

## **Framing the Syrian Operations: Populism in Foreign Policy and the Polarized News Media of Turkey**

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How do news media outlets react to an international crisis during a resurgence of populism at home? Led by President Erdoğan’s AK Party, Turkey’s military operations toward Syria provide fertile ground to examine how an increasingly polarized media industry has used populist framing to report on the conflict. Adopting a framing analysis method, this article analyses 2,166 examples of news coverage of the conflict by 3 mainstream national online news outlets with printed versions affiliated with certain political parties or sociopolitical camps—namely, the pro-government *Sabah*, the moderate/the pro-government *Hürriyet*, and the opposition/Kemalist *Sözcü*—as well as one alternative media outlet, *Bianet*. The findings reveal that the creation of a sense of crisis over Syria has precipitated a “rally-round-the-flag” effect. This prompted the ruling AK Party’s populist discourses to dominate the public sphere through the mainstream media, including opposition outlets, with detrimental implications for the state of democracy. It will likely serve as a baseline to make cross-country comparisons on the interplay among the media landscape, international crises, and authoritarian governments at a time of resurgent populism.

*Keywords: populism, political communication, media systems, rally-round-the-flag effect, foreign policy, crisis, content analysis, framing, Turkey*

For almost 20 years now, the right-wing populist President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan-led AK Party has been ruling Turkey by getting a majority of the votes in each general, presidential, and local election, and referendum. Paradoxically, the majority of the Turkish society and half of the voters, as revealed by the

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election results in the past couple of years, support the government's authoritarian policies. Regardless of its expanding middle class and robust civil society, the populist government led Turkey's authoritarian turn defies democratization theory (Sarfati, 2017) and poses a puzzle for academics to solve.<sup>2</sup>

Considering the ongoing social, political, and economic turmoil created by populist defiance of liberal democracies and pluralist media, there is an urgent need for further studies on populist political communication (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & De Vreese, 2017, p. 3). In particular, we need a better understanding of how populist discourses have set the political scene in various contexts. The literature on populist communication can be categorized as leaning toward the side of either demand or supply. Studies focusing on the demand side scrutinize peoples' adherence to populist leaders, governments, and movements (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2014; Elchardus & Spruyt, 2014; Rooduijn & Akkerman, 2017). Locating itself on the supply side of populist studies (Hawkins, Carlin, Littvay, & Kaltwasser, 2018; Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), this article adopts a communication-centered approach to examine the role of the media in populist politics (Esser, Stepińska, & Hopmann, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2018) in the polarized media system of Turkey with a "hybrid regime."<sup>3</sup> As Müller (2016) puts it, "populist will often eagerly frame a situation as a crisis, calling it an existential threat, because such a crisis then serves to legitimate populist governance" (p. 43). This article adopts a "cross-sectional analysis"<sup>4</sup> of Syrian operations to discern how different media outlets framed them as "crises."

In this light, its intended contribution is two-fold: theoretical and methodological. First, it examines how the interaction of structural factors (regime type and media system) and situational factors (cross-border military operations in Syria) prompt the rise of populist politics in a polarized media environment. Second, the study's primary focus is on the role of media outlets in the understudied case of the non-Western country context of Turkey with an authoritarian turn under populists in power.

Other studies have examined different aspects of populist communication in Turkey. Bulut and Yörük (2017) focus on the role of "digital populism" through Twitter trolling in political polarization, while Özçetin (2019) traces populism in a historical television series. Karaosmanoğlu (2020) demonstrates the political polarizing effects and populist social engineering role of culinary culture when used as a political communication tool. Kaptan (2020) analyzes the polarizing populist discourses of the pro-government, Islamist newspaper *Yeni Şafak* during 2018 national elections, Şen and Yenigün-Altın (2020) scrutinize the populist discourses of mayoral candidates on Twitter during the 2019 municipal election campaign, and

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<sup>2</sup> There has been a growing literature on various factors prompting Turkey's democratic backsliding including the rise of illiberal democracy globally (Öniş, 2015), de-Europeanization (Kaliber & Aydın-Düzgit, 2018), domestic developments (Taş, 2018), ideology (Somer, 2017), and the leader's personality (Yılmaz & Bashirov, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> According to the Economist Intelligence Unit's democracy index, by 2014, Turkey's showed a decline of 9% a year earlier, and it was below the world average. The decrease in its score continues since 2015, and the difference between it and the world average is widening. As of 2019, Turkey was ranked the 110th and categorized as the sole European country with a hybrid regime (Economist Intelligence Unit, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> The authors would like to thank Associate Professor Didem Buhari-Gülmez for proposing this study design.

Erçetin and Erdoğan (2021) reveal how pro-AK Party columnists contribute to the government's campaign for the April 16, 2017 referendum through their populist discourses.

Stressing the dynamic interaction among the rising authoritarianism, the resurgence of populism, and the polarized media landscape of Turkey<sup>5</sup> (cf. İşeri, Şekercioglu, & Panayirci, 2019; Yıldırım, Baruh, & Çarkoğlu, 2020), this article's main contention is to demonstrate the role of Turkish media outlets in disseminating (foreign policy) populist discourses in an international crisis context. Differently put, its main objective is to explain and understand how the media works for populist politics by disseminating populist (foreign policy) discourses. At a time of public in large (excluding the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party, the HDP<sup>6</sup>) rally round the flag over the Syrian operations, the article scrutinizes Turkey's media system in which commentary-oriented partisan media outlets create echo chambers for their readers. Against the backdrop to these discussions, this article makes special reference to the political context during Turkey's three Syrian military operations that took place on August 24, 2016–March 29, 2017; January 20, 2018–March 24, 2018; and October 9–17, 2019. This study aims to answer the following interrelated research questions:

*RQ1: Does the coverage of the Syrian operations by Turkish media outlets reflect press-party parallelism and a polarized political environment, or rather a call for unity?*

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<sup>5</sup> There is a growing literature on various dimensions of the Turkish media sector. Çarkoğlu, Baruh, and Yıldırım (2014) define it as a polarized model with an emphasis on "press-party parallelism" (p. 300), while Yesil (2016) labels it a "hybrid system" blending commercial and statist imperatives operating under the conditions of a polarized and politicized structure (p. 4). Since media owners dominate the economic business in Turkey, they have close relations with state economic resources such as energy, construction tenders (Sözeri, 2015). Aluç and Ersoy (2018) stress the conglomerate press structures under governmental pressure. In this parallel, Akser (2018) contemplates Turkish model as "polarized and corporatist" aspiring to become a liberal one (p. 96). Ersoy and İşeri (2021) propose three major characteristics of the Turkish media system as (1) press-party parallelism; (2) privately owned media (conglomeration); and (3) limited development of journalism as an autonomous profession (p. 419). Thus, Turkish media system does not fit any of the models described by Hallin and Mancini (2004). For our purposes, policy makers have been adopting populist politics and disseminating populist discourses through the media to maintain hegemony in the Turkish society. This does not necessarily mean that the opposition media is irrelevant; they are disseminating solely discourses of antihegemonic political actors—namely, "press-part parallelism" widening socio political cleavages in the polarized media system of Turkey.

<sup>6</sup> Founded in 2012 as an umbrella party composed of various groups, the HDP's (the Peoples' Democratic Party) objective was to appeal to potential non-Kurdish voters as well. In the absence of effective opposition, the cochair Demirtaş of HDP galvanized those moderate and liberal voters that were frustrated with the AK Party's rule (Kaya & Whiting, 2019, p. 101). Regardless of the uneven electoral playing field, the HDP managed to enter the parliament again in the snap elections held on November 1, 2015. Intuitively one could postulate that the HDP transformed from an ethnic-nationalist into a progressive democratic *Türkiyeli* constructive political party to prompt democratization of the country. Nonetheless, Kaya and Whiting (2019) warn us that the HDP's Kurdish agenda supersedes a wider democracy agenda and its ambivalent relations with the PKK bring questions regarding the sincerity of the party's democratic commitments (p. 99).

*RQ2: Are there variations among mainstream media outlets and alternative media in how they frame their coverage in populist terms?*

### **Populism and the News Media: A Communication-Centered Approach**

Despite its various forms, all these versions of populism contemplate an imaginary struggle between virtuous people and the corrupt elite. The term “corrupt elite” is an “antipluralist” representation that populists use to denigrate certain groups in the eyes of a wider population (Müller, 2016, p. 3). This Manichean outlook contrasts with liberal democracy’s principle of plurality, which is geared toward finding just ways to live together in a given society (Müller, 2016, p. 69). For our purposes, we will stick with the definition of populism by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017):

A thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite,” and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* or general will of the people. (p. 6)

Embracing both the ideological and political communication dimensions of the concept of populism will enable us to adopt a “communication-centered” rather than an “actor-centered” approach, to examine how the thin ideology of populism is communicated (Stanyer, Salgado, & Strömbäck, 2017, p. 354).

### **Media Populism: The CNN Effect Versus Indexing Theory**

Populist actors require the oxygen of publicity that can be acquired through mass media as the gateway to a wider audience (Aalberg et al., 2017, p. 4). Indeed, the media can play an instrumental role in not only the success (e.g., the *Daily Express* in the UK) but also the failures (e.g., *Bild* in Germany) of populist policy-makers (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 114). How can we explain the various roles media outlets play in populist communication? To answer this question, one should engage with two opposing theories that aim to explain the interactions of news media and policy-makers in setting the agenda during times of crisis such as military intervention. These are the CNN effect and indexing theory.

The CNN effect prioritizes the role of news media over policy-makers and proposes that the media does not only set the public agenda but also shape policy decisions. Robinson (2011) states that “by attempting to measure the influence of one variable—media—the CNN-effect debate adds to our understanding of how foreign policy decisions are made” (p. 4). Similarly, Livingston and Eachus (1999) define the CNN effect “as elite decision-makers’ loss of policy control to news media” (p. 413). Following this parallel, Livingston (1997) proposes three dimensions to the CNN effect: (1) a policy agenda-setting agent (2) an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals, and (3) an accelerant to policy decision making (p. 2). Scholars have tested the validity of the CNN effect in various case studies with mixed results: on northern Iraq (Schorr, 1991); on the U.S. military intervention in Somalia (Livingston & Eachus, 1999); on the international intervention in Kosovo (Hammond & Herman, 2000), and various conflict cases, including the Syrian civil war (Gilboa, Jumbert, Miklian, & Robinson, 2016).

In contrast to the CNN effect, the indexing theory emphasizes political elites in setting the public agenda through the media, particularly at times of crisis. L. Bennett (1990) asserts that "the press in this system might be seen to have settled for a comfortable role as 'keeper of the official record'" (p. 106). In the same vein, Palloshi (2015) says that "the media are a tool in the hands of policymakers" (p. 49). Zaller and Chiu (2000) confirm the validity of the "indexing hypothesis" (p. 385) during the Kosovo war. Similarly, W. L. Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston (2006) conducted a study on stories related to the Abu Ghraib prison scandal with the conclusion that "the leading national news organizations did not produce a frame that strongly challenged the Bush administration's" (p. 467). Similarly, at times of a call for national solidarity, the news media's indexing will likely be more salient (W. L. Bennett, Lawrence, & Livingston, 2007).

Against the backdrop of these contending outlooks on who influences whom in setting the public agenda, two perspectives stand out when it comes to populist political communication (Esser et al., 2017, pp. 367–370). The first is "populism by the media," where media outlets are actively involved in disseminating their version of populism, while the second is "populism through the media," where a media platform is used to convey the populist messages of political actors, whether intentionally or not (pp. 367–370). At this point, one should scrutinize the interaction between what Mazzoleni (2008) calls the "production logic" (pp. 54–55) of commercialized media and populist political forces in a given media environment.

Şahin (2019) divides media populism into two dimensions: "populism by the media and populism through the media" (p. 32). From this perspective, we can claim that both the CNN effect and the indexing theories are part of these two media populism dimensions. Either being a tool of populist political actors to reach a massive audience and setting their political agenda (the indexing) or influencing the political actors' agenda and having populism by the media (the CNN effect). In this parallel, Esser and colleagues (2017) discuss that populism has high news value, and Wodak, KhosraviNik, and Mral (2013) argue that right-wing populists are using the media as a tool for their populist discourses. Various factors set the ground for those populists to use the media to advance their political agenda.

### ***Structural and Situational Factors***

Structural factors might include influences that derive from characteristics of the media system interacting with the political system, and so shaping and constraining the coverage choices of media outlets. Situational factors, meanwhile, include the influence of the sociopolitical context as well as the features of a dramatic event such as a militarized interstate dispute, an act of terror, a coup, a political scandal, an environmental disaster, or a pandemic.

#### *Structural Factor: Media System*

Which systemic factors drive some media actors to disseminate a certain political discourse such as populism, but not others? Although there are many different paradigms to compare the media of different countries (cf. Jakubowicz, 2010), the media systems theory developed by Hallin and Mancini (2004) comes to the fore in terms of its coverage of a wide area and evaluation of different contexts.

In their seminal study comparing media systems, Hallin and Mancini (2004) propose four factors affecting news media's content: (1) the newspaper industry or the development of a mass press; (2) political parallelism; (3) journalistic professionalism; and (4) the role of the state in the political system. Drawing on those factors, they identify three main types of media system: democratic corporatist (characteristic of central and northern Europe); liberal (in the Anglo-Saxon world); and the polarized pluralist or Mediterranean model, which we will stress in this study regarding Turkey.

### *Situational Factors*

Situational factors include temporal developments that have an impact on the sociopolitical context. Among these contextual factors, international or foreign policy crises precipitating a call for national unity can mobilize the masses, with the help of news media, to give unquestioning support to political actors such as the president (Hatuel-Radoshitzky & Yarchi, 2020). This is particularly the case for incumbent populist politicians.

Moffitt (2015) conceptualizes crisis as an internal characteristic of populism that populists mediate and perform to "spectacular" failure, to spread the impression of a national security crisis (p. 210). The expected function of this performance for populists is to galvanize support among the people for strong leadership against the dangerous others, in the absence of a public sphere for political debate. In this vein, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) argue that a sense of crisis provides an excellent opportunity for populist actors to credibly inject a sense of urgency and significance into their messages (p. 10). Hence, it enables those populists to set the public agenda and/or effect policy options, often with the support of the media.

Several studies argued that the media increase the public visibility of political actors and this helps actors to establish a populist communication with the public (Ellinas, 2010; Esser et al., 2017; Mudde, 2007). As Schmidt (2020) found, "only in certain countries [in Europe] do political actors receive over proportionate visibility because of their populist communication" (p. 2360). Erdoğan and Erçetin (2019) found that the polarized media system of Turkey offered significant advantages for populist forces during the constitutional referendum in 2017 (p. 67).

### **Polarized Turkish Media System Under an Increasingly Authoritarian Regime**

Conceptualizing democracy as a mixed regime embraces both democratic and oligarchic elements, Sözen (2019) argues that "populists-in-power not only sacralize but also singularize competitive elections" with a potential outcome of "tyranny of the executive branch" (p. 269). In this vein, Sözen (2020) puts right-wing populist the AK Party relied on elections as the sole democratic mechanism reflecting "the popular will" by undermining those institutions weaken the rulers and strengthen the citizens (e.g., checks and balances; p. 25). Hence, accompanied by the rise of authoritarianism, populist politics, and polarizing rhetoric is driven by the incumbent AK Party have come to dominate the Turkish political landscape prompting the country's democratic breakdown from its early reformist agenda (Aydın-Düzgüt & Balta, 2019; Baykan, 2018; Castaldo, 2018; Somer, 2019).

The news media sector has taken its bitter share of this democratic clampdown as well. Through various decree-laws (i.e., 668, 675, and 677), 153 media outlets have been shut down, 520 journalists have

been prosecuted, and 122 of those have been imprisoned for their alleged ties to or aid for the Gülen movement and the PKK (Yesil, 2018, pp. 250–252). Besides, news censorship has intensified. Unsurprisingly, media freedom in Turkey recorded a dramatic drop in rank from 98th in 2007 and 2008 to 157th of 180 countries (World Press Freedom Index, 2019). While Yesil (2018) characterizes the heightened political control in the post-coup era as a new phase of authoritarian measures to neutralize mainstream and opposition media outlets in Turkey. Akser (2018) labels these coercive measures as “the final layer of increased media control by the AKP [AK Party]” (pp. 95–96) with two main ramifications: (1) The government has intensified reliance on political and economic means to censor criticism, and (2) Business conglomerates have been adopting internal censorship in their news media outlets (e.g., *Hürriyet*, *Sabah*) not to jeopardize their relations with the government enabling them to get public advertisements and lucrative public tenders (see Table 1). Hence, the media system of Turkey moves to a non-Western because of the government's role on the diverse and pluralism.

**Table 1. News Outlet, Circulation, Ownership, Other Business Interests, Coverage Style.**

News outlet	Circulation		Nonmedia business	
	rank	Ownership	activities	Coverage style
<i>Hürriyet</i>	1	Doğan Media Group/Demirören Holding <sup>7</sup>	Energy, retail, industry, tourism/energy, industry, real estate, construction	Moderate/pro-government
<i>Sabah</i>	2	Zirve Holding (Kalyon Group)	Construction, energy, transportation	Pro-government
<i>Sözcü</i>	3	Burak Akbay <sup>8</sup> (Estetik Publishing Joint Stock Company)	n/a	Opposition/Kemalist
<i>BIANET</i>	–	Inter Press Service (IPC) funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR)	n/a	Alternative

*Note.* Compiled from Ersoy and İşeri (2021, p. 420), the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (İTO) website, and the Media Ownership Monitor (MOM) Turkey website ([www.medyatava.com](http://www.medyatava.com)).

Nonetheless, there is still a place for newspapers such as *Sözcü* with a noteworthy readership by potentially increasing external pluralism (Yıldırım et al., 2020, p. 8). At a time of a heightened sense of

<sup>7</sup> As of May 21, 2018, progovernment conglomerate Demirören Holding acquiring of Dogan Media Group (including *Hürriyet*) has been completed (“Turkish Media Group Bought by Pro-Government Conglomerate,” 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Along with the chief editor and various writers of the daily, Burak Akbay had been issued an arrest warrant (“Burak Akbay,” 2020).

national security crisis with populist fervor at home and abroad, however, it is dubious to what extent the opposition media can increase media pluralism and enable public scrutiny over the AK Party's precarious foreign policy decisions.

### **A Resurgence of Anti-Western Populism and the Syrian Operations Collide**

Throughout the AK Party's incumbency, ambitious foreign policy discourse has accompanied transformation in Turkish domestic politics. Accompanying populist discourses in domestic politics, policy-makers have frequently expressed new foreign policy discourse as a part of normalizing Turkish politics and identity. In this light, Birdal (2018) argues that foreign policy discourses serve to legitimize the AK Party's policies at domestic politics (p. 127). Similarly, Coşkun, Doğan, and Demir (2017) read Turkey's foreign policy as a legitimization strategy of the AK Party's hegemonic project in domestic politics. Hintz (2018) interprets the country's foreign policy orientation as an outcome of "inside-out identity contestation" (pp. 14–32) in which elites take their domestic struggles to the foreign policy realm when their proposals in the domestic realm have been blocked. Analyzing discourses over the Middle East in general, the Syrian civil war in particular, Gürpınar (2020) also argues foreign policy as "a rhetorical gadget over contested Turkish identity" (p. 3) mainly initiated by the AK Party in the country's cultural wars. Erdoğan skillfully reframed the meanings of "us," "them," "friend," and "enemies" (Balta, 2018, p. 18) in the face of disputed decisions to intervene in the Syrian civil war.

This reframing has been accompanied by attributing blame to "corrupt outsiders" (i.e., the West; Balta, 2018, p. 18) for setbacks on both the international front (e.g., the rise of the PKK-affiliated PYD/YPG and ISIL in Syria) and in the domestic arena (e.g., the Gezi protests, Turkey's economic crisis, and the coup attempt). Unsurprisingly, the AK Party's foreign policy discourse has embraced anti-Western populist sentiments in which the West is juxtaposed as the "other" of Turkish political identity (Kaliber & Kaliber, 2019).

In line with the "diversionary theory of war," vulnerable leaders can use foreign policy to consolidate their domestic political positions and shape public opinion at home (Hagan, 2017). Similarly, the AK Party-led the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) adopted cross-border Operation Euphrates Shield against the YPG and ISIL forces in Syria in the immediate aftermath of the post-July 15 coup attempt. This was preceded by Operation Olive Branch, and more recently by Operation Peace Spring (see Table 2). Defying the objections of the United States and the European Union (EU), the Turkish parliament has approved all of these operations with the reservations of the CHP and opposition only of the HDP, which has a Kurdish voter base.



**Table 2. Turkey's Three Major Cross-Border Operations in Syria.**

Name	Dates	Official and stated objectives
Operation Euphrates Shield ( <i>Firat Kalkanı</i> )	August 24, 2016– March 29, 2017	Remove/eliminate ISIL from occupied Jarabulus and al-Rai
Operation Olive Branch ( <i>Zeytin Dalı</i> )	20 January–24 March 2018	Create a safe zone in Afrin by dislodging, if not eliminating, the YPG.
Operation Peace Spring ( <i>Barış Pınarı</i> )	9–17 October 2019	Prevent the creation of a "terror corridor" (i.e., the YPG) across the country's southern border.

Note. Adopted from "Operation Peace Spring" (2019) and Gürcan (2019).

### Methodology

This article relies on the framing analysis method to collect and analyze the data. Entman (2003) elaborates on how media outlets use framing in news stories as follows: "Framing entails selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues and making connections among them to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution" (p. 417). During war and conflict situations, news media framing becomes more important than at other times. The media is "telling us what to think about a story before we have had a chance to think about it for ourselves" (Parenti, 1993, p. 201).

Previous research on framing analysis shows us that there are two main approaches to identifying frames in the news: (a) inductive; and (b) deductive. Vreese (2005) explains that the inductive approach "refrains from analyzing news stories with *a priori* defined news frames in mind" (p. 53). The deductive approach, meanwhile, "investigates frames that are defined and operationalized before the investigation" (Vreese, 2005, p. 53).

Van Gorp (2010) argues deductive strategy is regularly used in framing research studies, "Namely, a predefined and limited set of frames is invoked and the empirical aim of the study is to decide to what extent these frames are applied in the news" (Gorp, 2010, p. 93). The deductive approach is thus more suitable for defining how we identify frames in the news. Pan and Kosicki (1993) remark that the deductive phase of a framing analysis by stating the frame needs to be recognizable, demonstrable, and countable. The benefits of the framing analysis are uncovering the culturally relevant and resonant theme that illuminates unique social and political understandings (Reese, 2010, p. 20).

The three mainstream online news outlets with print versions (*Sabah*, *Hürriyet*, and *Sözcü*) were chosen for two main interrelated reasons. Firstly, they have the highest circulation rates among readers from different sociopolitical camps (pro-government, moderate/pro-government, and opposition; see Table 1). Secondly, editorial policies of those outlets are likely to reflect their affiliated sociopolitical camps in

Turkey's polarized media system (pro-government *Sabah*, moderate/pro-government *Hürriyet*, opposition/Kemalist *Sözcü*).<sup>9</sup>

As Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier (2008) defined: "Alternative media can take one or more opposite positions on these matters: (i) small-scale and oriented toward specific communities, possibly disadvantaged groups, respecting their diversity; (ii) independent of state and market" (p. 1). We also included an alternative online media outlet (i.e., *Bianet [BIA]*) for three reasons: Firstly, alternative *BIA* is less exposed to state and corporate pressures than the mainstream print media. Secondly, as one of the oldest online alternative media, *BIA* is one of the most influential alternative online media with more than 180,000 and 200,000 followers on Facebook and Twitter, respectively. Thirdly, having an alternative media in our analysis will enable us to make a comparison of conventional and alternative media coverages on the highly politicized issue in the polarized media system of Turkey.

#### *Data Collection*

This study uses quantitative framing analysis to analyze news frames in the stories. First, we identified a list of frames related to populism and defined them with examples for operationalization purposes (see Table 3). The news stories from *Hürriyet*, *Sabah*, *Sözcü*, and *BIA* were derived from a Google search, with those not directly related to our cases excluded. Three coders processed  $N = 2,166$  news stories in total written at the time of three operations: August 24, 2016–March 29, 2017 ( $n = 563$ ); January 20, 2018–March 24, 2018 ( $n = 822$ ); and October 9–17, 2019 ( $n = 781$ ). For the reliability of the research coding, a minimum of 70% consensus on the agreement has to be reached among the coders, according to Miles and Huberman (1994). Their intercoder reliability test result is 80%, which is highly acceptable. When the coders finished their task, we transferred all the coding sheets to the SPSS.

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<sup>9</sup> Along with Turkish vs. Kurdish nationalism, conservatism/Islamism (predominantly represented by the AK Party) vs. secularism/Kemalism (predominantly represented by the CHP), named after the Turkish republic's founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, are the principal conflicting political ideologies since the early days of the republic (Ağırdır, 2020, pp. 167–336; Bora, 2016; Erdoğan, 2018). Against the backdrop of these sociopolitical cleavages, Turkey's media system is multifaceted (İşeri et al., 2019).

**Table 3. Explanations and Examples of Selected News Frames.**

Frame	Explanation	Example
Appeal to the people	Referring to the people in a manner that presumes or calls on their consent.	"The Turkish army, which consolidated its reputation with its victories throughout its history, is once again on the campaign for the survival of its nation and its state."
Sovereignty	"The people" is the ultimate democratic sovereign or the "ruler" often betrayed by the elites. While the "outside" is dangerous, the "inside" is a safe space for popular sovereignty	"Just as we were in unity and solidarity against the PKK, together against FETO, we were able to overcome this process without facing destruction. Behind us is a whole nation with its heart and courage" ("Operasyona neden Zeytin Dalı," 2018).
Class	"the people" are depicted as a deprived socio-economic class or subset of the population"	"Our people oppressed by the capitalist-imperialist powers" (Hypothetical).
Nation/ethnicity	"The people are understood as a national community or ethnic group, with emphasis on belonging to the native population as the main criterion to discriminate who is part or not part of the nation."	"[From the mouth of Emre Belözoğlu] Every Turkish should support the operation" ("Emre Belözoğlu," 2019)
Cultural	To influence ordinary people by using their cultural values. Shared and common values, religion, history, customs.	"It was reported by the Presidency of Religious Affairs tomorrow morning all mosques throughout the country will pray for the Peace Spring Operation to end in victory" ("Barış Pınarı Harekatı'na," 2019).
2) Attacking elite	Antielite, anti-establishment rhetoric and orientation. Populists portray the established ruling elites as corrupt, self-interested, arrogant, exploitative, and often treacherous. For our purposes to shed light on populist foreign policy in the atmosphere of rally around the flag, what we understand from the elite is the West (i.e., the EU and the U.S.).	"Throughout our Republican history, they [referring to Western powers] did not allow us to be in peace." ("Operasyona neden Zeytin Dalı," 2018)
3) Ostracizing others	Those domestic policy-makers and politicized people supporting certain political views do not represent people at large.	

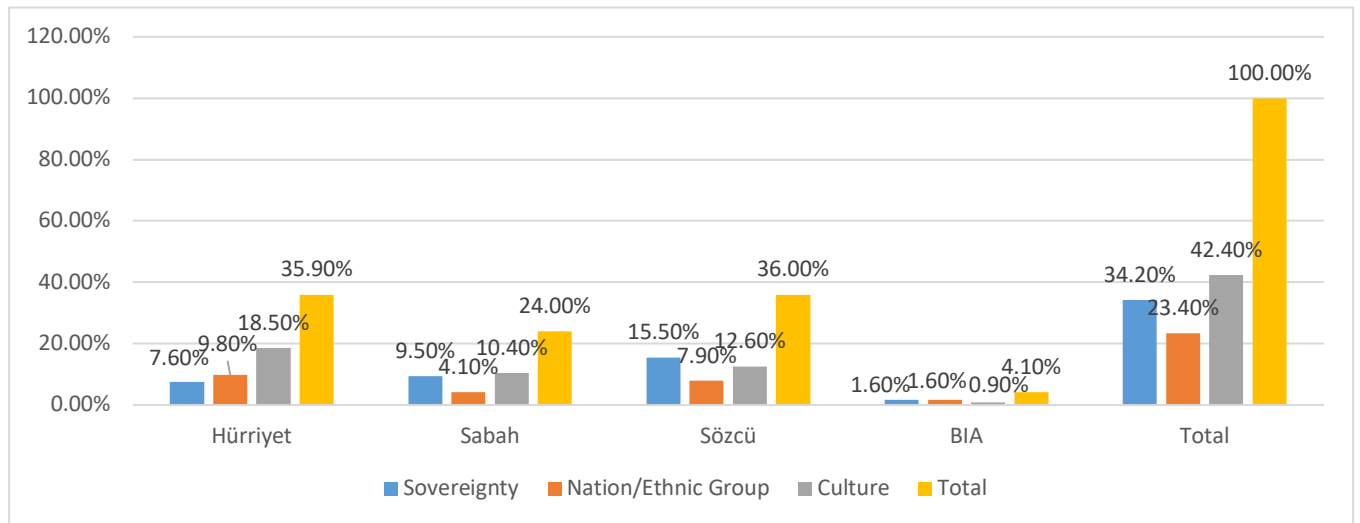
3.1) Dangerous others	"Stigmatizing and excluding segments of the people from the specific population"	"AK Party spokesman Ömer Çelik: It is a classical PKK tactic [referring to HDP and its criticisms on Syrian operation]" ("Ömer Çelik," 2019).
3.2) Authoritarian	"When political actors press for severe political measures or illiberal policies against those who threaten the homogeneity of the people."	"24 people were arrested for black propaganda in the Operation of Peace Spring" ("Barış Pınarı Harekatı'na," 2019).

Note. Adapted from Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, pp. 4–7).

### Findings

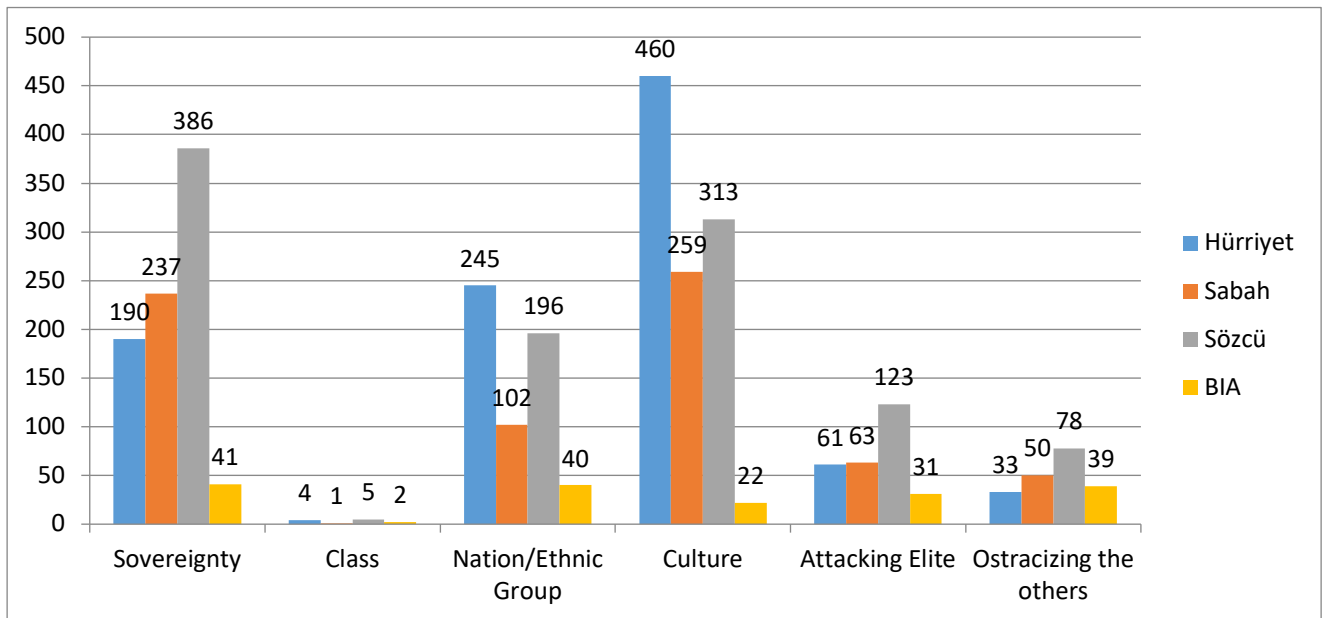
Turkey's military operations toward Syria (see Table 2) have provided fertile ground for examining how international crises have shaped the editorial policies of news media outlets in a polarized media setting. Adopting a content analysis method, the study analyzed the populist framing strategies of four national newspapers affiliated with certain sociopolitical camps: the pro-government *Sabah*; the moderate, pro-government *Hürriyet*; the opposition-Kemalist *Sözcü*; and the alternative media *BIA*.

Figure 1 indicates that during the three military operations toward Syria, Turkish newspapers tended to cover the conflict with populist frames. Under the "appeal to the people" category, newspapers used the "culture" (42.4%) populist frame more than others. Sovereignty (34.20%) comes second, national or ethnic group (23.4%) third, while class (0.5%) was used least. Among the newspapers, *Sözcü* used more populist frames (36%) while covering military operations. *Hürriyet* (35.9%), *Sabah* (24%), and *BIA* (4.1%) newspapers followed. It can be said that mainstream newspapers (*Hürriyet*, *Sabah*, and *Sözcü*) used populist frames more than *BIA*, which is an alternative online newspaper. As a counterintuitive finding, the opposition newspaper *Sözcü* has the highest populist frame—primarily due to its appeals to sovereignty—in the news stories.



**Figure 1. Column percentages of populist frames in newspapers.**

Figure 2 results indicate that among the three populist frames of appeal to the people, attacking the elite, and ostracizing the other, the “appeal to the people” meta frame has the highest rate of use by the newspapers. The opposition *Sözcü* newspaper again has the highest usage of populist frames in terms of “attacking the elite” (e.g., the United States and the EU) and “ostracizing the others.” Online alternative newspaper *BIA*’s populist frame adoptions are significantly lower when we compare them with the mainstream newspapers. *BIA* does not want to be part of transferring the populist frames to the audience. It can be claimed that *BIA* did not do either populism by the media or populism through the media.



**Figure 2. Degrees of populism in Turkish newspapers.**

Table 4 shows selected news outlets’ varying degrees of populist metaframe (appeal to the people, attacking the elite, and ostracizing the other) uses in their given coverages of the Syrian crisis. Soft populism indicates one, moderate indicates two, and bold indicates three populist meta-frame adoptions in the same news coverage. These findings also reveal that a newspaper that might be supposed to be indifferent to government-induced populism *Hürriyet*, exhibited the highest degree of populism, followed by pro-government dailies *Sözcü* and *Sabah*.

**Table 4. Total Number and Percentages of Populist Frames in News Outlets (The Degrees of Populism).**

	Zero	%	Soft	%	Moderate	%	Bold	%	Total
<i>Hürriyet</i>	164	22.04	497	66.80	73	9.81	10	1.34	744
<i>Sabah</i>	192	32.00	321	53.50	76	12.67	11	1.83	600
<i>Sözcü</i>	122	18.48	413	62.58	108	16.36	17	2.58	660
<i>BIA</i>	42	31.34	57	42.54	31	23.13	4	2.99	134
Total	520	24.32	1,288	60.24	288	13.47	42	1.96	2,138

According to Tables 5 and 6, the headlines and reporting styles of the Turkish newspapers tend to contain more commentary (52.17% in headlines, 65.28% in news content) than reportage (34.72%). Indeed, commentary-based journalism is a feature of polarized media systems. Alternative online newspaper *BIA* uses a significantly lower amount of commentary (4.48%) in its coverage. The headlines of the opposition daily *Sözcü* are categorized as using a large degree of commentary (75.73%). As a result, the commentary style usage in the news content of *Sözcü* is judged as very high (90.55%). In other words,

*Sözcü* newspaper has used more subjective evaluations. However, alternative online newspaper *BIA* uses more reporting (95.52%) than commentary (4.48%) in its headlines.

**Table 5. News Headlines: Reporting Versus Commentary Based.**

	<i>Hürriyet</i>	%	<i>Sabah</i>	%	<i>Sözcü</i>	%	<i>BIA</i>	%	Total	%
Report	393	52.82	348	58.00	167	24.27	128	95.52	1,036	47.83
Commentary	351	47.18	252	42.00	521	75.73	6	4.48	1,130	52.17
	744	100.00	600	100.00	688	100.00	134	100.00	2,166	100.00

**Table 6. News Content Coverage: Reporting Versus Commentary Based.**

	<i>Hürriyet</i>	%	<i>Sabah</i>	%	<i>Sözcü</i>	%	<i>BIA</i>	%	Total	%
Report	387	52.02	234	39.00	65	9.45	66	49.25	752	34.72
Commentary	357	47.98	366	61.00	623	90.55	68	50.75	1414	65.28
	744	100.00	600	100.00	688	100.00	134	100.00	2166	100.00

Table 7 tells us that newspapers tend to use political party/political and elite/representative such as AK Party (28.41%), Turkish armed forces (TSK; 26.05%), and along with others (e.g., war veterans, families of martyrs, celebrities, pro-government NGOs, security experts) as direct sources in the news stories related to the three military operations mentioned. *Hürriyet* has the highest proportion of direct source usage at  $n = 409$  times, *Sözcü* follows it with  $n = 383$ , and *Sabah* with  $n = 326$ . Online alternative newspaper *BIA* has recorded  $n = 68$  in its source use. While mainstream newspapers seldom used HDP as a direct source in their coverage, the party ranks second in *BIA*'s political elite direct source use. Opposition newspaper *Sözcü* also did not give enough space to opposition political party HDP ( $n = 2$ ) in their news coverage. This reveals that mainstream newspapers prefer not to cover critical perspectives on Turkey's military operations toward Syria. Thus, the AK Party government did not face any challenge from the opposition parties and newspapers discourses during the operations.

**Table 7. Direct Source Usages.**

	<i>Hürriyet</i>	%	<i>Sabah</i>	%	<i>Sözcü</i>	%	<i>BIA</i>	%	Total	%
AK Party	67	16.38	93	28.53	147	38.38	30	44.12	337	28.41
CHP	7	1.71	7	2.15	17	4.44	4	5.88	35	2.95
MHP	6	1.47	5	1.53	13	3.39	1	1.47	25	2.11
IYI Party	1	0.24	3	0.92	4	1.04	1	1.47	9	0.76
HDP	0	0.00	3	0.92	2	0.52	12	17.65	17	1.43
Other	225	55.01	117	35.89	94	24.54	18	26.47	454	38.28
TSK	103	25.18	98	30.06	106	27.68	2	2.94	309	26.05
Total	409	100.00	326	100.00	383	100.00	68	100.00	1,186	100.00

### Discussion and Conclusion

The right-wing populist with authoritarian leanings Erdoğan and his pro-Islamist AK Party have received the majority of votes in each election and referendum with the support of media (even opposition media as our article reveals in the context of the Syrian operations) for almost 20 years. In this respect, Turkey deserves to be included as a textbook example of how populist-in-power generates consent to their authoritarian policies. Indeed, the populists-in-power (i.e., the AK Party) frequently use legitimization discourses of the strong state and citizens in unity against “common enemies” and “dangers” (Ağirdır, 2020, pp. 159–165), as this article has revealed hinging on the role of media outlets during the Syrian operations. The role of Turkish media, which creates an echo chamber for supporters in the country’s polarized media system, in prolonging the reign of populist-in-power harnessing the country’s authoritarian drift under “the tyranny of the executive branch” (Sözen, 2019, p.280). In this scheme, the country’s interests and national unity come before democracy.

The most salient aspect of the findings is that the dominant populist elite—namely, President Erdoğan and his AK Party—induced a sense of national crisis over Syria. This precipitated a call for national unity with the support of residential elections campaign coalition partner (*Cumhur İttifakı*) the ultranationalist, but not necessarily populist, the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) coupled with consensus among the political elite consensus (excluding the HDP) in Turkey. This is also reflected in mainstream media outlets’ wide adoption of populist frames and direct source uses. Those newspapers’ neglect to use HDP as a direct source reveals their hesitancy to cover dissident voices. Hence, Turkey’s populists managed to set a militarized public agenda domestically and externally with the support of the mainstream media. In other words, the findings reveal how Turkish mainstream media, including the opposition daily *Sözcü*, became a showcase of “populism through media” during (Esser et al., 2017, p. 369) the Syrian operations, at the expense of democracy’s core principle of pluralism, under a polarized system interacting with a competitive authoritarian regime.

Contrary to the failure of the mainstream media, alternative online newspaper *BIA*’s relatively balanced reporting style was evident from its news stories. For instance, *BIA* gave more space to the opposition political party HDP, which has opposed the military operations from the beginning. This verifies the argument of Ersoy and Miller (2020), who underlines how alternative media “are an important platform in terms of removing the pressure that elite groups and the state authority have established on journalists and enabling different voices to have a positive impact on the reconciliation process” (p. 411). On the other hand, our research dissociates itself from those studies testing the “press-party parallelism” in different situations such as elections (Çarkoğlu, Baruh, & Yıldırım, 2014; Yıldırım et al., 2020), a referendum (Erdoğan & Erçetin, 2019), a political scandal (Panayırıcı, İşeri, & Şekercioğlu, 2016), and a coup attempt (İşeri et al., 2019).

Overall, this article has examined the interplay of a populist-led competitive authoritarian regime and a polarized media system during an international “crisis” environment in the non-Western context of Turkey. Its findings reveal that scholars studying the news media’s role in the resurgence of populism and democratic backsliding should pay closer attention to interacting structural factors (e.g., regime type and media system) and situational factors (e.g., cross-border crises). Briefly, one should not read the democratic backsliding of Turkey under its populist-in-power with the support of the media as an isolated development



but as a salient case that could take place in other countries that are turning authoritarian with polarized media landscapes. Hence, it recommends that scholars conduct cross-country comparative studies of various situational factors, for example, the COVID-19 pandemic, to examine the interplay of regime types and media systems in the decay of democratic principles globally.

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