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Baudrillard in Ankara: mainstream media and the production of *simulacra* in the Turkish public sphere

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ABSTRACT

Turkey's recent democratic backsliding has been profoundly reflected in the near-complete government control of mass media. Pro-government mainstream media, rather than pursuing truth, has engaged in systematic production and dissemination of *simulacra*. Developed by Baudrillard, the concept of *simulacrum* can provide insights into the truth and reality perceptions of Turkish voters. This has been a topic widely discussed, given that produced *simulacra* establish a legitimation framework for the Turkish government's domestic and foreign policies. Various print and electronic sources are studied to analyse the content of speeches and used techniques. In this study, Baudrillard's scheme will be applied for the study of three political narratives dominant in the Turkish public sphere: Turkey's 'struggle for survival (*bekâmücadelesi*)', the projection of key opposition leaders as 'traitors', and ideal leadership and diplomacy from past to present through two popular television series, '*Diriliş Ertuğrul (Resurrection Ertuğrul)*' and '*Payitaht Abdülhamid (Leader Abdülhamid)*'.

Introduction

Turkey's democratic backsliding in recent years has been profoundly reflected in the field of mass media.[1] Massive arrests of dissident journalists on terrorism and defamation accusations have been complemented with the acquisition of dissident media by pro-government business interests.[2] The May 2018 sale of Doğan Media Group, Turkey's leading media group controlling two mainstream television channels and three newspapers, to the pro-government Demirören Group heralded a new era in Turkish media.[3] Government control over the media amounts to full control of eight out of nine mainstream television channels and all but three

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[1]For more on this, see Kadir Akyuz and Steve Hess, 'Turkey Looks East: International Leverage and Democratic Backsliding in a Hybrid Regime', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 29, no. 2 (2018), 7–18.

[2]On the growing media control in the AKP era, see Bilge Yeşil, 'Authoritarian Turn or Continuity? Governance of Media through Capture and Discipline in the AKP Era', *South European Society and Politics*, 23, no. 2 (2018), 249–52.

[3]Cemal Burak Tansel, 'Authoritarian Neoliberalism and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: Beyond the Narratives of Progress', *South European Society and Politics*, 23, no. 2 (2018), 200.

mainstream newspapers.[4] Combined with the full government control of the public radio and television (*Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*-TRT), the government of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) has achieved a nearly complete control over Turkish mainstream media.[5] Capitalizing on this, it has engaged in a communication strategy, aiming not only to dominate the agenda of the Turkish public sphere but also affect public opinion's reality perceptions. The systematic use of audiovisual material in AKP campaigning points at the relevance of *simulacra* as a valuable analytical tool for understanding how the AKP government has pursued its domination over the Turkish public sphere.

Having its roots in Platonic philosophy, the *simulacrum* became popularized by Baudrillard in the context of post-modernist, post-positivist debates questioning the relationship between symbolism, media and reality in the digital era.[6] With the digital revolution and the rise of digital media and communications industry, Baudrillard stressed that in perceiving reality, the attraction of an image as a symbol of an object is more important than what the image represents; in fact, the balance has shifted in favour of the image. With the production of images, no more necessarily standing for the representation of an object, the form of image has shifted into a form of hyper-reality: something looks like real but is, in fact, nothing else than an image of its own. The analogue image used to be the representation of a past reality, which could be altered or distorted. The invention of digital images meant that images could be created while representing nothing and that they could be accepted as true representations by people who perceive them without questioning. A *simulacrum* stands for the representation of something that does not exist, yet its image is presented as evidence that it does exist. Despite the absence of any reference to reality, the *simulacrum* is taken as true.

This study argues that under the conditions of Turkey's democratic backsliding and near-complete government control of mass media, Turkish mainstream media, rather than pursuing truth, engages in systematic production and dissemination of *simulacra*. The concept of *simulacrum* can provide insights into the truth and reality perceptions of Turkish voters, a topic widely discussed following recent public opinion surveys in Turkey.[7] Various print and electronic sources are used to analyse the content of speeches and used techniques. In this study, Baudrillard's scheme will be applied for the study of *simulacra* production in three key Turkish political narratives: Turkey's *'struggle for survival (bekâ mücadelesi)'*, the projection of key opposition leaders as 'traitors', and ideal leadership and diplomacy from past to present, through two popular television series, '*Diriliş Ertuğrul (Resurrection Ertuğrul)*' and '*Payitaht Abdülhamid (Leader Abdülhamid)*'. This becomes a useful tool in the government's effort to dominate the agenda of the Turkish public sphere and influence the way the public opinion perceives reality.[8]

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[4]Interestingly, Turkish public opinion appears to trust the few remaining opposition media more than pro-government mainstream television channels. On this, see News Desk, 'Turks Trust Fox TV the Most, A Haber the Least for News, Survey Reveals', *Duvar English*, 17/06/2020.

[5]On this, see Yeşim Kaptan and Ece Algan, 'Television in Turkey: Local Production, Transnational Expansion, and Political Aspirations' in Yeşim Kaptan and Ece Algan, eds., *Television in Turkey: Local Production, Transnational Expansion, and Political Aspirations* (Cham: Springer, 2020).

[6]For more information, see Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[7]Sayıların Dili, 'KONDA Genel Müdürü Bekir Ağırdır: GDO'lu Ürünlerin Türkleri Kısırlaştıracağına İnananların Oranı Yüzde 59', *T24*, 04/03/2020.

[8]On media agenda-setting, see the classic Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36, no. 2 (1972), 176–87.

Baudrillard's definition of *Simulacra, Hakikat* and Post-Truth Literature

In his book entitled *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard argued that the tipping point of the rivalry between image and reality was the advent of modernity. Its emergence contributed to the victory of the analogue image, which was taken as a representation of truth. While the image won the rivalry against reality, the digital revolution of the late twentieth century became a milestone. It heralded the transition to post-modernity, where the creation of computer-generated imagery (CGI), while consumerism paved the way for the substitution of reality by digital images as true notions, standing as if they are the truth themselves.[9] According to Baudrillard, a *simulacrum* substitutes reality with its representation and is accepted as true; being not limited to an object nor a distorted image, it is *hyper-real*. It represents a form of reality without any origin or whose origin has been completely replaced by the image. The production of *simulacra* is examined through two important concepts upon which Baudrillard constructs his analysis: meaning implosion and image creation.

Meaning implosion is what Baudrillard considered at first, as this concept relied on consumerism and audience control. As consumerism and mass production rose, the agenda of people shifted to an image reality (widely accepted as true) on the media; media is the foremost *simulacrum* venue. The crux is that *simulacrum* does not exclusively refer to something that has been lied about, as the *simulacrum* stands for the fact that there is no reality beyond itself. Systematically, a *simulacrum* could be built on a post-truth, just like a cut image can be compiled with other distorted and non-distorted images to build a narrative. Baudrillard argued in his book '*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*' that images of the Gulf War were only a show of deterrence, similarly to nuclear weapons during the Cold War. There was no purpose in living a war destruction, and Americans faced only digital images on their televisions whose only function was to be consumed.[10] He emphasized that conflict deterrence on media was the main point imploding the meaning of a conflict. The reality of the threat is less important, just as in nuclear weapons, the reality of nuclear warheads was not an important reality for the public. As a consumption product, the broadcasting and deterrence of nuclear weapons was what people thought and embraced via the digital images of those weapons. The image of nuclear weapons was what an American citizen could comprehend, and its deterrence was more important than the question of the existence of nuclear wars.

For anybody watching that war on television, the Gulf War was only a compilation of videos and photographs whose reality could not be confirmed, only a creation of digital codes of television technology. The displayed events were not necessarily true; they were subject to media consumption just like a blockbuster movie: The Gulf War was no different from a movie or television scene in perception; it was real for the consumers during watching. Emre Çetin[11] explored the politicization of television dramas in Turkey,

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[9]Baudrillard's interpretation is different than Pierre Klassowski and Deleuze because the latter were pointing out the relations of originality, representations of originality and icons. Their argument was on 'differential systems, referring to the identification and differentiation of a notion, how one can distinguish between two different notions. On this, see Daniel W. Smith, 'The Concept of the Simulacrum: Deleuze and the Overturning of Platonism', *Continental Philosophy Review*, 38, no. 1 (2005), 89–123.

[10]Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 24.

[11]Kumru Berfin Emre Cetin, 'The "Politicization" of Turkish Television Dramas', *International Journal of Communication*, 8 (2014), 2478.

broadening the argument about political interference as well as a symbolization of current political debates. Carney analysed the popular Turkish television series '*Diriliş Ertuğrul*' and '*Kurtlar Vadisi*' through post-truth interpretation.[12] He argued that those television series were politically used for conveying certain messages to the public, as the part of the post-truth political campaigns, relied on the manipulations of national feelings.[13] Such television series have provided the government with new discursive spaces.[14] However, this study argues that, because pro-government media campaigns in Turkey expose images that are digitally created and treated as if they are real and they are believed as the portrayal of the real, they are *simulacrum* cases.

The concepts of post-truth and *simulacrum* are not identical; they overlap in certain ways and form part of a continuum. They could be distinguished so that one can identify what post-truth and what a *simulacrum* is beyond both. A *simulacrum* is a signifier that does not have to rely on a signified, a distorted truth, which comprises an element of post-truth. In case of distortion, there must be an *a priori* truth to fake it. Instead, a *simulacrum* is an image not signifying an existent truth, it does not refer to a referent, simulacrum is the referent itself.[15] It is to suggest that the media does not provide its audience with reality but produces a surplus of reality. This absence of signified and surplus of reality could be understood by deconstructing these images. As these over-produced images are treated as if they are real, *simulacrum* reveals the condition of *hyper-reality*. The *hyper-real* is the over-produced, imitated signifier that has a powerful sense of reality, but remains its surplus.[16]

Post-truth is primarily used to define the media coverage of political lies and the reasons why the public prefers them to objective coverage.[17] Feelings play a pivotal role in shaping demand for post-truth; public opinion often turns their backs to the truth, and distortion becomes a desirable model, as inconvenient truths are crowded out by reassuring lies. Meanwhile, post-truth raises mistrust concerns within the public sphere. Control and manipulation of emotions is provisioned, and professional political communication are key factors in this. Whereas *simulacrum* refers to the industry of the imagery and requires more systematic tools, post-truth relies more on the distance between the given rhetoric and truth. Baudrillard went beyond the short-term effects of lies by introducing the term *hyper-reality* rather than a mere distortion of truth. In post-truth, the creators of the signifiers are the politicians, whereas *simulacrum* derives from over-production by modes of media production, for entertainment, news, or politics. The *simulacrum* belongs to the category of post-truth but differs by means of its creation;[18]

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[12]Carney used the word '*factish*' over the television series claim which narrates the political reality truly. When a belief is not opposed to fact, *factish* represents a possibility to heal the break between what is 'real' and what is constructed.

[13]Josh Carney, 'Genre Strikes Back: Conspiracy Theory, Post-Truth Politics, and the Turkish Crime Drama Valley of the Wolves', *TV/Series*, 13, no. 1 (2018b), 11–12.

[14]Burak Özçetin, '"The Show of the People" Against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22, no. 5–6 (2019), 947.

[15]James Morris, 'Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, (forthcoming), 7.

[16]The concept of surplus reality is inspired from surplus value in economics: It suggests that the surplus meaning of reality does not refer to an existent reality, but only to itself.

[17]The term originated from playwright Steve Tesich's article in *The Nation*. For a critical view, see Frieder Vogelmann, 'The Problem of Post-Truth: Rethinking the Relationship between Truth and Politics', *Behemoth-A Journal on Civilisation*, 11, no. 2 (2018).

[18]The three stages of *simulacrum* pinpoint the milestones of the 'rivalry' between image and reality: (1) pre-modern period: The image refers to the truth, (2) modern period: The imitation of the reality through mass production and

digital sources create and over-produce the images that are accepted as true references. And lastly, while post-truth directly refers to truth, the *simulacrum* does not necessarily refer to truth *per se*; it can refer to *hyper-reality* as a result of production rather than a statement.

In order to clarify the systematic production of *simulacra*, Baudrillard argued that the analogue image is dead and technological mass production has heralded the age of digital image (CGI) in the public sphere. In comparison, the analogue image refers to the existence of sight, it intercepts with light and angle and offers different views; on the other hand, the digital image does not necessarily have a direct association with reality. It is possible to create images that do not exist or refer to reality or whose imitation can replace their origin.[19] These images are created as numbers in binary computer code and in virtual environment. As technology improves, mass image production breaks apart from the representation of an existent object. It shifts to a huge replication process, in which imitation cannot represent any truth because by imitation it lacks originality.[20] In this process of producing images, with the 'computer language of zeros and ones', the ability of language and thinking process falls apart with the quantitative production of imagery. Even though a photograph cuts the image-reality bond in the short term, it represents and stands for an analogue image of truth. In Baudrillard's view, the quantitative production of images is a failure, because, while with analogue imagery, scholars were in search of reflecting the truth with high quality, the creation of new computer-generated imagery is a kind of creation out of nothing. While analogue imagery enables the disappearance of an object, because it leaves a track, quantitative imagery does not leave any track of reality, so, they cannot enable the disappearance of an object. For Baudrillard, there are two important points, disappearance and destruction: In a Platonic sense, politics merely projects the shadows on the wall of a cave, the people living in it are disembodied. Those are the ones 'who have disappeared but survive by default.'[21]

People live in more information but less original meaning, because the hegemony of computer-generated images over reality is based on the imitative nature of mass production. Mass-produced, computer-generated images imitate a new reality, or they imitate other images and presented as new: 'they are more real than real'.[22] In Baudrillard's view, media mass production effaces the political domain's meaning and leads to a convergence of the active and passive:

> One enters simulation, and thus absolute manipulation—not passivity, but the differentiation of the active and the passive.[23]

Through the example of reality shows, Baudrillard argued that the partiality of receiver and the producer is no more: The political domain resembles a television reality show. Sequences of political images become *simulacra*, an image of nothing but an alleged reality, as the pro-government media-produced discourse of *hakikat* (truth) stands for.

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technological capabilities, (3) post-modern era: The representation precedes and determines reality. See John Storey, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader* (Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education, 2006), 187–89.

[19]Jean Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?* (New York: Seagull Books, 2009), 25–30.

[20]Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), 83.

[21]Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, 22.

[22]Morris, 'Simulacra in the Age of Social Media: Baudrillard as the Prophet of Fake News', 5-7.

[23]Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*.

Government control over virtually the whole media sector in Turkey facilitates its hegemony. Only the logically meaningless discourse of '*hakikat'* is left, which is over-produced by every medium. Since it is meaningless and its only purpose is the creation of *simulacra*, then the premise of the 'medium is the message' comes true: cameras turn out to be the message. The government does not expose the reality but suggests itself as the surplus reality, a media product.[24] In order to eliminate any alternative messages, polarization[25] becomes a key tactic: it polarizes dissidents with the gfovernment's media, which is outnumbered. Polarization helps create emotional followers for politicians, thinkers of imaginary of a non-existed reality. This function goes beyond merely disseminating government propaganda, as it is not limited to the proliferation of pro-government information and setting a pro-government political agenda. The goal is more ambitious: producing images of a reality that never existed. Turkish mainstream media's main mission is no more searching for truth but producing *simulacra*.

Choosing the *simulacrum* as a unit of analysis, instead of critical discourse analysis (CDA) theory, sheds light on different aspects of the ontological reality of the issue. According to Van Dijk[26] and Fairclough,[27] critical discourse analysis is useful to analyse ideologies manifested in popular culture and discourses, while it beholds the socio-political background of the discourses given by the elites. In the given settings of political domination, with the use of discourse, elite groups and public relations could be reproduced. Baudrillard's approach is not counterposed against the bottom-up approach of ideology reproduction in critical discourse analysis ; it implies the ontology of perceived dominance in a media-created reality. The *simulacrum* stands for the implosion of the meaning and substitution of reality by *hyper-real* images. This study argues that governments produce *simulacra*, not exclusively for ideology reproduction or representation. These dominated and suppressed relations are represented in the language and given discourse according to critical discourse analysis theory.[28] In this study, these reproductions are evaluated within the ontological approach of created and accepted images as *hyper-reality*.

Producing *Simulacra* in Turkish Public Sphere

Simulacrum I-Turkey's Struggle for Survival (Bekâ Mücadelesi)

Turkey's alleged struggle for survival (*bekâ mücadelesi*) is the first theme where the Turkish mainstream media has engaged in the production of *simulacra*. Turkey is under a constant partition threat by Western powers and their domestic accomplices. These include the Kurdish Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkeren Kurdistan*-PKK) and the Gülen movement

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[24]Brett Nicholls, 'Baudrillard in a "Post-Truth" World: Groundwork for a Critique of the Rise of Trump', *MEDIANZ: Media Studies Journal of Aotearoa New Zealand* (2016), 7.

[25]For more on media polarization in Turkey, see Ali Çarkoğlu, Lemi Baruh and Kerem Yıldırım, 'Press-Party Parallelism and Polarization of News Media During an Election Campaign: The Case of the 2011 Turkish Elections', *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 19, no. 3 (2014), 310–12.

[26]Teun A. Van Dijk, 'Principles of Critical Discourse Analysis', *Discourse & Society*, 4, no. 2 (1993), 254–57.

[27]Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London & New York: Routledge, 2003), 39–40.

[28]See Ruth Wodak, 'The Discourse-Historical Approach' in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), Norman Fairclough, 'Critical Discourse Analysis as a Method in Social Scientific Research' in Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, eds., *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies* (London, Thousand Oaks & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2001), 63–65.

(officially called in Turkey since 2014 as *Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü-FETÖ*). The country is on a constant ruthless struggle for survival, given by the government party and its supporters. Meanwhile, opposition leaders engage in cooperation with Turkey's enemies supporting a common goal: to bring about government change. President Erdoğan and his cabinet are depicted as the protectors of the nation, struggling against local and foreign enemies. Official statements and actions pave the way for a systematic production of *simulacra* based on the 'struggle for survival' theme. These *simulacra* focus on the magnification of security threats as a legitimation tool for government policies limiting human rights or suppressing the opposition. Turkey's national security interests are expressed by government officials, who are also responsible for outlining security policies. Securitization of the political domain becomes an essential element of government strategy.[29] A constant invocation of insecurity in public statements aims to make people endorse government policies that perpetuate the government's hold to power.[30] In official press conferences, security threats are linked with opposition parties.

In March 2019, the Minister of Interior Süleyman Soylu openly linked 325 elected members of the municipal council elected with the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi-HDP*) with the PKK.[31] Soylu claimed that his policy has led to lower rates of domestic terrorist attacks by the PKK. Following his reference to the success of Turkish security forces against the PKK, he added that the main opposition Republican People's Party *(Cumhuriyet Halk* Partisi-CHP) 'was buying a ticket for PKK's theatre performance'.[32] An image was projected the second and third-biggest party in the country, the CHP and the HDP, are terrorist accomplices and PKK supporters, while the government was fighting against them. According to Soylu's statement, terrorist attack rates have dropped; therefore, confidence and reliance of him is high, and his statements against other parties are not lies, they are confident images. These images are accepted to be true, but there is not any official action deriving from those allegations. Those 'traitor' images only refer to a constructed struggle against the alleged 'traitors'. Soylu's pictures, mostly taken with combat military personnel on the battlefield, projected his image as a 'fighter' for Turkey's survival. On the other hand, opposition parties and their leaders did not merely oppose government policies, they were aiding the enemies of Turkey.

The 'struggle for survival' discourse was carried through the 31 March 2019 municipal elections.[33] Pro-government mainstream media called voters for 'one vote to hit the enemy' and full support for President Erdoğan.[34] This was a clear imagery created by the ruling party of Turkey. This action was reminiscent of Baudrillard's *nuclear weapons* argument, the image of nuclear weapons acted as a deterrent to control the public. It did not provide with the reality of the destruction, but it only controlled the public without a destruction, as the deterrence 'excluded the reality of

[29]Berk Esen and Şebnem Gümüşçü, 'Rising Competitive Authoritarianism in Turkey', *Third World Quarterly*, 37, no. 9 (2016), 1587–88.

[30]Bengi Bezirgan-Tanış, 'History-Writing in Turkey through Securitization Discourses and Gendered Narratives', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 26, no. 3 (2019), 329–44.

[31]News Desk, "Bakan Soylu: 'PKK İle Bağlantılı 325 Kişiyi Belediye Meclis Üyeliğine Yazdılar'", *Hürriyet*, 22/3/2019.

[32]İsa Akar and Burak Yalman, "Soylu: 'Dağda 500 Terörist Kaldı'", *Ihlas Haber Ajansı*, 24/1/2020.

[33]Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu, 'Killing Competitive Authoritarianism Softly: The 2019 Local Elections in Turkey', *South European Society and Politics*, 24, no. 3 (2019), 324.

[34]İstanbul Ofisi, 'Milli Görüşçülerden Flaş 23 Haziran Çağrısı: İmamoğlu Felakettir, Yıldırım'a Atılan Oy Düşmana. . . ', *Yeni Akit*, 13/06/2019.

war'.[35] Choosing terrorists and being ruled by them was only a created image, to prevent the public from choosing any other alternatives—putting a step out of the social reality of the government party. In this case, this 'traitor' image was seen only in official discourses, and its reality was constructed in electronic media.

The over-production of this *hyper-reality* was provided with the innuendo: 'Gülenists are working undercover and are smart'.[36] It implied constant terrorist threat, the boundaries of 'terrorist Gülenists' do not exist, they are everywhere and virtually invisible. The 'survival' and terrorist images have lost their meanings in that way. The officials delivered this message in the media as the '*hakikat*' (truth), as pursuing the truth is a part of their image. Which, in the case of *simulacrum*, rules the truth's inaugural meaning out. Because the very moment government officials give the speech of truth, there is no truth to be searched anymore: merely an image of it. As Baudrillard argues '*on the disappearance of real*', when a thing is named, or even when the truth itself named, the image of that takes hold of it, it begins to lose its actual preference.[37]

These official statements, the campaign speeches about conspiracies of Gülenists, PKK, the United States and other Western countries and the link between them and opposition parties are not based on any official documents. While sometimes the numbers are given, the 'arrangement' or the 'related' words are not signing a certainty, so fact-checking in these 'arrangements' is not possible. In that regard, the mainstream media generally is accused of spreading post-truth.[38] Projecting the 'struggle for survival' discourse follows, however, the construction of a coherent image that reticulates the public sphere as a systematic production of *simulacrum*. Certain roles and positions are drawn and do not rely on practical affairs that anyone could correct. After this image creation, this production includes the profound features as Baudrillard expressed: repetition of signs, constant production and digital creation.[39] The domination of the media by the ruling party assumes the repetition of the same 'struggle for survival' discourse.[40] The constant production is supplied by the media and journalists about the same discourse and their so-called pro-survival analysis permeates the public domain. Lastly, the creation of an history about survival in television series or an advertisement is finalized with *simulacrum*. In a society in which the middle and lower-middle classes live under increasingly precarious conditions, the more instances perpetuating the perception of threat emerge, the more consensus for government policies can be elicited by the public opinion.[41] The claim 'there is a threat of Gülenists, they are everywhere at any time' can be given as a discourse, then this liquid threat could be morphed into any issue within the state, even for brain-drain or for wheat imports.[42] Struggle for survival is again one of the main themes in the two remaining *simulacrum* cases.

[35]Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond*, 81.
[36]İstanbul Ofisi, 'Erdoğan'dan "FETÖ" Operasiyonları İçin Uyarı Gibi Çıkış: At İzi, İt İzine Karıştı', *Cumhuriyet*, 07/09/2016.
[37]Baudrillard, *Why Hasn't Everything Already Disappeared?*, 28–33.
[38]Bekir Ağırdır, 'Koronavirüs'ten Sonra Adaletsizlik Sertleşecek, Orta Sınıf Yoksullaşacak', *T24*, 24/04/2020
[39]Baudrillard's philosophy suggests that the repetitive production of the signs creates an unconscious social logic, for this article's topic, the unconscious social logic is created by the ruling party with 'Survival'. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (London: SAGE Publication, 1998).
[40]Murat Akser and Banu Baybars-Hawks, 'Media and Democracy in Turkey: Toward a Model of Neoliberal Media Autocracy', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*, 5, no. 3 (2012), 305.
[41]Zygmunt Bauman, *Community: Seeking Safety in an Insecure World* (Cambridge & Maiden MA: Polity, 2013), 42.
[42]Ahmet Hakan, 'Bu FETÖ'cü Nasıl Çıkar?', *Hürriyet*, 15/09/2019, Hilal Kaplan, 'İyi Parti'deki Soros'çular Kim?', *Sabah*, 18/02/2020.

Simulacrum II-Opposition Leaders as Traitors

The second *simulacrum* case refers to two key figures of the Turkish opposition, the president of the Good Party (*İyi Parti*-İP) Meral Akşener and the mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu. Their political activities caused considerable distress to the government. Akşener resigned in 2016 from the government coalition partner far-right Nationalist Action Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*-MHP), establishing its own party and joining the opposition alliance. İmamoğlu was a member of the chief opposition Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP) and a mayor of Beylikdüzü, a lower-middle-class suburb of Istanbul, who ran in the municipal elections of 31 March 2019 for the position of the mayor of the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul. Both were viewed as major threats for government interests and faced pro-government mainstream media attacks: they were branded as being pro-Gülenist and pro-PKK and, therefore, traitors to the Turkish nation. By broadcasting compiled and created videos following their speeches, they aimed to create an image of their close relation with the PKK and the Gülen movement.[43] Within the framework of the 'struggle for survival' discourse, everyone who had public connections with Western associations and opposed government policies should be imaged as a potential traitor and could not be trusted.[44]

For example, two public statements by Akşener that 'after the fifteenth of the month, everything will change' and 'peace at home, peace in the world' were masterfully edited together, in order to establish a connotation with the failed coup of 15 July 2016.[45] As these statements were selected and serviced by the pro-government mainstream media and during AKP meetings, a video was added in which Akşener stated that 'after the fifteenth of the month, I will be president'.[46] As this is a real statement, the public were incited to believe that Akşener had a connection with the Gülen movement and had the ambition to lead Turkey in case the 15 July 2016 coup attempt had succeeded. Yet when the non-compiled full video is watched, it becomes clear that Akşener referred to 15 May 2016 and her MHP congress elections which she hoped to win. Akşener was also attacked with respect to her policies as minister of the interior if the aftermath of the so-called soft coup of 28 February 1997. While a bigger picture of her was drawn and other state official's statements like Süleyman Soylu, were continuing about her past in the 28 February 1997 Turkish military memorandum. Alluding to a meeting between Akşener and Fethullah Gülen in that period, minister of interior Süleyman Soylu was calling her 'explain that with whom you were in relation to 28 February [1997]'.[47] While the repetition and constant production of the same claims were reticulating the public sphere, a created video was also contributing to the *simulacrum* case. In an animated

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[43]'Game of Polls' is an animated replication of the famous series 'Game of Thrones', featuring all leading figures of Turkish politics. It was launched on YouTube with the aim to promote the communication campaign of the government party. Images and dialogues were directly linking opposition leaders to terrorism and aggrandizing President Erdoğan and his allies. 'Game of Polls' came to the support of the AKP election campaign, as its video links on Twitter were sponsored, and its channel had more than three million views in YouTube. For more information, see Game of Polls, *YouTube Channel* (YouTube, 2020), available from https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCvDV-wx2fAjFet13jgNZmIA On this, see: Erkan Saka, 'Social Media in Turkey as a Space for Political Battles: AKTrolls and Other Politically Motivated Trolling', *Middle East Critique*, 27, no. 2 (2018).
[44]Ersin Ramoğlu, 'CHP Düşerse ABD Düşer', *Sabah*, 29/01/2020.
[45]Tamer Korkmaz, '"Başbakan Olacağım" Diyordu. Olamadı. Şimdi De...', *Yeni Şafak*, 15/08/2017.
[46]Sabah, *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan'dan Meral Akşener'in Skandal İftirasına Çok Sert Tepki!* (YouTube, 2019), available from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqYNOrlzxTU [posted on 22/03/2019].
[47]İstanbul Ofisi, 'Soylu'dan Akşener'e: 28 Şubat'ta Kimlerle İş Tuttuğunu Çıkıp Söylerim', *Sputnik*, 15/03/2019.

video broadcast on the pro-government YouTube channel entitled 'Game of Polls', Meral Akşener and the CHP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu were taking orders from the Gülenists, but Erdoğan and Bahçeli were defeating them and did not let them achieve their prime goals. The description of the first video of that channel was 'The alliances of the Westeros giving a struggle for survival'.[48] The opposition leaders were drawn with their real pictures but put into the fictitious world of Game of Thrones as 'agents of Western powers'. Just as Baudrillard's description, the image was held as a real place where the people can see the truth, but it is only an image of an image in the digital world, hence, it is a *simulacrum*.[49]

Ekrem İmamoğlu's campaign in the March and June 2020 Istanbul municipal elections proved to be also a struggle against *simulacra* production. The first *simulacrum* referred to his ethnic origins and hence to his loyalty to the Turkish nation and state. Given that İmamoğlu was born and grew up at Cevizli, a village near the town of Akçaabat, in the Black Sea province of Trabzon. Akçaabat is a town with rich Greek history, where thousands of Pontic Greeks used to live until the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchange and where Greek dialects are still spoken in some remote villages. His contacts and visits to Greece in his capacity as mayor of Beylikdüzü and even his participation in Pontic folk dances (*horon*) danced by both Greeks and Turks from the Black Sea were presented as 'evidence' for his Greek identity. His victory in the municipal elections would, therefore, tantamount to a 'Greek reconquest' of Istanbul, something that a Turkish patriot should prevent at all costs.

The second *simulacrum* featured a 'secret meeting' between Ekrem İmamoğlu and journalist İsmail Küçükkaya on 13 June 2019, on the eve of a crucial televised debate between the two leading candidates for the metropolitan municipality of Istanbul Binali Yıldırım and Ekrem İmamoğlu, which was moderated by Küçükkaya. While the debate took place on 17 June, a few days before the election rerun of 23 June 2019, the leading pro-government daily Sabah revealed the meeting on 18 June 2019 asking, 'what is planned in that secret meeting?' A series of statements by Yıldırım, Mahir Ünal, spokesperson of the AKP and President Erdoğan himself pointed at the unethical nature of the meeting, the main allegation being that the debate questions were leaked to İmamoğlu by Küçükkaya. Sabah came to the points of raising comparisons between Turkish and US politics, claiming that the meeting was an import from US politics.[50] Rich camera footage from the arrival and the departure of Küçükkaya to the meeting venue was provided as evidence for the collusion between Küçükkaya and İmamoğlu.

In fact, the meeting did take place but was never meant to be secret. A few days before the debate, Küçükkaya contacted both candidates and requested a meeting with them to exchange views on the format of debate and other technical details. While İmamoğlu accepted his request, Yildirim stated that there was no need for a special meeting on this. As a result, Küçükkaya met İmamoglu on 13 June and his advisors in a central Istanbul hotel for about 45 minutes, while no meeting with Yıldırım and his advisors took place. These details were ignored by pro-government mainstream media, and the discourse about the 'unethical meeting' took the dimensions of a *simulacrum*. Creating an image of mendacity and dishonesty for both Akşener and İmamoğlu was a key objective of the

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[48]Game of Polls, *YouTube Channel*.
[49]Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 38.
[50]Doğan Haber Ajansı (DHA), 'İsmail Küçükkaya'nın Soru Sızdırma Skandalı İthal Mi? ABD'de Aylarca Konuşulmuştu', *Sabah*, 19/06/2019.

government media campaign and went as far as to link them with terrorism and enemies of Turkish national interests. The result of Istanbul municipal elections was linked to Turkey's 'struggle for survival'. Binali Yıldırım and the government alliance were praised by numerous opinion pieces and news reports for being aware of national threats that opposition leaders represented, while opposition views were censored.[51]

This thread of events fits to the Baudrillard's cave conception. There were only signs of treason, a threat of ceding Istanbul's municipal administration to an unreliable person related to Turkey's enemies, which the AKP is fighting against. The whole pro-government mainstream media was projecting and propagating Akşener and İmamoğlu's alleged mendacity and presented it as a reality show. For both Akşener and İmamoğlu, a litany of carefully arranged images composed their *simulacra* as conspirators and traitors to the Turkish state and nation.

The production of *simulacra* is not limited to news reporting. It can extend into the realm of fiction and historical drama television series. Feeding contextual facts into fictional narratives has been a regular practice in TV series productions by the Turkish state television corporation (*Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu*-TRT). Yet insinuations and implications have recently become so explicit and references to contemporary politics so direct, that in some cases it could be argued that they can no more be classified as pro-government propaganda, but *per se* constitute cases of *simulacra* production.

Simulacrum III-*Projecting Ideal Leadership and Diplomacy Through Television Series*

'*Payitaht Abdülhamid*'

The third *simulacrum* case refers to the projection of ideal leadership and diplomacy through two popular television series: '*Payitaht Abdülhamid*' and '*Diriliş Ertuğrul*'.[52] In the first television series '*Payitaht Abdülhami*d', the production of this *simulacrum* has been facilitated by the systematic promotion and proliferation of Ottoman symbols in Turkish public sphere. Ottoman Sultanic monograms (*tuğra*), symbols of each Sultan's era, have been the prime examples of the trend. While the advent of the republican era rendered these monograms defunct, in recent decades, there has been a revival of their public use, particularly that of Abdülhamid II.[53] While the original meaning of the *tuğra* has been lost, it stands as an evocation of the continuity between the era of Abdülhamid II and contemporary Turkey.

The setting of '*Payitaht Abdülhamid*' is the Ottoman palace in the late nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Abdülhamid II, the Ottoman sultan who suspended the first Ottoman constitution, liquidated the first Ottoman parliament and established an autocratic regime faces multifold domestic and foreign challenges. He struggles against all enemies of the Ottoman Empire, which he defends as the bastion of Sunni Islam and the Turkish nation. His image is wise, virtuous, powerful but surprisingly lonely. He is surrounded by treacherous bureaucrats who serve the interests of foreign powers and

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[51]Murat Akser, 'News Media Consolidation and Censorship in Turkey: From Liberal Ideals to Corporatist Realities', *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 29, no. 3 (2018), 88–89.

[52]On the reasons of the popularity and global exportation of the Turkish popular TV dramas, see Kaptan and Algan, 'Television in Turkey: Local Production, Transnational Expansion, and Political Aspirations', 10–13.

[53]Edhem Eldem, 'Kemalizm Öldü, Yaşasın Hamidizm!', *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 247 (2014), 50–54.

constantly undermine his struggle to strengthen the Empire. Only Tahsin Paşa and a handful of loyal nationalist and Islamist functionaries remain fully obedient to him and the Ottoman state. Abdülhamid II heavily engages with foreign policy and the competition of Great Powers within and beyond the borders of the Ottoman Empire. His aim is to protect the interests, the rights and the honour of the Ottoman Empire, in his capacity as Sultan. Moreover, in his capacity as Caliph, he aims to represent and protect the interests, the rights and the honour of the global Islamic community, oppressed under imperialism and colonialism. His main problems originate from the masonic order, Zionists and foreign powers like the United States, the British Empire, France, Germany and Russia.

While it poses as based on historical facts, the television series script is replete with fiction, pseudo-historic references, stereotypes and prejudices that can be invoked from the late Ottoman era to date. The character of Mahmud Paşa, a dissident inside Abdülhamid II's own Yıldız Palace, personifies, the 'enemy within', the Ottoman bureaucrat who systematically undermines Ottoman state interests and the Sultan himself. He collaborates with foreign ambassadors, masons, Zionists, local and exiled dissidents and other enemies of the Ottoman state. Masons and Zionists are presented as the archenemies. Edmund Rothschild is the grand master freemason described as 'a worshipper to money and power, a dark soul'.[54] Together with his companions Alexander Parvus and Emmanuel Carasso, he aims at the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. The conspiracies of freemasons and Western powers struck Abdülhamid II, but the Ottoman sultan found a way to survive and protect the Islamic world (*ummah or âlem-i İslam*). Moreover, infamous anti-Semitic hoaxes were incorporated into the television series script. A fake letter of Albert Pike, a US freemason, predicting the First and Second World War, the October Revolution and a Third World War and stressing the critical role of Zionism in all was read in the 59th episode of the series.[55]

Yet the audience knows that Abdülhamid II's struggle was doomed, and one of his domestic enemies, the 'Union and Progress (*İttihad ve Terakki*)' secret society, would defeat him. The 23 July 1908 Young Turk Revolution brought an end to Abdülhamid II's autocratic rule and restored the 1876 Ottoman Constitution. Abdülhamid II himself was deposed and succeeded by his brother Mehmet V Reşat, following the failed 31 March 1909 counterrevolution for the restoration of his autocratic rule. The Unionists took over complete power and precipitated the developments that led to military defeat, occupation and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Most importantly, through a litany of insinuations, what transpires on the screen is linked to contemporary Turkish politics. Abdülhamid II is compared to President Erdoğan, and the Unionists are linked with the chief opposition Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*-CHP) and other opposition parties and groups, which are branded as the 'enemies within'.[56] This representation extends to the republican era of Turkey and Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founding father of republican Turkey. By stating that 'they are under command of Pennsylvania',

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[54]On this character, see İstanbul Ofisi, 'Payitaht Abdülhamid Edmunt Kimdir? Suavi Eren Hangi Dizilerde Rol Aldı?', *SuperHaber*, 14/9/2018.

[55]ES Film, 'Sultan Abdülhamid'ten Tarih Dersi!,' in *Payitaht "Abdülhamid" 59. Bölüm*, ed. Serdar Akar and Doğan Ümit Karaca (İstanbul: TRT1, 2018). For more on this, see Kerem Karaosmanoğlu, *Komplo Teorileri: Disiplinlerarası Bir Giriş* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2019).

[56]Senem B. Çevik, 'Turkish Historical Television Series: Public Broadcasting of Neo-Ottoman Illusions', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 19, no. 2 (2019), 234.

they alluded to the US state where former government key ally and current archenemy Fethullah Gülen has resided since his flight from Turkey in 1997. The Young Turk Revolution is likened with the failed after the 15 July 2016 coup attempt. While Abdülhamid II was dethroned by the Young Turk Unionists, the 15 July 2016 coup attempt failed. Yet this was no reason for complacency, as the threat is always imminent, and the homeland still gives a 'struggle for survival'. Empathy for Abdülhamid II becomes, therefore, translated into firm support for President Erdoğan. In fact, Abdülhamid II has emerged as a counter model to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. As Eldem insightfully argued,

> especially among Islamist activists, Abdülhamid soon came to embody all the resentment felt against Kemalism, secularism, and Westernization.[57]

Parallels between the past and present were also disseminated through the popular history magazine *Derin Tarih* (Deep History), which in his September 2016 issue, in the aftermath of the failed 15 July 2016 coup, featured on its cover an image of Abdülhamid II and an image of Erdoğan adding the caption '*Abdülhamid'in Direnişi, Yeni Türkiye'nin Dirilişi* (The Resistance of Abdülhamid, the resurrection of New Turkey)'. The parallels between past and present and the identification of Erdoğan with Abdülhamid II were corroborated by statements of President Erdoğan himself bestowing authority and credibility upon the television series: 'To learn history, watch '*Payitaht Abdülhamid*'.[58] The image of Erdoğan as the successor of Abdülhamid II becomes a *simulacrum*, and his supporters find the opportunity to declare that unlike Abdülhamid II he would not fight alone against Turkey's domestic and foreign enemies.[59]

'Diriliş Ertuğrul'

The '*Payitaht Abdülhamid*' *simulacrum* and the discourse on ideal leadership and diplomacy are complemented by a *simulacrum* based on another popular television series with a history theme, '*Diriliş Ertuğrul* (Resurrection Ertuğrul)'. This time the plot moves to the late-thirteenth century Anatolia: Ertuğrul Gâzi is a leader of the Kayı tribe, son of Süleyman Şah and father of Osman Gâzi, the founder of the Ottoman Empire. Ertuğrul and his followers are close friends of Sheikh Mühiddin Ibn el Arabi. This was giving Ertuğrul a religious foundation to legitimize his rule. Ertuğrul's main enemies were the Knights Hospitaller. Titus and his grand master were the head of conspiracies, their aim was reclaiming Jerusalem from the Muslims and pre-empt the rise of Ertuğrul's power and other Muslim and Turkic rulers. Oaths for 'revenge' and 'destroying Islam' were strongly framing these Western anti-characters, with implicit references to the Palestinian question and the contemporary fight over Jerusalem. The series featured plenty of 'enemies within', traitors which were of Muslim religion or Turkic origin but were willing to collaborate with Ertuğrul's enemies. This led to fraternal strife and conflict within the Kayı tribe, when Kurdoğlu, an ally of Ertuğrul's father Süleyman Şah and leader of another clone of the Kayı tribe, established an alliance with Christian forces and attempted to overthrow him on the

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[57]Edhem Eldem, 'Sultan Abdülhamid II: Founding Father of the Turkish State?', *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association*, Vol. 5, no. No. 2 (2018), 29.

[58]İstanbul Ofisi, 'Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: Tarihi Bilmek İçin Payitaht Abdülhamid'i İzleyin', *TRT Haber*, 31/12/2017.

[59]Harun Alanoğlu, 'Seni Abdülhamid'in Yalnızlığında Bırakmayacağız', *Diriliş Postası*, 10/12/2016.

basis of fake legal evidence. These appeared as implicit—but clear—references to the Gülen movement, which was accused of dividing the Turkish people to overthrow the AKP government in December 2013 on the basis of corruption allegations through its alliance with the United States and other Western forces.[60]

There were plenty of other incidents blurring between historical fiction and political reality. The rendition of the television series music theme dubbed as 'Resurrection March (*Diriliş Marşı*)' in a January 2015 official reception of the President of Azerbaijan Ilham Aliyev by President Erdoğan in the recently inaugurated presidential palace in Ankara was very telling. On 7 June 2015 President Erdoğan visited the set of the television series at Riva, in the outskirts of Istanbul in a clear attempt to reinforce the association with himself and Ertuğrul Bey's role in the series.[61] Similar was the participation of two television series actors in the 29 May 2016 official celebrations of the Fall of Constantinople (*İstanbul'un Fethi*), attended by President Erdoğan himself, with an event entitled 'Resurrection Again, Rise Again (*Yeniden Diriliş, Yeniden Yükseliş*).'[62] Almost a year later, Erdoğan stressed the importance of useful television series like 'Diriliş Ertuğrul' as follows:

> We have to be careful regarding activities which do not secure a contribution to our cultural life. One of the biggest problems of our era is cultural flattening. Culture and civilization cannot be constructed with which are daily produced and consumed. We have to focus on lasting and long-term works. In particular, we have to incite our youth to sit next to the knees of a master, a teacher and learn an art. We cannot blind our eyes to the fact that social media, television eat and finish our culture. We have to find the ways to use these capabilities to transfer in an efficient way our own culture to young generations. Just like in the past the television series '*Osmancık*', '*Kuruluş*' played a very important function, nowadays the series '*Diriliş Ertuğrul*' is followed with interest inside and outside our country. If my 6-7-year-old, 13-14-old grandson becomes acquainted with it by watching it again and again, this means that we have won this struggle.[63]

The use of '*Diriliş Ertuğrul*'-inspired themes remained common. In his campaign, before the 24 June 2018 presidential elections, Erdoğan called the years of his rule before 2018 as 'the era of resurrection'.[64] Maybe the most outstanding manifestation of the use of the television series as a *simulacrum* was recorded in June 2020. In the Black Sea city of Ordu, the municipality decided to decorate a square with twenty busts of important figures of Turkish history. Ertuğrul Gâzi was one of them; to the surprise of all, the bust erected was, in fact, a bust of Engin Altan Düzyatan, the actor holding Ertuğrul Gâzi's role in the television series. While two local administrators were removed from their posts, following the scandal, the success of *simulacrum* dissemination became clearer than ever.[65]

[60]Josh Carney, 'Resur(e)recting a Spectacular Hero: Diriliş Ertuğrul, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey', *Review of Middle East Studies*, 52, no. 1 (2018a), 97.

[61]Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, *Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, 'Diriliş Ertuğrul' Dizisinin Setini Ziyaret Etti* (Ankara, 2015), available from https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/32612/cumhurbaskani-erdogan-dirilis-ertugrul-dizisinin-setini-ziyaret-etti.html.

[62]Carney, 'Resur(e)recting a Spectacular Hero: Diriliş Ertuğrul, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey', 96. Official celebrations of the Fall of Constantinople (*İstanbul'un Fethi*) became popularized and acquired official status in the AKP era, adding yet another *locus* of *simulacra* production, linking Ottoman history to contemporary Turkish politics.

[63]Gündem, 'Erdoğan'dan "Diriliş Ertuğrul" Açıklaması', *Hürriyet*, 03/03/2017.

[64]İstanbul Ofisi, 'Erdoğan'ın Açıkladığı 24 Haziran Manifestosunda Neler Var?', *T24*, 07/05/2018.

[65]Nedim Kovan, 'Engin Altan Düzyatan'a Benzeyen Ertuğrul Gazi Büstü Nedeniyle 2 Yönetici Görevden Alındı', *Hürriyet*, 08/06/2020.

Conclusion

In Turkish public sphere, truth relied on language: Anecdotes, hearings, dogmas and conveyed myths were true, without tracing back the source of knowledge and testing it. As democratic backsliding and media concentration have led to near-complete government control of mass media in Turkey, the main function of mainstream pro-government media has shifted from news reporting to the systematic proliferation and dissemination of *simulacra*. Following Baudrillard's argument, this study has shed light on the development of *simulacra* in three key Turkish political narratives: Turkey's 'struggle for survival (*bekâ mücadelesi*)', the projection of key opposition leaders as 'traitors', and ideal leadership and diplomacy from past to present through the popular television series '*Diriliş Ertuğrul*' and '*Payitaht Abdülhamid*'. This has given the Turkish government a significant advantage in promoting his own ''*hakikat*' discourse with considerable success. Opinion polls have confirmed that truth and reality perceptions of Turkish public opinion have been profoundly affected by these communication strategies. Produced *simulacra* establish a legitimation framework for the government's domestic and foreign policy. Pro-government mainstream media debate programmes and op-eds show that these *simulacra* are held as true and, as Baudrillard suggested, debate in this type of public sphere is nothing but fighting for images of a non-existent reality. This serves the interest of the Turkish government and its hegemonic position in public discourse, paving the way for tighter media control. It is only through social media, web-based journalism and media channels that the Turkish opposition has attempted to challenge the government's *simulacrum* production and promote a more pluralistic public sphere, resisting against the country's democratic backsliding. Despite recurrent coercion in agenda-setting and public perception of reality, the recent electoral successes of opposition candidates in the 2019 municipal elections have pointed at the limits of the AKP government communications strategy.

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