

Political Astroturfing in Twitterscape: The Role of Troll Armies in Turkey's Democratic Backsliding

This report sheds light on the AKP's political astroturfing campaigns through an in-depth analysis of the state-sponsored troll accounts.

Political astroturfing: State-sponsored campaigns on social media by using trolls in a centrally orchestrated top-down organization.

Our analysis of the 6,252 Turkish state-sponsored accounts suspended by Twitter shows the extent and modus operandi of the AKP government's political astroturfing campaigns.

The main goals of these campaigns were to dominate public discourse, set the public agenda in accordance with the best interests of the AKP administration, and vilify and discredit political discontents.

An in-depth analysis of 6,252 Turkish state-sponsored troll accounts indicated that these accounts:



disseminated false information both in favor of the AKP government and against the opposition parties and groups.



invited their followers to tweet about pre-determined topics so that they would be trending across social media ecosystem.



incited and justified violence, cruelty, and injustice against some members of opposition groups.



sought to justify the AKP government's most controversial policies and discredit several legal probes launched into some political officials' misdeeds (e.g., corruption, bribery, human rights violations).



portrayed opposition parties and key figures as allies and apologetic defenders of certain groups, who were declared as political outlaws by the government in a rapidly-shifting political context.

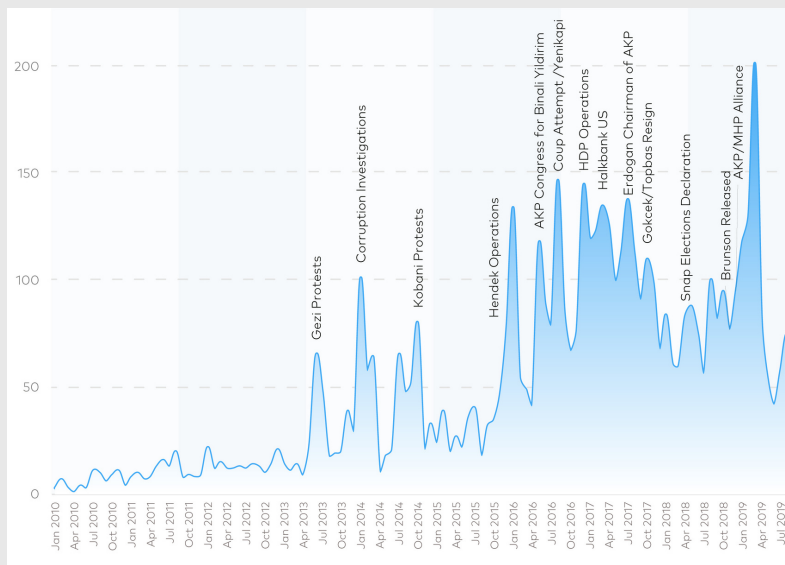


Figure 1. Number of new troll accounts created per month and the corresponding critical events

Trolls in critical incidents

Trends in the number of new accounts created each month from January 2010 to October 2019 showed that each spike in new troll account creations precipitated a critical national event.

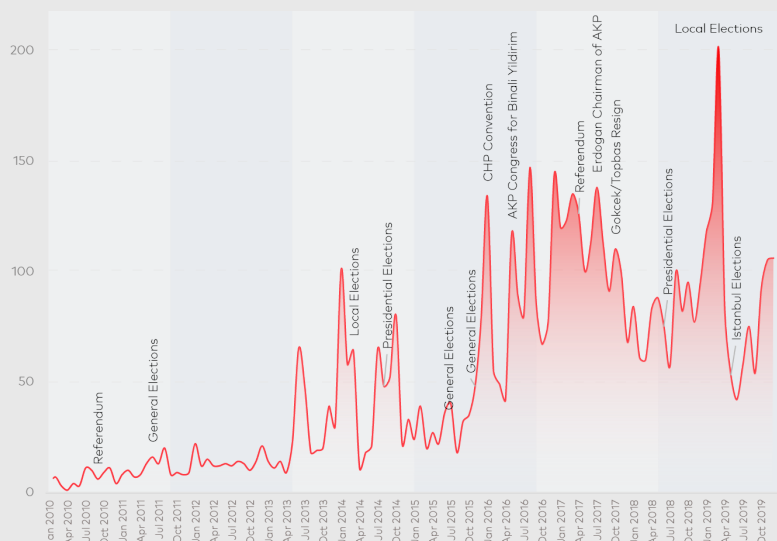


Figure 2. Number of new troll accounts created per month that corresponded to elections

Trolls in key elections

Spikes in new troll account creations also coincided with the key elections in the last decade in Turkey, which reflects the AKP's strategic priority of influencing voter behavior at the ballot box through political astroturfing campaigns.

The combination of quantitative analysis (i.e., account creation dates and frequencies, variation among the activities of trolls in the different sockpuppet categories, and popular hashtags) and qualitative analysis (i.e., themes emerging from the tweets of top trolls) show how the AKP attempted to shape the public agenda through political astroturfing campaigns during elections and after critical national events.