

Rising Ottoman Nostalgia in Turkish Popular Culture: An Analysis of Turkey's Europeanization Process and Ottoman-Themed Soap Operas

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Abstract

This article contributes to the study of the relationship between popular culture and politics by analysing the reversal of Turkey's Europeanization process after 2010. It explores how domestic dynamics can change social perceptions into foreign policy positions. Therefore, this article examines domestic dimensions and the current Turkish government's identity reconstruction process by considering popular culture as an important dynamic in the relations between the EU and Turkey. The current reconstruction process from a European to a neo-Ottoman identity of Turkey is analysed via Gramsci's cultural hegemony concept to understand the changes in Turkish politicians' discourses and popular culture products more efficiently. Two famous Ottoman-themed soap operas are compared in terms of their content and government's attitudes towards them. Moreover, discourse analysis and critical visual analysis are used to examine the representations of Turkish and European identities in the soap operas.

Keywords

Cultural Hegemony; Europeanization; Identity; Nostalgia; Ottoman; Popular Culture; Turkey

Introduction

Turkey, as the dominant Other of Europe (Neumann 1999, 39), has been experiencing contradictions in its relations with the rest of Europe throughout history, especially after the beginning of the new millennium. Walking in the streets beneath both the EU and Turkish flags waving together and visiting Europe one day without a visa has been a dream for most of the Turkish citizens for more than twenty years. However, alongside this fading dream, a governmental narrative aiming to create a society encultured by neo-Ottoman elements rather than contemporary European ones is starkly on the rise. A day in the life of an average student who takes additional religion classes besides the Ottoman language courses instructed at school is likely to end with them going home to watch their favourite soap opera about the wars between the glorious Muslim Turks and infidel Europeans. This scenario describes the ordinary day of a Turkish student for the last eight years. However, for policy makers and international relations researchers, this daily routine reveals much about the re-culturing of Turkish society itself.

This article aims to answer the question of how popular culture matters for both as a domestic policy means in national identity construction and as an instrument of soft power in Turkey's current international position. Therefore, it analyses the shift in Turkey's collective identity from European to a neo-Ottoman in the hegemonic project of the current government and through the lenses of soft power and cultural campaigns. From this perspective, national identity reconstruction intentions of the government can be recognised in one of the most famous aspects of Turkish popular culture: soap operas. After elucidating the concept of hegemony and describing a brief history of Turkey's Europeanization, the following analysis will scrutinise two soap operas, *The Magnificent Century* (2011) and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014), paying close attention to their content, the stylized image of the Turks and Europeans they depict, and responses from Turkish government officials to the series. This analysis can also shed light on why *The Magnificent Century* is highly criticized, while *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* is supported despite their thematic similarities: the underlying reason is the different interpretations of the two series of Turkish history and identity. Moreover, when exported, the soap operas may be used as an instrument of Turkish soft power because they reconstruct the image of Turks for an international audience. While the former finding reflects the importance of soap operas as a tool for reframing the national identity, the latter highlights the possibility of reconstructing an image of a nation in the international area by applying othering techniques of Turks against Westerners as an inversion of Said's Orientalism rhetoric (1979). The first section of the article examines Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and its' focus on media and elite class by studying the concept for Turkey's Europeanisation case in the last nine years while the second part elaborates on literature review

and the roots of Turkey's Europeanization process. The third section highlights the methods as discourses analysis and critical visual analysis that will be used in this article. In the fourth section, the analysis of the series and the discourses will be made and in the fifth part, the results of the analysis and researches based on Turkish public's opinions are compared to see the relation between them. In the Conclusion, the results of this research are discussed.

Gramsci and the Concept of Hegemony

The concept of changing cultural norms in International Relations has been analysed for decades by different approaches, namely because these deep shifts precede other major shifts in both domestic and foreign policy. While some traditional theories such as realism or liberalism rarely take the driving factors behind changing cultural norms into consideration, critical theories have examined them through discourses or shifts in domestic policy. This article seeks to highlight the connection between the turn in Turkish foreign policy priorities and the rise of neo-Ottomanist discourses in Turkish domestic sphere. Did this begin from the top-down, and if so, could it be indicative of a more focused agenda seeking to reconstruct Turkish identity? If indeed this is true to any extent, such shifts in the prevailing domestic ideologies would fundamentally change Turkey's international position as well. The link between attaining hegemony in culture and the media as a method for identity construction is captured by Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony, which helps us understand the relevance of culture and the media for identity construction in the international system.

Although Gramsci, in his original works, did not specifically focus on the international dynamics of states, Robert Cox extends Gramsci's thoughts to understand the meaning of international system (Cox 1983, 162). According to Stuart Hall, what makes Gramsci so important as a Marxist is that he was one of the first modern Marxists who recognized that "interests are not given, but politically and ideologically constructed" (Hall 1988, 167). Gramsci defined the state as a combination of political society and civil society where these two levels correspond through hegemony or direct domination (Gramsci 1971, 12), and result in a need for the analysis of civil society and culture.

Gramsci sees the concept of cultural hegemony as a way of *domination* which is one of the key factors framing culture as an important tool to gain power. Essentially, the concept of *cultural hegemony* refers to the creeping domination of one group over another by appealing to the vulnerabilities of the ruled group. This subtle but powerful form of consent targets the culture and worldview of the citizenry itself rather than enlisting the use of military force. Acknowledging the dimensions of soft power at play helps researchers to understand how ideas can reinforce or

undermine existing social structures via their imposition in culture. Gramsci (1971, 12) defines hegemony as:

“[T]he ‘spontaneous’ consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group; this consent is ‘historically’ caused by the prestige (and consequent confidence) which the dominant group enjoys because of its position and function in the world of production.”

When hegemony is achieved within the civil society by using consensual means aimed at the elite class, it spreads and universalizes the norms and values of that class. In doing so it thereby establishes a perception of political and ethical harmony between the dominant and subordinate groups (Germain and Kenny 1998, 17). Gramsci’s (1971, 26) emphasis on the role of education and media in shaping the intellectuals, and using these tools as means of creating and sustaining hegemony to structure the consent of society created a new perspective in political studies with its focus on the significance of culture in dominating a society.

Neo-Gramscianism, which is inspired by Cox, in its original sense does not offer a direct contribution to the concept of identity in political science and international relations. However, according to Langman, collective identity can be considered as the primary locus of hegemony particularly given that Gramsci’s notion of the ‘historical bloc’ and self-conceptions, or expressions of identity are not just cognitively built but motivated, and religion and nationalism generally serve hegemonic functions (Langman 2011, 2). Gramsci considers both the state and society ‘complexes’ or frameworks comprising constituent entities that ultimately outline the world orders. The intellectual’s role in any given state then would be to bind the members of a class and of an historic bloc together into a common identity (Cox 1983, 168). Therefore, the link between hegemony and collective identity is far too significant to ignore when addressing these elements as they play out in the domestic realm of Turkish politics.

The clear presence of ‘big government’ amongst nationwide media can be considered a contributing factor in the reversal of Turkey’s identity. The revival and reconstruction of neo-Ottomanization after the period of Europeanization presents an anomaly which literature has sought to explore. According to Yavuz, higher education, mass media and communications have played a very critical role in the reconstruction of collective identity in Turkey. This is particularly poignant given the rising role of media and public education as instruments of the in sustaining the hegemony of governments in domestic politics (Yavuz 1998, 19). Additionally, Saatcioğlu (2014, 87) emphasises that the transformation of the society is not related to the EU’s transformative power at all, it rather relates to urge of the government of the Justice and Development party (below: AKP government) for power consolidation. He examines the

ideological change occurring between Erdoğan's first term and his last term. Such attitudes on the part of the current government's administration correlate with actions that Gramsci or Marx would otherwise consider hegemonic consolidation.

The collective identity reconstruction process from Europeanization to neo-Ottomanization is usually explained with a focus on Turkey's foreign policy objectives and its relation to identity. According to Günay and Renda (2014, 49), Turkish elites used the concept and process of "Europeanization" to legitimize Turkey's foreign policy towards the Middle East. Therefore, a redefinition of Turkey's identity on religious terms (Sunni Muslim) rather than secular and aspiring politico-economic terms (a want-to-be member of the European Union) will directly affect Turkey's position in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. In other words, as Turkey re-orientates its own identity, it shifts the whole dynamics of power politics in the international area. Additionally, as Alpan and Diez (2014, 2) argue, Europe's transformative power on countries creates repercussion in Turkish politics, especially after the conservative government's policies, and it makes Turks seek other advantages. Yet, if we look at the answer of "how" this change takes part in the society, especially in the Turkish case, the changed discourse of the political elite can lead to a change in public discourses (Aydın-Düzgit 2017, 14). Popular culture is neglected as an instrument of de-Europeanization in the literature. To fill this gap, this article uses the concept of hegemony (that generates a common sense mainly connected to religion) to analyse the dynamics behind the transformation of Turkish identity by taking the media, popular culture products in TV into consideration as the main avenues for the transformation.

The Roots of Turkey's Europeanization

The clash of different identities has always affected Turkish society since its conception, and its ricochet into foreign policy as it has affected Turkey's position in international system. Turkey is caught between two identities; the West and the East. To the bulk of society, these are equated with "The European" and "the Muslim" respectively. Such has been the dynamic since the founding of the modern Turkish Republic. The secular republic project which seeks to achieve the level of contemporary Western civilizations was initiated in 1923 by the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. The society and the state transformed through several revolutions like switching to the Latin alphabet from the Arabic alphabet, clothe reforms abolishing the rule of wearing a headscarf in public for women, closing Islamic monasteries in the country and founding the new state on a secular system. After the end of the Ottoman era, Turkey adopted a new foreign policy approach which turned away from Middle Eastern countries and focused on building positive relations with Western states. Students were sent to European countries such as

France and England, to be educated and come back in order to assist in the progressive transformation of the country. However, it was not easy to erase the traces of Ottoman history which were based on Islamic leadership. Throughout much of this time, and the past was still seen through ‘a rosy lens’ and many perceived it to embody the glory of victories against its infidel enemies all around the world. After the 1950s, policy makers tried to mobilize a neo-Ottoman discourse to restructure the national identity. Such attempts failed because of the military coups which occurred when threats to the secular state mounted. Later, during the Cold War, Turkey’s self-assertion of its identity as European despite being the historical Other of Europe (Neumann 1999, 39) was strengthened by the country’s membership applications to NATO and to European Economic Community. The terms “bridge” and “window that opens from the West to the East” identified Turkey’s position in world politics, and became a prime example of Turkey’s ambiguous identity during the Cold War (Arkan and Kınacıoğlu 2016, 386). Despite Turkey’s aim to become a full member of the European Union after the Cold War, prolonged negotiation between the EU and Turkey, paired with a number of sceptical voices echoing within the Union about Turkey’s accession, have distanced Turkey’s chances of integrating into the EU. A number of reasons were cited by the European Union, some of them, including those emphasizing cultural differences, played a role in the change of Turkey’s Westward-leaning direction in the international arena to an Eastward one.

In 2002, Turkey’s domestic politics went down a path which has altered Turkey’s position in the international arena to the present day (Tüysüzöğlü 2013, 305). The victory of AKP would come to change Turkey’s formerly Europe-oriented identity in time. The party’s self-identification as a liberal (or progressive) Muslim party was a novelty. Never before had these two, stereotypically opposing attributes, surfaced in politics as successfully as they did with AKP. Turkish society was further instilled with hope. Alongside their economic platform, AKP’s commitment to the European Union full accession process was one of the most important factors leading to their victory. Even though the “bridge” concept continues to define Turkey’s geopolitical and strategic location, the meaning of the “bridge” gained a new understanding with the rise of the AKP government, particularly with the new foreign policy doctrine of Davutoğlu, who articulated his views in the book, *Strategic Depth* (Davutoğlu 2001). The new foreign policy objectives announced in this book was one of the factors which led to the reconstruction of the national identity of Turkish national identity. This reconstruction process started with the effect of Neo-Ottomanism¹

¹ Neo Ottomanism is a political project that aims reviving the Ottoman past in a variety of domains, including foreign policy, popular culture products and urban fabric. (Ergin and Karakaya 2017, 34).

in Turkish politics paired with a strong emphasis on religion as well as the aim of being a leader in the region with equal external relations with all neighbours.

The cumulative effect of discourse and narrative projected by Turkish politicians began to spread to popular culture. Once the active reframing of the Turkish and European identities in the eyes of the Turkish society was supported from the top, it became a hegemonic project. In addition to the rhetoric propagated by Turkish politicians, a new populist and xenophobic stream also appeared in Europe, largely in reaction to the Syrian refugee crisis. With the upsurge of populism, a strong emphasis on European civilization and Christian dominance in the Union increased the tension in Turkey-EU relations. Turkey's transformation of its identity from European to neo-Ottoman has accelerated, as both the EU and Turkey succumbed to *othering*. The influence of neo-Ottomanism in the media and popular culture changed society's identity and the image of Europe and turned Turkey's head away from being a member of the EU. The beginning of neo-Ottomanist discourse effectively became the beginning of a de-Europeanization process for Turkish society despite the initial aim of neo-Ottomanism was to develop good relations with the East as well as with the West (Tüysüzöglü 2013, 305). These developments in society had led to a change in Turkey's role in the international area. Notably, contemporary developments in Turkish foreign policy such as Shanghai Cooperation Organization (below SCO²) membership process show that Turkey has officially turned its face to the East and, with Erdoğan's hegemonic project, a new way of Said's orientalism which targets the West instead of the East has emerged in Turkish politics. Even so, Turkey is still 'waiting in the backyard' of the EU. A significant proportion of the Turkish population still ardently desires to become a member of the European Union. In spite of waning possibility, its negotiations with the Union continue. Lately, its exclusion from the EU has been highlighted by politicians a key feature of its non-European identity to bolster closer relations with other Muslim countries.

Neo-Ottomanism has been the leading instrument in shaping the new hegemonic project of the AKP government. This project started with the new foreign policy doctrine of the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davutoğlu, and turned into an identity reconstruction process in time challenging the EU's domination both in Turkish domestic and foreign policy. Contributing to Turkey's de-Europeanization, this process is carried out through the discourses of Turkey's and EU's about Turkey's everlasting accession process and the cultural differences between the two actors. These discourses have echoed in the domestic realm and started an othering process for

² SCO is a Eurasian intergovernmental organization which was established on 15 June 2001. Currently it has eight member states, namely the Republic of India, the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan (SCO 2020).

Europe in the eyes of Turkish society via different ways such as the change in the content of popular culture. The change in Turkey's domestic attitude towards Europe is traceable in one of the Turkey's biggest exportations to the Middle East, Turkish TV series, and has contributed to a reimagination of Europe against 'modern Ottomans' (contemporary Turks) and Muslim unity in the Middle East.

Discourse and Critical Visual Analysis: Methods to Study Identity Reconstruction Through Popular Culture

Due to its reflectiveness and interaction with the society, popular culture in 21st century should not be seen only as an entertainment tool, but also as a mirror for social processes. Therefore, in this research, two examples of popular culture products as a part of Turkish media are analysed to illuminate the link between the shift in the popular culture and collective identity reconstruction as the hegemonic project of the government. The reason why the products of popular culture are considered as data is that the way a large audience interprets or responds to a text or a movie should provide good evidence about collective beliefs in a state, society or political movement (Neumann and Hexon 2006, 14-15). Also, popular culture does not only reflect the cultural values, but it can also give a clue about an ongoing political process (ibid., 14). Therefore, considering popular culture not only as means of entertainment but also as a concept which should be taken seriously would be beneficial. As Duncombe and Bleiker (2015, 42) argue, popular culture unites "Us" through narratives that shape who we are and what separates "Us" from "the Other"; television and film can offer different messages contributing to identity constructions via emotions and visibility.

Soap operas are important products of popular culture. Generally, they reflect the social facts and politics of the given time. Their effect on Turkish society is too important to ignore due to Turkish society's interest in TV shows which is larger than in any other social activity. According to the Turkish Statistical Institute report in 2015, 94.6 % of Turks say that watching television is their favourite activity (BBC Türkçe 2015). Moreover, the Radio and Television Supreme Council announced that Turkish citizens watch TV for 5.5 hours a day on average, which makes Turkish society the world's biggest consumers of television shows (CNN Türk 2017). Given the length of soap operas in Turkey, which are not less than two hours per episode, watching a series in the evening is more than an entertainment, it is a family ceremony. Therefore, themes and changes in TV series can be presumed to influence society.

Furthermore, Turkish TV series have been highly popular outside Turkey as well. Through exportation, they can be seen as instruments of soft power exercised by Turkey on other countries, especially in the Middle East (AlJazeera Turk 2014). According to the Ministry of Culture and

Tourism, Turkish soap operas rank second after the US in global TV series sales and hit higher than \$350 million in foreign syndication (Daily Sabah 2018), while being the most glamorous export of Turkey since 2002. The representation of values and role models of the East differentiates Turkish soap operas from Western ones and covers the existing gap in the markets of the Middle East. While the TV series are an effective tool for the international promotion of Turkey, the values they sell abroad are shaping the profile of the country.

Narratives and images in soap operas are mostly representations of social life. They interact with one another in a variety of important ways. The shift in the content of soap operas is illustrated by the two most famous Ottoman-themed soap operas in terms of (1) how their content reframes the image of what constitutes the “Turk” and “European;” and (2) how the Turkish government responded to them which is an important element to understand the government’s attention to and aim with soap operas when the Ottoman history is the subject. Due to the research focus on the discourse of politicians and popular culture products, the methodology of this article is qualitative. Two specific soap operas, *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, are chosen as the primary “datasets” of this research due to their success in rating figures; they both have taken the first place in rating lists as well as in exportation rates (Dizisi 2019a; Dizisi 2019b).

Due to the focus on representations of different identities and their effects in the international arena, contemporary discourse is viewed as a dominant representation of how these identities are shifting over a relatively short period of time. Recognizing these shifts helps understand the situation where power is maintained and moulded via the aid of culture (Neumann 2011, 70). Therefore, this article relies upon both a discourse analysis of statements on Turkish politicians’ attitudes towards two soap operas as well as the narratives implemented in the soap operas themselves, which create the image of “Europe”. As Arkan and Kınacıoğlu (2016, 285) argue, discursive practices and representation relocate Turkey in the world and led to a mutual construction of identities between the EU and Turkey. In addition to the discourse analysis, critical visual analysis is used as a supporting method to analyse scenes from two soap operas. Selected images from the series show their representative power on identities, since the images have the potential to shape what can and cannot be seen in politics (Bleiker 2015, 884), and they have become increasingly central to the cultural construction of social life. For this reason, they can be considered as affected from social conditions, and therefore as much an influencer as well as a reflection of changing perceptions (Rose 2001, 6).

The Shift Towards Neo-Ottomanism in the Media and the Popular Culture of Turkey

Although the processes of identity construction started at the international level with the discourses and new foreign policy doctrines of the government, it did not take long to observe a similar shift in the collective social identity. This discourse reverberated into daily life and found a place in the popular culture, ultimately facilitating the government's hegemonic project of Neo-Ottoman identity construction led to a shift in Turkey's Europeanization process. As can be seen in the Gramscian concept, exercising hard power might not always be the best possible way to gain power, but power can be gained by winning consent; different platforms such as education or media may become constitutive elements of civil society (Gramsci 1971). Both the education system and media can be tools which the dominant class develops to uphold its hegemony in civil society, not by being reflective on societal consensus but by manipulating (Hall 1982, 57). Once this level is reached, they then wield the power to shape an entire generation. The reason for the changed attitude of the government through a new identity construction process found a place in the society can be observed as the effect of changed media (Yavuz 1998, 19) and regulation in school curricula with more focus on religious classes and Ottoman language.

Since 2010, Turkey's new generation of history-themed series have been centering on Ottoman history, and more than 15 TV series and several movies with the Ottoman theme have been produced. Two of them were successful enough to get the attention of the government, even to create polemics in politics, and showed how popular culture can be utilized as an effective tool in world politics for nation building purposes. Moreover, as it becomes clear from the following analysis, the export of Turkish soap operas changed from love-themed TV series to Ottoman-themed soap operas, where we can clearly see the growing interest in Ottoman idea in the 21st century throughout the Middle Eastern countries. The vice General Manager of TRT, the national TV channel of Turkey which televises the series, declared that *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* has been exported to more than 60 countries, mostly to the Gulf region (TRT Haber 2017). In addition to this, *The Magnificent Century* has reached more than 500 million viewers all around the world (Hürriyet 2019). The conqueror role of Turkish soap opera continues particularly with the theme of Ottoman Empire as "The conqueror of the world," and the valiance presented by this image has a major influence on the region in that it reshapes societal perspective.

The Magnificent Century (IMDb 2011) and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (IMDb 2014) are the two Turkish soap operas in which the two different "glory" periods of the Ottoman Empire are presented. Despite their similar historical themes, the former has been criticized strongly by the AKP government while the latter has been explicitly supported by the government. Nevertheless,

the reason for both supports and critiques of the government is the faithfulness of the series to the original “glory” and “tradition” of the Empire. The government’s way of glorifying the past to create a new national identity is an example of inventing tradition by means of referencing a collective Muslim-Turk past and formalizing, even ritualizing, this concept via media to serve government interests (see Hobsbawm 1983, 1-14). Moreover, the common point of the two series is the presentation of “Europe” in a very different way than the society used to see it. Representations of Western and Eastern characters and their relations with each other indicate the effects of the currently ongoing de-Europeanization process on the society.

The soap operas are riddled with *othering* elements where Europe is reframed. The presentation of European characters and countries in such a way is dismantling the idea of Europe which had been constructed by the former governments of Turkey since the foundation of Turkish Republic. The divisions between “Us” and “the Other” are generally based on religious differences, such as presenting a war and its participating parties as Muslims versus Christians rather than focusing on two states’ or nations’ rivalries. Additionally, both projects present “The European” as the infidel, arrogant, reveller and coward; while presenting “The Ottoman” as the sultans, the believers, decisive, hard-working, and fair. Likewise, the emphasis on jihad and martyrdom are at the centre of every war scene.

The Magnificent Century: The Glory of the Past

The Ottoman concept trend in TV series started with “The Magnificent Century”, which sparked both a debate among historians and a discussion in politics. The theme of the series is based on the life of Sultan Süleyman, who is known as the Magnificent or Lawmaker Süleyman, and victories of the Ottoman Empire in the reign of Sultan Süleyman, which lasted for 46 years. Alongside victories, stories about fights for the throne and plots among Hürrem Sultan and other women drew the attention of society. This soap opera also focuses on the relationships between the members of the imperial household, particularly romantic entanglements, and rivalries. Throughout the four seasons of the series, the great achievements of the Ottoman Empire, both domestically and internationally and the idea of being the leader of all the Muslims were presented constantly.

Wars with the Crusaders and the presentation of Christian enemies as cruel, unfair and lazy was one of the main concepts of the soap opera. For instance, the 26th episode of the series is centred around the Battle of Mohacs, which was fought between the forces of the Kingdom of Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, and resulted in the victory of the latter. During the 4th episode, while the king of Hungary, II. Lajos (Louis) was portrayed in his fancy palace and having fun with different women, Sultan Süleyman was shown as working hard on the strategies just before the

battle between the parties (See Figure 1). However, despite the weak image of the European powers and focus on the wars among Muslims and Christians, the emphasis on domestic peace in the Empire was strong. The way of framing the Empire as a multicultural environment where people of different nationalities lived in peace aims to show how fair the Islamic rule and the reign of Sultan Süleyman was.



Figure 1: Two different scenes from the fourth episode of “The Magnificent Century” where we see the representations of Sultan Süleyman (left) and the Hungarian King, II. Lajos (right). Source: Muhteşem Yüzyıl (2014).

Besides the heroic narratives in the soap opera, the emphasis on harem and the sexual life of the Sultan (who may have a girl from the harem anytime he wants) annoyed the government and led to interjections from Erdoğan (such as: “We do not have such ancestors!”) made while criticizing the inappropriate focus of the soap opera. He added that the Ottoman Empire was not made up of fights for the throne and harem (Arslan 2012). Echoing Erdoğan, the Minister of Family and Social Policies, Sema Aliye Kavaf, argued that it was shameful to present the glorious empire, which governed three continents for 600 years, in such a way. Meanwhile the deputy prime minister at the time, Bülent Arınç, indicated that Ottoman Sultans are also representative of historically Turkic values and that they should be protected by the law as Atatürk is protected (Milliyet 2011a). Negative responses to the soap opera about its incorrect presentation of the Ottoman past went beyond verbal backlash; legal steps were also taken to vindicate the magnificence of the Empire. Although the producer’s explanation on the series is clear in that it is a historical fiction soap opera, the critiques from the conservative government did not disappear. In 2012, AKP even submitted a bill of law to the parliament where they asked for a sanction to be

imposed on *The Magnificent Century*. Still, the soap opera continued until 2014 with a big rating success.

No matter what the government officials said, the flashiness of the series and the presentation of the past in such a glorious way had an illusory effect upon its viewership and hooked a large audience. Moreover, the theme of “conquering the world”, and the idea of “being more powerful than any other country” emboldened prevailing nationalistic urges existing within the society. The series was the most expensive Turkish television drama ever made (Tüzün and Şen 2014, 64) and it was exported to 52 countries, including the USA, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and various Middle Eastern and Balkan countries, reaching about 350-400 million viewers (AlJazeera Turk 2014). Also, according to the data from Turkey’s Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2015, the series had reached 400 million people in nearly 60 countries, despite the fact that the length of each episode exceeded two hours. In spite of the critiques from the government claiming that the serial does not reflect the real glory of the Empire and that it is just an object for superficial tabloids, the series was unprecedentedly successful at presenting its conception of history by re-imposing the ideas of palace culture and empire, political Islam, and martyrdom both to Turkish society and other parts of the world.

Resurrection: Ertugrul: Where the Glory Starts

The other soap opera featuring the theme of the Ottoman Empire is entitled *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. It is a historical adventure series which is based on the history of Muslim Oghuz Turks. It takes place in the 13th century and narrates the foundation of the Ottoman Empire with a strong emphasis on the harmony between Turkishness and Islam. The series centers around the life of Ertuğrul Bey, the father of Osman I, who was the founder of the Ottoman Empire. The series was in its 5th season in 2019. Each season describes different periods of the foundation of the Ottoman Empire, but it predominantly narrates the medieval campaigns waged by Turks against the Christian enemies. Despite the similarity of the themes between *The Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, the latter has received the support of the conservative government with its emphasis on the harmony between Turkish identity and Islam.

The very first episode of the series starts with Süleyman Shah’s tribe and their difficult living conditions. The tribe’s need to move somewhere else was the beginning of the foundation and the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. Moreover, in the first episode, the process of othering Europeans by drawing Süleyman Shah’s tribe as “Us” and the Crusaders as “the Other” starts with the scene where Ertugrul Bey rescues some prisoners from the Crusaders. The prisoners are welcomed in Süleyman Shah’s tribe and “Turkish hospitality” is emphasised many times by different characters treating the guests with a great respect. In the following three episodes the

emphasis on Turkish hospitality continues by including all guests regardless of their identity, even the ones that could easily become a trouble for the tribe.



Figure 2: Turkish Muslim (Kayı tribe) warriors are praying before a conquest. Source: TRT İzle (2019).

This soap opera is a mix of strong themes related to the establishment of an expansionist state that will rule with justice, as well as the Islamic concepts of unity, jihad, martyrdom, patience and hope, all combined with a hatred for the Crusaders and their spies from within the tribe. The quote from the 97th episode of the series makes the idea of jihad and faith as well as the idea of glory and the leader of the world: “We do not fight for treasures or plunder, we fight for God’s sake and for the order of the world.” The given message to the domestic audience is very clear and effective in the soap opera. The representations of Muslim Turk warriors in the series while they are praying before the war (see Figure 2) promote the justification of jihad: Islam should be the leader in the world order. The show captures the Muslim nationalism expressed by President Erdogan who, during a referendum period, spoke of a bitter “struggle between the crescent and the cross” (Armstrong 2017).

Contrary to *The Magnificent Century*, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* has had the support of the AKP government from the very first episode. The visit of erstwhile Prime Minister Davutoğlu to the movie set (see Figure 3), or the channel that the series has been televised, TRT, the national Turkish public broadcaster,³ for four years highlights the link between the soap opera and the government. The explanation of İbrahim Eren, deputy director general of TRT, demonstrates that the series is planned as a nation structuring process: “The series aims to strengthen the nationhood sentiment of Turkish people by teaching the audience how the Turkish state came into existence, through a

³ In contrast, the *Magnificent Century* is broadcasted at Show TV and Star TV which are two private TV channels.

combination of history and quality entertainment” (Daily Sabah 2017). Between the screen credits and the episode, the statement of “the source of inspiration of the story and characters in the series is our history” and its loaded tagline “A Nation’s Awakening” are apparent signs of the aim of the series. Despite the different comments on the soap operas by the government, the aim of the discourse has been the same; to sanctify the Ottoman past and to impose it on the society. In the cases of these two series we see the usage of media to impose an ideology on the society and the development of hegemony. *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* is directly related to the idea of the invention of tradition, given the way of self-assertion (see Hobsbawm 1983, 14) of Turkish identity both in the soap opera and in the supportive discourses of policy makers. *Magnificent Century* is indirectly linked to the same idea since the reaction of the government still has the aim to aggrandize the idea of Ottoman culture and impose it on the society. Despite the difference between the presentations of the past, in each of the cases the usage of Ottoman Empire both in the stories in the soap operas and in the discourses of officials serve the same purpose: the reconstruction of Turkish identity with an emphasis on religion.



Figure 3: Davutoğlu’s (left) visit to the set of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and shaking hands with one of the main characters of the series, the father of Ertuğrul (right). Source: Sabah (2015).

Trust of the Turkish Public in the EU Accession Process Before and After 2010

The Neo-Ottomanism project and its reflections on Turkish popular culture (which gained traction after 2010) had an important effect on shaping the Turkish public’s conception of the “Self” as “Turk” and the “Other” as Europe. This change in the Turkish public opinion on EU accession is clear in the results of public polls. If we compare the results of public polls before and after 2010, we see a change in Turkey’s trust in the EU accession process.

After receiving a candidate member status at Helsinki Summit in 1999, Turkey expected to begin accession negotiations with the EU as soon as possible. From 1999 until the 2004 Brussels Summit (where negotiations of Turkey's full membership were to start) Turkey initiated its reforms for financial and political adaptation into the European Union and received the full support of the EU during this process (Akdemir 2018). This period would become the period where Turkey's support for EU accession was at its optimum level due to the sympathetic attitude of policy makers and media channels towards the EU. According to research conducted by Boğaziçi University in 2001, 74 % of the Turkish public maintained a positive opinion about the EU accession process while only 18 % of the public expressed their negative attitude towards it. Moreover, Perception of Foreign Policy research of TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation) in 2010 shows that 69 % of respondents declared that they wanted Turkey to become a member of the EU. The 10 % who were pessimistic about full EU membership declared that their biggest reason for objection was the cultural and moral differences between the EU and Turkey (TESEV 2011).

In 2018, we see a notable change. The Economic Development Agency of Turkey (IKV henceforth), a non- governmental research organization that works on Turkey-EU relations, published the result of their public opinion survey about Turkey's perception of the EU. According to the data of IKV, while Turkish society's support for EU membership is increasing year by year, hope that it will actually happen is decreasing. The support of Turkish society for EU membership increased to 78.9 % in three years (from 2015 to 2017). However, 62.1 % of the respondents said that their belief in the possibility of full EU membership is decreasing (IKV 2018). The most important part of the IKV research, for this article, is the elaboration of the reasons that respondents gave for not supporting EU membership. The most common reason for the participants of the survey is the fear that EU membership will harm Turkish culture and identity (25.2 %), while the second (24.6 %) and the third (23.5 %) most common reasons are the beliefs that there is no future for the EU in general anymore, and that the EU's approach to Turkey has double standards.

Hence, cultural differences are perceived as the biggest obstacle for Turkey's EU membership by the Turkish public. This result is parallel to what is reflected in popular culture products as a difference between Turks and Europeans between 2011-2019. Moreover, these figures indicate the importance of the discourses of political elites as much as the effect of media and popular culture products in shaping public opinion.

Conclusion: Reframing Europe: Another Dimension of Orientalism?

The rising presence of neo-Ottomanism both in domestic and international politics through the discourse of Turkish policymakers and popular culture products continues to support

the reversal of Turkey's former Europeanization process. The efforts of the government seem bent on changing the negative image of the Ottoman Empire, and reminding the public of a forgotten and nostalgic identity of Turkey. Moreover, they are not limited to policy-makers. Reframing Turkish identity is quite visible in popular culture, especially in popular soap operas. Presentation of Turkish identity in a neo-Ottoman sense facilitates the indirect reframing of European identity in popular culture and contributes to the process of othering Europe in Turkish society.

The process of othering and framing "Us" is not new in world politics. Throughout history this process is used to serve political interests of communities. In the case of Turkey, we see the opposite way of othering than we used to see in famous studies, such as Said's *Orientalism* (1979). In these soap operas, rather than observing a perception of the East by the West, we watch the West in the eyes of Muslim Turks. We find something quite different than Europe in the majority of Turkish society's dreams, where the EU is always introduced as highly civilized and the defender of the oppressed. While people from outside the Ottoman territory are represented either as unfair infidels or as weak servants of the Empire, the rulers of the Ottoman Empire are framed as believers, strong and fair enough to keep the territories as peaceful homes for the multicultural society. This strong emphasis on cultural differences in soap operas is reflected in changing views on EU accession in public opinion polls, that indicate a decline in the belief that Turkey will join the EU.

The explicit responses from policy makers to the soap operas demonstrate that popular culture products can be used as a hegemonic project and an identity construction tool by the states. In addition to the domestic effect of soap operas on national identity construction, soap operas might be used as an instrument of soft power. The Arab world has been the biggest market for Turkish TV series (Tokyay 2017) despite the sharp change in the themes of Turkish soap opera as discussed in the previous sections. The reason for the huge demand of the new Ottoman themed soap operas from the Middle Eastern countries is not clear. Further research could show whether it originates, for example, in the feeling of having the glory of the past back from a TV screen, or Turkey's cultural evolution in terms of the content of soap opera before and after 2010. Ultimately, it seems Turkey's ambition to be the leader in the Middle East and its neo-Ottoman call already influenced the Middle Eastern countries. The common way of framing Europe in the recent Turkish soap operas is more than a coincidence; it is a way of imposing a new identity on the society while creating an Eastern style of Orientalism/Counter-Orientalism for the West. It seems like Turkey is strengthening its Muslim and Ottoman image in the world differently from how it used to, bringing new challenges to its EU accession prospects for the upcoming years.

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