

NAVIGATING MEDIA POLARIZATION AND POLITICAL PARTY AFFILIATIONS IN SHAPING NETWORK AGENDAS: INSIGHTS FROM THE SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS IN TÜRKİYE¹

Assoc. Prof. (Ph.D.) Gizem MELEK

Dept. of Radio Television and Cinema, Yaşar University

Abstract -This policy brief examines the interrelation between media and public network agendas concerning Syrian refugees in Türkiye. It serves as an illustrative case study within the framework of a polarized media system existing in the context of a competitive authoritarian regime, aiming to elucidate the cognitive effects of media on an international scale. Through a comprehensive analysis of extensive media and nationally representative mind-mapping survey data, it is discerned that the transfer of media's network agenda is notably significant solely among individuals aligned with the pro-government faction. Conversely, no discernible impact is observed on individuals supporting the opposition, irrespective of their political orientations and the media outlets from which they receive information. The study's outcomes hold substantial implications, signaling potential constraints on the applicability of the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) model in competitive or semi-authoritarian regimes. Within such contexts, individuals affiliated with the opposition may exhibit a diminished susceptibility to influence from mainstream media, thereby challenging the conventional efficacy of the NAS model, as consistently observed in Western democracies.

Keywords: Network agenda-setting; NAS; public opinion; Syrian refugees; competitive authoritarian regime; polarized media; Türkiye.

Introduction

Building upon McCombs and Shaw's (1972) seminal agenda-setting theory, Guo and McCombs (2011a; 2011b) introduced a novel paradigm denominated as the Network Agenda Setting (NAS) model, also referred to as third-level agenda-setting. In contrast to the first and second

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levels, which consider objects and attributes as separate entities, the NAS model recognizes their interconnectedness, existing in bundles within both the media and public opinion (McCombs et al., 2014). The NAS model has garnered significant attention in contemporary agenda-setting research, particularly in Western studies. However, there is a dearth of exploration of this model outside Western settings and electoral campaigns. Thus, the present study aims to fill this research gap by examining the understudied context of Türkiye and its refugee crisis. Consequently, this study contributes to our understanding of the cognitive effects of the media within a polarized media system operating under a competitive authoritarian regime². Furthermore, it enhances previous research on network agenda-setting by offering novel insights into an underexamined media and political terrain, particularly within the context of a global crisis concerning Syrian refugees, rather than the more typical electoral contexts.

Network Agenda-Setting Model (NAS)

In the realms of first and second-level agenda-setting, the conventional approach has been to treat objects and their attributes as distinct entities, both theoretically and analytically (McCombs et al., 2014). However, in actuality, these entities manifest as interconnected bundles within the domains of both media and public opinion. The third-level agenda-setting, denoted as the NAS model, propounds that media can amalgamate diverse sets of attributes or objects and impart the salience of these amalgamated agendas to the public agenda (Guo & McCombs, 2011a; 2011b). Essentially, the NAS model elucidates the interdependence among issues and their attributes, departing from the conventional agenda-setting theory that isolates them as individual components (Guo, 2013). Consequently, the NAS model explores the impact of news media on the audience's cognitive associations among disparate messages (Guo & Vargo, 2015). Its cardinal tenet posits that news media establishes connections between various messages, ideas, and concepts, and these associations can be transmitted to the public, thereby shaping the cognitive network of the audience (Guo & Vargo, 2015). Recent research studies have underscored the efficacy and relevance of the NAS model (e.g., Vargo & Guo, 2017; Vu et al., 2014).

The extension of this line of inquiry to competitive/semi-authoritarian regimes remains relatively sparse in the existing literature. Studies covering semi-authoritarian regimes present a mixed picture with some demonstrating the presence of network agenda-setting (e.g., Guzek, 2019a), while others do not (e.g., Guzek, 2019b), with a primary focus on the intermedia agenda-setting effect at the network level in the Polish context. Consequently, within a semi-authoritarian context, the knowledge of the network agenda-setting effect, particularly between media and public agendas, remains scarce.

At the same time, the body of research exploring non-Western contexts remains sparse as well, with only a limited number of studies conducted in this area. One notable contribution in this regard is the study conducted in China about the COVID-19 pandemic, which serves to reaffirm the implicit and explicit transfer of network connections from the media to the general public (Liu et al., 2022). Also, notable research undertaken in Taiwan and China have revealed

² Levitsky and Way (2010) define competitive authoritarian regimes as political systems characterized by a facade of democratic practices, such as regular elections, while concurrently exhibiting substantial manipulation of the electoral process to secure the ruling party's dominance. These regimes maintain a competitive façade, yet systematically undermine the principles of fair competition and perpetuate a non-democratic concentration of power.

indications of partisan network agendas that are influenced by selective media exposure (Chen et al., 2020; Wu and Guo, 2020).

Drawing on previous research, the current investigation focuses on Türkiye to examine the NAS model within a distinct non-Western setting characterized by a polarized media context operating under a competitive authoritarian regime. By bridging these theoretical perspectives, specifically democratic regimes versus semi-authoritarian and authoritarian contexts, as well as Western versus non-Western contexts, this study aims to provide a contextualized analysis of Türkiye. Such an examination will yield valuable insights into the dynamics of network agenda-setting processes within highly polarized political contexts.

Overview of the Turkish Context

Recent academic research on the Turkish media has revealed significant polarization influenced by news outlets' affiliations with socio-political factions on both domestic and international issues (Melek & İşeri, 2021; Yıldırım et al., 2021). Previous research has concentrated on second-level agenda-setting within the context of the Syrian refugee crisis, demonstrating the media's effectiveness in shaping public attitudes (Melek & Uluçay, 2019). Against the backdrop of media polarization and the shift towards authoritarianism in Türkiye's new executive presidency (Akman & Akçalı, 2017; Çalışkan, 2018), investigating how global crises, exemplified by the Syrian refugee crisis, influence the network agendas of media entities and the public's cognitive maps is imperative.

An elucidation of the current state of the Turkish media is essential for a nuanced comprehension of the subject. Since the initiation of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) era in 2002, conglomerates aligned with the government have assumed control over numerous mainstream media entities, consolidating the AKP's influence over the Turkish media landscape (Andı et al., 2020). Consequently, this trend led to a downgrade in Türkiye's press status from "partly free" to "not free" by Freedom House in 2014, citing the overt government influence on the media domain. In the 2023 World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2023), Türkiye ranked 165th out of 180 countries. Recent research findings highlight a discernible shift in press-party parallelism dynamics, favoring the AKP and resulting in more favorable media coverage compared to other political factions (Yıldırım et al., 2021). Given the intricacies of the media landscape in Türkiye, a significant number of individuals resort to online sources for political news and information. Urban residents, in particular, have embraced online news platforms and social media networks as alternative channels offering a critical perspective (Newman et al., 2020).

Syrian Refugee Crisis in Türkiye

The global media discourse has long been preoccupied with the pressing matter of the Syrian refugee crisis, which also prominently features on the agenda of the Turkish media. Official data from Mülteciler Derneği (2023) reveals that, as of March 2023, the Syrian refugee population in Türkiye reached 3,447,837. Notably, these figures are suspected to be significantly underestimated, with some opposition figures suggesting a count of approximately 13 million, encompassing unregistered individuals. Since the initiation of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Türkiye has consistently experienced a substantial influx of migrants, fostering extensive political discourse on issues ranging from the economy and employment to social

cohesion, security, and terrorism. Consequently, the Syrian refugee crisis has emerged as a central topic on the media agenda.

Recent research, as illuminated by Çakır (2019), underscores that 40% of Syrian refugees in Türkiye do not foresee a return to their home country in the foreseeable future. Türkiye presently hosts the largest global Syrian refugee population, constituting approximately 4% of the overall Turkish populace, holding temporary protection status as duly registered (Mülteciler Derneği, 2023). Consequently, the issue is poised to endure on the media agenda, particularly concerning facets of social integration, economy, security, and related considerations in the ensuing years.

Data and Method

This research employs a quantitative methodology, utilizing content analysis and network analysis techniques to explore the network associations between media and public agendas. Specifically, the investigation of these interrelationships is facilitated through the Quadratic Assignment Procedure (QAP) correlation and Multiple Regression Quadratic Assignment Procedure (MRQAP) analysis. Subsequent sub-sections will provide a detailed exposition of these methodological intricacies.

Media Data

This study utilizes a media sample comprising 12 outlets, encompassing websites of newspapers with the highest circulation and the most-watched primetime television news bulletins, as well as news organizations representing diverse political perspectives. The data covers the period from 16 July 2021 to 31 October 2021 (refer to Table 1). In total, 1003 news articles related to the subject matter under investigation were collected from these 12 media outlets.

Table 1. Media Sample

Media Outlet	Ownership	Political Stance
Cumhuriyet	Cumhuriyet Foundation	Secular, opposition
Sözcü	Estetik Publishing- BEME Media A.G	Secular, opposition
FOX TV	21st Century Fox Company	Secular, opposition
Halk TV	Cafer Mahiroğlu	Secular, opposition
TRT	Republic of Turkey	Public broadcasting
Habertürk	Ciner Group	Pro-incumbent AKP government
NTV	Doğuş Group	Pro-incumbent AKP government
Show TV	Ciner Group	Pro-incumbent AKP government
Hürriyet	Demirören Holding (until March 2018, Doğan Holding)	Pro-status quo/pro-incumbent AKP government (moderate until March 2018)
CNN Türk	Demirören Holding (until March 2018, Doğan Holding)	Pro-status quo/pro-incumbent AKP government (moderate until March 2018)
Sabah	Kalyon Group	Conservative; pro-status quo/pro-incumbent AKP government
ATV	Kalyon Group	Conservative; pro-status quo/pro-incumbent AKP government

Source. Adapted from Melek (2023).

AKP = justice and development party.

Here, time lag decision between media and public data was determined according to an extensive review of the literature spanning more than four decades. Various studies have proposed divergent viewpoints regarding the optimal timeframe for media effects to manifest. These perspectives range from suggesting an optimal duration of 4-8 weeks (e.g., McCombs, 2004; Winter & Eyal, 1981) to as little as a single day (e.g., Roberts et al., 2002; Weimann & Brosius 2016).

After an exhaustive examination of the existing literature and drawing upon insights from Professor McCombs, the leading theorist in the realm of agenda-setting theory, a conscious decision was made to gather news data spanning the preceding three and a half months leading up to the administration of the public opinion survey. Subsequently, following the conclusion of the news-gathering phase on October 31, 2021, a public opinion survey was conducted over the subsequent two months, extending into November and December of 2021. This strategic approach was intentionally formulated to address the potential manifestation of agenda-setting effects within relatively short timeframes, as indicated by recent studies (e.g., durations of less than a month, and in some instances, as brief as a few days). Furthermore, this timeframe aligns with the conventional research framework of four to six weeks, thereby ensuring the collection of comprehensive data capable of capturing the entirety of the agenda-setting phenomenon.

Public Opinion Data

This study gathered public opinion data from a nationally representative sample of 1200 individuals in Türkiye, selected across 12 provinces based on age, gender, and socio-economic status (SES). The survey, conducted in person, employed a sampling procedure aligned with the Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics (NUTS-1) regions defined by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK). The target sample was proportionally allocated among urban populations within each region, utilizing data from the Address-Based Population Registration System (ADNKS). Additionally, inquiries on political party affiliations and assessments of the left-right political spectrum were conducted to ascertain political orientations (refer to Table 2). For the exploration of the public network agenda, a face-to-face mind-mapping survey was administered by the Binom Research Company among the participants.

Table 2. Public Sample by Political Party Affiliations and Political Ideology

	Distribution	Sample (N)
<i>Political Party Predispositions</i>		
AKP (Incumbent - Pro-Islamist)	27.1%	326
CHP (Opposition - Secular social democrat)	33.8%	405
HDP (Opposition - Pro-Kurdish)	1.4%	17
MHP (Incumbent's coalition partner – ultra-nationalist far right)	9%	108
İYİ Party (Opposition - secular nationalist)	5%	59
Other	1.3%	16
No answer	22.4%	269
TOTAL		1200
<i>Left-Right Political Spectrum</i>		
Left (1)	15.8%	149

2	13.9%	131
3	11.7%	110
4	5.2%	49
5	7.5%	71
6	5.6%	53
7	9.9%	93
8	12.8%	121
9	10.1%	95
Right (10)	7.5%	71
Total answers	100%	943
Mean	5.08	
Standard deviation	3.06	
No answer	21.4%	257
TOTAL		1200

Coding Sheet and Procedure

This research diverged from conventional methodologies by adopting an inductive approach, eschewing generic coding frames from prior studies. The emergent themes were specifically identified for this study's dataset. Preliminary analysis, executed independently by three research assistants without intercommunication, involved the creation of word clouds to depict word and phrase frequencies. Subsequently, frequency lists in Excel format were generated for both media and public opinion datasets. Rigorous examination and verification of the distinct results were conducted to ensure reliability and accuracy. Notably, all three analyses revealed consisted themes. Consequently, the coding sheet was finalized by incorporating recurrent themes identified in both media and public datasets. The six definitive themes include Economy, Demography, Security, Crime, Returning to Syria, and Privilege. *Economy* encompasses diverse economic facets such as unemployment and poverty. *Demography* elucidates population structure, encompassing differences related to religion, language, culture, education, and integration. *Security* incorporates foreign policy, national security, border security, and the nation's survival. *Crime* addresses domestic policy and public order. *Returning to Syria* involves statements on Syrians' permanent return from Türkiye to Syria. Lastly, *Privilege* encompasses remarks on positive discrimination against Syrians.

Two assistants, following a two-month training period, coded media and public opinion datasets for network analysis. Common themes, like *economy* and *demography*, were treated as nodes. These nodes, represented as dyads on the coding sheet, were coded to determine the frequency of their co-occurrence. If, for example, the *economy-demography* dyad appeared in a news text, it received a code of 1; conversely, if absent, it received a code of 0. Achieving high intercoder reliability (Krippendorff's Alpha .74-1.00), both media and public opinion data, encompassing 1003 news articles from 12 organizations and survey responses from 1200 participants, were coded within three months using the coding sheet, tailored for the study.

Results & Discussion

Conducting content analyses and constructing data matrices, this study executed two discrete network analyses on media content and public cognitive map data. Additional analyses were performed on media and public opinion groups, categorized by their political party affiliations.

Relationships between these groups were assessed using QAP correlation and MRQAP regression analyses. The findings suggest a marginally significant transfer of the media agenda network to public cognitive maps. Notably, opposition individuals were identified as a factor diminishing statistical significance to a marginal level. Specifically, both media camps significantly influenced the pro-government public, yet no significant effect was observed on pro-opposition individuals from any media camp (refer to Table 3).

Table 3. Media and Public Agenda Networks: QAP Correlation & MRQAP Regression

	QAP Correlation (Pearson's r)	MRQAP Regression (R Square)
<i>Associations with Media and the Public</i>		
All Media & Public	.67*	.45*
Pro-Government Media & Public	.73**	.52**
Pro-Opposition Media & Public	.58	.33
Pro-Gov Media & Pro-Opposition Media	.96***	N/A
Pro-Opposition Media & Pro-Gov Public	.75**	.56**
Pro-Gov Media & Pro-Opposition Public	.54	.29

Note. *p<0.10. **p<0.05. ***p<0.001

QAP = quadratic assignment procedure; MRQAP = multiple regression quadratic assignment procedure

The results indicated a high correlation in the media agenda networks (Pearson's $r = .96$, $p < 0.001$) concerning Syrian refugees across diverse political camps, aligning with previous findings by Vu et al. (2014) and Vargo and Guo (2017). Yet, this study unveiled nuanced distinctions in the public agenda networks, demonstrating that the cognitive effects of media varies based on individuals' political perspectives. Specifically, statistically significant network connections were observed from the media to the pro-government public, while the cognitive maps of the pro-opposition public remained unaffected by any media camp.

While network agenda-setting models have demonstrated efficacy in Western contexts (e.g., Guo, 2013; Vu et al., 2014; Guo & Vargo, 2015), recent investigations into COVID-19 in China affirmed the explicit and implicit transfer of network connections from the media to the public (Liu et al., 2022). In China, a study akin to the present research, accounting for party affiliation and political views, observed varying media consumption patterns affecting the public (Chen et al., 2020). In semi-authoritarian settings like Poland (similar to Türkiye), research outcomes on network agenda-setting have been divergent. Some studies evidenced its presence, others have not, particularly the intermedia agenda-setting effect at the network level (cf., Guo et al., 2015; Guzek, 2019a; Guzek, 2019b). Thus, within a semi-authoritarian framework, understanding the network agenda-setting effect, especially the interplay between media and public agendas, remains constrained. This study assumes significance by expanding knowledge of the cognitive effects of media on the public in such nuanced political contexts. Unlike previous research, the present study revealed no network agenda-setting effect on opposition individuals from any media source. This departure from existing findings contributes to the NAS literature, indicating limitations in the applicability of the NAS model in competitive/semi-authoritarian contexts. It suggests that individuals opposing the regime may no longer be swayed by mainstream media—a contrast to the consistent evidence of the NAS model's effectiveness in Western democracies, China, and Taiwan.

The observed outcomes could be attributed to a decline in trust among dissident urban individuals in mainstream media, prompting alterations in their media consumption habits—potentially shifting towards social networks or reducing attention during mainstream media exposure. Low trust in the media, particularly evident in the opposition segment, has been substantiated by recent research in Türkiye (O'Donohue et al., 2020). Consequently, dissidents might have afforded less attention to mainstream media, resulting in diminished influence. This attests to the pivotal role of trust dynamics in shaping media consumption patterns and subsequently influencing the impact of mainstream media on dissident urban individuals.

An alternative explanation may stem from the heightened heterogeneity within the opposition group, encompassing individuals with diverse political affiliations such as liberals, Kurds, leftists, Kemalists³, and secular nationalists. This diversity contributes to a greater degree of variability within the opposition, in contrast to the more uniform structure observed among government supporters. Consequently, the determinants of cognitive processes are likely to vary significantly among dissenters, potentially rendering mainstream media less influential within this particular demographic. The intricate mix of political orientations within the opposition group underscores the complexity of factors influencing their cognitive responses to media influences, thereby contributing to the nuanced dynamics observed in the study.

A noteworthy observation in this study is the persistent association of specific themes or nodes in both media and public opinion, irrespective of statistical significance. Themes such as *economy*, *security*, and *demography* consistently have the most associations with other nodes, suggesting that both the media and the public prioritize and interconnect these issues in discussions about refugees or asylum seekers. Future inquiries could explore intervening variables that might have influenced dissident individuals in the absence of a significant media effect.

Furthermore, while the Turkish media system is commonly perceived as polarized, this study reveals a substantial correlation among media outlets affiliated with different political camps in the specific context of the Syrian refugee issue. Various factors may contribute to this correlation. The study focused on interconnections between objects—*economy*, *demography*, *security*, *crime*, and *Syrian refugee return*—rather than solely on attributions like *privilege*. Although acknowledged that media coverage may still exhibit polarity in terms of attribution, the study design precludes definitive conclusions about the extent of polarization. For instance, pro-government outlets may highlight positive economic impacts of refugees, emphasizing job market contributions, while pro-opposition counterparts may underscore potential economic burdens. Future research could enhance the analysis by incorporating a broader array of attributions into the network-level examination. Moreover, prior research conducted in various nations indicates that media outlets within each country often demonstrate specific patterns in their coverage of refugee-related narratives (Berry et al., 2016; Heidenreich et al., 2019). Drawing upon these observations, it is conceivable that Turkish media outlets, particularly concerning the Syrian refugee issue, may have developed correlated network agendas as a result of these inherent tendencies and contextual factors.

³Kemalism encompasses the collective efforts, principles, and initiatives of the founder of modern Türkiye, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938) and his associates, characterized primarily by a focus on modernization oriented towards Western Europe, the advocacy of secular Turkish nationalism, and the promotion of popular sovereignty (Arısan, 2008).

Moreover, this matter has attracted considerable media attention, notably in Türkiye, where a proclivity exists for uncritically reproducing politicians' statements without thorough elaboration (Melek & İşeri, 2021). The present study delves into extensive media coverage, specifically focusing on politicians' discourse concerning the Syrian refugee issue. This emphasis has the potential to cultivate a media landscape characterized by substantial correlation, notwithstanding disparate political perspectives. It is noteworthy that data collection coincided with a pledge by the then opposition leader, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu of the CHP, to repatriate Syrians if elected, leading to a resurgence of the refugee crisis on the media agenda. This resurgence, eclipsing the prevailing focus on the COVID-19 pandemic, accentuates the influence of political rhetoric on media narratives and public discourse in Türkiye.

Policy Suggestions

A compelling exigency exists for a nuanced strategy in addressing the interplay between media and public network agendas concerning Syrian refugees in Türkiye. The identified constraints in the efficacy of the NAS model within competitive or semi-authoritarian regimes underscore a notable erosion of public trust in media entities, particularly within the opposition public cohort. Consequently, it is imperative to advocate for the formulation and implementation of policies aimed at fostering media pluralism and diversity, concurrently emphasizing transparent reporting practices. This strategic intervention is posited as a means to redress extant challenges and to facilitate the restoration of public trust, particularly among individuals aligned with the opposition, in media institutions. By promoting a balanced representation of perspectives, such policies would aim to mitigate the potential polarization effects.

Additionally, there is a call for the development and implementation of media literacy programs to enhance public awareness of media influences and cultivate critical thinking skills. Strengthening regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms for media organizations is essential to ensure responsible journalism and diminish the negative responses from the public that observed in the study. Supporting independent journalism emerges as a crucial recommendation, serving as a counterbalance to partisan reporting and offering citizens a broader range of unbiased information. Furthermore, initiatives encouraging public engagement and dialogue, as well as international cooperation efforts to promote media freedom, are recommended to foster a more informed and resilient public discourse. These recommendations collectively aim to address the complexities of media influence in politically polarized environments and contribute to a more inclusive and transparent media landscape.

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Dr. Gizem Melek holds the position of Associate Professor in the Department of Radio Television and Cinema at Yaşar University, concurrently serving as the chair of the ECREA Women’s Network. Her research concentrates on the interplay between media and politics, specifically delving into media effects, journalism, and political and climate change communication. Dr. Melek’s research contributions are featured in reputable international journals such as Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly, Visual Studies, Communications: The European Journal of Communication Research, Visual Communication. Drawing from a journalistic career spanning six years in Türkiye and the UK, Dr. Melek enriches her academic pursuits with valuable practical experience.

E-mail: gizem.melek@yasar.edu.tr