



**NEO-OTTOMANISM AND NATION (RE)BRANDING IN
TURKEY:
THE CASE OF MEDIA**

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Thesis for the Master's Program in Political Science and International Relations

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ETHICAL DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have conducted my work in accordance with academic rules and ethical behaviour at every stage from the planning of the thesis to its defence. I confirm that I have cited all ideas, information and findings that are not specific to my study, as required by the code of ethical behaviour, and that all statements not cited are my own.

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ABSTRACT

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Master's Program in Political Science and International Relations

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This thesis focuses on the intricate relationship between ontological security, neo-Ottomanism, and nation branding. To do so, it explores transformation over the last two decades through history-themed soap operas and aims to shed light on the motivations driving Turkey's change under the Justice and Development Party government's rule. One of the core objectives of the JDP government involves (re)branding Turkey to achieve the visions of neo-Ottoman ideology. To maintain neo-Ottomanist policies, the identity of 'new' Turkey shaped by the JDP government, requires recognition in former Ottoman territories and this is achieved by exporting Turkish media products, especially to the Balkans and the Middle East. Therefore, this thesis analyzes contemporary TV series in two different periods, the first 2002-2014 and the second 2014-2023 in order to shed light on Turkey's changing identity and governmental narratives. In this process, to foster new ontological security codes, Turkey seeks to reunite with its imperial past and intentionally diverges from Kemalist narratives. The study examines the means used to bridge these narrative gaps, highlighting the reproduction of discourses created by the JDP government and

its elites through TV series. Finally, by revealing the symbiotic relationship between the media and the search for nation branding, ontological security, and an assertive neo-Ottoman identity, the thesis highlights the significance of media narratives in shaping and fortifying particular version of national identity, fostering a sense of ontological security and encouraging the adoption of an assertive neo-Ottoman identity.

Keywords: Neo-Ottomanism, Nation Branding, Ontological Security, Historical Soap Opera, TV series, Media.



ÖZET

Türkiye'de Yeni Osmanlılık ve Ulus (Yeniden)Markalama: Medya Örneği

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Bu tez, ontolojik güvenlik, yeni Osmanlılık ve ulus markalaşması arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiye odaklanmaktadır. Bunu yapmak için, tarih temalı pembe diziler aracılığıyla son yirmi yılda yaşanan dönüşümü araştırmakta ve Türkiye'nin Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi iktidarı altındaki değişimine yön veren motivasyonlara ışık tutmayı amaçlamaktadır. AKP hükümetinin temel hedeflerinden biri, yeni Osmanlı ideolojisinin vizyonlarına ulaşmak için Türkiye'yi (yeniden) markalaştırmaktır. Yeni Osmanlı politikaların sürdürülebilmesi için AKP iktidarının şekillendirdiği 'yeni' Türkiye kimliğinin eski Osmanlı topraklarında tanınması gerekmektedir, bu ihtiyaç Türk medya ürünlerinin özellikle Balkanlar ve Orta Doğu'ya ihraç edilmesiyle giderilmektedir. Bu nedenle bu tez, Türkiye'nin değişen kimliğine ve hükümet anlatılarına ışık tutmak amacıyla ilki 2002-2014 ve ikincisi 2014-2023 olmak üzere iki farklı dönemdeki güncel televizyon dizilerini analiz etmektedir. Bu süreçte Türkiye, yeni ontolojik güvenlik kodları geliştirmek için emperyal geçmişiyle barışmayı amaçlamaktadır ve kasıtlı olarak Kemalist anlatılardan uzaklaşmaktadır. Çalışma, bu anlatı boşluklarını kapatmak için kullanılan araçları inceleyerek, AKP hükümeti ve

onun seçkinleri tarafından yaratılan söylemlerin TV dizileri aracılığıyla yeniden üretildiğine dikkat çekmektedir. Son olarak, medya ile ulus markalama, ontolojik güvenlik ve iddialı bir yeni Osmanlı kimliği arayışı arasındaki simbiyotik ilişkiyi ortaya koyan tez, ulusal kimliğin belirli bir versiyonunu şekillendirme ve güçlendirmede, ontolojik güvenlik hissini beslemede ve iddialı bir yeni Osmanlı kimliğinin benimsenmesini teşvik etmede medya anlatılarının önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Osmanlılık, Ulus Markalama, Ontolojik Güvenlik, Tarihi Pembe Diziler, TV Dizileri, Medya.



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP (Turkish abbreviation of) – Justice and Development Party

EU – European Union

IR – International Relations

ISS – International Security Studies

JDP – Justice and Development Party

NMP – Nationalist Movement Party

OS – Ontological Security

RPP – Republican People’s Party

TIKA – Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

TRT – Turkish Radio and Television Corporation

USSR – Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

During the state-building process of the Turkish Republic, in the early 20th century, the founding leaders sought to establish a Western- leaning state. In doing so, many social and political reforms were followed to establish a secular, modern and democratic Turkish state in line of the modernizing ideology that also sought to bury the country's imperial past (Danforth, 2014; Yavuz, 2020; Yavuz, 2016). As noted by Danforth (2014) the early Kemalists criticized the Ottoman Empire for being backward and overly religious. However, they specifically used the term "Ottoman" not for the entire society or an era but to criticize the political elite they had seized power from. Additionally, according to M. Vehbi Tanfer (1995) in 1923, Atatürk told the French journalist Maurice Pernot the following; "We want to modernize our country. Our entire effort is to establish a government in Turkey that is modern and, therefore, Western. Which nation, desiring to enter civilization, has not leaned towards the West?". Thus, it can be said that these kinds of republican narratives of the country's imperial past often emphasize the Ottoman state's and society's backwardness by highlighting the need for modernization, in order to justify the Kemalist revolution. As M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) argues, the official state historiography emphasizes a rupture from the imperial past and highlights the adoption of modernity as a crucial path for the salvation of the Turkish nation.

Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government (2002-present), this republican narrative about the imperial past turned into a glorious nostalgia, which serves as an important tool for neo-Ottomanism. It is an ideology that seeks to restore the political and cultural dominance of the Ottoman Empire in today's Turkey by promoting Turkish culture and values in the region and implementing a more assertive foreign policy. It not only challenged Turkey's status quo-seeking foreign policy in International Relations (IR), but also its normative stance which goes hand in hand with Western norms and values. In this vein, Öztürk (2019) argues that "since 2002, Turkey has been ruled by a religious-conservative elite, and in the initial years it was often cited as an example of how Islam can be at peace with democracy".

Turkey's political landscape has been changing since the beginning of the 2000s. In the early years of the new millennium, Turkey was regarded as a country that sets a role model of democracy in the Middle East region in the light of its

republican values, such as being secular and democratic country with the majority of Muslim citizens. Borrowing from Li (2022) early in Erdogan's prime ministership, despite his religious background, he was noted for progressivism, advocating for press freedom, free speech, EU membership, and reforms in justice and military governance to align with Western standards. Considering the religious-conservative tendency in Turkey that brought Erdoğan and JDP to power “Turkey was soon hailed as a model for the rest of the Islamic world, an inspiring example of how Islam can be combined with secular democracy and market capitalism.” (Özkırımlı, 2022).

Seen in this light, with the JDP’s newly embraced neo-Ottoman narratives, Turkey would embrace its imperial legacy and project its influence over these regions, i.e., Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus, by setting an example to those regions as a powerful, stable, and most importantly secular democratic state with the majority of the Muslim people. This ideology, reached its peak under the JDP rule, is a reaction of the conservative and religious parties in Turkish society, to the reforms and oppression implemented for modernization and secularization in the early years of the Republic. Such as the letter revolution, clothing reform, and reforms that separated religious and state affairs, brought religion under state control, and abolished offices such as the caliphate. So, this thesis delves into the complex interplay among ontological security, neo-Ottomanism, and nation branding, tracing their evolution over the past decades through historical soap operas. It seeks to uncover the relationship between nation (re)branding and the ontological security codes of the ‘new’ Turkey under JDP’s rule showing the echoes of this change in the realm of media and highlighting the media's role in this intricate evolution.

Neo-Ottomanism as a concept preceded the JDP. For example, it was used by conservative politicians in the past, such as by Turgut Özal's undersecretary Hasan Celal Güzel. He argued that Turkey should get rid of its obsessions with Westernization and abandon the status quo while adopting an active foreign policy that would assume its historical responsibilities towards its region. (Uzgel and Yaramış, 2009). The September 12 coup in 1980 was effective in the emergence of neo-Ottomanism because the coup regime embraced the idea of Turkish-Islamic synthesis, which suggests Turkish culture and Islam are compatible and Turkey should have a greater role in the Muslim world. In the words of M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) “the main feature of Turkish Islam is that both nationalism and Islamism have been legitimized with a reference to the Ottoman past and its ‘glorious’ achievements. By reimagining

the Ottoman past as an 'Islamic' past and the Ottoman sultans as 'Islamic figures,' not only has the Ottoman past been Turkified, but Islam too has been Turkified. This Islamic- Turkish nationalism used the Ottoman past as its open reservoir to restore self-confidence and reveal the historic origins of Turkish nationalism." Besides that, the subsequent disintegration of the Iron Curtain in 1991, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union brought many geopolitical opportunities for Turkey. These events, which coincided with the Özal period, caused neo-Ottomanism to be frequently used in those years, and it was claimed that Turkey should fulfill its historical responsibilities by embracing its past instead of denying it.

M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) also mentioned that, "the Ottoman legacy meant the recognition of a moral responsibility toward the Muslim communities that had been part of the Ottoman Empire." It implied that Turkey, as the successor state of the Ottoman Empire, which was the final home of the caliphate, has a religious and historical responsibility to safeguard and guide the Sunni Muslims. However, in the Özal period, Turkey was characterized as a pro-Western state, the Islamist side was not as prominent at that time as it is today, and Özal was persuading economic liberalization, privatization of public sectors, and a pro-Western foreign policy stance which was distinct from the current neo-Ottomanism under JDP's rule.. In 2002, with JDP's coming to the power, Turkey started to gravitate around Islamist orientation of this ideology as well, particularly with the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu as the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009. He was the mastermind of the today's neo-Ottomanism idea. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020), Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy approach emphasizes the importance of Islam and the Ottoman past as core elements of Turkey's identity and as sources of motivation for its foreign policy. This perspective helps to explain the role of nostalgia and memory in shaping Turkish foreign policy decisions. In this vein, according to Arkan and Kınacıoğlu (2016) "it can be argued that the way in which Turkey's history and heritage were interpreted and portrayed in Davutoğlu's discourse have not only shaped the way in which Turkey's political elite viewed the country's position and responsibilities toward its neighbors, but also influenced the broader foreign policy goals of Turkey with respect to the wider world." Thus, in contrast to previous interpretations, today's neo-Ottomanism, as formulated by Davutoglu, offers a selective view of the Ottoman legacy to justify Turkey's expanding role in the Middle East (Volfova, 2016). For this reason, as mentioned by M. Hakan Yavuz (2020), the interpretation of the Ottoman

past through Turkish-Islamic lenses provides an “open reservoir” to the justification of Turkey's greater role in the region.

Consequently, the official narratives supporting the identity of the Turkish Republic have begun to change in the JDP era. In other words, neo-Ottomanism has gradually become an ideology that goes hand in hand with the Turkish-Islamic synthesis, forcing the Republic of Turkey to reconcile with its imperial past. Then, it has emerged as a reaction against Kemalist modernization reforms that aimed to create a secular society. In this sense, M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) argued that “although in today’s Turkey, the discourse of Ottomanism has turned into an attack on the reforms of the Republic and offers a powerful ideological weapon against Kemalist secularism and the country’s Western orientation.” The policies of the JDP government, which aligned with neo-Ottoman framework, is constantly pumped into the public sphere, for example, the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque and the increase in the number of Imam Hatip (Religious) High Schools or through compulsory history and Ottoman language courses taught in secondary schools, and high schools. Thus, the consent of the people was established for the implementation and maintenance of these policies, because the public is thus exposed to both Ottoman symbols and its cultural fragments, it also creates an emotional connection between society and imperial past, such as, Fatih Sultan Mehmet, was the first person who turned Hagia Sophia into the mosque after the conquest of Constantinople. So, in the context of neo-Ottomanism the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque symbolizes a return to the “glorious past” and it can be interpreted as an effort of Turkey to project its soft power to the Middle East and North Africa (Adisonmez and Oztig, 2023). Thus “the conversion decision is an attempt to reassert the JDP’s political power and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s firm leadership at home and reflects the AKP’s policies to elevate religion to the center of public life” (*ibid*). That means, it also contributes to the diffusion of Islam in the public sphere.

The cultural hegemony that Turkey seeks to acquire in the context of the neo-Ottomanist framework, for example, the aim to set an example for Arab countries as a secular and democratic state with a Muslim majority is supported by Turkish cultural capital, particularly through media. Under the JDP rule, the cultural capital of Turkey has aimed to be transformed into exportable commodities by the media such as TV series and movies, which can be marketed both domestically and internationally. In parallel to this change, Turkish identity has been transformed into a lucrative

commodity as a result of the transmedia campaigns surrounding Turkish television series and their actors. Different audiences consume this commodification of Turkish identity in different ways: some in Turkey do so out of nostalgia, while others in the Arab world aspire to it (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy, 2013). Especially, in the soap operas, which are reproduced countless times and generally set in Istanbul (the city is still represented as if it were the center of the world, just like it was accepted in the 16th century), themes such as the conflictual relations between a rich and secular woman or man and a poor and conservative opposite-sex partner are constantly handled. In Arab societies love, money, marriage and all the other problems that can be located in these series create a sense of modernity that is accessible to Arab viewers. However, in Turkey, these soap operas indicate that there is a constant conflict between the conservative and more open-minded modern segment of the public. *Kızılıcak Şerbeti*, one of the popular Turkish TV series being produced in 2023, can be given as an example of the representation of this contradictory relationship. The character named *Kıvılcım*, who is represented as a secular and modern woman in a scene of the first episode of the series, is uncomfortable with the presence of headscarved women in a store she enters and defines them as enemies of civilization, likewise, women with headscarves describe her as enemies of freedom. Again, in the same series, the relationship between Nursema and Umut and Fatih and Doğa couples can be given as an example of the representation of relationships between modern and conservative individuals in Turkish TV series.

The contrast created between these identities by media leads me to the concept of ontological security because applying this theoretical framework in this thesis provides valuable insight into how individuals' sense of self and identity are shaped and maintained through media representations. For Giddens (1991) ontological security, simply refers to the “security of being”. So, individual agents or actors in IR need to create autobiographical narratives about themselves. Then, they engage with others with these narratives in mind that not only strengthen and maintain their sense of self, but also establish certain behavioral patterns and routines. Alexander Wendt in his article called “Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics” (1992) suggests that states’ behavior in the international system is influenced by ideologies, norms, shared ideas and especially by identities and narratives rather than determined by solely material factors. Thus, ontological security can be interpreted as an anchor point that motivates states to create and maintain a

stable sense of self in the anarchical international system. Buzan and Hansen (2009), on the other hand, suggest that state identity can be attributed to a collection of norms and routines that both redefine state relations and make a distinction between the state and the Other. Therefore, the ontological security can be achieved through maintenance of consistent narratives. At this point, the codes of ontological security are important to understand this concept. These codes can be understood as a symbolic system that contains narratives, cultural practices, language and rituals, that provide a framework for understanding the world around us, and our place in it.

Borrowing from Laing (1960) Giddens introduced this term to the literature in 1991, arguing that individuals and societies rely on these codes to maintain a sense of stability in the dawn of rapid social change and uncertainty, as mentioned by Giddens, societies, individuals and states are pursuing consistent narratives and rituals to feel that they got some sort of control over their surroundings. Since all actors need to feel ontologically secure, competition over ontological security codes of different sociopolitical groups is inevitable in both domestic and international realms. Thus, Turkish media creates otherness and hostilities between conservative and modern parties of Turkish society through media narratives. Therefore, an ontological security dilemma is established by highlighting polarization among different sociopolitical groups in Turkish society. This situation creates a perception on the basis of winner-takes-all and provides never-ending hostility, which is a populist perception that equates the existence of the conservative part of society to the existence of the Justice and Development Party.

According to a KONDA report called ‘Polarization in Turkey’ (2019) “The findings in the report suggest the existence of a societal polarization in Turkey shaped by values. On one side, there are the values of the emerging more educated, middle and upper-class, younger, secular, urban, and modern lifestyle-oriented individuals. On the other side, there are the values advocated by those with lower education levels, lower and middle-class backgrounds, religious, rural/small-town origins, and traditional lifestyles. This social polarization is being reproduced through the current identity-based policies of political parties.” Additionally, the same report emphasized that, while conservatives see secular Republican People’s Party (RPP) voters as the group furthest from themselves, secular segments perceive conservative voters supporting the JDP as the group furthest from them in the same manner. It is related to the self-other dilemma, which points to a fundamental tension or conflict that

individuals, societies and states face in navigating their relationships with others. For example, Mitzen (2006) suggests that identity of a state can be considered as constructed through its dynamic interactions with others. Therefore, it entails the difficult task of balancing one's goals and well-being with the interests of others. That's why both the conservative and modern parties in the Turkish society must negotiate their sense of self and connection with others to maintain a stable and secure sense of identity. The contrast between the parties that part of this negotiation creates continuous hostilities and otherness. Thus, the conservative segment, which associates its own ontological security with the security of JDP, feels that if the JDP loses power, its existence will be in danger, thus its loyalty to the party enhanced, in order to survive. The findings in another KONDA report written by Baran Alp Uncu (2018) can be considered supportive of this assertion "A significant portion of the assessments regarding the Republican People's Party (RPP) revolves around the issue of secularism. Generally, there is a notable lack of trust in the RPP among the JDP supporters we have interviewed. Some individuals express concerns, particularly recalling past pressures imposed on the lifestyles of religious and conservative segments, viewing the RPP as a representative of that mindset. They are especially concerned that the pressure on their way of life will increase in the event of the possible coming to power of the RPP, which is worried that it will take a harsher stance on secularism." This statement reveals the association between the ontological security of conservative segments and the security of JDP and it ensures the consent of people for the policies of the ruling party.

It is also equally important to understand the role of media in this equation. In this age where we are surrounded by screens and are bombarded with information from countless different sources throughout the day, the media is a very effective tool for establishing a dialogue with the public. Being aware of this, the JDP government supports cultural works such as television series and movies that contain Turkish culture and history that are aligned with their discourses, with the funds of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. It contributes to the above-mentioned consent and efforts to create a new identity by effectively selling emerging visual media products to both domestic and foreign markets. This cultural export, which includes many Arab countries, is called "Neo-Ottoman Cool" (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy, 2013) in the literature. It refers to the representation of Turkish culture with Ottoman motifs and symbols in an innovative way. The term also reflects a kind of reaction against

Turkish-Ottoman centric symbolism that reflects the anxiety felt that Turkey has repositioned itself by putting itself in the place of the Ottoman Empire and started to expand its sphere of influence to the Arab region again after 100 years (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy, 2013). Turkey supports this new identity that it is trying to create by selectively recalling its imperial history, which is frequently portrayed in various television and cinema productions, transforming past shame and traumas into a narrative of glory. While this situation creates an alternative OS code by supporting the discourses of the conservative Islamist JDP government in both domestic and foreign spheres, it also radically changes Turkey's image in foreign policy and supports the effort to position Turkey as a regional power that opposes the status quo.

Exporting Turkish soap operas to both Arabic and Balkan countries, are actually nation (re)branding campaigns that are utilized to exert “symbolic power” (Bordieu, 1991). Thus, with the exports of soap operas Turkey tries to revive Ottoman memory to fulfill a particular version of its self-image to feel ontologically secure by putting forward its ontological security codes with a combination of old Ottoman symbols in front of the states located in the ex-Ottoman sphere of influence. By doing this, Turkey aimed to earn the respect and recognition as the successor of the Ottoman Empire it yearned for from the international community, and as a consequence of this, Turkey's soft power in the international arena increased. Therefore, it can be said that Turkey utilizes the memories of the Ottoman Empire to remind all of these nations that once they lived peacefully for centuries under Ottoman rule (in other words, Turkish leadership). This method is used to increase the legitimacy of the neo-Ottoman foreign policy that embraced by JDP. For this reason, the media has an undeniable role in Turkey's steps taken in domestic and foreign politics, producing the necessary self-narrative and consent for these steps to claim its new identity at peace with the past.

1.2. Rationale

This topic has been chosen for this thesis because, it is important to understand the motivation and effects of the change that Turkey has undergone in the last two decades during which the newly embraced neo-Ottoman brand flourished in the country. Understanding these changes is important for five main factors;

First of all, Turkey's changing identity affects its foreign policy. Due to the identity shift that occurs in accordance with neo-Ottomanism, instead of preserving the status quo, Turkey seeks a more active and participatory policy in the Middle East and Balkans. This situation started in the Özal period as argued by Adisönmez and

Joobani, highlighting that “Özal pushed for involvement in the First Gulf War in order to elevate Turkey’s role as an anchor of Western security and strategic interests.” As the rump state rising from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey sees the aforementioned regions as its sphere of influence and seeks to acquire a leading role in the region, referring to hundreds of years of peace in the Balkans and the Middle East under Ottoman rule, *pax-Ottoman* (the Ottoman peace) is a term that refers to this period (16th-17th centuries) of peace and stability. In 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu give a speech in Sarajevo “Our history is the same, our fate is the same, and our future is the same. As the Ottoman Balkans has risen to the center of world politics in the sixteenth century, we will make the Balkans, Caucasus and Middle East, together with Turkey, the center of world politics. This is the aim of Turkish foreign policy and we will achieve this. To provide regional and global peace, we will reintegrate with the Balkan region, the Middle East, and Caucasus, not only for ourselves but for the whole of humanity.” Considering this statement, borrowing from Panayiotides (2010) “Underlining the phrase along with Turkey clearly refers to the fact that Turkey - according to Davutoğlu- should be the geopolitical center that will lead the new period of ‘Pax-Ottomana’.” Turkey utilizes the memory of this period in order to support its claims on its historical responsibilities. Besides that, for example, Turkey makes both infrastructure and cultural investments in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania in the Balkans. For example, the Yunus Emre Institute, an institution that found in 2007 with an aim to promote the culture, history and language of Turkey in the international arena. 25% of the cultural centers established by Yunus Emre Institute worldwide are located in the Balkans.

Secondly, Turkey's changing perspective on history under the influence of the neo-Ottoman ideology creates a gap between established self-narratives associated with the Kemalist ideology and the newly established neo-Ottoman narratives. Traditional ideals such as preserving the status quo and promoting peace are being replaced by new narratives shaped by revisionist neo-Ottoman ideology. Contrary to Kemalist ideology, the neo-Ottoman ideology emphasized that Turkey should oppose the status quo take up its responsibility from the past, and take a more active political stance in its region. Eliminating this emerging gap is necessary for Turkey as imposes ontological questions vis-à-vis the state identity. Because it is vital for an actor to historically anchor its identity, Giddens suggests that (1991) “Telling convincing stories (self-biographies) locating the self in relation to others are central to this, while

lacking a biography can leave actors feeling overwhelmed”. So, the ontological security perspective offers a suitable lens in order to understand Turkey's changing domestic and foreign policies.

Thirdly, the gaps in Turkey's self-narrative filled by media, especially via TV series. In the series while the buried imperial past was made something longed, the Turkish-Islamic synthesis ideology came to the fore again as a result of the JDP and Nationalist Movement Party (NMP) alliance in 2018. The JDP has an extensive record of affiliation with the synthesis because of its efforts to promote a more traditional and religiously based society in Turkey. The two parties' 2015 alliance allowed the JDP to strengthen its grip on power by promoting policies like enhancing Islam's influence in the public sphere and promoting religious education in schools, etc. Today, this situation can be easily observed in many historical dramas and in certain soap operas, such as, *Magnificent Century*, *Söz*, *Payitaht Abdülhamid*, *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* etc. According to Zayed (2013), “the stories are often based on the invocation of a glorious past as a justification for the influential role of Turkey in the present”.

Fourthly, Turkey is (re)branding itself. According to Christopher S. Browning (2013) “beyond demands for welfare and physical safety, political leaders are expected to provide a coherent narrative of society, its nature and place in the world, through the outlining of a sense of national mission and purpose”. The neo-Ottoman interpretation of history, which is very different from republican interpretations of history, necessitated the rebranding of the Turkish Republic, because from a cognitive perspective, Turkey's new identity that goes hand in hand with neo-Ottomanism has fundamental need of recognition by others for instance, the states located in the Middle East and the Balkans, in order to establish a new sense of self. In other words, Turkey's neo-Ottoman policies have shaped a new identity, which the country seeks to introduce to others through nation (re)branding campaigns.

Finally, this thesis underscores the significance of media in molding Turkey's changing identity under the neo-Ottomanism framework to make Turkey ontologically secure. It highlights the media's crucial role as a pivotal tool for nation (re)branding, particularly through promoting a robust national image rooted in Turkish history. Despite their strong conceptual similarities, the term 'nation (re)branding' was selected for this study rather than 'public diplomacy' because it places greater emphasis on the strategical shaping of a nation's image and identity in the international arena. Additionally, considering the emphasis on Turkey's historical and cultural heritage in

neo-Ottoman ideology, the concept of nation (re)branding resonates more closely with the topic of this research.

Additionally, the current geopolitical conflicts will be taken into account, such as Turkey's interventionist policy in the Syrian civil war and the policies it followed after confronting Greece in the Eastern Mediterranean over Cyprus. Therefore, this research contributes to the literature by providing an up-to-date framework for the effects and the possible reasons for the mentioned shift in Turkey's identity. To do so and demonstrate the ongoing change of Turkey's identity this thesis splits the era of the JDP government into two periods and examine them under two different chapters. The first period covers the time frame of 2002–2014, delving into the impact of historical traumas and a nostalgic yearning for past glory. The second period adopts the time frame of 2014-2023 and focuses on the evolving narrative of Turkey's identity by exploring the contemporary challenges, geopolitical shifts, and domestic changes shaping the nation's identity. The aim of this is to examine how these themes are reflected in media products aligning with the government's discourses.

Therefore, the main research question of this thesis is “How are nation (re)branding efforts and the ontological security codes of the ‘new’ Turkey related?” Specifically, this thesis focuses on how this relation translates itself into the media domain. By answering these questions, this thesis highlights the role of nation (re)branding efforts in the reproduction of the ontological security codes of Turkey through historical soap operas. These television series play a significant role in reviving Turkey's establishing ontological security codes, which include matters of state survival (beka sorunu), the need for strong leaders, and the constant need for the legitimization of securitizing policies of Turkey. By blending elements of Ottoman history and symbols into these already existing ontological security codes, these series not only reaffirm the established security codes of 'old' Turkey but also breathe ‘new’ life into them, contributing to the ongoing evolution of Turkey's national identity. Therefore, these research questions have been chosen for this thesis to examine the intricate relationship between ontological security and nation branding and to understand the role of media in this relationship.

After this introduction, this thesis focuses on existing literature on nation branding and then introduces a theoretical framework that gravitates around ontological security. Following this part comes the methodology section wherein the hypotheses of this thesis are briefly introduced. Then, it proceeds to the empirical

analysis part, located under the ‘Findings and Analysis’ title. This part dives deep into Turkish historical soap operas under two different sections. Lastly, the conclusion part presents the outcomes of this thesis and explores the potential research areas for future studies.



CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To assess the ongoing evolution of Turkey's national identity, this thesis uses a theoretical framework that incorporates ideas from ontological security theory, nation branding theory, and the ideologies of neo-Ottomanism. Central to this framework is the understanding of ontological security as a fundamental aspect of national identity formation, which intersects with nation branding efforts aimed at shaping and promoting a positive image of the nation on the global stage. The thesis also examines how the neo-Ottomanist ideology, with its emphasis on Turkey's historical and cultural heritage, influences the nation branding efforts of the Turkish government. Furthermore, the examination of historical soap operas provides insight into the representation and promotion of the neo-Ottoman ideology, offering a lens through which to understand its impact on Turkey's national identity narrative within the context of nation branding and ontological security.

2.1. Nation Branding

In today's globalized world, many states are attempting to promote their international image and reputation. This trend is called as "nation branding". It can be defined as a historically specific form of producing images of the nation' (Aronczyk, 2013). The concept of nation branding as a remarkable phenomenon has gained significant attention in the last two decades in the framework of both interstate communication and the academic field (Merkelsen and Rasmussen, 2016). It is comparable to various advertising campaigns that utilized by multinational corporations to promote themselves. The idea of "nation branding" seeks to explain this phenomenon in terms of three main aspects; technical/economic, political, and cultural aspects (Kaneva, 2011). The first one, technical and economic aspect means promoting a state's economic and technological achievements to the rest of the world, such as transportation systems, new weapon systems, infrastructure, investment opportunities and other economic benefits of the country. Second, the political aspect on the other hand involves promotion of political system of the country or leading policies to the world, such as democratic values, or its role in international affairs. The last and most important one for this research is cultural aspect. It involves promoting country's identity through highlighting cultural heritage, history, art or other cultural products such as movies and TV series. According to Kaneva 'cultural' aspect is an

area that fits for cultural and media studies, because "efforts to rethink nations as brands relate to theoretical debates central to the critical scholarship of culture and communication," (Bolin and Miazhevich, 2018). Therefore, political and especially cultural aspects of the nation branding have utmost importance for this work.

In the literature, there is still little consensus about the definition of nation branding. Some scholars like Kaneva (2011) as mentioned above, suggest that it is a process of creating and communicating a nation's identity to the world, in order to promote nation-states' technical / economic, political, and cultural agendas. Other scholars, like Anholt (2007) give the recipe of nation branding as the combination of soft power and public diplomacy. Anholt identify nation branding as competitive identity and explains this case with the help of the "Theory of Competitive Identity" (Anholt, 2007). Anholt's hexagon of competitive identity created by six elements; Tourism, brands, policy, investment, culture and people. Anholt (2007) suggesting that "tourism is the loudest voice in 'branding' the nation." It is because the board of tourism has the most substantial budgets and skilled marketers to highlight the best parts of a nation. Also, brands can be seen as powerful ambassadors with their exports by boosting the nation's image abroad, Anholt (2007) utilizes brands such as Mercedes (Made in Germany) and Sony (Made in Japan) to exemplify this situation by mentioning the importance of branding the provenance. When people know the origin of a product, brands can be just as loud as the board of tourism. Policy decisions of the governments are also important factor in nation branding. As Anholt (2007) suggests, policies whether they pertain to foreign policy impacting populations abroad or domestic policy that receives coverage in the international media have an effect on the nation's image. Business is another key factor for a nation branding campaign. For nation branding, it is crucial to be aware of the effects of strategies for luring foreign investment, enticing international talent and students, and facilitating the establishment and expansion of foreign businesses inside its borders on the image of a nation. Cultural exports, cultural activities, and cultural exchanges are also affecting the image of the nations. In light of Anholt's ideas, filmmakers, poets, authors, and even famous sports teams and musicians can play a crucial role in a good or bad way in the building process of a nation's image and reputation. The last element of Anholt's hexagon is people that suggests, the attitudes and behaviors of individuals within a country, including prominent leaders, celebrities including, sports stars, and in general all the members of that nation have an impact on the nation's image when they travel

abroad, on screens, or interacting with visitors (tourists, business travelers, etc.).

Anholt (2007) suggests that a strong national identity arises when governments have a coherent and positive understanding of their country's essence, values, and future direction. By aligning actions, investments, policies, and communications, they can effectively build and sustain a competitive national identity, both domestically and internationally. Therefore, in this research I will combine Kaneva's cultural aspect with Anholt's understanding of public diplomacy and soft power in the framework of neo-Ottomanism. Since Turkey's JDP disseminate its neo-Ottoman aims through various cultural channels such as media exports in order to enhance its influence and soft power, it also creates consent of people via some sort of public diplomacy. For example, through media productions, the JDP framed the image of the "ideal citizen" in line with neo-Ottoman ideology in a way that appealed to common historical and cultural values. Thus, consent is constructed by the creation of an idealized image compatible with the cultural identity and aspirations of the people, through the historical anchor provided by neo-Ottoman ideology. It is important for this research to extend the definition of nation branding on the basis of Kaneva's and Anholt's definitions to reveal this complex mechanism.

Just like its definition, the goals of nation branding are also defined differently in the literature, some of the nation branding literature is focusing on economic goals such as promoting the tourism (Teemu and Rainisto, 2009), some others are focusing on political goals such as establishing public diplomacy and enhancing the soft power (Olins, 2005), and lastly some critical part sees its goal as propaganda to promote specific political agenda (Tsan-Kuo Chang and Fen Lin, 2014). So, the objectives of nation branding are varied and based on the unique circumstances and goals of each country. In this research, I suggest that while the objective of nation branding in Turkey may share some similarities with those identified in existing literature, there is another factor that has to do with the nation's perception of ontological security. In other words, Turkey's efforts to (re)brand itself go beyond simply enhancing its image and also indicate that it has a deeper connection to its fundamental identity and sense of security.

Nation Branding campaigns can have different strategies, for instance, advertising campaigns, social media campaigns, cultural events, and public relations. The purpose of these strategies can be changed according to the nature of the nation-branding campaign and targeted audience. For example, the Netherlands government

and the municipality of Amsterdam conducting a new online campaign to deter young British males to come to the city (Anna Holligan, 2023). As seen in this case, the strategy used by the campaign may vary depending on the targeted audience. Also, this case shows that nation branding campaigns do not always have to be positive or complimentary, instead, the nature of nation branding campaigns depends on the nation's best interest and the best image of their own identity that they ever imagined rather than only being materialistic and utilitarian in economic sense. Therefore, these campaigns are also carrying ontological essences. In the literature, Keith Dinnie suggests that "Nation branding strategies aspire to positively influence country image perceptions amongst target audiences. Country image has attracted much attention in the literature (see, for example, Alvarez and Campo, 2014; Hynes et al., 2014; Lopez et al., 2011; Roth and Diamantopoulos, 2009)." In this research, I suggest that the nation branding strategies and goals are as important as the country's image formed as a result of nation branding campaigns. In this way, it will be possible to specify how the relationship between Turkey's ontological security codes and nation branding campaigns is shaping its identity through the realm of media.

According to Bolin and Miazhevich (2018) "the majority of the existing literature tends to treat the media as 'neutral' vehicles for the delivery of branding messages to various audiences." Bolin and Miazhevich (2018) on the other hand suggesting that media is an integral part of nation branding and add that "despite an increasing presence of media researchers in the field of nation branding research, an adequate theorization of the media's role in nation branding either became side-lined or was secondary to the analysis of other issues, such as identity". Therefore, it will be not wrong to say that current literature is lacking organizational in other words agency aspect of the media. In this research, I suggest that media is not a neutral vessel to carry on branding messages to the audience. Media organizations have their own agendas and they put forward their own interpretations of government discourses. This research stresses the links between media organizations and the JDP government through various discourse analyses from cultural products that are utilized to brand Turkey and their comparison with the real discourses from politicians. This research is also providing current data on how government discourses are reflected in the state media and other pro-government media institutions and how they reproduce government discourses that support the Turkish "nation (re)branding" campaigns that are part of Turkey's neo-Ottomanist ambitions. Thus, this research can contribute by

providing useful insights for the literature by presenting the parallel between the individual agendas of those media organizations and how they represented government discourses with their own interpretations.

Additionally, a nation brand itself primarily for the external, international audience (Bolin and Miazhevich, 2018), thus nation branding campaigns are not particularly focusing on social solidarity among citizens. According to Bolin and Miazhevich (2018), “Primary aim is not to produce communities but commodities.” As a strategic way of communication, nation branding is future-oriented, however, history and national identity can be subsumed into this orientation one way or another. In this line, it can be claimed that history and national identity can be manipulated and reshaped in order to make them fit into future oriented nation branding campaigns. That’s why, in this research, I call Turkey’s nation branding efforts as nation “(re)branding”, because Turkey is trying to align its current national image with its identity that has continuously shifted in the last two decades under JDP rule. It is ontologically vital for neo-Ottomanist Turkey to fill this gap. So, “(re)branding” efforts of Turkey are dual purposed, which means, on the one hand, just like an ordinary nation branding campaign, Turkey's efforts are focused on the external international audience in order to create a favorable image of the country to attract investment and expand its area of influence. According to Senem B. Çevik (2019) “A number of studies have discussed the positive reception Turkish television series have received, particularly in the Middle East and the potential of enriching Turkey’s soft power (Buccianti 2010; Anaz 2015; Yanardağoğlu and Karam 2013). Consequently, television series that were initially produced for domestic consumption by private television networks have helped groom Turkey’s image and have complemented the government’s foreign policy ambitions in the Middle East, most notably those prior to the Arab uprisings (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy 2013; Kaynak 2015). Studies emphasizing soft power do not provide empirical evidence of the foreign policy implications on the ground, however, they recognize the potential that television series can have on shaping Turkey’s image.” On the other hand, in the domestic realm, these efforts can create nostalgia (Al-Ghazzi and Kraidy, 2013) and a sense of community to enhance social cohesion. Thus, the (re)branding efforts of Turkey are producing communities while also producing commodities.

In this sense, this research contributes to the current literature by providing valuable insights into the complex relationship between media, nation branding,

nation-building, and geopolitical ambitions, while connecting those to the narratives that shape the identities of nations. Thus, this research will provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Turkey's ontological security codes and its nation (re)branding strategies by combining ontological security theory and critical media reading. Finally, combining literature on nation branding and ontological security literature in this research can allow future researchers to gain deeper insights into the underlying motivations and intangible needs that drive nation (re)branding campaigns. Therefore, this research can enable a comprehensive understanding of how nation branding endeavors answer the quest for ontological security, offering valuable opportunities for future exploration in this field.

2.2. Ontological Security

In the late 1990s, just after the end of the Cold War, the ontological security concept has made its way to IR literature, considering that the existing theoretical frameworks were inadequate to explain and foresee the collapse of the USSR. Beyond that, ontological security, borrowing from Mitzen and Larson (2017) "is a concept that helps us think about how the ability to make choices and take action depends critically on our sense of self, which is itself produced in our actions, albeit often at the level of routines and background narratives. Bringing ontological security into the study of foreign policy in some cases points to different explanations for choices, while in others it adds causal depth and generates new implications"

Security studies in the International Relations literature were almost always under the influence of realist theory until the end of the Cold War and largely excluded other concepts and theories. Buzan and Hansen (2009) call this trend of international security studies (ISS) as military state-centrism. According to Buzan and Hansen (2009) "widener-deepeners argued, to different extents and in different combinations, in favor of deepening the referent object beyond the state, widening the concept of security to include other sectors than the military, giving equal emphasis to domestic and trans-border threats, and allowing for a transformation of the Realist, conflictual logic of international security." The need to address the shifting security issues, agendas, and actors in the post-Cold War world led to the development of critical security studies. The field of security studies had to be reorganized as a result of the change in global politics, which required a reevaluation of security-related issues. Therefore, critical security studies have broadened the definition of security to include more factors, including societal, economic, environmental, and regional

considerations (Buzan and Hansen, 2009). Within the context of these relatively recent advancements in Security Studies, the Copenhagen School, started to acknowledge the concept of "Security of being." According to Adisönmez and Rumelili (2020) "security of being is also included to some extent in the concept of social security, which was developed by the Copenhagen School within the scope of Critical Security Studies and defined as 'the continuation of the essence of a society in changing conditions away from real or imagined threats' (see, Ole Wæver, 1993)." Then, following its introduction, the concept of ontological security has gained popularity in the field of IR scholarship, sparking a wide range of studies that have contributed to clarifying major challenges.

Ontological security refers to the need to uphold continuity and order in one's identity and worldview in order to feel safe and confident in actions taken. According to Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020) "while the concept of ontological security was originally developed for understanding individuals, sophisticated arguments have been presented for applying it to states (see Mitzen, 2005; Steele, 2008)." Giddens (1991) explains the concern of ontological security as "security of being" in his words "ontologically secure actors possess the capacity to "go on" to cope with the changing world around them, following their ability to uphold a 'sense of continuity and order in events'" Thus, ontological security is, in most basic terms, a sense of assurance and trust that people have in the persistence and stability of both their physical and social surroundings, which are integral to their sense of self.

In the early 2000s, the concept of ontological security began to gain significance in the field of International Relations. First, Huysmans (1998), in the context of Critical Security Studies, argued that ontological security should be considered a fundamental aspect of "deep" concept of security. Similarly, Kinnvall (2004), in the field of political psychology, highlighted the tendency of individuals to seek ontological security through nationalism and fundamentalism in the context of globalization (Adisönmez and Rumelili, 2020). International relations scholarship then recognized the state's human-like specifications and suggests that states are also like humans pursuing ontological security. Furthermore, Alexander Wendt (2004) suggests that "states are not really persons, only 'as if' ones" that means from a constructivist perspective, states are social constructions formed by human interactions and perceptions rather than inherent entities with set characteristics. Just like individuals, they are interreacting with each other autonomously, they have their own interests and

agendas, and this dynamism is shaping and changing their identity continuously along their journey. In other words, Wendt is highlighting that, their existence goes beyond physical boundaries and they need recognition by other actors. According to Christopher S. Browning (2013) “Steele argues ontological security is usually prioritized over physical security in actors’ calculations. While physical security matters, ultimately states ‘want to maintain consistent self-concepts’ that affirm a state’s self-identity. This identity imperative, he suggests, explains why the Melians preferred death and honor to survival and shame in their spat with Athens and why Belgium insisted on its neutrality in 1914 despite knowing the decision would result in a German invasion bringing destruction and lost sovereignty (Steele 2008:94–5; Lindemann 2010:15; Welch 2010:451).” Thus, literature suggests that, in order to achieve ontological security, states may adopt foreign policies that appear illogical or irrational but are really motivated by their desire to preserve their sense of continuity and self-identity.

This aspect of ontological security is especially important to address emotional nature of nation-state’s relationship with its citizens. As argued by Catarina Kinnvall (2004), “The trust of other people is like an emotional inoculation against existential anxieties— “a protection against future threat and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront” (Giddens, 1991, p. 39).” With the erosion of social institutions that once provided a sense of local community, such as traditional values, religion and kinship, due to the effects of late modernity, the nation-state emerged as a crucial source of social solidarity, thus it become the main source of ontological security for its citizens (see, Browning 2013). This occurred as a result of the magic that these institutions once possessed, which aided in upholding a sense of continuity and order (a phenomenon known as "disenchantment" in sociology literature, as defined by Max Weber in 1918), beginning to dissipate. Therefore, nation-states were crucial in containing the rootlessness and disintegration brought on by this loss of social institutions than mentioned. At this point, I concur with Kinnvall’s (2004) suggestion about nationalism and religion, because these concepts are providing a historical anchor that stabilize the identity. Kinnvall's suggestion has great importance for this research as it aims to uncover the role of nationalism and religion in the ontological dimensions. In this way, this research seeks to provide an extensive understanding of Turkey's ongoing identity shift and its association with subsequent nation branding

endeavors, given that neo-Ottomanism is a product of the Turkish-Islamic synthesis.

Kinnvall and Mitzen (2017) suggests that “Ontological security refers to ‘security as being’, which Anthony Giddens contrasts to ‘security as survival’ (Giddens, 1991). If the latter calls to mind the familiar security concern of physical safety, ontological security pulls our attention elsewhere, to subjectivity more than physicality, highlighting that all political subjects face the need to maintain a sense of biographical continuity.” By offering a stable environment and a national narrative that people can identify with and feel a sense of belonging to, nation-states can play a significant role in addressing this need for ontological security. The national narrative fosters a sense of history, culture, and identity that is shared by all citizens, enhancing their sense of stability and security on the whole (Bolton, 2021; Zarakol, 2017). Consistent and ongoing narratives that provide biographical continuity are essential for upholding a solid sense of identity. These narratives, which are crucial for ontological security in the modern communication era, are largely reproduced, spread, and preserved by the media. In the literature, there are no works that cover the relationship between Turkey’s ontological security and narratives that created or reproduced by media (particularly TV series).

In conclusion this research would contribute to the literature of ontological security by exploring the relationship between media narratives and ontological security in the specific context of Turkey such as neo-Ottomanist representations in media. By investigating how media narratives contribute to strengthening their ontological security regime under the neo-Ottoman codes and values in Turkey, this research could provide valuable insights into how this dynamic operates in a particular cultural, and political context. Also, within this framework, it can shed light on to the reflections of this dynamic in the context of nation-branding. Overall, this thesis establishes a bridge between ontological security and nation branding literature by positing that Turkey's nation (re)branding efforts not only contribute to bolstering its ontological security as a coincidental outcome but rather to establish ontological security in its own right as a primary objective. Prominent researchers in the field of nation branding, notably Christopher S. Browning, have consistently acknowledged the interconnectedness between ontological security and nation branding literature. However, previous studies focusing on the objectives of this concept have predominantly framed them within economic, political, or propaganda contexts. For this reason, ontological security has always been accepted as a by-product of nation

branding efforts. This thesis asserts that the concept of ontological security could indeed be regarded as one of the primary objectives of nation-branding efforts a perspective that has been somewhat overlooked in scholarly discourse until now. Furthermore, a gap in the existing literature has been identified concerning the examination of Turkey's transformation under neo-Ottomanist policies as a nation (re)branding effort. Existing studies do not consider this transformation within the scope of nation (re)branding. Therefore, this thesis aims to contribute to the literature by filling this gap with the help of the analyses it offers.



CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This thesis mainly draws on secondary sources. In doing so, this thesis primarily utilizes the discourses of the political agents, such as Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other ruling JDP's party elites. This thesis also, gathers data through the analysis of dialogues and frames in television series. Then, these data are analyzed with the help of the "Framing Theory" by Erving Goffman and the "Theory of Discourse" by Laclau and Mouffe.

Framing theory is developed by sociologist Erving Goffman in 1974 in an essay called "Frame Analysis: An essay on the Organization of Experience". According to Linström and Marais (2012), "Goffman used the idea of frames to label 'schemata of interpretation' that allow people 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences or events ". So, it can be claimed that it examines how individuals and groups actively construct and interpret reality through cognitive frames from a sociological lens. The concept of framing has been applied to media analysis for almost four decades (Linström and Marais, 2012) Framing theory suggests that how information is presented to the audience has a significant impact on how individuals choose to interpret and process that information.

Essentially, frames are conceptual tools that organize and structure the meaning of a message. This concept is often applied in the news or media context, where the frame used shapes the audience's perception. In television series, directors and writers use frames strategically to convey certain perspectives or emotions. Scenes are meticulously framed to direct the audience's focus by highlighting specific elements that contribute to the overall narrative. Dialogues are also framed by careful script and presentation, thus shaping the audience's perception of the characters and the unfolding story, as well as their perception of reality. This deliberate use of framing in television series has the potential to provide valuable data for this thesis. Therefore, in this case, frames are the context of the TV series and where cameras looking at. It is important to understand how and why cameras look at specific directions in a specific way and what is discussed in front of the cameras to explore shared patterns with discourses from contemporary political contexts.

In this sense, considering this thesis mainly utilizes TV series (soap operas and historical dramas) such as "*Magnificent Century, Diriliş: Ertuğrul, Payitaht Abdülhamid, and Farewell to Rumelia*" to identify parallels between neo-Ottomanist

discourses given by political actors and their reproductions, the framing theory comes in handy as a method to identify and examine how the discourses of the Justice and Development Party (JDP) government are portrayed in the media and how are they transforming Turkey. Analyzing these portraits with the help of framing theory illuminates how these frames are constructed and interpret reality and how they become hyper-real for the audience by providing a deliberate understanding of them. In summary, the choice of Erving Goffman's framing theory as the methodology of this thesis allows for a nuanced examination of how reality is constructed and portrayed in parallel to the political discourses, particularly in TV series. Using framing theory illuminates how particular perspectives, narratives, and symbolic representations are used to shape public perception.

Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse is a theoretical framework, rooted in both post-Marxism and post-structuralism. It seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the social realms as a product of discourses, suggesting that, in theory, discourse can be employed to scrutinize all aspects of social phenomena (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). This theory reveals the dynamic nature of political identities by emphasizing the role of language, hegemony, and signifiers in the construction of social reality. The overall idea behind discourse theory is that social phenomena are perpetual and incomplete, the meaning remains inherently unsettled, paving the way for ongoing social contests regarding the definitions of society and identity (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). In this thesis, discourse analysis serves as one of the key methodological approaches, in line with Laclau and Mouffe's emphasis on the central importance of language in shaping political and social dynamics. This approach allows for the investigation of how elements of discourse contribute to the formation of Turkey's new identity in both fictional and real-world contexts and also makes it possible to trace discursive shifts. Especially in an area where media is involved and where floating signifiers are reproduced in countless ways every day, this theory comes in handy. In the context of discourse analysis, this thesis focuses on exploring floating signifiers, moments, and elements to identify the intersections between the fictional universes of the TV series and contemporary Turkey.

Firstly, the floating signifiers refers to a signifier without fixed signified, that means they are not embracing their meanings but borrowing those meanings from different discourses. For instance, terms used to refer to society as a whole, such as "the country," do not have a fixed meaning and can be used in a variety of contexts

and by different people to mean different things. In other words, depending on the specific social, cultural, or political context in which they are used, these terms can be understood in a variety of ways and have different meanings (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). Secondly, moments are referring to the signs with temporarily stable meanings, as Jorgensen and Phillips (2002) argued, “All signs in a discourse are moments. They are the knots in the fishing-net, their meaning being fixed through differences from one another”. So, they are vital for a discourse to articulate the meaning around these partially fixed knots. Thirdly, elements refer to the signs that have not yet been fixed, thus, they could always have been articulated differently (Jorgensen and Phillips, 2002). It means they are unfixed signs, contrary to the moments they are not linked with other signs. So, both elements and moments are important components of the construction of meanings through discourses.

“Hostility and otherness” are another fundamental aspect here. People's worldview is shaped through discourses, so it would not be wrong to say that meaning is created through discursive networks. This is why different discourses are always in conflict they assign different meanings to the same signs. Dabirimehr and Fatmi (2014) argued that “Hence, it is always possible that a discourse competes with the dominant discourse and changes into a hegemonic discourse.” Since the ongoing identity shift in Turkey is directly related to this discursive context, it could shed a light on the process of identity shift in Turkey.

Using this key concept (Hostility and otherness) of Laclau and Mouffe's “Theory of Discourse” bilaterally with another concept of this theory the “Competition” will reveal the way of creation and formation of this “new” identity. Competition refers to the struggle for hegemony among various discourses or social groups within a given society as defined by Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse. According to Dabirimehr and Fatmi (2014) “Discourses repeatedly send the other to the margin to highlight themselves but whatever severe this action may be, it can't eliminate the other from this challenging competition. Therefore, it is always possible to reconstruct and return the oppressed.” So, in Turkey's case, there is constant competition between Kemalist and neo-Ottomanist discourses. Sometimes one of them “prevails” and the other one is “undermined” (like in the early republican era Kemalist discourses were way more popular and now the neo-Ottomanist discourses are leading the way) however they never disappear, in this sense it is also possible to say that, they are contributing to the each other. Dabirimehr and Fatmi (2014) describe this as “the

relationship between self and other is not always hostile... The other can be present as a competitor on the scene. It can also prosper the competitive environment and as a 'productive outsider' act in creation and formation of identity (Kasrei and Shiraz, pp. 350, 2009)" To understand the shift in identity that has taken place in Turkey over the past two decades, it's highly important to comprehend the interdependent relationship between these two polar opposite discourses.

In conclusion, the theory of discourse is also chosen for this research's methodology because this thesis investigates the shared patterns between the discourses of political actors and their reproductions in various media, especially in TV series. The aim is to reveal how discourses are distorting reality by various ideological portrayals of past, present, and future by examining in depth the role of the media in the interconnected dynamics of neo-Ottomanism, ontological security, and nation (re)branding. By doing this, this thesis aims to provide a nuanced examination of Turkey's ongoing change under the JDP governance.

Considering the limited budget and time of the research, I will not be able to collect primary sources. It is going to be descriptive and qualitative study to provide an answer to the question of this research. The reason behind this choice is, quantitative methods may not yield effective outcomes when interpreting the narratives and discourses that are the backbone of this research. I believe that trying to grasp the meaning they refer to by adhering to their current context rather than the number and frequency of the stories and discourses created by the power will make it more possible to reach the answer to the research question. Also, I triangulate the cases (discourses of the political agents, the media's reproduction of these discourses, and the emotional reaction that they create) to show the interplay between them. As a result of the interaction nodes that will emerge in this way, a comprehensive and systematic review will be possible.

3.1. Hypothesis

- I. Turkey is (re)branding itself in the light of neo-Ottomanist policies and changing historical reading in accordance with the neo-Ottomanism's ontological security codes.*

In the mid-20th century, Turkey largely cut itself off from the Middle East and turned its face towards the West. At the beginning of this millennium, however, the JDP rose to the power that heralded major changes, particularly after the party's second term (2007-2011). According to Ayşe Zarakol "under the JDP's leadership Turkey was

supposed to become an economic powerhouse and a regional power, finally earning the respect from the international community the Kemalists so craved but were never able to fully secure.” Recent developments, such as economic problems and the break out of the civil war in Syria, and Assad staying in power indicate that the JDP's presumption and goal remained limited to national rebranding initiatives and did not go beyond them. Zarakol also add that “especially from their second term, the JDP presented itself as a party that was ontologically secure, leading a country that did not need to feel insecure vis-à-vis the West.” Then, the ontological security codes sought to be disseminated by nation (re)branding campaigns cleared the way for further neo-Ottoman policies. In the light of these policies, defining itself as a Muslim, secular, and democratic state at that time (early 2000s), Turkey claimed to set an example for other nations in the Middle East and was trying to convince the European capitals how valuable it would be to have Turkey in the EU.

However, when the Turkish leadership realized that the goal of joining the European Union was getting further away, JDP has changed its strategy. According to Ahmet Erdi Öztürk (2019) “Since roughly 2011, the Turkish state and the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP) have been going through a process of mutual transformation. Some of the historical apprehensions, biases and frustrations exhibited by Turkey as a middle power have been absorbed by the relatively reformist JDP.” Sunni Islam has become one of the primary driving forces behind the political agenda of the JDP government. As a result of neo-Ottoman policies and the changing political landscape with the Islamist tendencies, the JDP government consolidate its position and became a hegemonic power in domestic politics. The circumstance demanded that the JDP adopt a coherent narrative that is free of any ontological insecurities or uncertainties unlike the Kemalist narratives, and this narrative is commonly referred to as the neo-Ottoman narrative.

Accordingly, Turkey, as a state, needed to rearrange its image both in the eyes of the public and in the international arena, within the framework of neo-Ottoman policies. It is important for the states to create consistent narratives that support and stabilize their identity. Since the neo-Ottomanism required to take the imperial past buried long ago by its founders from its grave and turn it into glorious nostalgia, which indicates a shift in identity, Turkey’s effort to change historical reading and narratives that lying under the foundation of its identity has to change accordingly to the newly embraced political framework (neo-Ottomanism) in order to establish a secure

ontological foundation. Thus, it is inevitable that these ontological security-based concerns will occur in Turkey's reactions to what is happening around it and its attitudes toward other states. Especially at the begging of the Arab Spring in Middle East. According to Mustafa Türkeş (2016) JDP's main discourse towards the Arab nations that were going through an era of civil wars and rebellions against their undemocratic rulers was "Turkey can provide substantive assistance to the democratization process in its neighborhood... on the bases of ethics, morals and values" In addition, it would not be wrong to say that Turkey has been following a more active and interventionist foreign policy that opposing to the status quo as a regional power for at least the last 10 years and trying to position itself as an agenda-setter in the region. These interventionalist and paternalistic tendencies are reflections of identity imperatives of Turkey's 'new' identity that was shaped according to the neo-Ottomanist framework. According to Arkan and Kınacıoğlu (2016) "Turkey's identity and foreign policy are assumed to be ontologically linked for it is only through the discursive performances of foreign policy that identity comes into being, which in turn is 'constructed as the legitimization for the policy proposed.'" Since accepting the imperial past and constructing a new identity as its heir will require the continuation of the claims and historical responsibilities of the past. This is an ontological necessity for Turkey.

II. Turkish media serves the interests of the government and fosters neo-Ottomanism, it shapes national identity in domestic spheres and the country's image in foreign spheres as a tool of nation branding.

Media has a crucial role in the process of distortion of history and the creation of new narratives according to this distorted history. Michel Foucault (1973) argued that there is a semiotic gap between an object and its representation, and this gap cannot be bridged. The media exploits this gap to create a reality of its own, bombarding society with an overwhelming amount of information that eventually becomes hyperreal. According to French philosopher Baudrillard, "hyperreality is seen as a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins." Therefore, the media has the power to create numerous copies and representations of reality, that eventually become simulacra, in other words, copies without an original.

At this point, it is also important to take look into organizational levels of media, for example, according to Senem B. Çevik (2020) "Turkish drama series aired

on state network TRT have been instrumental agents in the government's attempts to shape the political reality in accordance with its political agenda.” So, organizations, like TRT, have also their own agendas that aligned with government’s. Thus, the media has been turned into a highly effective weapon by the Turkish government in both foreign and domestic politics. It is often emphasizing the glorious imperial past, tries to mobilize people's nationalist sentiments by touching their feelings and past traumas, and rebuilds national pride by reproducing highly Islamist and nationalistic discourses created by government officials. In this way, Turkish-Islamic synthesis was embodied in the ideal citizens desired by the JDP government through representations of TV series.

In a world where almost, no person can spend an hour without looking at a screen, media (especially visual media) is an almost perfect tool for reaching the masses. Production and reproduction of discourses by state officials through media and their exports to foreign markets provides legitimization in international arena and consent of people for neo-Ottoman policies. These policies that developed within the framework of the Islamist and nationalist discourses of the JDP government also increases the social cohesion among its supporters in the context of nationhood, turn the imperial past into nostalgia that longed for, and dictate its teachings by frequently reminding social traumas. By doing this they are encouraging people to look at the present with pride by leaving behind the shame and fears of the past. The distortion of history and then the taking of current political steps accordingly act like self-fulfilling prophecies, polishing the public's trust in the government and its pride. Covering up the traumas and embarrassments of the broad masses and presenting them a narrative of history that they can be proud of, inspires the people with hollow courage and creates a driving force in the implementation of both neo-Ottoman and all kinds of other policies by the government. Thus, while the government maintains the hegemony it has in domestic politics, it also succeeds in creating more sympathy in the societies of different countries with the help of its cultural capital and the cultural exports it promotes in foreign policy.

Considering this, one can assume that, Turkey carries out a strong public diplomacy campaign in the Balkans and the Middle East with the help of television series and by funding the restoration of historical structures to achieve its geopolitical goals and aims to revive its cultural hegemony in the mentioned regions. Therefore, nation branding can be seen as a strategic communication tool for states. As Merkselen

and Rasmussen argued (2016) “nation branding becomes a practical tool for positioning countries in a global competition for soft power (cf. Nye, 2004, 2008)”. Thus, the JDP government aims to reshape Turkey's established, status-quo-seeking, modern image rooted in Kemalist ideology and replace it with the newly flourished neo-Ottoman image that provides a historical anchor point within the context of Turkey’s "glorious imperial past”. That’s why I suggest using the term "nation (re)branding" to define this process. So, with the help of national (re)branding both the groundwork for future neo-Ottoman policies would be prepared and the ontological security for the “new” identity of Turkey would be provided.



CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The findings of this research reveal how the translation of the connection between Turkey's nation (re)branding efforts and its changing ontological security codes into the media domain, in order to shed a light on the mutual intercourse between the media and neo-Ottoman policies in Turkey. It will also provide a comparison of old and new narratives about identity and history of the Turkey for future researchers.

The research also going to establish a connection between nation branding literature and geopolitical context, thus it will reveal how Turkey's (re)branding efforts goes hand in hand with its geopolitical objectives. In this way, the role and importance of the media (especially visual media like TV Series) will be explained through both geopolitical and ontological security aspects. With the help of these analysis, it reveals the connection of neo-Ottomanism with affect literature. Finally, it will be possible to analyze and interpret the reshaped approaches of Turkey to geopolitical issues as a result of its neo-Ottoman adventure and the changes it has experienced in this process, both from a more comprehensive and wider perspective.

4.1. Transition From Trauma to Nostalgia 2002-2014

I. Introduction

This chapter unveils the portrait of a highly traumatized Turkish state identity by the dissolution of an empire with a poignant blend of nostalgia and the relentless pursuit of past glories. According to Crouse (2009) "Prior to World War I, Ottoman Empire had fallen into decline as its territories were gobbled up by other powers. The world dismissed the Ottoman Empire as 'the Sick Man of Europe'. Throughout the Nineteenth Century, the rest of Europe waited for the empire to implode." Its power was in decline for about two centuries. Along the way, the empire lost almost all its core administrative regions especially in the Balkan region mainly because of nationalism. Ottoman Empire was a multinational empire. However, being Ottoman meant almost nothing for the nations once experienced relatively stable relations under the Ottoman flag, due to spreading nationalism as a result of provocation by European imperial powers (primarily, Britain, France, and Russia). This turmoil eventually forced the Ottoman Empire to reform and grant autonomy to the Balkan nations in the early 19th century, however, the view on Ottoman rule had already changed. Consequently, nothing stopped the series of nationalist rebellions and independence wars that took place in the Balkans with the support of the Western powers.

The territorial and demographic losses in the Balkans were highly traumatic and the Republic of Turkey inherited this imperial trauma. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) “the events in the Balkans, especially painful recollections of deportations and massacres, we etched indelibly in the minds and memories of the Republic’s founding fathers.” Just after the traumatic Balkan experience, the empire found itself in the First World War and was defeated and forced to sign the never-implemented Treaty of Sevres (1920). Centuries long defeats, withdrawal and decline along with Western interference in domestic and economic affairs constituted the “Sevres Syndrome”. According to Guida “the Syndrome is an expression used in international relations to describe the paranoia of the Turkish secular bureaucracy and its politicians. This takes the form of an irrational fear that Western powers are bent on dismantling Turkey vis-a-vis the abortive Treaty of Sevres in 1920.” M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) also mentioned that “the traditional security concerns of loss of territories, the weakening of state power and isolation play a constitutive role in the making of foreign policy in today’s Turkey.” Against this background, after a series of economic crises and failed coalition governments, in late 1990s the JDP came to power alone in 2002 elections. JDP has managed to emerge as the first party in all the elections it has participated in since 2002 and it managed to increase its voter support continuously. According to Senem B. Çevik (2019) “across the course of seventeen years of rule, the Justice and Development Party’s (AKP’s) government tightened its grip on society by attempting to shape public spaces and engineer desirable citizens”. Throughout this process, the Turkish media landscape has faced increasing pressures, censorship, consolidation of ownership, and an apparent partisanship tendency, implicating it in furthering the JDP's objectives.

Against this backdrop, this first chapter, delves into an exploration of Turkish media products, more specifically first *Farewell to Rumelia* (Elveda Rumeli, 2007-2009) and then, *The Magnificent Century* (Muhteşem Yüzyıl, 2011-2014). Freedom of media in Turkey has always been problematic throughout its history. With the spread of mass media such as newspapers, it is possible to encounter media censorship even in the late Ottoman period. Turkish media has long been subjected to government pressure and tight relationships between media owners and the ruling party. Given the long-term absence of genuinely free and competitive market circumstances, as well as the concentration of power in a single party and leader, media freedom is being eroded like never before (Sözeri, 2015). The decline in democracy in Turkey has had a

significant impact on the press, media freedoms, and freedom of expression, particularly since 2013 (Çalışkan, 2018). *Farewell to Rumelia* is noteworthy for its commencement before the specified date, aligning with beginning of the second electoral victory of the JDP government in 2007—a period characterized by comparatively lesser media constraints compared to the present circumstances. In this era the main focus of Turkish foreign policy was to join the EU, but this process was slow and, according to Oscar Agestam (2018), “as the goal of joining the EU seemed more and more distant, support waned and the momentum was lost”. So, both *Farewell to Rumelia* (2007-2009) and *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014) coincide in capturing a pivotal moment in Turkish history, where political shifts and the evolving landscape of foreign relations influenced the narrative fabric of both the historical narratives and the acclaimed television series.

The objective is to portray the disparities between the initial period (2002-2014) and the subsequent phase (2014-2023) under the governance of the Justice and Development Party (JDP). This analysis occurs within the framework of neo-Ottomanism and the nation (re)branding. Furthermore, it investigates the changing perception of the history and the ontological security of "new" Turkey and it will reveal how this complex relationship is transformed in the media field.

II. *Farewell to Rumelia* (2007-2009)

Farewell to Rumelia is a historical soap opera. It tells the story of a Turkish milkman called Ramiz (Sütçü Ramiz/ Erdal Özyağcılar) and his family. The story unfolds in the village of Feveran, situated in the town of Pursican, which is under Ottoman rule and part of city called Bitola (Manastır, today's North Macedonia) in the Balkans, during the year 1896. The narrative takes place between 1896 and 1907. It centers on the events revolving around Ramiz, a milkman, and his family on the eve of the Ottoman Empire's decline, just before the Balkan Wars and the First World War. It coincides with a turbulent period in the Ottoman Balkans, each Balkan nation within Macedonia, such as Bulgarians, Greeks, Macedonians, etc. governed by the Ottoman Empire, sought to gain freedom in those territories. In the series, especially represented Bulgarian gang activity signaled the fall of the Ottoman Balkans. So, while the story mainly focuses on the struggle of Ramiz and his ordinary Turkish family in this volatile environment. The series also accommodates the representations of palace life in Istanbul and its political circles. These political circles mainly consist of representation of Sultan Abdulhamid II and the Unionists (İttihadçılar). While Unionists tried to

dethrone Abdulhamid II and declare the second constitutional period (İkinci Meşrutiyet), the Sultan tried to stay in power. Interestingly, it is also possible to see young Mustafa Kemal in the series, especially in one episode, while he is drawing Turkey's map that is today known as the Misak-ı Milli map. Like almost all Turkish TV series, *Farewell to Rumelia* is mainly a production made for local consumption. In this sense, considering the historical context of its narrative and representations of founding fathers of the Turkish republic, it sheds light on the era in which Turkish nationalism was born.

It is obvious that there is an ironic connection between the Balkan trauma being reminded to society through the series about the loss of the Balkans, also called Ottoman Europe, at a time when the goal of joining the European Union has become a more distant dream. On one hand, European capitals see Turkey, and Turkish identity as not eligible to join the European Union, on the other, Turkey finds this attitude of Europeans familiar with its history. While this connection is bolstering shallow nationalist discourses like “Turks have no friends other than Turks” (Türkün Türkten başka dostu yoktur), *Farewell to Rumelia* itself serves as both a mirror and a magnifying glass that reflects and amplifies the historical narrative which contributes to the construction of a collective Turkish identity by fostering a sense of shared history and cultural pride among its viewers. However, it offers more than shallow nationalism that mentioned.

Farewell to Rumelia refers to the once peaceful cultural coexistence of all Balkan nations and their shared history under Ottoman rule. At the beginning of the first episode, there is a monologue of milkman Ramiz in which he is introducing his town, village and society with these words “This is our town Pursican, this is our village Feveran. I don't know who gave these names or why, there are many rumors, ask others. Turks, Albanians, Bulgarians, Greeks, and Macedonians, we get along like brothers. No one says 'shoo' to someone else's chicken, no one looks at anyone with evil eyes. Our daughters and children all grow up together, everyone lives with their own customs and traditions.” This monologue can be interpreted as related to the neo-Ottoman discourse by connoting “Pax Ottomana” a historical period associated with stability in Ottoman territories, particularly in the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus. In particular to the Balkans, this stability is contrasted with the pre-Ottoman conquest era as well as the tumultuous times and traumas that occurred following the Balkan Wars and the First World War, which turned Pax Ottomana into nostalgia. It is also

possible to locate traces of Turkish-Islam synthesis in *Farewell to Rumelia*, according to Akova and Demirkiran (2013) "... during the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, Islam had also become more widespread, while the concepts of Muslim and Turk had come to refer to a common situation. In short, the concepts of "Muslim" and "Turk" came to mean the same thing." In this sense, most of the characters introduced as Muslims in the series are Turkish people.

To make it clear, take a look into example of doctor Mustafa (Tıbbiyeli Mustafa). He is a unionist (İttihatçı) who wants to dethrone the sultan and declare a second constitutional period through this revolution. In many scenes, Mustafa is a patriot who left his family and life behind to fight against both the Sultan and other separatist movements, and in numerous scenes, you can see him while he is saying with hope and bravery "May the homeland be well" (Vatan sağolsun). According to Erol and Uçar (2021) "Mustafa is a male name known by everyone, but in the Muslim Turkish tradition, it is the name of the Prophet and has a religious meaning." The origin of the name of such a character, who is represented as brave and warrior, sheds light on the Turkish-Islamic synthesis underlying the neo-Ottoman narrative. In the series, it's evident that the Turkish-Muslim community faces challenges from both separatist Christian gangs and the western imperial powers backing them. Another aspect of this struggle involves their resistance against a figure disliked and deemed reactionary and oppressive by Kemalist circles, namely Sultan Abdulhamid II, in this sense, it is possible to trace both Kemalist and neo-Ottomanist discourse throughout the *Farewell to Rumelia*.

In addition, there are scenes and dialogues that can be perceived as associated with Kemalist discourses. Such as, in one scene, Ramiz and newly appointed young district governor Dilaver on the way to the Pursican encounter a "tree of tax". In the words of milkman Ramiz "This is tree of tax, our state's tax invention is that those who do not pay their taxes are put on this tree, and those who pay are taken down." Then Dilaver asks "What happened to those who cannot afford to pay?" Milkman Ramiz continues "Those who are not able to pay their taxes are not taken down but they are forced to fall. The dead simply die, but if they survive, they are brought back on top of the tree again." Dilaver is surprised by the absurdity of the incident and asks "How can something like this happen, Ramiz Efendi?" Ramiz said with a slightly naughty expression "Governor's son, you see." He shouts, "May Allah protect and bless Abdulhamid Khan." Then, in a voice only he can hear, he adds, "And (Allah) keep him

away from us too." After this dialogue, young Dilaver rushes into the soldiers that keep people on the tree of tax and beats their commander. Framing method come handy at this point as this scene is mirrors the Kemalist discourses. Firstly, it reveals the inadequacy of Ottoman state apparatus, by representing the outdated and insufficient practice of collecting taxes, by representing the practice of collecting taxes with a "tree of tax" full of people on top of it. Secondly, it reveals the irrational practices that arise when all power is concentrated in the hands of a single person, in this case, Abdulhamid the second. All these reflections justify the establishment of the republic and its founding values by showing ordinary television viewers the insufficiency and backwardness of the empire and giving them this representation to compare with what the Republic offers. In this sense, this scene of *Farewell to Rumelia* is reproducing the Kemalist discourse in its fictional universe by shedding light to its origins. By taking an anti-Abdülhamid II position, the series highlights the empire's administrative, social, and economic backwardness. Consequently, it justifies the founding values of the Republic and the modernization it brings in its fictional historical context. It indicates that before the JDP government's complete control over the media, television series provided a platform, even if it was in the background, where Kemalist discourses could be reproduced.

Also, it creates some parallels between 19th century and early 2000s. In the series, it is possible to find episodes that show Greek and Bulgarian separatists pillaging Turkish villages and slaughtering Turkish-Muslim villagers. According to Erol and Uçar (2021) "It has been observed that the *Farewell to Rumelia* TV series, which was discussed within the scope of the study, directly built the public's hate speech towards the Bulgarian and Greek gangs... It is seen that discourse was created for rebellions, conflicts, and unfair actions against the Bulgarian, Greek, and Macedonian people, who were non-Muslim subjects who previously lived in peace and tranquility with the Muslim Turks in the Balkans. In this way, propaganda myths are being built such as 'Christian people are a great danger to humanity', 'Christian gangsters massacre civilians' and 'Christian army is barbaric'." Similarly, in some aired episodes, it is seen that the Greek rebels and the characters directly representing the Greek government of that period talk about their goals and dreams, such as Great Design (Megali Idea). In Erol and Uçar's own words (2021) "In this manner, assertions have been made about the historical rivalry between the Turkish and Greek populations. The aim is to reinforce nationalist sentiments among the Turkish people

against Greece.” For example, in one episode, after disguised Greek soldiers crossed the border plundered a village, and killed the Turkish-Muslim people, the people of Pursican gathered in front of the district governor's office, with weapons, shouting war cries, and everyone wanted to volunteer for the army to fight against the Greeks. In the same scene, Vahide, one of the daughters of milkman Ramiz, comes forward and wants to be the first to volunteer, the angry people at the scene consist of poor but patriotic villagers, and finally the rejection of the demands for war by the Ottoman government authorities, also evokes the narratives of the War of Independence in terms of context.

By reminding this kind of traumatic experiences from the past, the series reproduces the ontological insecurities of Turkey. According to Adisönmez and Onursal (2020) “Perhaps the clearest result of these traumatic experiences -which remain as distant but powerful reminiscences- has been the ever-resonating politics of 'state survival' since the foundation of Turkey, presupposing that Turkey's utmost objective is to save the state and secure its existence in a dangerous geography.” Considering that under the JDP government, Turkey initiated accession negotiations with the European Union in 2005 and then pursued a Democratic initiative (Demokratik Açılım) as a part of this process in subsequent years, it can be said that the historical traumas revisited by *Farewell Rumelia* draw parallels with this period. For example, the Cyprus issue has significance in Turkey's relationships with the European Union, dating back to Greece's EU membership in 1981 and peaked in 2004 when the entire island joined the EU as the Greek Cypriot Administration. The EU has imposed this issue as a condition of Turkey's membership, eliciting criticism from Turkey (Tan, 2016). Between 2006 and 2009, it is seen that Turkey made some diplomatic moves to prevent the negotiations from being suspended due to the Cyprus issue, but the negotiation process was sometimes disrupted and sometimes suspended due to the reactions of the Greek Cypriot Administration of Southern Cyprus and Greece. In *Farewell to Rumelia*, there is one scene that represents both a Greek statesman and a member of the separatist movement, they are explaining their intention with these words “The common goal for all of us is to scrape off the Ottomans from Europe as soon as possible.” When I put this scene that represents history and the political landscape of the early 2000s side to side, the aforementioned parallel that links history with the early 2000s reveals the historical trauma that shapes Turkish politics becomes visible. In both cases, Turks are not wanted in Europe and marginalized by European nations.

In another scene, where the Bulgarian gang abducted the Macedonian vet of the Pursican by pointing a gun toward him, the vet asks “How old are you?”, the head of the Bulgarian gang Ivan answers “I am 24.”, and the vet continues “I am 75 years old, your grandfather was my friend ... we were all friends, we had no problems. Don’t you understand? We fell on each other when the French, the English, and the Russians started to interfere in Ottoman affairs.”. This statement also reproduces the established ontological security codes of the Turkey. It reminds the Sevres Syndrome and stated that survival of the state is under treat once again by the Western imperial powers. This statement also reproduces the established ontological (in)securities of Turkey. It reminds the Sevres Syndrome and reflects that the survival of the state is under threat once again by the Western imperial powers. Given the almost unconditional and robust support from European capitals for Greece and the Greek Cypriot Administration, coupled with the Cyprus issue being utilized as a bargaining chip in the EU accession talks between Turkey and the European Union, the parallels between historical events represented in *Farewell to Rumelia* and the political landscape of the early 2000s become apparent once again.

Apart from the Cyprus Problem, another issue that European powers put pressure on was Turkey's Kurdish problem. Due to these pressures, in 2009, the JDP government launched the "Democratic Initiative" project for the Kurdish issue. According to the news report of the BBC (2009), “the main opposition party in the Kemalist line, Republican People's Party (CHP), and the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), which had not yet formed an alliance with the JDP at that time, opposed the project as follows: RPP's leader, Deniz Baykal, stated, ‘We fought for the right to say ‘I am Kurdish’ in times when it was not possible in Turkey, but the current initiative aims to transform ethnic identity into a separate nation.’ NMP's leader, Devlet Bahçeli, argued that the ‘initiative’ questions Atatürk's struggle, stating that ‘government-led attempts for division’ are at play.” At the same time, historically, *Farewell to Rumelia* tells the story of Ottoman tolerance and besides that, granting additional rights to non-Muslim minorities as a result of the pressures of Western imperial powers and its decline from the Balkans as a result of these interventions, and the series also ends right before the immigration of the Turkish-Muslim people from the Balkan lands where they had lived for centuries. According to Adisönmez and Onursal (2020) “78 percent of those polled in the 2006 National Public Opinion Survey agreed with the statement, ‘The West wants to divide and break up Turkey like it broke up the Ottoman

Empire””. Considering this, the narrative of the *Farewell to Rumelia* can be accepted as reproducing the fear and anxiety of the Sevres Syndrome of Kemalist discourse by creating a historical anchor point and carrying past traumas to the current social reality of the Turkish citizens.

In the end, within the historical context, "Farewell Rumelia" establishes a parallel between the past, where rights granted to minorities under the pressure of Western imperial powers led to escalating nationalist uprisings that resulted in the forced migration of the Turkish-Muslim community from the Balkans and the political landscape of the early 2000s, where Turkey politically struggled to join EU because of the pressures of Western powers on Cyprus Problem and the Kurdish issue. In this aspect, the series "*Farewell to Rumelia*," by recalling past traumas and reproducing a Kemalist discourse, brings to light the ontological insecurities that lead Turkey to securitize various developments in the country. This was one of the main internal obstacles that neo-Ottomanist ideology needed to face.

In 2008, according to a news report from Milliyet “Secretary General of the Presidency Mustafa İsen, known as a pro-Balkan bureaucrat of JDP, "The Balkans have become fashionable in TV series and travel routes. But I don't consider the abandonment story in the '*Farewell to Rumelia*' series as a behavior that coincides with our day. We should say 'Once Again Rumelia.' I believe that this would have very positive reflections on Turkey both politically and culturally." Given Isen’s position, this statement is reflecting the glint of one of the earliest neo-Ottomanist tendency in the era of the JDP government. Considering the activities of TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) in the region, like the renovation and restoration of mosques, bridges, lodges, fountains, and bathhouses, it is possible to say that the aforementioned discourse also found a response in Turkish foreign policy. Also, on TİKA’s website (2022), it is emphasized that "Today, mosques, madrasas, clock towers, baths, and bridges built during the Ottoman era stand as witnesses to centuries of Ottoman dominion and culture." In this way, the nostalgia that started in the fictional universes of television series is thus carried to the real world through the renovation and restoration of these physical spaces and thereby, this spatial dimension flourished the neo-Ottoman identity of Turkey in the international arena. In the following parts of the thesis, it will be possible to observe more clearly how the transformation and erosion of Kemalist discourses in *Farewell to Rumelia* towards neo-Ottomanism reflects a broader trend seen in other TV series. This shift is attributed

to the diminishing media freedom and the growing influence of the JDP government over the media landscape.

III. *The Magnificent Century (2011-2014)*

The Magnificent Century is a fictional Turkish historical soap opera that aired from 2011 to 2014. It is based on true historical events and characters. The series revolves around the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, who ruled the Ottoman Empire from 1520 to 1566. It begins with Sultan Suleiman's accession to the throne and ends with his death in the Siege of Szigetvar in 1566. The series follows the political, military, and personal events in the Ottoman Empire during Suleiman's reign. It explores the complex relationships within the royal court, including the intrigues, alliances, and betrayals among the characters. Although it touches upon many military and political events that took place at that time and the victories won by the Suleiman, the series is mainly sprawled around Sultan Suleiman's relationship with his wife Hürrem Sultan, and harem life. Overall, the series blends historical events with creative storytelling just like *Game of Thrones*, which started showing in the same period to offer a captivating and dramatic portrayal of Suleiman's life and the dynamics of the Ottoman Empire during his reign. By delving into Caliph and Sultan Suleiman's confrontations with the European powers, commonly referred to as the Crusaders, who joined forces against the Ottomans, the series reflects the Ottoman Empire as a formidable Turkish power and a global empire. In this sense, *The Magnificent Century* sheds light on the Turkish-Islamic synthesis that underlies neo-Ottomanism, showcasing the cultural and historical fusion that defines this period in history.

The Magnificent Century is the most viewed Turkish TV series in the world. According to statistics that shared by the government-led Anadolu Agency “The TV series exported to most countries was ‘*The Magnificent Century*’. The series reached more than 500 million viewers in 70 different countries.” In the same news report, it is stated that Turkey, as the country that exports the most series after the USA, has brought more than 150 television series to the audience in a total of 146 countries across Europe, the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, North and South America. In this way, television series become an extremely important tool to introduce Turkish culture to the citizens of other countries. While this situation increases Turkey's "soft power" in the international arena, the popularization of history-themed TV series has also led neighboring countries especially countries located in the Balkans and the Middle East to rediscover their Ottoman past. These series are also transforming the

Ottoman culture and history into a meta that can be easily consumed. Therefore, this led articulation of Ottoman culture and history to the popular culture. Alghazi and Kraidy (2013) interprets this situation as ‘neo-Ottoman Cool’. According to Senem B. Çevik (2019) it refers “Tukey’s foreign policy agenda creates a new brand of ‘cool’ around everything related to the Ottoman Empire.”

The Magnificent Century comes in play at this point. The series narrative incorporates iconic historical locations like Topkapi Palace and Hagia Sophia. It also showcases exemplary cultural elements of the era, including costumes, Ottoman cuisine, music, and bathing practices. They all became popular ways to consume Ottoman culture. For example, in one scene, Sultan Süleyman presents Hürrem with a ring adorned with a huge green gemstone. This ring became so fashionable, that thousands of replicas were made by jewelry makers and it sells like hotcakes. According to Tourism Aktüel magazine (2019) "With the recent airing of the widely discussed series '*The Magnificent Century*', which has become a significant factor in consumer trends and preferences, there has been an increased interest in visiting Topkapı Palace. Simultaneously, there is a noticeable rise in the sales of books about Hürrem Sultan and '*Hürrem Sultan Colognes*', inspired by the scents brought by Sultan's consort after returning from war." The trend of consuming Ottoman culture goes beyond just jewelry and the surge in tourism of historical places. There is a notable increase in individuals put on Ottoman costumes for photo sessions at studios. The sales of books about that period especially on Hürrem Sultan boomed. Also, many hotels in summer resorts have begun to offer the 'Hamman' and 'Turkish bath' experience to meet this increasing interest (Ergin and Karakaya, 2017; Turizm Aktüel, 2019). According to Anadolu Agency’s news report “In order to choose the one who is most similar to the characters 'Süleyman' and 'Hürrem' in the '*Magnificent Century*' a series that broadcast on TV Prva in Montenegro, the residents of the '*Montenegro Touristic Village*' near the city of Plujina in the north of the country, organized a competition under the name '*Sultaniyada*' (Event of the Sultans).“ In another news report of Anadolu Agency called “*Magnificent Süleyman has returned to the Balkans*” also mentioned that "The news pointed out that the TV series '*Magnificent Century*' was watched with great interest in Serbia by people whose great-grandfathers were afraid of the conquests of Suleiman the Magnificent, and it was emphasized that the series was broadcast on the Serbian '*Prva TV*' channel after the public vote and attracted great attention in the region. '*Vreme*' magazine drew attention to the news in

the Serbian media and the public debates and commented that '446 years after the death of 'Sultan Süleyman,' he became the most talked-about and popular historical figure in the Balkans again.'" These news and examples confirm Alghazi and Kraidy's 'neo-Ottoman Cool' thesis. In this way, Turkey is (re)branding itself and changing its international image by showcasing a blend of historical common ground and richness with a touch of contemporary appeal.

The Magnificent Century focuses on one of the most glorious periods of the Ottoman Empire, with a narrative that is diametrically opposed to the insecurities created by the "Sevres Syndrome" that lies deep within Kemalist ideology, moving too far from the date of birth of this trauma. Thus, the audience is detached from the current context which is contaminated by the fear of Western powers that want to divide and break up Turkey just like they did to the Ottomans, and fall under the spell of past glories. The series reminds viewers of many military victories that took place during that era. For example, the conquest of Belgrade, Rhodes, and most importantly Battle of Mohács. Right after the battle, there is a scene that Suleiman highlights the magnitude of the victory with these words "We won the Battle of Mohács from noon until afternoon, a victory that historians will record as the greatest triumph achieved in the shortest time in the universe". Additionally, throughout the series there are many scenes where Suleiman explains his ambition and aims of bringing Islam to the heart of the Catholic world to others. Besides that, there are several scenes that Suleiman refer to the Ottoman army as the Islamic army. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) "The main feature of Turkish Islam is that both nationalism and Islamism have been legitimized with a reference to the Ottoman past and its "glorious" achievements. By reimagining the Ottoman past as an "Islamic" past and the Ottoman sultans as "Islamic figures," not only has the Ottoman past been Turkified but Islam too has been Turkified. This Islamic-Turkish nationalism used the Ottoman past as its open reservoir to restore self-confidence and reveal the historic origins of Turkish nationalism." Through these representations, the series reminds audiences of a historical responsibility by showing how Turks once protected and expanded the Muslim world. In this respect, it would not be wrong to say that the series reproduces neo-Ottomanist discourse and sheds light on the foundations of Turkish-Islamic synthesis.

These victories and conquests of the past represented by the series have the potential to be translated into a reservoir of legitimacy and can create consent or sympathy

of the public towards Turkey's military interventions (especially in the Middle East region). According to Hürriyet's news report, Erdogan's discourses on Syria in 2012, "Inshallah, we will go to Damascus as soon as possible, read the Fatiha at the tomb of Saladin, and perform our prayers in the Umayyad Mosque." Together with another discourse from him in the same year "There are great sufferings and dramas in Syria. Our brothers and sisters there, including babies and children, are being murdered by being shot with tanks and artillery, and even by being strangled. 30 years ago, the father of this bloody dictator had done the same thing. At that time, Father Assad had massacred 30 thousand of our brothers. Now, the son He's on his way." reveals the parallel between series and the real world. In the series, the Knights of Rhodes who are the historical enemies of the Muslims are raiding pilgrims and Muslim trade ships in the Mediterranean and Sultan Suleiman as a Calipha and protector of Islam sieges down the island to punish them. Right after the conquest, there was a scene where Suleiman and other generals performed the ritual prayers of Islam. It was common in Ottoman history to perform prayers in places captured after wars and conquests by Sultans. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) "These shows, at least the ones showing Ottoman history in a favorable light, have had two major effects. First, for the viewers they created pride in past victories and a desire to repeat them. This feeling translates into more sympathetic attitudes toward the military intervention of Turkey in foreign affairs. Second, the shows provide a political context in which to decipher the challenges facing the current leader of Turkey (Erdogan) and stress the importance of a strong leader and communal unity as resources to cope with the problems. Each one of these shows seeks to accentuate the nation's glory in building an empire that served Turko-Islamic values in an international context, even if it comes wrapped in more maudlin and personal stories." Considering these, it can be said that Erdogan anchored Turkey's identity to history, and while legitimizing Turkey's foreign policy as the successor of the Ottoman Empire, he also managed to relate himself personally with the Sultans as the leader of this successor state. This relation will become more visible in the second chapter of analysis of this thesis.

Besides that, *The Magnificent Century* offers a lot more than past victories, it also reminds people, how their ancestors humiliated the Western powers of the past in contrast to the humiliations that caused by Sevres Syndrome. In one scene, during a council meeting, while Pargali Ibrahim was explaining to Süleyman what the Venetian ambassador wanted, the Sultan interrupted him "Hold on, Pargali, this Lajos infidel

awaits news from me. Let his head not be at ease, let him not be comfortable on his throne” and started dictating a letter to be sent to the Hungarian King and continue “Infidel Lajos, when this decree reaches the hands of you, know that many sultans have graced the soil of my fortunate gate, seeking refuge in the sanctuary of my court. You were the prey with an arrow embedded in your body, yet you did not step onto the battlefield. Pursuing the fleeing is not the custom of my noble ancestors, and killing the weak is not our practice. Therefore, you are spared from beneath of our sword. Why did you not send an emissary to our sanctuary, to my court, akin to the heavens in order to show your submission? Due to your lack of wisdom, it was decided to establish our tent in Budin.” After that, some viziers whispered to each other and mocked the frightened Venetian ambassador.

Therefore, *The Magnificent Century* takes the audience to a time when today's traumas have not yet been experienced and builds national pride within represented history for today's society. In this way, it can be said that the TV series like *The Magnificent Century*, such as TRT productions; *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, and *Payitaht Abdulhamid* play a role in reviving the positive and glorious moments from Ottoman history. Simultaneously, they reshape and romanticize the negative aspects of imperial past that criticized by the Kemalist perspective and turning them into a form of imperial nostalgia in favor of Turkey's current political agenda. According to Ergin and Karakaya (2017) “Thus, contemporary attempts to reinterpret the past go diametrically against the historical vision of Turkey's republican modernization. The result is a shift away from the insecurities of high cultural modernization, which in turn paves the way for efforts to rehabilitate a nebulous Ottoman and Islamic tradition in multiple ways.” Therefore, Turkey's unintentional (until TRT started producing the historical-themed sequels, that I mentioned) success in producing and exporting television series has two main gaining. First, they are (re)branding Turkey by changing its image and providing a sense of ontological security through nostalgia for the domestic consumers by anchoring its identity to the past. Second, they are providing recognition by others in international relations for the ‘new’ Turkey that they (re)branded under the vision of the JDP government.

Unlike the TRT productions that came after it, *The Magnificent Century* is a private media production that prioritizes the harem life, the intrigues of the palace women, and Süleyman's romantic affiliations. Despite the nostalgia and glorious representations of Ottoman history it creates, it is a series that has received a lot of

criticism from conservative circles. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) “Turkey’s conservatives who imagine the Ottomans as spotless Muslims became sharply critical of the show. Erdogan also weighed in on the debate and blasted the soap opera as ‘disrespectful’ towards Suleiman and the Ottoman sultans.” In 2012, Erdogan heavily criticized *The Magnificent Century* with these words “We don’t have ancestors like that. We don’t know such Sultan Suleiman or Lawmaker. He spent thirty years on horseback. His life was nothing like the one depicted in the show. We must know and understand this very well. I condemn both the directors of those TV series and the owners of that television in the presence of our nation. Although we warned the relevant parties on this issue, I expect the judiciary to take the necessary steps.” Following the criticisms from conservative circles and Erdoğan's rebuke, the perfectness attributed to the history of the empire, within the neo-Ottoman framework, was shaken by the so-called "inappropriate" representations shown by *The Magnificent Century*, which increased the pressures on the series. According to Ergin and Karakaya (2017) “Several high-ranking AKP members asked the producers, the Taylan Brothers, to discontinue the show. Although they refused to follow suit, the Taylan Brothers faced fines and, according to a 2013 interview in *The New Yorker*, implemented self-censorship, particularly by a conscious inclusion of more battle scenes.” This situation shows that the JDP government does not want other alternatives in their narrative on Turkey's identity, while it proves that they want their neo-Ottomanist discourse to continue single-handedly as a counter-hegemonic narrative against the Kemalist narrative in the interpretation of history. It is because to foster particular ontological security regime in the country, the narrative of self-identity must demonstrate continuity and consistency.

As indicated in various instances above, media plays a critical role in shaping and spreading these autobiographical narratives. At this point, television series and similar content offer viewers a certain perspective on history, leading them to understand the past within a certain political framework. Therefore, how the media conveys these narratives can influence society's perception of history and self-identity aligned with a certain political stance. According to Senem B. Çevik (2019) “The restorative approach is prevalent in the timing of the production of historical television series, which coincide with significant political events in Turkey. The general elections in 2011, the Gezi Park protests and graft probe, the fallout with the Gulenist coalition in 2013-2014, the presidential election in 2014, and the failed coup attempt are all

markers of these political events. As a result, the historical television series promotes the AKP's own historical interpretation as an official line of history.” Following the anti-government Gezi Park protests in 2013 and the coup attempt in 2016, the government consolidated its power over the media through censorship and taxation of opposition. After TRT, which is directly under state control, took control of the historical narratives in the media and received great acclaim with the series it produced, such as *Payitaht Abdulhamid* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, as Senem B. Çevik stated (2019) “TRT has become a leading outlet for the production and delivery of television series depicting various eras of the Ottoman Empire.”

In conclusion, *Farewell to Rumelia* and *The Magnificent Century*, which are discussed as the subjects of the first analysis section, coincide with a transition period from the Kemalist discourses of the old Turkey to the neo-Ottoman discourses of the new Turkey, as of the years they started to be aired. For this reason, they contain Kemalist discourse and modern representations that are controversial for conservative segments.

In the second part of this thesis, the focus will be on TV series produced and broadcasted by TRT, which is a state television, primarily *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Payitaht Abdulhamid*, to highlight the differences between the two periods discussed by this thesis. By lifting the veil on how the media shapes and spreads government discourses, this thesis sheds light on Turkey's ongoing process of nation (re)branding and its role in providing ontological security for the ‘new’ Turkey.

4.2. Resurrection of Imperial Ghost 2014-2023

I. Introduction

2012–2023 period was chosen for analysis in this chapter because as mentioned, significant political events unfolded during this period that can be considered milestones of Turkish politics. Such as the Gezi Park protests, the aftermath of the Gulenist coalition, the 2014 presidential elections, the unsuccessful coup attempt in 2016, and lastly, the election of Erdogan as President once again in 2018. According to Grigoriadis and Karabıçak (2021), “Government control over the media amounts to full control of eight out of nine mainstream television channels and all but three mainstream newspapers. Combined with the complete government control of the public radio and television (Türkiye Radyo Televizyon Kurumu – TRT), the government of the Justice and Development Party has achieved nearly complete control over Turkish mainstream media.” This control over media leads to the

monopolization of narratives, which makes it possible the ascendancy of alternative neo-Ottomanist perspectives over Kemalist discourses. This triumph is facilitated by the JDP government's influential control over mainstream media. In this vein, the growing control of media narratives by the JDP government is evident through the operations of two significant production companies. The first one is, Es Film, known for historical series such as *Filinta*, *Payitaht Abdülhamid*, and *Zeyrek & Çeyrek*. The second, Tekden Film, established by JDP parliament member Kemal Tekden, is responsible for producing *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, the exclusive airing of these companies' productions on public television (TRT) underscores the close relationship between media owners and the JDP government (Çevik, 2019). Consequently, this chapter starts with the analysis of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. Considering the connections between the government and media patrons, this chapter explores how government discourses are translated into media and spread to the masses. By doing so, it sheds light on Turkey's ongoing process of nation (re)branding and its role in providing ontological security for the 'new' Turkey.

II. *Resurrection: Ertuğrul (2014-2019)*

Resurrection tells the epic story of Ertugrul Ghazi, who is the son of Suleiman Shah and father of Osman -the founder of the Ottoman Empire-, in this vein, it can be said that it dives deep into the origins of Turkishness. Like any other globally popular series (i.e. *Game of Thrones*, *Magnificent Century*, etc.), its narrative contains elements of power struggles, politics, war, and heroism. However, it is portraying history very different from *The Magnificent Century*. Rather than focusing on palace intrigue, the private life of historical figures, and their relations with women, *Resurrection's* narrative roughly revolves around heroism, war, religion, morality and strong leadership. Elesaki (2019) explain this with these words “The ‘Resurrection: Ertugrul’ portrayed a very different image of Ottoman society, focusing on religious morality, limitations between people of different religions in mixing and more so between genders, it highlighted how the protagonist’s piousness was the source of his success and power, which could be reflected on a much broader scope onto society itself and the Ottoman era in light of this series’ narrative. The series itself was highly advocated by the AKP and supporters while secularists criticized it for being merely a political response and lacking any admirable creativity (Rohde, 2012; Armstrong, 2017)”. On top of that, President Erdogan himself has always been advocating the *Resurrection*, he even visited the set of the series a couple of times. Considering this

together with TRT's financial facilities provided to the series, one can say that *Resurrection* became the voice of JDP's political elites and government in the cultural industry.

The story of *Resurrection* begins in 1225. Starting from the first episode, the series sheds light on the Turkish-Islam synthesis with its narrative that refers to the nomadic past of the Turks and their role in the Islamic world with an emphasis on religion and customs at every opportunity. The series is generally about the conflicts and power struggles of Ertuğrul Ghazi and the Kayi tribe with internal and external enemies. The limited historical records from that period indicate that most of the narrative is fictional. Considering both the aforementioned connection between the production company that produces *Resurrection* and the JDP government, together with the lack of historical records from that era, and lastly, given the words of Mehmet Bozdağ who is co-producer and screenwriter of *Resurrection* "I am writing things as I imagine them, of course, it has its method, however considering the lack of historical information of that era, it is hard to adapt today's narratives, to that period in which series takes place." One could argue that; the series serves as a portrayal of the imaginative reality and historical outlook of both the JDP government and the conservative segment of society. This imaginative reality and historical outlook paved the way for the JDP government to construct or in other words resurrection a 'new' Turkey's national identity which shaped within the framework of neo-Ottomanism.

Resurrection: Ertuğrul is among the most popular Turkish series worldwide. According to Anadolu Agency "Turkey, ranking second in TV series exports after the United States, exported the *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* series, which sheds light on Turkish history, to 71 countries." It is also mentioned that "The international audience of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* in the digital realm is growing every day. Translated into more than 25 languages, including English, Urdu, and Arabic, the series has garnered a substantial viewership with a total of 2.9 million subscribers and 515 million views, according to operational figures on digital platforms in various languages." Its popularity started to compared with global hits like *Game of Thrones*, borrowing from Reyaz and Khan (2023) "*Resurrection: Ertuğrul* was dubbed as 'Muslim *Game of Thrones*' by The Guardian." While this popularity has enhanced Turkey's soft power on the global stage, it also presents a remarkable opportunity for the JDP government to (re)brand Turkey aligned with desirable political outcomes of neo-Ottoman ideology.

The desire of President Erdogan and JDP officials to utilize this opportunity can be seen through their discourses, for example, in one of his speeches in Ankara, President Erdogan expressed this desire with these words “You must be seeing how the Resurrection: Ertugrul series broadcasted on TRT has increased interest in Ottoman history. Wherever I go around the world, people ask me about Resurrection: Ertugrul. It indicates the need to focus on similar projects related to our history and archives in the coming period.” The JDP government needs to continue these kinds of projects aligned with their discourses, in order to establish a historical anchor and provide ontological security for the ‘new’ Turkey to achieve the neo-Ottoman vision. In this sense, Resurrection: Ertugrul became an effective tool to shape and anchor the national identity of Turkey because, it dives deep into the origins of Turkishness and its connection with Islam. This situation indicates a connection between current Turkish politics and Resurrection: Ertugrul, which is evident, considering the alliance between the pro-Islamist JDP and the pro-nationalist NMP (Nationalist Movement Party) in 2018. In this respect, it can be claimed that the series prepared the appropriate ground for this alliance and provided the discursive space needed for the JDP government by framing the relationship between Turkishness and Islam in a historical context. To do this, the show provides several different representations, First, it portrays the Kayi’s nomadic lifestyle and highlights their Central Asian origins by showing their migration across seasons to graze and nurture their herds in Anatolia until the capture of Söğüt. Second, in various scenes, the Horse and the weapon are given an almost sacred meaning. Third, the series also consistently highlights the bravery and martial skills of the Turks through intense battle sequences. Fourth, Ertugrul Ghazi himself often underscores that their struggles against both Christians and traitors among their ranks are not only for the Kayi tribe’s well-being but also for the safety and welfare of all Muslims. Hence, the emphasis is placed on the connection between Turkishness and Islam, underscoring the so-called role of Turks as the “protectors of Islam” according to the neo-Ottomanist narrative. In this vein, according to Avcı (2019) “In the series, which begins with fiction based on geography and built upon ethnicity, which is expressed as the place where national identity begins to be established, we watch the struggle for existence with other communities. The important emphasis in the series on ethnicity, homeland, and religion, which becomes evident later on, is noteworthy. It is telling the story of the contemporary Turkish Republic's historical, identity, and geographical establishment.” Considering this, it

can be said that, the series *Resurrection: Ertugrul* not only aims to enhance Turkey's international image and define its place in international arena but also actively shapes Turkey's national identity in line with the neo-Ottoman rhetoric of JDP elites. By presenting a narrative that emphasizes historical struggles, ethnic origins, and religion, *Resurrection: Ertugrul* offers a sense of continuity and stability in the face of contemporary challenges and constructs the consent of the JDP voters for the alliance with the NMP. Therefore, in a rapidly changing world the series acts as a historical anchor, fostering a collective identity rooted in Turkey's past. In this way with the help of a carefully crafted narrative, the series contributes to a sense of belonging and stability, thus helping to provide the ontological security that the 'new' Turkey needed.

To explain this, just like *The Magnificent Century*, by articulated into popular culture, *Resurrection: Ertugrul* has also allowed the symbols in the series to become commodified and find a place for themselves in the market. This not only amplifies historical interest but also showcases the potential for cultural elements to thrive in various forms. Borrowing from Okmen (2023) “Looking at the representation of the series abroad, it is seen that the metaphors frequently used in the series can be sold in the context of the creative industry. Some of these products were Kayı Boyu Ring, Diriliş Eruğrul music album, Börk, Kılıç-Kalkan.” This commodification allows for reaching a broader audience and carrying the reality created by the series beyond the screen. Given this, it is possible to find many pictures on the internet that show *Resurrection* fans who watched the series with replicas or even real swords, shields, and helmets to increase the immersive feeling of nostalgic fantasies. These pictures indicate that the nostalgic fantasies represented by the series are creating copies without originals (simulacra) because the narratives of the past are reproduced by series built on top of post-truths created by politicians. To make it clear, unlike historical narratives shaped by the JDP government and its close circles, *Resurrection* doesn't merely distort or fake the truth; it reproduces an already distorted narrative. In doing so, it transcends being a mere reflection and evolves into the referent itself. Given these fan pictures, it could be suggested that this metamorphosis into the hyper-real over time seems to amplify nationalist and Islamist tendencies through the lens of nostalgia. In essence, *Resurrection* becomes a vehicle not just for storytelling but for the construction of a new reality—a reality that merges with, yet surpasses, the historical narrative it initially drew inspiration from. The fan engagement with this hyper-real world reflects the profound influence of neo-Ottoman discourses that are

reproduced by the series on the collective consciousness.

The reproduction of neo-Ottomanist discourse is observable throughout the series. For example, commander Titus and grandmaster of the Templars while plotting another crusader campaign to the holy lands Titus explains his concerns about the Seljuks with the following words “What about the Seljuks, sir? Anatolia is experiencing its brightest days under the reign of Sultan Alaaddin.” And grandmaster answers “We will achieve our goal the day we pit the Turks against the grandchildren of Salahuddin Ayyubi.” Right after this dialogue, the grandmaster pours his wine on the map of the Middle East geography. This scene is important, because on one hand, it emphasized that Turks are the formidable power that protect, Islam and holy lands, referring the so called ‘historical responsibility’ of Turkey that mentioned by neo-Ottomanist ideology. On the other hand, it underscores the significance of maintaining positive relations and historical connections of Turkey with the Muslim world, in contrast to the Kemalist foreign policy perspective of the country. Additionally, pouring wine on the map of the Middle East carries the message that if the Ummah pits each other, the Middle East will be bloodied at the hands of the Westerners and their collaborators. Given that the episode in which this scene took place was broadcast in 2014, it can be claimed that the aforementioned message that carried by this scene is also related to the ongoing Syrian Civil War and the Israel-Gaza conflicts of that time. Following this, in January 2015, President Erdoğan gave a speech at the 10th conference of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation “We can rebuild the glorious civilizations we established in Bukhara, Samarkand, Isfahan, Baghdad, Cairo, Cordoba, and Istanbul if we unite. We don't need intermediaries or translators to communicate with each other. As people who face the same direction in prayer, we can speak the language of the heart (gönül dili); we can collaborate effectively on every issue that concerns our region and even humanity as a whole.” There is a parallel between this speech and the message carried by the aforementioned scene, considering the Western engagement in the Syrian Civil War and the religious context of the Israel-Gaza conflicts of that time. In fact, considering what Erdoğan said while concluding his speech, this connection becomes more visible, he said “I want to remind you once again: There is a very serious operation targeting the Islamic world. Look, Pakistan and Afghanistan are crying blood; Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and Libya are the same way. All games are here. You go to Myanmar, you go to Somalia, and see the same scape.” The current state of the Islamic world, emphasized by Erdogan, is depicted in

a strikingly similar manner in the "*Resurrection: Ertugrul*" series, portraying an Islamic world that has been 'reduced to ashes' after the Crusades and Mongol invasions. In this respect, *Resurrection* encapsulates not only the origin of Turkishness and the Turk-Islam synthesis but also the origins of contemporary issues by simplifying them by creating representations of 'good' vs. 'evil' or 'right' vs 'wrong'. It establishes a continuous link between the present and the past.

Facing a myriad of challenges, as a representation of a powerful leader Ertugrul Ghazi grapples with two primary fronts. On one side are notable 'external powers', including the Crusaders, Templars, Mongols, and Byzantines. On the other side, internal threats can be identified as 'traitors' who align themselves with the aforementioned 'external powers', posing a significant threat to the integrity and security of both the Turks and the Muslim world. In this vein, according to Özçetin (2019) "The whole narrative is based on posing Manicheean oppositions and clear-cut distinctions between the good and the evil; the people and the enemies of the people; the Muslims and the Christians or Shamans and so on. Ertuğrul, as a flawless character (brave, pious, selfless, romantic, fearless, clever etc.) is presented as the leader of both the Kayi tribe and the Islamic world as a whole." Therefore, by employing these clear distinctions between good and evil, just and unjust, and "we" versus "them", the series reflects the polarization in contemporary Turkey. Borrowing from Özçetin (2019) "In Erdoğan's and Islamist intellectuals' populist rhetoric 'they' referred to the Westernized and secular cultural elites, alienated from the values and morals (Muslimness) of the Turkish nation; to those who despise ordinary people, and who want to live a Western way of life. 'We', on the other hand referred to the authentic, traditional and pious Sunni-Muslim Turks." The reflection of this rhetoric can be found in almost every single episode of *Resurrection: Ertugrul*. For example, in one scene, when tribe elites gather in the tent of tribe's chef for a council meeting to decide where to migrate, Ertugrul Ghazi suggests that to follow the holy path of jihad and adds "As long as we follow our herd, there will be no Oghuz customs, no Alps (it means warrior in ancient Turkish-Altaiic mythology.) and peace will no longer remain. Every blowing wind, every falling rain will take us away from ourselves." This speech by Ertugrul, while aligning with the concept of "we" in Erdogan's rhetoric, also corresponds to the characterization of "they" attributed to the accompanying anxiety of alienated from the values.

The similarity between Erdoğan and Ertuğrul is not limited to the rhetoric they

use or their shared anxieties. According to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) “The portrayal of Ertuğrul is less derived from history and more intended to be a comment on Erdoğan’s personality and his desire to be the ultimate leader of the Sunni Muslims of Turkey. Thus, the show is less about history than it is about Erdoğan and his vision of leadership and his attempts to build a new political culture.” Intentionally or (being optimistic) unintentionally the portrayal of Ertugrul Ghazi which was drawn by the *Resurrection* embodies similar qualities to President Erdogan. Roughly speaking, both figures do not remain silent and fight against injustice, they both appear as strong and authoritarian leaders and most importantly, both of them protect and safeguard the interests of not only their nations but also the broader Islamic world, in their actions. Discourse analysis of the two figures will reveal the similarity between them more clearly.

In an episode, tribal leaders gather around for a council meeting, in order to learn the situation in Aleppo from Ertugrul Ghazi. Ertugrul said that “Drinking from the poisoned well called Aleppo comes at a cost, and we will pay this price abundantly. However, if we do not purify this poisoned water, the Islamic world will be dragged into a great catastrophe. The Crusaders are preparing for a new campaign, and they are clearing the way through the Templars to take Jerusalem. They are eliminating the beys (lords), tribes, and statesmen they see as dangerous along the way. We must absolutely and without fail cleanse Aleppo.” Then one of the beys disagreed with him “What are you saying Ertugrul? Is the concern for the entire Islamic world our burden alone? While we can't even find a suitable homeland for winter, you talk to us about cleansing Aleppo.” Ertugrul respond this persuasively with anger “If the cries of the oppressed are to fill the dome of the sky, if our sacred traditions, language, religion, and land are to be trampled by the oppressors, then what does it matter if we have a homeland or not? I understand that our arrival to these lands is not in vain. Either we live on these lands without allowing them to be trampled by the oppressors, or we erase ourselves from the pages of history like cowards who fail to stand against the oppressor.” In the context of this scene, the signifier of "oppressed" represents Muslims who have suffered from the Crusades, cruel Muslim rulers, and the Mongol invasion—essentially symbolizing Muslims subjected to persecution by external forces and their collaborators. The “oppressed” is a floating signifier, because it has no fixed signified, but borrows its meaning from different discourses in different contexts. The moment of this discourse given by Ertugrul can be defined as the period

in the aftermath of catastrophic events such as the Crusades and the Mongol invasion. The emotion is anger and frustration which is antagonistically articulated, additionally, Ertugrul exhibits a strong and authoritative tone that conveys a sense of urgency and importance by saying “If the cries of the oppressed are to fill the dome of the sky, if our sacred traditions, language, religion, and land are to be trampled by the oppressors”. By doing so, he tries to mobilize support charismatically. Lastly, it is definitely constructing a clear distinction between “us” and “them” by employing the idea of erasure from pages of history and increasing the stakes of the struggle and urges collective action.

All of these elements can be found in President Erdogan’s discourses as well. For example, in 2019, President Erdoğan attended an event organized by the Turkish-American National Steering Committee in the USA for the Turkish, fellow and Muslim society. In this event President Erdogan said that “... and let us not forget, that those who remain silent in the face of injustice are nothing but mute devils. Even if everyone were to be silent in the face of oppression and injustice, let it be known that we will not stay silent... Just as throughout history, today, irrespective of identity, Turkey stands with the oppressed against the oppressor... I say it loud and clear, no power, no threat can deter us from upholding the rights of Jerusalem, our first qibla, in Palestine. The cause of Jerusalem is not just the concern of a handful of Muslims in Palestine; it is the honor and dignity of the entire Islamic world, with a population exceeding 1.7 billion.” The traces of a floating signifier, namely “oppressed” can be followed in this discourse too. Considering the context and moment of this speech, it can be argued that the signifier “oppressed” in President Erdogan’s discourse signifies the same referent as in Ertugrul Ghazi’s discourse, pointing to Muslims. The moment of this discourse given by President Erdogan is also strikingly similar to the moment of Ertugrul’s discourse and defined as the period in the aftermath of catastrophic events such as the Syrian Civil War and Palestinian-Israeli conflicts. The emotion here is also anger and frustration and similarly, as it can be interpreted by this sentence “Even if everyone were to be silent in the face of oppression and injustice, let it be known that we will not stay silent” This discourse is also articulated antagonistically and Erdogan’s tone is also strong and authoritative. There is also articulation of distinctive “us” and “them” again. The term "we" in Erdogan's discourses takes on different meanings, shifting between signifiers—specifically, encompassing Turkey/Turks and Muslims. This nuanced usage reflects a dynamic and evolving definition that extends

beyond national boundaries to include a broader Muslim identity and indicates a rupture from Kemalist discourses that fixate on the meaning of religion as a non-governmental sign. In both President Erdogan's discourse and Ertugrul Gazi's discourse, Turkey/Turks are historically portrayed not only as a defender of national interests but also as a champion of broader Islamic values. In this sense, they are both carrying essence of neo-Ottoman ideology. On one hand, Erdogan's discourses emphasize the historical responsibilities of Turkey (Turks as the protector and sword of Islam), on the other hand, *Resurrection* illuminates the origin of these historical responsibilities that are highlighted by neo-Ottoman ideology. Thus, along with continuity, a historical anchor point is created too. This continuity and historical anchor that was created with the help of *Resurrection: Ertugrul* also carried over to the JDP's political campaigns.

According to Senem B. Çevik (2019) "There have been clear efforts to create a continuous historical interpretation between Ertuğrul and Erdoğan, thus instrumentalizing popular culture in propagating government discourse." The most important and obvious example of this is the Presidential campaign video of the 2018 presidential elections. This video tagged with "#ZümrüdüAnka" is available on YouTube. It is important to remember that, "Zümrüdüanka" means Phoenix, according to Encyclopedia Britannica it is a mythical bird that is "widely interpreted as an allegory of resurrection". Borrowing from Senem B. Çevik (2019) "Erdoğan was portrayed as the successor of Ottoman sultans, including Ertuğrul. The video had symbolic scenes from *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* with references to the struggles against foreign enemies." It can be visible in the last and the most important thing that President Erdogan said in this video is "To rejuvenate, to thrive, to gallop at full speed. For stability and the future, leaving behind the discourse of struggle, sorrow, and fate. For unity, prosperity, and abundance, it's Turkey's era, it's Turkey's time." In this way, this video portrays a nation that, under the guidance of strong Turkish leaders, has successfully overcome all obstacles and attained glorious triumphs in its history.

In a parallel to Atatürk's words in his Address to Youth "The strength you require resides in the noble blood flowing in your veins!", Erdogan, as the voice actor of this video, is echoing similar sentiments too. He talks about a glorious past that extends from the arrival of the Turks to Anatolia to the establishment of the republic and the present day. The video, which includes references in Erdoğan's voice to Atatürk's words such as "My humble body will surely turn to dust one day. But the

Republic of Turkey will survive forever”, shows that President Erdoğan is not only portrayed as the heir of the Ottoman Sultans but also portrayed as the conservative circles' Atatürk. Atatürk utilized state institutions like the Ministry of Education and the Presidency of Religious Affairs to control symbols, aiming to separate religion from both the public sphere and the state. As argued by Adisönmez (2017) Kemalist Revolution “... fixated the meaning of religion by delineating its boundary as a non-governmental sign.” Similarly, Erdogan is employing these state institutions and additionally, TRT to produce largely public source-founded TV series to redefine the meaning of “religion” by expanding its boundary and turning it into a governmental sign once again with the help of popular culture. Considering the top-down flow of social engineering and usage of state institutions, it can be argued that, at their core, neo-Ottomanist and Kemalist ideologies are opposing views that are quite similar to each other.

In conclusion, the similarity between Erdogan and Ertugrul, initially observed in the context of "*Resurrection: Ertugrul*," extends beyond the fictional realm and overflows into the current political context through the television screen. This broader connection has positively affected Turkey's sense of ontological security, suggesting that the alignment between the current political leader and the representation of historical figure serves to reinforce a sense of continuity and stability in the country's identity that is shaped by the neo-Ottomanist framework. Thus, it satisfies the desire of society to resurrect the 'glorious past'. This situation reveals the intertwined relationship between Turkey's (re)branding efforts, the neo-Ottoman political agenda, and ontological security. Besides, it illuminates how this relationship translates itself in the media domain by elucidating the role of the media in the nation (re)branding efforts and its contribution to providing the ontological security of Turkey.

III. Payitaht Abdülhamid (2017-2021)

Payitaht Abdülhamid tells the story of borrowing from the official TRT website, "Abdulhamid Khan's war against those who tried to destroy the state, every move of which was filled with wisdom." It is a story of highly controversial person, modern-secular circles called him as Red Sultan while conservative-religious circles called him as Great Hakan. To make this distinction clear, according to Günaydın (2017) “Looking at the period as an element of 'continuity' or 'rupture', which is now a clichéd debate for the historiography of the Sultan Abdulhamid period, points to a fundamental distinction that is capable of getting to the root of the problem. The

aforementioned separation, as seen in the perception of the Sultan Abdulhamid period, represents a bipolar story that can be established in many cases from the Tanzimat period to the present day. Because in a plane where the approach to history is realized through ideologies/positions, the view on Sultan Abdulhamid is also a positioning bracket. ‘The Great Khan (Hakan) prevented the distorted westernization and modernization that came with the Tanzimat’ or ‘The Red Sultan emerged as an antihero in the last period of the Ottoman Empire and disrupted the libertarian and secular line that started with the Tanzimat’ (Çetinsaya, 1998, pp. 137-138) Which of the propositions we find more reasonable is capable of showing us our position in the story.” Considering the view on Abdülhamid as a positioning bracket, then one can claim that the position of the TV series, *Payitaht Abdülhamit* is clear. Despite the controversial reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, *Payitaht Abdülhamid* focuses on the intricate political maneuvers and challenges faced by Sultan Abdülhamid II and his triumphs. For example, according to Amzi-Erdogdular (2019) “The Last Emperor, portraying the challenging historical period of one of the last Ottoman sultans, Abdülhamid II (1842-1918), does not open with his first major act in office -the suspension of the Ottoman Parliament in 1878. It starts, however, with the building of the Hijaz Railway, intended to connect parts of the empire with the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, enhancing the Sultan’s caliphal title and his status as the guardian of Islam and Muslims worldwide.” Given Erdogan's remarks about Abdulhamit in the program titled “Understanding Sultan Abdulhamid on the 100th Anniversary of His Death” in 2018 “Despite all the campaigns against him, Abdulhamid Khan remained in the memory of our nation as the Great Khan.” it can be said that the series is on the side that sees Abdulhamid as the Great Khan and therefore reproduces the discourses of the JDP government and its elites that are shaped within the neo-Ottomanist framework.

The series is available online and free of charge on the TRT website and several YouTube Channels, most importantly some of them have the option of English subtitles. This allows the series to reach a wider array of audience and has the potential to increase its reputation in international market. Additionally, according to Anadolu Agency “the series attracts great attention, especially in the Middle East, the Balkans, Turkish Republics, South America, and some Western countries, with its gripping story and cast.” TV series' intentional reproduction and broad dissemination of Ottoman and Islamic symbols played a key role in enhancing Turkey's neo-Ottoman

charm, making Turkey's changing nation brand appealing to both domestic and international viewers. These symbols are also commodified and TRT officially sells the accessories of the series bearing these symbols such as rings of Abdulhamid II and some important characters from the series, it is also possible to find replicas of historical badges, etc., on the web site called 'TRT Market'. These symbols are going beyond the screens with the increasing popularity of the historical-themed TV series and are pumped into the public sphere. Grigoriadis and Karabiçak (2021) claimed that "Ottoman Sultanic monograms (tuğra), symbols of each Sultan's era, have been the prime examples of the trend. While the advent of the republican era rendered these monograms defunct in recent decades, there has been a revival of their public use, particularly of Abdulhamid II. While the original meaning of the tuğra has been lost, it stands as an evocation of the continuity between the era of Abdulhamid II and contemporary Turkey." It seems an intentional choice to pump these symbols into the public sphere as I mentioned above, because continuity between history and present is also something that President Erdogan frequently mentioned. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan said the following things in the program titled "Understanding Sultan Abdulhamid on the 100th Anniversary of His Death" held at Yıldız Palace in Istanbul in 2018 "We must stop portraying the Ottoman Empire and the Republic as opposite periods." And he adds "Of course, the borders have changed, the forms of government have changed, and the documents underlying the management have changed, but the essence is the same, the spirit is the same, and even many of the institutions are the same. In this respect, we see Abdulhamid Khan as one of the greatest visionary and strategic figures." Given this discourse, this intentional narrative framing rooted in historical continuity contributes to the governmental efforts of manipulation of public perception.

So, it is very similar to the Disney products, just like Star Wars figures (lightsabers, action figures, etc.) that commercialized right after the movie releases. In this way, for example, the ring of Abdulhamid II becomes a phantasmic toy for a fan. Therefore, pumping such symbols into the public sphere through products turns the public sphere into a kind of immense Ottoman version of Disneyland. In his work titled *Simulacra and Simulation*, published in 1981, Baudrillard describes Disneyland as a perfect miniature model of America in which all simulacra patterns are intertwined flawlessly. In other words, he is saying that the dream it presents is neither fake nor real, but rather it operates as a persuasive apparatus, crafting a fiction we label as

reality. In this way, the charm and persuasiveness of the neo-Ottoman ideology are heightened, and Turkey's nation (re)branding efforts extend beyond the confines of the widely recognized definition of nation-branding, typically associated with foreign policy. Consequently, one can claim that *Payitaht Abdülhamid* and other TRT productions not only shape the perception of Turkey on the global stage but also influence the perception of Turkish society on their identity. In this vein, the simulacra created by the series extend beyond the screens, living rooms, and houses into the public sphere and create continuity between nostalgic fantasies of neo-Ottomanism and today's political context by solidifying society's belief in discourses of the JDP government and elites. As a result, this circumstance, especially the continuity between past and present, not only provides ontological security but also allows an upsurge in the popularity of both the JDP government and President Erdoğan, just like it happened right after the failed coup attempt in 2016. So, these narratives are strengthening the discourses on external powers that want to disintegrate Turkey by providing emphasis on the siege mentality.

In this vein, according to M. Hakan Yavuz (2020) “Erdoğan compared himself to Abdulhamid II and once said: ‘The same schemes are carried out today in exactly the same manner. The West’s moves against us are the same. Only the era and the actors are different’.” Given this, it can be argued that there are obvious similarities between coup attempts against Abdulhamid II in the *Payitaht* and the July 15 failed coup attempt that happened in 2016. For example, Gülenist were communicating with one-dollar banknotes, in the series, coup plotters communicated with each other with a coin that carries the star of David. Another example is, in *Payitaht*, one of the coups is plotted by enemies within the military school who were provoked by foreign powers, similarly, in the July 15 failed coup attempt of Gülenist movement, the military academy was also among the participants. Borrowing from news report of *Milliyet* (2016) “According to the determination of the Istanbul Chief Public Prosecutor's Office, the mastermind of the July 15 coup attempt was the Military Academies Command.” Additionally, in 2017, when German authorities did not allow the JDP to hold rallies in Germany, the JDP government and elites argued that external powers did not want Turkey to become powerful and did not support the referendum. Just like the British or Russian Empires that interfered in Ottoman affairs and plotted against Abdulhamid II in the *Payitaht* series. According to Senem B. Çevik “the AKP(JDP) suggested that contrary to foreign powers that do not support the presidential system,

Turks should stand tall, uncover this plot by foreign powers, and vote yes." The discourse of uncovering this mentioned 'plot' by foreign powers and therefore need to vote yes in the referendum, in a sense, became an extension of an immersive experience offered by the series for the audience of *Payitaht Abdülhamid*. Therefore, voting yes in the referendum is becoming a part of an interactive experience. As a result, by giving the audience a chance to realize the patriotic and faithful ideal of Turkish-Muslim identity mirrored in the series by voting yes in the referendum, the audience becomes a subject in the nostalgic fantasy created by the series. In this manner, the ontological security of the individual is strengthened through this interactive experience. So, this action helps the person find a sense of ontological security in the ideological foundations of the JDP government, which is rooted in neo-Ottomanism by establishing a link between their self and political preferences.

The continuity between past and present established through this glorious nostalgia portrayed by *Payitaht Abdulhamid* also paves the way for creating a causative link between the need for strong leadership and the survivability of the state. To make it clear, Abdulhamid II is presented in the series as a strong leadership figure who endured all difficulties and emerged victorious from all the struggles he faced, thus he managed to prevent the dismantling of the empire. In one of the first episodes of the TV series *Payitaht Abdulhamid*, an agent of the Sultan returning from Buckingham Palace tells the Sultan a plan that the British authorities of the period called the World of the new century. In this scene agent explain this event with these words "My Sultan, I entered the royal political chamber with the sketch you drew. Even though I couldn't look at everything, I had the opportunity to see the treacherous ambitions of the British about our state." And explain these ambitions with these words "My Sultan, we are in 1896 Gregorian, but the map in the room was dated 1901 Gregorian and the World of the new century was written on it." According to this map, while the Ottoman Balkans were shared among the nation-states in the region, colonial states were established in the Middle East region, and with a reference to the Treaty of Sevres (1920), only a small piece of land was left to the Turks between Ankara and Amasya. When Abdulhamid II heard these plans, he outrageously hit the desk, and said "This is the battle of truth against falsehood! And never has the triumph of falsehood been seen" and adds "Let the war begin!". The map mentioned above that divided the Ottoman Empire was never realized throughout the *Payitaht Abdulhamid* due to Abdulhamid II's strong and righteous leadership prevented any such

disintegration, aligned with the following discourse of Erdogan on the reign of Abdulhamid II in 2022 right after the cabinet meeting “Abdulhamid ruled the Ottoman Empire for 33 years without losing any territory.” In line with Abdulhamid II, according to President Erdogan’s discourses, for example, in 2017 in Düzce JDP provincial congress, President Erdogan said that, “Let's also know our history. You are watching *Payitaht*, right? You see there. They still want to get a piece from us. Never!” Abdulhamid II and President Erdogan both draw a clear distinction between 'us' and 'them' in their speeches. 'Us' as a floating signifier, has no fixed meaning but for Abdulhamid, 'us' refers to the ideal Ottoman identity-Muslim Turks. In Erdogan's talk, 'us' expands to encompass Turkey but the focus is on the ideal citizens desired by the JDP government. In line with, the battle of truth against falsehood mentioned by Abdulhamid II, Erdogan positioned himself and his voters on the side of truth, and everyone else who was against them became the allies of falsehood, who wanted to dismantle Turkey. Thus, hostility and otherness of the past are ripped off from their historical context articulated by *Payitaht Abdülhamid* and as a consequence, the moment is lost and they become timeless, therefore elements (hostility and otherness) become part of continuity between past and present. In this way, through the aforementioned distinction between us and them, a universal otherness is created for the ideal citizens desired by the JDP government and President Erdoğan. Consequently, the competition and hostility between these two groups transform 'them' into productive outsiders, actively contributing to the shaping of the desired ideal citizens. Similarly in another example, in Ankara 6th Ordinary Provincial Congress of JDP in 2018, President Erdogan said "With 780 thousand square kilometers, it (Turkey) is a single homeland. Remember, we came to 780 thousand square kilometers from 18 million square kilometers. What we were, what we became. Now we are meticulously weaving 780 thousand square kilometers, stitch by stitch. We will dig graves everywhere for those who want to divide and tear this place apart.” It shows that President Erdogan himself is also engaged in a parallel struggle against external forces that want to dismantle Turkey just like the Ottoman Empire, while it creates a unique similarity between the President and the Sultan, it also contributes to the construction of continuity between past and present.

Also, this continuity, between past and present, encapsulates an overlap between *Payitaht*'s fictional universe and Turkey's contemporary political context. For example, Bahadır Yenişehirlioğlu who is known as Tahsin Pasha of *Payitaht*

Abdulhamid became a member of parliament from the JDP's Manisa list in the 2023 Turkish parliamentary election. One year before his election, Yenişehirlioglu shared a picture of himself and President Erdogan from his official Twitter account, titled "Hünkarım" which means "my Sultan". In the series, Tahsin Pasha is represented as very close and loyal to the Sultan and always addresses Abdulhamid II as "Hünkarım" as well. This situation creates a very striking symbolic similarity between President Erdoğan and Abdulhamid II. Another example is, in one of his speeches in 2018, Orhan Osmanoglu (a member of the old Ottoman dynasty) said "The incident of March 31 and the time when he was dethroned resemble the present day. It is reminding of what happened to Mr. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan." Thus, fiction and reality are increasingly intertwined, turning Turkey into a boundless Ottoman version of Disneyland, where the boundaries between reality and nostalgic fantasies are blurred. Therefore, establishing continuity between past and present leads to a loss of time perception, which means people confuse the past with the present and consequently there is no present left rather there is only a continuum of nostalgic past.

In conclusion, the continuum of nostalgic past that was established by the reproduction of governmental discourses in *Payitaht Abdulhamid* and other series serves as a healing moment, where a strong leader and his ideal citizens overcome all the challenges and save the country. This healing moment highlights that under the rule of a strong leader, the ideal citizens who embody Islamic values and Turkishness can navigate through enemies and overcome traumatic experiences such as the Sevres Treaty or dissolution of the state and prevent them. Consequently, it provides ontological security at both individual and state levels because this narrative not only resonates within the distorted historical context but also offers a reassuring governmental narrative that mirrors the ideal self for the 'new' Turkey in the neo-Ottoman political context. In this vein, according to Dinçer (2023) "As similar to the Ottoman sultans, President Erdoğan is portrayed as the only leader, who can protect Turkey's security." This portrayal establishes President Erdogan's 'strong leadership' as a pivotal factor in providing ontological security for 'new' Turkey, both at the individual and state levels. Consequently, TRT's historical soap operas enhance the legitimacy of domestic and foreign policies of the JDP government shaped by neo-Ottoman ideology. This situation, while opening new discursive spaces for the party elites and President Erdogan, also creates a bubble of hyper-reality around Turkey that increases its appeal in the international arena and serves as a consent manufactory

within the national borders.



CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

This thesis has delved into the multilayered change Turkey has undergone over the past two decades, under the JDP governance. Specifically, it sought to scrutinize on revealing the complex interplay between ontological security, neo-Ottomanism, and nation branding. The JDP's core objective of (re)branding Turkey to align with the ideals of neo-Ottomanism, creates a rupture from Kemalist self-narratives. Thus, it triggers ontological insecurities caused by discontinuities in self-narratives. Therefore, this study argued that ontological security is not merely a byproduct of (re)branding efforts of Turkey, but rather the primary impulse that propels these efforts.

In this thesis, Turkish television series from two specific time frames 2002-2014 and 2014-2023 carefully examined to reveal the changing self-narratives of Turkey and government discourses. Therefore, this thesis highlighted the disparities in discourse between historical TV series created in the initial years of the JDP government within a relatively unrestricted media environment and the current TV series produced under a government-controlled media domain. In this way, the analysis of these history-themed TV series sheds light on the competition between Kemalist and neo-Ottomanist discourses which has been pivotal in shaping the country's socio-political landscape by presenting the transformation of media narratives in favor of neo-Ottomanism. The juxtaposition of Kemalist and neo-Ottomanist discourses within the context of competition over self-narrative provides a lens to comprehend the relationship between the nation (re)branding efforts of the JDP government and the changing ontological security codes of the 'new' Turkey.

Besides, this thesis explores the changes in Turkey's perception of history that occurred as a result of the competition for identity construction between neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism through their reflections in media. Firstly, this study defines the gap created by this competition and presents the rupture from Kemalist narratives. Secondly, while providing insights into the positive and negative effects of the glorious nostalgic narratives reproduced by the TV series on ontological insecurities, it reveals how President Erdoğan and the JDP government benefit from this situation by utilizing this nostalgia and anxieties. Thirdly, this study delves into the implications of self-narratives constructed by TV series under the JDP's neo-Ottomanist discourses on public perception and Turkey's recognition by others by also

considering how these portrayals contribute to the (re)branding of Turkey in the international arena. Consequently, it reveals the role of media in this intricate relationship between ontological security, nation branding, and neo-Ottomanism.

By examining discourse patterns and identifying intersections between the discourses analyzed in the fictional world of the series and the real world, this thesis has contributed to the literature on nation-branding and ontological security by explaining the role of media in Turkey's changing self-narratives. Consequently, it reveals that media narratives not only reproduce the discourses of the government but also open up new discursive spaces for the government through the distorted reality they produce.

As a result, this thesis has built a bridge between the ontological security and nation branding literature and present a new perspective for future studies in this field. In this context, it offers a more comprehensive understanding of Turkey's identity formation by including media narratives. So, it can provide valuable insights for future researchers to understand the dynamic relationship between ontological security and nation branding in different cases. In this vein, for future researchers, the findings of this thesis and the methodology used can expand knowledge on ontological security and nation branding by guiding studies to be conducted in similar contexts. Therefore, the symbiotic relationship of media and communication tools with ontological security and nation branding can be adapted to analyze different media narratives of different periods, and different countries, and thus contribute to the international relations literature.

Lastly, while this study has provided valuable insights into Turkey's ongoing transformation, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this thesis. First of all, the limited budget prevented me from reaching some resources in literature. Secondly, limited time was one of the factors that affected the quality and scope of the research. Considering the length and multi-season nature of the analyzed series, having more time would have been an advantage. Additionally, due to the reasons I mentioned above, it was not possible to collect primary sources from the television industry, especially from the producers of the series that this thesis analyzed. Primary sources could provide more data to analyze, especially information regarding the exports of TV series such as *Farewell to Rumelia* and *Payitaht: Abdulhamid*. Furthermore, the reliance on secondary data sources, such as existing literature and media reports, may have introduced biases or inaccuracies inherent in the original sources. Despite efforts

to critically evaluate and cross-reference these sources, the potential for misinterpretation or incomplete data cannot be entirely ruled out, which may have impacted the overall validity and reliability of the findings.



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