



South East European Network
for Professionalization of Media

DIFFICULT TASK IN SUPPRESSED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Media self-regulation in Turkey

Sinem Aydınli

OUR MEDIA:

A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism,
counter polarisation and promote dialogue



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report on the codes of ethics and the self-regulatory framework of media in Turkey provides a critical assessment of the challenges emerging from the practical application of ethical principles and the development of sustainable self-regulatory mechanisms in Turkey.

The findings in this report relate the lack of a sustainable self-regulation framework for the media and the shortcomings of existing initiatives in Turkey to the undemocratic and repressive atmosphere in the country. It is thus not surprising that journalists and the outlets they work for face heavy pressure to comply with the framework of regulatory mechanisms, which have turned out to be state-led retribution mechanisms; they also cannot establish independent media self-regulation in Turkey.

The report explores the current efforts of independent bodies such as the Press Council (PC), the Turkish Journalists' Association (TGC), the Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS), the independent media ombudsman, and the strategies that could potentially improve media self-regulation in Turkey. Through 12 interviews with media experts, journalists, media representatives, and academics conducted between May and mid-June 2023 as well as desktop research on the subject, this report aims to provide new perspectives on the current state of play regarding media self-regulation while identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

Our report has identified the following key findings:

- Although ethical principles and self-regulation are significant matters, violations of media freedom are currently centre stage in Turkey; the focus is on the steps required to recreate an independent media and live in a democratic society. A democratic society in which media are independent of any power centres is a precondition for media self-regulation to work properly, and for journalists and media organisations to comply with ethics principles.
- The report shows that the responsibility for self-regulation has been left to the own devices of rights organisations active in the field of journalism and freedom of expression, although it has not been completely abandoned. There are still efforts to find new ways of media self-regulation.

Although ethical principles and self-regulation are significant matters, violations of media freedom are currently centre stage in Turkey; the focus is on the steps required to recreate an independent media and live in a democratic society.

- Under current circumstances, the PC should take concrete action to follow up in practice on the effects of its warnings. The interviews show wide support for the idea that the implementation of the Council warnings should be supported by a follow-up mechanism and practical action.
- The Turkish Journalists' Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities (a code of conduct) adopted by the TGC is a point of reference for the journalists who believe that ethical standards are being developed and revised under changing circumstances.
- A common suggestion is that the first step would be for media organisations to start self-regulation within their respective organisation. Media representatives believe that self-regulation should begin internally in particular media outlets, and voluntarily, as a fresh start.
- The efforts of the one existing ombudsperson are seen as worth following but their work only creates a real impact in the long run with the support of independent media organisations.
- All in all, the agenda of rights organisations active in the field of journalism and freedom of expression has shifted from the issue of ethical principles in the media to press freedom as a result of the repressive political atmosphere, of the monopolisation of media ownership, and of the political and economic interests of media owners vis-à-vis the government. That is why hot topics in EU regulations such as the proposed European Media Freedom Act, AI, and co-regulation of online content, are not yet on the agenda.

I.

INTRODUCTION

Inadequate competition, lack of transparency of media funding, concentration of media ownership, political influence on editorial policies, and the lack of independence of regulatory authorities are ongoing concerns in the media scene in Turkey (European Commission, 2022). As mentioned in the Media Monitoring Report for 2022 (Önderoğlu, 2023), in Turkey, regulatory institutions are repressive rather than regulatory. It is the only country in Europe whose Internet is “not free” (bianet, 2022), and it ranks 165th among 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2023 World Press Freedom Index (bianet, 2023). The country also ranks among the bottom five according to the Media Literacy Index 2022 (Lessenski, 2022).

Considering these points, it is a challenging task not only to build a mechanism that will ensure compliance with ethical principles and put them into practice but also to develop a sustainable self-regulation mechanism for the media. It is fair to say that, for these to work, a society is required whose members enjoy freedom of expression and of the press and where journalists continue their profession without facing intimidation, prosecution, or imprisonment.

Still, the Press Council (PC) can be seen as a self-regulatory mechanism and the ombudsman can serve as a related effort on media self-regulation. However, the PC is being criticised for its deficiencies such as ineffectiveness in practice, limited financial capacity, and insufficient human resources, while the current ombudsperson remains a personal effort. The Turkish Journalists’ Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities (a code of conduct) by TGC is a point of reference for the journalists who believe that ethical standards are being developed and revised under changing circumstances. It appears that journalists, unions, and media organisations are engaging in internal discussions and sharing ideas (albeit with different approaches) for the struggle against the government’s regulatory tools – i.e., the political and economic instruments of repression – which help them reflect on professional challenges and standards, and try to develop their own approach to self-regulation.

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As a part of the regional research conducted for the “Our Media” project,¹ this report provides an overview of current codes of ethics and (self)regulation frameworks of the media in Turkey. It evaluates whether mechanisms other than regulatory authorities are functional, capacitated, and sustainable to play a role in the regulatory framework and in the promotion of media literacy. In addition to various interviews² with media experts, media representatives, and those involved in regulatory bodies, journalism unions, and media organisations, this report critically assesses the codes of ethics and regulatory framework. It also presents recommendations on how media self-regulation could be achieved and how the ethics codes could be applied to digital media.

1 “Our Media: Civil Society Movement to Promote Media Literacy and Activism, Prevent Polarisation and Promote Dialogue”, financed by the European Union and covering the years 2023-2025, has nine partners including the Southeast European Network for Professionalisation of Media (SEENPM), the Albanian Media Institute (Tirana), the Media Centar Foundation (Sarajevo), the Kosovo Press Council, the Montenegro Media Institute (Podgorica), the Macedonia Media Institute (Skopje), the Novi Sad School of Journalism (Novi Sad), the Peace Institute (Ljubljana), bianet (Turkey). The project focuses on the empowerment and the capacities regarding media freedom, development, and sustainability of civil society organisations, media professionals, young activists, and communities in the Balkans and Turkey.

2 See list at the end of this report.

II.

The current structure: THE MEDIA (SELF)REGULATORY FRAMEWORK AND ETHICS CODES

The period following the coup attempt of July 2016 has had a direct impact on the media in Turkey as it nurtured an atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and self-censorship. Regulation mechanisms have turned into retribution mechanisms which help the ruling party consolidate its power, a point mentioned in almost all the interviews we have conducted.

Formed in 1994, Turkey's media regulatory body, the Radio and Television Supreme Council (hereafter RTÜK), was authorised to inspect online broadcasting in 2019, under Law No. 5651 on the Regulation of Publications on the Internet and Combating Crimes, along with regulating broadcast organisations, providing licences, and auditing broadcasters. This regulation was regarded as the most significant step in Turkey's history of censorship (Adal, 2019). Moreover, with the Bill on the Amendment of the Press Law and Some Laws adopted in October 2022 (known as the "disinformation law" but dubbed "censorship law" by rights organisations), the government consolidated its power through its domination of digital media, specifically Internet news portals, as the vaguely defined provisions of the bill facilitate the prosecution of those who are alleged of publicly disseminating "false information". A journalist has already been taken into custody for "spreading disinformation" because of a tweet he had posted on this law (bianet, 2023a). Gökhan Durmuş, the head of the Journalists' Union of Turkey (TGS), said, "This is a regulation that they say they will [use to] fight against disinformation,

but they are the ones who created the disinformation. It should be changed immediately because it has become a legal basis for arresting journalists". RTÜK continues to suspend media outlets and impose fines for broadcasting content critical of the government on the vague grounds that the content is "against the national and moral values of society, general morality and the principle of family protection". The independence and neutrality of the RTÜK are still among the biggest concerns (Diken, 2020).

The new regulations mentioned above are not the only ones to restrict media freedom. The government also granted broad powers to the Information and Communication Technologies Authority (BTK), which, again, was utilised by the government as a new set of legal arguments to pressure digital media and social media (Article 19, 2022). Currently, the state-led regulatory mechanisms in Turkey are seen as working to silence those who are critical of the government; they function as a retribution mechanism.³

In 2018, just after the government ended a two-year state of emergency, a new institution, the Directorate of Communications (DoC), was established. Rather than functioning as a backup for the regulatory mechanisms, this institution works as a propaganda platform for the government and has a close relationship with the editors of media organisations aligned with the ruling party.⁴ The directorate thus dominates the truth regimes and creates a truth that sides with the ruling power. Moreover, as the only authority issuing press cards in the country at the moment, it has the power to choose who will have a press card, directly affecting journalism. Contrary to the general practice around the world, the biggest union, TGS, does not issue press cards, while the pro-government union does. Also, media organisations do not have representatives on the press cards commission.

Moreover, DoC established a Centre for Combatting Disinformation in 2022, and it has been publishing "disinformation bulletins" which are supposed to highlight disinformation in the news, but focusing especially on media organisations the government dislikes: "There is nothing related to the disinformation being spread by the pro-government partisan media in these bulletins" (Interview with Faruk Bildirici). The bulletins also affect court decisions regarding any news to be blocked as they are published through the institution linked to the Presidency.

The Press Advertising Agency (BİK), established to ensure the fair distribution of revenues from public advertising in Turkey, also links to the DoC. It already turned into a state-controlled mechanism for the financial intimidation of media that criticise the government and it does not abide by its own Press Ethical Principles (Basın Ahlak Esasları in Turkish). For instance, BİK cut public ads of the Evrensel newspaper for "violating Press Ethical Principles", as its

In July 2022, BİK updated its ethical principles, which had remained unchanged since 1994. Although journalists, media experts, and lawyers acknowledge that on the surface, this amendment aims to combat discrimination, in practice it has become yet another way more easily to silence media critical of government policies by applying vague, terrorism-related criteria.

3 Interviews with Faruk Bildirici, Ceren Sözeri, Süleyman İrwan, Çayır, İnceoğlu, and others.

4 Reuters reported that Director of Communications Altun and his staff gave instructions to media organisations about which news from WhatsApp should be highlighted and which should be ignored (Spicer, 2022).

columnist Ceren Sözeri associated the word “attack” with police when writing “The police attacked presidents of the bar association”. By doing so, BİK, while pretending to apply ethical principles, actually violated the freedom of expression (Interview with Ceren Sözeri).

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As mentioned by media expert and academic Ceren Sözeri and academic Süleyman İrwan, it is problematic that BİK amended these principles independently. In the end, on the very day the update was published in the Official Gazette, a judge decided to issue a blocking order based on an updated article of the Press Ethical Principles (Uyar, 2022).

A polarised Turkish media sphere is dominated by pro-government media (Media Ownership Monitoring Turkey 2022, n. d.). Because of this situation, it is believed that the perspectives and values regarding the news and news production have changed. For instance, Durmuş noted in our interview:

“It is now hard to find journalists questioning whether they follow ethical rules while reporting the news. Because in Turkey, you are either on the side of the government or against it. Acting in accordance with ethical values remains in the background and this puts the struggles against the state-led regulatory mechanism in the foreground.”

Still, we can discuss three reference points while considering the idea of ethics codes and self-regulation in Turkey:

I. The Press Council, known as the media self-regulatory body in Turkey, has a Code of Professional Ethics of the Press, established to evaluate ethical violations in the media. Yet, it needs to increase its capacity and sustainability as the Council should develop its effectiveness in practice.

II. The TGC has a Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities of Journalists concerning values governing the journalism profession.

III. Since 2019, there has been a model of an independent media ombudsperson in Turkey, established through the personal efforts of Faruk Bildirici. It has strengths and weaknesses considering the repressive atmosphere in the country’s media sphere.

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III.

ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN JOURNALISM AND THE MEDIA

Established in 1988 as a civil society organisation through a contract, the Press Council (PC) operates as a media self-regulatory body in Turkey. The primary duty of the Council is to evaluate applications regarding alleged violations of the Professional Principles of the Press (Interview with Murat Önok). The internal regulations of the Council refer to three primary legal texts, the Press Council Contract, Professional Principles of the Press, and Procedures for Evaluating the Press Council's Rules and Applications. Investigations of professional and ethical violations and external activities (aiming to protect the freedom of the press and establish moral values) are the two main activities of the Press Council (Önok, 2018).

The PC expects the implementation of these ethical principles in all kinds of print and broadcast media and social media. According to the Council, some areas require more work regarding self-regulation, such as the issue of hate speech in media. The PC sees itself as the only institutionalised body dealing with ethics and self-regulation in the media. According to our interviewee Pınar Türeñç, the head of the PC, the Council with its ethics codes is sufficiently equipped to aim to protect media freedom and the fundamental rights of media/digital service users within the framework of media and digital service regulations promoted by EU regulation. It is noted that the Council revised its principles regarding the need for digital media and is continuously working on it. However, as the PC has limited sources of funding, it is more difficult for the Council to promote itself nationwide and set up a follow-up mechanism, which eventually affects its sustainability.

Still, there are other opinions regarding its principles, as they are not binding. This needs to be changed, although others believe that even a warning itself is a significant action for journalism; they also believe that the ethical principles are supposed to encourage quality journalism, not to establish retribution mechanisms (Interview with Gökhan Durmuş).

The Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities of Journalists was prepared in 1998 by the TGC. According to our interviewee Sibel Güneş, TGC General Secretary, the TCG was the leading actor in preparing this Declaration, which is vital in developing journalistic standards in Turkey. The Declaration, as a code of conduct, was approved by TGC members in 2000. It was accepted as an annex to the TGC charter in 2005 and was revised in 2019. Güneş notes that the Declaration had been updated to cover the problems experienced in the digital sphere. Even the courts sometimes refer to the Declaration in cases concerning “false” news, and those who file complaints against critical journalists also refer to the Declaration.

In 2020, TGC dismissed Abdurrahman Dilipak due to his articles containing hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community and women. Nevertheless, he continues to work at his media organisation, which highlights that the decision is not binding: Even if the Council discharges a journalist, they continue their profession with the same media organisation they have been working for. This structure should be changed. If a follow-up mechanism were to be established, both the employer and the journalist working for the media company would face a sanction in practice. Eventually, it would provide self-regulation mechanisms that could affect the workplace. Thus, this would involve establishing an internal self-evaluation mechanism in the media organisation before news is published – a mechanism that could affect all media.

Generally, among all the interviewees, there is a shared opinion that the professional ethical principles of the press and the ethical rules should be accepted by all media and journalists in Turkey. However, mechanisms to monitor implementation of these rules are not currently the priority of journalism organisations due to the undemocratic and repressive rule in the country but also due to “concerns of the editorial side” or “interests” of the bosses of the media organisations, which causes journalists working in such organisations to experience job insecurity:

“If I have expressed my opinion within the ethical rules of journalism, a system should be established in which I am not punished. But this is something we need to work on a lot. In other words, all journalists in Turkey must first accept a series of ethical rules. Then the media bosses can accept it, and this is the only way we get to a stage like that. But right now, talking about these things looks very imaginary for us. So, the question is how the journalists internalised those principles rather than only having a written version of them”. (Interview with Gökhan Durmuş)

Regarding the digital environment, although the top issue is the new regulations adopted by the government to oppress the critical media (as mentioned above), other, new concerns have been raised including the increased speed in the delivery of news, the race for more traffic which “gives a distorting priority to topics that attract more readers”, and a “differentiated content architecture resulting from the way search engine trends now occupy the top spot in the

It may be better to have ethical principles abided by all media rather than establishing self-regulation specific to online media. If all media organisations agreed on fundamental ethical principles, a network of journalists could be established to start with self-evaluation

“hierarchy of influences” (Akin, 2018). These problems override any concern for ethical rules and result in them being routinely ignored in reporting. Still, some news media platforms have their own ethical principles published on their websites (Anka News Agency, gazeteduvar, etc.) although we do not know the effectiveness of these principles. Still, it may be better to have ethical principles abided by all media rather than establishing self-regulation specific to online media. If all media organisations agreed on fundamental ethical principles, a network of journalists could be established to start with self-evaluation. Such a course of action would also support media freedom in the country. Unfortunately, this prospect appears unrealistic for the Turkish media in the near future.

Table 1: **CODES OF ETHICS IN TURKEY**

TITLE OF THE CODE	GENERAL OR SPECIFIC	YEAR OF ADOPTION AND EVENTUAL REVISION*	IMPLEMENTED IN PRACTICE ⁵	WHICH SELF-REGULATORY BODIES OBSERVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CODE AND PROCESS COMPLAINTS RELATED TO THE CODE
Code of Ethics	General	1988	Yes	Press Council
Turkey Journalism Rights and Responsibilities Declaration (TGC)	General	Adopted in 2000, revised in 2019	Yes	-
Anka News Agency	Specific	2022	-	-
Press Principles (gazeteduvar.com)	Specific	2016	-	-

5 We understand by “implemented” either that a code of ethics is being enforced with sanctions in case of violations or that it is generally respected in practice by journalists.

IV.

SELF-REGULATORY BODIES AND MECHANISMS

“If there is an ethical problem with journalism or news that violates ethical principles, the way is not punish the journalist. It is to correct it or to show the journalist his mistake and ensure that it is not repeated. This is what I understand under self-regulation of the media”. (Interview with Gökhan Durmuş)

As “journalism in Turkey continued to be a precarious and risky profession, with low wages, high risk of judicial harassment and a lack of job security” and there has been a serious backsliding on press freedom in the country, self-regulation is not much of an issue (European Commission, 2022).

As mentioned above, the Press Council sees itself as an institutionalised structure in terms of self-regulation but has no sanctioning power other than to expose and warn. The Press Council was formed by 28 journalists with the aim of “introducing and promoting a system that is based on a common foundation, facilitating the free gathering of journalists who desire a freer and more respectful press and which, in terms of allowing the Turkish media to regulate itself, emulates Western democratic countries” (Erkelli Kızıl, 1998). Other than the PC, the field of self-regulation is left to individual media organisations and journalists’ associations. However, media representatives and journalists have not entirely given up on self-regulation. The first thing they are seeking to create is mutual trust and solidarity between journalists and the media organisations they work for. Each media organisation should begin to exercise its responsibility to (self-)regulate according to ethical principles.

Other than the PC, the field of self-regulation is left to individual media organisations and journalists’ associations.

Table 2: **MEDIA SELF-REGULATORY BODIES**

NAME OF SELF-REGULATORY BODY/MECHANISM	YEAR OF FOUNDING	FOUNDERS	SOURCE OF FUNDING	ACTIVE/PASSIVE
Press Council	1988 (formal)	28 journalists	Member organisations	Active
Turkey Journalism Rights and Responsibilities Declaration (TGC)	2005 (an annex to the TGC charter)	Members of TGC	Membership fees and rental income from own buildings	Active
Personal Media Ombudsman	2019	Faruk Bildirici	Organisations that recognise this ombudsman	Active

4.1. OBLIGATION TO INTRODUCE SELF-REGULATION MECHANISMS SPECIFIED IN THE LAW; OMBUDSMAN

The RTUK Law (Law No. 6112 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and Their Media Services) refers to the concept of “self-regulation” twice. The first reference is under the “Viewer representative” subheading of the “Private Media Service Providers” chapter and reads as follows:

“Media service providers shall assign a viewer representative who has at least ten years of professional experience in order to establish co-regulation and self-regulation mechanisms, to submit evaluations of the complaints received from viewers and listeners to the editorial board of the company and to follow up on the conclusions. The assigned viewer representative shall be announced to the public by appropriate means and notified to the Supreme Council.”

Regarding the duties of the Supreme Council, the second reference specifies the following obligations:

“(…) to keep abreast of developments concerning media services; to determine co-regulatory and self-regulatory mechanisms and general strategies for the sector; to conduct studies and to provide incentives in order to ensure improvement of media services in the country; to coordinate educational and certification programmes for employees of media service providers, and to issue certificates.” (Çongar, Demirelli & Epik, 2018, p. 13)

6 See Tarihçe/History Available at: <https://www.basinkonseyi.org.tr/tarihce/>

Despite these references to self-regulation and co-regulation in the legislation, the issue of self-regulation is entirely left to the initiative of institutions or journalists. Although “readers’ representative” was introduced in the law in the early 2000s and “audience representative” was created as an institution in 2006, neither of these positions exist in practice at present. There is also an effort made by Faruk Bildirici, who had been the readers’ representative at Hürriyet for eight years before Doğan Holding sold the newspaper to Demirören Holding. In January 2022, Bildirici called on media organisations to recognise him as the media ombudsman, and 12 media organisations accepted his position as an independent media ombudsman. His effort is worth discussing as Bildirici evaluates the ethics of news reporting by the media organisations that accepted his authority as ombudsman. He creates content regarding these evaluations and publishes it on gazeteduvar.com.

According to Bildirici, the ombudsman is a position that creates an intermediary between media organisations and readers or audiences (Interview with Faruk Bildirici).

According to Bildirici, the ombudsman is a position that creates an intermediary between media organisations and readers or audiences (Interview with Faruk Bildirici). For example, requests for a news item or a photograph to be removed are discussed together, leading to a joint decision. In this way, the ombudsman adopts current ethical codes and corrects mistakes in practice. As this is an effort made by Bildirici with a limited number of media outlets, it has no significant effect on the overall situation and has the potential to remain limited to its circle. What is needed is for each media organisation to have a readers’/audience representative to contribute to media self-regulation, in addition to Bildirici’s efforts.

V.

SELF-REGULATION OF ONLINE MEDIA

According to the *Media Monitoring Report 2022*, access blocks were imposed on at least 550 online reports in 2022 by Penal Courts of Peace⁷ or the Union of Access Providers in order to prevent claims of corruption, bribery, or favouritism being further discussed by the public. In 2022, access blocks were imposed on a total of 6,528 news items as a result of “violations of personal rights”. 5,388 news items were censored (bianet, 2023b).

Also, the procedure for international social media platforms to appoint a representative in Turkey and those with regular broadcast/publication to be brought under the surveillance of RTÜK resulted in access blocks imposed on Deutsche Welle Turkish and Voice of America Turkish.

As mentioned earlier, with the “censorship law” adopted in 2022, the government established much tighter government control over the online media. This legal framework has not been implemented objectively and proportionately as it has large potential to oppress media critical of the government through legal procedures that supposedly aim to prevent the spread of “false” information.

More violations of ethical principles take place in online media than print media, and the ethical problems faced by journalists in traditional journalism also exist in online journalism. However, one issue that is specific to online media continues posing a challenge for journalists: what matters online is not the accountability and trustworthiness of news but the speed and clickbait potential (Interview with Emre Kızılkaya).

TGC revised the declaration in light of digital change. The head of the PC, Türeñç, said that it revised its ethical codes with respect to the needs of online

7 According to the Law on the Regulation of Broadcasts via Internet and Prevention of Crimes Committed through Such Broadcasts (law number 5651, Article 9), “real and legal persons, institutions and organisations claiming that the personality rights are violated due to the content published on the internet may ask to the content provider, or to the hosting provider if they cannot reach the content provider, to remove the contents from the broadcasting by using warning method, and may also request to prevent access to the content by applying directly to the judge of the court of peace”.

media. However, interviewees mentioned that there is still a need to work on combatting online hate speech. One of the suggestions by Akin is to:

“(…) monitor publications in line with ethical principles of online media and regularly publish the results. This would affect outlets and journalists who remain outside of the self-regulatory mechanism, and could create an external regulatory effect in line with ethical criteria. No journalist would want to be the subject of a report prepared by journalists monitoring violations of journalistic ethics”. (Akin, 2018)

As a start, this kind of monitoring mechanism for online media could be instrumental in promoting ethical norms and encouraging their implementation.

VI.

The public service broadcaster of Turkey: NOT INVOLVED IN ANY SELF-REGULATORY MECHANISM

The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), a public service broadcaster that started broadcasting television in 1968 after its first radio broadcast in 1927, today broadcasts in “41 languages and dialects with 18 television channels, 17 radio channels and digital platforms”⁸ but TRT does not have a code of ethics or a complaint mechanism.

Currently, TRT is affiliated with the DoC and its broadcasting policies are openly in line with the AKP government, leaving no room for different voices: it is consistently one-sided. In other words, public broadcasting is not independent in Turkey, which is against international ethical principles. Moreover, it is not subject to any regulatory complaint procedure since, as already pointed out, regulatory mechanisms work as tools of retribution by the government.

Still, some initiatives to monitor TRT’s programming do exist. For instance, TRT has been accused of biased broadcasting, specifically during election campaigns: in the run-up to the latest elections, in May 2023, TRT Haber, the broadcasting news organisation affiliated with TRT, allocated one-fourth of the day to propaganda for the government (Cumhuriyet, 2023). This violates the RTUK’s decision that media organisations cannot broadcast one-sided or biased content. In light of this situation, the main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) filed a criminal complaint against high-level TRT officials

⁸ TRT’nin hikayesi <https://www.trt.net.tr/kurumsal/trtnin-hikayesi>

for failing to air CHP's election advert and ignoring multiple requests from the party on the matter. Moreover, in the run-up to the 2014 elections, TRT's general manager even said that the channel would cut the live feed of presidential candidate and co-president of the pro-Kurdish Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), Selahattin Demirtaş, if he criticised TRT again.

Although a public broadcaster is expected to serve the public interest, it is obvious that TRT is not impartial and is not treating all political parties and groups equally. It does not ensure equal opportunity for all political parties and groups in its broadcasts, which violates its legal and constitutional obligations. All these signal that there is no multitude of voices being broadcast on Turkey's public broadcaster. Given that, it is not surprising that TRT's Kurdish channel spread false news against the pro-Kurdish HDP by depicting party officials on multiple occasions as people who call for violence (Duvar, 2021).

TRT withdrew from the Press Council years ago and is currently not involved in any national self-regulatory mechanism. The case that contributed to its withdrawal is related to critical comments by the PC's president at the time about a government decision. In 2010, Oktay Ekşi, the-then chief columnist of *Hürriyet* (at the time a mainstream media outlet), who also served as the president of the Press Council, criticised the government's decision to give the Ministry of Environment and Forestry the authority to designate an area protected, by saying that "We are now seeing a deceitful mentality that would even sell its own mother". After this incident, the reactions against Ekşi did not subside and his position as the president of the Press Council became a subject of debate. Later, the Council issued Ekşi a warning about his column, and subsequently, in the same year, TRT and the state-owned news agency Anadolu Agency announced their withdrawal from the Press Council (Sözeri, 2018).

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VII.

OTHER EFFORTS BY RIGHTS ORGANISATIONS

Since Turkey's rights agenda has been dominated by the issue of freedom of the press in recent years, there have not been enough active efforts by civil society organisations to address the issue of media self-regulation. Still, there are good efforts to be discussed. For instance, bianet is an online platform (www.bianet.org) established by the IPS Communication Foundation, a civil society organisation, to distribute news reporting from a rights-based perspective. For the Foundation, codes of ethics are seen as rules that are open to improvement and should be constantly updated. For this reason, IPS chairperson Nadire Mater points out the importance of self-regulation as a live activity and states that bianet's practice is based on this understanding (Interview with Nadire Mater). Immediately after its establishment in 2003, the Foundation published a book titled "Media, Ethics and Law", in which it laid out its ethical principles (Alankuş, 2003). It approaches journalism and reporting with the same principles as human rights-based advocacy. In their weekly meetings and all internal discussions, the editors have been discussing, criticising and correcting each other's work. These internal discussions are a good example of how an internal self-regulation mechanism can work and how it increases the awareness of the responsibility of news outlets.

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Although they are not self-regulation mechanisms as such, there are other important independent complementary efforts by rights organisations to deal with one of the most important ethical rules on accuracy of media: verification/fact-checking platforms such as teyit.org support journalism engaged in fighting against manipulated facts and bogus news.⁹ These platforms analyse whether the news is accurate or not and therefore promote accountability in journalism. However, their reach with the general public is limited and confined to some networks.

Moreover, in terms of civil society organisations working on developing media literacy, the Hrant Dink Foundation has been monitoring and categorising hate speech observed in the national and local press since 2009. It draws attention

⁹ Although teyit.org is the most popular, dogrulukpayi was the first fact-checking initiative and went online in 2014.

to violations of ethical standards through the use of discriminatory language against ethnic and religious identities, sexist and homophobic discourse, and dissemination of news containing hate speech. In addition, Kaos GL has been monitoring and reporting hate speech in the media against LGBTQI+ people. These are worthy efforts to promote media literacy and ethics by monitoring the contents of the media from the perspective of respect for human rights and countering hate speech.

VIII.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Media in Turkey have serious concerns regarding regulation and self-regulation. In the last 20 years, 12,000 journalists have lost their jobs. After the 2016 coup attempt, Turkey “returned to the group of countries that arrest the highest number of journalists” (Article 19, 2022); in 2022, 31 journalists and media representatives were arrested. Thousands of lawsuits have been filed against journalists. Journalism is silenced as a result of government oppression and fear of employers (editorial pressure) and unemployment. Even if journalists want to evaluate themselves per the universal ethical principles and the Declaration of Rights and Responsibilities of the Journalists of Turkey, problems may still arise due to these factors. Even if they are independent and able to publish news online, they still face intimidation and fear of prosecution if that news runs against the values and interests of the government or is critical of it.

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The situation in Turkey highlights the importance of recognising the strong connection between adhering to ethical rules and securing democratic rights. This is why the struggle for democratic rights takes precedence in Turkey. As a result, in circumstances such as in Turkey, following the development of new EU regulation and applying it is a challenge. At the same time, only an independent media is capable of establishing a functioning, trustworthy self-regulatory mechanism. As is the case in any authoritarian regime, the ruling party and the presidency do not view freedom of expression and press as an issue. Therefore, institutions such as the DoC, the propaganda tool of the state, can focus on artificial intelligence and on topics such as “Methods of Combatting Disinformation in the Age of Artificial Intelligence” (Yeni Safak, 2023), noting that “Verification in reporting against disinformation needs to gain importance”. Yet, it is their understanding of “disinformation” which is critical and refers to all reporting that deviates from the government line.

Given the current circumstances in Turkey, it is obvious that developing a functional self-regulation mechanism in a repressed media environment is a difficult task. Still, rights organisations are aware that media self-regulation is not just a matter for journalism organisations or the media community, but

an element of the democratic rights of the public through which they defend their right to information. Thus, relevant civil society organisations continue to make their own contribution to empowering the public by developing media literacy skills or raising awareness on this issue through their monitoring activities, reporting, and organising seminars and training programmes jointly with journalism associations.

As self-regulation requires willingness and intent, its mechanisms should be established by the journalists who volunteer to conduct follow-ups. This could be a beginning for establishing functional media self-regulation in Turkey, as per the following recommendations:

- News media outlets should monitor their own publications for adherence to ethical principles and publish reports on examples of violations. This would raise awareness internally, encourage journalists to follow ethical principles, and in the long run help create an ethically responsible journalism.
- Media organisations should share reports on their self-regulation with other institutions. In this way, mistakes made and practices to correct them will facilitate and accelerate the spread of ethically responsible journalism.
- Although the rules of ethics, i.e., the TGC Declaration, are being revised when necessary, both the Press Council and the TGC should keep the revision of the code of ethics on the agenda to address ethical challenges arising from new developments in digital media.
- In order to establish a functional and reliable self-regulatory mechanism, there must be new regulation on media ownership and concentration that leaves no room for media organisations to be dependent on public tenders. There should be no political or economic ties between media organisations and the government. Political powers are obliged to make these arrangements in the context of the public's right to information and journalists' freedom to report.
- The capacity of journalists and rights organisations to follow and implement new EU monitoring and self-regulatory frameworks, especially with the facilitation of close monitoring mechanisms to be established by the Press Council and bar associations, needs to be sustainable. Avenues should be created for capacity-building and financial support for staff in institutions to monitor these regulations and propose necessary revisions.
- Newspapers and online media should encourage those working in media, rights organisations, universities and related media to write on media ethics and media literacy on a regular (e.g., weekly) basis, and to evaluate and publish their writings in order to raise awareness of media ethics standards and accountability and to promote responsible, quality journalism.

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LIST OF INTERVIEWS

The interviews for this research were conducted in Istanbul and via video platform or email, between 2 May April and 15 June 2023. We interviewed:

Faruk Bildirici (independent media ombudsman);

Faruk Çayır (lawyer/media expert at Alternative Informatics):

Gökhan Durmuş (chair, Journalists' Union of Turkey TGS);

Sibel Güneş (Secretary-General, Turkish Journalists' Association TGC);

Murat İnceoğlu (editor-in-chief, bianet);

Süleyman İrwan (academic, Uskudar University);

Emre Kızılkaya (journalist, IPI Turkey/Journo);

Nadire Mater (chairwoman at bianet/IPS);

Murat Önok (academic/Press Council, Koç University);

Ceren Sözeri (academic/media expert, Galatasaray University);

İlhan Taşçı (CHP Member at RTÜK);

Pınar Türenç (chair, Press Council).

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Sinem Aydınli completed her Ph.D. in the Media and Creative Industries programme at Loughborough University London in 2018 with a dissertation on the discursive formation of “political others” in the Turkish press. She is a research coordinator at bianet/IPS Communication Foundation and a visiting scholar at Kadir Has University. Aydınli was the country researcher of the Media Ownership Monitor Turkey 2018 & 2020 projects. Her research areas include media discourse, hate speech, and discrimination in media and cultural politics.

DIFFICULT TASK IN SUPPRESSED MEDIA ENVIRONMENT

Media self-regulation in Turkey

This publication is the result of research undertaken as part of the project **“Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue”**. The first research series was conducted in the thematic framework titled “Critical analysis of ethics codes and self-regulation in the media in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey”.

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