



How Press Freedom Disappeared **in Turkey**?

Legal Repression and Digital Censorship

v2. updated



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1. Introduction

Since 2016, the Erdoğan regime has systematically targeted journalists and critics in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt, introducing a widespread and sustained crackdown on dissent. In 2020, Türkiye occupied the 154th position out of 180 evaluated nation-states in the global media freedom index compiled by Reporters Without Borders (“RSF”). The trajectory of decline has continued over years, with the hostile environment in Türkiye exacerbating, as 515 journalists were prosecuted in the first half of 2024 alone. Such a hostile environment was also reflected in Türkiye’s ranking, with the country descending to the 158th position in 2024 according to the RSF global press freedom assessment.

The situation appears to be deteriorating further in 2025, particularly in light of the unrest sparked by the arrest of Ekrem İmamoğlu, the principal figure of political opposition to the Erdoğan regime. Given the political turmoil and the rapid pace of arrests among demonstrators, it is difficult to determine the exact number of journalists; however, it is certain that they are included in the reported total of 1,879 arrests as of late March, according to data provided by Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya.

As of now, roughly 90% of Türkiye’s media is under government influence, making digital communication the primary source of information between the public and independent journalists. Consequently, the digital landscape and journalists operating on these platforms have been relentlessly targeted by the government in various forms. Although the deterioration of freedom of speech and the rights of journalists in Türkiye is a broad topic, this report focuses on providing information and real-life examples of the persistent challenges journalists face, with particular emphasis on the digital landscape.

2. Legal Attacks on Journalism

The Rise of Digital Media and Government Scrutiny: Violation of personal rights

Social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook have become central avenues for news access, according to research published in 2023 by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism. As a crucial conduit for independent journalism, the digital sphere has increasingly captured the attention of Erdoğan's regime. The year 2023 holds particular significance, especially in light of the presidential elections held in May. A total of 219,059 URLs were blocked, including 14,680 news articles, 197,907 domains, 5,641 social media posts, 743 social media accounts, and 38 Google business reviews. This number represents a significant increase compared to the 2022 data, which showed that access restrictions affected at least 40,536 URLs, including 35,066 domain names, 3,196 news articles, 2,090 social media posts, and 184 social media accounts.

"Violation of personal rights" is predominantly invoked for blocking or removing content. In 2022, 3,191 out of 3,196 blocked news articles were removed due to alleged violations of personal rights. In 2023, this number significantly increased, with 14,332 out of 14,680 blocked news articles removed for the same reason. Although personal rights are protected under Article 24 of the Turkish Civil Code, there is no clear definition of what constitutes personal rights, allowing for a broad level of flexibility and a wide margin of appreciation in protecting the rights of individuals.

Under Turkish law, personal rights are considered to include various aspects, such as life, health, bodily integrity, dignity (reputation), privacy, name, image, and voice. Considering this broad scope of interpretation, personal rights are construed as being safeguarded by the Constitution, in addition to other provisions derived from various legal instruments. According to the Court of Cassation, the scope of personal rights can be determined based on the ordinary course of life, established value judgments, and life experience.

However, this broad interpretation can easily be exploited to benefit the Erdoğan regime. In 2023, corruption and irregularities were the most common topics among the blocked news articles, accounting for 5,881, making them the leading category of blocked content. A notable example of this occurred in June 2023, when the Istanbul Anatolian 5th Criminal Judgeship of Peace issued an order to block access to 93 websites for

distributing a Reuters article about a situation in the U.S. and Sweden involving Bilal Erdoğan. The block applied to websites that directly shared, summarized, or quoted parts of the article, on the grounds of “violation of personal rights” and for being “far from reality, unconfirmed, and far from goodwill.” The block affected all major international news outlets, including Voice of America, Euronews, MSN, and almost all independent news outlets in Türkiye, along with the original version from Reuters.

The article states that U.S. and Swedish anti-corruption authorities were reviewing a complaint, which claimed that the Swedish branch of a U.S. company had pledged millions of dollars in kickbacks in exchange for assistance from a son of Erdoğan to secure a dominant market position in Türkiye (*source cited for this sentence*). The article indicates that communications and business documents, which outlined this plan, were reviewed by Reuters and another individual familiar with the matter. Reuters also later reported that the branch’s project was completely abandoned in Türkiye due to “potentially concerning conduct” in Türkiye and that no bribery had occurred in that case. The outlet emphasized that the targeted article was prepared in accordance with its Trust Principles and its commitment to publishing fair and accurate reporting in the global public interest.

There are many cases where personal rights and freedom of press clash, and the Court of Cassation outlines four criteria to strike a balance when personal freedoms conflict with freedom of the press: apparent reality, public benefit and social interest, actuality, and the balance between essence and form. In addressing the above issue, the concepts of apparent reality and the balance between essence and form are crucial to understanding.

Apparent reality means that news reports should reflect facts that are apparent at the time of reporting, not the absolute truth. The perception of the average reader is considered the decisive criterion in the assessment of apparent reality. The press cannot be held responsible for reporting events that appear correct at the time but later turn out to be untrue. When the apparent reality rule is applied to Reuters, it is difficult to conclude that it breached journalistic standards. The Reuters report only reflected the facts at the time, based on certain evidence, namely that a complaint had been made to the U.S. and Swedish authorities about the Swedish branch of a company, concerning corruption involving a son of Erdoğan, and that this complaint was under review.

The balance between essence and form implies that there should be compatibility between reported content and the manner in which it is presented. This means that there

should be intellectual coherence between the style of the report and its content, with a clear distinction maintained between criticism and insult. Criticism may be harsh, but it should not cross the line into insult. The language used in the Reuters report is plain and straightforward, conveying the current findings with an objective tone, free of any criticism. Therefore, there is no deviation from journalistic standards regarding the balance between essence and form, and it is difficult to conclude a lack of goodwill.

To conclude, this situation is an indicator of how courts tend to approach violations of personal rights in political cases, often failing to establish an appropriate balance for a free press.

Judicial Corruption and Censorship within Courts

There are also other issues within the judiciary that undermine press freedom, including instances of bias and bribery. An instance of this occurred in October 2023, when the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor sent a letter to the Council of Judges regarding decisions by Istanbul Anatolian 4th Criminal Judgeship of Peace to block and remove content in exchange for money. The letter also contained accusations against the president of the Istanbul Judicial Commission concerning this matter. It is both ironic and tragic that a piece of content shared by a journalist, which exposed this corruption scandal within the judiciary related to decisions on blocking and removing content — specifically involving the Istanbul Anatolian 4th Criminal Judgeship of Peace — was itself blocked and removed by a judge from that same court in October 2023, following a complaint filed by the president of the Istanbul Judicial Commission who was mentioned in the content. All content related to this article, including news articles and social media posts, was blocked. Consequently, all types of coverage related to this matter were affected, and access to 172 separate reports was blocked on the basis of “violation of personal rights” of the president of the Istanbul Judicial Commission. Furthermore, access to another report documenting decisions made by the Istanbul Anatolian 4th Criminal Judgeship of Peace to block and remove content was also blocked and removed.

This chain of events demonstrates an abuse of power within the judiciary, which becomes especially harmful given the broad interpretation of what constitutes a violation of personal rights. Such actions threaten both the integrity of the judicial system and the freedom of the press, with recent developments indicating growing concerns in this regard.

2**Legal
Attacks on
Journalism**

Law No. 5651 and the Social Media Law

One such development concerns Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of Broadcasting on the Internet and the Prevention of Crimes Committed through Internet Broadcasting (commonly referred to as the “Social Media Law”), which imposes both obligations and liabilities on various internet actors, with the aim of preventing crimes on the internet. The now-repealed Article 9(1) allowed right holders to directly submit their requests to the Penal Judgeships of Peace, claiming a “violation of personal rights.” The now-repealed Article 9(3) provided that a judge of the Penal Judgeships of Peace could order the blocking or removal of content upon determining a violation of personal rights. The Constitutional Court repealed Article 9(1) and Article 9(3), citing the vague scope of these provisions, which granted Penal Judgeships of Peace excessive discretion and made it almost impossible to challenge their decisions. Therefore, this was found to be in breach of the freedom of fundamental rights under Article 13, the freedom of expression and dissemination of thought under Article 26, and the freedom of the press under Article 28 of the Constitution.

However, Article 8/A(1) of Law No. 5651 states that content can be removed on the basis of other reasons such as “protection of national security and public order” and “prevention of crimes being committed.” The Penal Judgeships of Peace have persisted in imposing online censorship based on other reasons such as “national security.” In 2024, these courts implemented restrictions on access to at least 3,136 news articles and journalistic materials on similar grounds.

Therefore, although certain measures have been taken by the Constitutional Court against violations of personal rights, the issue of vague concepts and the broad discretion they grant to judges remains a problem. This problem is not limited to personal rights cases but also appears in recent amendments to the penal code related to regulating online content and the dissemination of false information.

New Penal Code Provision: Article 217/A(1)

In October 2022, just ahead of the presidential elections in May 2023, the Turkish Penal Code was amended to include a new provision, Article 217/A(1), which provides:

“Any person who publicly disseminates false information concerning the internal and external security, public order and public health of the country with the sole intention of

creating anxiety, fear or panic among the public, and in a manner likely to disturb public peace, shall be sentenced to imprisonment from one year to three years.”

The provision fails to provide a precise definition of “false information,” nor does it offer a comprehensive explanation of what constitutes a threat to the country’s internal and external security, public order, or public health. Given the lack of clarity surrounding certain concepts within the article, there is considerable scope for actions and information to fall under these vague notions. Moreover, the law does not provide a clear definition of what might provoke anxiety or induce fear within the public. Additionally, this ambiguity is compounded by the fact that the article does not distinguish between the content creator and those who contribute to its dissemination, such as by liking or sharing. The Venice Commission, the advisory body to the Council of Europe, also criticized the vague wording of the provision, urging that its scope be clearly defined. Due to Türkiye’s lack of the rule of law, the interpretation of false information has been shaped to favor the Erdoğan regime and the ruling political party, thereby protecting their political interests at the expense of the opposition.

Another concern is the severity of the penalty, which entails imprisonment for a duration ranging from one to three years. Even large monetary penalties in civil proceedings can be sufficient to violate Article 10 of the ECHR, the right to freedom of expression, when the amount of such penalties is disproportionate to the income of the applicant and when there is no evidentiary support for the person who is being defamed. This reinforces the principle that criminal law should serve as *ultima ratio*—a last resort, a concept that is clearly not upheld for journalists in Türkiye. In 2024, a total of 4,590 individuals were investigated, including 33 arrests, some involving journalists, all under Article 217/A over a period of just two years.

There are also other legal instruments and provisions in Türkiye to hold journalists accountable. These primarily include provisions of the Turkish Penal Code such Article 125, which prescribe penalties for insult, Article 216 which criminalizes public call to hatred, hostility, degradation, Article 217 which prohibits public call to disobey the law, Article 267 which penalizes defamation, Article 299 which provides special protection against the President, Article 301 which criminalizes degradation of the Turkish nation, state, and state organs and institutions.

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Legal Attacks on Journalism

3. From Headlines to Headquarters: RTÜK and the Targeting of Media Outlets

RTÜK Licensing Demands on Independent Broadcasters

Oftentimes, it is not only the content or the journalist, but entire media outlets that are subjected to threats and pressure, usually targeted by regulatory bodies like the Radio and Television Supreme Council (“RTÜK”), which has imposed various measures against newspapers and radio stations.

This became especially evident in February 2022, when RTÜK requested Deutsche Welle, Voice of America and Euronews — among the few independent news outlets still operating in Türkiye — to obtain a broadcasting license. They were given 72 hours to apply for the licenses, but none of them complied. In April 2022, the request for Euronews was withdrawn after it altered the content that had initially triggered the broadcasting license requirement. Deutsche Welle and Voice of America continued to reject these requests, with Deutsche Welle stressing that the demand concerned not formal broadcasting requirements but rather an interference with journalistic content itself. Ultimately, RTÜK took this matter to the Ankara 1st Criminal Judgeship of Peace, which blocked access to both news sites on June 30, 2022.

Targeting Social Media and Street Interviews

RTÜK’s effort to issue broadcast licenses and maintain control is persistent, even targeting street interviews. On August 2, 2024, the Turkish government blocked access to Instagram, citing the platform’s failure to comply with national regulations and its disregard for local cultural norms and public sensitivities. This sparked widespread disapproval within society, as Türkiye ranks 5th globally in Instagram usage, making the platform highly influential for both social interactions and online business operations. The ban was lifted after nine days, following an agreement between Instagram officials and Turkish authorities to cooperate. This situation led to some street interviews during which Dilruba Kayserilioğlu publicly voiced her disapproval of the ban. In her criticism, she openly stated, “This is wrong. The President cannot ban Instagram as he wishes,” and her remarks were broadcast on a YouTube channel.

This led to her immediate arrest for eighteen days, and she was charged with “inciting hatred and enmity among the public” and “insulting the president,” with prosecutors

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RTÜK and the Targeting of Media Outlets

requesting a prison sentence of up to four and a half years. Although her appeals against the charges of “inciting hatred and enmity” and “insulting the president” were rejected, the court released her while the case continued. In September 2024, she was sentenced to a suspended prison term of seven and a half months for “insulting the public,” meaning that while she was given a prison sentence, it would only be enforced if she committed any criminal offenses within the next five years. In addition to the political scrutiny surrounding such cases, RTÜK reiterated in early September 2024 that street interviews should be monitored to prevent slander and the spread of online misinformation. Many consider this statement to be an attempt to control and restrict independent media and public discourse.

Following these statements, RTÜK further asserted its authority through a series of concrete actions and regulatory interventions that exemplified its increasingly aggressive stance toward independent media, as demonstrated below.

RTÜK’s Targeting of Açık Radyo

In October 2024, Açık Radyo (“Open Radio”), one of the oldest radio stations in Türkiye, was targeted by the RTÜK, which revoked its broadcasting license just a month before its 30th anniversary on air. After a broadcast on April 24, 2024, during which their guest used the phrase “Armenian genocide,” the radio station was fined the equivalent of 7,500 euros and subjected to a five-day broadcast suspension. RTÜK justified the fine and the suspension on the grounds that Open Radio failed to interrupt the guest after they had used the phrase, which it deemed to be “inciting society to hatred and hostility or fostering feelings of hatred within society.”

The founder of the radio station, Ömer Madra, stated that they had appealed the fine while simultaneously complying with it in order to avoid further tension. He also explained that they were not informed of the specific dates of the suspension and that the electronic notice had not been provided due to software and technical issues. Although RTÜK’s text was included in an electronic notification, the section indicating the closure dates could not be accessed due to a technical malfunction in the electronic notification system. This issue stemmed from errors encountered in the National Electronic Notification System (“UETS”), a government entity responsible for sending notifications to individuals. Although there is no direct ban on digital content, this situation presents a unique case in which RTÜK punishes Open Radio for an error caused

by third parties in the communication system, an issue that should also be considered detrimental to the digital landscape in journalism.

Open Radio filed a lawsuit against the penalty decision before an Administrative Court, which led to a stay of execution of the penalty payment until RTÜK submitted its defense. RTÜK challenged the stay of execution order before a higher court; however, the court rejected the challenge. In October 2024, the Administrative Court re-evaluated the case and ultimately canceled the stay of execution of the penalty payment. Before Open Radio could file any objections to this decision, RTÜK immediately revoked their license to broadcast, without providing prior notice or a justification for the license cancellation.

Furthermore, there is a growing tendency within the judiciary to uphold RTÜK's authority and decisions. In early 2025, the Council of State, Türkiye's highest administrative court, dismissed a legal challenge against a regulation expanding RTÜK's powers. The court concluded that the expanded powers granted to RTÜK did not infringe upon freedom of expression and considered its authority to be exercised within lawful boundaries.

Authoritarian Control and the Role of Social Media

Such hostility in RTÜK's requirements and threats further exemplifies an authoritarian approach. At times, this approach escalates to an entirely different level, especially when social media platforms are targeted by other state actors.

Many widely used social media platforms are tightly controlled to suppress independent journalism, particularly during incidents that highlight the deficiencies of Erdoğan's regime, sometimes even at the devastating cost of citizens' lives. The earthquake that struck in February 2023 stands as a poignant and consequential example of this dynamic. Claiming to prevent the spread of "misinformation" about the earthquake, X was blocked on the third day of the disaster. As a result, rescue operations and relief efforts on X were blatantly disrupted for 12 hours, preventing survivors trapped under the rubble from sharing their locations, health conditions, and urgent needs. In March 2023, X started blocking and removing journalistic content that pointed out the inadequacy of post-earthquake relief efforts following a court order. Later, other journalistic content addressing these blockings and removals was also blocked, once again under a court order.

4. Ekrem İmamoğlu's Arrest and Digital-Media Crackdown

The Arrest and International Response

4 In March 2025, Türkiye's media freedom landscape faced a pivotal moment when Ekrem İmamoğlu, the Mayor of Istanbul and a prominent opposition figure, was arrested on 19 March on corruption and terrorism-related charges, prompting widespread controversy and protests. The episode sparked a torrent of disapproval, both within the nation and across the international community, drawing sharp criticism from European institutions, human rights organizations, and foreign governments, each signaling profound apprehension regarding the state of the rule of law and democratic principles in Türkiye.

As a case in point, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) issued a strong resolution on 9 April 2025 calling on the Turkish authorities to release İmamoğlu immediately and to drop "all unfounded charges" against him. The Assembly noted that his arrest, the revocation of his university degree and associated procedural steps "appear politically-motivated and an attempt to intimidate the opposition, obstruct its actions, stifle pluralism and limit freedom of political debate."

In response to these "worrying developments, which signify a retreat from democratic values and contravene the will of the Turkish people," PACE called upon the Turkish authorities to uphold fundamental democratic norms and human rights unequivocally. The Assembly urged full respect for freedoms of expression and assembly, alongside broader human rights protections in the context of the ongoing protests. It condemned any disproportionate use of force against demonstrators and demanded the immediate release of all individuals detained on unfounded charges, including journalists targeted for reporting on the demonstrations. PACE further stressed the imperative of safeguarding media independence to ensure the public's access to accurate information and underscored the necessity of guaranteeing fair and impartial trials for all detainees, in strict adherence to the rule of law.

Impact on Journalists and the Public Sphere

However, Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest seems to have reverberated far beyond a single individual, casting a long shadow over Türkiye's public sphere. In the tense aftermath,

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Ekrem İmamoğlu's Arrest and Digital Media Crackdown

journalists covering the protests found themselves swept into the legal crossfire, their detentions sending a chilling signal that dissenting voices would not be spared. What began as the targeting of a prominent opposition figure unfolded into a broader campaign of intimidation, where the silencing of one became a prelude to the suppression of many, threatening the very lifeblood of free expression and the flow of information.

Reports indicate that the protests ensuing from his detention resulted in the apprehension of over 1,100 individuals only within five days, including a significant number of journalists. The ordeal for journalists began almost immediately. Two journalists, Elif Bayburt of Etkin News Agency and Nisa Suda Demirel of Evrensel, were apprehended in dawn-raids in Istanbul while covering the protests, setting the stage for a sustained crackdown on investigative journalists. Numerous journalists found themselves prosecuted under Law No. 2911 on Meetings and Demonstrations, which criminalizes participation in or organisation of “unauthorized” rallies and marches. The use of this statute illustrates how conventional protest-related legislation, nominally aimed at regulating public assemblies, has been applied in ways that blur the boundary between legitimate journalism and participation in public dissent. Several journalists were detained on the grounds that their presence at protest sites, or their coverage of the demonstrations, constituted involvement in unlicensed public gatherings. These detentions underscore a troubling pattern in which legislation designed to govern public order is leveraged to suppress journalistic activity and inhibit independent reporting on politically sensitive events.

Use of Terrorism and Digital Laws Against Journalists

In addition to assembly-related prosecutions, authorities applied terrorism legislation against journalists, including Turkish Penal Code, Article 314(2) (‘membership of an armed organisation’) and provisions of the Anti-Terror Law, Article 7/2-2 on ‘dissemination of terrorist propaganda.’ A notable case is that of Swedish journalist Joakim Medin, who, while covering the protests following İmamoğlu’s detention, was arrested on charges under these statutes as well as for “insulting the president” Turkish Penal Code, Article 299. highlighting the combined use of assembly and terrorism laws to suppress independent reporting.

The practical effect of these overlapping legal measures is a profound chilling of digital journalism. Journalists reporting on protests are not only at risk for their physical

presence at events but also for documenting and sharing these events online, including through social media updates, livestreams, photographs, and investigative reports. By extending the reach of assembly laws to digital coverage, authorities effectively criminalize real-time reporting, turning routine journalistic activity into a potential legal liability.

When combined with terrorism-related statutes that explicitly criminalize “propaganda,” the framework further suppresses the online dissemination of information. Any critical reporting, commentary, or investigative work published digitally can be construed as illegal, subjecting journalists to arrest or prosecution. Together, these legal instruments create an environment of digital repression, where journalists are pressured to self-censor and the public’s access to timely, independent information is severely restricted.

Social Media Restrictions and Account Blocks

The authorities’ crackdown on protests following Ekrem İmamoğlu’s detention swiftly extended into the digital realm, targeting social media as one of the few remaining avenues for independent voices. Platforms where journalists and activists could previously share information and opinions with relative freedom became subject to stringent restrictions. Amid the mass demonstrations, authorities ordered social media and messaging services to block content related to the protests, aiming to curtail the dissemination of information.

The restrictions began at 7 a.m. local time on 19 March, coinciding with the arrests of the mayor and other individuals, and primarily affected Istanbul. Bandwidth throttling continued for 42 hours until 21 March, with no official explanation provided for the imposition or subsequent lifting of these measures. Under the Electronic Communications Law Law No. 5809, such restrictions may be enacted by the Information Technologies Authority (“BTK”) at the Presidency’s request in cases of urgency or threats to national security or public order, and are subject to judicial review within 24 hours.

In addition to broad network restrictions, the BTK issued hundreds of blocking orders targeting the social media accounts of journalists, media outlets, civil society organisations, and human rights defenders under Law No. 5651. Non-compliance by social media companies can result in substantial sanctions.

Many accounts on X (formerly Twitter) were reportedly blocked, prompting the platform to publicly challenge the orders. X stated that it had received multiple court orders to

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Ekrem İmamoğlu’s Arrest and Digital Media Crackdown

block over 700 accounts, including those of news organisations, journalists, and political figures. On 26 March, the platform filed an individual application with the Constitutional Court to contest a BTK order blocking 126 accounts, highlighting the legal pushback against these sweeping online restrictions.

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Ekrem İmamoğlu's Arrest and Digital Media Crackdown

Continued Intimidation of Investigative Journalists

Beyond the mass account blocks, Turkish authorities escalated their online crackdown by detaining dozens of individuals for content deemed “provocative” in relation to İmamoğlu’s detention. Reports indicate that at least 37 people were apprehended after law enforcement identified 261 social-media accounts allegedly posting material that could incite unrest, spread disinformation, or foment political dissent in the immediate aftermath of the mayor’s arrest.

Even months after the initial crackdown following Ekrem İmamoğlu’s detention in March 2025, arrests and pressure, especially targeting independent journalists in Türkiye shows no sign of abating. In early October 2025, authorities launched pre-dawn raids in Istanbul that resulted in the detention of two prominent investigative journalists, Timur Soykan of *BirGün* and Murat Ağirel of *Cumhuriyet*.

Although the prosecutor’s office stated that Timur Soykan and Murat Ağirel were arrested following a complaint from Mehmet Emin Goktug, the owner of Flash Haber TV, who is currently in jail pending trial on charges of money laundering and illegal sports betting, both journalists maintain that the true motive was political. According to prosecutors, Goktug alleged that Soykan and Ağirel had threatened and blackmailed him regarding the transfer and purchase of the channel; however, the journalists contend that they were targeted by the state because of their investigative reporting on the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.

Moreover, the media-watchdog RSF said the arrests were clearly linked to their questioning of the İmamoğlu case, suggesting the authorities aimed to identify their sources and suppress further investigation.

5. Fatih Altaylı's Arrest and Online Commentary Restrictions

In June 2025, prominent Turkish journalist and television host Fatih Altaylı was arrested after posting a video on his YouTube channel commenting on a recent survey indicating that 70 percent of the public opposed granting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan indefinite tenure. In the broadcast, Altaylı referenced historical instances in which Turkish rulers were deposed or executed once public support waned. Prosecutors interpreted these remarks as a threat to the President, leading to his detention on June 22, 2025 under Article 299(1) of the Turkish Penal Code, which criminalizes insults against the President and carries prison terms of one to four years. Because the comments were made publicly, the sentence could be increased by one-sixth under Art. 299(2). Altaylı remains in pre-trial detention and faces a potential minimum five-year sentence, with the next hearing scheduled for November 26, 2025.

Altaylı has denied any wrongdoing, insisting that his comments were historical references rather than threats. Legal experts and human rights organizations have criticized the arrest, framing it as an infringement on freedom of expression. The Istanbul Bar Association described the detention as unlawful and emphasized that political commentary of this nature should be protected. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has also called for Altaylı's release, warning that the case could intimidate other media figures into self-censorship.

Despite his detention, Altaylı continues to engage audiences through his YouTube channel with assistance from his legal team. The program, now titled "*Fatih Altaylı Cannot Comment*," features an empty chair representing his absence while his prison letters are read aloud by an assistant. This form of "prison journalism" has attracted significant domestic and international attention. PEN Berlin has also protested the arrest, stressing that thought and analysis cannot be criminalized.

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Fatih Altaylı's Arrest and Online Commentary Restrictions

6. Public Repression and Echoes of Fear: Political and Legal Pressure on TÜSİAD Executives

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Political and Legal Pressure on TÜSİAD Executives

There is an undeniable increase in self-censorship and a worsening chilling effect, given the general stance toward journalism and the hostile environment in Türkiye toward freedom of speech. Consequently, it is to be expected that the aim is not only to intimidate journalists but also to target the public defending free speech.

Recently, the Industry and Business Association (“TÜSİAD”), whose members account for 85 percent of Türkiye’s foreign trade and contribute 80 percent of corporate tax revenue, also came under scrutiny by the Turkish government. The president of TÜSİAD, Orhan Turan, and the chairman of the group’s advisory council, Ömer Aras, became subjects of political targeting. This targeting was a response to their recent criticism of the government’s economic policies and the ongoing legal actions against opposition figures including members of the press. During TÜSİAD’s general assembly in February 2025, both Orhan Turan and Ömer Aras expressed concerns that the ongoing judicial probes into opposition figures and journalists had sparked public concern and social insecurity while undermining democratic values. Their criticism also extended to the adverse impact these issues had on foreign investment in the country.

A prosecutor’s office launched an investigation into their remarks on the grounds of “attempting to influence a fair trial” and “publicly spreading misinformation.” Both were initially detained for questioning and appeared before prosecutors the following day. They were placed under certain judicial supervision, including an international travel ban for both individuals, and were eventually released.

This investigation itself led to a drop in Istanbul-listed stocks, in conformity with Orhan Turan’s and Ömer Aras’ statements at the TÜSİAD general assembly for which they were investigated. Following the investigation, Istanbul’s primary stock index dropped by approximately 0.5%, with analysts suggesting that such actions could further hinder foreign investment inflows. On March 7, 2025, prosecutors concluded their investigation into both individuals, requesting prison sentences of up to five and a half years. Their first hearing before a court was scheduled to be held on May 20, 2025.

During the hearing at the Istanbul 28th Criminal Court of First Instance, the judges decided to lift the international travel bans previously imposed on Orhan Turan and



Ömer Aras. The court also accepted their request to be excused from attending future sessions in person, acknowledging their compliance with judicial proceedings. Before adjourning, the panel set the date for the next hearing to 23 September 2025, indicating the continuation of the case against the two business leaders.

On 23 September 2025, the second hearing in the trial of Orhan Turan and Ömer Arif Aras took place. During the session, Turan emphasised that his remarks addressed concerns about legal predictability, while Aras stressed the inherent link between law, economic stability and investor confidence. Prosecutors reiterated their request for prison sentences of up to five years and six months for each individual, citing charges of “attempting to influence a fair trial” and “publicly disseminating misleading information.” The court did not issue a verdict at that point and adjourned the case to 20 January 2026.

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Political and Legal Pressure on TÜSİAD Executives

7. Eyes Abroad, Voices Silenced: Erdoğan's 2025 Assault on Turkish Journalism

Türkiye's ongoing crackdown on independent journalism is not limited to arrests, legal charges, and digital suppression; it extends into the very interactions between journalists and Erdoğan himself. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has repeatedly used public appearances and press conferences to signal that scrutiny of the government or questions about detained journalists and dissidents will not be tolerated. These moments, both subtle and overt, reveal how the Turkish leadership manages both domestic and international attention, blending deflection, intimidation, and moral framing to undermine the legitimacy of journalistic inquiry.

In late September 2025, reports indicated that during a return flight accompanying Erdoğan, journalists were required to have their questions vetted in advance, a practice critics described as a "stage managed press event." A pre-approved list of questions, along with designated journalists, was circulated before take off and later aligned with the transcript released by the Presidential Communications Directorate. By pre-selecting questions and limiting genuine impromptu interaction, the authorities ensured that only sanctioned narratives reached the public. This method of tightly controlling access effectively prevents probing or critical inquiries, signaling to journalists what is permissible and what is off limits, and fostering an environment of self censorship.

However, when journalists dare to stray from the state-approved narrative, the repercussions are swift and unmistakable. A striking example occurred during a joint press conference on 30 October 2025 with German Chancellor Friedrich Merz. When a journalist asked Erdoğan about the large-scale detentions of media professionals following Ekrem İmamoğlu's arrest, the president smiled, dismissed the query, and pivoted to an unrelated issue, specifically a football corruption investigation. His remark that "no one is untouchable under Turkish law" was presented almost rhetorically, but in context, it carried a chilling subtext: the rule of law, as applied to journalists, is firmly under the state's discretion. This episode highlights how Erdoğan exploits global geopolitical apathy to deflect accountability for domestic human-rights violations, projecting an image of confidence while leaving the fates of imprisoned journalists ambiguous and uncertain. The event demonstrated that when journalists do attempt to raise difficult questions without prior approval, they are publicly rebuked or deflected, reinforcing the boundaries of permissible reporting and highlighting the risks of challenging state narratives.



Taken together, these interactions reveal a deliberate pattern: the Erdoğan administration not only pursues structural measures to silence dissent through arrests, digital restrictions, and legal pressures, but also cultivates a performative culture of intimidation that targets journalistic questioning itself. By publicly rebuking reporters and deflecting accountability, Erdoğan strengthens the perception that independent scrutiny is both unwelcome and potentially dangerous. Such behavior undermines press freedom, erodes democratic norms, and signals to the global community that systemic censorship in Türkiye is not merely a series of isolated incidents, but a carefully orchestrated strategy to control narratives and suppress critical voices.

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8.2025: Press Freedom, Digital Control, and State Repression in Türkiye

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Systemic Digital Censorship

Turkey has significantly intensified its control over online spaces in 2025, demonstrating a systematic and sustained approach to digital regulation. Interior Minister Ali Yerlikaya reported that during the first four months of the year, authorities blocked over 27,300 social media accounts and nearly 7,000 URLs, framing the measures as necessary to safeguard national security and public order. The government highlighted concerns about online disinformation and the potential misuse of synthetic media technologies, portraying these interventions as crucial to preventing unrest. Since June 2023, more than 237,000 accounts flagged as containing “criminal content” have been restricted, illustrating a long-term strategy of monitoring and controlling digital communications. Cybercrime units within the police and gendarmerie operate continuously to identify and remove content deemed harmful.

Human rights organizations and digital-rights advocates have expressed alarm that these measures disproportionately affect journalists, opposition figures, and independent media outlets. The legal basis for the actions stems from Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of Internet Publications and the Fight Against Crimes Committed via Internet, which permits the government to remove content and block accounts. Critics note that the criteria for “criminal content” are vague, and appeals are limited, raising concerns that these interventions are used to suppress dissent rather than address genuine legal violations. High-profile figures impacted include Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, reinforcing suspicions that political motives play a key role. Many blocked accounts experience restricted visibility beyond Turkey, effectively curtailing the international reach of independent voices.

The government presents these restrictions as part of a broader effort to counter online threats, including scams, cybercrime, illegal gambling, and harmful content targeting minors. While authorities justify the measures as essential for public safety, organizations such as the Freedom of Expression Association (İFÖD) and EngelliWeb argue that they overreach, undermining freedom of expression and limiting independent reporting. The combination of account suspensions, URL blocks, and platform-level enforcement

reflects a deliberate effort to control information flows both domestically and globally, contributing to Turkey's continued decline in international press freedom rankings.

Broadcast Media Under RTÜK Scrutiny

In the first half of 2025, Türkiye's broadcast regulator RTÜK intensified its punitive measures against independent media, issuing at least 46 sanctions, 42 of which targeted outlets critical of the government. The cumulative fines imposed during this period approached 100 million Turkish liras (approximately 2 million Euros). These measures reflect a broader pattern of using administrative and legal tools to constrain journalistic freedom and limit media pluralism.

Among the most high-profile actions, TELE1 faced a five-day broadcast blackout from 31 August to 5 September, following remarks by editor-in-chief Merdan Yanardağ regarding the 2016 coup attempt. RTÜK claimed Yanardağ's comments, which labelled the coup as Islamist and implicated the ruling AKP, incited public hatred and division. Although a court temporarily suspended the ban in early August to allow an appeal, the suspension was lifted later in the month, enabling the blackout to proceed. Similarly, SZC TV and Halk TV faced ten-day broadcast bans earlier in July for critical reporting, though Halk TV's sanction was suspended pending judicial review.

These sanctions carry additional long-term consequences, as repeated infractions could trigger permanent revocation of broadcasting licenses for these channels. Observers, including the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR) and ARTICLE 19, view RTÜK's actions as a direct assault on freedom of expression and independent journalism, warning that such measures undermine democratic norms and media plurality in Türkiye.

During the second quarter of 2025, RTÜK escalated its punitive measures against media outlets critical of the government, imposing fines totaling 11.3 million lira (approximately \$275,000) on broadcasters including Halk TV, NOW, SZC TV, and TELE1. In addition to financial penalties, Halk TV received a ten-day suspension of its broadcast operations. RTÜK also mandated that journalist Fatih Altaylı's YouTube channel secure a formal license, signaling the expansion of regulatory oversight to digital platforms and online streaming.

Pro-opposition broadcasters continue to face persistent pressure from RTÜK, whose governing board is composed proportionally according to parliamentary representation and is currently dominated by members affiliated with the ruling Justice and

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Development Party (AKP). The combination of regulatory fines, broadcast suspensions, and licensing requirements reflects a systematic effort to control media content and limit dissenting voices. These ongoing interventions occur within a broader climate of press suppression in Türkiye.

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Internet Throttling

In September 2025, Turkish authorities implemented widespread internet throttling in Istanbul, affecting major platforms such as X, WhatsApp, and Instagram, in response to demonstrations by supporters of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). The restrictions followed clashes between police and party members attempting to prevent a government-appointed trustee from taking control of the CHP's Istanbul headquarters. Access to these platforms was disrupted for approximately 12 hours, prompting many users to rely on VPNs to circumvent the throttling.

While the BTK normally issues public statements when internet access is restricted, no official notice was provided in this instance, and the BTK's website block-check tool did not reflect the throttling. Reports indicate that the disruption was concentrated in Istanbul, while users in other provinces were able to access platforms normally.

The internet restrictions coincided with a broader crackdown on CHP members and supporters, following the detention of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu in March 2025. Critics argue that such digital measures serve to suppress dissent and limit the organization and dissemination of opposition activities, reflecting a continued pattern of state interference in online communications and public debate.

Legal Harassment of Journalists

In the second quarter of 2025, Turkish authorities intensified their actions against media professionals, arresting 10 journalists and initiating prosecutions against dozens more, according to the press freedom monitoring group Expression Interrupted. Over the three-month period, 103 journalists faced trial across 73 separate cases. Of the 24 trials that concluded, 10 resulted in convictions while 14 ended in acquittals. Convicted journalists received a combined total of 28 years, three months, and four days in prison, with one journalist additionally fined 9,440 lira (approximately \$228).



8 Authorities also filed 12 new indictments against 26 journalists and opened 10 additional investigations, resulting in 21 detentions, including 10 formal arrests and one journalist placed under house arrest. The most frequently invoked legal provisions were Article 314 of the Turkish Penal Code for “membership in an armed organization,” Article 125 for “insult,” and Article 7 of the Anti-Terror Law concerning “dissemination of terrorist propaganda.” Other charges included “insulting the president,” “denigrating state institutions,” “false accusations,” and “spreading misleading information.”

As of the end of June 2025, 33 journalists remained in detention. The period was also marked by at least five documented cases of violent police interference, obstruction, or threats impacting six journalists. These figures highlight the ongoing climate of intimidation, legal harassment, and physical risk that continues to constrain press freedom in Türkiye.

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9. Conclusion

Since 2016, Türkiye has witnessed a sustained and systematic crackdown on independent journalism, with the Erdoğan regime targeting critics, opposition figures, and journalists through legal, administrative, and digital measures. The deterioration of press freedom has accelerated in recent years, reaching unprecedented levels in 2025. The political and social unrest following the arrest of Istanbul Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, coupled with the intensification of digital and traditional media control, has created an environment where dissent is not only discouraged but actively punished. Journalists, civil society actors, and independent media outlets operate under constant threat of arrest, prosecution, and administrative sanctions, severely limiting the public's access to free and reliable information.

Legal attacks on journalism have become a central instrument in this repression. Broadly defined statutes, including provisions on personal rights, terrorism, false information, and insults against the president, are consistently applied to curtail investigative reporting and public commentary. The judiciary has frequently upheld these restrictions, often relying on vague concepts such as national security, public order, or protection of personal rights to justify the removal of content, blocking of websites, and prosecution of journalists. Cases involving prominent journalists, such as Fatih Altaylı, demonstrate the severe consequences of these legal interventions. Content that engages in political analysis or references historical events is interpreted as criminal, reflecting the state's extensive reach into the public sphere and the digital environment.

The digital space has emerged as both a lifeline for independent reporting and a primary target for suppression. Social media platforms, including X, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp, have faced mass account blocks, URL restrictions, and network throttling. Authorities have used these measures to suppress real-time reporting on protests, political events, and other sensitive issues. The throttling of internet access in Istanbul during opposition demonstrations following the arrest of İmamoğlu exemplifies how the government can directly interfere with the flow of information and communication between journalists and the public. Such interventions not only hinder independent journalism but also instill a climate of fear and self-censorship among citizens, journalists, and civil society actors who rely on digital media to exercise their fundamental rights.

Broadcast media is similarly constrained, with RTÜK leveraging administrative authority to impose fines, suspensions, and license revocations. Channels and radio stations critical

of the government, such as TELE1, Halk TV, SZC TV, and Açık Radyo, have faced punitive measures for content that challenges the state narrative or discusses politically sensitive topics. These administrative interventions, combined with pre-approved press events and the selective vetting of journalists' questions, illustrate a deliberate effort to control narratives at both the institutional and performative level. Journalists are not only prosecuted for content but are also publicly signaled about what is permissible, reinforcing a culture of intimidation that extends from newsrooms to public discourse.

The combined effect of legal harassment, administrative control, and digital censorship has created a hostile environment for independent journalism. Journalists are prosecuted under overlapping legal frameworks, arrested in pre-dawn raids, and subjected to long-term detentions. High-profile cases and prosecutions demonstrate that even reporting on corruption, public protests, or government accountability can trigger severe punitive measures. At the same time, journalists who remain active employ creative methods, such as "prison journalism," to continue reporting despite incarceration, underscoring both the resilience of the media and the extraordinary challenges it faces.

This environment extends beyond the headlines and journalists themselves. Business leaders, civil society actors, and ordinary citizens are also targeted when their statements or actions are perceived as critical of the government, further reinforcing societal fear and undermining democratic participation. The case of TÜSİAD leaders being investigated for their public statements on governance and economic policy illustrates that the repression is broad and strategically designed to silence not only journalists but also other independent voices capable of influencing public debate and accountability.

Taken together, the legal, digital, and administrative pressures on journalists reflect a deliberate strategy by the Erdoğan regime to control information flows, suppress dissent, and consolidate power. Independent journalism, which is crucial for transparency, accountability, and public awareness, is systematically undermined. The chilling effect on digital reporting, the targeting of media outlets and their staff, and the pervasive intimidation of civil society actors all point to an orchestrated campaign to weaken democratic norms in Türkiye.

In conclusion, the situation of press freedom in Türkiye in 2025 is dire and continues to worsen. The Erdoğan regime has leveraged legal provisions, digital controls, and institutional authority to silence dissent and shape public narratives. Journalists are arrested, content is blocked, media outlets face fines and suspension, and civil society

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Conclusion



voices are intimidated. These measures not only endanger the safety and freedom of journalists but also deprive the public of access to reliable information and obstruct democratic discourse. The cumulative effect is a media landscape where independent reporting is systematically suppressed, critical analysis is criminalized, and public debate is tightly controlled. Without decisive domestic reforms and sustained international attention, Türkiye risks further entrenching an environment in which free expression is constrained, independent journalism is stifled, and the foundational principles of democracy are increasingly undermined.

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Conclusion

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