

# **Pride, Nostalgia, and Fury: Exploring Representations of Contemporary Politics in Entertainment Television**

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# Abstract

This thesis explores representations of political issues and actors in entertainment television as well as the audience's reaction to such content. While the majority of scholarly works in Political Communication neglects entertainment content, the limited research on convergence between entertainment television and politics identifies various ways of potential influence including the content of the narrative, the characteristics of the audience, and the cognitive processing. This research focuses on the first one, the content, and argues that the plots, characters, and motifs employed by television dramas are able to reflect political actors and issues, and to facilitate public political discussions, albeit the motivation behind their consumption is entertainment. Further, this may get intensified in places where television viewing levels are significantly high and where politics is able to permeate into private spheres. To test this claim, this study conducts a thematic analysis of two recent dramas from Turkey and online comments to these series by the audience. The analysis of the series and comments indicates that in Turkey, political events and actors find large representation in entertainment television and the political relevance of these portrayals are acknowledged by the audiences. Therefore, this research demonstrates that just like news programming, entertainment television is able to generate serious media effects and influence public discussion of politics.

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# Introduction

*“A narrative is an argument in fictional terms.”*

Angela Carter (Guardian Obituary, 2013)

Series such as *The West Wing*, *Borgen*, *House of Cards*, and *Homeland* are among revered dramas that attracted attention across the world and have been listed among the most important pieces of popular culture of the 2000s. All four, in different ways and within different contexts, give a their viewers a sense of what may be happening behind closed doors in the political sphere, what political actors think and what motivates them in their behaviour, and how the viewers themselves, as citizens, may be situated in the web of power relationships.

Despite their content that provides such a powerful and palatable depiction of the world of politics, the influence that such works might have of such works on people's understanding of politics, political attitudes and behaviour, has remained rather under-researched by political communication scholars concerned with the relationship between media and politics. News and other programs with an explicit political content have remained at the fore of these studies. Often times this goes in tandem with the use of quantitative methods of analysis based on survey data, where the attention has been on people's self-declared consumption of news media, leaving entertainment content out. When the influence of entertainment television has been considered, the focus has been mostly on satirical talk shows and infotainment programming and their potential impact as they cover daily political events (see Jones 2005; Brants and Voltmer 2011).

However, it has been argued that the distinction between news and entertainment has always been blurry and the distinction between politically relevant and irrelevant media was the result of institutionalisation of media in 1950s. During this process, the idea of creating a socially

responsible media was put forward by the scholars in order to assist stability of democracies and civic participation and large organisations adopted this system. This was built on a clear separation between news and entertainment, where the former was assumed to be based on facts and serve the public interest. This distinction came to dominate political communication research, which failed to focus on non-news genres, in spite of the fact that films, television dramas, comedies and other forms of entertainment continued to convey political values and perspectives and remained largely consumed by the public (Delli Carpini and Williams 2011, 65).

In the era of “peak television”<sup>1</sup>, the ubiquity of politically charged dramas makes it even harder to ignore their influences on people’s political understanding and behaviour. Moreover, studying such programming with politically charged content becomes even more pressing as it has been shown that political engagement and interest in politics have been on decrease whereas television viewing remains a favourite pastime activity in many societies (Jones 2005).

My study seeks to contribute to a nascent research on the role of entertainment television on politics by focusing on the production and reception of political dramas in an environment characterized by politicisation and heavy viewership. Specifically, in my thesis I inquire “*How does entertainment television depict the world of politics?*” and “*How does the public receive these politically relevant and talk about them?*”.

Although entertainment television and its potential impact on political engagement have attracted the attention of a few scholars, the majority of these studies have been conducted in the US, thus leaving out other contexts where such content might bear different implications. To

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<sup>1</sup> Current stage of television, referring to that fact that number of high-quality productions such as dramas, comedies, and reality shows becoming overwhelming, both for the audience and critics (Flint 2017).

address this gap, I study these questions in the context of Turkey, a country with an entrenched culture of entertainment television, where I argue that such programs are purposefully designed with ideological commitments, while also achieving these roles in an unintentional way, by simply capitalizing on popular themes that resonate with the society at large.

To address these questions, I analyse the political messages incorporated in two Turkish prime-time dramas, which are highly popular and often mentioned in the public discourse, namely *Resurrection Ertugrul* and *The Nameless*. I conducted thematic analysis of the two series in order to identify repeated narratives and symbols that resonate with relevant political themes and matched them with significant political events in Turkey. In the thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) model and employed an inductive method while coding the episodes. Following the most frequent themes in both series, I created four different clusters: the ethno-religious identity, the state and its leaders, the foreign agents, and the internal enemies. Moreover, to understand how these themes and messages are received by the public, I looked at audience comments and professional reviews written on these series in order to get a larger scope in terms of potential media effects.

The results of the analysis suggest that through the themes it presents and the way it links them with current political issues, television can take the form of an informative media outlet just like news programming, which is able to reflect political matters and suggest specific venues of political engagement. It shows that currently on Turkish prime time television, there are popular dramas that reflect the daily events either by analogies or by direct fictionalisations. I found that the themes, motifs, myths, and discourses employed by the political elite are echoed in these series. Furthermore, the audience seems to be aware of this representation and engaging in discussions over political and social issues through the series.



The outline of this thesis is as follows: the first chapter will survey the existing literature on entertainment television and its impact on the political life. This chapter will also present the arguments regarding television playing an important role in both informing and misinforming citizens. The second chapter will elaborate on the Turkish context and will explain why the Turkish case is appropriate for this study. In the third chapter, I will give a detailed account of the methodology that I use and the research design. In the fourth chapter, I will present the findings of the content analyses of the series and of the comment sections. Lastly, I will discuss the results and the implications of the analysis as well as the limitations of my study and further avenues of research suggested by the analysis.

# Chapter 1 - Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I firstly describe the importance of studying mass media and television in politics. Then, I present the main models of media effects research, indicate consonance among few, and suggest to adopt them in the study of entertainment television. Having established this, I turn to the arguments in support of a focus on entertainment programming. Overall, this section situates the entertainment television in the web of media research by pointing out the models of media effects and existing studies of political studies of entertainment television.

## 1.1 Importance of Mass Media in Politics

Before describing the ways of studying mass media, one should underline why mass media is important in society and politics, and consequently, why it is important to study. The study of media has always been among the prime topics of research for scholars. In addition to this, political actors have always considered media an important tool and sought to make them their allies. Media tools have been seen as potentially serving many political goals including re-election, gaining and retaining support. Further, media can take the form of being a watchdog and are consequently rendered as central political forces (Perse and Lambe 2017).

Perse and Lambe (2017) point out that media effects are pressing matters that need to be studied for two reasons: firstly, scholars are still unsure about the magnitude and inevitability of the effects. This means that there is no consensus in the literature over the power of the media among other forces that shape society and politics. Second, media effects are bringing about valuable practical and policy-oriented results. This means that through media analysis, practitioners of media can create powerful messages to “promote prosocial aims”. It may benefit

the society at large also by showing how exactly media is leaving an impact on the audiences. Then, according to the authors, parents, educators, and public officials will be able to reduce the negative effects of media through the clear understanding of the processes behind it (18).

In spite of the advancements in information technologies, television remains a popular medium, making it thus worth of being primarily taken into account. In terms of transmitting powerful messages that might influence societal thinking, television is still among the most popular sources for political attitudes. (Perse and Lambe 2017). Next to the news media, entertainment television has also been considered to affect people's understanding of politics, political attitudes and behaviour. Political communication scholars have been considered infotainment programming and satire for quite some time now (Coleman 2003; Jones 2005).

Therefore, studying television content is important to see the ways in which it affects individuals and to thwart the negative impacts it may leave. Having shown the importance of research on media effects and television, next section outlines the ways to conduct this research.

## 1.2 Four Models of Media Effects Research

Perse and Lambe (2017) identify four models of research that define the various explanations of media effects: direct effects, conditional effects, cumulative effects, and cognitive-transactional effects theories (30). Direct effects model focuses on the content of the media and argues that these effects lead to immediate and noticeable actions such as voting choice. According to this theory, they are able to behaviourally or cognitively affect the audiences because the content is generally perceived automatically by people, result in arousal, or involve realistic depictions. Although this model might be applied to rhetorical works such as political advertisements or

debates, it may be harder to do so for entertainment content as they are more than rhetorical tools and involve narrative.

Conditional effects, on the other hand, focuses on the audience. For this model, media has limited effects because people select the material they consume and are also influenced by their environments in the reception of media messages. Thus, we see selective exposure and fragmented audiences, phenomena that are predominantly presumed by social media research (Allcott and Gentzkow 2017). This model recognises the power in the audience in terms of media influence, yet it may fall short of explaining contexts where engagement with television content is frequent across various segments of the society.

Thirdly, the cognitive-transactional model considers both content and the audience. According to this approach, the audience relies on existing schemas in their minds to understand the media content whether they process it automatically or in a controlled manner. Whenever people control the processing (i.e. actively use schemas to evaluate the content), they are more likely to retain the information. Automatic processing, on the other hand, is used in viewing content like advertisements and it is able to prime the schemas of the individuals, and consequently influence the way the content is evaluated (Perse and Lambe 2017). Despite schemas can also be used in processing of entertainment media, this model largely focuses on mental organisation of the knowledge, and consequently requires a study of cognitive reactions to the content. This may exceed the expertise and scope of political scientists.

Lastly, cumulative effects model argue that media is able to influence people because it has consonant and repetitive themes and messages across its content. Thus, media content is pervasive and selective exposure remains quite hard to achieve. Media effects, for scholars that

adopt this perspective, are a result of cumulative exposure and not a result of a single event (Perse and Lambe 2017).

Furthermore, Perse and Lambe (2017) categorise agenda-setting studies as cumulative effects studies since “observations on news content tends to be fairly consonant across news channels” (44). They tend to involve similar stories, issues, events, and people, which renders selective exposure quite hard to attain in terms of news consumption. This is an important suggestion since entertainment television also involves consonant (political) content, selective exposure may also become harder to achieve due to repetitive and similar content.

Hence, the cumulative model appears to be the most credible model for conducting a systematic study of the effects of television programming. Exposure to television programming is by nature cumulative and we can argue that through cumulative exposure and restricted selective exposure people might adopt what is offered as salient or true in the media as salient or true in real life.

Another theory that resonates with cumulative effects model and has been used to explain messages of television is cultivation analysis. According to Morgan and Shanahan (2010) cultivation analysis provides a study of mass communication which looks at “the relationships between institutional processes, message systems, and the public assumptions, images, and policies that they cultivate” (338). According to this theory developed by Gerbner (1966), audiences tend to think that real-world mirrors the television world if they are repeatedly and heavily exposed to television messages. For example, the analyses of heavy consumers of crime dramas find that they tend to think that the world is dangerous, while frequent depictions of drug usage matches with the survey data that indicated heavy viewers tend to think most young people are substance users (Morgan and Shanahan 2010).

Following cumulative model and cultivation analysis, content analyses of network television indicate that heavy viewing is plausibly linked to shared views, myths, and discriminatory beliefs because of similar and repetitive images (Perse and Lambe 2017). Today, we can still talk about cultivation effects because newer technologies such as YouTube and Netflix enable not only more and diverse content but also more time spent watching television. In sum, this section argued why television requires attention and showed the models that can be applied to its research. Upcoming sections will detail the existing studies on entertainment television and on its convergences with news and politics.

### 1.3 The Study of Entertainment Television

Entertainment television works are generally classified as popular culture products, which are perceived as trivial and entertainment-oriented, rather than information-loaded. However, their relationship with political life has been discussed for quite some time now. The information-deficient label originates in Frankfurt School thinkers Adorno and Horkheimer who deemed popular culture detrimental to political life and democratic practices due to its “formulaic and repetitive content” (Street, Inthorn, and Scott 2013, 24). Moreover, when more people turn to entertainment, it has been argued that we can expect less political involvement and more apathy since popular culture has been seen detrimental for civic participation (Putnam 2000; Prior 2005).

In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) traces the inception of civic disengagement: “television and its electronic cousins are willing accomplices in the civic mystery we have been unravelling, and more likely than not, they are ringleaders” (Putnam 2000, 246). He identifies entertainment television as the culprit in the decrease of Americans’ civic participation. The perception that entertainment television hampers citizens’ prospect of getting informed and as a result harms

democratic culture, informs the distinction between entertainment and news genres. This distinction leads communication scholars interested in the political relevance of media to focus on “newsroom”, “public affairs content”, and non-fiction/hard news content in general, leaving outside purely dramatic fictional television (Street, Inthorn, and Scott 2013).

Mutz and Nir (2010) indicate that there is a clear distinction between processing of fictional and non-fictional content (197). In this view, the audience relies on information about the real world in forming perceptions and policy preferences because they store information gathered by fictional and non-fictional in a compartmentalized fashion. This means that the messages provided by the fictional works are discarded, as people deem such knowledge as distinct or simply irrelevant (Mutz and Nir 2010). Moreover, unlike the tendencies of news programming, there is also the idea that entertainment television is not partisan, serious, and deliberative (Jones 2005). Similarly, creators of works like political dramas are not held responsible for the potential impact they may leave on the audience since they do not make the claim of being factually accurate (Brock et al. 2002).

However, news and entertainment media intersect in many contexts. Today, there is an archipelago of media forms, which communicate ideas and/or facts through various forms and help individuals understand the realities of politics. Since this is the case, engagement with politics can take different forms and move away from participatory sense to a textual one. This means that one of the most common ways through which people engage with politics is through the media texts that represent political institutions and actors. Therefore, engagement can occur through entertainment television because it is one of the media forms that help people make sense of political life through the narratives, plots, and characters it constructs (Jones 2005).

Moreover, narratives of entertainment television are not only able to help people in meaning making but also in constructing conversations. People often turn to fictional narratives, characters, and plots when they talk about current events, which often include politics and policymaking matters (Delli Carpini and Willaims 2002). This resonates with claims that people do not simply watch television to escape from their own thoughts and from real-life but they also engage critically with the narrative they consume. In the end, the audience may incorporate the narrative if it sounds plausible and they may evaluate matters through this perspective (Lembo 2000). This may be manifested both in the political behaviour of citizens and in actions and statements of the political elite. The usage of popular culture could be often seen in the posters and signs used by protesters. A recent example is that of how a *Star Wars* character, Princess Leia was used in Women's Marches across the world (Independent 2017). In short, then, narrative and characters play a pivotal role in how citizens connect with political world and get to understand it.

For some, using narratives and characters of entertainment content while engaging with political matters is an indication of the idea that political participation begins in intimate relationships. This means that when people find no relationship between activities of politicians or newsmakers and their lives, and when they are critically engaged with television content, they turn to discursive practices in expressing their opinions and this include images and words that are public and available to them. Thus, people use these characters and imagery in their discourses because they tend to believe that everyday relationships and discourses must shape the political discussions. In short, individuals understand and wish to engage with politics through their own conversations, which is partially constructed by mass media including fictional television (Thelen 1996).



Furthermore, the developments in the entertainment television (i.e. turn to peak television) may have rendered television more influential in political meaning making and discussions, which makes it more worthy of study. Mutz and Nir (2010) argue that there is a myriad of television series whose plots and characters are borrowed from headlines, news stories, and fictionalized versions of actual events and institutions (201). They also classify the existing studies on the impacts of fictional works on political engagement and list three types of explanations that look at the 1. the “nature and amount of the content”, 2. the “kind of people who view fictional television content”, 3. the “processing behind dramatic fictional content” (200). The next section elaborates on these dimensions.

## 1.4 Mechanisms behind the Influence of Entertainment Television: A Survey of Existing Studies

### 1.4.1 *The Content*

The narrative through which political issues and actors represented may lead people to talk about and engage with those issues. In this section, I will survey the research that look at the narrative, which may alter political knowledge and attitudes. Street et al. (2013) give the example of how the political satire series *Yes, Minister!* provided an insight about how bureaucracy worked in Britain (29).

While political series can inform people about political processes, they are also able to instil various types of ideologies, and consequently play a role in political engagement. As Street et al. (2013) writes, popular culture has “the potential to reinforce, but also to challenge, the ways in which a collective identity might be understood in a particular society at a particular moment in time” (p.32). This potential in entertainment television can be traced through content like dramas,

which are able to invoke national sentiments and propose the right behaviour of a citizen (Emre Cetin 2014). Examples of such dramas can be found in Brazil, China, Egypt, India, and Japan (Porto 2011; Rofel 2002; Abu-Lughod 2005; Mankekar 1999; Yoshimi 2003), which are seen as a part of state's hegemony, it is argued that these dramas are able to create a framework for the audience on how to judge and assess social and political issues by their plots that reflect salient topic and issues in a given country (Emre Cetin 2014).

Influence of television portrayals have also been studied by using cultivation theory. For example, Moy and Pfau (2000) look at how entertainment television is able to influence perceptions of the federal government in the US. Next to the analysis of news sources, they examine “non-traditional news content” such as talk shows, sci-fi series, and crime dramas to see whether and how they are able to alter the confidence levels toward democratic institutions such as Congress or the Office of Presidency through the depictions of these institutions. Entertainment programming has shown to hold the potential to induce both negative perceptions of the federal government (as sci-fi series like *The X-Files* do with their cynical depiction) and positive perceptions (as crime dramas such as *NYPD Blue* did) (143). Their survey-based analysis finds that watching crime dramas, general dramas, and sitcoms enhanced the perceptions of the government, while action adventure shows indicated a negative impact on how the perceptions of government (147).

Next to the content itself, the attitude and behaviour-formation potential of entertainment programming has been discussed from the perspective of how the content is presented. Framing is an important element of the conveying a message in media and it is particularly successful in “issue-framing”, or in “issue-definition” concerning public policymaking (Baumgartner et al. 2010, 161). Through the tone of news coverage, we can trace whether the news is creating a

sentiment of enthusiasm or criticism among the public audience (162). Then, just like the news programming, works like dramas can “package the reality for an audience” and thereby providing them with meaning over certain issues (Holbert et al. 2005, 507).

Mulligan and Habel (2011) analysed how the frame of morality crafted by a film affects viewers’ opinions on the very salient issues such as rape and abortion. Using an experimental design which used excerpts from the film *Cider House Rules*, they found that the dominant frame in the film proved to be influential in changing attitudes on issues related to abortion in cases of incest. Moreover, they found that the influence in attitudes was observable as viewers had favourable attitudes toward the worldview that is proposed by the dominant frame.

Similarly, it has been shown that framing of political actors and issues in entertainment informs people and contributes to their political knowledge. For example, Holbert et al. (2005) conducted a frame analysis of the political drama *The West Wing*. In particular, their aim was to see framing of American Presidency. By tracing the frequency of the three roles ascribed to the fictional President in the series (i.e. chief executive, political candidate, private citizen) and character traits (principled vs. engaged) associated to these three roles, they argued that the fictional these three distinct roles exhibited by the President can enable the audience to establish a relationship with the American Presidency. They found that President was mostly seen in the executive and political candidate roles which were associated with the principled trait. The times when he was depicted as the private citizen, the associated trait was the engaging trait. The authors concluded the series reflected a complex image of American presidency, which is hard to receive from news.

Furthermore, framing and repeated themes on prime time entertainment have shown to be influential over pro-environmental behaviours and environmental concerns, and opinions women’s

rights. Through survey based studies, Holbert, Shah, and Kwak (2003a; 2003b; 2004) found that fictional narratives influenced the perceptions of the audience and were often incorporated by the viewers. This indicates that through their portrayals, such programming create unique relationships regarding actual groups or institutions. At the same time they play the role of mediators in “the relationships between various demographic, situational, and orientational variables and opinions about what basic rights should be afforded to women in society” (2003a, 57).

Moreover, entertainment television has shown to be influential not only through the framing of issues and people but also through evaluations of political actors. Holbert et al. (2003c) study *The West Wing* in order to see how it may be priming the audience in evaluating the current and former presidents. They argue that political dramas like *The West Wing* are exceptionally suitable for studying priming effect because it is not fairly easy to distinguish them from public affairs programming; especially for the younger generation of citizens (430). Van Zoonen (2005) notes that fictional staff and political storylines on *The West Wing* had been compared with actual persons and political issues of the time, which renders the series suitable for this kind of inquiry. Holbert et al. conduct an experiment about the series in order to see whether there is a priming effect and whether perceptions of both presidents (namely George W. Bush and Bill Clinton) improved after the participants were shown episodes from *The West Wing*. In the end, it is shown that through transmitting a positive image of American Presidency, the series led to more positive perceptions of people who held the office. (Holbert et al. 2013c).

To summarise, the narratives and the angle of the narrative provided by entertainment television have the potential to make people engage with politics, just like news programming. By elaborating on political issues and lives of political actors, as Jones notes, works like political dramas embody complex issues, concepts, and ideas (Jones 2005). They may render politics

accessible and their impact may be boosted due to cumulative exposure and emotional investment by the audience.

This obviously does not mean that dramas that have political themes make people more engaged with politics and thus rejuvenate democratic life. As the different but connected studies outlined above argue, this means that entertainment television such as (political) dramas and situation comedies are able to influence individual-level socio-political attitudes and behaviours due to their content that compels the audience to engage with salient issues, and thus becomes an element that contributes to political participation.

### *1.4.2 The Audience*

Next to the content, the audience itself plays a role in the level of influence of entertainment television. For some scholars, there is a difference between the audience of entertainment television and the audience of news programming, and this difference determines the level of influence. They are distinct groups because the former is more likely to give priority to enjoyment in viewing television whereas the latter tends to be largely partisan and knowledgeable about politics (Prior 2005). This means that the news audience is less likely to be influenced by the most messages conveyed through the narratives and depictions of the television. Baum (2002) also thinks the audience of entertainment content is more likely to be influenced by the content they are watching because they tend to be more “politically inattentive” (105). Similarly, as they prioritize entertainment part in their viewing, viewers of entertainment are less likely to select actively the message they are receiving.

Nevertheless, Mutz and Nir (2010) claim that entertainment television content such as political dramas are able to attract attention to issues like public policy discussions and social problems while also inducing an attitude in their audiences. In other words, the politically

inattentive viewers who might not engage with politically and socially potent matters encounter with such material on entertainment television. This resonates with the study of popular culture conducted by Street, Inhorn, and Scott (2013). They argue that there are underlying political messages in television dramas, popular music, and video games and they try to find how these messages are received by the audiences. Through their interviews with young citizens on their consumption of these materials, the authors found that despite the main motivation behind the consumption was the element of escapism and entertainment, the entertainment content was able to help them “to position themselves as members of regional and national communities”. (Street, Inhorn, and Scott 2013, 142).

Therefore, it is argued that audiences of entertainment and news programming are distinct groups and people who are interested in politics would mostly consume news programming and consequently are immune to representations on entertainment television. Although there may be different groups in terms of kind of preferred programming, the depictions of political matters may direct otherwise uninterested individuals’ attention to those matters.

### *1.4.3 The Processing*

Thirdly, entertainment television’s ability to influence mass opinion has been considered from the perspective of a distinct dimension of the narrative from news programming: the processing.

One of the mechanisms of processing is the absolute sleeper effect (ASE), a state induced by the narrative. ASE refers to the phenomenon that information obtained through fiction is persistent and tends to increase over time. This effect occurs because the audience experiences a state called transportation which is a mental journey that affects by the audience both cognitively and emotionally. Cognitive impact of transportation allows the audience to adopt the framing of

the narrative. Emotional impact, on the other hand, tends to lead the audience to develop a feeling of empathy and identification (Appel and Richter 2007).

Transportation can lead to reactions like the ASE because the audience forms representations that are “high on perceptual, spatial, temporal, and emotional information, akin to representations of perceived events” (Appel and Richter 2007, 117). Moreover, since they are consuming the fiction with the aim of entertaining, the audience tends not to engage in a reflective process which strengthens the representation. Appel and Richter hypothesized that false information conveyed through the fiction will be able to shift the beliefs of the participants and this shift would occur immediately and two weeks after consuming the content. In their experiment, they found that there was indeed a belief shift and the magnitude increased over time, which brought evidence in support of ASE (Appel and Richter 2007).

Similarly, by leaving an emotional impact, dramatic elements in the fictionalised portrayal of debatable policy matters are able to alter opinions of the participants. In an experiment, Mutz and Nir (2010) showed two different episodes of the crime drama *Law and Order*, which contain positive and negative portrayals of the justice system respectively. The authors found that a positive portrayal of the criminal system in a fictionalized setting led to more positive views about the system, whereas negative portrayals led to more negative views. They claim that features like narrative progression and character development create a special connection between the audience and the fiction. Moreover, for them, the positive versus negative storylines of *Law and Order* was able to influence the viewer because of the level of empathy the storylines induced. In their words, “the main effect of the storyline was evident only among those with high levels of empathy; viewers who empathized with the law enforcement character expressed more punitive attitudes post-viewing, compared to those who did not empathize” (Mutz and Nir 2010, 209).

In terms of emotional impact, we can look at Holbert et al.'s 2005 study once again in which they argue that on *The West Wing*, President Bartlet is portrayed as being both a private citizen and the highest-ranking official. According to the authors, this can lead to the priming effect by both “sentimentalizing a romantic ideal of the US Presidency” or by “restoring a sense of idealism to politics” (Holbert et al. 2005, 431). This means that priming effect is enabled by the feelings developed by the audience.

In line with cognitive and emotional impacts, narrative has shown to be powerful due to the effects of storytelling on human memory. Using psychological theories that indicate stories tend to remain longer and better in the minds of the audience, it has been argued that they are as powerful as rhetorical texts and materials (Appel and Richter 2007). This resonates with findings indicating fictionalised versions of politically relevant issues lead to long-term effects of how the audience perceives such issues. Moreover, there is also the claim that the success of entertainment-education programming can be used to show it can be able to alter the viewers' beliefs and attitudes (Appel and Richter 2007).

Overall, looking at the media effects research traditions, their application to entertainment television and three directions in existing research, we can argue that scope of media analyses in terms of cognitive, behavioural, or affective effects must be enhanced as to include entertainment television. For example, content like political dramas deserve a close reading, since they are also able to induce serious media effects via framing, inattentive viewership, sleeper effect, or narrative progression.



## 1.5 Mis(informing) Television

Entertainment television can also be equally powerful in misinforming the audience, as it is successful in informing them. Misinformation is a fairly popular subject among various scholars that study the relationship between contemporary mass media and politics. It is argued that misinformation have various sources, while at the same time it remains persistent to correction. The costs of having widespread misinforming sources are detrimental to societies due to quite obvious reasons, and thus, the ways of combating those remains a crucial task for scholars and policymakers alike. (Lewandowsky et al. 2012; Mulligan and Habel 2013)

One particular source of misinformation is rumours and fiction, which is a less obvious source that leaves lasting misconceptions. According to Lewandowsky et al. (2012), fiction is able to leave a remarkable impact by misinforming people because of the emotional arousal it induces. Thus, by provoking emotions of fear, disgust, wonder, or happiness, mainstream programs on entertainment television are able to “spread more readily from person to person and more widely through social media than neutral stories” (Lewandowsky et al. 2012, 108). Further, the authors note that misinformation through fiction is resistant to debunking because people are less alert and mindful when they are consuming fiction for their own enjoyment. This situation gets even more dangerous when fiction “pretends to accurately portray science” which accelerates the departure from reality (Lewandowsky et al. 2012, 109).

It has been also argued that fiction can have perverse consequences for political beliefs and attitudes. Consuming fiction may lead to incorporating blatantly false information among the viewers and such false information attained through fiction tends to be lasting. In order to see how narrative can influence the viewers’ beliefs, Mulligan and Habel (2013) conduct an experiment in which they show *Wag the Dog*, a film that involves a far-fetched conspiracy theory, namely US

government fabricating a war for political gains. They hypothesize that viewers who think that the film was more realistic and who scrutinise the message less are more likely to believe that a president will fabricate a war in the future and that a former president has already did something similar.

The authors conclude that although the first part of their hypothesis holds, the second does not. This means that although high levels of perceived realism affect being prone to conspiratorial thinking, less scrutiny has the reverse effect. In other words, this experiment indicates that those who are more motivated to scrutinize the message of the film are more likely to adopt conspiratorial beliefs. All in all, this study shows that the effects of entertainment media matter for politics, and this study is highly critical as that it indicates the perverse implications of fictional content for democratic governance (Mulligan and Habel 2013).

In sum, the empirical studies presented in this chapter indicate that entertainment television is able to inform, influence, and persuade the audience through different dimensions of the medium. Although this information process can be positive, it can also be negative as it may also misinform or persuade people toward biased or false information.

## Chapter 2 – The Turkish Context: The Media Environment and Entertainment Media

This chapter gives an overview of the Turkish media context and the role of the entertainment television in Turkey. Firstly, the waves of change in the media industry over the years and the television viewing practices in the country will be described. Then, the impact of Turkish dramas in neighbouring regions will be discussed.

### 2.1 Turkey and Telly

Television came into the lives of Turkish people in the late 60s with the enlargement of Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). With the waves of liberalisation in the media sector in the 1990s, many private channels joined TRT and a fierce competition among the channels emerged. This led to dramatic increase in the content of prime time programming that is still felt today. Yet today, TRT still exists as the public broadcaster of Turkey and it is largely funded by licence taxes, government funds, and advertisements. Currently there are fifteen public, twenty-four private, fifteen territorial, and two hundred and nine local channels on air in Turkey and 98% of the population has access to television broadcasting (Emre Cetin 2014).

There was another wave of change in media ownership and content after 2002. After Justice and Development Party (AKP henceforth)'s rise to power in 2002 a new bloc of media groups emerged which were mostly pro-government (Akser and Baybars-Hawks 2012). Due to the ruling party's neoliberal conservative political agenda, their hegemony challenged how the media content is regulated. For example, after 2002, freedom of the press started to be challenged by the

government and legal cases have started to increase dramatically due to the fact that certain channels did not follow the government discourses. (Emre Cetin 2014, 2015; Yesil 2016). This meant that political sphere started to exude over media production, and thereby penetrated the content whether intentionally or not. This reverberated to entertainment television as well since content like dramas started to involve different plot lines and themes in the post-2002 era, while some plots and themes have vanished (Emre Cetin 2014).

The media landscape has always been changing in Turkey, yet the special place of entertainment television remained constant. A recent report on Turkish television content reveals that the largest 6 channels in Turkey reserve 60% of their prime-time slots to television series and their reruns and a single episode is 150 minutes on average, which largely exceeds the average length of an episode on Western media. (Deloitte 2014). Entertainment television enjoys high attendance, with a share which rose up to \$6.6 Million in the mid-2000s (Emre Cetin 2014).

Turkish citizens have a considerable amount of daily TV consumption, with 5.5 hours per day as reported by Radio and Television Supreme Council while 75% of the responders said that they mainly watch news programming and domestic series (RTUK Report 2013). Similarly a report by OECD on Social Indicators state that Turkish people spend 40% of their free time “watching television and listening to the radio”, whereas 34% is left to “visiting and entertaining friends and family” (OECD, 2009). Thus, dramas and similar entertainment programming have a special place in the socialization of Turkish citizens. They are the “*sine qua non*” of Turkish television (Emre Cetin 2014, 2464).

## 2.2 Turkish Television Goes Abroad

As the market share of fictional programming rose domestically, the series also started to attract international attention. Since the beginning of the 2000s, Turkish television content is being exported to the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Balkans, Greece, Central Asia, and Latin America. Over 35.000 hours of Turkish television programmes were sold to 76 countries and generated an income of \$60 Million (Yoruk and Vatikiotis 2013, 2362). The popularity of these series can be traced through the ratings (for instance, the last episode of *Silver* attracted 84 million viewers in the Arab world), the rising number of tourists from these regions, and the market over the merchandise of these series (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013).

There are several explanations for the success of Turkish television series abroad. For example, Yoruk and Vatikiotis (2013) claim that this success owed to cultural proximities between Middle Eastern or Greek and Turkish societies. This means that historical ties, common traditions, and shared cross-cultural identifications enabled the high ratings in these regions. The high ratings owed to a nostalgic feeling toward lost traditions and connections for Greeks and to representation of an achievable Westernization for Middle Easterners (Yoruk and Vatikiotis 2013).

On the other hand, Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) argue that social dramas like *Silver* or political dramas *Valley of the Wolves* became popular in the MENA region because two factors: first, alternative/non-Western modernity image that it provides, and second, the image of counter-hegemony it presents with giving the non-Westerners in the role of the hero. To a certain extent, they agree with Yoruk and Vatikiotis' cultural proximities argument, albeit citing that Middle Easterners bear both anxiety and desire toward hybridity of Turkish culture.

Yet, for some, this success cannot be explained solely with cultural proximities and it is tied to the Turkey's political decisions in the recent years. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi propose a new concept

that can explain popularity of Turkish television, namely the “Neo-Ottoman Cool”. This phenomenon refers to Turkey’s realignment as a pivotal actor in the MENA region, which is enabled through refined attitude and rhetoric of the conservative AKP government toward the Middle East while maintaining a critical stance toward Western nations. Neo-Ottoman Cool is fuelled by Turkey’s rising political, economic, and social capital. Further, both series analysed by the authors depict a twofold model of masculinity, one being domestic and passive and the other fearless and proactive. These images point to a cultivation of icons of a Turkish (and by proxy Middle Eastern) modern masculinity (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013). In the words of Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi,

If the trope of neo-Ottomanism was invoked by Arab pundits concerned about the return of Turkish influence (hence the “Ottoman”), but in a different, that is diplomatic, cultural and economic, guise then coverage of Muhannad and Alemdar [the protagonists of the respective shows] establishes them as cool neo-Ottomans, more alluring and muscled versions of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. (2013, 27)

These suggest that AKP government secured following and trust among the Middle Eastern countries by relying on tools such as “media, popular culture, diplomacy, and skilful oratory”, created “the aura of Neo-Ottoman Cool” and led Turkey being discursively produced in the Arab public sphere (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi 2013, 18). Yoruk and Vatikiotis claim that Turkey’s soft power via television dramas do not lead to hegemonic ends in other regions since broadcasting of telenovelas in Turkey for many years did not lead to cultural invasion of Brazil in Turkey. I argue that entertainment content is able to function as an ideological and political apparatus. Even if it does not endow Turkey an actual political hegemonic status; it certainly enhanced Turkey’s allure and strengthened its central place in the eyes of Middle Eastern societies.

Overall, this chapter evidenced the importance of Turkish television in both domestic and international context. By looking at the data on television viewing practices and the market share of fictional programming, we can see that television has a pivotal place in the lives of average Turkish citizens and entertainment content is heavily consumed in the country (RTUK 2013; Deloitte 2014; Emre Cetin 2014). Outside Turkey, fictional programs reach people from various countries and contribute to the phenomenon of cultural penetration. This creates a strong potential in altering perceptions about Turkey while also enhancing its influence in such regions. Considering both the impact that cultivation theory suggests and the cultural and political implications of transnational media flows, studying series that involve politically salient issues appear to be a very relevant research in a place like Turkey.

## Chapter 3 – Research Design

In this chapter, I will present the research design and detail the case selection. Firstly, I describe series that are selected as cases and justify why they are appropriate for this study. Second, I present the method used to analyse the political themes in the Turkish television series and audience comments on internet, and explain how the analysis is conducted.

### 3.1 *Resurrection Ertugrul* and *The Nameless*: Turkish Prime Time Television as Case Study

In late 2014, a new prime-time TV series appeared on Turkish state-owned channel TRT with the tagline “A Nation’s Awakening”. It is the first series that this thesis will analyse, *Resurrection Ertugrul* (RE henceforth) is mainly about the struggles of the 13<sup>th</sup>-century Turkish tribe of Anatolia with the Seljuks in Konya, Arab tribes based in Aleppo, and the Knights Templar. It has been broadcasted since 2014, is available on Netflix since 2017 worldwide and has been exported to over 60 countries (Daily Sabah 2017). The news reports indicate that RE has been the most-watched series of the year 2017 with an audience share that rarely goes below 30% (Variety 2016).

Named after the leader of Kayi Tribe, the series sets out to describe the story of the tribe that is considered as the foundations of the Ottoman Empire, has consistently high rating results since its inception, and has been called “Turkish Game of Thrones” by the reviewers due to its medieval themes and characters (The Jakarta Post 2018). It opens with its series theme, which is heard in various sequences, that is played with the Turkic instrument *dombra*. It is noted that the



theme score bears resemblance to a 2014 election campaign song of AKP – which is also played with the dombra (Haliloglu 2015). In the series, Ertugrul Gazi, the main protagonist, becomes the leader of the tribe and faces a myriad of challenges while protecting the tribe from external and internal enemies. The series gives extended representation to Ertugrul's struggles and fights with these enemies and their schemes. In the official webpage of the series, the plot is given as “*The story of Ertugrul who is fulfilling his mission to end the antagonisms between other Turkish tribes and to advance the living conditions of Turks by establishing a large, settled state.*” (TRT.net.tr). Thus, his calling is to bring all Turks of Anatolia under one roof, free from threats and instability.

Secondly, *The Nameless* (TN henceforth) had been broadcasted on the private channel Kanal D between 2016 and 2018. The channel was listed as the most watched channel of the year in 2013 (RTUK 2014). It portrays the life of a young diplomat, Fatih, who volunteers for the governor position in a small town that is bordering Syria instead of moving to Switzerland after witnessing the murder of the governor of the town by the Kurdish separatist organisation. The series depicts the governor's new life in the fictional town Virankaya and gives a detailed account of how this terrorist organisation is aided by different actors while the governor's team and army officials make sure to stabilise the region and secure the life of the civilians.

I argue that the characters and the plots of both series are reflecting the current events in Turkish politics via repeated themes and imagery, both in domestic and international sense, such as the coup attempt of 2016 or the ongoing clashes on the Syrian border. RE follows the Neo-Ottomanism trend that has sprung in the beginning of the decade, which is considered as the ideology of the ruling party that represents itself in foreign and domestic policy, the arts, and scientific research. This representation includes promotion of Ottoman culture and traditions while

also striving to achieve the level of influence the Empire once held (Ertugrul and Yılmaz 2017)<sup>2</sup>. The Ottoman nostalgia has been on the focus of the ruling party AKP since the beginning of the decade due to party's Turkish-Islamic hybrid identity. For the ruling elite, the history education in Turkey underestimated the achievements of the Empire while overemphasising the secularist Republican achievements until their tenure. Thus, the endorsement of Ottoman Empire and its cultural legacy became a must for the AKP because for them the contemporary society has been degenerated "due to excessive Westernization" (Palabiyik 2017). By depicting the inception of the Empire, one could argue, the series is compelling attention to the cultural legacy while creating a sense of nostalgia and pride among the watchers. Such potential can be traced through the taglines of the series, as one of them states "*Did you think the sagas of our ancestors were mere stories? They are not to put babies to sleep but to wake men up.*" (Trt.net.tr).

Second series, TN, directly incorporates its subject matter from ongoing conflicts in the Southeastern region between the terrorist organisation that aims Kurdish independence, namely PKK<sup>3</sup>, and the Republic of Turkey. Through a fictionalised setting, it depicts how different actors interact in the conflict for the control of the region, including the foreign actors and Gulenist/Parallel State Organisation members<sup>4</sup>. Thus, the series offers an account of what may be going on in the negotiations and strategic planning amid the clashes. In a sense, TN reveals what

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<sup>2</sup> The trend is also visible on the emphasis on Ottoman heritage in the discourse of the political elite. Securing the region, for example, is referred as a mission that is given by the Ottoman heritage to Turkey. This, for scholars, indicates a shift in domestic and foreign policy from Europeanisation agenda to a new one based on Islam and the nation. (Ertugrul and Yılmaz 2017)

<sup>3</sup> The Kurdistan Worker's Party, the separatist organisation active in Southeastern Turkey that is recognised as a terrorist organisation by several organisations and states, including NATO, EU, US, and UK (BBC 2016a).

<sup>4</sup> A religious movement led by US-based cleric Fethullah Gulen, and a former ally of the governing party. The movement became powerful in education and media sectors, its members penetrated government bodies and media beginning in the 90s, and their influence increased until 2013. Its members within the army plotted a coup attempt on 15 July 2016, which led to national security issues in the country and its classification as a terrorist organisation called FETO/Parallel State Organisation (PSO) (Ozpek and Yasar 2017).

is not covered in the news for the audience, giving a glimpse into the lives of government and army officials on the Turkish-Syrian border, a place that is mentioned on the news in Turkey on a daily basis.

The depiction of history, government, citizenship, and the clash between pivotal actors in RE and TN coincides with Street et al. (2013)'s idea of seeing popular culture a "source of information and knowledge" next to an entertainment outlet. With their plots, characters, and ideological themes in these series, we could argue, these series cease to be an outlet that is oriented toward mere entertainment. It creates a "common sense" that describes political actors and processes that the audience hears from the news every day. Thus, entertainment programming is rendered an outlet in which politics is represented (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013).

Furthermore, although products of popular culture can be studied through how they are processed by the audience, studying "what they tell us does not exhaust their political importance" (Street, Inthorn, and Scott 2013, 19). Similarly, if we adopt cumulative effects model proposed by Perse and Lambe and cultivation theory, we must turn to content analysis in order to see the specifics of the messages of a medium, and thus, we can explain the media effects. Thus, exploration of the repeated politically loaded patterns and themes in fictional television programming seems warranted if we wish to see their potential impacts on the audience.

### 3.2 The Methodology

In order to identify the politically significant themes, then, I focus on the content of the two series and will conduct a thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a branch of the qualitative analytic method, which has a flexible nature that allows analysing complex data in a detailed and rich

fashion (Braun and Clarke 2006). The main task of this analysis was discovering repeated patterns and themes, selecting the ones that are of interest and reporting them in a systematic manner. As Braun and Clarke (2006) notes, thematic analysis is useful in “unpacking” and “unravelling” the surface of reality; “acknowledging the ways in which individuals make meaning of their experience”, and in turn, “the ways the broader social context impinges on those meanings, while retaining focus on the material and other limits of reality” (82).

Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) model, I coded the episodes in an inductive manner, which means that codes of the series were created after viewing the episodes. A data-driven approach is useful because it allows us to identify the ways in which entertainment television has the potential for various types of political engagement, and consequently to “read” television content, just as it can be done with news content. (Street, Inthorn and Scott 2013).

For this analysis, I have randomly selected 10 episodes from each series and each episode for both series runs around 120 minutes. For *Resurrection Ertugrul*, I have selected 10 episodes from the first season of the series, which was available on Netflix. For *The Nameless*, I selected 10 episodes from its first season, which was available on Kanal D’s webpage.

To supplement the analysis, I looked at professional reviews written in newspapers and blogs, and statements of the political elite about the series. Further, I inspected audience comments on “*Eksi Sozluk*”: a Turkish collaborative hypertext *Reddit*-like discussion site and the 16<sup>th</sup> most visited webpage in Turkey<sup>5</sup>. Akca (2010) writes that the webpage fosters a “democratic rational-critical discourse” by enabling its users to engage in political discussions without employing

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<sup>5</sup> According to Website Traffic Statistics Source Alexa as of 25 May 2018  
<https://www.alexa.com/topsites/countries/TR>

censorship. Thus, due to its status as a pioneer discussion site where users discuss freely over any topic, it would be suitable to explore the reflections of the themes of the series on the citizens.

## Chapter 4 – The Analysis

This chapter presents four themes that were frequently present in both series. In the first section, I present the themes and discuss how they converge with issues of contemporary politics. In the second section, I present the analysis of the audience comments of the respective series and show how the politically relevant messages are discussed by the audiences.

### 4.1 The Themes

#### 4.1.1 *Ethno-Religious Identity*

The most repeated and politically relevant theme in both shows is the “Turkishness” that is built upon ethnicity and religion, namely the Turkish and Muslim identities. This theme is more direct in TN as it is a fictionalised account of contemporary Turkey. The series begins with the viewer discretion warning which reads “In this series, we portray the real events occurred during the struggle for the motherland” and the first episode is dedicated to the memory of martyred Governor Muhammed Fatih Safitürk who lost his life in an explosion in his office in Mardin, Turkey (BBC 2016b). The first episode begins with a car explosion, which kills the governor of Virankaya and leads the diplomat Fatih to go there instead of Switzerland. The explosion that killed Governor Safitürk and the explosion in the first episode clear resemblances, and the protagonist of the series carries the same name as the late governor.

Furthermore, each episode involves cross cuttings and mise-en-scene that emphasises religion and belonging to the nation. These shots often involve dramatic voiceovers with grief-stricken music and monologues by the protagonist, which is accompanied with images of the

Turkish flag, soldier funerals, and civilians who are being kept safe. The voiceover is generally taken from a dialogue heard before a mission between the soldiers and the governor: “...*we are in love with our motherland, the azan, and the flag...*”, “...*if you believe, Allah will shoot the target...*”, “...*god willing, we’ll have the privilege of being a martyr...*“...*we do not call the martyrs dead, we say they met the prophet...*”, “...*be proud, parents, they will be avenged...*”.

The series offers a fictionalised account of the ongoing struggle between the Turkish army and a Kurdish separatist organisation, PKK, albeit without explicitly referring to any names or situations. It is possible to gather that the series address the debates and issues surrounding the clashes by employing a heavy dramatic tone and imagery. The funerals, armed conflicts, scenes including children, the Turkish flag, and the voiceovers are expanding what is usually shown on the evening news on Turkish channels. The strongest message that is being conveyed through such imagery is the importance of sticking together at times of crisis and distress. As such, in one of the episodes, Governor Fatih encourages citizens who are tired of the clashes in their towns by saying “*We can be Turkey only if we align with one another*”. This implies that although the citizens bear their differences in terms of ethnicity, language, or political alignment, they must seek the remedy in the state.

On the other hand, RE deals with matters of nation and religion by referring to the historical legacies. Since the show depicts the story of the Turkic tribe of the 13<sup>th</sup> century that became the Ottoman Empire, clearly the show involves heavy references to origins of Turkish identity. This is visible in the language, clothing, and lifestyle of the characters. The leader of the tribe in the first season, Suleyman Shah, constantly shares his wisdom with his fellow tribesmen and sons. There are didactic dialogues over customs and values of the Turks, which has been protected all the way from Central Asia, such as loyalty, respect for the elderly, and fairness. The symbol of the

tribe (I Y I) is ubiquitous and now a popular symbol that can be found on car bumpers, T-Shirts, accessories, and social media profiles. Its impact can also be seen in the political sphere as a new political party established in October 2017 adopted the name *İyi Parti* (Tur. Good Party) by employing a name play (“İyi” meaning both “good” and referring to the symbol of the tribe) (BBC 2017).

The references are not limited to ethnic ones as references to Islam are also quite common. The very first episode begins with the lines “*Allah is one, Allah is the one and only*” as the blacksmith of the tribe crafts a new sword for Ertugrul. In each episode, the council opens with a short prayer and many characters are frequently seen praying and reciting the Quran, which is a quite novel phenomenon on Turkish television. There is also a well-known Muslim figure in the series, Ibn Arabi, a scholar of Islam and a poet. A wise man who is accepted as a saint by some, Ibn Arabi becomes an advisor to Ertugrul and guides him when he is befuddled and forlorn. In one combat between Knights Templar and Ertugrul and his swordsmen, we watch a sequence that goes back and forth between the combat and Ibn Arabi, reciting *zikr*: silent and repetitive prayers and sentences glorifying God.

All of these indicate that there is a heavy emphasis on religion and the religiosity of the tribe. The assumption behind this emphasis is the wish for drawing attention to differences among Christians and Turks. Yet, it is also possible that the series is establishing setting new standards for Turkish television by involving a religious character as representations of “Westernised” or more secular ways of living on television is criticised by the conservative circles and parties (BBC 2012). Thus, the series is offering a new vision for representing Turkish culture and society.

The emphasis on Turkish and Muslim identities and heritage, one can argue, is a representation of politics on the entertainment television. The characters and situations that are



portrayed in the series can easily enable the audience to identify themselves with them, by invoking a sense of “us and them”. The imagery and voiceovers that represent the nation and the sacrifice in TN and Neo-Ottoman atmosphere and undisguised religiosity of RE bear strong parallelisms to the rhetoric of the ruling party elite. For example, Muslim Turkish identity is always emphasised and the struggle with the PKK is constantly on the agenda of all parties while the martyrs and their sacrifice is always glorified.

The intersection between Neo-Ottoman agenda of the ruling party and the new television series can also be traced in the statements of the ruling elite. President Erdogan who visited the set of RE himself, for example, during the 2017 National Culture Council, lamented the “television culture” and “cultural shallowing” of the current era, which is corrupting the youth and building a cultural imperialism. Instead, he expressed his support for “new ways of transmitting [Turkish] culture to new generations” and gave *Resurrection Ertugrul* as a positive example and mentioned how it has been watched by his grandchildren (Hurriyet 2017). In another interview, he praised the work of TRT, said that series like RE are a success of Turkish television, and are an “answer to those who say that it cannot be done”. For him, they are giving “a new spirit to the youth” by describing their culture and heritage to them and consequently “boosting their self-esteem”. Moreover, he mentioned that they are exposing the “games, scheming and deceit” in the history (Yeni Akit 2017). Similarly, Deputy Prime Minister Bozdag who also visited the set of RE expressed his enthusiasm, mentioned that he does not accept meetings on Wednesday nights to catch up with the series. He noted the importance of the series as it “rebuilds the geography of the time” and transmits it to the audience (Anatolian Agency 2018). Minister of Youth and Sports Bak also said that with RE, new orientations within society are arising, as there is an increasing interest

in sports like archery and horse riding. These are, for him, an indication of the emergence of a new culture that is excited about “customs” and “history” (Hurriyet 2018).

Furthermore, the emphasis on the martyrs coincides with the emphasis in the elite rhetoric, which started intensify after the coup attempt in 2016. After the coup attempt, the remembrances of the coup and the resistance to it were seen and felt everywhere. For instance, next to the speeches, posters depicting the nation and the people who were killed during the attempt were ubiquitous throughout cities and towns. As President Erdogan said while commemorating the attempt in June 2017: “My precious nation that once again stood up for its independence and future, I greet you with heartfelt feelings, and with longing” (Guardian 2017a).

By looking at the representations of the agenda of the ruling party, we can see that there is a convergence between the discourses in the everyday political life and the plots of the series. In a sense, they are establishing a link between the political and cultural spheres by putting forward an identification element by using themes that the audience hears from the news. The series are, however, expanding on what is being talked about by, in Jones’ (2005) terms, “entertainmentalising” politics. As popular culture products, then, entertainment television here is able to make the audiences feel in a certain way through their content (Street, Inthorn, and Scott, 2017).

#### *4.1.2 The State and Leaders*

In the two series, a theme connected to the first one and that is highly relevant to the political discussions, actors, and practices is the emphasis on leadership and the relationship between the state and such figures. In RE, unsurprisingly, the plot revolves around the protagonist

that gives the name of the series, Ertugrul. As explained earlier, albeit in a fictionalized fashion, the series sets out to illuminate how a small tribe in Asia Minor in the 13<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be a mighty empire that ruled over three continents. There are constant reminders and depictions of how Turks have always had nations that are ruled by men with exceptional strength, courage, and intellect. Each episode starts with a viewer discretion warning, which says, “The stories and characters depicted here were inspired by our history”. This indicates the fictional dimension yet commitment to the depiction of actual history.

In RE, Ertugrul is depicted as a strong, smart and merciful man - a fighter who is fair and altruistic. In his vision (also his father’s before him), Turks must stop fighting with one another and strive to gather under one nation so that no enemy can crush their spirit and reign over them. On occasion, he also talks about the state of Turks he has in mind, which will be founded upon mightiness, intelligence, and justice. The emphasis on Ertugrul’s Pan-Turkism goals are ubiquitous, they can be found in his dialogues with his advisory council, with fellow Tribes persons or even with his mother. I will not rest, Ertugrul says, until all Turks live under the same roof, safe and sound.

Sinanoglu argues that Neo-Ottoman TV series are building a cult of personality around political leaders, these series indicate the necessary “commitment to the leader” while also “legitimising exclusionary policymaking” (Sinanoglu 2017). Although the legitimising dimension necessitates further elements, we could argue that such depiction bear resemblance to a current of rhetoric and attitude in Turkish political culture that deems the ruling party and the president a populist appeal. He is commonly referred to as “the chief” (Tur. *Reis*) and seen as a figure of the protector of the repressed, such as the Political Islamists. In a similar fashion, in a review article

of the series, William Armstrong also points out to the salience the way in which the leader is depicted in the series and how a 12<sup>th</sup>-century leader relates to Turkey in 2018 (Armstrong 2017):

“A cult of personality has developed in which Mr. Erdogan is seen as the sole embodiment of the ‘national will’. He tells the faithful at public rallies that Turkey is fulfilling a sacred destiny under his presidency, returning to its historical role as a regional leader and global power” (Armstrong 2017).

Consequently, following this description, it seems like there can be a parallelism between Ertugrul’s “holy duty” and the “sacred destiny” of President Erdogan and the ruling party.

In TN, the leaders are embodied in the characters of the governor and his aides, and the army officials that collaborate with them. They are depicted on a mission that is aimed toward “protecting the motherland”. Their sacrifices are also underlined as many of them are shown leaving their families for the missions in remote towns on the border, yet they do not take offence at this, as this is required to halt the killings of more soldiers. A similar theme was also present in *Valley of the Wolves* (2003), albeit it is about the paramilitary heroes undertaking unofficial operations. Emre Cetin (2015) argues that the depictions of the service for the nation in *Valley of the Wolves* imply the discourses surrounding nationalism, *étatisme*, and paramilitarism (88). Although the leading figures in TN are official employees of the state rather than paramilitaries, the idea that state must serve the nation and the nation requires an “authoritarian *étatisme*” that can be exerted by those who prioritise the nation’s interests is shared in TN as well (Emre Cetin 2015).

In short, then, TN, by detailing the lives and sacrifices of the people who are on duty on the borders of Turkey, is addressing the current nationalist figures and discourses. From here, we can argue that TN is reaffirming the activities of the government bureaucrats and soldiers in the region while signalling the requirement of adherence of Turkish and Muslim identities through the

references to nation and religion. Thus, in a way, Turkish nationalism and leader figures who must protect the motherland are represented in these respective series.

#### *4.1.3 Foreign Agents Conspiring*

The third theme that is illustrated in both series can be named as foreign agents that conspire against Turks. This refers to the former and current ideas over surreptitious actors and relationships that attempt to influence or shape political agenda in Turkey. These ideas find representation in television in various ways including entertainment programming. In TN, when the new governor accepts his job, we see him discussing with a high-ranking official about the actors who wish to “demolish nation states”. The minister tells him that their ultimate goal is to control energy sources and this can only be secured by weakening the states in the region. Further, we see a foreign NGO that is operating in the small town of Virankaya, which is assisting healthcare facilities, and run by a German doctor called Otto. As the series progress, we find out that Otto is working with PSO members infiltrated state bodies and the PKK. His intentions are clear to the audience as he openly declares “For Turkey to come crashing down, we need Virankaya to crash down”. In order to control the oil pipes and other energy sources in Southern Turkey, Otto and his colleagues are operating in this region and we learn that this is not their first operation. Once during his preparations for a suicide bombing to be blamed on Turkish authorities, Otto says that he was there when “the borders were being redrawn in Yugoslavia” and “during civil wars in Africa”. Yet for him, the Middle East is unique in terms of people being passionate and committed to their nations. Through the emphasis on NGOs, we see that for TN, foreign actors play a significant role in the perpetuation of the conflict.

In RE, the wars between Turks and Christian crusaders, the Knights Templar, are described in detail. The series portrays Christians, whether they are from somewhere in Anatolia or from Constantinople, are always conspiring against the progression of the Turks behind closed doors. They want to divide the alliance between Turkic/Muslim tribes in order to break their spirits and consequently become the sole rulers in Anatolia. It is possible to see various Christian leaders coming together to find a solution to the Turks who get stronger each day. The strategies of Knights Templar to stop the Turks vary quite a lot since they resort to sending spies who try to contaminate the food supplies to induce plague or infect people with leprosy. The message that series try to convey in the face of foreign invaders and conspirers is that there must necessarily be unity among the members of the tribe and among the Muslim tribes in general. Only then, it will be possible to have a grand Turkish and Muslim state that is able to resist the hegemony of neighbouring leaders.

We could argue that such storylines allude to current government rhetoric toward Western countries in Turkey. In the mid-2010s, while introducing the Neo-Ottomanist agenda, the political elite of the government adopted a more critical attitude toward the West. Such shift led the government to openly accusing Western powers like European Union or the United States for meddling with Turkey's internal affairs when there were criticisms for the failure of upholding liberal democratic principles (Ertugrul and Yilmaz 2017). Furthermore, the mega infrastructure projects that reshaped the landscape of Turkish towns and cities are usually used in the arguments relating to "jealous foreign powers" that tries to halt Turkey's growth (Armstrong 2017).

At times, there are reminders in the speeches of President and other high-ranking officials about how Muslims and Christians are apart and in constant conflict. This may be a reflection of the religious nationalist character of the ruling party, which is used at times to mobilize certain groups within the Muslim majority. For example, before the recent referendum that proposed to

switch to a Presidential system, President Erdogan claimed that there has been an everlasting “struggle between the crescent and the cross”; while referring to the current discord with the EU and other similar groups (Guardian 2017b). Armstrong (2017) also makes a similar claim as he argues that the series reflect the “deep-seated ambition for prestige and national assertion against enemies” (Armstrong 2017). Moreover, in these shows, the narrative indicates that peoples of Turkey have eternal enemies who try to divide them in order to rule over them, on their own land. Due to the depiction of foreign figures, Sinanoglu (2017) argues in his article about Neo-Ottoman themes on TV that series like RE are clearly one of the mechanisms that grant legitimacy to today’s political regime since it is able to fuel “conspiracy-theory-fuelled political culture” (Sinanoglu 2017, web).

The fuelling of conspiratorial ideas by Turkish television, however, is not a completely novel phenomenon. *Valley of the Wolves* (2003) also presents references to similar ideas that exist in RE and TN. The series depicts a Turkish paramilitary hero, Polat, which undertakes covert operations with his protégés to protect Turkey and Turkey’s interests against domestic and foreign threats. Emre Cetin (2015) in her analysis of the series writes that the show frequently depicts the actions of “external powers” which turn into contemporary hindrances that lie in front of Turkey (116). Thus, Polat is shown fighting to halt the projects of agents, allied businesspersons, and secret governing elites that try to meddle with Turkey’s social and political order.

Furthermore, conspiratorial themes bear significant consequences because, as Emre Cetin (2015) explains in her interview-based study of *Valley of the Wolves*, people who identify themselves as nationalists share such discursive position of the series and view it positively as it is deemed to give ordinary people information about “state affairs and politics” that is not provided by the news media (117). For her, the appreciation lies behind the socio-historical anxieties that

go back to the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the World War I, which rendered Turkey a target in the eyes of the foreigners due to its geopolitical location (Emre Cetin 2015). Thus, the depiction of the Knight Templars in RE and the agent provocateurs in TN are important elements in the contemporary Turkish popular culture as they have the potential to be perceived as plots that are hidden from the society.

#### *4.1.4 Internal Enemies*

A connected but complementary theme to foreign threats is one of the internal enemies. Just as we see the depictions of foreign actors that try to shape the trajectory in Turkey, various domestic actors are plotting to harm the state due to their own beliefs or covetous intentions. In TN, the narrative of domestic threat embodied by two different groups. The former is the members of the PKK and thus clash with the state. In the series, ordinary rural Kurdish people presented to be appreciative of the state as state secures their infrastructure and security. In the first episode, when the new governor goes to meet the locals, one elderly shopkeeper says they are doing much better than the Kurds in Syria as they “do not even have a state”. Furthermore, there are constant reminders that Turks and Kurds fought together in Gallipoli in the World War I and the strife is damaging both societies. In one of the voiceovers, the governor says “we do not have the luxury to alienate the youth” and so they must eradicate the incentives to join the organisation. Thus, the ones that join the organisation, as it is shown in the series, are the “lost” and “tricked” ones.

The second internal threat in TN is the government workers who are affiliated with Gulenist Organisation/PSO. Without naming any actual groups or individuals, these people are depicted as people who conduct covert operations within government branches. For example, the governor and his team find out that the people who infiltrated the government have been using a



special application and entering the system with the serial number of a 1 dollar bill assigned them. In reality, it is revealed after the coup attempt that Gulenists within government and army had been messaging through a unique application on their phones which could be accessed via serial code of a 1 dollar bill. Moreover, at a certain point, when Otto questions their motives, the high commissioner replies that they have been training their men since they were ten years old and ready for every sacrifice. In reality, it is known that the organisation's recruiting starts at a very young age, usually at religion-oriented schools. Thus, clear references to the news and facts regarding the Gulenists make it possible to understand the representation without clearly naming any group or anyone.

In the first half of the first season, it is shown that the commissioner and the sergeant are agents. These people are working with Otto while also getting support from organisation's own sources abroad. They are shown planning to harm the Turkish state and its officials by showing that they are failing to secure the region. One important plot line was the planned suicide attack during Nowruz celebration, which was averted by the governor and his team. When they interrogate the sergeant who was supposed to conduct the suicide attack, governor's aide Bülent says him "You have fanned the flame that is burning on this land, you have sided with *Nimrod*, you have chosen torment, and now you will suffer the consequences".

On the other hand, on RE, despite their strengths, Ertugrul and his brother Gundogdu are also depicted as men who can be wrong at times. This reflects the idea that Ertugrul and his brother are humans after all and they make mistakes as everyone does, which is along the same lines as the Islamic dictum of "even the best steed sometimes stumbles". In one episode, we watch Gundogdu being effervesced and deceived by his father's power greedy stepbrother Kurdoglu, which leads him to rebel against his father and brother. In the end, his decisions leave Kayi Tribe

in jeopardy by revealing the next migration path of the tribe. Kurdoglu's scheming get to a level where he moves the headquarters of the tribe to his own tend when his brother is away, indicating the internal strife that can plague a community.

In the face of such deceit and strife, the message is that one should trust the leader in times of instability as making mistake like a trusting a deceitful person is an honest mistake and remedy will be coming from the leader. In the very first episode, Ertugrul's father, Osman, says to his wife that he must be wary all the time as "Jackals always wait for a weakness" meaning that there is competition, schemes, and backstabbing among the tribesmen which will try to break their unity and chance to form a stable leadership. Lies, greed, and rumours lead to unholy alliances, which always threaten Ertugrul and others.

The theme of being deceived by internal enemies and greedy people alludes to a large controversy in Turkey, namely the Gulenist/Parallel State Organisation (PSO). This organisation, albeit a religious movement, is the perpetrator of the coup attempt that occurred in 2016. The organisation is known to have infiltrated the government bodies and bureaucracy and this was tolerated due to the shared conservative outlook of the ruling party and the organisation. Yet, the groups became adversaries in late 2013 when the members within the judiciary opened an investigation on four ministers under AKP government. This was deemed as an "attempt to subvert the government" by those who "established a parallel state" (Ozpek and Yasar 2017). The strife between government and the organisation accelerated over the years, which eventually lead to the coup attempt initiated by Gulenists within the army (Ozpek and Yasar 2017). After the coup attempt, the elite of the ruling party claimed that they were deceived and their bona fide was abused (Hurriyet Daily News 2015). In order to cleanse the government bodies from internal adversaries, the government promulgated a state of emergency, which is still in force as of May 2018.

Hence, the themes of jackals and deceivers who are always around, referring to the idea that there are various groups within Turkey that tries to harm its branches due to various ends they have in mind. Furthermore, the message of trusting the leader when there are rumours and schemes seems to be mirroring the betrayal of one of the government's former allies.

## 4.2 The Reception

In this section, I investigate how these series resonated with the audience through the data that is extracted from the entries about the respective series in the discussion site *Eksi Sozluk*.

### 4.2.1 *Resurrection Ertugrul: Audience Comments*

Reactions to RE, unsurprisingly, create two distinct groups: the appreciative and the critical viewers. The former group praises the show due to the novelty it established on Turkish television: the depiction of Turkish and Islamic heritage and customs. It is also seen as a sign for “conservative circles taking the reins of media industry” for some due to the themes. As one user notes the series “made them happy” due to “serious and professional depiction of the era”, without “watering down history”.

The perceived success in the depiction of the era is repeatedly emphasised in the entries of those who appreciate the series as they seem to value the reminders of custom, tradition, and respect. “No state without the custom, no custom without the state”, another user writes. They claim that “custom is a life guide that teaches siding with the oppressed, to live in justice, order and peace”, and this series conveys this idea successfully. It can be inferred from comments that this group is also willing to ignore the failures in terms of historical accuracy as “telling the sagas

of the ancestors” and “memorialising the prophet and other holy men and their words” on television are more important. Another similar comment mentions that people who criticise the show do so essentially because of the fact that the word “Allah” and practices like prayers and *zikr* are quite frequent, implying their disassociation with religion.

There are also numerous comparisons with Western historical productions such as *The Tudors*, the British period drama about VIII. Henry and his reign. One user writes that *The Tudors* was not criticised even by English historians because “no one can do a direct depiction of an event occurred 600 years ago”. The most important element for this camp seems that series like RE are able to make history and spirituality more interesting and to push people to learn more about these matters. Noting the fact that RE fills a vacuum and there is a need for similar works, the commenters also argue that it helps with Turkey’s image everywhere, otherwise “[Turks] will keep whining about how they are portrayed in the West”.

The critics of RE, on the other hand, focus on how the show bears deliberate and direct resemblances to today’s politics, especially the ever-present plot-line of traitors. Although some appreciate the theme and would watch it all the time, they mostly critique the heavy emphasis on religious motifs that mostly does not have a purpose in the plot. Nevertheless, for some, there is a feeling that the series “treat the audience as if they are dumb” and “always carries a message concern”. Calling it the *Valley of the Wolves* of the Middle Ages, the critics also point to the historical inaccuracies, most importantly Kayi Tribe not being fully Muslim at the time and practicing Shamanism partially. Most of the critical commenters agree that the conjuncture does not allow history to be depicted as it is and they condemn the historical figures being used in commercial pursuits.

### 4.2.2 *The Nameless: Audience Comments*

The comments under *The Nameless* discussion board can also be divided into two groups as RE comments. The positive commenters praise the series because of the realistic depiction of actual events going on in South-eastern Turkey. Although some acknowledge the gaps and overly dramatic elements, they appreciate the depiction of how terror organisations are funded and organised, which left some with “gasps” and made them feel “insecure”. They also tend to think that series show what they have known albeit partially, as one commenter acknowledges the depiction of collaboration between the PSO member policemen and the PKK and says “We knew this had been happening”. This group of commenters also disagree with the idea that there is stereotyping with regards to the portrayal of Kurdish people. For example, one commenter writes:

“This show is being attacked by leftists yet it started perfectly and goes on perfectly. Some say it depicts Kurds negatively, but it is merely showing those who join the PKK in that way and say, not the taxi driver who is also Kurdish and working with the governor. I think it is good that they are also showing how civil servants like the mayor is working with the terrorists. Hope this series succeed.”

Due to the appreciation for the portrayal of the known events, they also underline that TN differs from propaganda work. Noting the comments that deem the success of military-themed shows like TN a commercial one, it is possible to gather that not all positive commenters are pro-government or conservative which can be captured in one comment that says “they are not trying to construct an attitude but merely reaffirming existing ones. True propaganda is on TRT”. This suggests that the depiction of current affairs in South-eastern Turkey create an audience from various segments of the Turkish society. Thus, targeting nationalist sentiments is finding an extensive response and this can be supported in the comments that say the series “wound [the audience’s] feelings”, is reflecting “[Turkey’s] living history”, “will remind [Turks] what happened and what traitors did”,

“made [the audience] cry and showed that how hard it must be to be a parent of a soldier or a police”.

The negative commenters, on the other hand, accuse the series for employing an “empty nationalism” and for making a “good Kurd/bad Kurd” distinction, which in turn is able to flame the polarisation in the society. Some people also point that the series has the characteristic of being “very populist” and blatantly “pro-government”, and call it “brother of *Resurrection Ertugrul*” and “the new *Valley of the Wolves*”. Similarly, one commenter writes that the representation of actual events make it seem like “everything happened in the near past was caused by the foreign actors-PKK-PSO alliance”.

A repetitive theme within the negative comments is also regarding the capitalisation of the martyrs and the struggles in the region. While some criticise the action scenes and emphasis on heroism rather than Turkishness and point to the unrealistic mistakes such as “governor participating in the armed conflicts”, most critique the dramatic emphasis on love for the motherland which is “prosaic” and “tawdry”. They also underline that using the “pain of some people” is “not classy”, “emotional exploitation”, and just like the “Vietnam themed films of Hollywood”. As one commenter writes:

“They are using the martyr governor and it is not classy. It is just exploiting nation’s feelings and getting people’s blood up”.

Thus, although the series find appreciation in terms of providing a portrayal of actual events, there is a general worry of capitalising the pain of families who lost a loved one in the region and a reaction in terms of bias: “They try to convey the message that ‘moles infiltrated our institutions’ but instead they should have said ‘they were infiltrated by some people’.”

Overall the audience comments for both series indicate that there are two camps in the reception of the series, much like the society at large in Turkey. While one group appreciate seeing series that portray Turkish heritage and current struggles of Turkey on television as they might remind forgotten value and traditions and elaborate on what is seen on news, the other criticises them due to their potential to distort what actually happened in history and had been happening now.

# Conclusion

The main aim of this thesis was to see how political sphere is represented by entertainment television how the audience interact with it and receive it. I conducted this analysis in the context of Turkey, a country where many aspects of social life is politicised and with substantial television viewing practices. My argument was that in contemporary Turkey, entertainment programs are representing daily political events, and this has repercussions on the way people understand and discuss about politics. In addition to this, political dramas capitalise on popular themes in culture and discourse, thus reinforcing specific representations of politics through fictionalised accounts. It is, therefore, both ideological and commercial interests that shape the content of the entertainment television.

In order to situate entertainment television in mass media studies, I firstly surveyed the models of research and existing studies on entertainment television. Although they have different approaches in terms of the underlying mechanisms of influence, I showed that there is a group of political communication scholars who have shown that entertainment television was able to influence people's political opinions and lead them to discussion and other ways of engagement, much like news programming.

As I have summarised in the first chapter, one of the mechanisms of influence was the content itself. The depictions of political issues, events, or actors, have shown to be important elements in providing an insight into the political life and establishing or reinforcing attitudes regarding politics and identity. Therefore, through their plots and themes, it is shown that programs like dramas have the potential to increase levels of political engagement by giving accessible versions of actual politics or mirror actual events, and consequently amplify them. It is also argued



that they have the potential to accelerate the dispersion of false or biased ideas, which tends to have a long-lasting effect on the audience. Moreover, as per cumulative effects model and cultivation analysis, repetitive and similar plots and themes may increase the power of messages of entertainment television.

Furthermore, I explained why Turkey is a particularly relevant context to study how entertainment programs shape political understanding. I presented the features of contemporary media system in Turkey and discussed the changes in media production and the media usage habits in Turkey. Although the media content has always been subject to scrutiny in Turkey, it has been argued that there was a new shift, which suggested a new agenda. Moreover, I summarised the sociological aspects of television viewership in Turkey and showed that it is an integral part of the socialisation of citizens. This situation, in turn, can enhance the levels of influence of the stories, ideas, and messages in the series and can render series useful in the meaning construction of political events.

Indeed, the analysis has shown that Turkish dramas were representing politics through heavy emphasis and repetition over certain themes regarding Turkish identity and Turkey's current struggles at home and abroad. The depictions of actual events were rendered either through fictionalising current events or providing a fictionalised account of history. The first two themes, *Ethno-religious Identity* and *State and Leaders* show that values that are important to a large number of citizens, nationalism, and religion, find representation in entertainment television, reiterating the rhetoric of the political elite. Although these themes have been constantly on the agenda of various political actors in Turkey, the analysis indicates that they are now being reproduced on entertainment television and broadening newscasts. Other two themes, *Foreign Agents* and *Internal Enemies*, can be seen as rather recent issues that have been on the political

agenda. Irrespective whether they are created due to ideological or commercial incentives, the analysis found that the narratives on television dramas borrowed plotlines and characters from recent headlines and offered fictionalised versions of commonly referred events and persons.

Finally, the analysis of audience comments shows that the series split the viewers into two sides, much like any political issue in Turkey. Mirroring the heavily polarised society, the commenters on the discussion site were either applauding the portrayals of the Turkish nation, Islam, or current endeavours of the country or they were castigating them due to misrepresentation of certain events or disrespecting certain values. All of these indicate that contemporary politics find representation on entertainment television, which is consequently contributes to the understanding of politics and political discussions of individuals by reflecting daily politics and discourses.

This thesis aimed to contribute to the political communication literature that suggests entertainment television is able to leave politics-related media effects. In this descriptive research, I employed a content-based analysis and relied on self-reported data both for the episodes and comments. To expand on this analysis and strengthen it, inter-rater reliability measures could be used in further research. Moreover, a thematic analysis of dramas and online comments by itself is not enough to establish a causality between the content and levels of influence. To achieve this, further research on entertainment television may strive to find out the magnitude of this influence through survey or focus group based quantitative studies. This would be an important step in illuminating details of media effects and public discussion of politics not only in Turkey but in similar other contexts.

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