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## Politics, Media and Post-Truth Society in the Time of the Pandemic



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# Politics, Media and Post-Truth Society in the Time of the Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected all countries at different levels, but mostly negatively, in areas such as in realms social, political, and economic, as well as in terms of health and security. While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in different dimensions remain among the most popularly discussed topics of the recent period, this study focuses on the effects of the pandemic on politics, media, and the post-truth society. In the first part, it attempts to determine whether there is a parallelism between the methods of governments and politicians in different countries in the fight against the pandemic, and their levels of development and democratization through examples. The uncertainties experienced in the period of the pandemic, in which all countries were caught unprepared, the withdrawal from normalcy, and the problems experienced in the economies were followed by a rapid recovery process, especially with the discovery of the vaccine. While this recovery was experienced more rapidly and effectively in democratic countries, a different picture emerged in countries with weaker democratic traditions, higher authoritarian tendencies, and under the rule of populist leaders. In this context, the performances of democratic, populist, and authoritarian governments are evaluated comparatively. In the second part, in addition to the impact of the pandemic on the media sector, the social effects of individuals' news consumption habits in the so-called "post-truth" era will be discussed. As a matter of fact, the negative effect of fake/false news during the pandemic has shown its negative effects in different areas, especially in terms of social well-being. This situation has been defined as an "infodemic" by the World Health Organization and has been considered to be at least as dangerous as the pandemic itself. In such a period when a belief in science and scientists are most needed, the reactions were given to the news about COVID-19 at the level of individuals, the extent to which the fake/false news can be noticed, and the role of all these changes in the continuation of the post-truth society will be discussed within the scope of the study.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

**D**eclared as a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, COVID-19 has continued to make its impact felt deeply in almost every country since the day it emerged. During this time, all countries have been affected by the pandemic to varying degrees, but mostly negatively, in the social, political, and economic, and in health and safety areas. As of October 2021, approximately 5 million people worldwide have died, and 241 million have been infected. With the discovery of the vaccine, the number of people vaccinated began to be discussed, rather than the number of cases and deaths. Although there have been changes in the countries' policies to fight COVID-19, uncertainties about the future still exist. While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in different dimensions remain among the most commonly discussed topics of the recent period, this study focuses on the effects of the pandemic on politics, media and the post-truth society. In this context, while the first part focuses on the relationship between the pandemic and politics, the performances of the countries in the fight against the pandemic are examined through the forms of government in various countries and their levels of development and democratization. Besides the effects of the pandemic on the media sector, the second part

focuses on the need for accurate information in the so-called "post-truth" era, the news consumption habits of individuals, and the spread of fake news and lies.

## Politics and the Fight Against the Pandemic

The relationship of the pandemic with politics is among important topics currently being, as are countries' strategies to combat the pandemic, their performance, the steps taken on individual rights and freedoms etc. When examining how governments and politicians in different countries manage the pandemic process, in most cases we see models that cannot produce a quick response and which falter as a result. However, when we look at it by dividing it into sub-areas such as the development levels of countries, democratization levels, owned resources, etc., it is possible to say that some countries have coped better than others. In the first part of the study, the methods and strategies followed in the fight against the pandemic at state level and their rate of success will be examined. Considering that the impact of the pandemic is still felt intensely, there will be an attempt to determine whether there is a parallelism between the management styles, development and democratization levels of the countries concerned, with an evaluation to be made through examples.

Considering the management styles of various countries, it is possible to say that the practices in combating the

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pandemic show serious differences in countries with a different understanding of management and policies followed which diverge from each other. As a matter of fact, countries with authoritarian regimes and/or populist leaders seem to be worse off in the pandemic, apart from countries with a high state capacity and previous experience in health crises, such as China and Singapore in Asia.<sup>2</sup> This failure has also brought about a decline in popular support in said countries. As revealed in the research conducted by M. Bayerlein and G. Gyöngyösi, although populist and non-populist leaders have implemented similar policies in the pandemic, non-populist leaders increased their power in society, while populist leaders lost power and their governments weakened at the same rate.<sup>3</sup> In countries under the rule of populist leaders, the policies of the said leaders to turn the crisis into an opportunity, and in this context, the method of suppressing opposition and critical voices have also had an impact on this situation. As a matter of fact, populist governments have tended to gather power into their own hands by impeding the functioning of democratic institutions, especially through the implementation of a state of emergency.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, while even in countries where democracy is more developed, the fight against the pandemic could not be started immediately, the decisions of populist leaders or

authoritarian regimes were noticeably slow, as well as arbitrary. When we look at the political decisions of the populist leaders during the pandemic management period, it is possible to observe that the scientific data have not been taken seriously enough, the suggestions of the scientists are not implemented sufficiently, the lockdown decisions are implemented too late or limited and the lockdown measures are very limited in order to keep the economy alive. Some populist leaders (Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador for example) have even refused to wear a mask, which was identified as the simplest but most effective protection method, causing their attitude toward the seriousness of the situation to be questioned. Similarly, there have been attempts to politicize the pandemic in countries under the rule of populist leaders or where there is a tendency to authoritarianism, and this has turned into a tool of polarization. For example, Pauline Hanson, the leader of the far-right party *One Nation* in Australia, defined the virus as the "Chinese Virus", called on the public to boycott Chinese products, demanded that the government stop foreign investments from China, and clamored against the social distancing and lockdown decisions taken by the government. She used divisive rhetoric in line with many authoritarian leaders in the world.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Berk Esen, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN26tws3tg>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bayerlein and Gyöző Gyöngyösi (2020) "The Impact of COVID-19 on Populism," *Kieler Beiträge Zur Wirtschaftspolitik*, No. 29. [https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/Michael\\_Bayerlein/Impact\\_COVID\\_19\\_on\\_Populism\\_Bayerlein\\_et\\_al\\_6\\_2020.pdf](https://www.ifw-kiel.de/fileadmin/Dateiverwaltung/IfW-Publications/Michael_Bayerlein/Impact_COVID_19_on_Populism_Bayerlein_et_al_6_2020.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> A.g.e.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Sengul (2020) "Australia" G. Katsambekis and Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.) *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report*. No. 7. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/132452/2/interventions-7-populism-pandemic-UPLOAD.pdf>.

As Didem Seyis has revealed in the comparison of the cases and death rates of countries, populist governments are more unstable and less successful in combating the pandemic compared to mainstream governments. In the words of Seyis, "The most striking example of this is the USA, which, despite having the largest economy in the world, spent most of the pandemic during the presidency of populist Donald J. Trump with the number of cases over 29 million and the loss of nearly 535 thousand lives."<sup>6</sup> Trump, who exhibited unsuccessful crisis management and handed over the reins to Joe Biden after the November election, criticized the statements of the World Health Organization, refrained from wearing masks, criticized the states that imposed curfews, and accused China of spreading the virus, in his statements both at press conferences and on his Twitter account.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, as part of the COVID-19 measures, he has imposed restrictions on Mexican immigrants crossing the border, while also suspending the visa issuance processes and implementing anti-immigrant policies.<sup>8</sup>

It is possible to observe similar trends to the United States in other countries that are also ruled by populist leaders, such as Hungary, the United Kingdom, Brazil, the

Philippines, etc. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is one of the leaders who uses the pandemic to consolidate his own political power. In addition to the restriction measures implemented by all countries in the fight against the pandemic, the fact that he has the authority to rule the country indefinitely by decree within the scope of the state of emergency has taken his country away from democracy with an approach that is incompatible with the conditions of the pandemic and which excludes the opposition. As a matter of fact, he replied to the intense criticisms from the opposition parties as follows: "We will manage this process without you".<sup>9</sup> Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, one of the first names that come to mind among the leaders who have unsuccessfully managed the pandemic, also downplayed the virus at the beginning of the pandemic, describing it as "hysteria" and "small flu". Claiming that less than 1000 people would lose their lives in the pandemic and that curfews would unnecessarily harm the economy, he has changed health minister three times during the pandemic and accused the governors who imposed curfews of "tyranny".<sup>10</sup> Brazil, which did not implement lockdowns in order to avoid problems in the economy, faced severe consequences as a result, and the number of cases and

<sup>6</sup> Didem Seyis (2020) "Health Policies of Populists in the COVID-19 Process," *Istanbul Institute of Political Studies Analysis*, March. <https://www.istanpol.org/post/COVID-19-surecinde-populistlerin-saglik-politikalari>.

<sup>7</sup> Donald G. McNeil Jr. and Andrew Jacobs (2020) "Blaming China for Pandemic, Trump Says U.S. Will Leave the WHO," *New York Times*, 29 May. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/health/virus-who.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Dildar Baykan (2020) "Trump announces suspension of immigration to the US for 60 days," *Anadolu Agency*, April 22. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/trump-abdy-gocmen-kabulununun-60-gun-sureyle-askiya-alinacagini-duyurdu/1813744>.

<sup>9</sup> Özge Çakır Somlyai (2020) "The bill that caused controversy in Hungary became law: the state of emergency was extended indefinitely, Prime Minister Orban will rule the country with decrees for an indefinite period," *Medyascope*, March 30. <https://medyascope.tv/2020/03/30/macaristanda-tartismalara-yol-acan-tasari-yasalasti-ohal-suresiz-olarak-uzatildi-basbakan-orban-ulkeyi-belirsiz-bir-sure-boyunca-khklarla-yonetecek/>.

<sup>10</sup> "COVID: Brazil's Bolsonaro calls governors 'tyrants' over lockdowns," *BBC News*, 22 March 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56479614>; "COVID-19: Brazil to get fourth health minister since pandemic began," *BBC News*, 16 Mart 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-56410626>.



deaths increased uncontrollably (as of October 2021, the number of people who have lost their lives in the country has exceeded 600 thousand, and approximately 22 million people have been infected so far).<sup>11</sup> The Philippines, on the other hand, carried out one of the longest and strictest shutdowns, in addition to the measures taken by the populist and authoritarian President Rodrigo Duterte during the pandemic, such as the cancellation of international flights and the creation of checkpoints under military surveillance. Duterte ordered the use of violence and even shootings against those who violated the curfew. At the same time, he has taken his place among the leaders who use the pandemic as a pressure tool, with extremist policies such as the arrest of people who raise their voices against the measures taken, and the decision to close the country's leading media platform ABS-CBN.<sup>12</sup> Although unlike other populist leaders, he listened to the scientists and implemented their recommendations, his excessive practices made him look like the other populist leaders in terms of the privileges he gave to other politicians and his relatives in the country.<sup>13</sup> In The United Kingdom, which has a more established democracy compared to

the countries listed above, but is led by the populist Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the herd immunity policy implemented at the beginning of the pandemic has provoked serious criticism.<sup>14</sup> The inaccuracy of this policy, which was taken under the influence of Prime Minister Johnson's underestimation of the severity of the pandemic, was revealed by the projections made<sup>15</sup>, and within the framework of the increasing number of cases and deaths, a lockdown policy was adopted in the United Kingdom. The UK has been able to reverse its initial unsuccessful policies with the implementation of lockdown, restrictions, and intensive vaccination in the following stages of the pandemic. Despite this, the United Kingdom maintains its place among the top 10 countries that have been affected worst by the pandemic, with more than 160 thousand people losing their lives and about 8.5 million people being infected.

It would be appropriate to talk about the existence of countries and leaders who, like all countries, were seriously and negatively affected by the pandemic, but who managed to quickly prevent the negative effects thanks to the measures they took, in order to be able to compare them with the unsuccessful examples. Among

<sup>11</sup> Thomás Zicman de Barros (2020) "Brazil," G. Katsambekis and Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.) *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report*. No. 7. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/132452/2/interventions-7-populism-pandemic-UPLOAD.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> Lynzy Billing (2020) "Duterte's Response to the Coronavirus: 'Shoot Them Dead,'" *Foreign Policy*, April 16. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/duterte-philippines-coronavirus-response-shoot-them-dead/>; Tom Smith (2020) "Philippines: Rodrigo Duterte's dictatorship sinks to new depths with closure of main broadcaster," *The Conversation*, 7 May 2020. <https://theconversation.com/philippines-rodrigo-dutertes-dictatorship-sinks-to-new-depths-with-closure-of-main-broadcaster-138025>.

<sup>13</sup> Nicole Curato (2020) "The Philippines," G. Katsambekis and Y. Stavrakakis (Eds.) *Populism and the Pandemic: A Collaborative Report*. No. 7. <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/132452/2/interventions-7-populism-pandemic-UPLOAD.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> House of Commons (2021) "Coronavirus: Lessons Learned to Date" *Sixth Report of the Health and Social Care Committee and Third Report of the Science and Technology Committee of Session 2021–22*. September 21.

<sup>15</sup> James Gallagher (2020) "Coronavirus: UK changes course amid death toll fears," *BBC News*, March 17. <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51915302>.

the democracies and leaders considered successful in the fight against COVID-19, Germany, and New Zealand stand out as remarkable examples. German Chancellor Angela Merkel and New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern outperformed both populist and male leaders within the framework of the strategies they implemented during the pandemic. Therefore, one of the topics of discussion during the pandemic has been the relative success of female and male leaders in the pandemic. In this regard, the research by S. Garikipati and U. Kambhampati examining the first six months' crisis management of 19 female leaders in 194 countries suggests that female leaders are more successful due to their more proactive, open to communication, and coordinated attitudes in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. When examined in general, female leaders were able to react swiftly and decisively against the pandemic by making the decision to implement lockdown measures more quickly.<sup>16</sup>

Germany, under the leadership of Angela Merkel, was among the countries with the highest number of cases at the beginning of the pandemic, despite its strong economy. When the World Health Organization data for the first six months of the pandemic were examined, Germany ranked 6th in the top 10 countries with the highest number of cases in the world.<sup>17</sup> Although there

are deficiencies and inadequacies in the measures taken from time to time, Germany has drawn a more successful graphic than the countries in its own classification and other EU members. The reasons behind this are factors such as Germany's economic strength, adequate health system, incentive packages offered to its citizens, rapid testing opportunities, availability of the vaccine, and the speed of its implementation. The aforementioned activities were carried out to prevent the spread of the disease, and to help protect the high-risk groups such as the elderly, chronic patients, and health personnel.<sup>18</sup> New Zealand, on the other hand, has also taken its place among the countries that have performed most successfully, especially in the first months, against the COVID-19 pandemic. As a matter of fact, in the country led by Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, it was declared that no new cases were encountered in June 2020, with the implementation of border controls, disease monitoring, isolation, social distancing and hygiene measures, extensive testing, and monitoring of potential cases.<sup>19</sup> By using the advantages of being an island country effectively, New Zealand has succeeded in preventing new cases by monitoring every potential case. It is possible to see this success in the total number of cases and people who lost their lives during the pandemic. In fact, since March 2020, the number of infected people in New Zealand has been limited to

<sup>16</sup> Supriya Garikipati and Uma Kambhampati (2020) "Leading the Fight Against the Pandemic: Does Gender 'Really' Matter?," SSRN, June 3, <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3617953>.

<sup>17</sup> World Health Organization (2020) "Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Situation Report", No. 107, [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200506COVID-19-sitrep-107.pdf?sfvrsn=159c3dc\\_2](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200506COVID-19-sitrep-107.pdf?sfvrsn=159c3dc_2).

<sup>18</sup> Muhteber Hüsmenoğlu and Berra Yılmaz Kuşaklı (2021) "German healthcare system COVID-19 pandemic situation analysis", *Sağ Aka Magazine*, 8(2), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Gizem Sade (2021) "How Did New Zealand Defeat Corona Virus?," *Euronews*, October 7, <https://tr.euronews.com/2020/06/08/yeni-zelanda-COVID-19-u-nas-l-yendi-hangi-stratejileri-uygulad>.

approximately 5,000 people, while the number of people who have lost their lives due to COVID-19 has been only 27.<sup>20</sup>

In Turkey, where the first pandemic case was detected in March 2020, many measures being implemented in the world were quickly implemented. In this context, a series of measures such as flight bans, curfews, mask requirement, remote working, and short-time working allowance has been taken. However, the changes in the statistics announced by the government over time, the failure in the distribution of masks and colognes to people over the age of 65 at the beginning of the pandemic, and the shortcomings in some measures have attracted criticism. With a circular issued by the Ministry of the Interior, municipalities in metropolitan cities such as Ankara and Istanbul were prohibited from launching aid and donation campaigns, designed specifically in order to support citizens in difficult situations, and the government chose to follow a divisive polarization policy in this regard.<sup>21</sup> The launch of a central aid campaign called “We are Self-Sufficient, Turkey” after this ban reveals the mission of helping the masses behind the political success of the Justice and Development Party and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The fact that this aid mission was not wasted on municipalities led by opposition parties, even under pandemic conditions, has

been one of the important indicators of this polarization.<sup>22</sup> The emergence of tendencies similar to the reflexes of populist leaders discussed above, in Turkey from time to time, has brought about the use of the pandemic especially for propaganda purposes and its use in politics.<sup>23</sup> It is obvious that there is a need to adopt a partisan understanding on issues that have a global impact, such as the pandemic, and to deal with the issue on the basis of scientific knowledge, taking into account the risks posed by the politicization of the issue.<sup>24</sup> Despite all these developments, the steps are taken in the pandemic and the performance of the government were evaluated positively by the citizens. As a matter of fact, as revealed in a public survey conducted by Kadir Has University, 59.2% of the citizens find the economic support packages, while 57.7% find the government's policies and the measures taken by the municipalities “successful” or “very successful”.<sup>25</sup> Compared to other countries, Turkey's performance in accessing and vaccinating citizens shows that it is in a good position in the management of the pandemic.

As a result, despite many countries being unprepared for the pandemic, the uncertainties experienced in the process, their subsequent withdrawal, and the problems experienced in their economies, especially after the discovery of the vaccine, despite all this a rapid recovery

<sup>20</sup> Johns Hopkins University Coronavirus Resource Center, <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Ayşe Sayın (2020) “Coronavirus: Why municipalities' aid campaigns created controversy, what do the government and opposition say?,” *BBC News*, April 1. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-52127212>.

<sup>22</sup> Seda Demiralp (2021) “COVID-19, Populism, and Political Change In Turkey,” *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 19(4), 127.

<sup>23</sup> Şebnem Yardımcı Geyikçi (2021) “Pandemic and Populism,” *Politik Yol*, May 15, <https://www.politikyol.com/pandemi-ve-populizm/>.

<sup>24</sup> Afşin Yurdakul, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN26tws3tg>.

<sup>25</sup> Mustafa Aydın et al. (2021) “Quantitative Research Report: Social and Political Trends in Turkey 2020”, *Kadir Has University Turkey Studies Group*, January 7, 128.



period have begun, especially in democratic and highly developed countries. The attitudes of the leaders at the beginning of the pandemic led to a significant increase in the number of cases and deaths in some countries, as seen in examples such as the USA and the United Kingdom, which are more democratic than others but led by populist leaders. With the discovery of the vaccine and the change of president in the elections, as in the case of the USA, countries have succeeded in reversing the negativities. It has been observed that in countries such as Hungary, Brazil and the Philippines, where the tradition of democracy is weaker, the tendencies toward authoritarianism are high, and in those which are led by populist leaders, government figures tend to turn this crisis into an opportunity to consolidate power; rather than fighting the pandemic itself. Examples such as the efforts of each country to suppress dissident voices in parallel with the fight against the pandemic, and interventions against freedom of expression and individual rights and freedoms have shifted the focus to different areas in these countries' struggles. In countries like Turkey, which "have an authoritarian populist government, where elections can be held, where the opposition is still effective, and therefore defined as competitive/authoritarian by political scientists", in other words, in the "grey area", the pandemic management is better than the other populist countries listed above. It is possible to say that it coped better than the rest, yet "populist leader reflexes" are seen from time to time.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the examples discussed above, such as Germany and New Zealand, which have established democracies and are led especially by women leaders, are important in terms of showing that democratic countries can produce more permanent and inclusive solutions to the problems experienced during the pandemic. Another important issue to be considered in the relationship between the pandemic and politics is the issue of regaining the rights and freedoms that have been suppressed due to the measures taken. Even in countries such as the USA, where freedoms are unwaveringly protected, individual rights and freedoms have been restricted during the pandemic period. There have been practices such as banning the entry of unvaccinated people into certain places, the obligation to wear masks, and curfews.<sup>27</sup> In the medium term, these restrictions will be lifted or reassessed in countries with predominantly democratic aspects, especially by voicing voter demands in parliaments. In countries led by populist leaders and tending to authoritarianism, it is still unclear how long the restrictions will last or how much of the restricted individual freedoms will return.<sup>28</sup> The changes to be experienced after the pandemic in this regard have the potential to invite discussion of the relationship between the pandemic and politics in a different dimension.

<sup>26</sup> B. Esen, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021; Şebnem Yardımcı Geyikçi (2021) "Pandemic and Populism," *Politik Yol*, May 15, <https://www.politikyol.com/pandemi-ve-populizm/>.

<sup>27</sup> B. Esen, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021.

<sup>28</sup> A.g.e.

## Media and Post-Truth Society in the Shadow of the Pandemic

The impact of the pandemic has deeply affected institutions and organizations, communities and individuals in almost every region. It is a known fact that access to information is vital in times of crises such as disasters, pandemics and wars, and thus the role of the media becomes more critical. In this environment of uncertainty, in which long-term curfews are experienced, new measures are implemented every day due to changing conditions, and new information is constantly conveyed by official institutions, individuals have been desirous of following the developments regularly through traditional and new media channels. It would not be wrong to claim that individuals have become more dependent on the news media during the pandemic period compared to the pre-pandemic period. Although the media sector, like all other sectors and institutions, was caught unawares by the pandemic, it provided active support to governments in matters such as providing the necessary information and implementing the measures immediately. In addition, individuals have contributed to the process, by the dissemination of both true and false information, especially through social media channels. The panic and fear caused by the spread of unconfirmed and false information once again showed the importance of access to accurate information in this period. In this

part of the study, the impact of the pandemic on the media sector, as well as the social effects of individuals' news consumption habits in the so-called "post-truth" era will be discussed. In the post-reality period, which refers to a situation in which "objective truths are less effective than emotions and personal convictions in determining public opinion on a particular subject," as Emre Erdoğan puts it, we see "the destruction of the social perception towards science and scientists."<sup>29</sup> In a period such as this, when science and scientists are most needed, the reactions given to the news about COVID-19 at the individual level, the extent to which the fake/false news can be noticed, and the role of all these changes in the proliferation of the post-reality society will be discussed.

Access to information is a necessity to maintain our daily lives, comprehend what is happening around us, and take action against possible developments. The increase in the number and variety of platforms where we can access information, and the proliferation of information providers in the past decade have brought about increasing competition in the media sector, and as a natural result, an abundance of information has been experienced.<sup>30</sup> In an environment where such an abundance of information is experienced, the most obvious need for the media and communication sector is access to accurate and confirmed information, especially in an environment such as a pandemic where the situation rapidly and continuously changes. For example,

<sup>29</sup> Emre Erdoğan (2020) "From the Editor", *Reflective Journal of Social Sciences*, 1(1), p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Andreu Casero-Ripollés (2020) "Impact of COVID-19 on the media system. Communicative and democratic consequences of

news consumption during the outbreak," *El profesional de la información*, 29(2), p. 2-3.

it has been observed that there has been a huge increase in information consumption with the declaration of the State of Emergency in the USA. The percentage of people who closely follow the news about the coronavirus increased by 32% in the second half of March 2020, compared to the number of those following the political news for the previous two weeks.<sup>31</sup> According to the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* findings, which cover 49 different countries on 6 continents, an increase was observed in the news consumption of reliable and well-known channels, especially in countries with strong and independent media channels. This is closely related to trust in the news. While Finland is the leader in people trusting the news at 65% of the population, the USA is the last country in trusting the news with a figure of 29%.<sup>32</sup> In the study, which determined that television is still an important tool in news consumption, it is stated that the demand for print media has decreased due to limited physical movement. It has been determined that the use of social media has been very common, especially among young people and groups with lower education levels.<sup>33</sup> The abundant use of social media has had significant effects on the spread of fake/false news. As a matter of fact, in the aforementioned research, platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp were pinpointed as the channels where fake news spread the most.

Although the acceleration of news and information flow in the digitalized world has facilitated access to information, it has also brought about a serious decline in individuals' questioning and cross-checking of the news they access. This has increased the fact and risk of the rapid production and dissemination of fake news. Parallel to the increase in news consumption, especially in times of crisis, there is a serious increase in the speed of spreading false information. While individuals tend to believe in such information in the post-truth era we are currently living in, this growth in the spread of misinformation brings with it a number of problems. As Waisbord puts it, "fake news is fabricated information that cleverly imitates regular news and uses existing public beliefs to influence and destabilize society and institutions, creating confusion and anxiety among citizens."<sup>34</sup> This situation, which has become more significant especially during the pandemic is expressed as an "infodemic" and emerges as a phenomenon that threatens public health at least as much as the pandemic itself. The World Health Organization defines the infodemic as "the vast body of knowledge that emerges during an epidemic, some true and some false, spreading rapidly like a virus and complicating the health organization".<sup>35</sup> While the widespread use of social media accelerates the production and dissemination of

<sup>31</sup> A.g.e., p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Nic Newman et al. (2021) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021*, [https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital\\_News\\_Report\\_2021\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2021-06/Digital_News_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> A.g.e., p. 9.

<sup>34</sup> Waisbord, Silvio (2018) "Truth is What Happens to News: On Journalism, Fake news, and Post-truth". *Journalism Studies*, 19(13), p. 1866-1878.

<sup>35</sup> World Health Organization (2020) "Managing the COVID-19 infodemic: Promoting healthy behaviours and mitigating the harm from misinformation and disinformation," September 23. For

the aforementioned news, this indicates that the trust in traditional media and their importance has decreased.

Misinformation exists in all countries, regardless of social, cultural, and economic levels. However, research shows that the resistance to disinformation/misinformation is higher in countries where media diversity and freedom are strong.<sup>36</sup> Along with the pandemic, serious problems have been experienced in media diversity and freedom. And this situation is in parallel with the problems faced by media organizations and media organs in their daily functioning. When the impact of the pandemic on the media is examined, while the media outlets in Europe and America have stated that they have had the most financial difficulties, they emphasized that the free and polyphonic media could not catch up with the digitalization brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic period due to financial reasons. For example, in the first 6 months of the pandemic, approximately 37,000 employees from the media sector in the USA were laid off, given mandatory leave, or had their salaries reduced.<sup>37</sup> In such an environment, experts state that the shrinkage of the sector in this way puts the traditional media in danger of extinction.<sup>38</sup> The importance of established/traditional media is evident in sharing and circulating confirmed information, especially

in times of crisis such as pandemics. The difficulties experienced hinder this situation and contribute to the continuation of the post-truth situation.

The report titled “The Impact of the Sanitary Crisis on Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom” published by the Council of Europe touched upon the difficulties faced by press and media organizations and listed the difficulty of accessing accurate, impartial, transparent, and diverse information as one of the most important problems.<sup>39</sup> Especially during the pandemic period, developments such as the introduction of travel restrictions including on journalists, the blocking of access to some regions, the inadequacy of press cards, and the blocking of access to information by official authorities due to the state of emergency, brought difficulties to the media sector and news production. The risks to the safety and health of press members trying to gather news under pandemic conditions also reveal a completely different dimension of the subject. The problems experienced in the media sector and news production bring about the appropriate conditions for the production and dissemination of fake/false information. Considering the negative effects of the infodemic on social health, the intense campaigns carried out by anti-vaccine groups on social media in almost every country

details see. <https://www.who.int/news/item/23-09-2020-managing-the-COVID-19-infodemic-promoting-healthy-behaviours-and-mitigating-the-harm-from-misinformation-and-disinformation>.

<sup>36</sup> S. Koçer, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiN26tws3tg>.

<sup>37</sup> “News Media Outlets Have Been Ravaged by the Pandemic.” Accessed 8 October 2021.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/10/business/media/news-media-coronavirus-jobs.html>

<sup>38</sup> Damian Radcliffe (2020) “COVID-19 has ravaged American Newsrooms – here’s why that matters,” *The Conversation*, June 20, <https://theconversation.com/COVID-19-has-ravaged-american-newsrooms-heres-why-that-matters-141955>.

<sup>39</sup> Council of Europe, *The Impact of the Sanitary Crisis on Freedom of Expression and Media Freedom*, July 7, <https://rm.coe.int/16809ef1c7>.

increase social risks during the pandemic. In fact, contrary to the campaigns carried out by governments, in order to reach the necessary vaccination levels to ensure social immunity, anti-vaccine individuals hinder vaccination efforts with the error-strewn and unscientific contents they produce. People's choice of ignorance over science and their pursuit of conspiracy theories brings with them social, economic, and political problems in every country, beyond the health sector, in the post-truth era. Considering the allegations made by anti-vaccine supporters during the pandemic and reaching the realms of conspiracy theory, statements such as "microchipping", "changing people's genetic structures" or "neutering" through vaccines negatively affect the process of combating the pandemic in every country's public opinion.<sup>40</sup> Especially in an environment where people who believe in the power of science support the vaccine and have completed the vaccination process, and therefore do not feel the need to share their positive examples, while questionable information spreads faster, the voices of the anti-vaccine movement continue to be louder.

In order to see the dimensions of the infodemic during the pandemic, the report titled "Journalism, Press Freedom and COVID-19" prepared by UNESCO at the

very beginning of the pandemic reveals striking data. As stated in the report, Bruno Kessler Foundation researchers conducted an analysis of 112 million public social media posts in 64 languages and found that 40% of these posts came from unreliable sources. Similarly, within the scope of different research, 178 million Twitter posts related to COVID-19 were examined and it was discovered that approximately 42% of these posts were produced by bot accounts and 40% of them were not reliable sources.<sup>41</sup> In an environment where so much misinformation is spread, journalists who have the potential to spread the correct information face a number of obstacles, as highlighted above. In addition to the problems already expressed, Reporters Without Borders has documented attacks against 125 journalists in 29 countries, including deportation, detention, interrogation, police brutality, revoking press cards, and confiscating electronic devices.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, the Index on Censorship data identified more than 400 cases where journalists were prevented from reporting on COVID-19.<sup>43</sup>

Of course, Turkey is not exempt from all these trends seen in the world at large. According to the report prepared by the International Press Institute, the pandemic negatively has affected the media, especially

<sup>40</sup> Okan Yücel (2021) "The Five Conspiracy Theories That Anti-Vacciners Are Trying To Spread Most," *Medyascope*, July 20, <https://medyascope.tv/2021/07/20/besibiryerde-4-asi-karsitilarinin-en-cok-yaymaya-calistigi-bes-komplo-teorisi/>; Neelaveni Padayachee and Varsha Bangalee (2021) "Reluctant to be vaccinated for COVID-19? Here are six myths you can put to rest," *The Conversation*, July 30, <https://theconversation.com/reliant-to-be-vaccinated-for-covid-19-here-are-six-myths-you-can-put-to-rest-165027>.

<sup>41</sup> UNESCO (2020), *Journalism, press freedom and COVID-19*, April 30, [https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco\\_COVID\\_brief\\_en.pdf](https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/unesco_COVID_brief_en.pdf), p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> For details see Reporters without Borders website: <https://rsf.org/en/tracker19-Coronavirus-COVID19>.

<sup>43</sup> For details see International Press Institute website: <https://ipi.media/COVID19-media-freedom-monitoring/>.



the independent media in Turkey, as it has in other countries. Problems such as the decrease in the advertising budgets of independent media organizations under pandemic conditions, the decrease in sales due to the fact that readers prefer not to handle printed products for fear of infection, and the disruptions to the distribution sector due to curfews have left these organizations in financial difficulties.<sup>44</sup> In research on trust in institutions and organizations, the media has maintained its position as the least trusted institution for years. For example, when the survey on Social and Political Trends in Turkey, which is carried out regularly every year by Kadir Has University is analyzed, it is seen that the media has been the least trusted institution for the last three years.<sup>45</sup>

Considering Turkey in particular, it can be claimed that, in the words of Suncem Koçer, we live in a post-truth society in which reality lost its power after the 1980s and 90s, that is, in a situation where accuracy or social and professional ideals (accuracy, independence, accountability, etc.) are not strictly respected.<sup>46</sup> Such a social structure brought about the decline of the mainstream media in the eyes of society and the rise of alternative channels, thus reducing the trust in the institutions of democracy and the media. This brings about the creation of an environment suitable for the

spread of false information through alternative channels, and the proliferation of the post-truth society.

According to a study that compared the contents of a total of 617 items examined on three news verification platforms (Teyit.org; Malumatfuruş; Doğruluğu Ne?) in January-June 2020, more than half of the contents in question consisted of coronavirus-related stories.<sup>47</sup> It has been stated that 94% of the contents subject to the said review are erroneous, 2% is correct and 3% is partially correct. When the contents of this misinformation spread in the first 5 months of the epidemic are examined, it is seen that it focuses on the spread, treatment, and effects of the virus, the practices, and statements of the authorities, and the social effects of the virus.<sup>48</sup> As both worldwide and Turkey-wide studies reveal, the rate of spread of false news reveals the risk faced.

Although the spread of misinformation has accelerated, it should not be forgotten that social media platforms are the most important tool used by institutions such as governments, non-governmental organizations, and universities to spread information quickly, especially during the pandemic period. Considering that accurate and reliable news affects people psychologically in a positive way, it is obvious that information to be shared

<sup>44</sup> İpek Yezdani (2021) "Journalism in the Shadow of the Pandemic: Turkey", *International Press Institute*. <https://freeturkeyjournalists.ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/TUR-Turkey-Report-COVID19-Impact-on-Media-FINAL.pdf>.

<sup>45</sup> Mustafa Aydın vd. (2021) "Quantitative Research Report: Social and Political Trends in Turkey 2020", *Kadir Has University Turkey Studies Group*, January 7, 34.

<sup>46</sup> S. Koçer, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021.

<sup>47</sup> Selman Selim Akyüz (2020) "False Information Outbreak: Fake News Circulating in Turkey During the COVID-19 Outbreak," *Mediterranean Journal of Communication*, 34, s. 432-434.

<sup>48</sup> A.g.e., p. 434.

by official accounts will reduce the level of anxiety in society. While the consistent and reliable statements made by the official authorities have changed the public's perception of the crisis positively; accurate and confirmed information increases individual awareness and belief in the fight against the virus, as well as reducing panic and anxiety.<sup>49</sup> In this context, it emerges that false information triggers the tendency not to be vaccinated, and so governments need to use these channels actively and effectively in order to break the effect of creating anxiety in the masses.

Resistance to misinformation may differ in societies. In societies with high resistance to misinformation, individuals tend to spread it less than others, even when they encounter false information. The research which was put forward by E. Humprecht, F. Esser, and P.V. Aelst by comparing three country groups, gathered the factors affecting online disinformation under three headings: 1) political climate, 2) media climate, and 3) economic climate.<sup>50</sup> Accordingly, it has been determined that the resistance to misinformation is low in countries where distrust in the media is high and public broadcasting is weak, especially in countries with a political environment where populist tendencies and polarization are high, and in countries where social media use is intense and the digital advertising market is large.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to the negative performance of the populist leaders in the management of the pandemic, which was revealed in the first part of the study, another negative aspect is that they provide an environment suitable for the spread of false information. On the other hand, it is seen that media literacy is high in systems where resistance to misinformation is high. For example, in Nordic countries such as Finland, where media literacy is high, it is possible to say that there is a positive relationship between the functioning of democratic institutions and freedom of the press and the media.

In the post-truth period, and especially during the pandemic, the speed of spread of false news and its effects show that media literacy is an issue that needs to be emphasized. In this regard, while the press and media organizations should play their part in making accurate and unbiased news analysis and transferring data from the right source, the audiences to whom the news is delivered should learn to develop their knowledge and skills in distinguishing true/false information. It is essential to increase the level of consciousness of people who make the news and access the news, especially by examining good examples in the world. As Afşin Yurdakul pointed out, instead of focusing on a single field, preparing news items by synthesizing different fields with an interdisciplinary approach, and transforming them into the language of everyday life, and delivering

<sup>49</sup> Erman Şentürk et al.. (2021) "The effects of social media news that users trusted and verified on anxiety level and disease control perception in COVID-19 pandemic," *Turkish Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 24, p. 23-32.

<sup>50</sup> Edda Humprecht, Frank Esser, Peter Van Aelst (2020) "Resilience to Online Disinformation: A Framework for Cross-

National Comparative Research," *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, January 24.

<sup>51</sup> A.g.e., p. 6-9.

them to the audience in that way will provide convenience in accessing the right information.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, at the micro-level, it is essential for individuals to develop themselves in critical thinking and weigh up the knowledge they have acquired. At the macro level, it is seen that there are areas that need to be worked on with sensitivity and care since the regulations to be created by the states in this area will bring issues such as the media and freedom of expression to the agenda. Finally, as Koçer puts it, there is a necessity for social media channels to be able to conduct their own audits and to act in accordance with the aforementioned rules by making sure a set of principled decisions comes to the fore at the corporate level.<sup>53</sup>

As a result, the importance of accessing accurate information in the post-truth era we live in is undeniable. However, among the most important findings is the fact that it becomes ever more essential for those managing the process to deliver accurate information based on scientific data, especially during crisis periods such as pandemics. In an environment where trust in traditional press and media organizations is gradually decreasing and the importance of such media is diminishing, the alternative and new media channels that have emerged with the effect of digitalization facilitate the spread of false information. In order to prevent this, state institutions should also increase their influence in these areas and lead the dissemination of accurate and official information. In addition, there is a need to combat the

spread of misinformation through measures to be taken at different levels, starting with individuals and reaching the level of industries and governments. Considering the social, economic, and societal effects of the information pollution created by anti-vaccine supporters, especially during the pandemic, the importance of this is even more clearly understood.

## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic, which caught the whole world off guard, has become one of the most discussed and researched topics of the recent period, with the negativities and uncertainties it has created in all areas of life. In this context, the relationship of the pandemic to politics has been discussed along with topics such as the strategies of countries to combat the pandemic, their performance in doing so, and the steps they have taken regarding individual rights and freedoms, in this study. Especially when the management styles of the countries are taken into account, it has been observed that the practices of the pandemic show serious differences in countries with different management perceptions and that the policies followed diverge from each other. As revealed in the study, while the countries where democracy is established and especially those led by female leaders have been successful in combating the pandemic, arbitrariness in the management of the pandemic has attracted attention in countries ruled by populist leaders and where authoritarianism is dominant. While it is seen that in countries with both populist and

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<sup>52</sup> A. Yurdakul, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021.

<sup>53</sup> S. Koçer, Global Academy Talks, 18 May 2021.

authoritarian tendencies, such as Hungary, Brazil, and the Philippines, where the severity of the situation is underestimated and the fight against the pandemic is used for political benefit; in countries with a stronger tradition in democracy, such as the USA and the United Kingdom, the initial failures could be brought under control over time. How soon the restrictions on the opposition or individual rights and freedoms will be lifted within the scope of the measures taken during the pandemic has the potential to further clarify the difference between authoritarian and democratic regimes in the future. Therefore, the changes to be faced after the pandemic will bring about circumstances where the relationship between the pandemic and politics is to be handled in different dimensions.

While the pandemic has increased the needs of individuals for accessing information, the importance of accessing accurate information has been realized once again within this period. Despite the critical importance of the media in delivering accurate information to individuals, especially in times of crisis, the loss of trust in the traditional media has brought about a more active role for alternative information channels. However, these alternative channels have been the channels where fake/false news is shared more frequently and spread more rapidly. The negative impact of fake/false news during the pandemic has shown its negative effects in different areas, especially in social health. It was defined as an infodemic by the World Health Organization and confirmed to be at least as dangerous as a pandemic. Within this context, it is necessary to fight against this issue in almost every segment of society, especially for

individuals, in order to reverse the tendency toward a post-truth society.



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