

## The World is Tilted

Jul 29, 2009



Articles & Testimony

**T**om Friedman is right, the world is flat. New communication technologies and globalization have created a flat world, erasing most social and political inequalities among nations. However, in this flat world, there is a new trend: from Italy and Turkey to Russia, Iran and China, where the governments control the media and the new communication tools, the world is tilted in favor of governments. What is more, this tilted world is not so equal, especially when it comes to politics.

Take Italy and Turkey, for instance. Both are democracies. Yet in both countries, the governing parties control much of the media, often distorting political debate in their favor.

In Italy, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who was a powerful media mogul when he entered politics, today controls much of the Italian media. According to Reuters, Mr. Berlusconi holds sway over 90 percent of Italy's broadcast media through his private media holdings and by exercising political power over the state television networks. It should not come as a surprise that Italy was rated as "partly free" in Freedom House's 2009 survey -- in "Western Europe" only Turkey shared this ranking with Italy.

Mr. Berlusconi's power over the media allows him shape the debate in favor of his government, as well as escape scandals that could finish him off politically. Mr. Berlusconi wins elections despite all odds and despite the shifting-sands nature of Italian politics. In Italy, the world of politics is tilted.

In Turkey, too, where the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan happens to be a close friend of Mr. Berlusconi, control over the media helps the ruling party shape the political debate in its favor. Since 2002 when the Justice and Development Party, or AKP, came to power, the government has used legal loopholes to confiscate ownership of independent media and sell it to its supporters. In 2002, pro-AKP businesses owned less than 20 percent of the Turkish media; today pro-government people own around 50 percent.

The AKP's new found control over the media is not without consequences. A review of the newspapers and networks reveals a split country. AKP-affiliated media reports on Turkey as a perfect country, if not for the serious allegations of coup plots against the government. Meanwhile, media unaffiliated with the AKP portrays an imperfect country wrought with corruption and ineffective governance. The media divisions, among other reasons, have caused Turkey to be cut in half, split between AKP's supporters and opponents. Still, as long as the AKP maintains control over half of the Turkish media, it will enjoy strong support. In Turkey, the world of politics is tilted.

Then, there is Russia, an effective single-party state. Russian leader Vladimir Putin, a close friend of Mr. Erdogan and Mr. Berlusconi, runs a state in which all media, with the exception of a few independent outlets, belongs to pro-government businesses or is in the hands of the Russian state. To put things in perspective, of the 26,000 newspapers, 16,500 magazines, 1,400 radio stations and 2,200 TV stations in Russia, the number of independent media outlets is in the single digits. Russian authorities regularly raid independent media offices and arrest journalists. Sometimes, even this is not enough: the flag bearer of Russian opposition Novaya Gazeta has tragically lost four journalists in the past eight years under mysterious circumstances.

This near absolute control over the media has allowed Putin to consolidate power in ways previously unthinkable in Italy and Turkey. United Russia, Mr. Putin's party, regularly wins landslide victories in elections, most recently pulling in almost three-quarters of the electoral support in the 2007 Russian legislative election. Analysts often ask why Russia is unable to produce an effective political opposition to Mr. Putin. The roots of this problem lie in Mr. Putin's monopoly over the Russian media: the more tilted the political world in favor of a government, the more the ruling parties can consolidate their power, ultimately preventing any opposition from gaining support. Mr. Putin must make his friends jealous for in Russia, the world of politics is almost irreversibly tilted.

Then, there is authoritarian Iran and China, where the world of politics is so tilted it cannot even be scaled. In these countries, the government controls not only traditional media, such as newspapers and TV networks, but also new tools of communication, such as the internet and cell phone communication.

When demonstrators took to the streets in the aftermath of Iran's recent presidential elections alleging electoral fraud, the government blacked out media access and shut down the web and cell phone networks, effectively cutting Iran off from all media sources. Briefly, the internet and cell phones allowed the Iranian demonstrators to organize. However subsequently, the government's ability to shut down the internet and cell phone communications provided the kiss of death for the anti-government protests, preventing the demonstrations from growing -- in Iran, the world is sharply tilted in favor of the regime.

The same story repeated itself in a more perfect form during the recent riots in China's East Turkestan (Xinjiang) region. Soon after the riots began, the government shut down internet access in the Uyghur province, ending the demonstrators' hope of using the web to organize. This step was followed by a total shut down of cell phone communications, including text messaging; isolating East Turkestan from the rest of the world. In Turkestan, the new world is so tilted that the Uyghurs cannot even see beyond it.

The flat new world is better off in many ways compared to the world of the past. Yet, ironically the same forces that are flattening the world can also tilt it, empowering authoritarian states, and allowing undemocratic trends to take roots in democratic societies. In the 21st century, one hopes that the world is not only flat, but also, and more importantly, that it is also even.

Soner Cagaptay is a senior fellow and director of the [Turkish Research Program \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=12&newActiveSubNav=Turkish%20Research%20Program&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D12&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

## RECOMMENDED

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

[\(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations\)](#)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

[\(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria\)](#)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Energy & Economics \(/policy-analysis/energy-economics\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Turkey \(/policy-analysis/turkey\)](#)