Turkey has recently faced a number of domestic and international developments that range from an economic downturn to a coup attempt, from cross-border military operations to diplomatic crises. Despite the obvious differences in terms of their political, economic, military, and social contexts, these events can nonetheless be studied through a common denominator: the changing sets of tools pro-government actors employ to impose their narratives on social media as the events unfold. This frame provides a means to integrate the variety of social media users engaging in this dynamic: paid or unpaid, anonymous or identified, these users undertake online political messaging in order to suppress critical voices on social media and shore up support the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government and its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Moreover, these users not only serve a domestic political function but also, together with state actors, undertake information operations in English and other languages to influence global public opinion. For example, in July 2016, when a small group of insurgent military officers affiliated with Erdogan’s arch enemy Fetullah Gulen orchestrated a coup to overthrow the government, social media activity on Turkish Twitter reached unprecedented levels. While users from all walks of life overwhelmed the site with news, information, and opinion, government-backed trolls and identifiable pro-AKP accounts carried out a sustained campaign to praise Erdogan and express support for the ongoing purge against putschists (Yildiz and Smets 2019). Meanwhile, news media outlets, already highly partisan and politicised, helped circulate the AKP narrative that Western powers might be using Gulen to destabilise Turkey and that Erdogan and his government could not be accused of human rights violations as they clamped down on the coup plotters. Last, but not least, a myriad of actors consisting of Turkish diplomats and representatives around the world, state agencies, and AKP supporters shared infographics and videos in English to communicate to foreign audiences that Gulen was a terrorist mastermind and that ordinary Turks fought bravely against his soldiers to safeguard democracy.

I begin with this example since it opens up a space for the discussion of information operations undertaken by pro-government users, the proliferation of pro-Erdogan and right-wing nationalist content on social media sites, and the structural conditions of the online sphere in Turkey. In fact, the coup attempt marked an important period in the socio-political, legal, and media processes, stretching over the last decade, that has allowed the AKP and its affiliates to develop tools for the control and manipulation of information online. During the AKP era (2002–present), the majority of news outlets have become vehicles of government propaganda,
Social media manipulation in Turkey

Social media and journalistic autonomy and professionalism have sustained unprecedented damage. The social media environment is increasingly polarised as pro-AKP users, both paid operatives and average citizens, overwhelm Twitter and Facebook with government narratives and harass dissenters. Obviously, these problems are not specific to Turkey, yet the AKP’s digital surveillance schemes and use of legal provisions to silence its critics make social media sites especially vulnerable to the effects of troll harassment and dis/misinformation campaigns.

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the state of news media and the online public sphere in Turkey. After demonstrating how AKP’s attempts to tame both realms over the past decade have made them highly vulnerable to polarisation and politicisation, I proceed to discuss AKP-backed social media operatives as well as other groups. Lastly, I point to some lines of inquiry that might remedy the gaps in literature concerning dis/misinformation campaigns in and from Turkey.

Turkey’s news media and online public sphere

Turkey, a country of 80 million, boasts dozens of national newspapers and news channels and hundreds of local print and broadcast outlets. While these numbers might suggest a pluralistic ecosystem, one must keep in mind that news media in Turkey operates under conditions of clientelism, patrimonialism, and the predominance of informal arrangements in the sector. Although Turkey’s news media have depended on their ties with the ruling elite for financial survival since at least the neoliberal restructuring of the country in the 1980s, party-press parallelism, marginalisation of critical voices, and the decline in journalistic professionalism reached unprecedented levels during the AKP era. Under the leadership of Erdogan, the AKP neutralised mainstream and oppositional media via legal and financial attacks, such as the prosecution of journalists, expropriation of critical outlets, and levying of tax penalties. In the meantime, it cultivated a number of partisan media conglomerates by distributing privatisation deals, public tenders, cheap credits, and government advertising to loyal businessmen (Kaya and Cakmur 2010; Akser and Baybars-Hawk 2012; Yesil 2016b, 2018; Somer 2016). The extent to which the media have become an integrated tool of the AKP government becomes especially clear during political, economic, and foreign policy crises that challenge the AKP’s hegemony. Partisan newspapers use the same headlines and publish similarly worded op-eds, while pro-Erdogan news channels peddle conspiracy theories about myriad actors (the US, Europe, Israel, George Soros, IMF, etc.) supposedly preoccupied with destabilising Turkey. For example, during the nationwide Gezi protests in 2013, one newspaper published a fake interview with Christiane Amanpour in which she allegedly confessed that she and CNN were paid to overreport the Gezi protests in order to weaken Turkey (Fung 2013). Another pro-government newspaper fabricated (using Google Translate) parts of an interview with Noam Chomsky that seemingly defended Erdogan’s policies during the Arab Spring (Peker 2013). After the failed coup in 2017, pro-AKP newspapers engaged in smear campaigns against the Open Society Foundation, Amnesty International, and foreign and Turkish academics and philanthropists, accusing them of having secret meetings to overthrow Erdogan and create chaos in Turkey (Star 2017).

The online sphere has not been immune to repression, polarisation, and manipulation either. The AKP’s earliest attempts at imposing strict controls on online communications came in 2007, with the passage of the country’s first Internet Law, which allowed the AKP to criminalise content that it deemed harmful to the youth (Akdeniz and Altiparmak 2008). Soon, government agencies and courts began to use this law and existing anti-terror laws and penal code provisions to ban websites with so-called harmful content, as well as to curb Kurdish political expression that allegedly threatened Turkish national unity. By the end of the 2000s, the number
of blocked websites had reached tens of thousands, and users’ access to information had been severely limited and freedom of speech violated (Kinikoglu 2014; Yesil 2016a). The AKP’s attempts to control the online space intensified in the 2010s as politically engaged citizens, disenchanted with government interference in news media, came to rely on digital outlets to share news and information or to express critical opinions (Tunc 2014; Bulut 2016; Parks et al. 2017; Coskuntuncel 2018). Especially after the nationwide Gezi protests and the revelations of a massive corruption scandal in 2013, the AKP government imposed further restrictions to combat the alleged threats of online communications. The following year, it hastily amended the Internet Law and authorised the blocking of websites without a court order. It also amended the Law on State Intelligence Services and the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), expanding the online surveillance of citizens (Yesil et al. 2017).

After the botched coup in 2016, the AKP declared a state of emergency, under which it passed decree laws that facilitated the interception of digital communications and the collection of private data from state institutions and private companies. Perhaps more worryingly, law enforcement began to call on citizens to inform the authorities of social media users who posted anti-state and/or terrorist content. Since then, it has become customary for the AKP’s ‘informant network’ in state bureaucracy and public institutions and its supporters to report critical voices to the authorities on charges of terrorism (Topak 2017).

### Social media manipulation

In addition to creating strict new legal tools to control the digital realm by surveilling and prosecuting users, the AKP began to increase its user presence on social media sites in order to co-opt their information-sharing function, with the goal of suppressing critical news and disseminating government-friendly content. It was during the Gezi protests that the AKP officials came to recognise that social media, especially Twitter, served as a space for protest organisation and as a source of news and information. As the protests were underway and new forms of citizen journalism were beginning to take hold, the AKP hastily began to form its own social media team (Karatas and Saka 2017; Saka 2019). There is no publicly available information as to who put together this team and how, but there are a number of analyses that offer some clues. According to one explanation based on leaked emails, a pro-government NGO operative suggested to Erdogan’s son-in-law that ‘a team of professional graphic designers, coders, and former army officers with training in psychological warfare’ could be formed in order to deliver pro-government messages on Twitter, ‘counter critical narratives in foreign media outlets’ and ‘weaken the protest networks on social media’ (Sozeri 2016a). According to Erkan Saka, an academic who conducted interviews with some of the leading pro-AKP Twitter users, private individuals with connections to higher echelons of the party wanted to ‘seize the moment’ and proposed to form a social media team and/or engaged in pro-government messaging themselves (2018: 165).

Despite the lack of clarity about its beginnings, the AKP’s social media team is known to have grown and professionalised a few months after the Gezi protests. In September 2013, a team of 6,000 ‘volunteers’ was formed in order to ‘promote the party perspective and monitor online discussions’ while ‘correcting the [opposing camp] with valid information, always using positive language’ (Albayrak and Parkinson 2016). However, in a few months, it became evident that ‘hundreds of pro-government accounts mobilize[d] quickly, creating offensive hashtags and pouring on slurs’ to intimidate journalists and academics who wrote critical pieces about Erdogan and the AKP (Kizilkaya 2013). These so-called volunteers thus came to be referred to as ‘AK trolls’, a designation used to draw attention to their aggressive tactics. To this day, the
term refers to anonymous or identified, paid or unpaid social media users who engage in online harassment and doxing, as well as orchestrated information operations on behalf of Erdogan and the AKP.

AK trolls and lynch mobs

As Turkey’s first ‘Twitter army’ and one deployed by an authoritarian regime, AK trolls have understandably become the nearly exclusive focus of scholarly analysis in this field (Karatas and Saka 2017; Bulut and Yoruk 2017; Saka 2018; Yesil et al. 2017; Yuksel 2018; Yildiz and Smets 2019; Saka 2019). Who are the AK trolls, then? A network analysis conducted in 2015 revealed that AK trolls comprise two major groups: identifiable users (e.g. party members, cabinet ministers, political consultants, pro-AKP pundits) and anonymous trolls. At the time of this analysis, the central node in the network connecting these two groups was Mustafa Varank, the chief advisor to Erdogan (Saka 2019: 55). As Saka notes, the composition of AK trolls has changed since 2013, tracking intra-party factions, and some prominent AK trolls have even closed their accounts and left the network (Saka 2018). In 2015, the AKP launched a new entity called the ‘New Turkey Digital Office’ to counter the negative connotations of the troll designation and to quell the internal strife amongst its social media team. The director of the office took pains to distance his 180 employees from AK trolls and noted that they functioned as the AKP’s ‘digital campaign office’. He also noted that this new entity was simply responsible for creating content about the AKP’s and its local municipalities’ accomplishments and for monitoring opposition parties’ social media messages (Altuntas 2015). Since then, no information has been made available about the New Turkey Digital Office or its activities. However, in 2019, the Oxford Internet Institute, in its ‘Global Disinformation Order’ report, confirmed the existence of a ‘medium capacity team’ in Turkey that consists of an estimated 500 ‘cyber troops’, a term used to refer to ‘government or political party actors tasked with manipulating public opinion online’. The OII found that the Turkish team is affiliated with a government agency or agencies; its members are active on Facebook and Twitter; and they work primarily to suppress critical voices, amplify pro-government messages, and manipulate media content by creating memes and videos (Bradshaw and Howard 2019: 5, 6, 18, 19). It is unclear how many teams are backed by the AKP for purposes of social media manipulation and whether the AK trolls and the New Turkey Digital Office are the same individuals. However, there is ample information about who the AKP-backed team’s targets are and what tactics they use. Among the most prominent targets are journalists and activists who are critical of the AKP, as well as politicians from opposition parties. A study conducted by the International Press Institute in 2016 found that journalists were among the prime targets of AK trolls. They are labelled ‘traitors’, ‘terrorists’, ‘terrorist supporters’, and ‘infidels’; humiliated via offensive language, and attacked with sexual insults and threats (especially females) (2016). In their analysis, Karatas and Saka also revealed that AK trolls try to silence journalists, activists, and opposition party politicians as well as ordinary citizens through abusive language, label them ‘terrorists’ and ‘traitors’, and threaten them with arrest (2017).

AK trolls’ attacks against these targets usually take the form of lynch mobs and unfold in a number of stages. First, prominent AK trolls tweet about an oppositional figure using non-threatening language or take a screenshot of their Twitter posts. Next, they mobilise anonymous trolls who then spam the user in question and/or create an incriminatory hashtag (Sozeri 2015; Saka 2019: 56). Finally, AKP officials and pro-government pundits retweet the incriminating tweets, which are then picked up by pro-Erdogan news media only to be reported as facts. In some cases, pro-AKP users and news outlets even call on the authorities to take action against
the individual who’s being attacked. For example, when a Turkish-Dutch journalist tweeted a picture of the Turkish flag with the hashtag #FuckErdogan, online vigilantes mobilised, and a prominent AK troll @tahaun (married to First Lady Emine Erdogan’s private secretary) called on the police to ‘detain this creature this evening’. Soon after, the journalist was arrested and released after a few days, but then blocked from leaving the country (The Guardian 2016).

AKP-backed operatives also rely heavily on bots, especially to push their hashtags to the top of trending topic lists (Saka 2019: 59–60). There is no research on the current number of bots used by AKP’s teams, but in 2014, two researchers discovered 18,000 bots that were tweeting pro-AKP messages during the local election campaign (Poyrazlar 2014). Bots were used in another social media campaign in 2016 when the hashtag #WeLoveErdogan made it to the top of the trending topics list ahead of Erdogan’s visit to the United States. When Twitter removed the hashtag on suspicions of bot activity, AKP officials accused the social media company of censorship and of being a part of a ‘global [influence] operation’ against Erdogan (Hurriyet Daily News 2016).

**Pro-government messaging**

AKP-backed social media operatives not only troll, dox, and harass critical voices; they also seek to mobilise the party’s voter base by disseminating nationalist, religiously informed, and/or populist content. An example of such an information campaign occurred during the coup attempt in July 2016. The botched coup was the top-tweeted event in Turkey since the Gezi protests, especially by pro-government operatives, journalists, and pundits as part of their efforts to overwhelm Twitter with AKP narratives (Yesil et al. 2017: 22; Yildiz and Smets 2019). In their research, Yildiz and Smets describe the coup attempt as a moment of ‘extraordinary, often religiously-framed mobilization on Twitter’ wherein anonymous trolls, official AKP accounts, and identifiable pro-AKP accounts carried out a sustained campaign (Yildiz and Smets 2019: 350). Their thematic analysis of coup-related posts show that official AKP and identifiable pro-Erdogan accounts generally expressed devotion to Erdogan, asked citizens to attend anti-coup demonstrations, and accused the US and Israel of supporting the coup attempt. In contrast, anonymous trolls adopted threatening, humiliating, and intimidating tones in their posts. Their tweets were marked by binary oppositions such as ‘us versus them’, and ‘the nation versus others’ as they attacked journalists and academics and accused them of being ‘foreign agents’ (364). Such binaries are indeed central to AKP-backed information operations. As Bulut and Yoruk (2017) note, prominent AK trolls often deploy nationalist, populist themes in their Twitter campaigns to construct antagonisms between ‘the nation’ and ‘its enemies’. They frame Turkey as the underdog victimised by the ‘West’ and Erdogan as the ‘man of the people’ who is under constant attack by internal and external enemies. In tweets that seek to praise Erdogan, they attribute Turkey’s accomplishments to the ‘will of the people’, especially the pious segments of the population that comprise the backbone of AKP’s voter base (4105).

Similar pro-government campaigns occurred during other politically charged episodes such as the constitutional referendum in 2017 and Turkey’s military incursion in North Syria in 2019. In June 2020, Twitter announced that it took down a network of 7,340 accounts that consisted of fabricated users and pro-AKP retweet rings. In their analysis of the dataset, researchers at the Stanford Internet Observatory found that this ‘influence operation’ network was linked to the AKP’s youth wing and that it carried out these operations and many others in order to circulate a pro-government narrative and criticize opposition parties (Grossman et al. 2020).
In my ongoing research, I also found that pro-AKP social media operations against the mayor of Istanbul, Ekrem Imamoglu, are laced with similar ‘us versus them’ and ‘native versus other’ antagonisms. AKP officials and their proxies in the media relentlessly criticise Imamoglu, an opposition politician who defeated the AKP candidate in local elections in 2019, effectively ending Erdogan and his allies’ 25-year reign in Istanbul. On Facebook and Twitter, there are dozens of images of Imamoglu that have been photoshopped to show him as a cross-wearing Christian with a diploma from the masonic school who buys alcohol on trips to the grocery store. Designed to depict Imamoglu as a Western-oriented elite who espouses a foreign, non-Muslim lifestyle and is alienated from ordinary people’s values, these social media posts stoke nationalist and religious sentiments. Needless to say, they are also circulated by the predominantly pro-government news media and used as fodder by the AKP as part of its populist politics.

**Information operations in the international arena**

As noted earlier, existing research on social media manipulation in Turkey has mostly focused on AK trolls and their domestic operations. Yet there are other actors that specifically target foreign audiences to propagandise on behalf of Erdogan and the AKP. In what follows, I provide an overview of these groups and their activities.

**Bosphorus Global**

Bosphorus Global is an entity founded in 2015 by a pro-Erdogan pundit Hilal Kaplan and her husband. Though they claim Bosphorus Global is an independent NGO, leaked emails have revealed that Kaplan and her husband received direct funding from Berat Albayrak, Erdogan’s son-in-law and the minister of treasury and finance (Sozeri 2016b).

Bosphorus Global runs a number of websites and social media accounts to influence both domestic and international public opinion on behalf of Erdogan. According to its website, Bosphorus Global is primarily concerned with Western media representations of Turkey and thus aims to create spaces in the international public sphere wherein ‘subaltern groups’, such as Turks and Muslims, can voice their viewpoints (Bosphorus Global, Mission n.d.). To this end, Bosphorus Global runs a number of information projects on the web and social media that target both domestic and foreign audiences. Domestic accounts in Turkish primarily involve narratives about exposing Gulen and the PKK, while international accounts aim to fact-check news items published in Western media about Turkey, highlight internal problems of the putative West, and, of course, inform foreign audiences about the Turkey’s arch enemies, Gulen and the PKK.

One such account in English is Fact-Checking Turkey, which aims to monitor the ‘factual accuracy of various news and claims about Turkey’ (Bosphorus Global, Our Projects n.d.). Yet unlike genuine fact-checking initiatives, it relies on AKP officials’ or anonymous sources’ statements and unverified media reports instead of publicly available and verifiable information (Sozeri 2017). It also prioritises extraneous details over core issues and even engages in political offensives against Erdogan’s so-called enemies. Other English-language accounts, Chronicles of Shame and Crackdown Chronicles, are exclusively concerned with the West. Chronicles of Shame seeks to present an ‘archive’ of various acts of racism and discrimination around the globe against Muslims and refugees and, to this end, publishes abridged versions of news stories from international media on Islamophobia, racism, and human rights violations in Europe and United States. Meanwhile, Crackdown Chronicles focuses on the ‘inner political contradictions’ of the West: that is, the tensions between Western ideals of democracy and human rights.
and actual practices of press censorship, police violence, and rights violations in Europe and the US (Crackdown Chronicles n.d.).

**Anonymous groups**

In addition to Bosphorus Global, there are anonymous accounts that promote pro-Erdogan arguments in the international arena. For example, in July 2016, a few days after the failed coup, a group of users began to circulate a narrative on 4chan that accused Hillary Clinton and the CIA of conspiring with Gulen to topple Erdogan. According to Buzzfeed, these users were ‘extremely likely’ to be AK trolls, although there is no evidence that confirms this claim. That question aside, the 4chan posts were ultimately picked up by American right-wing media outlets Breitbart and The Daily Caller, both of which published their own stories about so-called links between Gulen and the Clinton Global Initiative (Broderick 2019). Subsequent pieces on Breitbart and The Hill similarly claimed that ‘Gulen’s vast global network’ was a ‘cult’ and a ‘dangerous sleeper terror network’. These pieces were penned by Robert Amsterdam, an AKP attorney working on Gulen’s extradition from the US, and Michael Flynn, who at the time received payments from an AKP-affiliated businessman (Amsterdam 2016; Flynn 2016). Shortly after the publication of these pieces, the same pro-Erdogan narrative was picked up by Rudy Giuliani, who began to call for the extradition of Gulen on cable news channels, thus lending the 4chan misinformation campaign a certain level of authority (Broderick 2019).

We do not know whether the anonymous 4chan users planned for American right-wing media and even Trump’s personal attorney to pick up their allegations. Regardless, this episode shows how pro-Erdogan information operations can cross borders by leveraging the political salience of symbols foreign to Turkey’s domestic context and allow operatives to influence public opinion internationally as well as in Turkey.

On various occasions, these international operations have also taken the form of hacking. For example, in March and April 2017, a number of German and Dutch state institutions, political parties and commercial organisations had their websites and social media accounts hijacked. The hackers posted swastikas and a message that read ‘A little #OTTOMANSLAP for you, see you on #April16’ under the hashtags #naziholland and #nazigermany. April 16 was the date of the referendum in Turkey that would greatly expand Erdogan’s powers as president. Some AKP ministers had expressed their intention to hold rallies in Germany and the Netherlands in order to mobilise the Turkish diaspora in those countries. When the German and Dutch governments discouraged and/or rejected the ministers, tensions flared, and Erdogan accused the two countries of being ‘Nazi remnants’ and said they would ‘pay the price’ for their treatment of Turkish officials (Jones 2017). To this day, it remains unknown which group(s) carried out the online attacks and whether they were contractors hired by the AKP.

**Nationalist hacker groups**

Similar nationalistic campaigns have been carried out by groups that openly take responsibility for breaking into foreign websites and social media accounts and are seemingly unaffiliated with the AKP. Amongst these groups is AyYildiz Tim (Star and Crescent Team), which self-identifies as ‘a voluntary lobbying organisation to counteract cyberattacks against Turkey’. AyYildiz Tim hacked the Twitter accounts of former Fox News hosts and contributors and filled their feeds with pro-Erdogan content. The messages they posted in Turkish read, ‘You are hacked by the
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Turkish cyber army AyYildiz Tim! We got your DM correspondence! We will show you the power of the Turk!’ and ‘We love the Turks and Muslims in the world. We condemn those who persecute them, especially in the United States, and we share their suffering. We love Turkish soldiers, we love Erdogan, we love Turkey’ (Russo 2018).

Another nationalistic hacker group, Aslan Nefeler Tim (ANT) (Lion Soldiers Team) describes its mission as ‘defending the homeland, Islam, nation, flag’ and ‘safeguarding our country in the cyber world’ (Aslan Nefeler, n.d.). Informed by ethnic Turkish nationalism, its operations target foreign countries that the group deems threatening to or critical of Turkey. For example, ANT has hacked the website of the Belgian Ministry of Defense, accusing the Belgian government of supporting the PKK, and the websites of Austrian parliament and several ministries and banks because of ‘Austria’s racism against Muslims’ and the Austrian government’s criticism of Turkey’s human rights record (Souli 2018).

Conclusion

As discussed in this chapter, the information landscape in contemporary Turkey is being polarised and manipulated by a deep-rooted and accelerating process of state intervention through new legislative tools as well as via informal or illegal collusion between state and non-state actors. Turkey’s newspapers, news channels, and social media sites constitute fertile ground for dis/misinformation operations, especially given a prevailing political culture premised on ‘us versus them’ cleavages. Twitter has become the prime site of pro-government operations, especially those that exploit nationalist, populist, and/or conservative politics. Perhaps not as sophisticated or as far-reaching as their Russian and Chinese counterparts, AKP-backed operatives nonetheless troll, hack, and dox intra-party rivals and critical voices, such as journalists, academics, and activists. As discussed in preceding sections, different groups with organisational or ideological ties to the AKP have been working to manipulate the digital sphere by suppressing the opposition and amplifying pro-government content.

The proliferation of pro-AKP information operations present an opportunity for new lines of inquiry. Existing research has shown that AK trolls, pro-AKP accounts, and official AKP accounts participate in the co-production of nationalist, populist, and/or religiously framed information campaigns (Bulut and Yoruk 2017; Yildiz and Smets 2019). Future research can help us reveal how AKP’s ideological perspectives shape such social media operations, both qualitatively and quantitatively. It would, for example, be interesting to map potential connections between specific moments of deterioration in the AKP’s relations with Western governments, media, and policy circles and the deployment of social media operations to discredit them in the international public sphere. Researchers can also study citizen participation in these campaigns and the predominantly used discursive and visual themes.

As noted earlier, the literature on information operations in Turkey has been overwhelmingly concerned with pro-government actors. Yet there is definitely a need for more analyses of social media operatives who are affiliated with opposition parties, Gulenists, foreign actors, and other potential anti-AKP groups. Other than anecdotal evidence, there is no scientific research on whether and how opposition politicians, citizens, and activist groups critical of Erdogan initiate or participate in information operations. AKP officials and pro-AKP pundits often accuse mainstream secularist politicians, PKK-affiliated actors, Kurdish activists, and Gulenists of carrying out ‘influence operations’ against Erdogan, but there is no qualitative or quantitative data with which to assess this claim.

Last, but not least, there needs to be more research on social media operations (and their linkages to broadcast and print media) that are designed by the AKP and state organs to propagandise
Turkey’s military operations and geopolitical initiatives. For example, when Turkey launched a cross-border military offensive in north Syria in 2019, there was a sustained Twitter campaign to communicate with international audiences. Likewise, when the AKP government carried out similar military operations in 2016 and 2018, it relied on various English language outlets (including the state-run TRT World and Anadolu News Agency, online news sites, NGOs and think tanks, paid social media teams, and volunteers) to amplify friendly content in the international public sphere. It would also be interesting to study whether there are any social media operations that the AKP undertakes in Africa, the Balkans, or the Middle East – all areas where Turkey has military and geopolitical objectives.

Notes

1 Access to Bosphorus Global’s Twitter account (@BosphorusGlobal) has been restricted since June 2020 due to ‘some unusual activity’.

2 Other nationalist hacker groups include Akincilar (Raiders) and the Turk Hack Team. For more information on these groups’ hijacking of websites that belong to the Vatican, the Library of Congress and various Greek and Armenian entities, see The National Herald 2020.

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