020).

Digital authoritarians use censorship, social manipulation, harassment, and targeted persecution against online users the most. One reason for that is the pluralist nature of these examples. Although elections are either absent or do not fit the standards of freeness and fairness, authoritarian regimes are still compelled to appeal to their electorate to preserve their position. Systematic manipulation, intimidation, or erasure of critical content is vital for repressing the opposition as well as spreading the incumbents' message. Deterioration of the institutional framework provides a gray area for the government's legitimate capabilities over the state apparatus. Particularly under competitive authoritarian regimes and right-wing populists, said strategies create a façade of legitimacy. Consistent demonizing of the opposition paints a picture of extremity in criticizing governmental decisions and reframes different opinions as attacks on the political structure. Since manipulation is a subtle act compared to outright limitations on freedom of expression, their cost for the regime is also much more manageable. Apart from the low risk, it can even prove beneficial on account of the government's propaganda.

Authoritarian practices differ in their extent and motivations, and likewise, digital authoritarianism is not a uniform strategy in its application. Some regimes tend to take a more direct approach and "pull the plug." Others opt for heavy censorship and disinformation. This difference originates from the divergent structural limitations of cases. A government can crackdown on the news concerning corruption while resorting to manipulation with regards to coverage on national welfare. The expected utility of the action and the circumstances surrounding the political context determine the strategy best fit, both in its timing and severity. When it comes to controlling data in the interest of ensuring a government-friendly media environment, two examples have founded the basis for digital authoritarianism literature: Russia and China (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). Their influence was to the extent that varying degrees of manipulation and surveillance was modeled and named after their practices. These strategies can be broken down into six main techniques: surveillance, censorship, social manipulation and harassment, cyber-attacks, internet shutdowns, and targeted persecution against online users. While the Chinese model can be characterized by high-tech surveillance and targeted persecution, the Russian regime excels at digital disinformation and influence over the information flow. The Chinese Model requires an excessive amount of autocratic state centralization and control. For this reason, the Russian Model is more realistic and carries a lower risk for cases of democratic backsliding.

2.1.1 Russia as the "Disinformant" Model

Starting from President Putin's rise to power, the state's control over dumas and population has steadily increased. Thanks to President Putin's unique KGB background, the tensions between parliamentary and military have given way to a merger. As Boris Yeltsin's successor, Putin has implemented a quick series of reforms that created his own loyal clique, resulting in a completely different level of state capacity compared to Yeltsin's presidency. By introducing new bills, the institutional framework has been transformed into a system under which the president has power above all.

Roots of the totalitarian regime prior have persisted in post-Soviet Russia as the government's approach to media carried similar incentives. Foundations of state control over communication have started with SORM (System for Operative Investigative Activities - *Sistema operativno-razysknikh meropriyatiy*), although it was viewed as legal overseeing of security initially. SORM specified conditions for the legal interception on communication and telephone networks. Obligation to install the hardware stated by the Federal Security Service (FSB) imposed a clear state presence over lines of communication. However, SORM only lived for a short time as multiple network providers avoided practice restrictions while following them on paper. Facing both operational and financial difficulties, the project proved to be unsustainable in the long run. Its selective control over the media characterizes the Russian model of digital authoritarianism. It can be described as the strategy of *divide et impera* when the situation is salvageable; censorship, forced shutdown, and persecution when it is not. In general, Russia's approach to digital authoritarianism mirrors the toolbox they used for censorship regarding traditional media. A clear example of this occurred in Putin's first term in office. In its most renowned episode, the famous political satire show "Puppets" ("*Kukly*" in Russian) depicted President Putin in an evil, gnome-like manner. As one can imagine, Putin was displeased, and Kremlin required NTV to remove the puppet from the show. Channel's refusal to comply resulted in it going under state control and shut down of "Puppets" in 2002. The regime kept up the selective blocking of opposition content rather than a general ban as its general strategy. While the cost of repression (Dahl 2008) is higher for the regime and should be used sparingly, government pressure under patronage networks and the spread of propaganda flies under the radar. In addition to carrying a lower risk of backlash, this builds the opportunity for solidifying pro-government support. Most informally, the song "A man like Putin" by *Poyushchie vmeste* topping the Russian Music Charts in 2002 provided valuable propaganda surrounding Putin's charismatic leadership and strict rule.

As demonstrated by Putin's handover of the presidency to his prime minister Medvedev after his first two consecutive terms, the Russian experience of authoritarianism paid mind to keep up a democratic front in its earlier years. Regime's presence in the offline space is much more evident, deterring the citizens through punishment and intimidation. This was made possible with Putin's consistent executive aggrandizement, leading to a weakened judiciary, whereas the state's operational power was enhanced by the law enforcement agency loyal to the regime. Consequentially, while there is no explicit legal punishment for the action, the regime is quick to deliver the punishment through illegal use of force. State violence particularly targets journalists, to the extent that the 15th of December is the annual Remembrance Day for Journalists Killed in the Line of Duty. The assassination of journalist and human rights activist Anna Politkovskaya in 2006 cemented a point of no return for government pressure on free media, for she was a prominent figure who reported on and condemned the Russian state intervention in the Second Chechen War spanning through 1999 to 2005. Although the perpetrators were brought to court and arrested in 2014, there was no breakthrough on who ordered the contracted killing. Several other examples, such as Nikolay Andrushchenko, Maksim Borodin, and Sergei Grachyov, were all critical of the government on their platforms and found dead under questionable circumstances. With systematic buying of smaller independent outlets and heavy taxation policies which forced local businesses to step down, mainstream media of Russia is already pro-government. Violence on this scale against what is left of the opposition news conveys a direct message. The government's crackdown on dissent is another subject of violence. During the 2011-2012 anti-Putin protests, a protestor had a humorous take on the consistent censorship of freedom of speech, covering his own sign with black box tape to "save the government from the hassle." The following footage shows him roughly handled and escorted to custody by the police.

Compared to its offline presence, the regime's oppression of the online space was mild at first. Russian citizens have enjoyed access to the outside world, although Kremlin came up with alternative channels on which it will have supervision. The regime relies on intermediary liability as service providers are held accountable for giving a platform to an illegal content, creating a business relationship within co-dependency with the government. A prime example was the government's ties with Vkontakte. While Facebook is accessible in Russia, Vkontakte is a much more popular alternative. Vkontakte is accessible internationally; however, its userbase is overwhelmingly Russian. In addition to creating an environment less permeable by the international community, Vkontakte's userbase is reportedly manipulated by the government. Russia's infamous Internet Research Agency acts as the formal

institution of state manipulation and disinformation over the net. Recruitment of "trolls" change or blur the discourse of the political content posted over the site. Trolls use a variety of strategies in their online presence, such as reporting the opposition users, overrepresenting the regime's support, and undermining the regime's critics' cooperation. Apart from drowning out the criticism, trolls might positively interact with a moderate and legitimate political claim through accounts of extremists in order to undermine the credibility of the opinion. In this sense, the Russian model of digital repression is more subtle at first glance and excels at disinformation technologies compared to China's level of surveillance and restriction.

A more direct approach to digital authoritarianism in Russia has surfaced recently. With the Russian Internet Restriction Bill passed in 2012 by the Russian State Duma, "blacklist system" under the supervision of Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media (*Roskomnadzor*) created the opportunity for selecting favorable content. Initially, it aimed to filter content related to drug use, suicide, and child pornography. This aim expanded with the amended list's inclusion of the Federal List of Extremist Materials. Said list prohibits "abuse of mass media freedom" on the basis of adjudication. Undeniably, alleged abuse of mass media consists of a vast array of criticism towards federal and local governance. In March 2018, the scope of repression grew even more prominent as spreading fake news or disrespecting the state authority also became subject to penal sanction. Prior to the 2018 change, Yarovaya Law in 2016 introduced obligations for operators to store user data, which is available to authorities upon request. In combination, Kremlin enjoys significant leverage over alternative media as it can both access the user data and put users on trial over the content.

Over the past decade, Russia's online control has gotten stricter. This fact can be attributed to Putin's authoritarian rule getting consolidated over time. Another reason is the level of threat incumbency is faced with. Russia threatened YouTube and Instagram with a nationwide ban back in 2018, lest they removed the corruption video of Alexei Navalny when he refused to do so himself. Regime dissident Navalny is already banned from Russian TV, has been victim to poisoning, and was arrested immediately upon landing in Russia. His team's video showing the extent of corruption in Putin's Russia went viral and stirred public dissent to the point of sparking mass mobilization. Although President has made a public statement denying the accusations and labeling the lavish lifestyle shown in the video as -ironically- manipulation, thousands have started protesting and demanding Navalny's release. In just a few days, 3.000 people have been detained for partaking in protests. Despite the attempts to remove him from every possible platform, digital media made it possible for the opposition in Russia to cooperate in a protest of this scale. Only

time will tell how Kremlin will react to mass media freedoms from here on. In light of the authoritarianism literature, it would be reasonable to expect that censorship and manipulation will shift into more severe strategies. Mass movements hold the potential for toppling autocratic regimes, even more so with peaceful demonstrations (Croissant, Kuehn, and Eschenauer 2018). The latest protests are potentially destructive not because they are pro-Navalny, but they are anti-regime. Since this underlines the fragility of the regime, the government will most likely attempt to crackdown on remaining freedom of speech, or it will be forced into a democratic opening by the mass.

2.1.2 China as the "Surveillant" Model

Despite their similar mindsets and motivation to team up, the Chinese model of digital authoritarianism differs from its Russian counterpart in several vital points. From the start, China's Communist Party took extraordinary measures to limit the expression of public unrest. The Internet has been subject to restrictions at the same time with its commercialized use in the 1990s. As of now, China is perceived as the leading promoter and distributor of tools for digital authoritarianism, such as facial recognition technologies and AI-based surveillance systems. It can also be characterized with regards to its explicitly harsher stance on freedom of expression. Censorship and partial internet shutdowns are commonplace, with most if not all international media banned from the citizens' access. In an effort to create its own isolated media, the regime has founded its national version of a mixture of Facebook, Twitter and Medium called Sina Weibo. Surprisingly, several Chinese diplomats, embassies, and consulates continue using their Twitter accounts despite the ban. In addition to handing out hundreds of prison sentences to citizens on the ground of their anti-government interactions on Twitter, the government takes more drastic measures in repressing acts of dissent. In 2018, Chinese activist Dong Yaoqiong went live on Twitter and threw ink on a billboard of President Xi Jinping, accusing the Communist Party government of "oppressive brain control." Her account was deleted hours after the incident, with her latest tweet showing several uniformed men waiting outside her apartment. Her family and friends could not reach her until her release from a psychiatric facility in 2019, despite Shanghai police denying knowledge of her arrest from the beginning. Apart from platforms of social media, the regime also has immense monitoring over private communications. The renowned bear "Winnie the Pooh" became the most censored image of 2015 in China (Li 2019; Luedi 2016) due to 'memes' comparing President Xi Yinping to the cartoon character. After banning the image, citizens using the words "Pooh" or "bear" in their private messaging

have reportedly been tracked by the government and prosecuted as they opposed the president. Monitoring to this extent enables the government to take pre-emptive measures on mass mobilization (Qin, Strömberg, and Wu 2017).

The most excellent aide in China's conquest of online presence has been the implementation of Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems. Visual recognition technologies have marked a milestone in digitalized surveillance (Liu and Xiqing 2017). The state invested in CCTV cameras with automized facial recognition. Xinjiang province even introduced obligatory DNA sampling for ethnic profiling purposes in their monitoring process (Qiang 2019), and China's tech firm Huawei allegedly patented a facial scan technology specifically for identifying citizens of Uighur descent in 2018. Above mentioned examples stress the capacity of digital surveillance in protecting the regime from any democratic opening caused by the masses. Moreover, China is aiming to switch over to a social credit system. The initial deadline of 2020 was not met due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but many features of the system are already completed, according to the official accounts. The social credit system provides benefits for the Chinese government in more than one way. With its population of almost 1.4 billion, state welfare is suffering from incompetency. The credit system includes commercial actors such as big businesses and companies, aiming to use big data in both monitoring and assessing the behavioral patterns of citizens. Hence, it will enforce a marriage between state authority and private sectors in maximizing efficiency.

Chinese model's striking importance is the export of high-tech surveillance systems. Under Xi Jinping's rule, the Chinese economy prioritized innovation-based development and sought to set the international infrastructure standards. The state is funding many projects in robotics and information technology. Apart from the exponential expansion in its market share, the Chinese economy has been the trendsetter in the global competition in recent years. With projects such as Made in China 2025, Belt and Road Initiative, and Digital Silk Road, China aims to expand its influence and become the leading distributor of technological advancements. In 2019, the Sino-Russian Joint Innovation Investment Fund was launched in an effort to bring together the two main perpetrators of digital authoritarianism. Although it started off as a primarily symbolic partnership, there were concrete goals set which cumulated improvement of digital surveillance. Subjects of focus in 2020 and 2021 were listed as communication, A.I., and the Internet of Things. Most significantly, Huawei has started to operate in Russia. This cooperation brought about a possible alternative for the Android operating system in Russia, Aurora (Bendett and Kania 2019). Furthermore, China has channeled its economic power into influence over UN sub-agencies in control of internet regulations. International Code of Conduct for

Information Security, circulated in 2015, declared the winner of the debate regarding whether the internet should be a subject of private actors or states. Both Russia and China have supported internet sovereignty by states instead of privatized interests and non-state actors in the international arena (Nye 2014), resulting in the International Telecommunications Union's (ITU) leadership over Internet Cooperation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).

The biggest hurdle between China and Russia's full cooperation in digital authoritarianism is the power dynamic in the relationship. Russia, justifiably, sees the partnership as being tilted in China's favor. Insofar, Russia is greatly dependent on the high-tech infrastructure of China and does not help Russia's efforts in advancing their own. Another reservation is the loss of talents and technology, which is a notion shared by Western countries. While China's "first-mover advantage" has brought the capability to import technologies and technological trends, it also spells out a higher ability to copy and integrate foreign elements. Apart from the possibility of losing promising tech developers and developments, Western counterparts are also guarded against China's stealing of user data. Initially released in 2016, the social network service TikTok has become popular around the globe in 2019 and 2020. This seemingly innocent video-sharing platform has raised questions in many aspects, and the Trump administration has attempted to ban TikTok in the U.S. for the alleged copying of users' data. As expected, TikTok reportedly censors content criticizing the Chinese government or related to the Uyghur oppression. Moreover, a privacy security breach was found as the privacy policy of TikTok does not abide by the data security policies of Google. There are multiple accusations against the platform sending data on usage information, IP address, location data, and keystroke patterns.

2.1.3 Further Implications of Models

China's model of digital authoritarianism seems foolproof in its total control over every channel of communication. Another critical point to underline is the regime's success in distributing means of digital surveillance. For these reasons, experts argue that China's aggressive repression will prevail over Russian manipulation of the media (Weber 2017). Recent studies brought up that dictators allow vertical information flow while disturbing the horizontal flow with the aim of monitoring political actors and activists (Huang, Boranbay-Akan, and Huang 2019), leading to a re-emphasis of dictators' tradeoff between repression and co-optation (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2014; Gandhi and Przeworski 2006; Wintrobe 2000). This tradeoff

is also observed in China, despite its strategy being generalized as repression(Xu 2021). Furthermore, Russia's digital authoritarianism presents a low-tech alternative for autocrats. The debate surrounding the Russian intervention in the 2016 U.S. elections has ironically legitimized Russia's claim of the need for increased state control over information security (Lindsay and Gartzke 2016). Albeit also strengthening the hand of China in the matter, the Chinese level of digital surveillance requires a highly centralized state, absent or dysfunctional parliamentary opposition, complete or predominantly unchallenged rule over the institutions, and means to impose violence over the regime's opposers. Even in the face of willing state actors, structural and societal differences make it implausible for most authoritarian regimes to employ such tactics fully. Many Middle Eastern regimes employ tactics of heavy censorship (El Gody 2007) and surveillance (Gohdes 2014); African regimes do likewise (Mare 2020). However, the digital authoritarian tendencies of these regimes are directly linked to the threat of uprisings, especially in the aftermath of Arab Spring for the formers' case. They do not follow a general pathway of institutionalized digital authoritarian control like Russia or China. It is useful to handle digital authoritarianism with a Habermasian interpretation of cyberspace (Warf 2011) concerning systematic repression and manipulation of opinion in their preferred strategies.

The Arab Spring movement has spelled a critical moment for the exponential increase in the global trend of digital authoritarianism. Social media played a crucial role in every step of the uprisings, from their spark to spread and persistence. The movement garnered interest regarding the causal relationship between political movements and social media usage (Comunello and Anzera 2012; Stepanova 2011; Wolfsfeld, Segev, and Sheafer 2013), as well as a silver lining for creating a counter-trend of democratic openings (Howard et al. 2011). From the incumbents' perspective, it has made the threat of being ousted by mass movement much more prominent. As a result, there was a sharp increase in content bans, restriction of online access, and opposition individuals being targeted (Hussain and Howard 2014). A similar trend could be observed in North Africa's personalistic regimes and is growing (Mare 2020), making these two regions fertile ground for fostering digital authoritarianism and critical for the trajectory of digital authoritarianism in the near future. As is, they constitute an outlier category in which they are not able to institute control like the Chinese Model for their lack of economic means; however, they also do not engage in systematic manipulation like the Russian Model.

The Russian model of digital authoritarianism presents an alternative not only in its lower amount of necessary technicality but also in its subtlety. Manipulation of social networks is easier done and maintained compared to full-scale monitoring. The observable tendency to impose stricter control over the internet in Russia is better

understood by Putin's increasing authoritarianism and need to repress the opposition against perceived threats rather than the Chinese model being a more complete version of its Russian counterpart. The fate of internet freedom in democratically backsliding countries depends on how far the erosion of democratic institutions enables limitations on freedom of speech. Given that the state of democracy on the global level is exhibiting a worrying backslide, it is reasonable to expect that the authoritarian regimes will heighten their violation of civil rights, and the Chinese model's viability will increase. On the other hand, the future of digital authoritarianism is yet to be decided. Struggle between the Digital Deciders -a group of as-of-yet undecided countries- and international legal bodies (Writer et al. 2019) will determine the trajectory of digital authoritarianism and its ground of applicability.

2.2 Right-Wing Populism and Media

Populism, despite being an increasingly popular field for scholarly work, is shrouded with vagueness to the point that pointing out its ambiguity became a cliché (Panizza 2005, 1). Amongst a variety of approaches to populism in its thin-centered ideology (Mudde 2004), logic (Laclau 2005), and discourse (Hawkins 2009). For reasons of clarity, this thesis uses Laclau's (2005) emphasis on "us vs. them" and Moffitt's (2016) definition as a "political strategy" based on performance and mediation. The notion of "mediated populism" builds the linkage of populist movements and media control as the constant need to appeal to the public is a fundamental part of the populist strategy. "Reality construction, framing, news-making, media logic, and agenda building"(Mazzoleni et al. 2003) are constantly abused in maintaining popular support. Populist rhetorics' discrediting and erosion of institutional mechanisms limit the available regulatory overseeing of other actors. Populists target media out of necessity and create an environment of "us vs. them" to the extent that 'truth' drastically differs between the two camps.

The distortion of participatory democracy that democratic backsliding brings about include several mechanisms (Corrales 2020); of which sectarianism (Collier 2001; Collier and Collier 1979; Pappas 2019), demonizing the opposition (Mudde 2004; Müller 2016) and declining pluralism (Diamond 2020) are of interest to this thesis' scope. All three are mechanisms further abused by populists in strengthening the endurance of their incumbency. The populist communication style (Block and Negrine 2017; Nai 2021) creates a positive feedback loop in enabling populist abuse of the media. Furthermore, right-wing populism specifically emphasizes nationalism,

championing "the people" and limited international influence (Brubaker 2017), simultaneously increasing the populist leaders' unchecked power over the media and stripping of the international pressure in countering its abuse. Furthermore, the anti-establishment rhetoric makes conventional media one of the first targets for right-wing populists. Within this framework, remnants of the traditional and digital conventional media stand against the "will of the people" and symbolize the old establishment oppressing it. Media makes an easier target for populists for it holds less institutional value and is vulnerable to crony ties, making it relatively easy to capture with a low cost and potentially high benefit in strengthening the personalized regime (Krämer 2014, 2018; Postill 2018).

Recent work on populism touched upon populists' use of media in solidifying their regime by extensive propaganda and further division of the electorate. A different branch of literature focused on authoritarian regimes' control and oppression of the media in prolonging their regime. However, both can be instrumentalized simultaneously in a democratically eroding setting. Dictators and populists alike are faced with the threat of being ousted by the populace excluded from power (Svolik 2012), making digital media a dangerous zone for them due to its potential for the mass organization. Apart from taking direct measures in countering this threat, systematic manipulation is also helpful in reversing the tide in their favor. Media, in its digital and specifically the traditional form, is heavily influenced by political power (Seymour-Ure 1974). Furthermore, digital media is a handy tool in circumventing traditional media (Schroeder 2019). With advancements in technology, many companies hold a monopoly over the newest software and tools, creating a "networked feudalism" under them (Unver 2017, 129). Neo-patrimonialism under right-wing populists further enables the crystallization of hold over technology and data by creating a co-dependency between the state and private sector's interests. At the cost of state resources and violation of essential privacy, the harvest of big data provides big companies with profit maximization, whereas governments become equipped with the means of countering regime's dissidents.

2.3 Methodology and Case Selection

This thesis approaches the classification of new digital authoritarian cases from a basic game-theoretical cost-benefit consideration on the incumbents' part. The benefit is conceptualized as increased control over the social sphere and solidifying the personal regime of the incumbent. Costs are the potential domestic backlash, inter-

national pressure, and economic investments. It is crucial to note that the increased control and domestic backlash factors interact with the gradual process of democratic backsliding and increasing populist characteristics of the regime. Process-tracing was picked as the ideal method for this thesis as it highlights a sequence of events and argues for a pattern. Since the hypothesis exerted here is that a comparable pattern of digital authoritarian action exists across populist cases, this method is suitable for providing systematic within-case evidence. It would be especially useful in eliminating the main alternative argument -that they adopt increasingly authoritarian policies with the most drastic strategy available to them, simply due to their time in office and rise in power. The sequence shall clarify that the implementation of strategies corresponds to the populist's motivation and available tools in countering the democratic threat posed by media, rather than the time he or she held the office.

The main limitation is the generalizability of the claim since the main strength of this method is making within-case inferences while ruling out their alternative explanations - that an omitted factor caused the effect or the sequence's relation to the endpoint was spurious. Since the argument is in favor of an overarching mechanism, the assumption is that cases are causally similar. For this reason, a comparative method was used to extend the applicability over a single case. Observable similar processes will showcase the pathway leading to one categorization of digital authoritarian strategy, whereas distinguishing processes will lead to the other in the case that the null hypothesis can be rejected. For the reasons stated above, most different systems design was picked to fit the scope of this research. Two cases of varying GDP, social cleavages, and populists' time in office were picked, but they share the dependent variable of digital authoritarian practices as their common denominator. Their GDPs are vastly different, with Turkey's being 761.4 billion and Hungary 163.5 billion$ respectively. Their populations are equally different, with Hungary having 9.773 million against Turkey's 82 million. In addition, Turkey is eight times bigger than Hungary in acreage. In sum, they have different levels of Internet penetration and means to alter the media landscape regarding the cost factor stated above. The post-soviet experience influences Hungary's social profile in its tendency to depend on personalistic regimes (Cianetti, Dawson, and Hanley 2018). While both countries have an east vs. west social cleavage, Hungary's version is linked to said post-socialist experience; it takes a liberal vs. conservative dimension in Turkey. Lastly, and most importantly, they are influenced by different regions and international actors seeing that Hungary is a member of the EU while Turkey has failed to qualify for the membership. Arab Spring has had a more prominent effect on Turkey than Hungary due to geographical proximity and shared religious char-

acteristics. The recent crises Turkey faces made it vulnerable to an anti-government mass movement similar to Arab Spring. On the other hand, Hungary is becoming increasingly intertwined with Kremlin's policies and embracing its influence.

In contrast to their many differences, both are increasingly referred to in their control over the internet, populist policies, and undermining of democratic institutions. Both cases follow an increasingly populist discourse in their political arenas and refer to the populist style of communication (Erçetin and Erdoğan 2018, 2021). Hence, they meet the scope conditions of right-wing populism and democratic backsliding and foster digital authoritarianism. The pressure of an internal factor – European Union membership- was there (with the harmonization packages) for Erdoğan's Turkey in its earlier years, while it was apparent throughout Orbán's time in office. This provides further room for comparison by tracking changes in strategy accompanying the change in their political circumstances.

Another reason for these two cases' selection was taking an in-depth look at their populist shift. Based on the data available, the results posit a puzzle seeing that although their democracy scores are decreasing and populism is becoming rampant, net freedom scores of the cases seem to be improving, such as the case of Hungary. This thesis argues that nuances of the shift are omitted in scores (e.g. violations of user rights scores improve while fake news, trolls, and bot accounts become prominent, for the additional "users" are not the one's incumbents take action against), and a qualitative analysis is needed for a better understanding of the shift.

The following chapters aim to explore two questions: case-level comparison in addressing the gradual change of both cases in terms of the aforementioned explanatory variables, and a historical narrative of within case shifts' generalizability in their resemblance to the Russian, Chinese, or a new category as they grow more authoritarian. The argument treats new cases between a continuum of the two main models and exerts that certain qualitative differences diverge them from their predecessors. Likewise to the democratic backsliding it is accompanied with, the populist shift is built in a piecemeal fashion. Keeping in mind the aforementioned continuum aspect, the cases are expected not to follow a linear pattern, making their starting point, trend, and timing of change important points to this argument.

In line with the literature, a basic classification of tools and strategies instrumentalized by populist leaders in achieving a digital authoritarian setting was used. Media takeover, censorship, and manipulation were focused on as they shape the gradual framework of transition to digital authoritarianism. The first strategy, while being commonly referred to in political communication literature surrounding traditional media, is absent from the digital authoritarianism toolkit. Internet shutdowns, tar-

Table 2.1 Ideal Types of Digital Authoritarianism, Main Models

	Chinese Model	Russian Model
Control Over Institutions	State controlled	State controlled or pro-government
Legal Pressure	Full control, close to none	High
Restriction on Content	Extremely high	High
Crony Relationships	Full control, none	Extremely high
Persecutory Action	Extremely high	High
Employment of Trolls	Full control, none	Extremely high
Delegitimization of the Mainstream Media	Full control, none	Close to full control, low
Surveillance	Close to full control	High

Table 2.2 Ideal Types of Digital Authoritarianism, New Cases

	Turkish Case	Hungarian Case
Control Over Institutions	Extremely High	High
Legal Pressure	Extremely High	Moderate
Restriction on Content	High	Moderate
Crony Relationships	Extremely High	Extremely High
Persecutory Action	High	Moderate
Employment of Trolls	Extremely High	Extremely High
Delegitimization of the Mainstream Media	Extremely High	Extremely High
Surveillance	High	Moderate

geted persecution against online users, and surveillance were addressed under the general topic of restrictions on digital media, with persecution against online users being the most common one. Strategies were reshaped into a categorization based on eight items: the capture of the state and media institutions in controlling media output, changes in the legal framework, restriction of opposition content, crony relationships, persecutory action towards opposition individuals, employment of trolls, delegitimization of the mainstream media, and h) surveillance. The Russian and Chinese Model's fit into this categorization can be seen in Table 1 above.

For new digital authoritarian states especially, sequences overlap and intertwine with one another as digital authoritarianism takes root. Their demarcation points are discussed in further chapters within the historical narrative. This allows for systematic documentation and comparison of cases. Comparable or different patterns, preceding or succeeding authoritarian accretion likewise is crucial to take note of. Such patterns were identified in tandem with the preceding literature review and aim to underline the divergence from classic scholarly work on political communication and complement this thesis' focus on populist regimes. The suggested third typology of digital authoritarianism of Turkey and Hungary can be observed in Table 2 below.

As can be seen, economic costs render total control hard to achieve for both cases if one compares it to the Chinese Model. However, they also lack the Russian Model's control over the media landscape. Whereas the Hungarian case misses the means

to apply pressure through state institutions due to its EU commitment, Turkey is more similar to Russia in that aspect. Since both cases fit into the populist communication style, they resemble the Russian model as they expand their area of influence. Similar to the points made above, Tables 1 and 2 are necessary for drawing the three ideal types but not sufficient in explaining the shift into them. Because of this reason, a qualitative analysis of process-tracking is included to highlight the nuances between cases. The exerted argument is that the Turkish case is similar to Hungary rather than the Russian Model in its causal mechanism of reaching the endpoints listed in the table, and the cases listed in Table 2 provide a generalizable typology for right-wing populist cases.

3. TURKISH CASE OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

Unfortunately, in the last decade, Turkey has garnered international attention with its violation of free media. As stated in the literature (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020), her track record in media freedom has been far from perfect since the 1990s. Governments have displayed consistent patterns of restriction and punishment for opposition outlets as well as apparent favoritism towards pro-government ones. The remaining content opted for appealing to the relatively stable opposition voter base. The electoral success of Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) back in 2002 failed to signal a deviation from this path in its early years. As 2021 marks their 19th consecutive year in government, we can observe a steady increase in media pressure over AKP's time at the helm of parliament. The key argument of high political and societal polarization stands (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, and Yıldırım 2014). In addition, another process we must observe is the democratic backsliding Turkey has experienced over the last two decades (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020). Indubitably, consequences of the accelerating authoritarianism are evident, with Turkey now being dubbed as "the largest prison for journalists" (Eski 2019).

Turkey, especially the "New Turkey" Erdoğan declared after the 2011 legislative election victory, paints an illustrative example of media violations. Admittedly, Turkey's shortcomings in media freedom precede Erdoğan and his party. The media has, notoriously, stayed in line with a multitude of governments and changed its discourse in accordance. Sensitive topics relating to ethnic and religious minorities were unanimously avoided. 1980 coup provided a window of opportunity as the media expressed more diversity thanks to democratic transition (Bayram 2010). Similar to Latin America (Guerrero 2014), a wave of deregulation in the early 1990s resulted in further commercialization (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020) and led to "captured liberal" media. It is necessary to mention here that the literature on political communication refers to both direct (or classic) and indirect censorship (Shadmehr and Bernhardt 2015) over media in its "captured" aspect. Hence, with

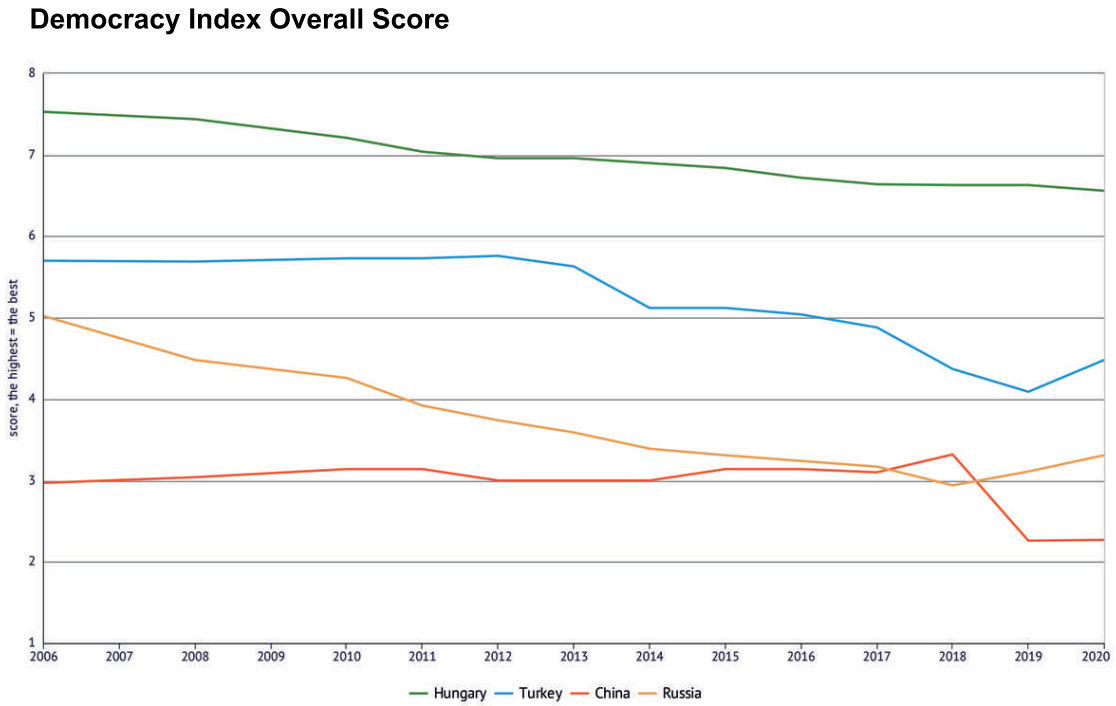
the direct and indirect censorship media is now facing, Turkey's media freedom has hit an unprecedented low.

The following chapter aims to describe the process of the Turkish case of digital authoritarianism under AKP's rule regarding tools and strategies mentioned in the previous section. Three strategies are essential: media ownership and leverage of government founded upon crony relationships, censorship and bans on alternative media, intimidation of its users by abuse of legislative framework, and lastly, employment of manipulation by trolls and bot accounts.

3.1 Media Ownership: Creating a Government-Friendly Media Landscape by Crony Capitalism

As is the case with the general populist rhetoric, Erdoğan and AKP came to power as challengers to the existing regime and status quo. As a prominent party figure, Erdoğan has explicitly been vocal about his distaste in media since the beginning, for its being owned by the "elite" and maintaining the status quo. Another factor of utmost importance in shaping this attitude was Erdoğan's experience in Refah Partisi (Welfare Party). Existing media outlets held Erdoğan and RP in a negative light. This was made evident with the four months imprisonment sentence Erdoğan received due to reciting a poem in 1997. Media coverage regarding the adjudication showed apparent enthusiasm about the unfolding of events, with the most memorable headline being "He will not be able to become even a headman" (Radikal 1998). This headline became a central piece of Erdoğan's populist rhetoric in underlining "the people's" triumph over the preceding regime in later years. In combination, the two motives mentioned above propelled AKP and Erdoğan to replace the media with a pro-government one. Control over traditional media has set the stage for AKP's digital authoritarianism. As the media became tied to conglomerates owning several pro-AKP outlets, said outlets' news sites became a projection of their traditional counterparts. In tandem with the increasing control, 'professional' digital media became dominantly in favor of the government.

Figure 3.1 Democracy Index Scores



Turkey's descend into competitive authoritarianism came gradually. As Figure 1[1] shows, it is not unique in this aspect that each of the four countries mentioned throughout this thesis has experienced a slight but consistent decrease in their democracy scores over the last fourteen years. AKP's media control was no different, a 'patient struggle' against the conventional media (Aladağ 2013). Between 2014 and 2018, the asymmetry in media ownership in pro-government and opposition was made official. This clear government bias was the consequence of a series of changes that took place since 2002. By buying outlets and shifting ownership to businessmen with close ties to the government, AKP has laid the ground for what came to be called *havuz medyası* by its opposition.

The most significant institution AKP abused as a means for seizing media companies was Savings Deposit Insurance Funds (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu, TMSF). In the aftermath of the 2000-2001 economic crises, many media assets (such as Aksoy Group and Uzan Group) were confiscated and transferred to TMSF due to the debts of their parent holding companies (Sümer 2011). Said assets were later subject to tender offers, which transferred them to favorable businessmen. AKP also introduced its circle of businessmen into media ownership. By mid-2007, new business groups dubbed "pro-government circles" entered the scene (Yılmaz 2016). As their shared characteristic, they had ties to either AKP or Erdoğan

[1]Data taken from Global Democracy Ranking dataset.

himself. An illustrative example of such would be the Albayrak family and the formation of Turkuvaz Media Group. The father is Sadık Albayrak, who is an Islamist intellectual and journalist himself. Through their similar backgrounds and time in RP, Erdoğan and Albayrak formed a close bond dating back to the '80s. Albayrak's son became the CEO of Calık Group (another government-tied group) at the start of 2007, and Merkez Media Group was transferred to Calık Group in less than a year. This situation was brought on due to the former owner group's financial struggles and admittance of fraudulent partnerships. Nevertheless, the transfer of ATV to Calık Group and following the pro-government influence of Turkuvaz Media Group displayed the government's favoritism and resulting media bias. It is also no surprise that the TMSF mentioned above held the tender regarding this matter. Another instance of this nature was the change in Cukurova Group's ownership, as its media properties were also confiscated due to debt and later sold to Ethem Sancak in 2013. Sancak has been the owner of another media group between 2004 and 2009, in which he gave increasingly positive coverage of AKP. Sancak also repeatedly vocalized his love for Erdoğan, later banned from access by a court ruling per his request. Hence, this purchase raised justifiable concern on media objectivity, especially in light of the alleged misuse of authority in the price set by TMSF.

While being picked as the most important milestones for the media landscape of media ownership, above mentioned events are not the complete documentation of the media handover. Further changes in ownership took place throughout AKP's government of nineteen years. However, they can be generalized as the corroboration of crony relationships rather than changes in the outlets' political stance, such as Turkuvaz Media Group being sold to Zirve Holding after just one year under Calık Group. Hence, these changes mainly affected the distribution of influence amongst pro-government circles, whereas the media's asymmetry between opposition and pro-AKP voices was maintained.

Another aspect of government-media cooperation was business interests consonant with one another. It was a publicly known fact that existing media companies were tied to the government in sectors other than the media, primarily in construction (Elmas Balancar and Kurban 2011; Somer 2010), which led to an increasing co-dependency of interests over time. By 2014, half of the media companies had dominating shares and influence in construction, namely Doğuş, Kalyon, Demirören, İhlas, and Albayrak Media Groups. At the same time, some of the said holding companies and a few from the remaining half had shares in the energy sector (Corke et al. 2014), making it as popular as construction among groups. Seeing that both construction and energy sectors are heavily influenced by government policies, tender offers, and outsourcing, a positive correlation between media groups' shares in

these fields and pro-government coverage can be linked to the cause of crony relationships they have formed. Furthermore, media companies have continuously benefited from controversial government contracts and tax amnesties. Amongst the most notable examples were Doğuş Group's winning the bid for a US$702 million bid for Galataport in 2013 and Kalyon Group's TRY9.5 billion railway construction contract. As an example of the latter, the owning companies for Yeni Safak and Kanal A have had their debts almost wholly erased between 2005-2009, a sum reaching TRY190 million combined (TBMM 2013). Albayrak Group had again benefited from a 97.8% discount in their tax debt in 2019. In between the said timeframe, several groups and conglomerates were brought up in relation to government contracts and amnesties on tremendous amounts of tax debt each year. The groups holding shares in both the media and construction, such as Albayrak and Kalyon Groups, were mentioned multiple times in a year for allegedly corrupt government contracts. These examples were picked to illustrate the amount of reliance media groups display in the government, for the length of this thesis would be insufficient to list every crucial instance of such nature and serve little in the development of the argument. For the sake of highlighting the pattern, it is worth mentioning that an amendment was made to clause b of article 21 of Public Contracts Law in 2018. Said amendment had introduced the circumstance of the administration deeming it necessary in determining the procedure followed. Hence, the change of 2018 equipped the government with almost unchecked power over holding public contracts with the negotiated tender procedure. Negotiated tenders have been criticized for the lack of transparency in the process and negotiated price, and the participants being predominantly pro-government companies as the state could invite participants it deems fit. Reportedly, Kalyon Group has won 11 out of 17 large scoped public contracts with the aforementioned 21/B procedure, while it was invited by the administration to 5 others, leaving only one tender it has taken with open contract procedure.

The extent of "crony capitalism" (Aligica and Tarko 2014; Enderwick 2005) and direct government influence in media ownership was made obvious with the leaked tapes in 2013. According to the voice records, Erdoğan himself organized the sale of Calık Group's media assets, while prime minister Binali Yıldırım handled the funding of the purchase by Kalyon Group. Various businessmen who were allegedly part of this funding were promised public contracts and further economic privileges by the government (MOMT 2018*a*). Over time, the reach of conglomerates extended and covered an even larger portion of Turkey's media landscape. Each of said companies owns several outlets in various forms, including newspapers, TV channels, and online news sites. Hence, another distinctive pattern is the monopolization of news.

A striking example was the finalized buyout of Doğan Media Group in 2018. The purchase cost Demirören Group the controversial price of $916 million. Doğan Agency was issued a TRY3.75 billion tax fine back in 2009, resulting in two leading newspapers being sold to Demirören Group and almost immediately adopting a pro-government stance. The fall of Doğan Group was seen as the milestone in Erdoğan's crusade against free media for 21 out of 29 daily newspapers, and 90% of the newspaper circulation would be pro-government following this transaction. While being targeted, Doğan Group was regarded as a "neutral" company in its political stance and balanced news coverage. Hence, its change in ownership crystallized the pro-government dominance in media and monopolized a number of influential outlets under the Demirören Group.

Although the base of pro-AKP media indeed materialized between 2007-2014, above mentioned further changes spelled out a change in its structure. Several conglomerates bought smaller pro-government media groups, leading to a media concentrated in the hands of big corporations and open to instrumentalization by state actors (Çarkoğlu and Yavuz 2010; FreedomHouse 2009). A few prominent figures dominated the media, and the outlets they owned became increasingly vocal about their support to Erdoğan. In turn, public projects, tenders, and tax discounts favored these figures on a regular basis. Another means of profit is ad revenues backed by the government. As Irak (2016) reported in an illustrative comparison of figures, in 2014, pro-government media has had 62% of reported ad revenues while their circulation adds up to 25% of all media. On the other hand, opposition media had a full 2% of total ad revenues. Anadolu Ajansı (AA), a reporting agency older than the republic itself, had a 545% increase in state support in 2014 compared to 2002. Coupled by the fact that AA's Twitter coverage consists 91.1% of AKP, it is no surprise that the government is willing to back AA's economic shortcomings. Moreover, newspapers that were bought by groups close to AKP lost around 13% of their circulation share within a year of their sale (Yıldırım, Baruh, and Çarkoğlu 2020), making this large-scale move in ownership absurd, to say the least, in terms of profit (Irak 2015).

In addition to the patterns mentioned above -confiscation by TMSF and patronage linkages over business interests- of forming a media landscape based on crony relationships, a last and more minor change in media ownership was made possible due to the attempted coup in 2016. Samanyolu Group, Feza Publications Inc., and Koza Ipek Group all ceased their publication after the government crackdown on Gulenist[2] media. TMSF has once more played a crucial role in the change of

[2]Supporters of the leader of religious network Cemaat (Community) Fethullah Gulen, who is the alleged perpetrator of the attempted coup in 2016.

ownership as Koza Ipek Group, with the entirety of its assets, was transferred to TMSF. With Decree 674, It was also granted further privileges as the law trustee for captured assets before their closing down. In 2018, another amendment put TMSF directly under the Office of Presidency while other financial institutions were bound to the Ministry of Finance.

As illustrated in the pages prior, AKP's media governance built upon a complex patronage network with crony relationships with conglomerates at its base. In seizing control of the media, AKP has transformed the scope of a state mechanism, namely TMSF, and abused it intending to alter the media landscape of Turkey. With the party's access to state resources, it has increasingly and continuously favored progovernment outlets through public contracts related to various business interests. It has replaced the media's supposed role as a watchdog with the co-dependency of the media and government. Both the financial figures and breakdown of the process point to the fundamental role of crony capitalism in AKP's approach to media and corroborating the patrimonial rule of Erdoğan. Hence, the author argues against the use of the term "neoliberal media autocracy" (Akser and Baybars-Hawks 2012) for the Turkish media setting. Consistent abuse of state power, personal ties, and economic privileges characterize the process, whereas principles of free-market and profit were deliberately pushed aside. Dominance over ownerships of traditional media outlets served as the foundation for AKP's digital authoritarianism, for it allowed the government to control the 'formal' form of digital media. Following the capture of their traditional counterparts, each news site started to offer progovernment coverage of events. This has laid out the need for AKP to control more 'informal' means of digital media such as social media outlets. The following section focuses on said forms of digital media. However, it should be kept in mind that this form of media's attributed "alternative" characteristic was due to the control over ownership discussed above.

3.2 Systematic Restriction: Censorship, Bans and Persecution

While Erdoğan has always been quite vocal about his distaste for the media, his opinions regarding social media displayed a whole new level of animosity. He has recurrently accused social media platforms of spreading fake news, being controlled by *dış mihraklar* (foreign hubs), and aiming to destabilize Turkey. For these reasons, he called Twitter 'a new scourge' and 'menace to the society,' repeating similar claims throughout the years. The main factor in Erdoğan's opposition to so-

cial media stemmed from the individualistic nature of the platforms in contrast to government-owned media groups. In the face of increasingly pro-government stances, social media served as an alternative outlet for information as well as an exchange of opinions (Andı, Aytaç, and Çarkoğlu 2020). Another striking characteristic is that the social media has a massive following from both camps in the polarized electorate, making selective censorship an arduous task and risking backlash in public opinion (Behrouzian et al. 2016; Çarkoğlu and Andı 2021). In comparison to state control over media and the use of propaganda in pro-government outlets, social media displayed a vast array of opinions, including those not in favor of the government. In the absence of restricted civil liberties, this provided fertile ground for the mobilization of opposition. Despite a small margin of the youth being active in politics, the opposite stands for their stances online (Irak 2017; Kamiloğlu and Erdoğan 2014), and the usage of social media serves as an alternative outlet for the opposition (Ataman and Çoban 2018; Çetinkaya, Şahin, and Kırık 2014). Magnum opus of the potential of this mobilization was exercised with the Gezi protests in 2013. Although government attempts to control digital forms of media precede Gezi, it has undoubtedly been a milestone in AKP's digital authoritarianism. Following years showcased an increasing level of censorship and persecution over both online users and platforms, culminating with the legislative reform on social media AKP proposed and passed on July 29, 2020. According to this law, social media providers with over 1 million users are to form bureaus in the country. Those who fail to comply will be charged with an increased fine and a drastic decrease in their allowed bandwidth if this point is not addressed in 6 months. In practice, Turkey is pushing for never before seen level of regulatory control over social media, which might result in the death of 'legal' social media altogether.

In contrast to Erdoğan's attitude towards digital media in his following terms, bans and restriction to access did not occur on a large scale throughout AKP's earlier years. One notable example occurred in 2008 due to a user uploading a video containing an offense of libel against Ataturk's person. Although the government clearly demanded the video be deleted, Youtube deleted the content only for those of Turkish IPs. This led to a back and forth between the AKP government and Youtube, but the ban was lifted in 2010 when the offending content was entirely removed. Only three days after this decision, it was banned once more due to recordings of Deniz Baykal's private affairs being uploaded to the site. Again, access was restored following the removal of the content; however, the ban persisted for a couple of months after the deletion without justification. The distinction between AKP's earlier years and later digital authoritarianism is that above mentioned bans on YouTube were sparse, directly linked to the definition in the penal code of the legislative frame-

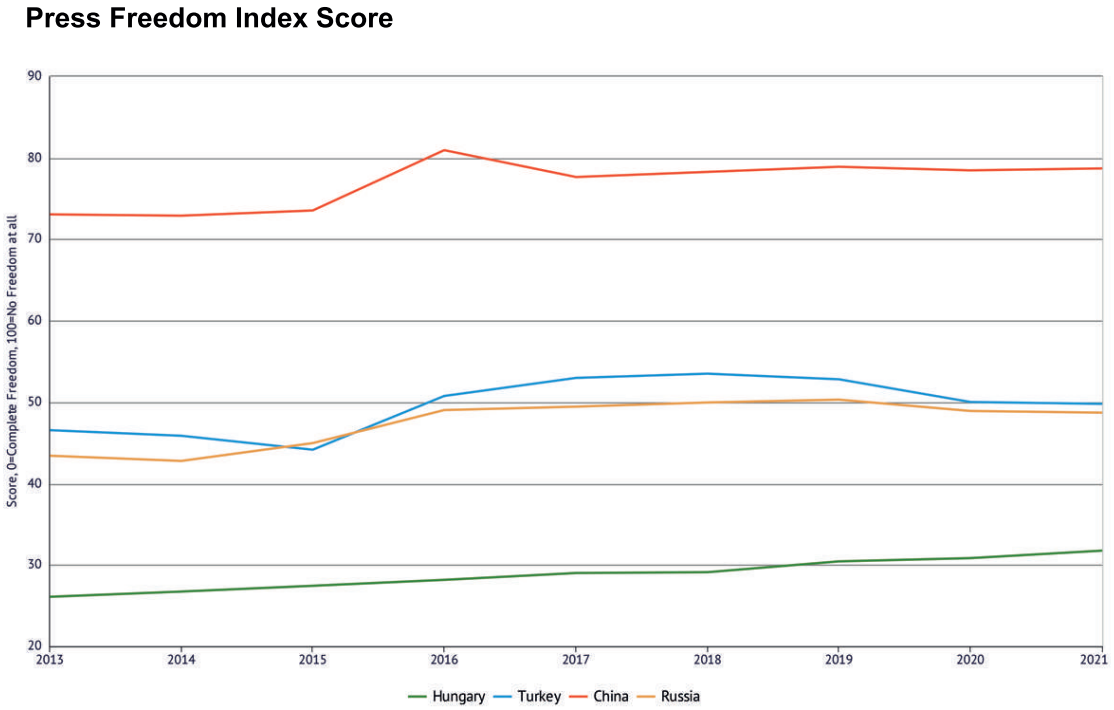
work, and freedom of speech was not directly affected by the said events. In 2007, AKP passed new legislation regulating the circulation of online content and service providers. In addition, at the end of their second term, AKP has passed a controversial legislative decision, namely "Draft Procedures and Principles Regarding the Safe Use of the Internet." In the first half of the same year, the Turkish government has held 501 out of 1,789 requests to remove content by governments, according to Google's data (BBC 2012). This subsequent trend in censorship triggered a widespread backlash, to the point that demonstrations were held in 30 provinces at once. Before its coming effective on August 22, May 15 became associated with "Do not touch my Internet!" protests. The draft regulated a number of words and sites inaccessible to prevent the distribution of pornographic content (in accord with article 8, clause a of the 2007 regulation law mentioned above), especially minors. However, several sites that had no relevance to this type of content but were known to harbor opposition communities were also listed, such as eksisozluk [3]. This led to the justified concern of users that regulations were targeting a selected opposition community and the 'public sphere' they have created (Akca 2010) under the guise of the public good. During the protests, social media played a specifically important role in the organization.

The passing of the draft coincides with the start of the de-Europeanisation process of AKP. In the following years, media has experienced increasing pressure from the government as Erdoğan's policies diverged from EU harmonization. Akin to his right-wing counterparts, Erdoğan opted for a nationalist stance and demonization of international influence in his rhetoric. The primary factor in limiting AKP's approach to general bans on the internet in this period was the European Union (EU) negotiation process being underway and said approach was reversed as EU's influence on Turkey eroded. As Figure 2 shows, Turkey's press freedom was slightly improving over time[4] according to Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, but unfortunately, the fall in 2016 placed Turkey in a worse situation of press freedom than where it has started. Following AKP's electoral success back in 2002, the sixth EU harmonization package was adopted in July 2003 and relaxed the restrictions on government monitoring over media (EC 2003). The parliament even adopted a new Press Law in 2004 to improve freedom of speech and free media. However, the subsequent events proved that this legislative change fell short. As its main shortcoming, it has transferred the control over media from the executive

[3] A collaborative hypertext 'dictionary' based on users' contributions, founded in 1999. It does not operate as a dictionary but a forum, frequently covering controversial political events. It is one of the biggest online communities in Turkey.

[4] The trend is positive between years 2011-2013 as well. Data were not included in the graph due to the change in the operationalization of the variable.

Figure 3.2 Press Freedom Index



to the judiciary branch (EC 2004), making the change contradictory in its aim and application (FreedomHouse 2005). Judiciary has become increasingly involved in direct and indirect censorship in the following years. Regulation of the media is decided in article 28 of the constitution, with circumstances for legal intervention and restriction bound to article 26. The most notable items of interest to this thesis are the protection of the state's being and structure, information regarded as classified and not made public, as well as national security. All of the said items are vague in their definition as to what should be regarded as reasonable ground for government censorship. Furthermore, article 285 in the Turkish Penal Code (TPC) prescribes heavy fines for coverage of ongoing court processes, whereas articles 299 and 301 (introduced in 2005 and 2008) regulate the offense of libel against the president's person, the state, and its institutions respectively.

In the absence of a solid and independent judiciary due to Erdoğan's populist erosion of state institutions, all of the articles mentioned above have been abused to restrict the media. The effect of government pressure on media restriction can be observed in both direct and indirect terms. As its direct form, article 301 has been constantly referred to in court rulings (EC 2007), especially for outlets critical of the government's handling of minority rights like AGOS and Nokta. An example of prime importance in showcasing the broad judicial discretion left at the government's hand when it comes to deciding matters of national security was the investigation

on Can Dundar. He was accused of divulging state secrets to espionage due to his news story on the government's arms shipment to Syria and was sentenced to 27 years and six months in prison. Indirect censorship followed the pressure created by media monopolization as several journalists publishing in press and online recounted the stories of suppression by their employers (Girit 2013). Some have been fired with disagreements over finances being cited as the reason, and those who kept critical journalism in other outlets were fined akin to Dundar. The remaining media landscape displayed limited opposition content as a result of the self-censorship mass purges of journalists have created.

Indubitably, digital censorship in the Turkish media has been completely transformed with two critical moments: The Cemaat-AKP dispute starting from 2012 and culminating with the attempted coup in 2016; and the Gezi protests in 2013. Both had lasting effects on the social media framework as AKP constantly referred to participators sympathizers as "enemies of the nation." Erdoğan intervened with an iron fist thanks to the legal framework mentioned above. Article 301 was constantly abused against journalists for it includes institutions and internet sites as well as persons. Likewise, articles 299 and 125 (offense of libel against an individual) include offenses taking place online. After Gezi protests and AKP's failure to maintain a simple majority in the parliament in June 2015 elections, filed lawsuits under article 299 have skyrocketed. Compared to an average of 144 lawsuits per year in the five years before (and an even lower average of approximately 50 for the years between 1986-2010), there were 1953 lawsuits filed under this offense in 2015 (Önder 2016) alone.

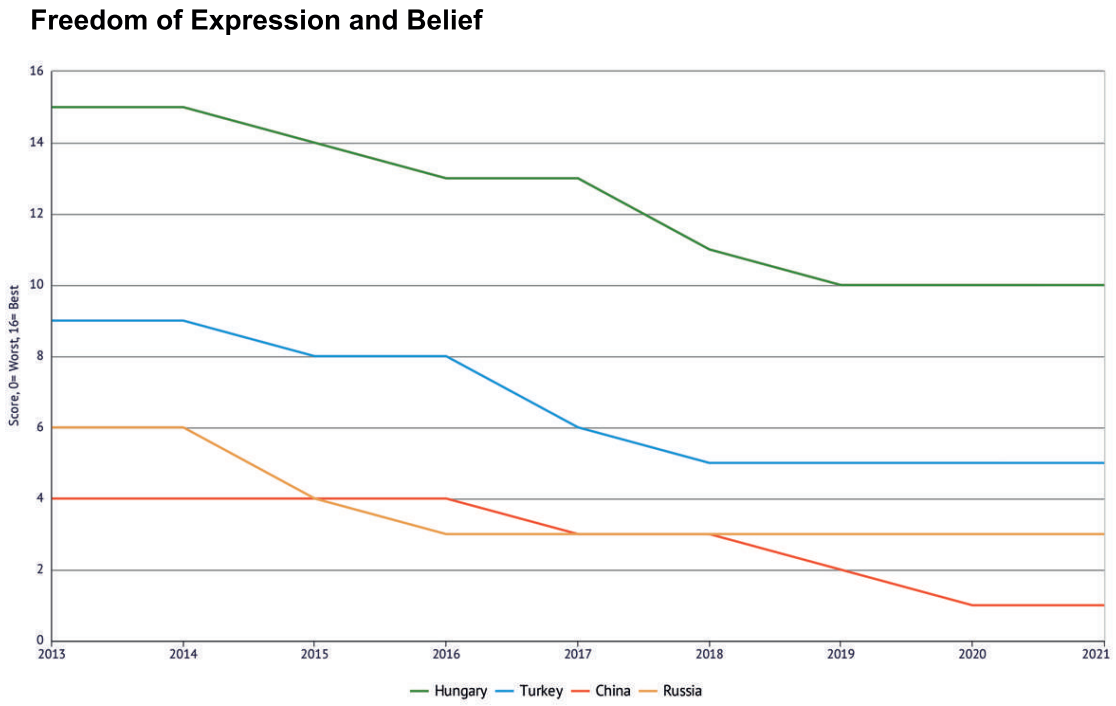
At this point, we should take a closer look at the Turkish new media. The "golden age" of Turkish online media can be attributed to the 2013 Gezi protests. With pro-government mainstream media's coverage of the protests being close to none, Twitter, in particular, shone and lived up to the title of the "alternative" media. Characterizing aspect of social media interactions in this timeframe was the humorous approach to politics (Avcı 2013). Turkey has had a long history of opposition political humor dating back to Akbaba in 1922. The practicality of political humor in Turkey's increasingly authoritarian regime nowadays is twofold: first, it provides a bridge for communication between an ideologically fragmented opposition; second, it openly challenges the aggressive leadership Erdoğan has built as the "Chief"[5] of New Turkey. In this sense, political satire is almost exclusive to the opposition. AKP has countered political humor with the vague legal boundaries of the offense listed in aforementioned articles 299 and 125, whereas the potential for opposition

[5]"Reis" in Turkish, commonly used by AKP supporters with reference to Erdoğan.

mobilization was met with a crackdown on accessibility. True to Erdoğan's words, "Twitter and all, we are going to extirpate them" (BBCTürkçe 2014*a*); Twitter and Youtube were banned in March 2014 (BBCTürkçe 2014*b*). The ban was repeated with the addition of Facebook after 20 days due to a leak of private consultation between government officials. This has become common practice in later years, as most platforms were banned with administrative action in times of social crises. To recount a few, all of the said platforms were banned in 2015 due to their coverage of the murder of a prosecutor in his office (@TwitterPolicy 2015), and access to Wikipedia's article on 2015 general election polls was prohibited. The same actions were taken in times of Suruc Attack in 2015 and Ataturk Airport Attack in 2016, this time with a broader scope of bans, including online news sites. After the leak of Minister Berat Albayrak's emails, Dropbox and several other file hosting services were banned, and journalists faced persecution for their coverage of said mails. Lastly, after several MPs from the Kurdish party HDP (Halkların Demokratik Partisi, Peoples' Democratic Party) were taken under custody, the bans extended to Instagram and WhatsApp (Irak 2015).

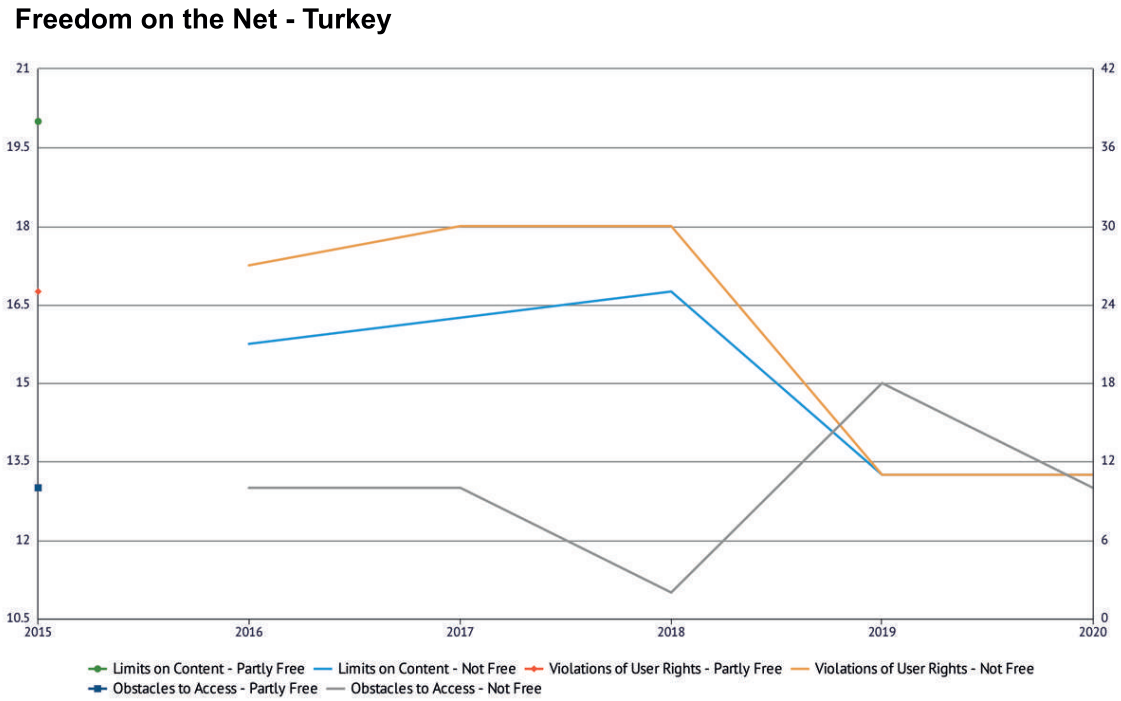
The coup attempt in 2016 perpetrated by Gulenists opened a new page in restrictions concerning national security. An anonymous user going by the alias @fuatavni and seemingly holding pro-Gulenist views with apparent disdain for Erdoğan became increasingly popular until the coup. The account made several substantial claims which were realized in the following days, raising suspicion that an official of high position owned it. Although the account has not been banned officially, police operations took place in order to capture the individual behind it. In similarity to bans on social media becoming common practice after the spark of Gezi protests, persecutions of such for the sake of protecting national security became frequent after 2016. In just two months, 50 journalists were indicted, and 132 media outlets were shut down by a presidential decree (Ögret 2016). This is why the decrease, as mentioned earlier in press freedom shown in Figure 2. Freedom in expression and belief, shown in Figure 3, exhibits a similar pattern and shows the "alternative" content available in the press.

Figure 3.3 Freedom of Expression



After nearly being ousted with the coup, Erdoğan's crackdown on digital media became more severe following his re-election in 2018. In 2018, Turkey alone had made approximately 73% of content removal requests worldwide to Twitter (MOMT 2018*b*). Between 2018 and 2020, at least 389 journalists were put on trial, 152 of them being under article 314/2 (association with an armed organization) in TPC and 147 of them under article 5 (crimes associated with terrorist organizations and aims) in ATL (Anti-Terror Law) (PiA 2013). By 2020, over 450.000 domains, 140.000 URLs, and 42.000 tweets were banned (IFD 2020). Control over content increased even further as Wikipedia was banned between 2017 and 2020 by a decision ruled by Ankara the 1st Criminal Court (TurkeyBlocks 2017). In 2019, a new bill expanded regulations to online streaming platforms such as Netflix under the authority of RTUK (Radyo ve Televizyon Üst Kurulu, Supreme Council of Radio and Television). Figure 4 depicts the drastic increase in limits on content and violations of user rights starting from 2018.

Figure 3.4 Freedom on the Net for Turkey

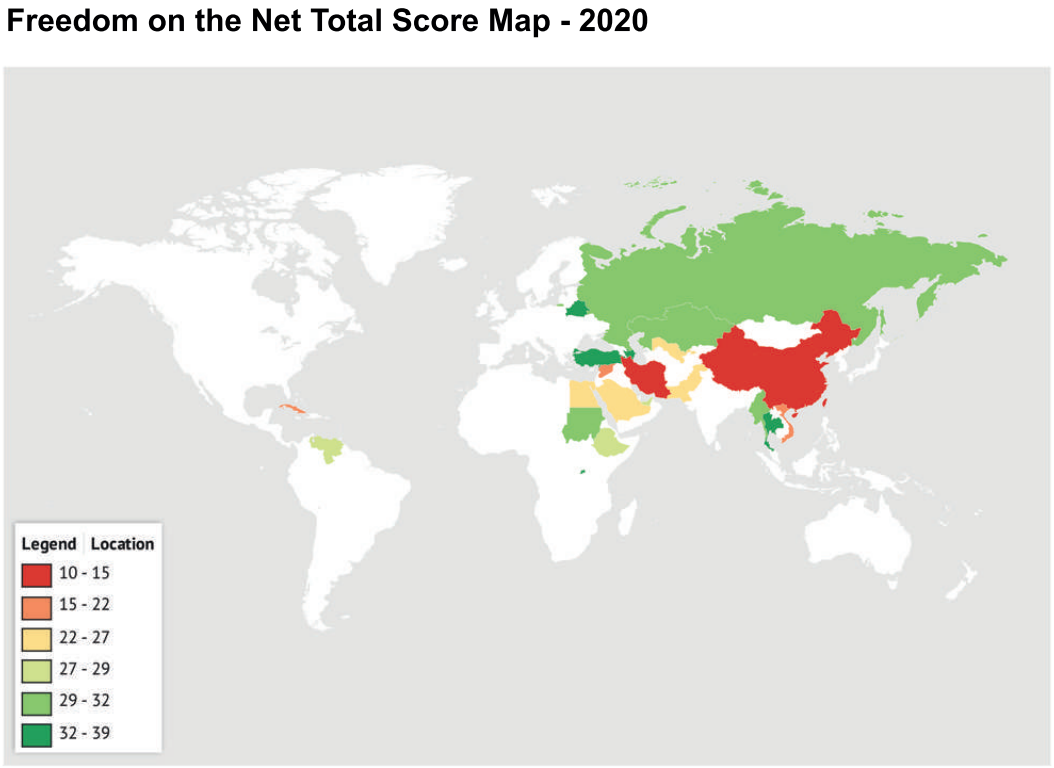


In summary, social media is too close to free for comfort and threatens the survivability of Erdoğan's populist regime in Turkey as it has a chip on the shoulder of the AKP regime's legitimacy. It also provides a platform for marginalized media, which is why it has successfully become the "alternative." There is the opportunity to encourage mass mobilization, NGOs' participation in the political arena, and consensus between opposition voters. Earlier years of AKP had limited means of censorship on digital media due to EU talks' effect. Starting from 2011, the government has started to become increasingly apparent in its control over online content as well as both journalists and citizens as users. Thanks to a series of legislative reforms, AKP was equipped with the means of taking legal action against opposition content. After taking over mainstream media through conglomerates' ownership, online news and platforms became the target seeing their popularity amongst the opposition voters. The events of 2013 and 2016 have strengthened the motivation for administrative action against digital media. Former highlighted the potential of "alternative media" for opposition formation and organization, whereas the latter posed a direct threat to Erdoğan's presidency and provided him with the justification for retaliation simultaneously. However, the government's control came up short in manipulating social media apart from imposing stricter actions, and Erdoğan has turned to disinformation in the remaining platforms. The increasing use of "trolls" and bot accounts with the aim of manipulating public opinion will be discussed in the next section.

3.3 Manipulating the Remains: Trolls and Bot Accounts

As mentioned above, Twitter shone as the primary source of "alternative media" during the Gezi protests. The increase in popularity baffles definition as the Twitter population grew from 1.8 million to 9.5 million (Yaman 2014, 21) within just three months. Although the government responded with more and more legal enforcement regarding online activity, it was insufficient compared to their control over traditional media. Restrictions of access, persecution of users, and resulting self-censorship have made opposition content less visible; however, pro-government content was equally scarce. Said situation painted a contrast with mainstream media. In solidifying its propaganda across all available channels, AKP resorted to bot accounts and a troll army. The significance of Twitter lies in manipulating public opinion and discrediting the claims of opposition voices simultaneously. Using political trolling based on humans or algorithms (Woolley and Howard 2016) is an effective strategy most associated with Russia. AKP's trolls most resemble Kremlin's operation patterns (Saka 2016, 2018; Walker 2015); and even partook in an online tug of war following Turkey's shooting of a Russian fighter jet in 2015 (Bulut and Yörük 2017, 4097). The regional effect of expanding populism and digital authoritarianism can be observed in Figure 5. All of the countries colored in the map are "not free" in their net freedom, making the region the most concentrated area of autocrats of the Internet.

Figure 3.5 Freedom on the Net Map



Political trolling is a subject scarcely touched upon in social sciences. It is of increasing relevance for bots, trolls, and widespread abuse of artificial intelligence has been integrated into opinion-making processes to the point of no return (Polonski 2017). Trolls shape political discourse not only by their framing of the issue but also by setting and following an agenda. "Tweeting to a topical hashtag resembles a speech at a public gathering—a protest rally, an ad hoc assembly—of participants who do not necessarily know each other but have been brought together by a shared theme, interest, or concern" (Bruns and Moe 2014) and such ad hoc assemblies signal the potential for anti-regime sentiments, regime support, and shifts in public opinion.

Following Gezi and Erdoğan's increased attacks on social media, the regime resorted to dealing out sanctions based on the fickle judiciary framework it has built over the years. According to the Ministry of the Interior's data, on average, five people were taken into custody per day in 2017 (MI 2017). On the other hand, AKP is aware of both risks and benefits of social media following. In Turkey, social media has a massive following, especially amongst the youth. According to self-reported data, people spend 6 hours on average surfing the internet per day. The government's incentive to penetrate social media as the last standing hub of opposition is admittedly harder to observe systematically, given the nature of the subject. How-

ever, several journalists have covered the issue. Allegedly, the troll army of AKP was founded by the vice-chairman of AKP and initially consisted of members from AKP youth organizations. Over time, it has expanded into an organization of 6,000 people, with 30 core members setting the trending hashtags for other members to flood (Özay 2014).

Most trolls are believed to be imam-hatip school graduates (religious high schools in the Turkish education system), a branch of schools AKP has close ties thanks to patronage linkages with religious sects[6]. Hence, one patrimonial network of AKP doubled in function and started to influence public opinion online in addition to offline. Trolls are reportedly paid at least 1,000 and get promoted by merit, the best being awarded tenders and commercial business offers from state-linked companies. These accusations were also interpellated in the parliament (BirGun 2016). Between 2013 and 2016 prominence of AKP trolls has steadily increased in their retweets and networks and successfully politicized social media platforms (Bulut and Yörük 2017, 4101). The influence of trolls increased in breadth and depth following the 2016 coup. Thanks to the political environment it created, criticisms of the government were criminalized and framed as attacks on "New Turkey" and "tall man". Given the excessive amount of punishment handed under articles regarding association with a terrorist organization or insulting the state, its institutions, and the president's person, criminalization of online presence could entail severe circumstances, which fueled further self-censorship.

Another use of troll army and bots AKP is fostering is over-representation of the regime support. The party became increasingly engaged in both formal and informal online networks (Irak and Öztürk 2018). Unfortunately, there have been more than one instance where an AKP official was caught red-handed promoting themselves by fake accounts. Opposition media covered the news with "Today's AKP official of mixing up their fake account is..." (Yarın 2017), for minister Ozhaseki and mayor Altepe did the same before. Another AKP MP started to live-stream the Grand National Assembly's closed talks on the constitutional draft from a fake account. While promoting the person is one facet of the issue, an even greater one is promoting a uniform political view. On several issues, drafts and bills, trolls and bot accounts flood the social media and give enormous support to government figures. One recent example of such was the Minister of Interior Soylu's resignation following the incompetent regulations regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. Unconventionally, Soylu shared his resignation letter over his Twitter account instead of the usual formal announcement. Within hours, the hashtag #seninleyizsoylu (*#wearewithy-*

[6] "Tariqah"s or dervish orders

ouSoylu) became a trending topic in Turkey. In the face of a seemingly incredible amount of popular support, Erdoğan refused Soylu's resignation. Although it is not verified, regime dissident mafia boss Sedat Peker made accusations that Soylu has orchestrated the move and has gotten the said support by bot accounts, which is a claim also theorized to be accurate by the experts at the time. Suspicion over tremendous social media support is not unreasonable either. According to the report published by Stanford Internet Observatory, it was verified that troll and bot accounts were linked to AKP organizations. In 2020's purge of propaganda accounts, Twitter declared that 32,424 accounts were deleted from China, Russia, and Turkey, of which 7,340 were Turkish (@TwitterSafety 2020). It is an impressive feat for Turkey to hold a little shy of one-fourth of troll accounts next to the giants of digital authoritarianism. The report further underlined that accounts had shared 37 million tweets, especially in support of Erdoğan, attacks on opposition parties, and demands for reforms (Hamsici 2020). This points to another crucial effect of political trolling and bot accounts as attacks on opposition figures and defamation increase in volume. For both the support and attacks over online platforms, disinformation is heavily instrumentalized. To make the extent of digital manipulation in Turkey more precise, it is "... already one of the countries most exposed to fake news, has one of the highest ratios of bot infections in the world, and is also among the countries with the lowest resistance to fake digital news" (Unver 2019). As the last sequence of control over digital media, the regime has penetrated the hub of opposition and fabricated its own truth in advancing policies fitting the populist agenda. It is no surprise that access to the internet has improved starting from 2018, as shown in Figure 4 above, for the remaining Internet benefits AKP and Erdoğan.

3.4 Conclusion

Turkish case of digital authoritarianism is an important example for shedding light on possible pathways for populist regimes' handling of the free media. As his populist counterparts, Erdoğan assumed office with his struggle against the existing political framework. The media's dominantly opposing views and belonging to the 'elite' made him target the media. While Turkey did not possess a mainstream conservative media Erdoğan could rely on, almost every media outlet exhibited a drastic shift in their narrative after just a decade. The primary reason for this unfolding of events was the crony capitalism of AKP. While holding the traditional media under direct control, AKP has also expanded its influence over the internet, mainly

the news sites of said traditional media. As a result, digital media was regarded as the "alternative" for opposition voters. Just shy of the end of their second term at the helm of parliament, their digital authoritarianism started to materialize more directly, especially in terms of legislative decisions. Gezi period pitted AKP against the online presence of opposition voters and created a demarcation of traditional news and social media on opposing sides of the political debate. After 2016's failed coup attempt, Erdoğan operationalized a crackdown through legal persecution, presidential decrees, and bans on several platforms. Lastly, the remaining opposition presence has been plagued by trolls and bot accounts favoring the government. Through these three sequences, Erdoğan has triumphed over means of alternative information and created pro-government media to prolong his incumbency, solidify his voter base, and further expand his control over civil society.

4. HUNGARIAN CASE OF DIGITAL AUTHORITARIANISM

The case of Hungary has garnered recent scholarly attention regarding its democratic trajectory in the latest years. As 2021 marks Victor Orbán's eleventh year holding the position of Prime Minister, Hungary has turned increasingly authoritarian. The country has accomplished an unfortunate first, as it is the only non-democratic member of the EU since 2020 (Repucci 2020). In turn, several NGOs, international organizations, and member countries have issued demands of political sanctions on Hungary in an attempt to reverse the democratic backsliding it is facing.

Orbán's regime can be characterized by populism and national conservatism. As a distinguishing quality, Orbán openly advocates for an 'illiberal state' in advancing national conservatism. His shift to right-wing became apparent in his first term in office between 1998-2002. Following two elections favored the Socialist Party, resulting in a drastic change in the government. However, Orbán's Fidesz managed to keep its popularity in later years, and coupled with the Socialist's decreasing voter support, won the election by a landslide in 2010. The subsequent decade has solidified Orbán's grip on power as Fidesz constituted the majority in the parliament after his coalition with Christian Democrats. This allowed Orbán to pass several constitutional and legislative reforms. The consequences of said reforms spell out a perfect example of the "executive aggrandizement" (Bermeo 2016) pointed out in democratic backsliding literature. Simultaneously, Orbán expanded his influence, blurred the boundaries of executive decision-making, and grasped the popular vote. His maintaining of popular support is linked to several causes in the literature, such as the weak democratic tradition as a result of the post-soviet context (Krygier 2019), deepening of social cleavages (Palonen 2009), and rising Euro-scepticism resulting from a clash of values (Furedi 2017). An overlooked factor of Orbán's success lies in his gradual capture of the media network, resulting in an enormous asymmetry in pro-government and opposition narratives. Although recent scholarly work aimed to fill the gap in the literature (Fabry 2020; Serdült 2020; Zgut et al. 2020), the issue was raised only after Hungary became a competitive authoritarian regime.

An extensive recollection of Orbán's attitude towards media is hard to come by. In contrast, with many of his populist counterparts, Victor Orbán openly targeted free media since he assumed office. Independent media outlets shrank in numbers and the variety of content they can offer over time. In his crusade against opposition voices, Orbán instrumentalized takeovers as well as restriction and persecution of journalists. One of the last remaining independent media outlets, Index.hu, was met with a change of staff on the grounds of political motivation (Index 2020) in Fall 2020. Calls for the EU to intervene and protect freedom of speech through political pressure were made (IPI 2020), although there is no action taken insofar. In building control over the media, the case of Hungary was specifically successful for its implementation of all three strategies at once: legislative action, financial manipulation, and political pressure (Altena 2017); and the organizational grasp of Fidesz and Orbán resulted in perpetual democratic backsliding where linkage and leverage to EU fell short (Sandoval 2018).

The following chapter offers a breakdown of the building and practice of Victor Orbán's strategies of digital authoritarianism. The case of Orbán's digital authoritarianism is a valuable contribution to literature in showing the solidification of an increasingly aggressive pro-government media landscape. Systematic violation of freedom of speech aids populist leaders like Orbán in spreading and legitimizing their rhetoric as the one and only 'truth.' Diminishing opportunities in accessing alternative sources of information further contributes to democratic backsliding and creates a positive feedback loop, which is why it is worthy of scholarly attention with regards to both digital authoritarianism and populism literatures.

4.1 Media Ownership: Media Empire of Orbán and Simicska

The period of 1998-2002, marking Fidesz's first electoral win, should be mentioned in underlining Orbán's motivations for and means of usurping the media. Indubitably, his first term sheds light on Orbán's following change in strategies when he re-assumed office in 2010. Akin to his many right-wing populist counterparts, Orbán displayed a consistent shift towards a more nationalistic and conservative perspective. While limited in tools available to him, his first term in office had comparable aims and motivations. As another similar trait, Fidesz and Orbán started as 'democrats' challenging the exclusionary characteristics of the Kádárian legacy of the former regime (Rajcsányi 2018). They claimed competency through establishing a domain (Futák-Campbell and Schwieter 2020) by building their 'championing the

people' claim on this aspect. The crucial point of Orbán's first term in office lies in Fidesz's time at the helm of government being cut short. The party's 2002 electoral loss came as a surprise as socialists reclaimed office, and the main reason for this loss was regarded as the party's elitist image (Benoit 2010). In the following years, Fidesz announced a new stance and became a "people's party," explicitly changing their conservative bourgeoise politics in favor of populist rhetoric.

Orbán's quick rise and fall between 1998-2002 signaled significant changes for the party and was the foundation of "Orbánist" policies. 2006 marked another milestone for Fidesz and Hungarian political context, in the form of Őszöd speech by Prime Minister Ferenc Gyurcsány. There is a consensus in the literature that said speech is a key element in Hungarian politics favoring the right-wing for the last two decades. A much less traversed subject is how it directly benefited Fidesz and Orbán. Hungary's post-communist background also affects the populist discourse it builds (Lugosi 2018); hence Gyurcsány's mishap created the perfect opportunity for rejection of Soviet roots. Part of the uprising can be directly attributed to the political environment as a result of the "emotional" policies Fidesz has followed until that point (Rajacic et al. 2007). The change of party slogan as mentioned earlier, "people's party," came in this period since Fidesz 'earned' this title with its role in the protests. This left Fidesz the only effective alternative for MSZP (Hungarian Socialist Party - Magyar Szocialista Párt) and left-wing, resulting in a landslide victory in 2010.

Even before their re-assuming government, Fidesz maintained widespread relevance in the political arena through the networks it has built since the start of the 2000s (Bajomi-Lázár et al. 2013; Gálik and James 1999). It was specifically successful in establishing its own community in business and media. Orbán's created and took over a series of media networks in this period thanks to oligarchs he had ties with. His primary aide in these developments was Lajos Simicska, his old friend from their teenage years and another founding member of Fidesz. Their long-time partnership went as far as Simicska being dubbed the "operational prime minister" (András and András 2019) while Orbán handled the political matters. This title did not exaggerate Simicska's operational significance for the government, for his media empire covered almost every branch. He owned Hír TV, a news channel founded in 2003 and was the first of this nature in Hungary. Unsurprisingly, Hír TV played an important role in broadcasting the 2006 protests. Thanks to their news coverage, more than 1 million people (over 10% of the entire population at the time) have witnessed pro-government Magyar Televízió's headquarters being stormed and eventually brought down by the protesters. Another influential news outlet he overtook was Magyar Nemzet, a conservative newspaper founded way back

in 1938. 1998-2002's conservative coalition with Orbán at the helm channeled state advertising to Nemzet, boosting its funding and saving it from the de facto push into limited visibility of socialist governments prior. Thanks to this move, Nemzet stayed as a strong contender in circulation and has been part of the pro-Orbán media since 2000. Yet another news outlet he had interests in was Heti Válasz, an online conservative weekly publication founded in 2001. The current editor-in-chief is the spokesperson of the cabinet in Orbán's 1998 coalition. Following Fidesz's 2002 loss, he resumed his former political journalism, starting Hír TV the same year with exterior investors' help. He was the CEO of the channel until joining Heti Válasz's editorial board in 2004. Lastly, he founded Lánchíd Rádió in 2007, which offers online streams and national-populist political content.

As can be seen above, the extensive influence on public opinion was possible thanks to the network Fidesz was building within this timeframe. Gyurcsány's mention of the incentive to build a clandestine media directly aimed to oust Orbán from the media presence he enjoyed in 2006. In this sense, both his successor's fall and his rise in popularity were due to the media's influence over public opinion. Furthermore, the first electoral loss Fidesz has suffered was blamed mainly on the persisting post-Soviet media bias socialist parties enjoyed. For this reason, Orbán's loss in 2002 and re-election in 2010 played a critical role in his approach to media. As seen in Figure 2 above, Hungary's press freedom shows a minor but consistent negative trend over the years. This trend is more drastic in freedom of expression and belief shown in Figure 3[1]. Despite ranking first in freedom of expression amongst the four, Hungary has experienced the same decrease in its score, seemingly owing its first place to the initial conditions. After the Fidesz-KNDP alliance acquired the necessary parliamentary majority, Fidesz immediately amended the constitution and removed the government's obligation to prevent media monopolies. This move garnered widespread criticism, especially by the EU, on the grounds that it stood against media freedom and provided the government with the means to circumvent the media landscape at will (Media and Authority-Hungary 2011). In 2014's electoral campaign, Orbán further utilized pro-government media monopolies in his favor, banning parties from broadcasting in TV channels and radio stations, whereas Fidesz continued its airing of campaigns through the NGO Civil Unity Forum (COF) it is tied to.

Keeping in mind the crucial role he played in Orbán attaining political influence over the years, it is striking that Lajos Simicska was the person who became Orbán's biggest enemy in his second term. Although Orbán won the 2010 election and

[1]It can be argued that the questions related to freedom of belief exaggerate the effect, and the shift is due to Orbán's conservative nationalist policies. However, the entire item of D includes questions on how free the media perceived to be by the respondent, existence of self-censorship, and pressure on the journalists, making it suitable for visualizing the trend in media freedom.

Simicska seemed to be his right-hand man, he owned the entire media network of Fidesz's singlehandedly. That is not to deny that Simicska's media empire equally relied on neopatrimonialism and crony capitalism. However, Simicska's media influence meant that he could impact government policies and was a potential contender. This is why right after his 2014 re-election, Orbán asked Simicska to shut down news site Index with the option he signed recently. The pair had a falling out for Orbán made his intentions of balancing Simicska's influence clear. It was dubbed as "media war" in Hungary because of Orbán's implicit admission that he also aimed to create his own media. Simicska responded in kind and used every outlet he owned against Orbán, going as far as displaying the text "Orbán is a scum" on his billboards. He made use of the option on Index and took over the site in 2017 after several Fidesz members showed interest in buying the last remaining online opposition outlet. In 2017 Origo's parent company was purchased by the son of a Fidesz member. The site started to publish several articles in favor of Orbán's policies right after. This development matches the timeframe of Index's change in ownership. Hence, it can be exerted that Orbán tried to counter the opposition's Index with Origo.

After 2015, it was made evident that in addition to pro-government ownership directly aligning with the content these sites offer, the opposite also held true. The only surviving opposition media outlets were able to do so by anti-government funding. Fidesz's win in the 2018 elections and Media War's aftermath delivered unchecked power over media. Most of the outlets formerly owned by Simicska shut down due to financial problems or were sold to pro- Orbán cliques. Hír TV changed ownership and merged with the pro-government channel Echo TV. Lánchíd Rádio stopped its broadcast. Even Magyar Nemzet ceased publication after its 83 years of journalism. To make it even more striking, the last two announced their closure on the same date, only three days after the 2018 parliamentary elections. Hír TV succumbed to the same financial problems after three months. Of formerly Simicska associated media outlets, only Index survived the onslaught.

After Simicska "lost" the elections of 2018, Orbán went on to create his own media empire directly tied to the government. Realized only six months after his third consecutive win, KESMA (Közép-Európai Sajtó és Média Alapítvány - Central European Press and Media Foundation) can be defined as the materialization of Orbán's aim. Said foundation owns over 500 media outlets, including but not limited to above mentioned Hír TV, Magyar Nemzet, and lastly, Origo. KESMA's establishment immediately sparked concern over media freedom in Hungary, and its success leaves no doubt if these concerns were misplaced (Gorondi 2018). Foundation managed to acquire such a vast array of outlets in a short amount of time. Most of the outlets under its control were 'donated' to the foundation right after

its establishment, especially those known to have people with close ties to Orbán in their executive board or ownership. In the end, Orbán reclaimed the pro-government media landscape after his dispute with Simicska.

4.2 Government Pressure: Purges of Staff

Hungarian experience of digital authoritarianism under Orbán is indisputably in a close-knit relationship with the influence of oligarchs, and Simicska specifically. Domination over traditional and digital outlets was the foundation of Orbán's return to power and Fidesz's consistent electoral success. Orbán, in contrast to autocratic regimes elsewhere, generally avoided persecution and violence against journalists. Most of the control he has built over the years relies on manipulating the media market and shrinking arena for independent journalism, giving way to the assessment that the Hungarian government is not behaving in line with the EU's guidelines already (EFJ 2019). Nevertheless, this limited censorship and judiciary action is primarily related to Hungary's association with the EU. Despite Orbán's anti-immigrant policy and emphasis on an independent Hungary 'free' from forced cooperation with the EU, Hungary still abides by EU regulations in the broad term. EU is also not willing to expel Hungary from membership while the Russian-Hungarian autocratic partnership is seen as a growing threat. As a result, there is a semi-functional relationship between the two, one which limits the legislative means for authoritarian action. However, the illustrated scope of ownership enabled the regime to impose government pressure on outlets within supposedly liberal actions. By pushing for firings of critics of the regime and harassment of the opposition, Orbán did everything he could to restrict the available opposition content. Admittedly, it is much milder in comparison to internet shutdowns and bans his authoritarian counterparts employ. However, given that his choice set was already limited with regulations from the EU, there is a consistent trend of minimalizing digital media content that cannot be ignored. The resulting media landscape is predominantly pro-government, and opposition voices are pushed into self-censorship.

Apart from highlighting the scope of media domination Orbán built over time, two news outlets are of specific importance to this thesis as Hungary's most popular news sites: Origo and Index. Index, then named Internetto, was founded in 1995 and Origo in 1998 respectively. With their early introduction to the media landscape, both started to surpass the leading press news agency in popularity as early as 2010. Another similarity is that both news outlets faced immediate political pressure

following Fidesz's win in parliamentary elections. In 2010, Origo was still seen as a mostly neutral news outlet without attachment to a party or figure, and its coverage was less focused on politics. Index, on the other hand, had a staff of twelve journalists reporting on politics. Index's increased emphasis on politics at the time can be traced back to its owner. Although a businessman bought the site, it was speculated that the original name behind the acquisition was Zoltán Spéder, vice president of OTP Bank, who had close ties with several Fidesz officials. Anticipated political intervention after Fidesz's landslide victory materialized much closer than expected, as firings due to publishing content critical of Orbán started to occur. This led to the editor-in-chief for the last 11 years, Péter Uj, resigning from his post. A large portion of the Index's original circle followed Uj's exit in later months. Index has been part of the media network of Fidesz since its change in ownership in 2005, but political pressure was not apparent until Orbán's win and crackdown in 2010. Admittedly, several incidents in the media were attributed to Simicska's economic influence and bribery, such as decisions on editorial boards, the firing of staff, and alterations of content before. However, this time, Index lost all but one member from its long-standing crew of a decade in under one year. In 2014, unbeknownst to its employees at the time, Lajos Simicska signed an option with Spéder for Index's ownership. This option opened a new chapter for Index as the handover became effective in 2017 with Media War, making Index the most influential opposition news outlet.

The other prominent site, Origo's course in this period was almost identical to Index, although the two ended up on opposite sides of the spectrum due to the above-mentioned handover. In 2010, Origo was changed with a former Index employee. In 2011, the editor-in-chief departed from the site and was replaced with another former Index employee. His successor too left the news site in 2013, claiming political pressure from the government was the reason behind his resignation. His replacement also got fired within just one year. This time, the departure triggered a chain reaction in which the whole staff working on the "Origo News" section resigned. His firing from the site was linked to company interests in the official announcement, but much like the ones before him, it was suspected to be a political move seeing that he had a lawsuit against a Fidesz official. Magyar Telekom, the owner of the Origo site, was also accused of being an accomplice in the political pressure of Orbán. Government officials held meetings with Magyar Telekom's executives, in which the former allegedly pressured the latter into intervening with Origo's company decisions and taking a pro-government stance in its coverage (Kingsley and Novak 2018).

The similarities between Origo and Index's transformation seem apparent. Official claims that such a series of changes in owners, CEOs, editors-in-chief, and staff,

not only of similar nature but completely overlapping in their timeframe as well, happened free of political pressure is hardly plausible. Following said changes, the content these outlets air have also undergone a drastic shift. Whether through self-censorship caused by firings or direct government intervention, they have adopted an increasingly aggressive pro-government stance. Furthermore, Media War after Simicska and Orbán's conflict displayed the same pattern. Results of their falling out were apparent as figures close to Simicska were purged from state positions, and in turn, Simicska owned media outlets published criticism towards the government in 2015 mass protests. In response, the state advertisement revenues which served Simicska's outlets disappeared at first. Next, Simicska lost his most critical executive members as heads of Magyar Nemzet, Hír TV, and Lánchíd Rádió stepped down, all at once. Simicska openly challenged Orbán when his news platforms started to support Fidesz's seemingly most promising alternative, Jobbik, after April 2015. This laid the ground for the difference, as mentioned earlier in Index and Origo's pathways. The former became the most popular news site and opposition outlet under Lajos Simicska, whereas the latter turned increasingly pro-government.

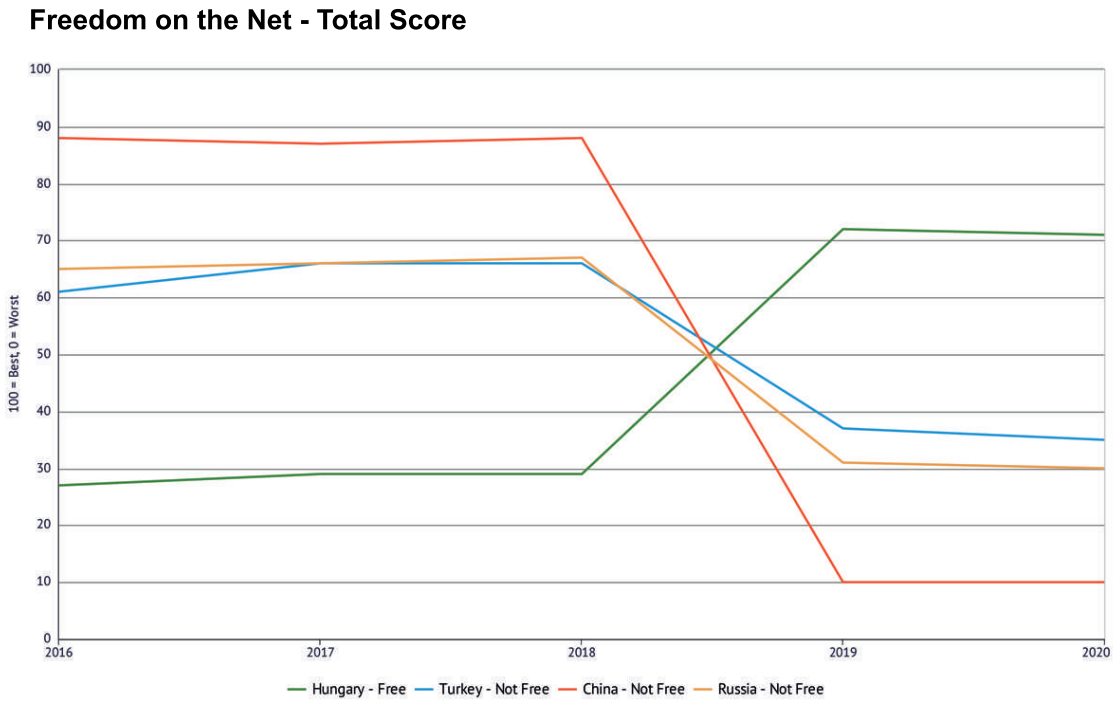
Origo's change in narrative can be linked to a general trend in the Hungarian media. Over time, the outlet published several radical articles in favor of Orbán's policies, especially regarding his anti-immigrant stance. In this aim, it repeatedly spread false news and falsified foreign outlets in order to build a hostile take on the topic (Druckerman 2018). At the same time, its attacks on opposition became more frequent as well as severe. It targets opposition politicians with fake news and keeps at it despite the fines for defamation it has been previously charged with. In addition to fake news and targeting of politicians, journalists face increasing volumes of harassment online (Tofalvy 2017), making content that is not pro-government much less visible.

4.3 Media Manipulation and Fake News

In accord with the regime's close ties to Kremlin, Hungarian digital media has become increasingly similar to its Russian counterpart in recent years. A strengthening factor in this notion is that not only the government Fidesz but its main contender Jobbik is also sympathetic towards Kremlin's policies. All three actors seem to hold the same sentiments, especially regarding immigrants, rejection of widening EU and NGO influence, and the Ukrainian issue. As a result, right-wing propaganda is rampant in Hungarian digital media. The most frequently used tactics

are disinformation and attacks on opposition figures, specifically activists who hold more liberal values for said topics. Paradoxically, the majority of the propaganda revolves around accusations towards independent outlets being biased or "Western propaganda." It also condemns Western outlets for shying away from the truth in the name of "political correctness" and following a liberal agenda, especially on the ground of reporting criminal actions committed by immigrants (Simon 2016). The subtleness of manipulation strategies Orbán favors in advancing his policies minimize the costs of international pressure, for the country's freedom on the net score, shows a positive trend. The trend for all four examples can be seen in Figure 6, and the mechanism behind Hungary's "free" digital media will be discussed further in this chapter.

Figure 4.1 Freedom on the Net Scores



In the political context of Hungary, trolls are mainly used for setting the agenda and over-representation of demand for right-wing policies. Although the legislative framework limits campaigning for political parties, it does not cover online presence. Starting from 2015, Orbán has built a domestic network of trolls to make up for the portion of media ownership he has lost. This had aided him in the heated 2018 elections specifically, in which trolls were employed for maintaining and advancing popular support. In addition to individual trolling, Hungary's manipulation tactics are organized in units. The most popular strategy is creating pro-government Facebook groups, for it is the top 1 social media platform in the country (Sarnyai 2018),

followed by setting up fake news sites. Due to the sheer amount of propaganda sites, objective journalism often gets buried, and fake news decides the country's political discourse. Government-funded mainstream media also participates in disinformation, for example, the circulation of a commercial as a "terrorist attack" perpetrated by immigrants (Komuves 2018). Although their claims of such are falsified, no official correction is being made, and disinformation keeps spreading through other channels of manipulation, burying the truth underneath.

In the aftermath of the election, manipulation of digital content persisted in Hungarian media. One of the most popular groups on Facebook, ELÉG ("enough" in Hungarian), has reached 147,242 followers in 2019 (Szentpéteri 2020). It offers aggressive anti-immigrant content with a strong language and promotion of religious and national values. Another popular platform for similar content is YouTube, as a growing number of Hungarian channels are set up for allegedly "raw footages" of Muslim attacks. Most of the said accounts operate with a Russian IP or are directly linked to Russian Vkontakte sites. Furthermore, Fidesz has utilized a massive disinformation attack before the 2019 municipal elections. The majority of the disinformation being circulated consisted of conspiracy theories surrounding opposition candidates (Capital 2019), spread by automated as well as organic accounts and online trolling. Memes about immigrants became the most popular tactic in spreading disinformation, and even Fidesz's official Facebook account disseminated such content.

Figure 4.2 Freedom on the Net for Hungary

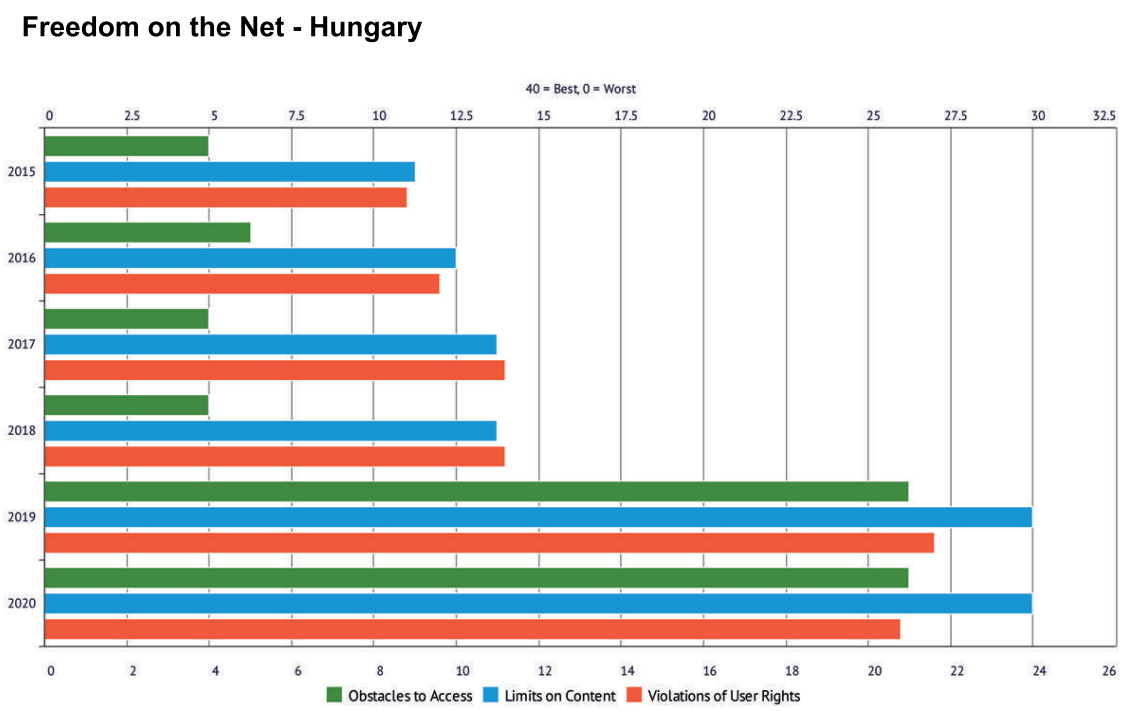
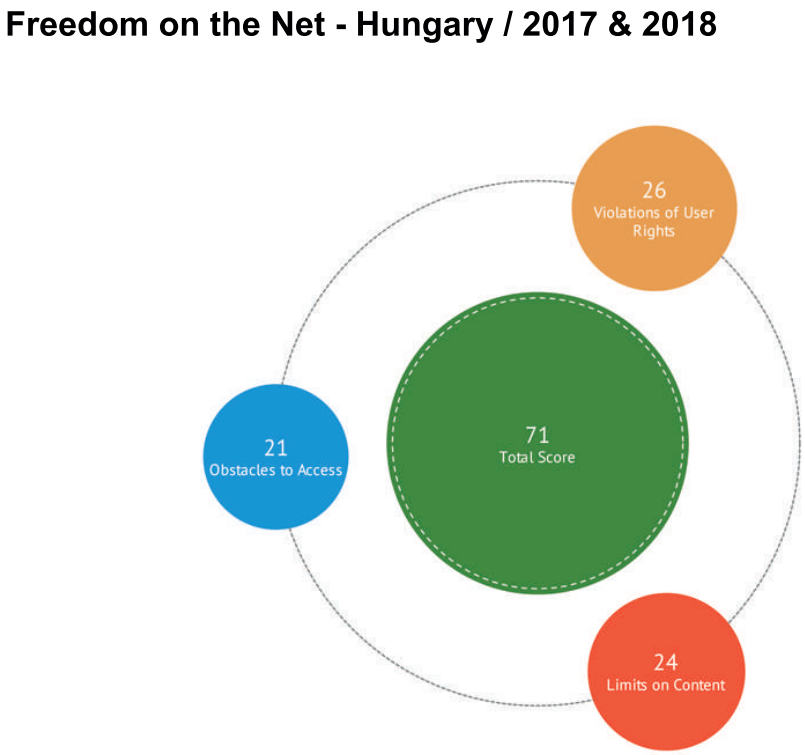


Figure 4.3 Freedom on the Net Hungary



As can be seen in Figure 7, Hungary has a positive trend and is currently listed as a "free" country in terms of web freedom. At the same time, the country has recently lost its "free" status in its overall democracy score and became the first non-democratic member of the EU. It can be asserted that these contradicting trends can co-exist. However, a closer look shows that much of the improvement in its score comes from clearing obstacles to access and refraining from limiting the content. As the qualitative analysis prior underlines, this positive trend can also be attributed to the fact that broader access to the net aided Orbán rather than making the media free. Similarly, limits on content have lessened while demonization of opposition content and the spread of blatantly fake news became commonplace. Figure 8 shows the distribution of the total freedom of the net score for the years 2017 and 2018. Both years were listed with identical scores. However, empirical evidence indicates that the 2017-2018 period has had a decisive Media War in which Orbán abused state resources to solidify his popular vote. Most possibly, the data omits the events because Orbán perpetrated the action through an NGO, did not target a media institution but individuals, and refrained from taking persecutory action. The chapter above aims to make a counter-argument that while it is nigh impossible to capture the nuance in the index, the case-level analysis makes it apparent that the period between 2017 and 2018 was a milestone that the score overlooks. Moreover,

what seems to be an improvement at first glance might indicate that the populist control reached a level where less pressure is accompanied by other strategies and benefit the populist. The same notion would explain Hungary's being the outlier case in Figure 4 and put it in the same category of overall deteriorating net freedom.

Starting from 2015 and increasing over time, a domestic troll army backed by Kremlin has penetrated Hungarian online platforms. Disinformation is disseminated through Facebook groups, false news sites, and even mainstream media outlets. It further fuels the division between the electorate and aids Orbán with his populist rhetoric as 'truth' becomes debatable thanks to the cacophony created by fake news. It becomes advantageous in times of political crises since attacks on the opposition can be done indirectly, which would not further upset Hungary's relationship with the EU. Reframing issues and pushing Fidesz's agenda allows Orbán to determine the political discourse, hindering the opposition's means to fight back against his populist regime.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter aimed to draw a schema of digital authoritarianism for Orbán's Hungary with a systematic approach in linking motivations, attitudes, and events to strategies adopted towards digital media. It is observable that Orbán started to fund his own right-wing media from 2000, which became his primary link to the voter base throughout the 2000s, and this notion became increasingly vital for him after 2006. His previously limited attention on digital media was replaced with increasing political pressure in his first term as the two most influential online news outlets were rendered unable to keep their autonomy in the face of constant government intervention. Ownership of the media was ensured through Orbán's close relationship with Simicska, and their extensive media empire left little to no motivation for harsh punishment of opposition voices. From 2002 to 2015, Fidesz and Orbán gained increasing control over the media. However, this increase in digital authoritarianism did not take the form of persecution against online users, shutdowns, or widespread surveillance. The increase in government intervention was triggered by the threat posed by the feud between Orbán and Simicska. The regime opted for controlling the media altogether but did so by utilizing financial manipulation and political pressure the most. The measures taken for limiting freedom of expression became gradually more relentless as Orbán's former ally operationalized the media empire he built in the name of his party. After 2018, he kept this constant pres-

sure over digital media by targeting independent outlets such as Index, establishing new pro-government online news agencies, acquiring ownership of formerly opposition ones through patronage linkages, and spreading propaganda through regime's trolls.

5. CONCLUSION

Media, and free media specifically, has had enormous influence in broadening the political horizons of the citizenry. Undisturbed flow of information and alternative sources of viewpoints constitute a sine qua non for polyarchy, and due to this function, censorship of media has had a long history. Further commercialization and professionalization in media made room for subtle means of controlling information in the late 20th century. The introduction of the internet created a "new media" for its distinction from the traditional means of information flow. First, it was subject to no central, institutionalized regulation. Second, the capacity for interaction has improved both in speed and scope. Third, this rapid and international interactivity came with a considerable amount of anonymity.

The new media's initial contribution fell short in several aspects. These shortcomings mainly bloom not from the structure but the regimes they were exposed to. Authoritarian regimes expanded their toolbox of repression to online settings. All three revolutionary aspects of the internet are being challenged. According to Freedom on the Net 2019 report, there is a global decline in online freedom of speech. Even in the case of an improvement, gains stayed marginal and were mostly restricted to developing democracies. In many countries, the incumbents made the Internet less accessible by introducing changes to infrastructure and legal frameworks. When the threat regime has felt was greater, websites and users were blocked entirely. Some took even more drastic courses of action, such as the two-month internet outage of Sudan in 2019. It is no surprise that moments of turmoil in a country matches with the governments' crackdown on the internet. The benefits and motivations are even more excellent for those under right-wing populism as a byproduct. By resorting to shutting down daily international access to information, populist regimes enhance the informational cost and limit the spread of criticism available to the system. Coupled with the isolation from the international information flow and consistent discrediting of free news as "manipulation" and "fake news," the gains become twofold. The threat of opposition is lowered, conventional establishments of

the old regime are delegitimized and even criminalized in the absence of free media. Furthermore, anti-establishment rhetoric creates a new type of establishment loyal to the leaders' person or party, which holds attitudinal and behavioral patterns of polarization, advancing the democratic deterioration and increasing the durability of the incumbency.

The most pressing problem is the capacity digital authoritarianism equips the state with. Regarding the third aspect of the internet mentioned above, namely anonymity, the tables have turned. As the world has adapted to the digital age, online presence has become an inseparable part of our lives. This means the initial scarcity of the personal knowledge we give away over the internet has also exceeded that one would have no qualms about sharing. While big data is primarily implemented into marketing and consuming habits, its use in repressive policies holds grim possibilities. Constant monitoring of the internet activity renders opposition out in the open. When the judiciary and legislative bodies are systematically diminished, vaguely defined institutional and legal frameworks create the possibility of punishment for opinions voiced online, which is falsely regarded as a "private sphere" of our lives. As seen across many examples, criticism towards the incumbent is easily classified as "spreading fake news" and an attempt to manipulate the mass by the authorities. Populist rhetoric aids this notion further with its emphasis on "enemies of the nation."

Furthermore, the opportunities for digital authoritarianism are growing day by day. With the advancements in information technologies, facial recognition, and A.I., the tools for monitoring have witnessed a tremendous spike. Authoritarian regimes are teaming up in their means of control, as said technologies are exported to different regions with similar interests. As of now, China is the prime example of digital authoritarianism, the worst abuser of internet freedom for six consecutive years, and the leading country in exporting digital surveillance tools. The situation is expected to worsen with the implementation of the social credit system. Russia has employed its own model of digital authoritarianism through increasing disinformation, limitations of internet access, and intimidation of users. Available channels of information are heavily biased and closely tied to the government. This "captured" media allows for persecution of the opposition and silencing the political activity before a mass movement fully forms, while readily available pro-government sources increase the reach of propaganda while creating a false sense of being informed. With the COVID-19 pandemic, digital authoritarianism has reportedly grown even stronger under the guise of safety measures.

Given the novelty and significance of this topic for the future of democracy, this

thesis aimed to improve the literature's understanding of mechanisms behind digital authoritarian practices. Although it is another popular topic as a "threat to democracy," digital authoritarianism and populism literatures do not reference each other often. Working in tandem with one another would benefit both fields. In pairing digital authoritarian processes with populist rule's motives and strategies, this thesis argued for a typology of transitionary digital authoritarian regimes regarding their application of methods. Empirical evidence supports the argument that right-wing populists are comparable in their digital authoritarian pathway. Differences between the two cases stem from the unique characteristics they carry and the threats they face. For example, Simicska's wealth as an oligarch coupled with his long history with Orbán has led to media monopolization in Hungary being directly linked to his person. After their falling out, Orbán opted for another monopolization under a state-formed foundation. In the Turkish case, ownership is divided between few groups who have ties to Erdoğan. Due to the EU's external pressure, the Hungarian case displays much less legislative action taken for digital authoritarianism. The regime targeted the opposition content in the form of free-market mechanisms and disagreements over profit. Although the external pressure was also limiting AKP at first, the unlikeliness of an EU membership allowed Erdoğan to disregard holding even a façade of democratic legislation ultimately. 2016 coup equipped him with the means to crack down on criticism while reframing the issue as a fight against terrorism. In accord, AKP's instrumentalization of trolls is mainly focused on Erdoğan and nationalism. Orbán's close relationship with Putin paved the way for a more general approach to disinformation. He mainly utilizes trolls, bot accounts, and fake news to promote his nationalist and anti-immigrant policies.

Even still, they are comparable in their differences as well. Applications differ because of case-specific circumstances; however, the motivation behind the action, target, timing and expected outcomes are at the same level. Both cases follow the general sequence of A to C. First, usurping traditional media and their online versions takes place, resulting in unchecked control over "formal" types of digital media and online platforms being the "alternative" to government propaganda. Crony relationships enable populist leaders to create a loyalist media and network of co-dependency in this step. Then, alternative media is targeted by selective persecution of journalists, firings, censorship, and even bans. Criticism towards the government and populist leaders becomes less visible, and the environment created by arbitrary punishment and government bias fuels self-censorship. Opposition becomes underrepresented in the media and has fewer means for organization and mobilization. Lastly, the government replaces the remaining opposition presence with manipulation and disinformation. Opposition is discredited by defamation,

and political discourse is heavily influenced by fake news and conspiracy theories. Instead of "pulling the plug," incumbents can monitor opposition movement by harvesting data, weaken the claims against them, and spread their propaganda all at once. Regime approval is overrepresented, the popular vote is maintained, and the threat of mass movements against the leader is minimized.

As the main contribution of this thesis, the suggested third typology of digital authoritarianism offers a generalizable trajectory of digital authoritarianism for different cases of right-wing populism. The eight items listed in this categorization method apply to many cases across different regions, which might point to a tendency to mimic the Russian or the Chinese model or create a hybrid model altogether. For further research, mixed-methods studies with expectations informed by the quantitative analysis and strengthened by the qualitative evidence provided by case experts would tremendously improve the external validity of the argument posed here. Akin to other cases of democratic backsliding under right-wing populism, cases like India and the Philippines would provide invaluable insight in improving the generalizability of the argument presented in this thesis. Furthermore, including cases of left-wing populism in Latin America would test the effect of populist rhetoric's ideological direction.

A closer look at the new digital authoritarians carries several important implications for different fields of political science. Firstly, improving our understanding of the causal mechanism behind the global trend of declining Internet freedom would greatly benefit in informing our expectations of the digital media's effect on democratic and undemocratic consequences we are faced with. Secondly, a digital authoritarian media landscape's behavioral and attitudinal implications are crucial in keeping the populists' grip on power tight. Voting behavior and democratic backsliding literatures might benefit from referring to the above-mentioned typology in their analysis of a persisting incumbency or democratic deficit. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the rising "threat" of digital authoritarianism is a scourge for the future of democracy from a normative perspective. By taking a systematic approach in deciphering the items and steps of this third typology, the policy implications of this thesis might offer strategies of countering -and hopefully reversing- the tide that is digital authoritarianism.

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