

# Framing as a Social Movement's Transnational Strategy: The Gülen Movement's EU-Turkey Discourses in the Post-2016 Online Media

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on framing as a social movement's transnational strategy. Applying the cultural approach to framing analysis, it investigates how the Gülen movement, as a social group with restricted access to national gatekeepers, uses discourse to internationalise a domestic power struggle with a powerful opponent. Moving the struggle to the international arena presents a discursive opportunity that determines which ideas become visible and legitimate both internationally and nationally. The importance of such internationalization increases in times of conflict and the media play a vital role in this process. The paper argues that the editors of the pro-Gülen movement foreign online platforms established after the movement was forced into exile following the failed 2016 coup, use strategic framing to tailor their frames for the host context and culture. That increases the resonance of their frames and the potential of the discursive opportunity. The article confirms the previous findings that media are a crucial resource for transnational social movements because policymakers are sensitive to public opinion, which is shaped by media frames.

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KEYWORDS

Gülen movement, transnational, social movement, AKP, Erdoğan, media, framing

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International institutions affect but do not determine the behaviour of state and non-state actors. Actors whose access to the national gatekeepers is limited (or restricted) might reach out to various foreign and international actors, including states, international organisations and the international public opinion, to gain a normative advantage in the domestic debate (KECK – SIKKINK 1998; PRINCEN – KERREMANS 2008). It brings forward the question of how transnational social movements utilise the public arena of international discourse to achieve their goals vis-à-vis their domestic adversaries.

A rather specific case of a social movement with an international political engagement is the Turkish Gülen movement (GM). Once the most influential religious/social group in Turkey (TURAM 2007; HENDRICK 2013), its transnational network reached an estimated 160 countries by the 2010s. The GM's recent history has been closely linked to the rise of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP), which has been in power in Turkey since 2002. The support of the AKP facilitated the movement's immense expansion both in Turkey and abroad. However, the alliance fell apart in 2013 and the former allies became foes, which culminated with the 2016 failed coup. Since the Turkish government accused the GM of organising the coup (which the movement denies) (CF. CAGAPTAY 2017; YAVUZ 2018; YAVUZ – BALCI 2018), the GM became a key target of persecution by the Turkish regime and all its official activities had to move abroad. While its pre-2016 foreign activities were extensive, the post-2016 exile experience forced the movement to become far more transnational and active in the international arena.

A multitude of works analysed the GM foreign activities (YAVUZ – ESPOSITO 2003; HENDRICK 2013; LACEY 2014; TITTENSOR 2014; ÇELİK – LEMAN – STEENBRINK 2015; NOCERA ET AL. 2015) but relatively few works have examined the transformation of the GM foreign engagements after the 2016 failed coup (WATMOUGH – ÖZTÜRK 2018; ALAM 2019; SOZERI 2019; UGUR 2019; MARTIN 2020). Martin (2020: 15) concluded her work by stating that the GM had a good chance to flourish in liberal democracies, where it could “convincingly frame [itself] as a victim of the obvious authoritarianism in Turkey.” Scholars close to the GM such as Alam (2019: 270) stated that its followers were still active and believed that the GM would “continue to grow” by developing a post-2016 identity which would combine its religious, civic-social and political dimensions.

The most comprehensive outlook on the GM activities in the post-2016 exile so far has been presented in a 2018 special issue of *Politics, Religion & Ideology*. The special issue's editors argued that the links formed through “*cultural democracy*” (WATMOUGH – ÖZTÜRK 2018: 7), including media and publishing activities, allowed the GM to “*lobby host publics and governments*” and continue with their “*coordinated campaign*” against the Turkish government. The members and sympathisers of the movement who lived in the West, were “*becoming outposts of resistance to the Turkish regime under Erdoğan*” (TITTENSOR 2018: 127), taking their fight “*to the public arena of international discourse*” (TEE 2018: 13).

Despite the fact that the GM controlled a large share of the Turkish media market and owned several foreign outlets (CF. NOCERA ET AL. 2015), research on the post-2016 foreign activities of the GM has for the most part ignored the transformation of their post-coup media involvement. As mass media are a “*site of struggle between competing positions*” (SPLENDORE 2020: 993) and the access to the media is often crucial for exerting influence over the narrative defining political reality (CURRAN 2002; CARPENTIER 2011), media might represent a discursive opportunity structure for social movements. Discursive opportunity determines which “*ideas achieve visibility, resonance or legitimacy*” (BERKOWITZ – MUGGE 2014: 77). Its importance increases in times of conflict or change, when the actors need to generate additional support (HEIN – CHAUDRI 2018: 16). One way to study discursive opportunities is by applying framing analysis, an important tool of the IR theory of constructivism.

This paper focuses on framing as a social movement's transnational strategy. The multifaceted nature of the GM (CF. BAŞKAN 2005; STEENBRINK 2015; BAŞKAN CANYAŞ – CANYAŞ 2016, TEE 2021) makes it difficult to conceptualise it within the standard definitions used by social movement scholars (CF. TITTENSOR 2014; FITZGERALD 2017). Acknowledging this limitation, this paper follows some previous works on the GM (YAVUZ 2005; JAGER 2016) and uses a social movement framework. A social movement is defined as a “*loose collectivity acting with some degree of organization, temporal continuity, and reliance on noninstitutional forms of action to promote or resist change in the group, society, or world order of which it is part*” (MCADAM – SNOW 2010: 1).

Applying the cultural approach to framing analysis (VAN GORP 2007; SCHEUFELE – SCHEUFELE 2010), I investigate how a transnational social movement

promotes “*specific frames in order to gain public support for their interests, positions, and concerns*” (SCHEUFELE – SCHEUFELE 2010: 110) in the international arena. I argue that the editors of pro-GM foreign online platforms increased their legitimacy as frame advocates by distancing themselves from the movement. They used strategic framing to depict the *current* Turkish regime as a threat to the EU and to define the GM as a victim. Their aim was to persuade the relevant international actors to apply pressure on their antagonist, which would increase the GM's chances of getting an upper hand in its domestic power struggle.

The article is organised in the following way: the first section presents constructivism as the theoretical basis of this article, and explains the cultural approach to framing analysis and how it relates to social movements. It is followed by a brief summary of the relationship between the AKP and the GM. The next section outlines the method of data collection and then defines and analyses the GM frames. The article concludes with a discussion of the main findings and some concluding remarks.

## THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Constructivism, “*one of the most influential and compelling perspectives in mainstream IR*” (JUNG 2019: 4), includes social factors in the study of world politics (WIENER 2007). The scholars of constructivism highlight the importance of values, norms, rules, or discourses for explaining political processes and events. In constructivism, a lot of attention is directed to how international norms are developed and challenged. It takes place in a “*highly contested*” (FINNEMORE – SIKKINK 1998) context, where ideas compete with other (often contradictory) norms and perceptions (RISSE-KAPPEN 1994).

The obvious question then is what leads to the selection of a particular idea. Among the key mechanisms are the powers of persuasion and contestation. Persuasion turns ideas into norms (FINNEMORE 1996; LYNCH 1999); values are attached to actions and provide legitimacy for actions. Public opinion is influenced or manipulated “*to provide support for a selected policy*” (MINTZ – REDD 2003: 200). The actors who share the given norms might try to persuade the less convinced actors (WIENER 2007). Interests and preferences are “*subject to discursive challenges [because] actors [...] are prepared to change their views of the world or even their interests in the light of the better*

*argument*" (RISSE 2000: 7). Persuasion is also used to delegitimise the interests and actions of the actors' opponents. Another key feature is the perceived legitimacy of the actor and its interests and preferences (PFEFFER – SALANCIK 1978), where the actor's actions are perceived as "*desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions*" (SUCHMAN 1995: 574).

Interpretation of norms is affected by those who participate in the process of forming the norm; i.e., the definition of the norm depends on the actors. While states remain the main actors of international politics, constructivists also focus on individuals and groups (E.G., PRICE 1998; KECK – SIKKINK 1999; KIM – SHARMAN 2014; TABOSA 2020) and examine how non-state actors try to affect preferences of not only their home countries, but other states, international organisations and non-state actors. That includes areas of "high politics".

Policy situations in both national and international arenas can be framed by states but also non-state actors such as social movements (MINTZ – REDD 2003). One way to examine how actors mobilise support and obtain legitimacy by using language and discourse is frame analysis (BENFORD – SNOW 2000; MINTZ – REDD 2003; DELANTY – RUMFORD; VAARA – TIENARI 2008; BOESMAN – D'HAENENS – VAN GORP 2016; HEIN – CHAUDHRI 2018; BELMONTE – PORTO 2020), which is explained below.

### Framing Analysis

Frames have their roots in common cultural themes; thus, if the problem at stake matches the public's pre-existing interpretations (value constructs) coming from their political, ideological or religious beliefs and is put in a familiar context, it increases the likelihood of its acceptance by the public (SNOW – BENFORD 1988; NISBET 2010; VAN GORP 2010; BERBERS ET AL. 2016; BELMONTE – PORTO 2020). Successful "*norm entrepreneurs*" are able to "*frame' normative ideas in such a way that they resonate with relevant audiences*" (MINTZ – REDD 2003). The resonance of the frame depends on its credibility (the frame consistency, the credibility of the frame articulators and empirical credibility) and salience (promoting values close to the values of the target audience and their everyday experience, and the frame's resonance with the cultural narrations of the target audience) (BENFORD – SNOW 2000). The resonant norm or frame can be used strategically, as the actors can willingly adopt values

even if these values were previously peripheral to their main goals (BARNETT 1999; PAYNE 2001). As different cultures use different sets of frames (BERBERS ET AL. 2015), frames must be adjusted in a foreign environment to become understood and accepted. Strategic framing involves intentional tailoring of the frames to the host context/culture and reacts to external factors such as framing of the state or counter-movements (CARREGEE – ROEFS 2004).

Framing analysis shows how the use of reasoning devices promotes particular facts and assessments of the situation, making them “*more salient*” in order to 1) define a problem, 2) identify the causes, 3) make moral judgements and 4) suggest solutions (ENTMAN 1993). This chain provides a logical move from identifying a problem to its solution (SNOW – BENFORD 1988; VAN GORP 2010). Thus, frames can be used to justify a particular solution to a problem. Besides reasoning devices, framing analysis works with framing devices, which Reese (2010: 19–20) defined as “*specific linguistic structures such as metaphors, visual icons, and catchphrases that communicate frames.*”

Frames being part of social movements' discourses (DE VREESE 2005), they are the key “*challengers of hegemonic values*” (CARREGEE – ROEFS 2004: 224). Social movements use frames to not only mobilise possible followers but also gain support and “*demobilize antagonists*” (BENFORD – SNOW 2000). In such cases the success often depends on the media (MINTZ – REDD 2003). The media, being “*a component of [the] political opportunity structure*” (GAMSON – MEYER 1996: 287), construct meaning, reproduce culture and are sites of contest. The rise in the online media furthermore presents a “*substantial resource for movements to utilize*” (HEIN – CHAUDRI 2018: 5). Indeed, social movements have tried to gain stronger ground in the “*discursive contest*” by using unconventional media such as social media, blogs, and online platforms, which facilitated the reliance on mental short-cuts and sources “*that conform and reinforce [...] preexisting beliefs*” (NISBET 2010: 51).

How social movements produce frames in the international arena (framing) has generally received less attention than the actual frames (CARREGEE – ROEFS 2004). How a social movement tries to affect the home country's relations with the EU and thus demobilise its opponent is an example of conflict internationalisation (or conflict Europeanisation in the EU context), where a social movement shifts “*to transnational strategies*” (TARROW 1995: 233) and strategically targets “*power-holders outside the state*”

(BOURNE – CHATZOPOULOU 2015: 878). Examining conflict internalisation contributes to our knowledge about the social movement's role in the politicisation of the European public space (BOURNE – CHATZOPOULOU 2015), which I examine on the case of the internationalised power struggle between the Turkish Gülen movement and the ruling AKP. An overview of their relationship is provided next.

## THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT AND THE AKP

The impact of the Gülen movement on the Turkish political and economic systems since 2002 is undeniable (E.G. GÖZAYDIN 2009; TAŞ 2018). The evaluations of the movement, and its nature, characteristics and impact on Turkish politics have been very contradictory and ranged from the belief that it represented moderate Islam and intercultural dialogue and provided excellent education, to views that saw it as a dangerous sect trying to take control of the Turkish state (CF. STEENBRINK 2015). Indeed, its activities have ranged from a personal and religious focus to institutional involvement (including involvement in education and the media) and “*infiltration of key government and military offices*” (FITZGERALD 2017: 4).

Starting in the 1970s with a group of followers around the former imam Fethullah Gülen, the Gülen movement (known as *Hizmet* or *Cemaat* in Turkey) rose to nationwide importance in the 1980s. Gülen's relocation from Turkey to the USA in 1999 facilitated the globalisation of the movement and turned it into one of “*the largest and wealthiest*” (TEE 2016: 161) transnational movements in the world. His influence remains strong over the core but limited over the entire GM, which “*allows GM followers to claim that Gülen is at once the reason, motivator, and instigator behind the GM's transnational efforts, and that he leads no one and manages nothing*” (HENDRICK 2013: 72). This gradually developed sophisticated defence strategy (HENDRICK 2013; TITTENSOR 2018) reacted to the Turkish Kemalist elites' treatment of religious movements as a threat to the secular order of the country.

Gülen's exile in the USA coincided with the EU granting Turkey the official candidate country status in 1999 and resulted in the GM adopting a pro-Western and pro-European Turkish foreign policy narratives (YILMAZ 2005). It used Turkey's NATO membership and EU accession process obligations to soften the Kemalist elites' pressure on Islamic movements in the

country. In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in the USA, the GM has also used the “*discursive opportunity*” (LACEY 2014: 97) provided by the dichotomy between “good” and “bad” Muslims (MAMDANI 2002); it described itself as a liberal, pro-Western and pro-democratic Sufi-inspired movement, which helped it gain legitimacy as a norm entrepreneur in the West.

To protect and promote its interests in Turkey and abroad, the movement sought support among various Turkish political groups but its rapid expansion started when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s AKP came to power in 2002 (TAŞ 2018; YAVUZ – BALCI, EDS. 2018). The AKP broke away from political Islamism and promoted itself as a conservative but pro-Western force. The AKP and the GM shared the social base of pious Anatolian middle-class Muslims, were market-oriented and culturally and religiously conservative, and had a common “enemy” – the Turkish army and nationalist Kemalists. Their ideological combination of Islamic roots and neoliberal economic policies known as conservative globalism (ÖNİŞ 2009) won them broad support. The GM and the AKP together framed the AKP’s “new Turkey” as democratic and pro-Western, as a conservative democracy defined by the cultural values of Islam, a neoliberal economy and European democracy (ÖZTÜRK 2019; GÜMÜŞ, 2020). They contrasted it with the Kemalist “old Turkey,” which was perceived as undemocratic, corrupt, and economically weak. Even though the GM never openly declared its political support for the AKP (insisting that they did not support a particular party but democratisation and EU accession), it admitted that large numbers of their sympathisers voted for the AKP. Their informal alliance continued throughout the period of Turkey’s gradual de-democratisation and de-Europeanisation after 2007 (YAVUZ – BALCI 2018).

Once the AKP-GM alliance removed its powerful Kemalist opposition from the critical positions in the state, their differences grew larger and the alliance broke down in 2013 with a corruption probe against the then Prime Minister Erdoğan and some ministers of his government (CF. ÇAGAPTAY 2017). Erdoğan responded by calling the GM a Fethullah terrorist organisation (Fethullahçı Terör Örgütü, FETÖ) in 2014. To downplay the allegations that the GM tried to control the Turkish police and judiciary, the GM reacted not so much by denying them as by trying to undermine the legitimacy of the critics. The distancing support it previously lent to the AKP enabled the GM to quickly become a staunch critic of the AKP



governance. The feud they declared with each other culminated with the 15 July 2016 failed coup, which the Turkish government directly blamed on the GM (CF. YAVUZ – BALCI 2018). While in the pre-2016 era the movement supported global expansion to promote its political and economic interests, the coup transformed it into an involuntary exile movement and it has become a major critic of Erdoğan abroad.

Part of the GM's economic success rested in its massive investment into the media market since the 1980s (NOCERA ET AL. 2015). They reacted to the political and economic environments in Turkey, which favoured the hegemonic discourses of powerful secular groups, whose hyperbolic narratives were often "*adopted by the foreign media and then also reproduced in the academic literature*" (TITTENSOR 2014: 66), which taught Islamic movements like the GM the importance of having access to the media and controlling the narrative.

The GM media played a crucial role in securing the AKP electoral victories in 2002, 2007 and 2011 and the positive image of the party in the West during the 2002–2012 period (CAGAPTAY 2017). In exchange, the AKP supported the GM's domestic and international business activities. Most important was the story of the newspaper *Today's Zaman* (TZ), which was launched in 2007; the paper was tailor-made for the European market and targeted non-Turkish readers interested in Turkey, including scholars, businesspeople, and diplomats. The newspaper promoted the Turkish accession process in Europe and quickly became the most widely read English-written Turkish newspaper. The AKP government supplied the paper to the foreign embassies in the country and made it available free of charge at its foreign missions (NOCERA ET AL. 2015). It led many European actors to believe that the AKP was a pro-democratic reform party and that the GM was "*Turkey's leading voice on issues of human rights, democracy, EU integration, and constitutional reform*" (HENDRICK 2013: 179). The GM's cultivating of its connections with foreign diplomats, intellectuals, businessmen, journalists and politicians, increased the potential of creating a favourable reception of the movement in the country (BALCI 2017) and legitimised the GM's discourses. The media in English-speaking countries were used to "*exert control over their own framing efforts and identity*" (FITZGERALD 2017: 6).

The EU accession process and the requirement of democratisation and desecuritisation presented a unique opportunity to raise domestic and international support for weakening the opposition (the traditional secularists/Kemalists in the military, the judiciary, academia and the media). The GM media used the democratisation frame to attack the undemocratic features of Kemalism, referring to the universal categories of democracy, human rights, and economic liberalisation (YAVUZ 2013). The campaign culminated with the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials, which accused military officers, judges, academics, journalists, and politicians of plotting a coup against the AKP government because it had placed Turkey on the Europeanisation track.<sup>1</sup> The stories, based on illegal wiretaps, were first published in GM-linked media such as *Taraf*, *Zaman* or *TZ* and pro-AKP media (*Yeni Şafak*, *Star*), which set the agenda and kept the stories going for many months, legitimising the mass detentions and the trials. The “*criminalisation of the military and opposition [...] deprived [the opposition] from shaping public opinion and from participation in the formulation of politics in Turkey*” (GÜMÜŞ 2020: 149) and legitimised the crackdown on the AKP opposition in the eyes of the international audience, including the European UNION (TEE 2016). Many accepted the frame that the trials were part of the government’s democratisation and liberalisation efforts in line with the EU accession process.

The trials weakened the common enemy but contributed to the demise of the GM-AKP alliance, where the media played a crucial role once again. During the Gezi Park protests in 2013, *Zaman* published an article criticising the government’s treatment of the protestors written by Gülen, which was followed by several extremely critical columns in *TZ*.<sup>2</sup> In autumn 2013, *Zaman* revealed the government’s plan to abolish the preparatory schools,<sup>3</sup> which represented a serious blow to the GM’s economic base and recruitment place in the education system. The most visible split came with the corruption probe in December 2013, which was heavily covered by the GM media well into 2014. The GM media attacked Erdoğan domestically and internationally, depicting him as a corrupt and increasingly authoritarian leader, which made the GM media a target of the government. In March 2016, the government took over *Zaman* and following the July 2016 coup it banned all GM-linked media in Turkey. In the days following the failed coup, the government shut down 1,284 private schools, 15 foundation universities, 800 private dorms, 54 private hospitals, 195 media outlets, 19

trade unions, 560 foundations, and 1,125 associations that were all associated with the GM (IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE BOARD OF CANADA 2020).

Once the GM's domestic voice had been silenced in the post-2016 massive purges in Turkey, the international arena, including cyberspace and media, became an important factor in the movement's power struggle against the Turkish regime (SONER 2016; ÖZTÜRK 2019). Yet, framing analysis was previously applied to the post-2016 GM only in a very limited way (DUMOVICH 2019; SALEEM AND OSMAN 2019; UGUR 2019). The analysis below investigates the strategic framing in four pro-GM online English-written media platforms to examine the dynamics of an internationalised domestic conflict between a social movement and a state.

## DATA COLLECTION

Preceding the framing analysis, I obtained thorough knowledge of the GM and their media in their political and social contexts. I collected findings of academic research on the framing patterns and strategies in their pre-2016 English-written resources (the failed coup serving as the breaking point after which the Turkey-based media were eradicated). The next step was to identify and select online English-written platforms linked to the GM. Even though this research did not aim to measure the impact of these platforms on public opinion and policymakers, I included potential impact<sup>4</sup> among the selection criteria because the size of the audience of the platforms affected the resources available to them. Four online platforms met the primary criteria: *Ahval News (AN)*, *Nordic Monitor (NM)*, *Stockholm Centre for Freedom (SCF)*, and *Turkish Minute (TM)*.

Given the tradition of secrecy and “strategic ambiguity” (HENDRICK 2013: 72) in the GM, it is important to explain at this point how I addressed this major limitation with establishing a credible and verifiable link between the GM and these platforms. No acknowledgements were found in the platforms' official statements and the financing of the platforms was also unclear. Following the previously observed findings that most GM followers in the organisations (including the media) linked to the GM can be found among their administrative staff and on their boards (SEE, E.G., TEE 2016), the link was established through the platforms' editorial teams, whose members all had a very strong representation in the pre-2016 GM media.<sup>5</sup> That

the crews were very similar to those of the pre-coup GM flagship media was also confirmed by interviews with Turkish journalists.<sup>6</sup> The deep ideological divisions between the Islamic and Kemalist/leftist circles in the Turkish society, where the Turkish media work as an “*echo chamber for their own side*” and tend to present the problem as a binary good-and-bad problem (EVANS – KAYNAK 2015: 48), together with the fact that the members of the platforms’ editorial teams had closely cooperated with the GM media in the pre-2016 era, justified the selection.

To analyse how the platforms reported on Turkey-EU relations, I examined all the news texts published on the four online platforms between January and March 2019, a period which coincided with the European Parliament’s (EP) 2018 Regular Report on Turkey, the EP’s vote to suspend Turkey’s EU accession negotiations and the 54<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Association Council between the EU and Turkey in March 2019 (the first since the State of Emergency was lifted in Turkey in 2018). The search included all articles published on the platforms in this period (making no distinction between news, opinions, and editorials). I first identified all articles with the keyword Europe in them. Articles with this keyword that were not relevant to the EU and EU politics were subsequently eliminated from the analysis pool. This yielded 64 articles in *AN*, 16 in *NM*, 6 in *SCF* and 30 in *TM* (N=116) that covered Turkey’s relations with Europe.<sup>7</sup> I carefully read these strategically collected news articles, focusing on how the stories about Turkey and Europe/EU were told and answering the following questions: How is the relation between the EU and Turkey described? Which factors are identified as the causes of the current state? What/who is identified as the villain/victim? What are the effects of the current situation? What are the suggested remedies? This yielded two dominant frames, democratisation and Islamism, which are summarised in Table 1 and defined and discussed below.

## FRAMING THE EU-TURKEY RELATIONS IN THE GM-LINKED MEDIA

### The EU as a Democratising Force for Turkey

All four platforms focused on the civic definition of European identity, defined the EU in terms of democracy, freedom and human rights and

presented the EU as one of the crucial sources of Turkish democratisation, which had to be externally imposed on the country – Turkey needed the EU/West to democratise. They described the EU as the vital force of the Turkish democratisation process. *TM* (FEBRUARY 12, 2019) wrote: “*progress was the result of the EU accession process and the associated democratization, system transformation and appropriation of EU norms and principles in regional politics,*” and described the post-2016 de-Europeanisation process of Turkey as de-democratisation, and Turkey as a “*disqualified ex-democracy*” (FEBRUARY 6, 2019). The platforms made frequent references to the EU accession process and the values associated with it and claimed that Erdoğan’s Turkey contradicted them domestically but also in its foreign policy. Erdoğan and the AKP were defined as the causes of Turkey’s departure from the EU project. They handled their former support of the AKP and Erdoğan by claiming that he tricked the EU (and the GM) and that he only pretended to be a democrat to use the EU and assume unlimited power (a previously common admonition of the Kemalist opposition). Calling the Turkish accession process “*the most spectacular failure,*” *AN* (March 11, 2019) argued that “[*his*] *commitment to elevating Turkey into the club of European nations [...] gave him cover to dismantle the constitutional checks on his power,*” and “*to neuter the powerful military, passing laws subjecting it to civilian control.*”

*TM* repeatedly used the good/bad Turkey binary dichotomy, where “good Turkey” was the Europeanising Turkey at the time of the AKP-Gülen alliance, and “bad Turkey” was the AKP and Erdoğan post-2016: “*Once there was a democratizing and Europeanizing Turkey: a reliable NATO partner, an EU candidate, a secular and democratic constitutional liberal model based on a pluralist society [...] Now things are different [...] a country run by a tyrannical and unpredictable regime that systematically violates the rights of its citizens and even those visiting Turkey or doing business within its borders*” (*TM*, February 6, 2019). Some of the articles were instrumental in leading to conclusions such as the claims that the change in Erdoğan’s EU policy started in 2013 and was linked to his alliance with “Eurasianists,” and that they used him to pull Turkey toward Russia. The slide away from democracy was in all four cases associated directly with Erdoğan. *AN* described him as “*an arrogant monster politician*” (January 4, 2019) and “*a populist colossus,*” (March 11, 2019) and *NM* described him as anti-western, anti-democratic and anti-secular (January 21, 2019) and as a dictator (February 25, 2019). Strong words were used to describe not only Erdoğan but the regime as such. For

example, *AN* labelled the Turkish regime as “autocratic” and “brutal”, and as a “sultanate” (February 14, 2019).

The EU was also criticised for being too benevolent with Erdoğan, cooperating with him and in this way helping in the rise of his authoritarianism. The platforms argued that other factors such as economic relations or migration should take prevalence over the democratic concerns. *AN* labelled the EU policy towards Turkey as “seeing no evil, hearing no evil, speaking no evil” and “brinkmanship” and accused the EU of “lending a precious helping hand to Erdoğan” by keeping Turkey as a candidate country (March 12, 2019). Like *AN*, *TM* (February 21, 2019) partially blamed the EU for its lax approach: “the ongoing pathetic ‘wait-and-see policy’ of the EU based on the refugee deal with Erdoğan and some other short-term interests [... that] strengthen the regime.” Like *AN* and *TM*, *NM* (March 18, 2019) warned against an “appeasement” of Turkey, which they claimed Erdoğan saw as a demonstration of “weakness.”

The EU and its emphasis on democracy, respect for human rights and rule of law were identified as remedies for the halted democratisation in Turkey. The commentators argued that the EU should insist on a return to democratisation, and that until Turkey complies, the accession negotiations should be suspended; thus, they supported the EP’s call to end the negotiations if Erdoğan stayed in power. *TM* (February 21, 2019) requested that the EU use its power to change the nature of Turkey’s regime, which meant that it should push for “[a] return to normative EU politics on Turkey, emphasizing the restoration of the constitutional regime, the rule of law and individual and minority rights: in a nutshell, the re-democratization of Turkey. To achieve this, the EU should freeze the negotiation process.” *NM* (February 14, 2019) called for “intergovernmental complaints that could be filed by multiple member states against Turkey [and that could] help restore the rule of law and fundamental human rights and freedoms.”

The democratisation frame of the Turkey-EU relations was also used to address the falling out between the GM and the AKP in 2013, the 2016 coup and the following crackdown on the Gülen movement in Turkey and abroad. *NM* (January 21, 2019) defined the GM as “a civic group that is highly critical of the Erdoğan government.” The platforms linked the GM to the Kurds, with *AN* and *TM* labelling them the two most oppressed groups in

Turkey. The initial falling out between Gülen and Erdoğan in 2013 was presented as having been caused by Gülen's concern for the future of Turkish democracy and his support for Turkey's Western orientation. *AN* (January 24, 2019) published an opinion which claimed that Turkey failed to prove to the West that the movement was a terrorist organisation, that attempts to do so were a "*self-engineered political fiasco*," and that the "*war*" against the GM was a policy of "*quashing dissent*."

The failed 2016 coup was also covered by the democratisation frame; all the platforms denied Turkey's allegations that the coup was organised by the GM and claimed Erdoğan staged the coup to dismantle the remaining parts of the Turkish democracy, purge the GM and move Turkey away from the West. *TM* (February 21, 2019) argued that it "*was a civilian coup by Erdoğan and his allies*" and described the coup as a means to abandon the Turkish effort to join the EU as supported by the GM. *NM* argued it was a "*false flag*" coup (January 30, 2019) and that Erdoğan "*faked*" the coup to purge the opposition and take control of the intelligence agency, and to get rid of "*government officials including thousands of judges and prosecutors*" (January 14, 2019). It described the charges against the GM followers as "*a bogus criminal case against legitimate critics*" (February 7, 2019). The platforms praised the EU and the European countries for standing up against Turkey and helping those persecuted by the undemocratic regime of Turkey in cases of failed kidnappings, espionage, and "*politically motivated harassment tactics*" (*NM*, February 1, 2019).

Of the four platforms, *AN* covered the broadest range of governance-related topics pertinent to Turkey. To strengthen and legitimise its arguments and positions, it worked with liberal, Kurdish, secular and foreign writers. It quoted EU institutions, well established, respected papers and magazines such as the *Guardian*, the *Financial Times*, and the *Economist*, experts and analyses prepared by foreign think tanks, by which it achieved "*legitimacy by association*" (TEE 2018: 8; HENDRICK 2018: 200). The Western sources of information were presented as reliable, objective sources of information, while the Turkish sources were used for reporting the Turkish point of view.

While they were most common in *AN*, all the platforms made references to European politicians to increase the legitimacy of their narratives. These politicians included the 2019 EPP Spitzenkandidat Manfred Weber,

German Chancellor Angela Merkel, Italian Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini and MEP Kati Piri (*NM*, *SCF*, and *TM* quoted her definition of the post-coup purges as a “*witch-hunt*”). All the platforms also frequently used the EU institutions as reference points in their headlines, the “*most powerful framing device of the syntactical structure*” (PAN – KOSICKI 1993: 60), especially the EP (including various MEPs), and the Commission, or they made vaguer references to “*EU officials*” (*TM*, January 21, 2019) or “*EU politicians*” (*SCF*, March 25, 2019); these references were made in connection with not only the Turkey-EU relations and the authoritarian tendencies of the Turkish regime but also the defence of the GM. *SCF* used the EP, for example, as a reference in its headlines twice out of a total of six relevant articles – when praising the GM schools in Pakistan and when criticising the legal insufficiency in Turkey. A link between a politician and the EU was achieved, for instance, by the headline “*EU’s Hahn*” (*TM*, March 15, 2019).

The distancing, objectivising support the GM lent to the AKP during the alliance times enabled the GM to quickly become a staunch critic of the AKP governance based on the continuum of the pro-democratic frame. Even though the nature of the relationship changed as the GM and the AKP went from being allies to enemies (MARTIN 2020), the democratisation frame was used to promote the GM’s position in the West; the movement defined itself as a democratising pro-Western/European force and its “enemies” as those who opposed the pro-democratic and pro-Western/European direction of the country.

## TURKISH ISLAMISM AS A THREAT TO EUROPE

The second frame defined the EU-Turkey relations in terms of the Islamic threat the current Turkish regime presented to Europe. Establishing their legitimacy as the “good Muslims,” especially in some liberal circles in the West, the GM continued with its intercultural and interfaith activities in the post-2016 era, emphasising “good Islam” as part of the Turkish culture. While the AKP, including Erdoğan, was previously described as a party for secular, moderate, democratic Muslims, and as a Muslim version of Christian democratic parties (the AKP received observer status with the European People’s Party in 2005), they platforms claimed that, under the current regime, Turkey was becoming a radical Islamist force. They linked Erdoğan’s anti-western rhetoric and the neo-Ottoman tendencies in the



AKP foreign policy to his wish to lead the Muslim world (with the help of the Muslim Brotherhood, to fulfil his “*caliphate dream*” by 2023 [NM, January 21, 2019]), which would be achieved by supporting terrorism, jihadists and sharia. The row with the GM was included in this frame along the same lines; NM, for instance, argued that the Turkish government persecuted its followers because the GM media disclosed that Erdoğan’s regime was “*aiding and abetting armed jihadist groups*” (January 14, 2019). He and the AKP were, thus, presented as a radical Islamist threat to Europe.

The Islamism frame was most visible in AN and NM; they claimed that Erdoğan’s Islamism was a tool of his foreign policy, and that he was trying to establish a Turkish “*hegemony by funding organizations and mosques around the world*” (AN, January 12, 2019). While NM distinguished between the “good” (democratising, pro-European) and the “bad” (Erdoğan’s, anti-western) Turkey within the democratisation frame, it also promoted the “good versus bad Muslims” dichotomy in the Islamism frame, defining Erdoğan and his clique as “*fake*” Muslims when arguing “*Erdoğan’s leadership has practically nothing to do with fundamental Islamic values*” (January 21, 2019).

NM (March 18, 2019) also warned against the Erdoğan-induced radicalisation of the Turkish diaspora in Europe, to which he exported “*poisonous political Islamist rhetoric*” (NM, January 21, 2019). NM claimed that the Turkish government was involved in the support of jihad in Syria and the spread of Islamist terrorism to Europe through the Muslim diaspora and its radicalisation. It identified the Turkish religious authority, Diyanet, and its German branch DITIB, as sources of jihadist policies towards Europe in Turkey. NM requested that the EU address the problem and thus become “*more effective in neutralizing Erdoğan’s looming threat over diaspora groups.*” NM avoided defining the GM as a religious movement (a term used by AN), calling it a “*civic group*” instead, possibly to downplay its Islamic element.

AN (January 12, 2019) claimed that Turkey was interfering “*in the religious lives of immigrants preventing their integration*” and associated the reversal of Erdoğan’s pro-European policies with his Islamism; AN (March 11, 2019) blamed Erdoğan’s loss of appetite for the EU bid on the 2005 decision of the ECHR to “*uphold the French ban on Muslim face veils*” but also distinguished between the good and bad Turkey/Muslims by reporting how Muslims previously living in Europe had moved to Turkey, where they

were better received and enjoyed cultural similarities. In these instances, Turkey and Turks are depicted as “good,” while it is argued that the problem for Europe is the political Islamism of the current Turkish regime.

Due to the Turkish regime’s aims to influence Europe’s Muslims, the Turkey-EU security and migration cooperation plans were questioned in the platforms. *AN* (March 12, 2019) called the counter-terrorism cooperation between the EU and Turkey “*ludicrous*” because Turkey was “*widely reported to be one of the privileged nests of the Islamic State.*” It also warned against the refugee deal because Europe faced “the inflow of Turkish refugees,” including members of the GM, fleeing Turkish oppression. *AN*, *NM* and *TM* highlighted that Turkey used the refugee deal to blackmail Europe and turned it into a security threat, linking it with both internal and external threats to Europe’s safety and stability. *NM* (January 14, 2019) argued that Turkey was “*forcing migrants to European borders*”, undermining the integration of the Turkish diaspora and contributing to the rise of far-right parties. Erdoğan/the AKP’s Turkey was presented as a direct and indirect threat to Europe and the West due to its radical Islamism.

*NM* represented the most vocal anti-Erdoğan and pro-GM platform of the four, using episodic presentations, drama and sensationalism with expressive and emotional language. Its reporting frequently consisted of issue stories focusing on one topic (PAN – KOSICKI 1993). These did not reflect on current EU-Turkey developments and used extensive speculative documents and claims. For instance, they described Erdoğan’s past as an “*Islamic Raider*” (*NM*, January 17, 2019). They implied that Erdoğan and his family had jihadist roots, and argued that he supported terrorism, which they based on Erdoğan’s speech in March 2019, where he referred to the Ottoman Empire stretching from Vienna to East Turkistan (currently the region of Xinjiang in China).

All four platforms used strong headlines to draw attention to the claimed Islamic militancy of the Turkish regime (they included the words “*jihadist*,”<sup>8</sup> “*radical*,” “*violence*,” “*Islamism*,” “*caliphate*,” and “*abduct*”) and linked its rising Islamic radicalism (just like the democratic backsliding above) to Erdoğan. In the 16 analysed *NM* articles, Erdoğan’s name was in 6 headlines, where he was associated with purging intelligence service officials, helping a “*drug runner*” (January 25, 2019), having a “*mafia leader*

*ally*" (February 5, 2019), and promoting "*violence and radicalism*" (March 18, 2019). The headlines were also used as a red herring when they did not match the actual content of the article, such as in the case of an article mostly describing long queues at the fruit and vegetable stands in Turkey but with the title "*Erdoğan says EU not taking Turkey into the bloc because it is Muslim*" (TM, February 16, 2019).

The threat of militant Islam served as the dominant symbol, using the existing fear of Islamic terrorism and the already existing view of Erdoğan as an Islamist in Europe to undermine the credibility of the Turkish regime. Erdoğan was the villain, and the European public and Muslim minorities were the victims. The problem for the EU and the West at large was not Turkey or Islam per se, but Erdoğan and his political Islam.

## DISCUSSION

The analysis of the Europe-related articles in the given period (January – March 2019) revealed two key frames which the four platforms shared: 1) Erdoğan/the AKP's failure to proceed with democratisation and reversing the trend; 2) Erdoğan/the AKP's political Islamism as a threat to Europe and the West. These frames of democratisation and Islamism developed in the context of the post-2016 coup developments in Turkey and built on the republican narrative of Turkish identity, which was based on the policies of modernisation, westernisation, and laicism/secularisation.

The democratisation frame argued that Erdoğan and the AKP opposed and denied European values, while the Islamism frame labelled him a threat to Europe's internal (Muslim communities, political extremism) and external (migration) security. Both frames identified Erdoğan as the cause of Turkey drifting away from the EU accession goal and promoted the idea that the EU should adopt a tough stance on Turkey, should not make any deals with the regime and should halt/end the negotiations. The platforms used the context of the EP's Foreign Committee recommendation to formally suspend the negotiations with Turkey to validate their demands to end the negotiations until the government in Turkey changes; the platforms appealed to the rationality of the EP's decision.

TABLE 1: THE FRAME MATRIX FOR TURKEY AND TURKEY-EU RELATIONS

Frame	Reasoning devices					Framing devices
	Definition of the situation	Causes	Consequences	Possible solutions	Moral values	Metaphors, catchphrases and lexical choices
Democratisation	De-democratisation of Turkey and a staged coup to bring Turkey closer to Russia and further away from the West	The AKP/ Erdoğan used the EU to assume unlimited power but did not internalise the European values; the EU was too benevolent	Violation of human rights, one-man rule, persecution of the opposition	Halt or end the accession negotiations until the democratisation process restarts, change the regime	Rejecting democracy in favour of power	disqualified ex-democracy, tyrannical and unpredictable regime, sultanate  arrogant monster, populist colossus, dictator  autocratic, brutal, quashing dissent  pathetic 'wait-and-see' policy, appeasement  engineered political fiasco, witch hunt
Islamism	Erdoğan has neo-Ottoman ambitions, and wishes to lead all Muslims and establish a Turkish hegemony in the Muslim world	The Turkish regime does not follow the basic values of Islam; they are 'bad' Muslims	Security threat – radicalisation of the Turkish diaspora, preventing integration, support of terrorism; Turkey's policy generates refugee flows, and contributes to the rise of far-right parties in Europe	End the EU refugee deal, control the links to the Turkish diaspora	Rejecting secularism, tolerance and liberalism	caliphate, Jihad, radicalism, violence  fake Muslims, Islamic raider  looming threat, privileged nest of the Islamic State  Mafia, drug-runner

Using the two frames, the platforms distinguished between the “good” and “bad” Turkey, which allowed them to avoid fatalism regarding the future of the EU-Turkey relations and continue with the pro-Western narrative of the movement, which placed Turkey in the Western world. The Islamism frame worked with the post-9/11 “good versus bad” Muslim narrative (MAMDANI 2002); the Gülenists were presented as the “good Muslims,” and the AKP and Erdoğan as the “bad Muslims,” which was extended to

the “good versus bad” Turks in the democratisation frame; “good Turks” representing the Turkish opposition to Erdoğan were able to integrate into the European society, and his supporters were the “bad Turks,” who are unable to integrate into the European society.

The platforms fed into the already existing images of the villain (Erdoğan), adding the dimension of the victim (GM). *NM*, *SCF*, and *TM* specifically focused on the victim/villain relationship between the AKP and the GM, defining the GM<sup>9</sup> as a civil group which promoted democracy and Western values and which was punished by the regime for this. The removal of the villain would rectify the injustice incurred. It fit with the collective action frames identified by Gamson (QUOTED IN WICKS 2017); the purges and exile were an unjust punishment (injustice), which could be remedied if the negotiations were halted (agency) until Erdoğan (the identified specific adversary) was removed. The amplified victimisation confirmed the presence of the injustice frame, which is common among social movements (BENFORD – SNOW 2000).

Since the 1993 Copenhagen criteria defined the prerequisites of EU candidate countries as including not only a market economy but also democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights, the self-perception of the EU as a “democratic club” rose in importance. The rapid de-Europeanisation of Turkey, Erdoğan’s populist Islamism and the persecution of the GM by the Turkish regime created new resources, which could be strategically used. The impact of the de-democratisation on the support for the Turkish accession among the European public has been confirmed by opinion polls<sup>10</sup> and was confirmed to be “*a relatively strong driver*” (LINDGAARD 2018). The European public is also very concerned about Muslim radicalism – a report published by the European Council on Foreign Relations (KRASDEV – LEONARD – DENNISON 2019) showed that it was the most threatening image to Europeans and was present not only among anti-EU and extreme right but also pro-European mainstream parties. Other surveys confirmed these findings (BAYRAKLI – HAFEZ 2019).

Framing the EU-Turkey relations by democratisation and Islamism, the GM wished to support and develop a favourable hegemonic discourse (CARRAGEE – ROEFS 2004) over what had happened in Turkey. The negative attitude of most EU member states and the European public to the current

Turkish regime provided the material reality against which the platforms constituted their anti-Erdoğan discourse. The slide away from democracy was empirically observable just like the promotion of the Islamic agenda in Turkey, making both frames credible and legitimate because they confirmed and did not challenge the accepted European worldview regarding the current Turkish regime. They were “congruent with the most common audience schemata” (ENTMAN 1993: 56). Resonating with the “larger cultural themes” gave both frames a “natural advantage”, increasing their appeal because they appeared to the public as “natural and familiar” (GAMSON – MODIGLIANI 1989).

The GM promoted a change in the EU policy towards Turkey (ending the accession negotiations) as an opportunity which the present moment offered, and emphasised “the risks of inaction” (GAMSON – MEYER 1996: 286); if the EU did not act, the situation would progressively worsen. They used moral statements to demonstrate that the change would produce more fairness and better policies. They identified the GM as a victim which stood up against a powerful oppressor, the Turkish regime. The reader is expected to “sympathize with the weakest side” (BELMONTE – PORTO 2020: 63), which suffered because it defended the values it shared with the audience. They worked with what Ahmad (2020: 16) called the “most enduring myth of the Cold War era”, i.e., reducing complex problems to a “single, external, collectivised enemy ‘Other’”. The GM presented itself to the European public as part of “us” (the in-group), which the audience perceives in a more favourable light and as superior to the “other” (the Turkish regime as the out-group) (BERBERS ET AL. 2016). As the international level remained the only arena for an exiled group, it framed the Turkish regime in a way that made the EU an ally in promoting its domestic demands. As Berkowitz and Mugge (2014) found in the case of the Kurdish transnational diaspora, which was also securitised by the Turkish government, we similarly observed that the GM turned to the EU transnational political space because unlike in the domestic context, in this space it was possible for the GM to get access to institutions that seemed favourably inclined to their aims.

Framing the Turkish regime as a threat to democracy and secularism increases the saliency and urgency of the issue, and thus, it attracts the attention of other journalists. Journalists often rely on sources, including other media (LEWIS ET AL. 2008; DAVIES 2008; BELMONTE – PORTO 2020; IROM ET AL. 2021),

especially for complex problems; given the complexity of the Turkish environment, and the structure of the media market in Turkey, including the widespread violation of media freedom and the limited presence of foreign correspondents in Turkey (TASTEKIN 2019), European journalists are looking for information that would present a counterview to the official Turkish views (KILIS 2019). The pro-GM media provide the information they are looking for. Presenting their work as independent journalism (avoiding any identification with the GM), referring to key policymakers to validate their reporting perspective (LAWRENCE 2010: 270) and redefining themselves as Turkish “dissidents” increases their credibility and legitimacy as sources of information about Turkey.

The GM-linked platforms tried to evoke the feeling that they presented an objective and fair view reinforcing authority and legitimacy (PAN-KOSICKI 1993); openly taking sides in the conflict would lower their chances of influencing public opinion – they risked that expertise would “*be quickly and easily interpreted by the public through partisan lenses*” (NISBET 2010: 45). As access to media is not equal, the use of their own/favourable media for validating their frames might be crucial (SPLENDORE 2020) for affecting the European discourse so that it would be in favour of their strategic framing of the situation in their home country, and so that Europe would react in the desired way.

The analysis showed that both aspects of frame resonance, that is, credibility (frame consistency, credibility of the frame articulators and empirical credibility) and salience (promoting values close to the values of the target audience and their everyday experience, and resonance with the cultural narrations of the target audience), need to be addressed for social movements to successfully employ the discursive opportunity provided by an internationalising of their domestic power struggle with a potent antagonist. It allows them to provide information to policy makers, which presents a potentially powerful means of affecting policy. The potential of the discursive opportunity increases with a direct involvement in the media market, which confirms the previous findings that media are a crucial resource for social movements at the European level because policymakers are sensitive to the public opinion that is formed based on the media frames (PRINCEN – KERREMANS 2008).

## CONCLUSION

As the Gülen movement, once the most influential religious/social group in Turkey (CF. TURAM 2007), has been silenced in the post-2016 Turkey due to the massive purges against its followers, the European arena has become an important factor in the movement's battle against its former allies, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP). The know-how the GM acquired when building its media empire in Turkey and its pool of professionals have the potential to be applied in its endeavours abroad. It does not have enough resources to engage in the national debates across the EU but it has utilised the online media and its links and skills to expand its online advocacy and recreate the "Turkish reality" for the European public.

While scholars have studied how transnational issue networks tried to persuade and pressure state and non-state actors in the international arena both online and in real-world politics (KECK – SIKKINK 1998; PRICE 1998; CARPENTER – JOSE 2012; BELMONTE – PORTO 2020; SPLENDORE 2020), the GM represents a similar, yet different case. It has entered the international arena to promote its economic interests and to protect its position in the insecure domestic context, whether the opponents were the Kemalist elites (in the past) or the AKP government (today). For that purpose, it utilised the established international norms and values. The transition from voluntary to involuntary exile due to the changed relationship with the ruling party presented a challenge to the movement's legitimacy. Oppression from a government "*facilitated movement development*" and the repression served as a "*fortifying myth*" (SUH 2001: 450). As it never openly endorsed the AKP, it used the continuum of the democracy and Islamism frames to argue that, just as the EU, it had been "tricked" by the regime.

Learning the context, motivations and tools contributes to our understanding of social movement discourses in a foreign arena. It demonstrates how reality is created and promoted based on the mediated meaning of particular actions. Using framing analysis allows us to better comprehend and explain social movement dynamics, namely how social movements assess and approach political opportunities. The study thus contributes to our knowledge of internationalised domestic conflicts and how a social movement can utilise international discourse to gain and preserve its legitimacy and persuade international state and non-state actors to act in its interest.



Here the aim was not to assess the impact of the movement on European policy but to assess the process of trying to influence it through cultural framing. This approach recognises that social movements react differently to circumstances, and events can have different effects on the movement. The EU level has limitations for social movements; that discussion is outside the scope of this paper but it is clearer that as the importance of Brussels increases in European politics and politics in the neighbourhood, the engagement of local social movements with the EU level and in the EU capitals is often perceived favourably by the movements. The next step would be to extend the analysis to a longer time frame to test the findings of this time-limited analysis and include the GM's academic and dialogue centres and think tank activities in Europe.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 For the treatment of the case in the GM-affiliated media, see Hendrick 2013; Nocera 2015; and Cagaptay 2020. The individuals convicted in the Ergenekon and Balyoz trials were released from prison in 2014 based on evidence that the cases were fabricated, and the GM played a crucial role in bringing them to court, which the GM denies (Tee 2016).
- 2 While *Zaman* quickly muted the criticism, *TZ* continued with the critical tone, which was indicative of the diverging contents of the English and Turkish versions of the paper.
- 3 For more, see Tee 2018.
- 4 Defined by the year of establishment and the number of unique visitors on their websites and their social media presence. By March 2020, the *AN* website had 1 million unique visitors, *TM* 13.6 thousand, *NM* 8.4 thousand and *SCF* 5 thousand. The data were collected from the website <https://www.semrush.com>. The *AN* Twitter account had 27 thousand followers, *NM* 11 thousand, *SCF* 16 thousand and *TM* 230 thousand followers. The *AN* Facebook account had 117 thousand likes, *NM* 932 likes, *SCF* 2 thousand likes and *TM* 11 thousand likes. For *AN*, only the English version data were measured.
- 5 The editor-in-chief of *AN* is Yavuz Baydar, a former columnist at *TZ* and the newspaper *Bugün*, which was owned by the Koza-Ipek Media Group, which was linked to the GM. After *Bugün* was taken over by the government and Baydar was removed from office, he began a new daily, where he worked with Ergün Babahan, who formerly wrote for *TZ* and *Millet*, another newspaper of the Koza-Ipek group, and is currently the editor of the Turkish language version of *AN*. A detailed account of the take-over of *Bugün* was published in *TZ* and is still available on [hizmetnews.com](http://hizmetnews.com), which archives several articles that were written by Babahan and Baydar for the GM-linked media in the past (the Turkish government banned and erased their content). They wrote pieces where they praised the GM; Babahan complimented Gülen as a preacher and celebrated the GM's presence in the USA (*Hizmet News*, October 9, 2011; *Hizmet News*, November 23, 2011); Baydar called the GM schools "arguably the best [Turkish] activity" (*Hizmet News*, April 10, 2014) and wrote a column stating, "For a day and beyond, one felt that Gülen's vision was within reach – possible indeed" (*Hizmet News*, May 19, 2013). İlhan Tamir, the editor of the English version of *AN*, was also associated with the GM (see, e.g., Berlinski 2012). The other platforms can be linked to the GM through their staff as well. The editor-in-chief of *TM* is the former editor-in-chief of the GM magazine *Puff*. Its columnists include Ekrem Dumanlı, the former editor-in-chief of *Zaman* and the author of a book entitled *Time to Talk. An Exclusive Interview with Fethullah Gülen*, which was published in 2015; and Abdullah Bozkurt, a former Ankara bureau chief for *TZ*, who is also the president

- of the SCF and an executive director of the Nordic Research Monitoring Network, which runs the NM.
- 6 Three interviews were conducted in March 2019 during a field trip to Turkey. All the interviewees worked for media not affiliated with the Turkish government and wished to stay anonymous. One of them said, regarding AN specifically: "Unfortunately since the Gülen movement is so secretive[...], it is quite hard to get solid evidence that it is connected. But the fact that Baydar and Tanır are leading the news portal and their publication line favours defending the Gülen movement in the news, [makes it sound] like it is connected. They have hired people who lost their jobs after Zaman, Birgün, Samanyolu, etc. were taken over and shut down... same crews mostly... various freelance journalists and some young academics who worked for them briefly, were all saying that Ahval pays 5–6 times more than the market prices so they were tempted to work for them, despite the obvious links [to the GM] one can see at the management level" (Whatsapp communication with the author, July 17, 2019).
- 7 It was not possible to establish the total number of all articles published on all four platforms between 1 January and 31 March 2019 to determine the ratio of all EU-Turkey-related articles.
- 8 Of all four platforms NM made the most frequent references to "jihad," which was in various forms mentioned 67 times during the three-month period (compared with 8 times in TM, 5 times in AN, and 0 times in SCF).
- 9 TM previously compared the GM purges to the oppression of "the modern day's[sic] Jews of Nazi Germany and black Africans of the apartheid regime in South Africa" (December 8, 2018).
- 10 Lindgaard (2018), who analysed the trends of the European public opinion on Turkey's EU accession from 1996 to 2016, showed that there was a relatively stable support for it (36% in 1996 to 31% in 2010), and a rising number of those who opposed it (44% in 1996 and 59% in 2010) but a sharp decline in the support after the 2013 Gezi Park protests (7% for it and 76% against it in 2016). He also showed that the member states' governments were more in favour of it than the general public, with the concerns for democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights and liberal values playing an increasingly important role for the general public.

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