Article

AKP's electoral success: Populist communication and conservative welfare regime in Turkey

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Abstract: During his 22-year rule, Turkey's populist leader Erdoğan not only ensured his control of mainstream media ownership, but he also aligned the language and style of these media with his own populist politics. This investigation presents a unique perspective by highlighting the AKP's establishment of a network of loyal media outlets and business individuals through crony capitalism while also demonstrating that the party garnered loyalty from religious foundations, and the urban poor due to the aid and financial support provided by AKP municipalities. The primary objective of this research is to offer a distinct scholarly contribution by analyzing the influence of crony capitalism and welfare policies within the context of populist politics. This study employed a methodology centered around network graphs designed to reveal connections between the AKP, various media outlets, and associations and foundations, thereby highlighting the AKP's association with key actors involved in the establishment of a neoliberal-conservative hegemony.

Keywords: crony capitalism; debt policy; partisan media; populist communication; welfare policy; urban poor; Islamist foundations

1.Introduction

The global financial crisis in 2008 and the ensuing economic recession resulted in a rise of the far-right and populism in Europe and beyond. Neoliberal policies prevailing in the 1980s and later paved the way in Turkey and many other countries towards the deterioration of income equality, precarization of the working classes, and the rise of populist leaders. The most notable ability possessed by these populist leaders is their adeptness in persuading their audience that they represent a minority group that has been unjustly mistreated by attributing their difficulties to the actions of 'the elites' or various factions of adversaries both inside and beyond their community, as well as by asserting that by representing 'the people', they are the primary source of power (Kalaycı, 2023b, p. 591).

Nowadays, the world is witnessing a wave of new authoritarianism. New authoritarianism is a hybrid form of government, which maintains competitive elections and 'democracy,' yet the rule of law has been swallowed by the executive branch and the media is largely controlled by the ruling party (Wiatr, 2017, p. 832). In countries with authoritarian populism, it is evident that the checks and balances system has been eroded, the rule of law has been compromised due the ruling party's control over the bureaucracy and judiciary. Media outlets and non-governmental organizations have either been silenced or partisanized, leading to a significant departure from democratic principles within these countries.

Since his party came to power in 2002, Tayyip Erdoğan has followed a populist policy based on the antagonism between ordinary pious people and secular elite. The

splits between 'center vs. periphery' and 'secular vs. conservative,' endemic in Turkish politics, provide a highly fertile ground for populism (State-society and bureaucracy-bourgeoisie can be also added as the other dichotomies). See (Akça et al., 2014, p. 2). Kemalist (The term refers to the Republic's founding figure, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk) secular elites imposed a top-down modernization on rural, religious, and uneducated masses. As a result of their mission to build a Westernized and secular Turkish nation by 'civilizing' a society that 'lagged-behind', Kemalist elites alienated the religious masses from the state and its institutions when anything falling outside the 'model citizen' as defined by the official Kemalist ideology was considered to be a threat to state security (Kayhan, 2017, p. 162). From its first years in power, the AKP (the Justice and Development Party) was able to garner the support of different segments of society by promoting the idea that the former Kemalist regime was responsible for democratic deficits and human rights violations. As a result, even liberal, social democrat, and leftist political actors accepted and even actively supported AKP's struggle against the former Kemalist regime (Tombuş and Aygenç, 2017, p. 71).

Since assuming power, the AKP has endeavored to reconcile neoliberal reforms with Islamic ideals, hence formulating a welfare policy approach based on a combination of both paradigms (Göçmen, 2018, p. 188). Due to its solidified political clout, bolstered by the support of both the Islamic business sector and the urban poor, the AKP managed to maintain its electoral support with only a marginal decline, despite the economic turmoil witnessed over the last years (Marschall et al., 2016, p. 201). Rather than actively addressing the poverty that has resulted from the massive process of proletarianization and the implementation of neoliberal policies in Turkey, the AKP administration has chosen to manage it so as to cultivate support among voters. Following privatization measures enacted on social services, the AKP, in alignment with neoliberal policies, transferred the responsibility for these services to the private sector, charity associations, and local administrations by relinquishing the government's obligations (Eder 2010; Yılmaz 2018, 106). The allocation of social assistance by municipalities under the governance of the AKP is not dispersed randomly; rather, districts with higher AKP electoral support tend to receive a greater share of benefits, resulting in increased loyalty to the AKP among poor populations (Yörük, 2012, p. 517). Through the implementation of partisan redistribution of resources, the AKP has not only targeted the urban poor but also the loyal business, creating 'a winning cross-class coalition and a community bonded around mutual interests' (Demiralp and Balta, 2021, p. 8).

Scholarly investigations into the AKP's ability to maintain its position of authority for a span of 22 years frequently highlight either the party's welfare policy targeting the urban poor, its implementation of polarization policies alongside the populist discourse used since assuming power, or its consolidation of control over the media, bureaucracy, and judiciary as a means of conquering the state. During its 22-year rule, 'AKP has usurped the control of what Althusser calls the "repressive state apparatus"—the military, the judiciary, legislation, and the executive branch' (Kalaycı, 2021, p. 219). Undoubtedly, the AKP has employed the carrot-and-stick method to strategically place individuals who exhibit loyalty inside the realms of the media, bureaucracy, and judiciary, and via the selective implementation of social

assistance programs, it has cultivated a loyal base of poor urban voters. This study, however, examines the simultaneous influence of three key drivers behind the electoral success of the AKP: the use of populist discourse in fostering social and political polarization, the role of the media in disseminating such discourse, and the formation of a loyal capital group and the urban poor.

One might reasonably assert that cronyism is a pivotal factor in the electoral triumphs of the AKP. According to the Oxford Dictionary, crony capitalism is an economic system characterized by close, mutually advantageous relationships between business leaders and government officials. Although cronyism is often associated with corruption, it is distinct from corruption. 'Cronyism is based on a tie or a connection or a relationship between actors, involves implicit, unspecified, and reciprocal transactions with no stipulation of a time period during which favors must be returned' (Khatri, 2016, p. 4). This study demonstrates that the AKP repeatedly modifies the public procurement law and reallocates public resources to companies that exhibit loyalty to the party. It also highlights how the AKP utilizes a carrot-and-stick approach to exert influence over the media, bureaucracy, and non-governmental organizations, elucidating the reasons behind the urban poor's continued support for the party (despite the presence of an economic crisis) by examining the implementation of selective social assistance programs.

This article does not directly assess the influence of partisan media on the voting habits of AKP voters. However, it will be shown that the conservative-Islamist welfare regime and the debt policy of the AKP administration play a paramount role in the electoral behavior of impoverished voters supposedly stultified and oblivious to reality because of watching partisan media. The party's tools include crony relations between economic enterprises and the AKP which have reached new heights as these businesses are rewarded with access to public funding in return for their contribution to AKP's hegemony building project (Buğra and Savaşkan, 2014). While the escalation of fake news is globally associated with the rise of populism, in Turkey the impact of crony capitalism and the current government's crony networks should also be considered.

This investigation presents a unique perspective by highlighting the AKP's establishment of a network of loyal media outlets and business individuals through crony capitalism while also demonstrating that the party garnered loyalty from religious foundations, sects, communities, and the urban poor due to the aid and financial support provided by AKP municipalities. The primary objective of this research is to offer a distinct scholarly contribution by analyzing the influence of crony capitalism and welfare policies within the context of populist politics.

2. Methodology: Graphs and connections. AKP's crony networks

This study employed network analysis as a methodology to elucidate the cronyism of AKP, utilizing the graph commons technic for this specific objective. Graph commons is a tool that allows for the mathematical or visual representation, annotation, and integration of intricate data structures in a comprehensible and easily manageable manner. Graph commons is a platform that allows users to map, publish, and analyze data, providing opportunities to transfer, analyze, and utilize data both

on an individual basis and as a group. Data on public tenders granted to the owners of the media outlets were sourced from the Turkish Commerce Registry Gazette, the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce Databank, as well as the websites and newspaper articles of these organizations.

Following the opposition party CHP's victory in the 31 March 2019 elections, when they gained control of the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul, the center of crony capitalism, the first graph commons was launched to address this issue. The shift of Istanbul municipality's away from the AKP resulted in a substantial reduction in resources for foundations and groups that had previously received generous funding from this party. The second graph commons were prepared prior to the 31 March elections for the same purpose. However, the Erdoğan administration persisted in allocating funds to media organizations and religious foundations and associations that supported the government. Nevertheless, the AKP's ability to grant lucrative municipal contracts to pro-government businesses and provide social assistance to urban underprivileged communities through the municipality was curtailed following the loss of Istanbul and Ankara, two major cities.

This study employed a methodology centered around network graphs designed to reveal connections between the AKP, various media outlets, and Islamic foundations, thereby highlighting the AKP's association with key actors involved in the establishment of a neoliberal-conservative hegemony. The crony networks of AKP involving partisan media and their associated companies, the relationship of Islamic charity foundations with Erdoğan's family and AKP's politicians, and the relation of Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality with these foundations during AKP rule can be clearly seen from these graph commons figures.

'Crony capitalism provides a way to understand Turkey's recent and current regimes when it is used as a way to explore networks depending on capitalist cronies' (Kalaycı, 2022, p. 578).

In the first part of the study, populism and partisan media broadcasting policy based on fake news will be described in harmony with Erdoğan's populist politics. The second part illustrates the economic reasons behind fake news in partisan media, showing the crony networks linking partisan media with the ruling party, not least through the public tenders they were awarded, using graph commons. Additional graph commons figure demonstrates how the governing party's social assistance schemes are used to create the perception that this support comes from Erdoğan and the AKP themselves, analyzing the interconnection between the Erdoğan family and high ranking AKP officials with Islamic foundations. In the third and final part of the article, the welfare and debt policies of the AKP government are described to explain the effects of these policies on the poor and middle-class voting for the party in power.

3. Populist communication

According to Cas Mudde, populism is 'an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups: "the pure people" vs. "the corrupt elite", and argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale (general will) of the people' (Mudde, 2004, p. 562). However,

describing populism solely as an ideology would be incomplete; it would be essential to consider not only what populist politicians like Erdoğan tell the people but also how they covey it. The style of partisan media conveying Erdoğan's populist messages is at least as important as the content of these messages, given that populism is at the same time a communication style (Aalberg et al. 2017; Ernst et al. 2019; Hameleers 2020; Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Jost et al. 2020; Moffitt 2016). Populist content cannot be conceived separately from populist style; it is inevitable that the two are in harmony or are harmonized over time (Kriesi, 2018, p. 13). Populist politics has its own language and style, and with the rise of populism across the world, this specific communication style has become the dominant factor in politics.

Ordinary and/or 'pure' people occupy a central position in populist communication, while corrupt elites and dangerous 'others' are depicted as the enemy of these pure people. Being '[p]eoplecentric, conflict-focused, emotionalized, and based on common sense and gut feelings' are chief elements of the populist communication style (Hameleers, 2020, p. 149). The recent negative tone and emotional appeals characterizing electoral campaigns are all associated with the domination of a populist style in politics (Nai, 2020, p. 222). Clarity, ordinariness, simplicity, and straightforwardness are essential in this style. Populist politicians are generally strong (charismatic) leaders, and they may give the impression of being 'a man of the people' by employing slang, vulgar, and even adolescent language (Bos et al., 2013). In addition, main sources of knowledge in populist communication are no longer the elites and experts. Once the spheres of politics and media came to be fully dominated by populism, empirical evidence and expert views were substituted by ordinary people's experiences and feelings (Hameleers, 2020, p. 149). It is common to observe populist leaders across the world using aggressivity, negative emotionality, and provocations in their electoral campaigns. In short, dramatization, simplification, emotionalization, negativity, polarization, moralization, directness, ordinariness, as well as colloquial, rude and vulgar language are some of the stylistic features attributed to populism (Engesser et al., 2017, pp. 1285–1286). The format, language and symbols employed by partisan media correspond to the populist political style and exhibit similarities with populist politics. The populist style, including agitation, calculated provocations, exaggeration, spectacular acts, and attacks on political taboos, commonly observed in populist leaders (Heinisch, 2003, p. 94), is exaggerated by Turkish partisan media.

3.1. Erdoğan's populism and authoritarianism

While populism reached its zenith during the Erdoğan period, it was never alien to Turkish politics. Since the transition to the multi-party system in 1946, right-wing parties have always claimed to be the true representatives of the 'people', while the CHP (Republican People's Party) represented the elites despite carrying the word 'people' in its name. Tayyip Erdoğan, who was born into an Islamist conservative family, is considered the spokesperson for the religious, uneducated, and rural periphery against the secular, educated, and urbanized center supposedly represented by the CHP (Aytaç and Elçi, 2019, p. 90). By depicting the secular-republican elites

affiliated with the CHP as alien and even antagonist to the values of the people, Erdoğan garnered the support not only of the pious segment and the Kurds, but also of the liberals and the European Union.

With his policies, Erdoğan addressed the aspirations, desires, and ambitions of the pious poorer elements of society by extending religious freedom, loosening the strict Kemalist notion of secularism and enabling the less well-off to own their cars and houses, offering them low-interest loans. While channeling state funds to pious businessmen loyal to him, Erdoğan provided employment and housing opportunities for economically disadvantaged religious masses and transferred a part of state and municipality resources to loyal religious masses voting for him through social assistance programs, such as coal and food aid, which the opposition calls 'election bribe' (White, 2017, p. 25).

In the years 2002–2007, Erdoğan used a rather moderate political language because he could not yet control the media and Kemalism still prevailed in the military and the judiciary. With the regime's shift towards authoritarianism and the transformation of mainstream media into a largely AKP organ, Erdoğan's communication style also evolved towards a more aggressive, exclusionary, polarized, and anxiety-fuelled rhetoric. During his 22-year rule, Erdoğan not only came to control the ownership of the mainstream media, but he also streamlined the language and style of the media according to his own populist politics based on post-truth (fake news—'Fake news is information that has been deliberately fabricated and disseminated with the intention to deceive and mislead others into believing falsehoods or doubting verifiable facts' (McGonagle, 2017, p. 203)). Since 2011, partisan media have been champions of this populist communication style.

'Erdoğan's populism can be described as authoritarian, nativist, and civilizational. Since 2015, emergency rhetoric and assertive/absolutist as well as colloquial language have been added to Erdoğan's polarizing and exclusionary populist rhetoric.' (Kalaycı, 2023 a, 737). Having emerged as a reaction against the privatization and commodification of a public space, the Gezi Protests and the corruption scandal in 2013, and finally the coup attempt in 2016 have contributed to crises in the legitimacy of the AKP and rising authoritarianism of Turkey (Yeşil and Sözeri, 2017, p. 544). The increasingly cultish character of Turkey's political regime acquired constitutional status with the approval of the constitutional referendum in 2017 that introduced a presidential system of government to Turkey. This new system contained numerous ambiguities which have given Erdoğan the executive power and capacity to control both the judiciary and the legislature. In recent years, criticisms surfaced regarding AKP's transformation into a party- state, anticipating that Erdoğan will 'reduce the people's will to his personal will, and turn the "empty space" of democratic politics into a property of the devout constituents of the Party. The totalitarian nucleus within his current authoritarian regime project has been gradually gaining new momentum' (Yılmaz and Turner, 2019, p. 697).

Partisan media outlets are trying to design the political sphere in conformity with Erdoğan's wishes by using certain notions such as 'internal enemies, a dualist stance towards authorities, conceptual struggles, majority-victimization, and vulgarity' (Ylä-Anttila et al., 2019, p. 5). The main mission of the partisan media (to a degree that on some days, eight dailies display the same headline) is to conceal the

truth and keep it away from public discussions. The partisan media outlets re-establish the antagonism between the people and the elites by arousing a feeling of disenfranchisement.

Following Erdoğan's political discourse, partisan media's broadcasting is dominated by populism. Their programming depicts the West as the enemy, disparages the old establishment, promotes nativism and nationalism under the slogan 'domestic and national', polarizes the society between 'we' and 'they', and demonizes those it has othered. The policy of partisan media with its populist content and style is ridiculed by the opposition as it relies almost entirely on fake news. It has become a daily activity for partisan media to carry out character assassinations and criminalize dissident journalists along with politicians with entirely fabricated allegations.

Any effort to try and expose fake news or conspiracies and to prove these news items to be wrong in the light of proven facts is useless, because it would not cause any irritation or trouble on the part of populist politicians who are pronouncing these lies or the media outlets disseminating fake news. Politicians are no longer obliged to pay a price for their lies, slanders, and conspiracies; i.e., in contrast to past experiences, lies no longer produce negative consequences. 'Internal inconsistency and being unapologetic and unrepentant for telling proven lies became a sign of strength' (Lulie, 2017). Initiatives like fact checkers trying to expose conspiracy stories and fake news 'are not only ineffective—but can actually be counterproductive' (Gröning, 2019). As D'Ancona (2017) puts it, social media is under the influence of algorithms, foster resistance to and rejection of proven facts because only individuals with similar political views and tastes are linked and matched with one another. Based on their investigation of 126,000 stories on Twitter between 2006 and 2017, Vosoughi et al. reached the following striking conclusion: 'Falsehood diffused significantly farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information' (2018, p. 1146).

## 3.2. AKP's crony capitalism and partisan media

As Surajit Mazumdar claims, crony capitalism emerged 'as a derogatory or derisive description of the illegitimate use (or abuse) of public authority to favor businessmen or business firms who have close relations with those exercising that public authority' (Mazumdar, 2008, pp. 2–3). In crony capitalism, interest groups, firms, and media outlets 'compete to be the cronies who benefit from this government interference. Crony capitalism is not controlled by big government but rather caused by it.' (Holcombe, 2013, p. 551). Governments fostering clientelist relations with businesses to gather electoral support are not unusual. However, under crony capitalism, 'government creates rents and then distributes them to itself and favored interests' (Zywicki, 2015, p. 77). Although the three concepts clientelism, patronage, and corruption are often used synonymously, they have different meanings. Unlike in clientelism, favors in patronage relations are distributed 'not to individuals but to groups'. As pointed out by Erdmann and Engel (2007, p. 107) 'the difference between clientelism and patronage is essentially a distinction between the recipients, between "individual" (land, office, services) and "collective" benefits

(e.g., roads, schools).'

Crony capitalism was prevalent in South Asian countries and former Soviet Union countries that underwent market economy transitions in the 1990s. However, it was not exclusive to these nations, as it was also observed in a diverse range of countries, spanning from developed nations like Italy to developing Latin American countries like Brazil. It is now very common, particularly for large-scale projects, to be awarded to companies that support the government. For instance, in Brazil, which hosted the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics Games, the rents were allocated to the well-connected elites. Similarly, in Russia, which hosted the Sochi Olympics Games in 2014 and the 2020 World Cup, projects of significant magnitude, such as the construction of stadiums, airports, roads and hotels, have been allocated to the cronies (Wolfe and Müller, 2018, p. 105).

Crony capitalism in Turkey, where large portions of public tenders are given to business groups that share Islamic and conservative-authoritarian values (e.g., obedience), plays an important part in the making of AKP's authoritarianism. The AKP has created a loyal business class and 'politicized state institutions (debt collection, tax authorities, privatization, public procurement) and eroded the rule of law to distribute rents and resources to its supporters' (Esen and Gumuscu, 2018, p. 349). In **Figure 1**, by looking at the lucrative contracts and mega projects, it can be argued that the media sector has emerged as the focal point of crony capitalism during the AKP period. The partisan media has appeared as the winner of Erdoğan's crony capitalism aimed at building an obedient bourgeois class and media.

By using principal state institutions like debt collection, tax authorities, privatization, and public procurement, the AKP has realized capital transfer to its cronies with whom it has religious and ideological ties. 'Popular opinion—personified by the 2011 Occupy movement—shows that the general public opposes crony capitalism when they become aware of it'; therefore, these crony relations should be concealed from the public for the sake of the survival of crony capitalism (Holcombe, 2013, p. 550).
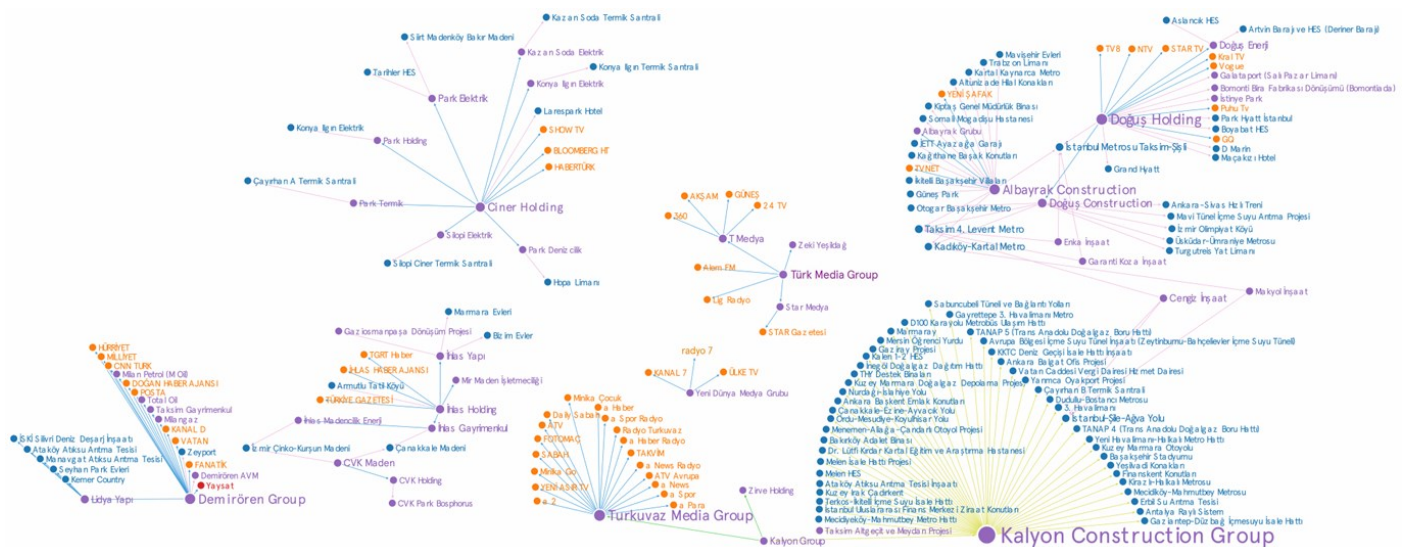
Figure 1. Partisan media outlets and their other investments before 31 March 2019 local elections.

Source: Turkish Commerce Registry Gazette (Türkiye Ticaret Sicili Gazetesi) and Istanbul Chamber of Commerce Databank (İstanbul Ticaret Odası Bilgi Bankası, [İTO] Bilgi Bankası).

Figure 1—By looking at the lucrative contracts and mega projects, it can be argued that the media sector has become the center of crony capitalism during the AKP period. By means of overlapping ownership, partisan media outlets receive their profit from well-paid public contracts in the sectors of construction, energy, mining, tourism, and health. In return they not only act as media outlets loyal to the government but also contribute to AKP's electoral success by making large donations to AKP-ruled municipalities and Islamic foundations (Atalay, 2018, p. 181; Kimya, 2018, p. 368).

As seen in **Figure 1**, Albayrak, Demirören, İhlas, Kalyon, Turkuvaz, Türk Media, Ciner and Doğuş have been awarded several megaprojects with the help of the AKP. Article 21/b of the Public Procurement Law No. 47345 helps the AKP to form a loyalist group of businesspeople, which is one of the reasons why, according to data from the World Bank, five out of ten firms that have got the most public tenders in the world are from Turkey (Limak Holding, Cengiz Holding, Kolin, Kalyon ve MNG Holding) (Samar, 2018).

In 2003, the Public Procurement Law was promulgated with the intention to diminish irregularities and corruption as well as improving competition, integrity, and transparency in public tenders. But against all expectations, it played a part in the rise of crony capitalism (Gürakar, 2016). By undergoing more than 190 amendments under the AKP governments, the Public Procurement Law, along with privatizations and public transfer of private capital from dissidents to party supporters, 'played critical role in the process of building a dependent business class' (Esen and Gumuscu, 2020, p. 1083). Partisan media manufactures fake news in favor of Erdoğan to ensure the continuity of its crony relationship with the government. Erdoğan was able to have all opponent journalists removed as a result of the takeover in the media sector shortly after gaining power, which means that at present it is almost impossible in 'mainstream media' to employ a journalist critical of Erdoğan. On the other hand, it would be inaccurate to maintain that manufacturing fake news in conventional media is only due to the government's pressure. Media giants all have intrinsic incentives to manufacture fake news because they are among the biggest profiteers of the crony capitalism.

The ease with which Erdoğan can tell 'things' such as 'there were no fridges in the old Turkey' or 'ambulances came to Turkey during AKP rule' and the inability of the conventional media to refute these lies is evidently directly associated with crony capitalism. Shaping the economic policies of the Erdoğan government, crony capitalism has directly influenced the media sector in Turkey, leading to the disappearance/partisanization of mainstream media.

Another factor to be understood for an accurate and comprehensive analysis of fake news in partisan media is Erdoğan's economic and social network, because Erdoğan's authoritarian rule is based on a symbiotic set of relations among the poor masses, loyal business, and partisan media. On the other hand, there are the poor working-class and the religious masses that applaud AKP's policies and follow partisan media. Thus, the question arises why the poorest and mostly religiously-conservative sections of the society vote for AKP. The bulk of AKP voters is predominantly composed of low- and moderate-income voters and comes from families with limited educational capital (Uncu, 2018, pp. 12–14).

4. AKP's conservative welfare policy

The AKP's welfare policy does not adhere to a rights-based framework but rather adopts a partisan approach whereby the receipt of social benefits is contingent upon voting in favor of the party. The AKP has pursued a dual approach in its governance, characterized by efforts to weaken the role of welfare policies and transfer responsibility to the private sector, as well as to maintain the unwavering support of marginalized segments of society including housewives, farmers, and elderly pensioners. Such support has been fostered through the provision of assistance to the poorest layers of society, delivered in the form of both in-kind and cash transfers (Bozkurt, 2013, p. 384).

The neoliberal perspective posits that the family or community (rather than the state) serves as the primary source of social protection. The AKP has not only implemented neoliberal policies that have resulted in the privatization of public services but has also facilitated the emergence of faith-based, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that reproduce its cultural hegemony rooted in Islamic and conservative principles (Kazanoğlu and Ketola, 2022, p. 601, 604).

In their comparative analysis, Szikra and Öktem examine the illiberal welfare policies of Hungary and Turkey, two countries undergoing a rapid shift towards authoritarianism to demonstrate how the Fidesz and AKP effectively implemented welfare policies that align with their conservative discourses, ultimately bolstering their electoral support by focusing on reforming family policy for the former, and health policy for the latter. Implemented in various nations, including Turkey, the adoption of neoliberal policies has led to the precarisation and flexibilization of the employment regulation. For instance, in Hungary, Fidesz, similar to the AKP's approach in Turkey, not only diminished the influence of trade unions but also appeased employers by implementing policies that increased the flexibility of employment regulations (Szikra and Öktem, 2023, p. 210).

Increased precarity and job insecurity among the working classes, also due to AKP's neoliberal policies, multiplied the number of people in need of social assistance, hence augmented dependency on AKP's political clientelism (Özdemir, 2020, p. 10). 'As clients become increasingly dependent on the incumbent for their material well-being, voters' ability to punish the incumbent may be limited' (Yıldırım, 2020, p. 95).

'AKP's multilayered populist/clientelist social aid networks' provided both legitimacy and electoral success for the party (Gürcan and Peker, 2015, p. 15). Granting 'public-service association' status and tax-exemption to Islamic charities without any need for authorization of their donations/fund-raising activities, the AKP gave these charities and NGOs a key role in welfare distribution and electoral control, turning them into essential instruments of the state machinery (Atalay, 2013, p. 167; 2018, pp. 179–180). Islamic foundations as a key element of the welfare program, along with conservative trade unionism, contributed to AKP's Islamization of society and adaptation of workers to neoliberalism. Highlighting social cohesion rather than class conflict, AKP-controlled conservative trade unionism reproduced the paternalistic labor relationship 'where Islam plays a passivizing cultural-ideological role in preaching docility, obedience, and gratitude' (Gürcan and Peker,

2015, pp. 15–16). In addition, the AKP's 'neoliberal authoritarianism' or 'authoritarian neoliberalism' has reshaped the relationship between capital and labor in order to enhance competition, flexibility, and low wages in the labor market while also reducing job security and weakening labor unions (Erol, 2019, p. 663). AKP has compelled workers to abstain from affiliating with left-wing trade unions in order to retain their employment (Özkızıltan, 2019, p. 228).

According to Bahçe and Köse, the previous welfare regime that was based on a constitutionally guaranteed social rights-based model was supplanted during the AKP period by a neoliberal welfare/poverty regime based on a selective and unequal system of social assistance. Designed to secure the allegiance of the urban poor, the AKP's welfare regime is integral to the new labor control regime (2017, pp. 575–576).

The significance of municipalities' role in the realm of patronage politics is unquestionable, as they have contributed to the establishment of distributive politics and clientelism due to their involvement in the delivery of public goods (Marschall et al., 2016, p. 204). Municipalities under the AKP's welfare regime, especially the municipality of Turkey's most densely populated city, Istanbul, are fundamentally important. The arbitrary cancellation of the municipal election in Istanbul after the CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu had carried a victory on 31 March 2019 is a direct indication of the significance of this metropolis both for the relocation of resources to loyal companies and the provision of social assistance to the impoverished people by the AKP government.

In the entire country, but especially in Istanbul, clientelistic networks and patronage distribution among the pious poor in low-income urban areas have played a major role in AKP's electoral success (Ark-Yıldırım, 2017; Sayarı, 2014). After coming to power, the AKP made legal changes to widen the remit of municipalities in the field of social assistance, allowing them to act as charity brokers. Rather than using municipal resources, the municipalities ruled by AKP forced pro-government firms to make 'donations' to them or to AKP-affiliated foundations in return for public tenders (Kimya, 2018, p. 367). In order to access lucrative contracts and state bids, pro-AKP entrepreneurs financed social assistance through generous cash or in-kind donations in electoral districts that have become the AKP's electoral strongholds (Cengiz, 2020, p. 522). In order to 'select the "deserving poor," and deliver social aid', the AKP 'established an immense network of providers (i.e., party workers and bureaucrats)' (Atalay, 2018, p. 184; Yıldırım, 2020, p. 83). In this way, not only did bribery and corruption acquire legal and religious legitimacy under the brand of 'charity donations' in the AKP period (Bozkurt, 2013, p. 385; Eder, 2010, p. 178), but this also enabled AKP to present itself as a champion of the poor and of Islam. In order to gain the trust specifically of the poor pious social segments, AKP municipalities have tried to make these social assistances as visible as possible 'by organizing soup kitchens for the poor [and] building giant food tents for iftar meals during the month of Ramadan' in the most central and crowded urban centers like Istanbul's Taksim Square (Eder, 2010, p. 178).

In this process, AKP-controlled public banks played a pivotal role in fostering partisan media. They not only extended inexpensive loans to their parent holdings, but also facilitated the support of a loyal bourgeois class and a voter group by

providing affordable loans to AKP-affiliated consumers and small businesses, particularly construction companies. During the pandemic, in particular, in order to boost the construction and automotive sectors, the AKP obliged public banks to offer loans with lower interest rates, amid allegations that they select AKP-affiliated business owners and individuals as recipients (A question submitted to the presidency of the Turkish Parliament by CHP MP Orhan Sümer, who had stated that 'public banks are giving credits to partisans, knowing that they will not be able to retrieve the debt', was rejected, see 'Kamu bankalarında neler oluyor [What is happening in public banks?]' (Odatv, 2023)).

As has been noted, '[m]unicipal governments act as "brokers in charity" who channel the resources, in kind or in cash, provided by charitable donations' (Buğra and Keyder, 2006, p. 224). Besides, since there is no transparency on how much money has been transferred or what type of rewards were given to the businessmen from the local fund in exchange for donations to the municipality's charity fund, an Islamic form has been conferred to the bribery and corruption during AKP rule in the name of donation to charity (Buğra, 2007, p. 47). Illegal activities of loyal businessmen were rewarded with public tenders and contracts instead of being prosecuted (Buğra and Keyder, 2006, p. 224). The urban poor, surviving on the donations of AKP municipalities and Islamic foundations, see a continued AKP rule as essential to their interests.

Concurrently seeking to shape civil society, the AKP provided financial support to associations and foundations aligned with its conservative ideology while simultaneously marginalizing NGOs that did not espouse pious conservative values (Kazanoğlu and Ketola, 2022, p. 605, 611). Encompassing legal changes and aiming to promote their presence in the realm of welfare, the AKP actively extends various forms of assistance to Islamic associations and foundations that perceive state institutions as potential partners (Göçmen, 2018, p. 195). As a result, these religious charity groups and philanthropic associations have effectively assumed the role of the welfare state (Bozkurt, 2013, p. 374). Not exclusive to Turkey, this phenomenon can also be observed in several other Muslim countries in which Islamist charities and religious NGOs play a significant role in income redistribution and social assistance. Nevertheless, the presence of AKP leaders and members of Tayyip Erdoğan's family in the management of several of Turkey's religious foundations and organizations may create the perception that the AKP administration is directly involved in the provision of social assistance through these charitable organizations.

In **Figure 2**, it can be seen that foundations with organic ties to the AKP and Erdoğan's family receive financial support from Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality. This graph commons image is based on the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Annual Report on NGOs, Schools and Dormitories (2018) as well as the websites of the foundations in question. The foundations that received the most financial support from the Municipality are TÜGVA, whose board of trustees includes Tayyip Erdoğan's son Bilal Erdoğan, TÜRGEV, founded by Bilal Erdoğan, with Erdoğan's daughter Esra Albayrak as a board member, and Türk Teknoloji Takımı (T3), whose president is Erdoğan's son-in-law Selçuk Bayraktar. Following the CHP candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu's electoral victory in 2019, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality cut the financial support to these foundations. As is clear from **Figure 2**, since the

charity organizations are chaired by—or their boards of trustees include—Tayyip Erdoğan's children and sons-in-law or other close relatives or AKP figures; the donations of these foundations may easily be perceived as direct charity from Erdoğan's family or from the party (AKP is considered by its supporters as a gate-keeper of the public services deemed the most useful ones (Massicard, 2014, p. 31)), raising fears that these organizations may be dissolved in case Erdoğan has to leave office. For now, the policy of charity with Islamic references is of great value to the president, especially in terms of his well-established popularity among the popular strata who had long felt excluded from the political game dominated by secular elites (Lelievre, 2018). 'In Gramscian terms, these practices represented mechanisms of establishing consent via distribution of material concessions to subordinate classes, on which the AKP came to rely more heavily on as its hegemonic project increasingly ran into crises' (Adaman et al., 2019, p. 521).
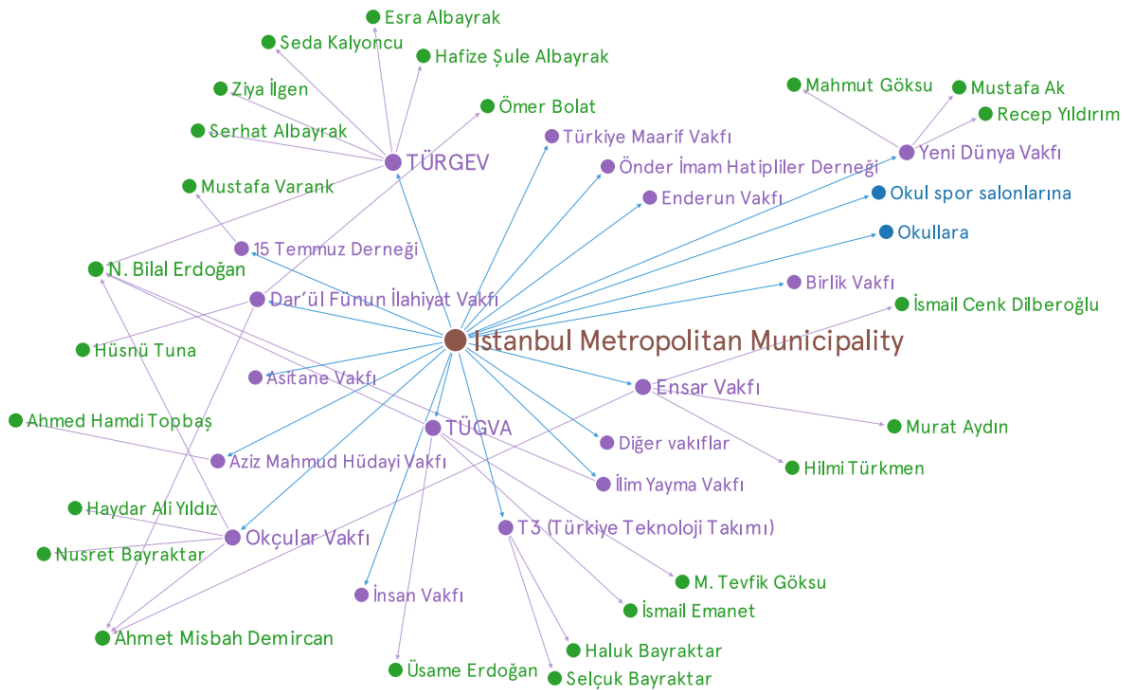
Figure 2. Istanbul metropolitan municipality funds transfer to Islamic foundations affiliated to AKP and Erdoğan's family (before the local elections in Turkey on 31 March 2019).

Source: Istanbul metropolitan municipality annual report on NGOs, schools and dormitories (2018).

5. Conservative trade unions and AKP's debt policy

Ümit Akçay links AKP's success of staying in power for twenty-one years to Erdoğan's particular neoliberal economic policy: Once AKP established a neoliberal populist model, structural changes occurred in Turkey's political conflict and 'power struggles have taken the form of intra-elite conflict, rather than class struggle'. The model that Akçay calls 'neoliberal populism' weakens the working class by atomizing it and relies on securing its partial consent by means of a limited welfare regime. The AKP's authoritarian populist neoliberal policy not only seeks to achieve capital accumulation through the exploitation of a low-cost, disposable labor force but also attempts 'to incorporate different segments of the laboring classes into their

political project by individualizing their collective agency' (Bozkurt-Güngen 2018, p. 222, 227).

By integrating the workers and their families into the neoliberal system as domestic consumers and credit users, AKP has both expanded the neoliberal market relations and ensured that the indebted workers stay out of trade unions that might otherwise challenge the government (Özkızıltan, 2019, pp. 232–233). Thus, in order to cripple the left-wing trade unions that have a potential to resist its neoliberal policies, the party forced the workers to join ideologically conservative unions and established a patronage relationship by developing a co-optation strategy with these conservative trade unions (Atalay, 2018, p. 187). The AKP government harshly crushed even the smallest attempts of protest of workers who remained affiliated with the left-wing trade unions, not tolerating any protests, acting like a police state in the aftermath of the attempted coup on 15 July 2016. Consequently, AKP did not only weaken the left-wing trade unions, but also forced workers to join the Islamist-conservative unions loyal to the party, thus assimilating the working class into the AKP.

Consumer credits made accessible to large numbers of workers created new dependencies in conformity with the demands of the capital (Vercellone, 2010, pp. 106–107). With the rise of neoliberalism, debt across the world has proliferated—student loan debt, credit card debt, mortgage, hire purchase and leasing debt, micro-finance debt, etc. Neoliberal transformation involves a retreat of the welfare state, a breakdown in the power of organized labor, precariousness of the labor markets, financialization of the economy, and an exponential expansion of debt (Mahmud, 2012, p. 469). The debt-based economy and the production of mass indebtedness have led both to the transformation of class relations and the depoliticization of politics by hiding exploitation, exploiter, and class antagonism and by individualizing workers (Federici, 2014). 'Precarious and formally "self-employed" work has become an essential component of class composition' in many countries' (Roth, 2010, p. 224).

Bissonnette (2019), after describing debt as a political phenomenon that disciplines and tames workers, further maintains that the debtor/creditor relationship is a power relationship because it compels the former to behave in conformity with the interests of the latter. Feher claims that the power relations between capital and labor reached a novel dimension in the new phase of capitalism, and as in the era of financial capitalism, the individual has become a 'credit-seeking project' and the employer-worker relationship resembles an 'investor-invested' dynamic. According to Feher (2017), the exploitation that employers continue to subject their employees to is now the power of selection that investors wield over the 'invested'. 'Living with debt is living in a "credit panopticon", says Mahmud, and he further explains that the working classes increasingly turned to debt for economic survival and that the interiorization of market goals and neoliberal rationality replaced solidarity, collective rights, and anti-subordination in precarious labor markets (Mahmud, 2012, pp. 485–486).

During AKP rule, TOKİ (the Housing Development Administration) reinvented itself and became the main producer of 'affordable' market-rate housing offering mortgages with long maturities. Being a TOKİ contractor has become a privilege due

to the rapid increase of TOKİ's share in the housing market, and this privilege was offered only to construction companies loyal to the AKP (Karaman, 2013, p. 3418). In fact, the 'miracle formula' that consistently enables the AKP to win elections and get the support of the poor is as follows: Subdue workers who have been impoverished under precarious living conditions because of the neoliberal policies of the AKP (1) by offering credits creating heavy debt burdens so they become interested in the continuation of AKP rule, (2) by providing social aid on behalf of the AKP to poor families known to be AKP voters in order to assure their loyalty and gratitude. Finally, the AKP holds on to its power in spite of the economic downturn, generating fear that these credits and social subsidies will end if AKP loses the government. AKP voters living off those benefits and cheap loans are then buying into the truth presented by AKP organizations, municipalities, Islamic charities, Islamic-conservative trade unions, TOKI, and loyalist media. It is this clientelist relationship created by the AKP that ensures the vote of the poor.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenon of impoverished segments of the population voting for ruling parties responsible for their hardship, rather than punishing them, is not exclusive to Turkey. Similar dynamics can be observed in certain Eastern European countries like Hungary, where populist leaders govern. Furthermore, crony capitalism extends beyond Turkey and is prevalent in numerous countries spanning South Asia, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Africa. The enduring grip of the authoritarian right-wing populist AKP government, despite the worsening economic crisis, widespread impoverishment, and growing wealth disparity, can offer valuable lessons for other nations grappling with similar economic challenges and the rise of right-wing populism.

This study argues that the partisan media, disseminating Erdoğan's populist discourse in line with his policy of polarization, in concert with conservative Islamist welfare and partisan debt policy are playing an important role in making the urban poor vote for AKP. The AKP has successfully established networks of economic and political interdependence by motivating the emergent Islamic capitalist class—through lucrative contracts and pro-business reforms – and appeasing the urban poor—through gestures that promote traditional Islamic community values and morality (Karaman, 2013, p. 3424). During the AKP's rule, the social security system shifted from 'a legally defined rights-based system' to a 'conservatively-oriented and paternalistic system which institutionalised the neo-liberal Poor Law' system, with various entities such as municipalities and non-governmental organizations, including Islamic foundations and associations, assuming a significant role in the transfer of resources to poor households (Bahçe and Köse, 2017, pp. 578–579).

In this article, it is argued that the perpetuation of cronyism is indispensable for various actors including media outlets owned by holdings whose other branches receive lucrative public contracts thanks to their close ties to AKP and for the urban poor whose livelihood is dependent on charity donations from AKP loyalist businesses. Accordingly, both actors consider Erdoğan's rule as essential for

securing their livelihood or their wealth, respectively. The main purpose of this article is to demonstrate in the context of clientelism and AKP's welfare and debt policies why partisan media is disseminating fake news and why the urban poor are voting for AKP. It is highly plausible that the urban poor who depend on social aid remain indifferent to the 'truth' as long as they believe that AKP will continue favoring them in future redistributions of resources. Other factors such as the leader's charisma, religion, and security issues also affect the urban poor when they vote for Erdoğan, but AKP's social assistance and debt policies are among the main determinants in the relationship AKP established with the less well-off groups in the cities. Thus social assistance returns to AKP in the form of votes, leading to the formation of a patron-client relationship between AKP municipalities and voters receiving their aid (Özdemir, 2020, p. 11).

This article also illustrates how partisan media has been broadcasting in tune with the communication style of populism which at the moment is on a steep rise globally. Through graph commons figures, the function of AKP's crony capitalism in creating partisan media has been demonstrated. The Erdoğan regime has built a network encompassing the media (and therefore the construction and energy companies owning these media outlets) and Islamic foundations that guarantee the loyalty of the urban poor to the regime through charitable donations.

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