

Western Perception and Media Coverage of Türkiye's Elections

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ABSTRACT *Media coverage of the recent elections in Türkiye, especially in the first round, has proven the profound distortion of image and misperception in some Western circles. Although a biased reading of the events, which pivots mainly on ideological connotations, aimed at influencing the outcome of the vote, it resulted in mere wishful thinking. The role of the media in influencing communication through the framing of the agenda has empirical evidence; however, in the case of Türkiye, a cognitive gap has opened up between expectations and reality, which lies on a non-objective and sometimes emotional interpretation of the facts. The electoral results, by denying once again any superficial prediction and manipulation attempt, must be read as a lesson on how to look at Türkiye, its government, and its people and therefore generate more accurate and genuine information.*

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The recent political and presidential elections in Türkiye must be considered historic, not only for the reconfirmation of the power of the AK Party and its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who triumphantly sealed the ‘Century of Türkiye,’ but above all because these electoral results refute and still contradict the distorted perception of some Western circles. On the mainstream, indeed, in the weeks immediately preceding the call to the polls of May 14, 2023 various newspapers and many Western commentators more or less explicitly gave their support to the opposition, perceived and therefore described as a ‘supporter of democracy’ and a “due choice against Erdoğan’s autocratic regime.”¹

Similarly, many journalists who came to Türkiye to report on the elections and the political climate in the country have fallen into the trap of misperception and disseminating knowledge affected by a partial and politicized reading of events and dynamics, generating expectations that, by denying the facts, proved to be fallacious and biased. Even in some political circles, there was a cautious optimism towards the opposition led by Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the main opposition political party, the Republican People’s Party (CHP) which, however, should be considered lukewarm wishful thinking. As communication is undoubtedly an instrument of power and influence, its pervasive capacity also depends on the lenses, i.e., criteria of interpretation that are used to read and look at the facts. Indeed, it is by support-

ing ideas based on personal interpretations of society and reality, often connoted on an ideological level, that bias is created.

Emotions, Ideology, and Framing

‘Personal reality’ mainly concerns emotions and feelings, a set of values, ideas, ideologies, and private experience. However, it often has nothing to do with an ‘objective’ reading of what is happening in the global world, which eventually is known through mass media information and communication, but also through social media and the internet. This means that the perception of reality we have comes from the information reaching us through the media, which was conceived just to play the role of ‘mediators’ between individuals and the surrounding world. In this logic, information can bring out desired emotions by talking a lot and primarily about certain issues, or by representing a specific dimension while omitting the other one and dismissing whole readings. In other words, the play of tones, emphasis, images, and the anticipation of consequences stimulate emotions and desires, thus influencing opinions in one direction or another.

One aspect of human thinking is, in fact, ‘motivated reasoning,’ such as the tendency to reach conclusions based on evidence that eventually corresponds to pre-existing beliefs. In other words, if some issues pose a threat to anyone’s political ideology, he or she will fight them tenaciously;

if instead they go in favor of his or her worldview, he or she will accept them without much objection.² In this sense, people resist information that challenges their beliefs, especially if it comes from opposing political factions or conflicting values. For example, in the case of the elections in Türkiye, facing with evidence that the candidate they liked in a negative way won, some showed to be even more ardent in supporting the opponents or after Erdoğan's victory many called and wrote about fraud against the Turks and the state of democracy in the country. In other words, people tend to believe what they want, even at the cost of denying the evidence, especially when it is perceived as coming from the opposite political faction. Some specialized studies show that motivated reasoning is equally widespread in all political groups, and it seems to prevail among the better-informed, at least on some issues.³

As the current world we live in can be defined as 'post-constructivism' and 'post-truth,' in the formation of public opinion, appealing to emotions and personal ideas yields more than facts. In fact, this certainly appears more convenient as it does not require any interpretative or in-depth effort. However, empirical evidence is fundamental to structuring the political debate, especially when discussing complex and controversial social and political realities. The biggest problem, in fact, is the distorted perception of reality, especially on salient political issues. It also implies the issue of professional ethics as

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well as knowledge. Wrong perceptions generate partial knowledge and, therefore, ignorance. In addition to the personal and depth psychology elements, it is also appropriate to refer to the factors pushing both individuals and social groups to follow what is happening in the world. Certainly, as Lippmann himself affirms in his communication theory essays, it often happens that states, institutions, or corporations place obstacles to a full knowledge of facts. History itself continues to show the difficulty of some information apparatuses in exercising their communicative function correctly outside of propaganda. Furthermore, although we live in an information ecosystem that is easy to access thanks to the pervasiveness of social networks and digital information, there are still serious economic, social, and cultural barriers that prevent healthy, in-depth analysis and genuine knowledge of the facts.⁴ Indeed, the entry of digital media has presented a set of new opportunities while also posing a variety of challenges. In fact, digital media has

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brought a sort of revolution within the communication space, for example, by allowing everyone to have a say in how news is produced and received, while before people received the information passively and acted in accordance with what had been communicated to them by the media. In other words, digital media allows interactivity with the audience by enabling them to accept or reject the messages communicated, while on the other side, it may act as an open pool where they can insert any kind of information.⁵

In other words, communication can produce misinformation by generating a lack of answers to a concrete question or by reinforcing false conventions. Misperception also hinges on the conviction of being well informed, mainly because it is often based on emotional or ideological assumptions, which may lead to being more refractory towards new information and systemic readings.⁶

Certainly, today's great concern is the disinformation surrounding contemporary political issues, also motivated by mere ideological and conspiratorial agendas. On a scientific level, 'framing' in communication is de-

defined as "the selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality and made more salient in a communicative text, to promote a particular definition of a problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation and/or a recommendation."⁷ Thus, frames are not just communication tools; they are mental models understood as forms of knowledge that underline a particular vision of the world based on the choice of certain words and therefore generate specific expectations and attitudes. In this sense, there is no neutral reading of reality; something is included to the detriment of something else. Consequently, understanding depends on framing, and this can substantially influence opinions on specific issues. After all, as it was evident in the case of the Türkiye elections, it is not the media faction proposing the 'best' arguments that wins a debate or that pleads the most just cause, but the one offering the most plausible and intuitively credible scenario, pivoting on interpretation considered reliable and realistic.

Turkish Elections and Western Media Bias

It is not a new case that in the West there are stances against Erdoğan and his government, which mainly hinge on growing concerns about the state of democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights in a country that, as regards freedom of thought, is also considered "one of the biggest prisons in the world for journalists."⁸ The Turkish government has repeatedly responded to those statements,

rejecting the accusations. “Türkiye has no problems with the freedom of the press, despite deliberate and manipulative claims by national and international actors,” declared the Presidency Communications Director Fahrettin Altun, explaining how such criticisms over press freedom in Türkiye had deviated from its main subject, the media, and had become political and ideological in their nature. “Türkiye currently has a wide variety of media organizations, such as television channels, newspapers, websites, or other platforms with differentiating viewpoints. Members of the opposition can voice their criticisms with ease in such a setting,” Altun explained, adding that “some people or nations have used and continue to use the freedom of expression or press freedom as a pretext to ideologically target Türkiye in an “obsessive” way.”⁹

Hence, the support that some media outlets have openly granted to the opposition and Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu in this recent electoral race is mainly attributed to this logic. Indeed, the covers and main articles showed how widespread the anti-Erdoğan sentiments are in the name of freedom and democratic maturity in Türkiye.

On May 4, 2023, the media outlet *The Economist* dedicated a special issue to Türkiye, with a cover referring to the “Most Important Elections of 2023” with graphics that recalled the Turkish flag under the slogans: “Erdoğan Must Go,” “Vote,” and “Save Democracy.” A narrative that was further emphasized by some internal

articles with pungent and politically oriented titles such as “If Türkiye Sacks Its Strong Man, Democrats Everywhere Should Take Heart.”¹⁰ It looked like a clear attempt by Western media coverage to mobilize the votes by shaping a specific perception and siding with that part of the political debate demanding a change in Türkiye based on democratic assumptions. However, this approach has neglected the strength of the Erdoğan government in shaping public views of policy and leadership as well as the democratic understanding of the Turkish people.

Indeed, there is no doubt that such a reading of the facts deviates from the complexity of the analysis that a country like Türkiye requires. It is mainly justified on ideological and emotional assumptions, which have not just opened up an important cognitive gap with the reality of things but also failed in the aim of shifting the majority of votes in favor of the opposition, thus favoring domestic continuity. Nevertheless, *The Economist* is not new in such a communication framing. In light of the electoral race, it proposed coverage entitled “Türkiye’s Looming Dictatorship,” claiming that the country could be “on the brink of dictatorship” under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s leadership.¹¹ On that occasion, Fahrettin Altun, replied via Twitter by emphasizing the danger of propaganda and disinformation: “Outrageous headlines and provocative imagery might help them sell their so-called journal, so we congratulate them on their ingenious marketing techniques! But

In the lead-up to the May 2023 elections, the Western media consistently directed its focus towards President Erdoğan displaying a noticeable bias in their interpretation of the Turkish reality.



we must remind audiences that this is sensationalist journalism based on cheap propaganda and disinformation.¹² Before then, other editions had pointed fingers at Türkiye and its leader Erdoğan, who was portrayed as an unknown character: “Democrat or Sultan?,” whose stability was supposedly challenged by many elements.

In addition to the propaganda against Erdoğan and his government, several other outlets led by *The Washington Post*, contradicted by the electoral results confirming the failure of their own expectations and political interpretations of Türkiye, have focused on the “free and unfair”¹³ processes of the elections by entering

into a self-motivated reasoning loop. Undoubtedly, belonging to certain ideological circles has facilitated the pro-opposition perception; hence, various Western commentators, public figures, and politicians have occupied social media with posts and tweets in favor of a ‘different and more democratic future for the Türkiye,’ praising a change against Erdoğan. The day after, some of them remained silent, while some others timidly admitted their responsibilities by declaring that “nobody had understood anything about the elections in Türkiye.”¹⁴ Indeed, that was the objective reality: few observers in the West, mostly those who deeply know the country and its psychology because they have breathed its air and

lived it deeply, have been able to bet and win on the triumph of the AK Party and President Erdoğan.

However, although in the light of the first electoral round of May 14, the emotional charge and expectations were very high, also seasoned with a certain enthusiasm regarding the victory of the opposition, in the run-off of May 28, the mainstream communication has maintained a low profile. It was as if President Erdoğan's reconfirmation was expected, and the idea had to be digested. Instead, all the narratives about the 'dictatorship' and the 'autocratic regime' have almost magically vanished, strengthened by reality: with a turnout of almost 90 percent and recourse to the ballot, democracy, at least in its participatory and electoral criteria, was guaranteed, respected, and honored. It was a clear message outlined by the world leaders congratulating Erdoğan on his electoral victory: the need to deal with Türkiye, a country that has preferred the continuity guaranteed by a strong leader to a change, and above all, a country that, thanks to Erdoğan, has increased its national pride, reaffirming its role of a strategic partner for many.

***Charlie Hebdo*: No More Freedom of Speech, but Insulting**

In this context, however, it is appropriate to mention, for purposes of analysis but certainly not for ethics, the cartoon proposed by *Charlie Hebdo* between the first and second electoral rounds. The image of in-

Despite different political ideologies and different interpretations of the facts, there is always a red line of demarcation between the acceptable and the unacceptable, pivoting on professional ethics

cumbent President Erdoğan naked and being shocked by an electric bulb in a bathtub has once again crossed the line of humor and freedom of expression, becoming extremely outrageous. The cover reads "Erdoğan: Like Cloclo, Only Fate Will Rid Us of Him!" referring to the French pop singer Claude Francois, who died in 1978 when he was electrocuted trying to fix a light bulb while taking a bath. This a further sign of how the French satire magazine, which has already attacked Türkiye and President Erdoğan in the past, eventually supported the latter's defeat.

Crippling images, facts, and collective emotions exaggerating tones and messages beyond the ideological connotation, certainly denotes a syndrome of weakness. The escalation of rhetoric and pungent symbolism, indeed, only serves to strengthen one's stance and further legitimize the fallacious interpretation of reality when things do not go as hoped or expected. A sort of abnegation of truth, which therefore deserves to be

What remains, however, is that beyond frames and narratives, Türkiye has reconfirmed President Erdoğan based on trust and continuity, despite any Western perception and ideological resistance

desecrated. However, there is always a limit to decency since the offense against President Erdoğan has resounded as an outrage to the whole Turkish nation, which, as some state officials had clearly announced, seemed motivated to react to the publication by giving the ‘right answer on May 28.’ İbrahim Kalın, at that time Presidential Spokesperson and Adviser to President Erdoğan, said in a tweet that the second round of presidential voting would prove how popular the incumbent is. “If the *Charlie Hebdo* rag went so crazy ... we’re on the right path,” he declared. “Our nation will give you the best answer, with an even louder voice, on May 28.”¹⁵ Also, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, then Minister of Foreign Affairs, joined the chorus of criticism against *Charlie Hebdo*, calling: “Ignoble *Charlie Hebdo* continues to insult the Turkish Nation. Let us not forget! Those who praise evil always drown in their own hatred and mischief. The real lesson is that those who cannot defeat the free will of the Turkish nation with various games are desperately relying on fate.”¹⁶ Indeed, for years, *Charlie Hebdo* has periodically sparked con-

troversy by targeting Türkiye and the Muslim World.

Beyond the political connotation, however, the French satirical newspaper, in its anti-Turkish and Islamophobic spirit, more recently turned the humanitarian tragedy of the earthquakes of February 6, 2023, which violently hit Türkiye and Syria, into a grotesque comic strip. Precisely, *Charlie Hebdo* had published yet another cartoon announcing the end of Türkiye. The drawing showed teetering buildings amid heaps of rubble with the caption: “No Need to Send Tanks,” proving how the perception of things can border on the disgusting and shameful, leading to extremely partisan information and hate speech. There is no doubt that the images featured by *Charlie Hebdo* convey a message of very high moral corruption. Indeed, despite different political ideologies and different interpretations of the facts, there is always a red line of demarcation between the acceptable and the unacceptable, pivoting on professional ethics.

Speculating on pain and death goes much further than humor and comics; hence, it has nothing to do with the dissemination of information or freedom of expression. In fact, this is an extremely delicate topic in the liberal political systems, which have recently pronounced discretionally on what is politically correct or incorrect. Indeed, in the West, the moralistic option has found a conspicuous expression in the widespread paradigm of ‘political correctness.’ In other words, political correctness has

become a sort of new social conformism aimed at preventing hurting or even intimidating certain groups of people. Ultimately, political correctness implies the attempt to sweeten verbal or non-verbal language, above all by purifying it for the protection of the sensitivity or self-esteem of some. It is mainly a matter of mutual respect between people, cultures, religions, and nations, which necessarily requires a rational study of reality, a deep psychological understanding, and a sense of empathy that must be continuous and uninterrupted.

Conclusion

As the above-described cases show, there is a sort of double standard approach that sometimes privileges just a unique interpretation of facts. Indeed, when it comes to reading the reality of Türkiye, discussion of Western media coverage, overall, of Erdoğan's rule and the last elections proved how widespread media bias is, both in its aims of influencing public opinion and changing election outcomes. Thus, it is crucial to be cautious when reading the information, as some mainstream media follow a political agenda. Moreover, there are many intricacies and viewpoints; therefore, it is becoming very challenging for the reader to have the most balanced picture of Türkiye. Hence, seeking out various sources of information and recognizing that there are various points of view to consider is a must for an objective understanding of reality. Although there were high expectations for the

opposition, it is also worth noting that not all Western media coverage has been just against Erdoğan.

Indeed, some outlets acknowledged the positive achievements and successful policies of the Turkish President and his government. As a matter of fact, the coverage widely depends on professionalism, but it can also be attributed to differences in editorial ownership and perspectives. Even from the perspective of those who have a univocal reading of Türkiye, it is necessary to distinguish the reasons for their stances. Some news outlets are openly against Erdoğan and his government, considered too far from Western criteria and from a mature interpretation of democracy; therefore, they support the idea of a regime change. While others, as in the extreme case of *Charlie Hebdo*, assuming that it can be called journalism, are characterized by anti-Turkish and anti-Muslim rhetoric, hence risking to generate hatred and further polarizing the political and social climate around the axis 'West versus the rest.'

What remains, however, is that beyond frames and narratives, Türkiye has reconfirmed President Erdoğan based on trust and continuity, despite any Western perception and ideological resistance. Therefore, it is advisable to take this as a lesson by learning to look at Türkiye for what it really is and not for what we would like it to be according to some emotional criteria, political agenda, or pure convenience. In this regard, everyone –journalists, writers, and readers– is called to change the lenses of perceiv-

ing, unpacking the information, and further analyzing things, by leaving aside personal paradigms, emotions, and wishful thinking. Although in some cases it does not seem so easy to adhere to the ideological framework of some reports, in others, it is advisable to start a healthy professional self-stream of conscience aiming at producing genuine and objective information. Getting to know Türkiye in depth, in its whole connotation, by talking to its people and reporting not only from the luxurious lounges of the big cities but also from the Anatolian and most rural villages, is the key. Indeed, penetrating into the set of values of others and applying non-partisan analytical criteria, as Max Weber teaches, is a useful viaticum for honoring the truth and real facts. In the end, perception certainly matters, but objective knowledge does not flourish upon biased filters. ■

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