



BEYOND PROPAGANDA | JUNE 2015

The New Authoritarians: Ruling Through Disinformation

After Gezi—How Erdoğan Uses Information to Control Society

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Executive Summary

After huge protests erupted in Turkey in 2013, foreign speculators doubted whether Erdoğan and his ruling AKP party would be able to hold on to power. Yet, the following year Erdoğan won 52 percent of the vote in the presidential election.

Propaganda and disinformation helped to shape the narrative surrounding the Gezi protests and played a large part in AKP's surprising victory. In order to take control of the information space, the government provided economic incentives for sympathetic media companies, and slapped critical outlets with tax investigations and heavy fines. Turkish journalists were intimidated through heavy surveillance, mass firings, then arrests, and even death threats.

The protestors were branded as terrorists. Their demonstrations were largely discredited after pro-government media outlets reported a number of conspiracy theories, including the claim that the protestors were participating in group sex in a mosque, which tapped into the population's strong religious sentiments.

Controlling the majority of newspapers and television is not enough in modern-day Turkey. 92 percent of Turkish millennials use social media. In response, the government has formed an online army that works to combat anti-government sentiment. When information was leaked via social media about Erdoğan's family, he reacted by branding both Twitter and YouTube as unconstitutional, and subsequently banned them.

When media manipulation, intimidation, and the religious narrative fail, Erdoğan does not hesitate to use co-optation, offering subsidies and unlimited possibilities to supporters: all perfectly legitimate under Turkish law.