



## Dirty Seeds of Media Transformation in Turkey: The Vertigo of Communication, the Young Party and the Democratic Deficit

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*Recently, the Turkish broadcasting sector - an affluent TV landscape with more than 400 TV stations of which 23 are national and 16 are regional ones, has been controlled largely by a handful of conglomerates with a variety of “interests”. Among these interests the political ones are evident, as well as their implications on the nature of “politics” in the country. By the early 2000’s, the major example of the non-democratic interplay between politics and media in Turkish history turned out to be manifest. In this study, the electoral campaign of a particular political party, Genc Party (Young Party - GP), in the 2002 general elections will be analyzed, in relation to the political communication strategies deployed. GP, whose political attitude can best be described as “eclectic ultra-nationalism”, or “pop ultra-nationalism”, was established only five months before the elections, building on the prevailing corporate network and personal image of its founder Cem Uzan, a young successful business man and media baron. GP received 7,5 percent of overall votes (approximately 2,5 million votes), which can be regarded as an exceptional success in Turkish electoral history. GP’s campaign which applied unique communication methods and was backed up by media of various kinds signifies the ‘de-politicization’ of politics, the take over of the political sphere by the media sphere, the victory of image vs. content, and finally the Turkish version of Berlusconi’s party “Forza Italia”. The article discusses the bitter relationship between media, politics and the public sphere as it was experienced in a post-deregulation Turkish setting.*

## 1. Introduction


With over 14 million television-owning households, the Turkish broadcasting market is one of the largest in Europe. In 2007, there were more than 400 TV stations in the country, of which 23 were national and 16 were regional ones. All national television channels are also on cable and satellite. There are also a number of channels available exclusively to digital pay-TV audiences. In short, these days the Turkish audience enjoys an affluent TV landscape both in terms of content and access. However, this panorama only emerged in the 1990s. Following the abolishment of state monopoly in broadcasting in 1994, industrial giants and holding companies began investing in the sector and started new commercial TV channels. Parallel to such structural changes, the content or substance of communication was transformed. New program formats, new faces on the screen and new discussion topics invaded the Turkish communication landscape. Thus it can be argued that, since the early 90s Turkish society has been communicating in a different manner than it did a decade ago.

It must be highlighted that the transformations witnessed in the media sphere were embedded in the macro changes that Turkey experienced since 1980. On the one hand, the political domain was occupied with the consolidation of the democratic regime, which had halted following the *coup d'état* of 1980. The economic domain, on the other hand, was being reshaped by the structural adjustments that were enacted in line with the neo-liberal economic philosophy. The transformations in the media sphere in Turkey since the 1990s took place within this political-economic transition period.

In this article, the consequences of such changes and the interplay between the media transformation and the democratic performance in Turkey will be scrutinized, by investigating some of the visible outcomes of this period. First, the transition in Turkey since 1980 is presented in order to contextualize the media transformation within a meaningful framework. Then, the changes witnessed in the media landscape will be discussed, with regards to their reflections on Turkish democracy. The analysis of the political communication strategies of a Turkish ultra-nationalist party during the early 2000s concludes the article, as an evident illustration of the convergence of media, communication and politics in the transient Turkish context of the post-1980s period.

## 2. Era of Transformations: Post-1980s Turkey

The 1980s were a decade when major conversions took place in Turkey, particularly in the economic and political spheres. The *coup d'état* of 1980 - the third one after the military interventions of 1960 and 1971, opened up the decade with harsh political implications. All political parties and the Constitution were eradicated; the left and right movements of the 1970s were



dissolved while many members were imprisoned by the junta; almost all civil society organizations, including labor unions and professional associations were banned<sup>1</sup>. The ideological framework of the previous decade (socialist/communist/left vs. Islamist/nationalist/right) was replaced with state supported neo-liberalism, which was represented by the Motherland Party (ANAP), the winner of the 1983 elections.

The main intention of the neo-liberal economical program in Turkey was the substitution of the state's regulatory role with free-market domination. This policy change was embedded in the global trend towards privatization, based on "the perceived inefficiency of central planning and government-protected monopolies, which were characterized by poor financial performance, overstaffing and dependency on government subsidies, and poor export performance" (Gershon 2005: 20). Thus liberalization of various sectors historically monopolized by the state reshaped the economic landscape. At the same time, Turkey followed a second global trend<sup>2</sup> that was directly related with the telecommunication and media sectors. Massive public investment in advanced communications networks and information-related sectors was initiated by the state. This action paved the way for the deployment of these technologies and infrastructures for economic interests.

## 2.1 Media Transformation


In this context the Turkish media environment transformed into a new mode in just over a decade: from being controlled by a public service monopoly with only one channel, to a staggering 270 TV channels crowding the airwaves in the early 2000s - four times as many as in neighboring Greece. Following the approval of the commercial channels' entrance in the sector in 1994, major changes took place in the media landscape regarding its structural characteristics, particularly the ownership structures.

At first the newspaper owners started investing in electronic media and began turning into media conglomerates. This reached the point where almost all the major dailies owned one or more radio and/or television stations. The family-run press ownership structure began to disappear, as new economic imperatives and business models were introduced. Another path followed by newspaper owners was to sell their companies to new players whose primary

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<sup>1</sup> The only associations whose activities were not suspended by the military junta were TUSIAD, TOBB and TISK, which were employer associations representing the Turkish *bourgeoisie*. Indeed, these associations had welcomed and supported the military take over.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of media and telecommunication technologies, many of the structural networks and relationships of capital began to surface in different countries around the world in the 1980s, as nations changed their telecommunication structures and policies to eliminate trade barriers, promote competition, and create opportunities for economic development (Blankson & Murphy 2007: 5-6).



interests lay in other sectors. Once private commercial broadcasting was legalized, holding companies poured investments into the sector, which increased the number of television channels and newspapers dramatically.


Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, a snowball affect was observed, as industrial rivals feared the advantages media would provide to their competitors. The process occurred in both directions: some media organizations were transformed into holding groups while some holding groups entered the media market through new investments, partnerships or acquisitions. Growing media conglomerates first acquired smaller media outlets to minimize the number of competitors, then globalized their business through mergers with trans-national media groups. In this fashion, CNN of the Time Warner group in cooperation with Dogan Group in Turkey entered the market in 1999, as *CNN Turk*. The third phase of enlargement consists of investing in the media sector of regional countries, or in “new markets”. The main example is the Dogan Group, which has operated Kanal D in Romania since February 2007 as a joint venture with Swiss publisher Ringier, and owns Trader Media East, the leading classified advertiser in the former East Block countries.

Some aspects of the rapid growth of a handful of Turkish media giants are similar to the “second-tier media firms” of newly industrialized South American countries that gained visible national and regional dominance since the 1990s. These powerful Latin American media groups (such as Brazil’s Globo, Mexico’s Televisa, Argentina’s Clarin and Venezuela’s Cisneros Group), as highlighted by McChesney (1999: 12) “have extensive ties and joint ventures with the largest media TNCs, as well as with Wall Street investment banks”. At the same time, the political and cultural power of these groups and the economic integration they enjoy are firmly rooted in the *laissez-faire* agreements and clientele established early on in most Latin American countries (Fox 1988, 1997; Hallin & Papathanassopoulos 2002)

In short, drastic developments that came about in the 1990s set the scene for the birth of the Turkish “media industry”, which was characterized by intensified financial maneuvers with the lack of proper regulation. The consequences were soon evident as an immense concentration of ownership, the establishment of cross-media monopolies, unregulated integration (both vertically and horizontally) along with diversification in different sectors. Today a handful of conglomerates with a variety of diversified business interests are shaping the media ownership situation in Turkey. Out of seven key cross-media groups in Turkey, three share more than 75% of all national media revenues in different branches including press, TV, radio, magazines, and music. The distribution of advertising revenues<sup>3</sup> in the TV market illustrates the

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<sup>3</sup> Although advertising spending has increased steadily in Turkey (540 million USD in 2001, 730 million USD in 2002, 879 million USD in 2003, 1.308 million USD in 2004, 1.665 million USD in 2005, 1.910 million USD in 2006), ad spending per capita is still among the lowest in absolute terms (The Turkish Advertising Sector, Advertising Association Website: <http://www.rd.org.tr/> [Accessed 2 February 2010]).



vast domination of the “big three”, as 76.9 percent of television advertising expenditure goes to the four main channels of the three major media groups: ATV (Çalık), Kanal D (Doğan), Show TV (Çukurova) and Star TV (Doğan). The rest of the television sector - including TRT (public service broadcaster), 20 national, 16 regional and hundreds of local channels - has to survive on the remaining 23 per cent (Dogan Yayin Holding 2007).

## 2.2 Democratization


As Christensen notes, from the studies on media in South Eastern Europe, Latin America and Turkey, a number of common issues emerge. The most relevant one of these commonalities is the rapid - and sometimes uncontrolled - spread of free-market policies and ideologies; and the general perception of a link between the free market and the democratization process (Christensen 2007: 182).

The prevailing democratic expectations from the commercial channels in Turkey were mostly rooted in the democratic discrepancy of the public service broadcaster TRT throughout its monopoly period. According to Kaya, the ideological background of TRT as it came into being in 1964 was shaped by “modernization” and “development” paradigms that dominated the country and benefited from US financial aids (1999). Having received Marshall Aid throughout the 1950s, the Turkish state utilized TRT broadcasts, both radio and TV, in order to create ideological support from the public for state policies (Kaya 1999: 7). Kaya’s arguments, when considered in concert with radio’s perceived role in the early Turkish Republic as disseminator of the state’s doctrines (such as Westernization), provide an insight regarding the programming policy of TRT throughout the public-monopoly period, which lasted until the early 90s. The vastly elitist, evidently “from top to bottom” and by and large homogenizing broadcasting policy of TRT, did not meet the cultural, political and social demands of the majority of the Turkish public<sup>4</sup>, while at the same time strict state interventions in the programming preferences of TRT favored such a broadcasting regime.

Furthermore, broadcasting in Turkey (both radio and television), like in many other countries with the exception of the Unites States (Bourdon 2004), was introduced with serious national missions assigned to the medium. Extensive symbolic, political and educational purposes attached to broadcasting increased the perceived significance of the media by the changing power holders, such as governments and juntas. Hence, public service media’s total

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<sup>4</sup> The case of *arabesk*, a folk music genre that became increasingly popular from the 1960s and was banned in TRT broadcasts, is an example of such a mismatch between popular cultural demands and TRT’s programming policy. Despite the ban on *arabesk*, this music was widely disseminated via cassettes and played mostly in taverns and public transportation. Finally, in the early 90s, TRT removed the ban on arabesk.



or partial lack of independence from the power holders was a characteristic of the period preceding the 1980s. In short, broadcast media's role in enabling a viable democratic public sphere was far from satisfactory in this epoch.

Therefore, the early years of de-regulated Turkish media were celebrated by the majority of the population as the victorious period of democracy. Indeed, throughout the early years of Turkish commercial media, some tantalizing glimmers of critical, investigative journalism (Finkel 2000) were observed. Scholars such as Karaman and Aras have noted that during the 1990s the development of private media systems in Turkey led to a number of changes to oppressive "legal norms established earlier on under the monopoly of state control" (2000: 46). Furthermore, dissident voices, which had been historically excluded from the Turkish media sphere, such as Islamists or Kurdish nationalists, could gain access to media channels to propagate their discourses (Öncü 2004). It was claimed that the epoch of paternalistic and partisan public service broadcasting was replaced by a democratic media landscape.

However, the media honeymoon in Turkey was short lived (Christensen 2007: 183). The speed with which the Turkish business world recognized the myriad possibilities (economic and political) offered through the control of media channels was not matched by swift, effective action on the part of the Turkish government to regulate an increasingly hyper-commercialized, oligopolistic system. For the Turkish media conglomerates, broadcasting was primarily a means of wielding the political and economic muscle (Oxford Business Group (OBG) 2004: 145). Although profits in the media business were pessimistic compared to the vast investments attracted to the sector<sup>5</sup> throughout the 1990s, numerous large industrial holdings had not hesitated to join the fierce competition. According to various scholars (Adakli 2001: 161-162; Catalbas 2000: 127-132; OBG 2004: 145; Sonmez 1995: 4-6), this "rush to media business" was an attempt motivated by an intent at exploiting not only the media's cultural influence, but potential political benefits as well. Involvement in Turkish media allowed the companies to gain state loans and provided them with a tool to pressure the government.

In this atmosphere, the concentration of power (economic, political and symbolic) in the hands of a few media conglomerate was inevitable. Furthermore, as the media business consolidated towards the early 2000s, the revenues increased as well as the economic expectations facing the companies from their owners and shareholders. Thus, ratings and advertisement revenues turned out to be the sole determinants of the dominant profit-oriented media rationale. Creative programming strategies of the early years of commercial

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<sup>5</sup> Between 1990 and 1995, the profit rates were never less than 6.1% in food, 9.9% in cement and 3.8% in chemicals, in Turkey. Within the same period, the profit rates for some of the biggest daily newspapers fell. Hürriyet lost 14.8%, Sabah 2.2% and Milliyet 0.4%. A similar picture exists for the most popular television stations. (OBG 2004)



broadcasting, diversity of the television content and especially the amount of information-related programs diminished dramatically.

In parallel to the changes regarding the content, working conditions of the media workers deteriorated considerably. From the very early years of the commercial media boom in Turkey, trade unions were under attack by corporate owners with both economic and political motivations. A de-unionized employee would cost less for his/her boss, and at the same time would be more vulnerable to editorial pressures. As noted by Tunc, unions turned out to be a non-entity in the Turkish media market<sup>6</sup> (Tunc 2003: 9), an evident contradiction with the situation prior to the introduction of the commercial media in the 1990s.

The new epoch was launched by de-regulation, however the course of events proved that de-regulation was not a momentary action but it was a characteristic of the following years. Although an “independent”<sup>7</sup> regulatory authority (RTUK) was established by the state following the end of the broadcasting monopoly, necessary regulations for enabling healthy functioning of the broadcasting sector were never accomplished. Particularly with regards to the ownership structures and to establishing an “enabling environment” for the pluralistic democratic participation in broadcasting, necessary legal arrangements were not efficiently performed.


Furthermore the state did not sufficiently develop the public service broadcaster TRT that had turned into a marginal media outlet after the introduction of the commercial channels. Although the crisis of the public service broadcasters after the deregulation process has been a common trait in almost every country, the Turkish case was exceptional. As of 2007, in European countries, average audience share of the public service broadcasters ranged between 35 and 50%, while Turkish TRT scored the lowest with only a 7.1% audience share (OECD 2007: 176). The State has not taken necessary actions to increase the competitiveness of TRT.

In short, neither through the broadcasting authority nor via the public service broadcasting the State intervened into the chaotic media market to improve its democratic deficit. The Turkish media landscape was left to the mercy of the almost non-regulated free-market.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Ministry of Labour and Social Security statistics, the number of journalists who actually have unfettered access to union rights is approximately 5 per cent (about 500 people) of the total number of workers in the journalism sector (roughly 10,000 people) (Tunc 2003: 9).

<sup>7</sup> Independence of RTUK is a highly contested issue, primarily due to the composition of the RTUK which has been criticized for being too political (Tılıç 2007: 64). Of the nine members of RTUK appointed by the parliament, five had to be nominated by the party or parties in power and four by the opposition parties, and furthermore, the head of RTUK reports directly to the prime minister. Thus government intervention in the practice of RTUK is common practice.




The Turkish experience exhibits strong parallels with global trends, particularly with the Latin American experience, where “the commercial media were in a prime position to take a great role in shaping the contours of the ‘public’ sphere thanks to the broader wave of privatization of public services and liberalization of economies”, and where “this dynamic has in large part coincided with an on-going era of democratization” (Blankson & Murphy 2007: 6). In both cases, however, liberalization was undertaken to create opportunities for big business and relieve government from some of its burdens, not to deepen democratic participation. In response to this climate, media regimes have pursued business, not public service goals, thus extending a broadcasting history defined by a narrow range of ideas, limited oppositional voices, and constricted debate (Fox & Waisbord 2002; Hernandez & McAnany 2001)

Although the general outlines of the emergent picture in the Turkish media environment following the transformations of the 80s and 90s is far from unique in comparison with those in other parts of the world, such general trends yield highly variable outcomes in different national contexts contingent upon the political configuration that underpin and shape them (Öncü 2004: 23). In order to provide an example of the specificity of the consequences of the Turkish media transformation, the next section is devoted to the story of a political party that emerged in Turkey around the early 2000s. Having benefited from the democracy-related problems inherent in the media landscape, the case of Young Party (*Genç Party - GP*) symbolizes one of the most negative possible outcomes of transformation periods.

### **3. Case of the Young Party (GP) as the incarnation of “spectacularization of politics”**

In order to understand the context of the emergence of the GP, one should consider the transformations of the 1980s and 1990s in Turkey, together with the reflections of these changes on the political communication sphere. According to Ergur (2002: 17-20) neo-liberal economic policies of 1980s, hand in hand with an evident increase in flow of information, reformed the established framework of Turkish society, in which two “crucial reference points” - *production* and *durability*, were replaced with new ones, namely *consumption* and *temporariness*. Reflections of these dramatic mental changes were obvious on the characteristics of “the political”. As highlighted by Cizre-Sakallioğlu and Yeldan (2000) the ‘hollowing out’ of politics in Turkey was taking place: a process of populist ‘anti-politics’ in which engaged civil society was replaced by the veneer-like ‘utopia’ of the market and consumption.

In parallel to these transformations, political representation, which had historically lacked sufficient organizational structures in Turkey, converted into a process in which *form* is overemphasized in contrast to diminished meaning of the *content*. Institutional politics was shaped by novel communicative




strategies. Changing societal dynamics (transforming production patterns and relationships, internal migration, urbanization, changing countryside, dissolving patriarchic family structure etc.), and the failure of established political communication methods to meet the needs of a changing society, paved the way for new political persuasion strategies in the country. The gradual increase in the *spectacle* aspect of political communication took place as a response to these dynamics throughout the 80s and 90s. In this new atmosphere, political persuasion was associated with a systematic and continuous flow of rhetoric, heavily loaded with visual components, while political/ideological connotations turned out to be minor and superficial. “The marketing logic” - the motto of the new era covering all aspects of social life, was translated into the political sphere as “political marketing”. Advertising agencies, image consultants, and polling professionals were employed in the political campaigns to “sell political products to voters” (Bostancı 1995: 82). Leaders and their images turned out to be the ideal products to sell in political campaigns. *Turgut Özal* of ANAP throughout the 80s, and *Tansu Çiller* of DYP in the 90s were the forerunners of the “image of the leader” trend. In this context, the mass media, particularly commercial TV channels that appeared in the Turkish media landscape in the early 90s, served as excellent platforms for the circulation of “the images designed for the consumers in the political market” (Yıldız 2002: 4-5). In return, the emerging “logic” of the transformed media system had significant reflections on the characteristics of the political. Indeed, during the 1990s, the Turkish mass media became little more than cheerleaders of this process of “hollowing out of politics” in Turkey (Cizre-Sakallıoğlu and Yeldan 2000).

The story of *Genc Party* (The Young Party) embodies the “spectacularization of the political” perfectly, not only due to its highly image/form-oriented communicative strategy, but also due to the remarkable success this strategy achieved in the decade following the media-transformations in Turkey (2000s) - a time when the consequences of the changes in the media sphere on “the political” turned out to be more manifest.

### 3.1 Birth of GP

Genc Party (GP) was established only five months before the 2002 general election by prominent businessman Cem Uzan, the eldest son of the Uzan Family - then one of the wealthiest families of Turkey. Originally farmers, the Uzan family made their fortune in the construction business, particularly by winning rewarding state dam contracts in the 1980s. In 1991, Uzan launched the first Turkish commercial TV station - *The Magic Box*, as a joint venture that involved the son of the then President Turgut Özal. The family became one of Turkey’s wealthiest, with a business empire ranging from the media and mobile phone network to energy. However they also have a history of conflicts with



minority shareholders, business partners and government regulators, and have been the focus of hundreds of lawsuits<sup>8</sup>.

Following the announcement of the election date in 2002, Cem Uzan “quit” the family business interests to initiate the ultra-nationalist *Genc Party (The Young Party) - GP*. The party did manage to win 7,5% of the vote in the elections, which was higher than various political parties with long historical traditions and organizations in Turkey, and a storm of controversy was raised over GP’s electoral campaign methods, which will be analyzed in the next section. The then head of TV Broadcasters Association of Turkey, Nuri Colakoglu, was among many others, who severely criticized GP’s campaign:

Uzan has his own media group, hired the best advertiser, and was running his campaign even before the first round. He has two newspapers and three TV channels, and rights to all the football games. At halftime of the games, we see him giving lectures and talking to people at rallies all around Turkey, accompanied by leading singers and performers. His political stance is in line with Haider and Le Pen - anti-American and anti-IMF, anti-European, and he appeals to unemployed young people. Turkey is ideal for a demagogue at this time. What should the media involvement be? Ignore him, launch a battle against him, report about him? [...] (LaMay 2002: 6)

### **3.2 GP’s 2002 Electoral Campaign : a novel political communication strategy**

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) found in their report on the Turkish elections in 2002 that “[t]he election campaign was short but active. Parties campaigned in a calm and peaceful atmosphere. Although there were a substantial number of cases of harassment reported by some political parties and by human rights groups, there was a general consensus that the situation had improved markedly compared to previous elections” (OSCE 2002: 2). Considering the electoral campaign conducted by GP, it is hardly possible to agree with the optimistic evaluation of OSCE report. Both the political messages (*content*) of GP, and the methods utilized to propagate them (*form*), did not only give birth to an atmosphere very different to “calm and peaceful”, but also revealed the dangerous directions of populism.

Although the content or political dimension of GP’s electoral campaign is at best peripheral to the spectacle that is designed to propagate them, the analysis begins with the political messages of GP<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> In July 2003, a United States court issued a ruling ordering Uzan Group to pay USD 4.26 billion in damages to Nokia and Motorola on charges of fraud, accusing the family of “an almost endless series of lies” (OBG 2004).

<sup>9</sup> The following analysis is based on Bora (2002) and Turan & Capan (2003).

### 3.2.1 Content

GP's political attitude can best be described as "eclectic ultra-nationalism", or "pop ultra-nationalism" (Bora 2002: 53-60). Although GP seemed to be flirting with voters of the existing ultra-nationalist parties, the ideological shallowness and lack of political arguments throughout GP's communication campaign were clearly dissimilar to that of the other parties. Having anger as the major motive, GP built its political rhetoric on severe criticism of the establishment and government, as well as various other institutions, such as IMF, World Bank or EU. However, the criticism of the status quo was non-rational, non-ideological, a-historical and inconsistent. In many respects GP's approach was anti-political and solely managerial, in a professional sense.

The weakness of the criticism was compensated with sophisticated, although irresponsible, populist promises on one hand, and a sophisticated communication strategy, on the other. Among others, "increasing the number of provinces from 81 to 250, 200 square meter state owned land to be given to every family, cheap credits for every family to be paid back in 30 years, distribution of all primary and secondary school books for free, abolishing VAT on foodstuff" were promised to voters, as "simple tasks for a dedicated leader", such as Cem Uzan (Bora 2002: 53-60). However, more than the charm of these promises, the way they were communicated to the voters made the difference in GP's case.


### 3.2.2 Form

Following the declaration of the election date GP contracted *Ali Taran Creative Workshop*, a prominent advertising agency in Turkey, which had implemented various commercially successful advertising campaigns, as well as provided the Uzan Group advertising services for its other businesses in preceding years. Consequently, the 2002 electoral campaign of GP was designed and implemented in a commercial marketing manner, on a product development rationale.

First of all, the image of GP was created as a typical "one-man" party. It is hard to remember any figure from the party, except its leader Cem Uzan. From continuous utilization of the first person singular (I'm, my, mine etc.), to including Uzan's personal signature in the party emblem, the only messages - the promises speculated throughout the campaign - are perfectly individualized in Cem Uzan. This preference, from a marketing perspective, is reasonable since his businessman background was sufficient to portray his power and his capacity to rule once given the chance.<sup>10</sup> Wealth, together with many other indicators such as his British-citizen wife, and his "famous" Dolce Gabana label

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<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, the predilection towards a one-man-show image has an organizational drive as well: there is no typical political party organization in GP, but professional employees, vastly from Uzan's existing businesses.



shirt, inevitably placed him in the “elite” category. However, this perception was juxtaposed with a “one-of-us” image symbolized by numerous signifiers (continuous physical touches with attendants of public meetings, randomly halting and hand shaking, not wearing a tie etc.). In short, the image of GP embodied in its leader was simple and clear: We have the power and will use it for you (Bora 2002: 53-60).

In order to comprehend how this image is circulated, one must take a closer look at two major components of GP’s communication strategy: the public meetings and mass media.


Public meetings of GP were instances of face-to-face communication (although highly mediated) between the party and voters. They were designed as splendid spectacles in which political content was at best minimal. A typical meeting opened up with a pop concert of a renowned musician and distribution of free meal and other gimmicks. Then Uzan would be invited to the stage gloriously to give a very short but provoking speech. After the speech, his departure from the meeting area and other visuals were projected on screens with emotional melodies. This scenario was repeated in each meeting with slight changes in the content of the speech, which was between 110 and 130 sentences (Goregenli 2003). Analysis of 25 speeches given by Uzan, between September 29 and October 30, 2002, reveals a content pattern as follows:

In the first part, existing common sense problems of the country are portrayed and it is emphasized that “all of us” share this destiny. Subsequently, foreigners and IMF are argued to be responsible for Turkey’s crisis: they are aware of the values, which Turkey inhabits, and exploit the country. The second part of the speech is full of harsh criticism of the government for being irresponsible, insufficient, corrupt, cowardly etc. Then GP and its future promises are presented. Finally, he concludes by continuous pledges on his honor, and leaves the crowd under protection of Allah - the God (Goregenli 2003).

During this short and simple speech, the masses were asked to repeat certain slogans and make populist pledges. Language was in line with the typical right-populist genre, with an advertising touch that used repetitions, phrases that end with exclamation marks, and simple, lasting slogans<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Among many competing parties, only GP had an outstanding and commonly known slogan before the elections: “Step out of Turkey’s path! You can’t stop it! Turkey’s coming!”. Likewise the advertising perspective can be observed in the name the party: Young Party. The adjective “young” aims to catch the voters in two aspects. Primarily, there is a popular belief in Turkey that the country has suffered a lot from the same “old” faces in the politics, therefore it is speculated that youth must be given a chance. In other words being “young” may sell in Turkish politics. In addition to this, in Turkey, a country with an extensively young population, attracting the votes of the youth guarantees the representation in Parliament. Therefore, naming the party “Young” aimed to lead the youth to identify with the party (Bora 2002: 53-60).




Another major characteristic of GP meetings was the relationship between these meetings and the mass media. Utilizing his own media group, which includes three TV stations, two newspapers, and several radio stations, Cem Uzan successfully expanded the reach of GP public meetings to a nation-wide level. Extensively partisan TV and radio stations, as well as a cellular phone network, propagated videos, talks and text messages loaded with GP propaganda, while group newspapers, in a similar attitude, were distributed for free throughout the electoral campaign. Most of these actions were in direct violation of the law of political campaigns, and a considerable amount of penalties were charged to Uzan Media Group<sup>12</sup>. However, with GP accusing the other media groups for imposing an embargo on the party and playing the underdog, sanctions of the regulatory organ provided more sympathy from voters. Thus it is fair to say that the party president's media group, his TV and radio channels and his newspapers acted as party broadcast organs (Can 2006: 395).

Beside extensive utilization of Uzan's media channels, there are two unique features of GP's mass media strategy, which have broader implications on the rationale of GP's electoral campaign. GP public meetings were designed to serve as "produced content" to be distributed via media channels of the Uzan group. In that sense public meetings were similar to TV, radio and print media advertisements of GP, which were produced in-house by Uzan group media outlets. There was a well-written script of meetings, a plot and several characters (main character was Uzan, while supporting roles were distributed among almost invisible and uniform party members and attendants of the meetings). Furthermore, in order to leave no possibility to digress from the designed screenplay, the meetings were directed professionally, however invisibly, by organizers. These events were, then, recorded (audio-visually, or in written form) in a refined technical quality, and edited in a similar manner. Finally, they were distributed in diverse time and space settings, via Uzan's media channels. In short, GP electoral meetings were strategically designed and orchestrated as future media products.

The second unique aspect of GP's electoral campaign in relation to the mass media is how GP communicated with other media outlets in Turkey. Although the Turkish public was clearly aware of GP's campaign before the elections, thanks to his media group and extensive number of public meetings, this did not find practically any reflection in the media, other than Uzan's own media. The only existing mentions about GP were about the unreasonable promises of Uzan or his impossible fantasies, with a dismissive and perfectly non-political tone. In other words, the media did not take GP seriously and did not act upon it as a political reality of the country, whether imaginary or realistic. Cleverly, GP built on this approach of the rival media groups as material to play the

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<sup>12</sup> The country's main media supervisory body, RTUK, suspended his three TV stations with a month-long broadcast ban for promoting personal interests.



underdog throughout its campaign, which was in line with the above mentioned core argument of GP: other media were embargoing GP (Gormus 2002: 4).

Moreover, the lack of any serious questions posed at the party rallies enabled GP to implement the communication strategy that it preferred: a one-way flow of information in which simple messages were continuously repeated through various channels (Gormus 2002: 4). As a rule, this approach did not include any kind of multi-way discussions or even dialogue<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, by not critically analyzing and posing inquiries about GP's ideology (or even action plan), the media provided GP with a desired communication environment.

#### 4. Conclusion


As a new political organization without any tradition and organization, GP's evident success in the 2002 elections did not have permanency. In the subsequent general elections in 2007, GP received 3 percent of the general votes, and it currently seems to be dissolved. Its activities and existence, which dominated the media sphere in the 2002 elections, have vanished. However, GP *could* find a space and attract considerable support on the political sphere, even if it was only for one election. It is worth underlining that although GP did not have any political foundations and arguments, exploitation of the anger of the voters was successfully realized via the utilization of extensive communication methods. In other words, GP communicated with the audiences perfectly even though it did not have anything to communicate. However for a short while, this strategy worked.

This new manner of political existence, which is vastly deployed by nationalist parties of various degrees in various countries (with Italy as the major example), has a few common characteristics. They are "new", in a sense that they penetrate the political arena not through existing parties but via individual leaders. Furthermore, they do not have a traditional political party organization, but more of a commercial enterprise structure. Due to the limited organizational capacity of such parties, communication with the voters is "loose" and mostly via mass media (Bora 2002: 55). Such loose communication fits with a focus on images and rhetoric, rather than content. It does not necessitate a communication based on dialogue, argumentation and reason, but a one-directional, repetitive and emotional one.

As analyzed in this article, the appearance of GP as a political actor in Turkey in 2002 was not coincidental: GP was a "movement" embedded in the post-90s media-saturated Turkish political space. Thus, the communicative strategies deployed by GP did not appear out of the blue and did not disappear for good.

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<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, no media channels, apart from the media group owned by the president of GP, were allowed to participate in GP meetings or conferences. Programs about the GP were produced and broadcast only by its own media group, which prevented Uzan from any encounters with any scrutiny.



Its antecedents in the 1980s had pioneered the image-based “loose” communication methods, and the variants of these techniques that were further developed by GP are currently common-practice in Turkey in the political sphere.

Therefore, it can be argued that GP is a “seed” of the various transformations witnessed in Turkey since the 1980s, which have brought about a “pseudo-democratic” public sphere. The affluence of the media environment as a product of liberalization of broadcasting did not translate into anything but a shallow version of democratic participation, promoted as “freedom to choose”. Solely economic motivations of the media ownership and exclusively “rating-oriented” mentality of the broadcast system generated an abundance of evanescent images, “ideas” and information. As noted by Baker (1995: 18), this leads to a “vertigo of communication in which the phenomena/the facts are presented (by the media) in a way that they become incomprehensible, unthinkable. They are not the facts anymore, they are the *mediatic facts*”. In this communicative atmosphere “sense-making” turned out to be an awfully tricky task, and the political space got its share of this process, as “spectacularization of the political”.


This conclusion does not categorically mean that the introduction of the commercial channels is the sole cause of such a loss of democratic imagination in Turkey. However, as the case of GP or other political actors who benefited from this problematical climate illustrate clearly, such a communicative environment does not entail democratization but malfunction of the political space. The path Turkey followed in relation to the media transformation was initiated, shaped and enjoyed by the power elite who had both commercial and political interests, rather than public concerns, such as democratization. The rise of the GP can be seen as the landmark of this process, whose leader was the owner of the first commercial TV channel *Magic Box* that paved the way to the era of de-regulation in broadcasting in Turkey.

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