

**Harun Güney Akgül**

University of Wrocław

**FAKE NEWS AS A TOOL OF POPULISM IN TURKEY:  
THE PASTOR ANDREW BRUNSON CASE**

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**Author**

A doctoral candidate at the University of Wrocław pursuing a PhD in Political Science, with a focus on the evolution of the Public Sphere with on Turkey since 2002 and Political Communication.

ORCID no. 0000-0001-8427-8867

e-mail: harunguneyeye@gmail.com

**Abstract**

This study examines how populist politicians made sense of the issue of fake news. They generally consider fake news as a valuable propaganda tool for their political interests. According to the Reuters Digital News Report in 2018, Turkey ranks first on the list of countries where people complain about completely made-up stories. The study researched how fake news is helping facilitate the rise of populism in Turkey. There is plenty of fake news aired by pro-government media. Therefore, the Turkish government is emerging as a suspect behind the fake news cycle. The fact is that most of the fake news is published for the benefit of the government. Research shows that, paradoxically, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is regarded as one of the most important populist politicians in the world. These two different indicators can be valuable data in revealing the relationship between fake news and populist politicians. The aim of this paper is to consider the significance of this apparent relationship between fake news and President Erdogan. In order to do this, a critical discourse analysis method was based on the fake news about the pastor Brunson case, because Turkish readers came across a huge amount of fake news regarding his case in pro-government media.

**Keywords:** fake news, populism, Turkey, Brunson Case

*I lived in Rome under the good Augustus,  
In the time of gods who were false and told lies.*

Dante (Canto I, Inferno)

**Introduction**

Fake news is now a major phenomenon in the world's media and political debate. The term 'fake news' was the Collins Dictionary's official word of the year for 2017; According to the dictionary fake news is false, often sensational, information disseminated under the guise of news reporting. Generally, fake news is not based on verifiable facts, resources or excerpts. It addresses prejudices and emotions rather than rationality. One study defined fake news "to be news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcot and Gentzkow, 2017, p. 213). According to a large-scale survey "fake news headlines fool American adults about 75% of the time" (Silverman and Singer-Vine, 2016,

para.1). “Earlier studies have applied the term to define related but distinct types of content, such as news parodies, political satires, and news propaganda.” (Edson and Zheng & Ling, 2018). In many cases, readers do not take fake news seriously. Today, we do not go for news anymore; it comes to us. Hundreds of news items bombard us on smartphones, computers, and tablets each day.

The impact of fake news on policy was observed in the 2016 American elections. The latest research has demonstrated that fake news was instrumental in Trump’s election victory (Farkas and Schou, 2018). According to Norman and Woollacott, the definition of fake news is not enough to explain these problems. They refer to the “post-factual” or “post-truth” era, instead of fake news (2016). With the new populist wave in Europe and America, we have started talking about fake news and populism as one entity. For example, “*Le Monde*, one of the leading French newspapers, identified and corrected 19 lies made by Marine Le Pen, the extreme-right candidate who reached the runoff of the 2017 French presidential election, during her televised debate against Emmanuel Macron” (Barrera, Guriev, Henry & Zhuravskaya, 2017). This case is evidence that fake news is taking over all types of media. Claas Relotius, a reporter and editor, who was working for *Der Spiegel*, falsified his articles on a large scale and even invented characters, deceiving both readers and his colleagues (Spiegel Online, 2018). This shows that fake news is a severe problem in every aspect of media.

This study analyses discussions about the relationship between populism and fake news. Why did fake news appear in present-day mass media? Moreover, what is the effect of fake news on the wave of populism? We discuss the importance of fake news in relation to sources of propaganda for populist politicians. The aim of this paper is to offer critical discourse analysis and theoretical background to deal with these questions. It will try to find answers to questions regarding the fake news on the Brunson case. The back-end data storage method will be employed to analyze the fake news disseminated during that period.

## **The history of ‘fake news’ and journalism**

Fake news is produced without ethical elements, although there was a code of ethics in media within Enlightenment period. Principles of journalism are to ensure that citizens have access to the right information and are protected against fake news. “There are hundreds of codes of conduct, charters, and statements made by media and professional groups outlining the principles, values, and obligations of the craft of journalism. Most focus on five common themes: Truth and Accuracy, Independence, Fairness and Impartiality, Humanity, Accountability” (Ethical Journalism Network, 2017). With these principles, each of these elements must be included during the making of the news. Journalists have to guarantee the accuracy of the news and news has to be checked through the various filters before being published without any pressure or constraints (Herman and Chomsky, xii: 2002). One of the most important reasons for the beginning of the Enlightenment was the printing press, because citizens could access news easily and they were able to discuss this news appropriately in the public sphere. From these foundations, citizens started a struggle against totalitarian and authoritarian powers leading to the emergence of the present democratic system. “Originally ‘public’ journalism was conceptualized as a way for main-

stream news organizations to engage and work with local audiences, to cure the cynicism then alienating citizens, and to heal the professional–public divide that appeared to undermine democracy” (Chadha, Steiner, 2015). During the modernity, journalism was the method for intellectuals to use reasoning to reach the truth. “Journalism plays a key role in democracies around the world, acting as a watchdog on the state and informing citizens about the decisions that affect their everyday life” (Jorgensen, Williams, Sambrook, Harris, Blanco, Dencik, Cushion, Carter & Allan, 2016). Since the importance of mass media has increased in society, the media has increased its attractiveness to politicians and business people. We can claim that politicians and business people have started to influence the mass media, denying the existence of accurate news, and offering instead their own commentary.

With the development of the Internet, the media acquired new functions. Manuell Castell calls this period the ‘Information Age’. He discusses new media and communication technologies based around networks, arguing that they are contributing to a fundamental change in culture. The new development is called ‘culture of real virtuality’, which describes the culture that is organized around electronic media (2010). Owing to the new function of media, the construction of the news has been changed. Chanwick (2013) has called this new media landscape a ‘hybrid’ that is built upon interactions among the mass media and the new digital media. Perhaps, the hybrid media system fosters the rise of populist ideology in a different way (Aalberg et al. 2017; Martella, 2017; Monti, 2018; Mazzoleni et al. 2018) because social media is a convenient platform to abuse emotions. With the help of visual and audio content, the populist movement had the chance to hugely influence public opinion. “As stressed above, the populist movements have sponsored fake news websites by creating them, by giving them visibility through their own websites or social networks accounts and by discrediting the ‘traditional’ press.” This new way makes it quite easy to produce news. “In the past, journalism has been the *ancilla veritatis* (the handmaiden of truth) or the guardian of objective truth” (Monti, 2018: 10). Today, anyone can receive news at any time and in almost any place without media; “that is, the production of contents is free from being filtered by journalists or other types of gatekeepers” (Mazzoleni and Bracciale, 2018: 3). It is like watching the terrorist attack live-streamed directly from his Facebook account. Then this video can be turned into a propaganda tool by being watched on a big screen by President Erdogan in his campaign (BBC NEWS, 20 March 2019). Adam Hodges asks this question to explain this new structure; “How are we to make sense of today’s propagandistic messages, which seem to occur online in the form of fake news increasingly?” (2018). The novelty here is that the production of news and information is not controlled by journalism. Therefore, according to Silvio Waisbord, “Journalism is a fragmented, complex, open-ended institution. This situation can be better described in terms of disruption rather than ordered, unified news, journalism, and publics” (2018: 1867). The exclusion of journalists in news production may have made it possible for politicians to influence the news. Apart from this problem, there are many functions of news which are seriously confusing.

### **The relationship between the fake news and the populist politician**

The noisy argument over the meaning of populism is transcending the academic border because there is no single definition of the term. Moreover, populism is a crucial argument

about a threat to democracy. In political science, populism is the idea that society is divided into two groups at odds with each other - "the pure people" and "the corrupt elite" (Mudde, 2017). However, today, this term has become the biggest threat to democratic achievements. Nowadays, anti-immigrant and anti-European Union parties and leaders wield a significant political power in Europe. This kind of leader secured their victories by manipulating democracy. For instance, the populist movement is not afraid of using fake news during election campaigns. These leaders caused polarization by playing with social values. Otherwise, polarization is very important for using fake news because "group polarization refers to the fact that when like-minded people get together, they often end up thinking a more extreme version of what they thought before they started to talk to one another" (Sunstein, 2014: 6). They tend to create an autocratic structure with false accusations against democracy. The decline of democratic values following victories of the populist leaders, e.g. Brexit campaigners, Trump's controversial election victory and the rise of Jair Bolsonaro is a crucial power behind the populist movement. Early studies have shown that the media plays an important role in the global rise of populism (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Mudde, 2004). While media has already had such an impact on populism, the transformation of the media triggered by the internet has led to an increase in this impact.

On the other hand, according to Julie Posetti and Alice Matthews, 'fake news', disinformation, misinformation and propaganda have been features of human communication since at least Roman times when Antony met Cleopatra. Octavian waged a propaganda campaign against Antony. With misinformation, Antony was considered as a womanizer and a drunk, it being implied that he had become Cleopatra's puppet. This misinformation campaign allowed Octavian to hack the republican system once and for all (2018: 1). This research started to find out the effect of fake news or disinformation on Mark Antony smear campaign and then the research created a guide to the history of 'fake news' and disinformation. The Great Moon Hoax, The Boer War, World War I-II, The German corpse factory, The Cold War, The Iraq War, The Syrian Civil War, and many others political arguments had relations with misinformation and populist policy. This research also includes Brexit and Trump's election victory.

Since the inception of social media, many populist governments have learned how to control the new public sphere and its digital ecology (Tufekci, 2017: 225). Perhaps, misinformation is one of the best tools for them within social media. Brexit and Trump's controversial election victory were a significant triumph for populist politicians (who are not part of the 'pure' people). "The vote for Brexit has occasioned the need to reassess the ranges and guises of populism" (Freedon, 2017). Misinformation was an important factor of both campaigns. For example, one of the most prominent campaign claims during the EU referendum was that the UK contributed £350 million per week to the EU and that, instead, that money could be spent on the National Health Service (Rose, 2017). This claim was voiced many times by populist politicians throughout the referendum but it was fake news because "it relied on the maximum possible conceptualization of the costs of EU membership for the UK while disregarding both the rebate that the UK receives and the effects of direct EU spending on the UK as a result of membership" (Rose, 2017). Trump and his election victory is another important example of fake news and populism. Following the 2016 election, according to a database, 115 pro-Trump fake stories were shared on Facebook a total of 30 million times and 41 pro-Clinton fake-stories have been shared a total of 7.6 million times (Allcott and Gentzkow, 2017: 213). His administration ignores

global warming science and spreads misinformation and dismisses inconvenient truths as “fake news” (Klingner, 2018). These examples show the importance of fake news in the victories of populist politicians.

A simple Google search for the terms ‘populism’ and ‘fake news’ shows that the two were a trend during the same period. One opinion holds that we live in ‘a new populist era’ because it was triggered by online media (Mudde, 2016). Consequently, we can say fake news is on the rise owing to the fact that online media is a useful platform for spreading fake news. But what are the stages of the fake news? The relationship between populism and fake news is clear.

Figure 1. Google trend of populism

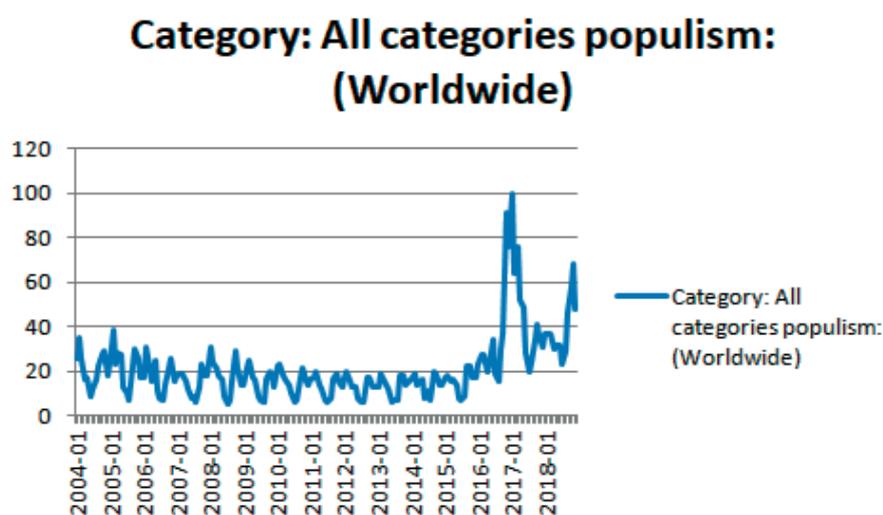
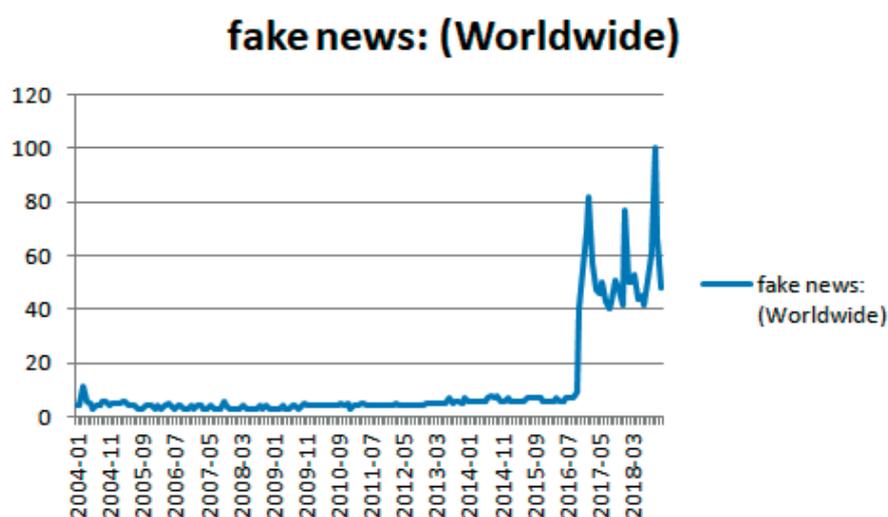


Figure 2. Google trend of fake news



As scholars like Hodges point out, fake news is produced by politicians centrally and then it is cascaded to pro-government media. Also, social media is useful for this purpose. “Facebook and Twitter allowed people to exchange information on a much greater

scale than ever before while publishing platforms like WordPress allowed anyone to create a dynamic website with ease. In short, the barriers to creating fake news have been undone” (Telegraph, 2018). Social media users prefer the news that is compatible with their convictions and opinions, much of this news being fake news. On the other hand; “hoaxes and falsehoods have been associated with the internet since its early days, but it is only in the last two years that organized, systematic misinformation campaigns, often linked to governments, have emerged, and their effect on democracy and society scrutinized” (Telegraph, 2018). This process is assisted by a new program, “filter bubbles,” the phenomenon of showing people things that they like or tend to agree with, and hiding those that they do not (Pariser, 2011). “If this window is filled with highly partisan and, in some cases, false news, then many people will be assessing political candidates and information by distorted and misleading information,” says Martin Moore at King’s College London (Adee, 2016). Very populist politicians especially benefit from systematic misinformation campaigns. It is a very effective method because a new study by MIT shows that “fake political news also diffused deeper more quickly and reached more than 20,000 people nearly three times faster than all other types of fake news reached 10,000 people” (Vosoughi & Roy & Aral, 2018). Anthony and Moulding found that political identity and conspiracies were strong and important predictors of fake political news (2018). According to another research published in *Cognition*, “susceptibility to fake news is driven more by lazy thinking than it is by partisan bias per se, a finding that opens potential avenues for fighting fake news” (Rand and Pennycook, 2018). This feature of social media for populist politicians is a groundbreaking discovery. “Trolls and bots, disguised as ordinary citizens, have become a weapon of choice for governments and political leaders to share online conversations” (Omidyar, 2018). The arguments of populist politicians are based on “emphasized agitation, spectacular acts, exaggeration, calculated provocations, and the intended breach of political and socio-cultural taboos” (Heinisch, 2003). These arguments are protected and become active with fake news.

On the other hand, in January 2018, the European Commission set up a high-level group of experts (“the HLEG”) to advise on policy initiatives to counter fake news and disinformation spread online. The analysis presented in the Report starts from a shared understanding of disinformation as a phenomenon that goes well beyond the term “fake news” The HLEG advises to deal with the issue on a long-term rather than short-term basis. This plan consists of five main pillars: enhancing transparency of online news; supporting media and information literacy to counter disinformation and help users navigate the digital media environment; empowering users and journalists to tackle disinformation; diversifying and making the news media ecosystem sustainable, and finally processing and evaluating the new media (European Commission Report, 2018). These recommendations of the commission have not been equally applied widely by countries.

Turkey ranks on the list of countries where people complain about completely made-up stories, according to the Reuters Digital News Report (49%). Also, exposure is widespread in Eastern European countries like Hungary (42%), Romania (38%) and Poland (28%) (Fletcher, 2018). These countries also feel the effects of populism. The especially populist Turkish government is closely related to fake news in Turkey. Therefore in the research part of the article, there will be an analysis of how fake news is working towards increasing populism in Turkey.

## Background of fake news and media in Turkey

Fake news is not a new element for the press in Turkey. Turkey previously had a harrowing experience with fake news in the context of the traditional media. On 6 September 1955, Turkish state radio announced that a bomb attack had taken place in the house in Thessalonica, where Atatürk was born, and this fake news appeared in two different afternoon issues of the Istanbul Express newspaper. This news led to a disaster because it did not need to be verified by its readers. As a result of this there were attacks on Greek minorities living in Istanbul, Greek-Orthodox women were raped, and the number of deaths is uncertain; in the Turkish press, it was reported that between 11 and 15 people died, 4,214 houses, 1,004 workplaces, 73 churches, 1 Synagogue, 2 monasteries, 26 schools, and 5,317 other establishments such as factories, hotels, pubs were plundered by Turkish citizens (Güven, 2011). Turkey is a country in which many ethnic groups live together. Turkish politicians and journalists should be very careful about such fake news. Unfortunately, they do not stop using fake news out of sheer interest in political power. Especially with the AKP in government, fake news has become one of the most critical problems in Turkey.

The Justice and Development Party, (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi (AKP) in Turkish), also called AK Party (AK Parti in Turkish), the political party came to power in Turkey in the general elections of 2002. Turkish society has lost the gains of the republic during the AKP government, turning away from Westernization towards Islamic populism. “President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Turkey is converging on a global wave of populism, defined as a return to authoritarianism, a constitution that benefits the majority at the expense of minorities, and a celebration of religious and native values” (Gole, 2017). This transformation is not surprising for Turkey because “the threat posed by populist actors is greater in weak democracies, as the institutions to manage such demands and address claims from the population are less well developed” (O’Brien, 2015). Some writers offer a new term, called ‘Erdoğanism,’ “which is defined as the emerging Turkish regime that combines elements of electoral authoritarianism, neo-patrimonialism, Islamism and populism. Turkish media received its share from this transformation” (Yilmaz and Bashirov, 2018). Today under this regime, “more than 180 media outlets have been shut down, and an estimated 2,500 journalists and other media workers have lost their jobs. Turkey’s rank was 157 out of 180 countries according to World Press Freedom Index in 2018, sandwiched between Rwanda and Kazakhstan” (Hong, 2018). Turkish authorities blocked Wikipedia because there were articles about Turkey’s role in the Syrian civil war. Hundreds of anti-government people, including journalists, human rights activists, and lawyers have been arrested for allegedly using a chat app, or criticizing the government on social media. This clearly demonstrates the close relationship between fake news and Turkey.

This was not so visible in the early years, but since 2002 the AKP has been trying hard to get the monopoly of the media. Opposition parties have difficulty to appear in the media sixteen years later. “The independence of the mainstream media continued to be undermined by its close business links with the government. More independent-minded journalists were forced out of their jobs by editors who were fearful of upsetting government and media owners” (Sayari, 2016). Thereupon Dogan Media Group was sold to the pro-government and pro-Erdoğan (Turkish President) Demiroren Holding in March 2018. “This sale means the death of pluralism and independent journalism in Turkey’s mainstream media,” said Erol Onderoglu, Turkish representative for media freedom ad-

vocacy group Reporters without Borders (Butler and Toksabay, 2018). Today “pool media” has become a term that symbolizes media that publishes broadcast pro-government stories. Pool media is crucial for making fake news because it is produced by the government. After that, this news is served to the pool media and most of the time and all newspaper use the same headline and text. Bots use this fake news for the next step. Bots are the accounts that are controlled en masse from a central point.

According to Kerem Sozeri, this generally works with this way in Turkey; so instead of equal participation in the social media, “they amplify their owner’s agenda. In Twitter, this often plays out with the trending topics in two ways: During times of political crises, they first try to boost a pro-government hashtag, giving a wrong impression on the balance of public support (“astroturfing”).” (Sozeri, 2018). According to various sources, the AKP has established troll troops, nearly six thousand. Moreover, their main tasks are to stand up to America, the Kurds, the Arabs and Israel. (Guardian, 2016). After this stage, large masses who are emotionally involved in the government share the fake news with their partisan comments without any news verification process. Finally, the fake news spreads to a broad mass of society as if they are reliable news. We can find many of examples of the fake news cycle in Turkey to examine. Fake news is used in a lot of different ways by the Turkish government. The government sometimes organizes protests to oppose social movements by producing misinformation. For instance: “In Turkey, the events of July 2016 would also show that governments can even use these tools to defend themselves against illegitimate challenges, like an attempted coup” (Tufekci, 2017: 226). On the other hand, all aspects of the July 15 coup have not been elucidated. A leaked document proves Turkey’s ‘controlled coup’ (Gultas & Rettman, 2019). The Turkish government is creating these and similar fake stories or misinformation with the help of social media accounts. It was discovered that lots of pro-Erdogan websites were producing fabricated news. Bosphorus Global is an important one of such pro-Erdogan websites. Actually Bosphorus Global is not just a website, at the same time, it is also the black box of Erdogan, formed by journalists and politicians known for their proximity to the government (Weise, Politico, 2018). Ahmet Davutoğlu, who was ex-prime minister, had to resign because they fabricated misinformation about him. The Brunson case is an exemplary one that covers all these issues, revealing Erdogan’s relationship with fake news, misinformation or fake stories.

## Research questions and methods

As the study aims at understanding how populist politicians use of fake news for their political achievements. The research question is as follows; What is the effect of fake news on the wave of populism?

In terms of methodology, Firstly a sample set was created with the case study, and this study positions itself into the broader field of critical discourse studies (CDS), although the quantitative method was used on explicit content (what the news said). The implicit contents of the shares (what the news mean) were analyzed by using the qualitative discourse method in order to reveal the semantic meanings embedded within the text. It is about analyzing how language use relates to the symbolic construction of institutions, ideologies, power relations, and identities (Citron, 2010). CDS does not limit researchers to a specific study method, but this study combines computational topic modelling with legally oriented clauses of the data (Subtireluand and Baker, 2017). The research uses data

material published between April 2018 and October 2018. The sources were collected by considering the historical case of the pastor, Andrew Brunson. The data material consists of fake news content from President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as well as journalistic articles and scholarly commentaries published in the following Turkish pro-government online newspapers and magazines about the case of Brunson: Sabah, Hurriyet, Yeni Safak, YeniAkit, and Sputnik. Data sources were collected media debates around “The case of Brunson” throughout the five-month research period and locating central actors during these debates, and some data sources also support various data visualization options and offer data export in multiple formats (Nadhom and Loskot, 2018). Fifty different fake news items about The Brunson case were found on the internet using a keyword search. The data was then processed through a set of text cleaning procedures and it was examined under three main headings; (1) the use of fake news as a material of domestic policy during the Brunson case, (2) the economic crisis and the Brunson case (3) the impact of the fake news about the Brunson case on foreign policy. As the analysis especially focuses on fake news as part of political discourses and antagonisms, the scope has deliberately been limited to the three topics mentioned above. With this study, it will be revealed that the chain of fake news about the Brunson case has had an impact on domestic politics, the economy and foreign policy. These areas are approached horizontally as three simultaneous fragments of past-day political struggles to achieve hegemony. Therefore, the article does not seek to locate the genesis or historical origins of each of these effects or evaluate their relative dominance. This study aims to better understand President Erdogan’s shaping domestic and foreign policy based on this fake news.

## Analysis

Before the AKP, Turkey was ruled using the principle of separation of powers with the democratic parliamentary system. Now, Turkey is governed by the presidential system, and President Erdogan has wide powers with this new system. He used large-scale legal proceedings to carry out this structural change. The effect of the Turkish army on the administration was broken with the Ergenekon case. It was later revealed that this case was based on false claims. After the 2016 Turkish coup d’état attempt, Fethullah Gulen, an Islamist preacher who lives in Pennsylvania, was accused by the Turkish government of leading this coup attempt (Gall, 2018). Erdogan began to rule the country under a state of emergency after this case. The Brunson case is one of those cases that emerged as a result of the policy pursued by the Turkish government. Therefore this case has become an important example to show whether the Turkish government is related to fake news. The pastor Andrew Brunson had worked in Turkey as a missionary for 23 years. He was arrested soon after the failed coup against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2016. The Turkish court accused him of helping the Kurdistan Workers Party, the P.K.K., which is a separatist terrorist organization inside Turkey. He was also accused of having relations to followers of Fethullah Gulen. Anonymous witnesses were used as the basis of these claims. (Maza, 2018). Brunson was arrested in 2016 but Turkey entered a crisis with his case.

**Table 1.** Effect I: The use of fake news as a material of domestic policy during the Brunson case

Newspaper	Original Title	English Translation	Date
Sabah	İşte Brunson'un FETÖ ve PKK bağlantısı	Here is Brunson's FETÖ and PKK connection	03.08.2018
Sabah	15 Temmuz bir Türk-Amerikan Savaşıydı	July 15 was a war between Turkey and the United States	05.09.2018
YeniAkit	Gezi'den 15 Temmuz'a CIA-FETÖ işbirliği!	CIA-FETÖ cooperation from the Gezi Park protests to July 15	15.03.2018
YeniSafak	Brunson'un cebinden hem PKK hem de FETÖ çıktı.	Both PKK and FETO came out of Brunson's pocket.	30.08.2018

The pro-Erdogan press accused Pastor Brunson before trial. These news stories quickly turned into an anti-American propaganda discourse. In this case, the United States has become a clear target in the case of complex relations, such as PKK members, FETÖ's civilian imams, Syrian refugees, Israelis, missionaries, CIA agents, US military retired intelligence agents. The article titled "Here is Brunson's FETÖ and PKK connection" was published in the Sabah newspaper under the byline of Kenan Kiran on 3 August 2018, this news is a narration based on its accusations of anonymous witnesses (Kiran, 2018). The rest of the pro-government media press made such claims as well. Behind the coup of July 15, the perception of the United States had long been imposed on the society by the government. In a survey conducted by the Haberturk newspaper in 2016, 79 percent of Turkish people stated that America was behind the coup (Haberturk, 2016). But the charges were circulated with fake news against the USA. We can say that this case was fiction because of the lack of solid evidence about it. "The evidence was presented in court partly by two anonymous witnesses who gave testimony by the video that distorted their images and voices" (Gall, 2018). The government knows that there is no proof for American's connection with the coup. Erdogan wanted to create a strong perception of Turkish public opinion because he wanted to eliminate the question marks regarding the government's relationship with the coup (Barkey, 2017). There is a lot of unknown and distorted information about this unsuccessful achievement. It has already appeared in the academic literature as "Turkey's post-truth coup" (Tas, 2018). Ahmet Donmez, who lives in exile in Sweden, has recently found a document written by a Turkish prosecutor on 16 July 2016 (Gultaslı & Rettman, 2019). Perhaps the Brunson case was used by the Turkish government to eliminate such suspicions against the government. The interior minister of government, Suleyman Soylu, repeated many times during the case that America was behind the coup. Pro-government media published articles supporting these statements. Ersin Ramoglu used the most remarkable title on this subject; "July 15 was a war between Turkey and the United States" (2018). Even though there are many unanswered questions about the coup by the government, the United States has become a target of Turkish public opinion during this case.

On the other hand, the Gezi Park protests, which were an anti-government protest in 2013, have also been associated with this case. This claim was again based on the testimony of a secret witness. Allegedly; before the start of the Gezi Park protests, Andrew Brunson, John Woodall, and Aslan Salti joined a teleconferencing meeting at an Istan-

bul conversation center in March 2013, where attendees planned the Gezi Park protests, instructing their groups to start chaos (Ergin, 2018). The government had already tried to create the perception on public opinion that the Gezi Park protest was caused by external forces rather than by democratic action. In this case, the pro-government press announced to its readers under the headline “CIA-FETÖ cooperation from the Gezi Park protests to July 15!” that this claim was correct (Newspaper Yeni Akit, 2018). The reason behind Erdogan’s attempts to validate his claim by using the pro-government press and courts is different. He desires to strengthen his political argument over the electorate. It was observed during this case that there were no such proofs against foreign states or foreign press and that he only wanted to use it as an argument for domestic politics. As can be seen from the examples above, the politicians involved in the government have used this case as a propaganda material and used it to achieve internal political success. There is still much fake news about July 15 and the Gezi Park protests. Likewise, the Brunson case was accepted as evidence in support of the government’s allegations about these events.

Nevertheless, his case was used to try to block public questioning regarding what they considered to be the faulty economic policies pursued by the government. This case, which was built on secret witnesses, caused partial trade restrictions to be imposed by the United States.

**Table 2.** Effect II: The Economic Crisis in Turkey and the Brunson Case

Newspaper	Original Title	English Translation	Date
Yenisafak	‘Onların doları varsa bizim de Allahımız var’	They have ‘their dollars,’ we have ‘our god’	10.08.2018
Sabah	Türkiye’ye yönelik ekonomik saldırıya dünyadan destek yağdı!	World’s support to Turkey for the economic attacks carried out against it!	13.08.2018
Aksam	ABD’nin Ekonomi Darbesi de Basarısız	The USA’s economic coup failed as well	15.08.2018
Hürriyet	Ekonomi savası ABD’yi vuracak	Economic war will hit the USA	15.08.2018

According to the content of the case, there is no direct claim to the Turkish economy. Turkey’s economy had an alert before his case. The central bank is unable to take economic decisions independent of the government, and flawed economic policies were followed by the government and listed as a reason for it (Alderman and Rao, 2018). One year after the Brunson case, Erdogan fired the head of Turkey’s central bank (July 2019) because the central bank didn’t act on the order of Erdogan. He had ordered the central bank to lower interest rates. After the United States announced that it would impose some economic sanctions on Turkey because of Brunson’s case, the Turkish lira was continually devalued and collapsed against the dollar. “Turkey’s currency crisis is reminiscent of other debt emergencies across the globe but differs in some key ways” (Cox, Cnbc.com, 13.08.2018). For example, the government did not feel responsible for this economic crisis. But according to David Rosenberg, chief economist, and strategist at Gluskin Sheff, it is about credit because Turkey was a huge borrower in global markets over the past number of years. In

total, there's some \$220 billion in foreign debt for Turkish companies and financial institutions (Cnbc.com, 13.08.2018). President Erdogan explained the reason for this crisis as an attack on the Turkish economy by the United States. Erdogan said in his public speeches; "They have 'their dollars,' we have 'our god'" (Yenisafak, 2018). He called for citizens to convert dollars and gold into Turkish lira to help fight in the "national struggle." In response, the currency renewed its sell-off; Erdogan added that he would decisively defend the country against economic attack (Reid, 2018). The government tried to make this economic crisis a political argument, instead of evaluating all the factors that caused the economic crisis together with economic experts. The pro-government media presented the economic crisis to its readers as a pro-government political argument. Sabah newspaper used the title "World's support to Turkey for the economic attacks carried out against it" (Daglı, 2018). The contents of this news created messages with confidence in the Turkish economy and there was no accusatory element in these support messages against the United States. In the newspaper Aksam, Kurtulus Tayiz, with his column titled "The USA economic coup failed as well," supported the government's argument regarding the economic crisis. The columnist asserted that the crisis would be overcome through a national struggle against the United States (Tayiz, 2018). In this period, the newspaper Hurriyet featured essential representatives of the Turkish economy in its pages, but the newspaper followed a policy to support the perception that the economic crisis was caused by the economic war with the United States.

This newspaper's interview with Adnan Balli, the general manager of Isbank, was announced to the readers with the title of "Economy war will hit the USA" (Hürriyet, 2018). This title cannot be expected to evoke a different subject to Turkish readers apart from the supposed US-Turkey economic war, but he was talking about the current global economy and its effect. Balli did not mention this claim, and he didn't even use the title sentence during the interview. It is an excellent example of fake news for readers who read only the title on the Internet. Even though the content of the news is based on the true information, the fact that the title is adapted to support the current perception of the agenda is moving the fake news to a more dangerous point. Headline writing has been long considered as a skill but, in the digital age, it has become a talent used to distort the factual news.

The crisis with the United States was a good reason for hiding the mistakes of the government in its economic policies for Turkey. As can be seen in the news examples above, the process that started with the government and pro-government press distorted the Brunson case with fake news, and it continued with the economic crisis. In the period when the economic crisis began, this kind of fake news on the crisis continued to deepen the current economic crisis in Turkey. However, many people still believe that America is behind the economic crisis. According to the survey conducted for Marketing Turkey in September 2018, The percentage of consumers who saw the economic crisis as a result of an international conspiracy dropped from 70 to 50 in a month, and the rate of those who saw this crisis as a result of government policies increased from 30 to 50 percent (Marketing Turkey, 2018). It shows that President Erdogan managed to keep his constituency with the support of the pro-government press against the economic crisis. Fake news about the economic crisis was effective in this success but the continuation of the economic crisis in 2019 has reduced citizens' reception for fake news about Brunson case.

**Table 3.** Effect III. The impact of the fake news about the Brunson case on foreign policy

Newspaper	Original Title	English Translation	Date
Sputnik	Türkiye'den ABD'nin F-35 ambargosuna alternatif: Rus Su-57	Turkey has an alternative to the US F-35 blockade: Russian Su-57	28.05.2018
Sputnik	Rus Su-57, ABD yapımı muadili F-35'ten 2.5 kat daha ucuz	Russian Su-57 is two and a half times cheaper than its US combat aircraft F-35	05.07.2018
Sputnik	Cumhurbaşkanı Basdanışmanı Cevik: F-35 olayında ABD ciddi zarar görecek	Mr Cevik, Chief Advisor to the President will be seriously damaged about the F-35 crisis	16.08.2018
Sputnik	Erdoğan'ın 'F-35'leri vermezlerse tahkime gideriz' açıklamasına ABD'den yorum yok	There is no comment from the USA to Erdogan's statement "If they do not give F-35, we will go to the arbitration"	08.08.2018

This case has played a crucial role on determining Turkey's foreign policy, not only regarding relations with the USA but also with Russia and Syria. Russian propaganda organ Sputnik used this case very well for Russian interests. Before this case, Turkey's increased cooperation with Russia had become a significant source of concern among its Western allies (Çevikoz, 2018). After Turkey had an agreement for buying Russian S-400 air defense system, and also Turkey's cooperation with Russia in Syria, the West began to suspect that Turkey was drifting away from NATO and its engagement to western values, ideals, and principles. The S-400 is a generic name for a variety of air defense systems configured in slightly different ways. However, President Erdogan did not refrain from making a variety of manipulations to adopt this foreign policy to his community, and the Brunson case was just one of these manipulations.

The American Senate had decided to stop selling F-35 fighter jets after the Brunson case because Ankara planned to purchase the sophisticated Russian-built S-400 defense system (Seligman, 2018). Turkish pro-government media announced this decision in order to blackmail their readers. On the other hand, the Russian online news websites Sputnik also had produced news about these crises that would affect Turkish public opinion for the benefit of Russia by Sputnik online news. It is funded by the Russian State and disseminates Russia's national interests and propaganda to the whole world. According to Aro, many fake news sites, such as Sputnik, portray their content as an "alternative," but it is only pro-Russian or anti-western. For these reasons, Sputnik was forbidden by Latvia (2016:125). In the last three months of the Brunson crisis, Sputnik reported the crisis with news in line with the Turkish government's statements.

Actually, with the start of the S-400 defense system crisis with the West, Sputnik has started the effort to move the agenda on this crisis. Sputnik used this title on May 25, 2018; "Turkey has an alternative to the US F-35 blockade: Russian Su-57" (Sputniknews.com). This news is based on the views of anonymous experts. They mainly focused on the advantages of having Russian fighter jets. The purpose of this fake news has created a perception that Russian aircraft are cheaper and better than F-35s in Turkish public opinion, whereas Turkey will have industrial participation in the F-35 and Turkey has

already invested in the F-35 program. Russian websites didn't write about these important details. Sputnik continued to write about the advantage of the Russian combat aircraft under this title; "Russian Su-57 is two and a half times cheaper than its US combat aircraft F-35" (Sputniknews.com, 05.07.2018). The news is mainly based on the marketing of Russian combat aircraft. Russia wanted to use Turkey's Foreign Policy dilemma between west and east during the Brunson case. Therefore Sputnik, which is a pro-government media in Russia, fueled the crisis between the United States and Turkey like Turkish pro-government media. For instance, this title was used to increase the severity of the crisis: "Mr Cevik, Chief Advisor to the President: The USA will be seriously damaged about the F-35 crisis" (Sputniknews.com, 16.08.2018). Cevik said that experts in the US's respected defense and foreign policy journals say that their countries will suffer from this decision and serious disruptions in the production of the F-35. But she didn't name about any journal or the expert who provided the analysis.

On the same day, Erdogan's words were used in the following headings; Erdogan said that "if they do not give F-35, we will go to the arbitration" and there is a description from the USA about this explanation (Sputniknews.com). The content of this misinformation gives the impression that the US administration is in a desperate situation concerning Turkey's policy. With this fake news, Sputnik news was interested in the combat aircraft F-35 rather than the Brunson case.

This kind of news was made by Sputnik to create a pro-Russian perception in Turkish public opinion. The Sputnik news website, which covers all aspects of the subject to discredit the combat aircraft F-35, does not use sound sources, but rather makes limited and narrow. Following the analysis, Sputnik's news was mainly based on a lot of commentaries and information produced by rumors inside its news. This kind of news, which is obtained by mixing the fake news with the actual news, is far more dangerous than the fake news because readers cannot identify whether the news is actual or fake. Sputnik generally spreads this kind of news. Both Turkish pro-government media and Russian pro-government media have assumed the same role in determining Turkey's foreign policy. Sputnik wants Turkish public opinion to come for the coverage of Turkish politics and stay for the pro-Kremlin spin.

## Conclusion

During this study, the attitude of pro-government media in the Brunson case was examined. The attitude of the international media broadcasting in Turkey was also included in the investigation of this case. The *Hurriyet*, *Sabah*, *Yenisafak*, *Yaniakit* and *Aksam* newspapers were represented as Turkish pro-government media in the study. Sputnik engaged in international publications as online news sites in Turkey was included in the sample as well. Collected data were analyzed with a political economy perspective with CDS. Erdogan used Turkish pro-government media, which is fed with fake news, to maintain his political power during the Brunson case. Apart from this research, Pro-Erdogan disinformation material was published on unreliable and non-journalist media, including the Turkish state media website. Youtube, Twitter, Facebook, blogs and trolls produced thousands of comments about the Brunson case. All this proves that President Erdogan has created the chamber effect in Turkish society.

The purpose of the study focused on the role of fake news in the rise of the populist movements, which have been considered a threat to democracy in recent years. The Brunson case was a case based on anonymous witnesses. Therefore, it was not difficult to make fake news about this case that was formed by inaccurate statements. That fake news was served by the Turkish government to support Erdogan's long-standing populist policy. Turkey's democratic achievements were destroyed under this policy. Economic, political and foreign political problems that emerged with this democratic destruction were victims of hush up attempts with the Brunson case. With the help of fake news, America was identified as the cause of all these problems. Erdogan created a case that appealed to the feelings of nationalism and continued to maintain his political power with the false news produced from the Brunson case.

Pastor Brunson was released on October 12, 2018, and returned to his country. President Trump thanked President Erdogan on Twitter on the conclusion of the case. US-Turkey relations were normalized after this case. Nonetheless, Putin supported and imposed Russian policies on Erdogan during the case. According to the research result, Putin's policies were supported by Sputnik, which has radio and internet broadcast, and had misinformed Turkish public opinion. The analysis also confirmed that Sputnik supported the pro-government media with false news.

As a result of research; it can be seen this was a case, which was based on the anonymous witnesses, There are three right-wing populist presidents (Erdogan, Putin, Trump), who wanted to use the Brunson case for their political self-interest. It was found out that the fake news was used as the primary tool in making populist leaders' own public opinion and making propaganda in this case. More than a quarter of Europeans voted populist in their last elections. Why is populism in the world on the rise? There is no single answer to this question, but fake news is the most critical tool for populist leaders.

The analysis of American media and Trump's explanations during the Brunson case is not part of this study. Also, the approach of left-wing populists to fake news is not known and discussed in this article. So what kind of a political structuring is needed to end the production of fake news? What are the other elements that populist politicians use as propaganda except for fake news? These are some of the central questions that future research on the affect of fake news on politics can hopefully uncover.

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