

**FOREIGN POLICY BEHIND THE SCENES: TURKISH
TELEVISION DRAMAS AND THE POLITICS OF PRODUCTION AND
CIRCULATION**

By
Ceren Çetinkaya

Submitted to Central European University - Private University
Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations

*In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
International Relations*

Supervisor: Erzsébet Strausz

Wordcount: 74.161

Vienna, Austria
January 2026

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Copyright © Ceren Çetinkaya, 2026. Foreign Policy Behind the Scenes: Turkish Television Dramas and the Politics of Production and Circulation - This work is licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution \(CC-BY\) 4.0 International license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

For bibliographic and reference purposes this dissertation should be referred to as: Cetinkaya, C. 2026. Foreign Policy Behind the Scenes: Turkish Television Dramas and the Politics of Production and Circulation. Doctoral dissertation, Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations, Central European University, Vienna.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, Ceren Çetinkaya, candidate for the PhD degree in International Relations at the Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations declare herewith that the present thesis titled “Foreign Policy Behind the Scenes: Turkish Television Dramas and the Politics of Production and Circulation” is exclusively my own work, based on my research and only such external information as properly credited in notes and bibliography. I declare that no unidentified and illegitimate use was made of the work of others, and no part of the thesis infringes on any person's or institution's copyright. I also declare that no part of the thesis has been submitted in this form to any other institution of higher education for an academic degree.

Vienna, 31 January 2026

Ceren Çetinkaya

DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI

Generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) was used in this work. I, the author, have reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content, claims, and references. An overview of the use of GenAI is provided below.

- I used ChatGPT and Grammarly to proofread and correct grammatical and stylistic errors only. The tools were used to improve grammar and sentence structure without altering the original meaning.

ABSTRACT

In the past fifteen years, Turkish soap operas have achieved significant global success, coinciding with the rise of Ottoman-themed television series and the increasing political involvement of cultural workers in Turkey. This transformation in cultural production paralleled Turkey's evolving foreign policy during the 2010s, as the country shifted from a primarily pro-European stance to positioning itself as a regional leader in the Middle East, a strategy often referred to as neo-Ottomanism. These concurrent developments highlight the intricate relationship among national identity, foreign policy, and cultural production in contemporary Turkey and internationally.

This dissertation examines television series produced between 2011 and 2024 in relation to shifts in Turkish foreign policy, engaging core International Relations concepts such as national identity and foreign policy through the framework of cultural production and circulation. It analyzes on-screen representations in Ottoman-themed Turkish television series alongside the production processes that construct these narratives and traces the evolution of their broader political implications. The study demonstrates how Ottoman-themed narratives are politically received, negotiated, and contested in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, including through regulatory interventions and prohibitions. Rather than viewing popular culture solely as representational output or a simple instrument of soft power, the dissertation contends that cultural production and foreign policy are mutually constitutive. By analyzing production networks and everyday working dynamics, the study positions cultural producers as foreign policy actors and investigates the forms of agency they exercise in meaning-making practices.

Drawing on insights from the Popular Culture and World Politics literature in International Relations alongside Media and Production Studies, the dissertation adopts a

multidisciplinary approach and a qualitative research design. The analysis is based on relational interviews with cultural producers, combined with the analysis of visual and discursive materials from the television series they produce. By attending to representation level and everyday working practices, creative choices, and institutional constraints, the research explores how cultural producers reflect on their own positioning within broader political dynamics and how foreign policy narratives are negotiated throughout the production process.

The contribution of this dissertation to the discipline of International Relations is threefold. Theoretically, it advances debates on Popular Culture and World Politics by adopting a practice-based, production-oriented approach and by conceptualizing cultural producers as foreign policy actors. It highlights the relational and contextual forms of agency cultural producers exercise in meaning-making practices related to national identity and foreign policy. Methodologically, the research design aligns with theoretical framework by combining representational analysis with relational interviews that foreground producers' everyday work and production networks in order to unpack agency, thereby advancing a practice-oriented, production-centered approach to the study of cultural production and foreign policy. Empirically, the dissertation contributes to the study of Turkish soap operas and foreign policy by moving beyond linear accounts of cultural diplomacy and soft power. It instead reveals a politically conditioned, contested, and sometimes disrupted nature of transnational cultural circulation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My PhD years have been a crazy ride, with many ups and downs. While I enjoyed many opportunities for my intellectual growth in and outside Vienna, life continued to flow in every possible way. Looking back at the journey now, I wouldn't change a single moment of it. After these years, I realized that what makes this ride so valuable is the people who were there with me, whether they were always by my side or not physically.

My biggest thanks go to Erzsébet Strausz, my supervisor, whose support I always felt. Thank you for always thinking with me and for being an inspiration. It was a pleasure to have a special soul like yours with me on this journey.

I would like to thank my supervisory panel, Michael Merlingen and Ulrich Meurer, for their support and feedback throughout this process. Another huge thank you goes to DSPS coordinators, Ingy and Monica, for answering every question I had with kindness and patience every single time.

I am deeply grateful to my interlocutors who took part in this research and whose names I cannot share due to confidentiality; and to all the cultural workers who generously shared their time and knowledge with me, making this thesis possible. Your power stretches far beyond what you may realize in shaping the world, and I hope this work you contributed to is able to show at least a part of it.

My time in DSPS brought me in a group of colleagues who turned into close friends in no time. I was very lucky and happy to have all these brilliant and kind people with me:

Ekin, I feel like we have grown up together into two women who are immensely proud of each other. Thank you for opening my mind through conversations that went in every possible direction.

Natalia, your cheerfulness and constant support always meant a lot to me. I feel very lucky to get to know a heart like yours, thank you!

Thank you too all dear friends İdil, David, Dominik, Lilia, Mehmet, Monica, Freya, Viktoria, Giancarlo, Vladimir and many more for every beautiful moment we shared. You all inspire me so much! I will miss our Turkish nights and long chats.

Despite the distance, my ride-or-die Aylin was always there for me when I needed her. Thank you for always believing in me since the first day we met and being best cheerleader for my dreams for over a decade!

Huge thanks to Conor, who witnessed only part of this journey but is here to stay. I feel incredibly lucky that, among infinite possibilities, we found each other. Thank you for sharing my dreams, believing in me and for being there whenever I needed you.

I would like to thank my family for always supporting me with so much love, even though they sometimes questioned whether I really needed to do this. Kızınız doktor oldu! 😊

Last but not least, I would like to thank myself for showing up, even on the hardest days. This was a dream of mine for so long, and I am so glad that I decided to follow it.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Historical Background: Negotiating Between East and West	9
Situating Turkish Television Dramas within International Relations.....	20
Research Questions	33
Thesis Structure	39
 Staging the Past, Projecting the Nation: Concepts and Tools	 43
The Nexus of Cultural Production, National Identity and Foreign Policy	44
1.2. Cultural Producers and Their Agency in Foreign Policy	57
2.1. How to Study Soap Operas?	70
 Frame 1 - From Future Aspirations to Historical Heroism on TV: Shifting from the West to the East	 91
1.1. Everyday, Media and Cultural Production in Turkey	93
1.2. From Dreaming the Future to Imagining the Past	96
1.3. Autocratization and Ottomanization of the TV	101
2.1. Characters of the Nation: Ottoman Television Dramas and National Imaginaries	108
2.2. Mediating History: National Identity and Representation	113
2.3. Beyond Osman and Ertuğrul: The Modern Turkish Saga	128
Chapter Summary and Discussion	132
 Frame 2 - Beneath the Binary: Navigating the Everyday of Cultural Production	 135
1.1. Locating the Soap Opera Industry in Cultural Production.....	138
1.2. Crystallizing Production Networks and Hierarchies.....	144
2.1. Beyond the Divide: The Layered Landscape of Turkish Drama Production.....	152
3.1. Intersecting Identities in Cultural Production: Motivations, Perceptions, and Practice	156
3.2. Motivations and Perceptions of Soap Opera Production	157
3.3. Production Technicalities, Everyday Work and Agency	164

3.4. Gatekeeping the Sector and the State.....	169
Chapter Summary and Discussion	177
Frame 3 - Kingdoms of Soaps: Geopolitics of Turkish TV in the MENA Region and Transnational Agency.....	180
1.1. Turkish TV Series Travelling Beyond the National Borders.....	184
1.2. The Ottoman Era in the Shows	189
1.3. Bans, Restrictions, Politics Reactions: Background of a Soap Opera Crisis	191
1.4. Rewriting the Past: <i>Kingdoms of Fire</i> and the Counter Productions in International Relations	200
2.1. Working in the Shadow of Politics: Micro-Practices in the Sector	205
2.2. Negotiating a Diplomatic Crisis Through Everyday Practices	209
Chapter Summary and Discussion	216
Conclusion	218
3 Frames of the Thesis	221
Contributions to International Relations	225
Bibliography	232

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, Turkish television dramas have emerged as one of the most influential forms of entertainment in Turkey and have gradually expanded onto the global stage. With the liberalization of media and the rise of private TV channels, soap operas quickly became a nightly ritual across Turkish households, dominating prime time and shaping everyday cultural life. In addition to the domestic audience, these series have found their audience internationally and watched across the world especially after 2010s. Producers, recognizing this potential, invested heavily in the sector, which soon developed its own technological infrastructure and specialized human capital. Despite the demanding format with episodes averaging 2.5 hours once a week, and the growing influence of digital streaming platforms, Turkish dramas continue to enjoy remarkable popularity both domestically and globally. This enduring prominence, together with the increasingly evident alignment of Turkish television dramas with foreign policy dynamics, situates them at the center of this study's analytical focus, a significance that becomes particularly apparent when considered in relation to their extensive global circulation and international success.

While Turkish series dominate prime-time slots domestically and constitute a daily ritual for millions of households, their international circulation makes Turkey one of the leaders of the soap opera exportation in the world. In 2024, Turkey ranked third worldwide in TV drama exports, following only the United States and the United Kingdom;¹ the sales extend across Latin America, the Middle East, and South Asia. Between 2020 and 2023 alone, global demand for Turkish dramas surged by 184%,² with countries in the MENA region, Balkans

¹ *The Economist*, "The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect," February 15, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/02/15/the-third-largest-exporter-of-television-is-not-who-you-might-expect>

² Ayşe İpek Aytaç, Mehmet Üner, and Elif Esiyok, "Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas," *Rutgers Business Review* 9, no. 2 (2024): 241.

and Eastern Europe among the top importers.³ In 2024, the industry exported over 300 series to more than 200 countries, generating revenues exceeding \$500 million.⁴ Although early productions primarily targeted domestic viewers,⁵ by the 2010s, Turkish dramas had gained immense popularity, prompting producers to look beyond national borders and encouraging state officials to harness this momentum for public diplomacy and national identity-building strategies.

The global success of Turkish television dramas has thus unfolded in tandem with their growing entanglement in national identity-making and foreign policy aspirations. This convergence became particularly pronounced in the early 2010s, when, beginning around 2011, a series of historical television productions emerged in quick succession. While they each mobilized distinct narrative, aesthetic, and ideological registers, collectively they contributed to the popularization of period dramas as a growing genre in Turkish soap opera production. Within this global flow, more militaristic period pieces - such as *Diriliş: Ertuğrul/ Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014-2019) and *Kuruluş Osman/ Establishment Osman* (2019-2025) - have secured a distinctive position, supported in part by the Turkish government. This marks a shift in the popular culture narrative regarding the Ottoman history from earlier Ottoman-themed productions of the 1990s and early 2000s, which tended to emphasize harem intrigue, and the decadence of the palace rather than martial heroism and state-building narratives.⁶

³ M. Tokyay, "Arab World Remains Biggest Market for Turkish TV Series," *Arab News*, November 21, 2017, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1197036/media>; D. Kutuk, "Show and Tell: How Turkish TV Shows Found Fandom in the Balkans," *TRT World*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.trtworld.com/article/13118069>

⁴ Duvar English, "Turkey's TV Series Industry Earned over \$500 Million from Exports in 2024," Duvar English, January 20, 2025, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-tv-series-industry-earned-over-500-million-from-exports-in-2024-news-65557>.

⁵ Aytac, Üner, and Esiyok, *Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas: A Case Study*, 242.

⁶ For examples, you can see the following shows and movies: *Kara Murat: Fatih'in Fedaisi* (1972), *Harem Suare* (1999), *Hürrem Sultan* (2003), *Abdülhamid Düşerken* (2003), *Son Osmanlı: Yandım Ali* (2007), and *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (2011-2014).

The production and circulation of *Resurrection* and *Establishment* cultivate affective registers of belonging, identity, and solidarity across former Ottoman geographies and the broader Turkic and Islamic world. A striking example of the effect and mobilization of these shows as soft power tools occurred on 9 May 2017, when Mustafa Varank, then a senior advisor to President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, tweeted a photograph of President Erdoğan aboard his private jet with producer Mehmet Bozdağ and two leading actors from *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*.⁷ The accompanying caption emphasized the show's growing popularity in Kuwait, noting that the team had travelled there to attend a groundbreaking ceremony. This public display of proximity between political leadership and the creative team signaled the government willingness to integrate popular cultural products into broader foreign policy discourse.

As the previous paragraphs illustrate, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* functioned as more than a conventional period drama. Its significance lay both in the government support it enjoyed and in the political motivations behind its production, along with the international responses it received. Conceived as a state-backed response to *Magnificent Century (2011-2014)*, a series criticized by government circles for its depiction of Ottoman history, *Resurrection* advanced a heroic and pious vision of Ottoman origins. The widely circulated image of President Erdoğan with the production team, therefore, symbolized more than a casual encounter: it reflected the centrality of cultural production in the government's cultural reorientation, and the place soap operas are gaining in international politics. It highlighted how television dramas had become entangled with national identity formation, foreign policy ambitions, and the active engagement of industry professionals. From this point onward, Ottoman and Seljuk-themed dramas proliferated, with new production companies emerging to specialize in historical series - echoing Erdoğan's call for a "national and local art whose logic is not a foreigner to Turkey,"

⁷ Mustafa Varank (@varank), "Diriliş ekibiyle dönüş yolundayız; Kuveyt'teki temel atma töreninde Cumhurbaşkanımızla sohbet ettik. Diriliş orada da çok seviliyor," Twitter, May 5, 2017, 3:21 p.m., <https://x.com/varank/status/861991983698632705>.

⁸ a direct critique of the Turkish cultural sphere's longstanding "Western" orientation. While state endorsement and political proximity enhanced the visibility and symbolic authority of historical dramas such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, this same proximity also complicated their international circulation, particularly in contexts where Turkey's foreign policy orientations were received with ambivalence or outright suspicion.

Despite the significant interest in Turkish television dramas among Arab audiences, who often envisioned these series as alternatives to Western television productions, Turkish series periodically became entangled in diplomatic crises among state actors. Following a political crisis between the Saudi Arabia and Turkey in 2018, Turkish TV shows, their purchase and broadcasting, were banned in the region through the biggest media corporation, Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) in the region.⁹ In addition to the general ban in the Gulf region, series like *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* encountered significant resistance abroad, especially in the Middle East and North Africa region. In Egypt, the series with historical- military focus were not merely perceived as entertainment products but were instead interpreted as instruments of Turkey's cultural and ideological expansion. Critics in these regions argued that such productions represented a form of cultural imperialism, strategically designed to extend Ankara's soft power influence through the circulation of historical narratives and Ottoman imagery,¹⁰ which brought counter productions like *Kingdoms of Fire* (2019-2019) from Egypt-United Arab Emirates cooperation. These cases have revealed the extent to which cultural meaning is fluid and deeply contingent upon local contexts, political climates, and historical

⁸ Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *Yerli ve Millî Anlayış Her Konuda Olduğu Gibi Kültür-Sanatta da İdealimiz Olmalı*, [Domestic and National Understanding Should Be Our Ideal in Culture and Arts as in Every Subject], 2018, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/92787/-yerli-ve-mill-anlayis-her-konuda-oldugu-gibi-kultur-sanatta-da-idealimiz-olmali-#>

⁹ Umut Uras, "Saudi Network Ban on Turkey TV Shows Is 'Political': Minister," *Al Jazeera*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/6/saudi-network-ban-on-turkey-tv-shows-is-political-minister>.

¹⁰ *Middle East Monitor*, "Egypt Fatwa Bans Ertugrul, Turkish Soaps," 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200212-egypt-fatwa-bans-ertugrul-turkish-soaps/>.

sensitivities. While Turkish producers and the government framed these dramas as vehicles of cultural pride and regional solidarity, audiences and authorities elsewhere decoded them through their own geopolitical anxieties and cultural memories.

The same cultural forms that work on bolstering Turkey's new "national and local" image internationally, whether as intended or not, serve as contested terrains at home, where cultural production is increasingly shaped by political struggles and ideological interventions. The remarkable success of these series, combined with Turkey's geopolitical positioning and rising authoritarianism, has unfolded alongside, and become deeply intertwined with, the politicization of culture. The state's idea of being more involved in cultural production was signalled openly in 2018, when the Director of Communications declared: "Your political hegemony is over, your cultural hegemony will also end," encapsulating the ambition to reshape the cultural field as *yerli ve milli* (national and local) and to challenge the long-standing dominance of secular elites. This discursive and institutional reconfiguration of culture, however, was not confined to symbolic statements or policy visions; it increasingly shaped the everyday conditions under which cultural producers operated.

The culture sector has always been entangled with politics; however, in the last years, cultural producers in Turkey have found themselves working within a climate where political pressures, ideological expectations, and market needs permeate their daily practices. This became particularly visible in early 2025, when prominent talent manager Ayşe Barım was arrested on charges of "influence peddling" and "aiding and abetting the overthrow of the government." What began as an inquiry into monopolization of the sector quickly turned political, as prosecutors pointed to her clients', who are the most well-known actors in Turkey,

involvement in the 2013 Gezi Park protests.¹¹ Similar pressures have targeted producers and actors critical of government policies, with dismissals, show cancellations, and even arrests underlining how cultural labor is enmeshed in broader political struggles. Actresses such as Aybüke Pusat, who appeared in the national broadcaster TRT1's drama *Teşkilat* (2021–), were dismissed after publicly opposing the imprisonment of Istanbul's mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu.¹² The series she acted in portrays the covert operations of an elite unit within the National Intelligence Organization (MIT), blending patriotic themes with high-stakes geopolitical narratives. Following his support for Aybüke Pusat, the screenwriter Ali Aydın, who used to produce *Mevlana Celaleddin-i Rumi* (2023–2025) for TRT's digital platform, a show that depicts the life of Rumi, drew the attention of the TRT General Manager, and the show was removed from the platform.¹³ Meanwhile, others, like Cem Yiğit Üzümoğlu, were taken into custody for openly supporting the boycott, and an international travel ban was imposed on the actor, who is an active actor on the international stage.¹⁴ These incidents highlight the intensifying ties between high politics and the cultural sector, and how cultural sector professional's lives and jobs have become more and more visible in the political sphere. They also reveal the double bind cultural workers face: losing their jobs for dissent while being simultaneously expected by opposition-minded citizens to use their visibility for political change, making work in the sector more complex than ever.

¹¹ The Gezi Park protests began on May 28, 2013, as a sit-in by environmental activists opposing a redevelopment plan that threatened Istanbul's Gezi Park, but after police violently cleared the occupation, the movement rapidly expanded into nationwide demonstrations demanding respect for rights such as freedom of expression, press, and assembly, and resisting creeping authoritarianism under the AKP government.

¹² İmamoğlu is widely regarded as President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's strongest political opponent ahead of the next elections, and Pusat also expressed support for a boycott of pro-government media outlets and affiliated institutions.

¹³ Sait Burak Utucu, "Eleven People Detained in Turkey as Part of Investigation into Boycott Call," *Euronews*, April 3, 2025, <https://www.euronews.com/2025/04/03/eleven-people-detained-in-turkey-as-part-of-investigation-into-boycott-call>.

¹⁴ Cem Yiğit Üzümoğlu: Who Is the Turkish Actor Who Cancelled His Appearance at a Greek Theatre Due to Erdoğan's Travel Ban," *Proto Thema*, April 16, 2025, <https://en.protothema.gr/2025/04/16/cem-yigit-uzumoglu-who-is-the-turkish-actor-who-canceled-his-appearance-at-a-greek-theater-due-to-erdogans-travel-ban/>

The aforementioned dynamics within the Turkish cultural realm constitute layered cultural sites in which politics is not merely represented but deeply embedded, emerging through complex and shifting power relations at both domestic and international levels. Over the past decade, the sector has increasingly become a space where concepts such as “political”, “legitimate Turkishness” or “legitimate history” are continuously articulated, negotiated, and contested; particularly through debates surrounding the meaning of national identity and the boundaries of the national. These negotiations were not limited to the domestic sphere but rather circulated internationally triggering similar negotiations in different regions in relation to Turkey’s position to them, revealing the transnational media structures. Therefore, they reflect broader struggles over belonging, legitimacy, and cultural authority in contemporary Turkey. Such tensions have generated intricate power relations in which cultural producers operate within constant political and social pressure. They are compelled to navigate their professional choices and creative expressions within an ever-shifting political landscape that often conflates artistic production with ideological alignment. As a result, cultural work has become a profoundly politicized field, where decisions about content, collaboration, and distribution are deeply entangled with questions of loyalty, dissent, and visibility.

Constituting the central motivation of this research, this intensification of the cultural sphere raises several interrelated questions. Under what circumstances does the representation of *Turkishness* produced and reproduced, and through which mechanisms do a shift in that representation occur? Why have cultural workers become increasingly embedded in broader political processes, while some are celebrated by political institutions and others are stigmatized as threats to national security? How does this evolving political climate shape their everyday practices and self-perceptions as individuals, cultural producers, and citizens who are gradually transformed into political subjects? Finally, considering the growing international fame of Turkish television dramas, how do these domestic shifts within the political and

cultural landscape inform the role of Turkish cultural production in international politics, and what broader political reactions, both domestically and abroad, do these productions provoke?

In addressing these questions, this research focuses on the politics of cultural production and the embodied practices of a specific professional group: cultural producers involved in the production and circulation of Turkish television dramas. By examining their reflections of their everyday labor, negotiations, and affective dispositions, the study foregrounds what kind of agency they work with and how political power is encountered, internalized, contested, and reworked through cultural production. In doing so, this research conceptualizes cultural producers not merely as intermediaries of ideology or passive instruments of state power, but as situated actors whose professional practices and self-understandings are both shaped by and actively contribute to the reconfiguration of national identity and foreign policy.

While these questions span multiple analytical scales and contexts, this research approaches them through the competing visions of the Turkish “Self,” articulated both domestically and internationally, and projected through cultural production. In this sense, cultural production provides a particularly rich site for examining how national identity is negotiated, contested, and re-signified across political and cultural arenas. While the global popularity of Turkish television dramas warrants analysis beyond the conceptual confines of “soft power,” this research focuses specifically on Ottoman-themed TV series, where historical narration, nationalism, and contemporary political imaginaries most visibly intersect. Whether these productions are subject to government criticism or receive substantial state support, they offer valuable insights into how notions of national identity and foreign policy are negotiated both within the cultural sector and through its interactions with state power. In this context, culture is not simply a state-led instrument of soft power but a field of negotiation where state ambitions, commercial logics, and creative practices intersect. Decisions about casting,

storylines, or aesthetics emerge from everyday negotiations shaped simultaneously by market demands, ideological expectations, and artistic ambitions. Cultural workers - from screenwriters to actors and distributors- navigate overlapping professional, personal, and national identities, making production itself a site of political negotiation. The analysis requires engagement with the complexities of Turkish identity perpetuated over the years, how it intersects with the country's foreign policy trajectory, and how both are understood and negotiated in everyday cultural work.

The Introduction continues with a historical background subsection, as I find it important to situate the project within its broader historical and political dynamics. While including a historical background section results in a longer Introduction, I consider it essential to introduce the context I am working with as early as possible. Since the project engages with the concepts of national identity and foreign policy, it is beneficial to provide an overview of the foreign policy trajectories Turkey has undergone and how these have shaped understandings of national identity. Only then am I able to think through the empirical case in dialogue with the research questions and relevant theoretical discussions. Following the historical overview, the chapter situates the project within International Relations scholarship and introduces the research questions. The Introduction concludes with an outline of the thesis structure, guiding the reader through what is yet to come.

Historical Background: Negotiating Between East and West

In order to understand the complexity of cultural production and the political dynamics surrounding it through the lens of national identity and foreign policy, it is first necessary to trace the historical trajectory of the modern Turkish Republic. The Republic of Turkey represents the culmination of a long line of Turkish states, often considered the sixteenth in

this succession. Its connection to its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, has been complex, shaped by both the modernization efforts and the revolutionary transformations that accompanied the Republic's establishment. The Ottoman Empire's relationship with Western powers had already been fraught before and during World War I, a tension that continues to influence debates on the Western values the Turkish Republic sought to adopt during its founding era. While attempting to position itself as a Western power, the Empire and the Republic were also frequently perceived as an "other" by Europe, reflecting the ambivalent reception of its modernization and Westernization projects. These modernization revolutions and their reception have been interpreted differently by successive governments over time, reflecting the ongoing negotiation of national identity, which will be discussed further in this section.

Beyond ideological choices, Turkey's unique geographical position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia has further complicated its national identity, situating it simultaneously within multiple cultural, political, and historical frameworks. The country is positioned right at the intersection of Europe and the Middle East, where its predecessor ruled significant parts of both regions and acted as the caliphate for the Muslim world for over four hundred years. The collapse of the Ottoman state and the fast-paced Westernization process in the new Republic took away this "religious leader" position from the country due to the political needs of its time. This sudden change in Turkey's geographical role and disengagement from the Empire's political values were considered a cultural trauma by the conservatives, meanwhile by the modern/secular population who believed in Western values such as democracy, it was seen as an opportunity to start anew with a more modern orientation.¹⁵

¹⁵ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 160.

There have been several different ethnic and ideological groups in this geography over the century, whether during the Republican or the Imperial times, however, the entanglement between the two ideologies and cultural outlooks has been more visible than ever today. These ideologies can be summarized as secular/modernists who are driven by the Western orientation and following the values brought by the founding father of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and conservatives/political Islamists who take great pride in the Ottoman legacy and religious leadership in the region.¹⁶ All these complexities in the Turkish identity led to a never-ending identity contestation at different layers of life, from the state ideology of different governments extending to the public life through education and culture for a century.

Despite the critiques of the revolutions during the establishment period of the Turkish Republic initiated by Atatürk, modernization was seen as a salvation also in the final years of the Ottoman Empire. This process started in the 19th century through the Tanzimat (Reorganization) Period in the Empire, and this era marked a series of profound reforms aimed at centralizing authority and modernizing the state to compete with European powers. Spanning roughly from 1839 to 1876, this period included the proclamation of the Hatt-i Şerif of Gülhane (1839) and the Hatt-i Hümayun (1856), which are two foundational reform edicts of their time. These edicts aimed to guarantee equality for all citizens, regardless of religion, and to restructure administrative, legal, and economic institutions.¹⁷

During this transformative period, many young Ottoman intellectuals, later known as the Young Turks (*Jön Türkler*), made their way to Europe, particularly to France, not through state sponsorship but largely in response to the political pressures and restrictions imposed under Sultan Abdülhamid II's rule. Seeking intellectual freedom and spaces in which to

¹⁶ H. Ertuğ Tombuş and Berfu Aygenç, "(Post-)Kemalist Secularism in Turkey," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1 (2017): 71.

¹⁷ Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw. "The Era of Modern Reform: The Tanzimat, 1839-1876." In *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

advocate for constitutionalism and reform, they continued their education and political organizing abroad with the hope of returning equipped to contribute to the Empire's modernization and prevent its disintegration by adapting to the new global order.¹⁸ However, upon their return or even from afar, their newly acquired "Western" habits were criticized by many within Ottoman society, who accused them of "false Westernization" - that is, superficially imitating Western lifestyles and appearances while allegedly abandoning Ottoman moral values without fully grasping the intellectual, scientific, or institutional foundations of Western modernity. These debates around right and wrong ways of Westernization and how they would impact the Empire made their way to the Turkish literature where the leading writers of the era used the theme in their stories very often.¹⁹ However, despite the modernization edicts and the opposition, by the onset of World War I, the Empire was already considered to be "the sick man of Europe" by Tsar Nicholas I of Russia²⁰ and could survive no longer, led to the establishment of modern Republic of Turkey in the following years.

Following the Ottoman Empire's defeat with Germany in World War I and its subsequent partition under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres, a protracted War of Independence - led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk - sought to reclaim sovereignty and resist foreign occupation. Ending with the victory of the Turkish nation, the following years after led to new foundations of the country's political structure and its geopolitical positioning. Throughout these developments, the sultanate was abolished in 1922, and in 1923 the Republic of Turkey was officially proclaimed, marking a decisive break from the imperial past. During

¹⁸ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *The Young Turks in Opposition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 167–169.

¹⁹ For well-known literary examples of the theme of "false Westernization," see Ahmet Mithat Efendi, *Felâatun Bey and Râkım Efendi* (Istanbul: Turkey İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2018 [1875]); Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *The Carriage Affair (Araba Sevdası)* (Istanbul: Turkey İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2017 [1896]); Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, *The Dandy (Şipsevdi)* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2019 [1911]).

²⁰ Shaw and Kural-Shaw, *The Era of Modern Reform: The Tanzimat, 1839-1876*, 34.

this time, the Western countries, including the United States and Europe, was defined as the 'modern civilization' and was established as the benchmark for Turkish society by the country's founding father, Atatürk.²¹ The period ushered in profound cultural and political transformations, including the adoption of the Latin alphabet in place of the Arabic script and comprehensive clothing reforms that aimed to secularize public life and visually distinguish the new Republic from its Ottoman past. Among the most significant changes affecting the Empire's religious status and international standing were the closure of Islamic monasteries (tekkes and zaviyes), the establishment of a secular state structure, and the abolition of the caliphate in 1924. These reforms signaled the end of the Ottoman state's historical role as the political and spiritual leader of Muslim communities, marking a decisive break with the imperial legacy.²²

In the early years of the Republic, there was a deliberate strategic effort to cultivate closer ties with Europe and the United States, reflecting the leadership's vision of aligning the new state with the Western international order. Meanwhile, relations with the Middle East were largely neglected, not only because the region was associated with the Ottoman imperial past from which the Republic sought to distance itself, but also due to the new government's concern that involvement in Middle Eastern affairs might undermine its Westernization project and complicate its pursuit of international recognition and legitimacy.²³ These priorities informed an early foreign policy practice centered on caution and non-entanglement, which was only later articulated and systematized through the principle of "peace at home, peace in

²¹ Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*, 225.

²² H. O. Ongur, "Identifying Ottomanisms: The Discursive Evolution of Ottoman Pasts in the Turkish Presents," *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 3 (2015): 416.

²³ İsmail Erkam Sula, *Turkish Foreign Policy in the Early Republican Period: An 'International Society' Approach*, *Marmara SBD*, no 1. (2021): 6-8.

the world.”²⁴ This foreign policy approach prioritized stability, neutrality, and integration with Western institutions over regional engagements.

Turkey’s quest to anchor itself in the Western world became increasingly evident and institutionalized in the realm of foreign policy during the following decades, particularly in the 1950s. In order to adapt to the new international order following World War II, the newly founded Republic sought security and stability through alignment with the Western bloc. This orientation was decisively institutionalized when Turkey joined NATO on 18 February 1952, formally embedding itself within the transatlantic security architecture and underscoring its geopolitical commitment to the West.²⁵ Simultaneously, as Western European states advanced efforts for regional economic integration, Turkey extended its ambitions beyond security: on 31 July 1959, it submitted an application for association with the European Economic Community (EEC).²⁶ Through this bid for economic and political integration, Ankara aimed to consolidate its membership in the Western world, a step that promised modernization, economic development, and a recognized place in the emerging European order. Over time, this Western orientation became a structural feature of Turkish foreign policy, shaping the country’s political, economic, and social trajectories well beyond the Cold War era.

While the Western-oriented foreign policy approach of Turkey continued in the later decades, it became a point of debate in domestic politics when the right-wing parties sought to reclaim the Ottoman-Islamic past. These ideological changes between 1950 and 1980 aimed at countering left-wing movements in the country by integrating the “Ottoman” concept into Turkish national identity. This trend, starting with the Democrat Party, shaped political

²⁴ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Turkish Foreign Policy During Atatürk’s Era,” accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkish-foreign-policy-during-ataturks-era.en.mfa>

²⁵ Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Turkey–NATO, Together for Peace and Security Since 60 Years,” accessed December 5, 2025, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-nato-together-for-peace-and-security-since60-years.en.mfa>.

²⁶ Bahar Rumelili, “Turkey’nin Avrupa’yı Yeniden İnşası: Üyelik ve Vatandaşlık [*Turkey’s Reconstruction of Europe: Membership and Citizenship*],” *Marmara Journal of European Studies* 23, no. 2 (2015): 82-84.

discourse by re-introducing the Ottoman-Islamic past into Turkish national identity as a counter-ideological tool against left-wing movements.²⁷ During Turgut Özal's presidency in the late 1980s and early 1990s, these earlier ideological currents were translated into foreign policy practice. Özal promoted closer engagement with the Middle East, the Balkans, and the post-Soviet Turkic republics, framing Turkey as a regional power rooted in its Ottoman historical geography. This approach, often described as an early form of neo-Ottomanism, treated the Ottoman legacy not as a restorationist project but as a strategic and symbolic resource for regional influence.²⁸ Nevertheless, these ideas did not materialize in Turkey's relations with its Eastern neighborhood due to domestic and uncertainties of the post-Cold War international order.²⁹

Following the brief attempt of bringing a new strategy to Turkish foreign policy through Ottomanization, Turkey continued to strengthen its ties with the Western powers. The country was granted formal candidacy to the European Union in 1999 with the Helsinki European Council, which became the prime time of Turkey's Europeanization process.³⁰ This step symbolized an institutional recognition of Turkey's long-standing aspiration to integrate with Europe, and the decision was met with great enthusiasm by the state officials. This long-awaited milestone also reinforced the strategic and normative alignment of Turkish domestic and foreign policies with EU standards, leading to a more determined political framework for Turkey to follow in the upcoming years. Nevertheless, Turkey's membership process ended in a deadlock with the changing political sphere in Turkey, and the membership dream never got materialized in the new century.

²⁷ Alper Gülbay, "İç ve Dış Politika Boyutları ile Yeni Osmanlıcılık [Ottomanism with Domestic and Foreign Policy Dimensions]," *TOBİDER – International Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. 4 (2023): 265.

²⁸ William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2013) 254.

²⁹ Hakan M. Yavuz, "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no. 12 (1998): 39

³⁰ Başak Alpan, "'Europe-as-Hegemony' and Discourses in Turkey after 1999: What Has 'Europeanization' Got to Do with It?" *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* (2014): 68.

The Turkish political and cultural landscape in the 2000s once again became a central site for debates on the duality of Turkish identity and its close entanglement with foreign policy ambitions, as the country shifted within two decades from a strong Europeanization trajectory toward positioning itself as a regional leader in the Middle East. A new chapter of fluctuating trajectory of Turkish identity and its foreign policy began in 2002, when Justice and Development Party (AKP) under the leadership of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan came to power. Despite the political Islamist tradition AKP came from, one of the party's biggest promises during the 2002 general elections was the full commitment to the European Union accession process, which signaled the continuation of the country's Western-oriented foreign policy.³¹ Although the beginning of negotiations in October 2005 was seen at the time as a huge step towards membership, in hindsight, it marked the point at which Turkey began drifting away from its European dream. This political tension was fueled with the unresolved Cyprus issue and Ankara's refusal to implement the Additional Protocol (which extended customs-union obligations to the EU's 2004 members, including Cyprus),³² as well as growing skepticism in key EU states and widening foreign-policy divergences between the parties.

In addition to the challenges over the Cyprus issue and customs-union obligations, the rising democratic backsliding in Turkey further distanced the country from the EU, and Turkey's foreign policy also started to take a turn after 2011. Despite the cracks in the relationship with the EU, the Ministry for European Union Affairs was established by Decree-Law No. 634 on 8 June 2011, to manage the work related to the EU accession process solely through a ministerial framework in Turkey. However, the institution did not survive long. After the shift to the Presidential Government System in 2018, the Ministry for European Union Affairs was reorganized as the "Directorate for EU Affairs" under the Ministry of Foreign

³¹ Karabekir Akkoyunlu, "The Five Phases of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the AKP," *Social Research* 88, no. 2 (2021): 247.

³² European Commission, *Turkey 2006 Progress Report*, SEC(2006) 1390 final (Brussels: November 8, 2006). https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-progress-report-2006_en.

Affairs.³³ These institutional changes regarding Turkey's EU accession process came simultaneously with other foreign policy aspirations of the country. The historical and religious sentiments of the Turkish government gained momentum both in domestic and international policies of the country, and Turkey started to look for other potential partners after realizing the deadlock with the EU,³⁴ leading to another chapter of neo-Ottomanism.

Ahmet Davutoğlu stands as an important figure in the neo-Ottoman foreign policy ambitions of Turkey in 2010s. During his tenure as the Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–2014) and later as Prime Minister (2014–2016), neo-Ottomanism reemerged on the Turkish foreign policy agenda, though it was partly overshadowed by EU accession efforts only during his time as Foreign Minister. Being an International Relations professor, Davutoğlu formed the foreign policy of Turkey based on the thoughts and strategies he developed in his book *Strategic Depth*³⁵. The book examines the international system before and after the Cold War and discusses Turkey's position within this evolving structure. Believing that a sound understanding requires grasping a country's foundational roots, he explored Turkey's relationship with the Ottoman Empire's legacy. The book also envisions Turkey's future within a framework shaped by historical and organic ties to the Balkans, Anatolia, the Middle East, North Africa, and Western Asia. Based on these insights, Davutoğlu aimed to pursue an active foreign policy strategy, especially in former Ottoman lands. He claimed that Turkey could solve big problems in the Balkans that could not be solved by the EU, and therefore Turkey under the rule of AKP tried to be an alternative to the EU in regions such as the Balkans and the Middle East.³⁶ Some scholars interpret this nostalgic approach to foreign policy as a coping

³³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate for EU Affairs, "History," accessed 28.11.2024, https://www.ab.gov.tr/history_53840_en.html.

³⁴ Lisel Hintz, "Take It Outside!" National Identity Contestation in the Foreign Policy Arena." *European Journal of International Relations* 22, no. 2 (2016), 335.

³⁵ Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position* (London: Küre Publishing, 2001)

³⁶ Kürşad Ertuğrul and Öznur Akcalı Yılmaz, "The Otherness of Turkey in European Integration," *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 62.

mechanism in times of crisis, offering an alternative to envisioning other successful civilizations as an example for being emulated.³⁷ In this framework, neo-Ottomanism is mobilized as an ideal past to replace future-oriented developmental aspirations.

Today, Turkey positions itself as a regional leader by combining humanitarian action with a critique of global power dynamics, encapsulated in Erdoğan's motto, "*The world is bigger than five.*" This slogan challenges the dominance of the five permanent United Nations Security Council members, advocating for a more equitable international system.³⁸ Through policies such as opening its borders to millions of Syrian and Afghan refugees, framed as both a humanitarian obligation and a counterpoint to Europe's restrictive policies, Turkey seeks to present itself as a more just and compassionate alternative to Western powers in the Middle East.³⁹ This humanitarian approach is also institutionalized through organizations such as AFAD (Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency) and TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency). These institutions play a central role in delivering humanitarian aid, development assistance, and reconstruction projects across former Ottoman geographies, including the Balkans, the Middle East, and parts of Africa. From a Neo-Ottoman perspective, this approach also reflects an aspiration to reclaim its historical role as a protector of oppressed peoples and a central power, evoking the Ottoman legacy of regional stewardship and leadership in the Islamic world.⁴⁰ This approach strengthens its influence among neighboring states and also reinforces its leadership narrative in the Muslim world.

On the surface level, it seems like the shift from a European to a neo-Ottoman discourse appears to operate primarily within the realm of high politics, manifested through

³⁷ M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), xiii.

³⁸ Berdal Aral, "'The World Is Bigger than Five': A Salutory Manifesto of Turkey's New International Outlook," *Insight Turkey* 21, no. 4 (2019): 71–95,

³⁹ Mustafa Kutlay and Ziya Öniş, "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order: Strategic Autonomy or New Forms of Dependence?" *International Affairs* 97, no. 4 (2021): 1097.

⁴⁰ Bülent Aras and Pinar Akpınar, "The Role of Humanitarian NGOs in Turkey's Foreign Policy," *International Peacekeeping* 22, no. 3 (2015): 235–238.

institutionalized practices by ministries such as Ministry of Foreign Affairs, or the Ministry of Culture, and their diplomatic engagements with the EU and countries in the MENA region. However, in the IR scholarship, especially in the critical theory debates, it is argued that politics does not reside solely in grand summits or the corridors of foreign ministries. It also permeates everyday life, shaping and being shaped by social media feeds, television screens, and even casual conversations that take place in our living rooms.⁴¹ With Turkey's growing political tensions with the EU, its realignment with Gulf countries, and political statements increasingly centered on Turkey's glorified past, this shift gradually infused into the everyday lives of ordinary citizens. What initially appeared as a transformation confined to high politics became progressively visible in cultural forms that only slowly became accessible to the broader public. This change unfolded alongside the Turkish government's new political aspirations and was reinforced through regulatory interventions in the media sector as well as shifts in the genres and narratives of television productions. In doing so, it expanded conventional understandings of foreign policy and the political by enabling these concepts and structures to circulate across multiple cultural formats embedded in everyday life and produced through the routine practices of cultural producers.

In the past ten years, the cultural site of Turkey has become a place where different political processes intersect, from national identity building to foreign policy making, through the reproduction of the nation through popular culture, many cultural artefacts, including the soap operas. This development necessitates a theoretical engagement with how national identities and geopolitical imaginaries are constructed, negotiated, and circulated through

⁴¹ Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall, and Ted Svensson, "Everyday International Relations: Editors' Introduction," *Cooperation and Conflict* (2019): 123-130; Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans, "The Concept of 'the Everyday': Ephemeral Politics and the Abundance of Life," *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 278-96; Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (London: Routledge, 2002); Angharad Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

cultural production, as well as with the agency of cultural producers operating at the intersection of culture and power.

Situating Turkish Television Dramas within International Relations

The intersection of culture, national identity, and foreign policy has increasingly drawn scholarly attention in International Relations. This is particularly the case in literatures where national identity is conceptualized as a contested and actively negotiated terrain at the everyday level, and where the political is conceptualized and reproduced through ordinary cultural practices. Critical approaches to foreign policy, especially the debates in post-colonialism,⁴² feminism,⁴³ critical security studies,⁴⁴ post-structuralism⁴⁵ and international political sociology⁴⁶ have examined how meaning-making practices and everyday politics shape national identity and foreign policy. In this strand, foreign policy is theorized as a key site in

⁴² For exemplary work, please see: Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

⁴³ For exemplary work, please see: Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Megan Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718; Lee Ann Fujii, "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 231–241.

⁴⁴ For exemplary work, please see: Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998); for ontological security perspectives: Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008); Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–627.

⁴⁵ For exemplary work, please see David Campbell, *Writing Security: The United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jutta Weldes and Diane Saco, "Making State Action Possible: The United States and the Discursive Construction of 'the Cuban Problem,'" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 361–395; Matt Davies, "You Can't Charge Innocent People for Saving the World: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Politics of World Order," *International Political Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 449–473; Kyle Grayson, "How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 378–393; Angharad Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

⁴⁶ For exemplary work, please see Tugba Basaran, Didier Bigo, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and R. B. J. Walker, eds., *International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines* (London: Routledge, 2017); Didier Bigo and R. B. J. Walker, *International Political Sociology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Zoë Jay, "Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences": Genre, Politics, and Fun at the *Junior Eurovision Song Contest*, *International Political Sociology* 17, no. 4 (December 2023); Ruben Kremers and Lena Rethel, "Curated Power: The Performative Politics of (Industry) Events," *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2024).

which national identity is articulated, often in relation to perceived external constraints, hierarchies, and Others. When foreign policy is conceptualized as a relational and meaning-making site, cultural production and everyday-level analyses become crucial for tracing how competing visions of the nation are negotiated and circulated across everyday and foreign policy domains.

In the case Turkey's foreign policy, the meaning of "Turkishness" is neither fixed nor solely state driven. As discussed in the historical background section, Turkey's historical trajectory combined with its geographical location between the East and West as long complicated efforts to define Turkishness as belonging unequivocally to one side or the other. This ambiguity points to the fundamentally fluid nature of national identity, particularly in the realm of foreign policy, where identity is continuously reshaped in response to shifting domestic and international conjunctures rather than remaining fixed or immutable.⁴⁷ Moreover, identity formation cannot be understood as a purely top-down process. Over the past fifteen years, Turkish cultural production has increasingly become a site where Turkishness is negotiated, contested, and rearticulated through changing conjunctures, most notably through television dramas and soap operas. In this context, foreign policy and national identity emerge not as fixed outcomes of centralized state narratives, but as the product of complex and dynamic interactions among cultural workers, market forces, and political institutions.

Therefore, the current research builds on debates on national identity, foreign policy, and cultural production, situating itself within the Popular Culture World Politics literature in International Relations which will be discussed in detail in the upcoming paragraphs and chapters. This literature enables an analysis of the political through the lens of cultural

⁴⁷ David Campbell. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and The Politics of Identity*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999, 11.

production and everyday practices, with a particular focus on the nexus between geopolitics and popular culture.⁴⁸ Consequently, this research examines how identity and foreign policy are produced and mediated through cultural production, highlighting the ways in which popular culture operates both as a reflection of existing power structures and as a site for alternative political imaginaries. This body of literature enables the study to conceptualize power as embedded in representational and everyday practices in this research, thereby allowing cultural production to be read as a matter of international politics through the lens of relational agency.

While attending representational practices in national identity formation, this dissertation also foregrounds cultural producers as active agents of these representations, who indirectly participate in the making of national identity and foreign policy. It examines the structural conditions within which they operate, their everyday work practices, and the power networks they are embedded in, thereby placing cultural producers at the center of cultural politics. Debates in Media Studies and Production Studies are particularly useful in this regard, as they analyze the cultural production sector in terms of its own internal dynamics and its relationship to meaning-making and politics.⁴⁹ These insights enable the study to foreground contextual agency, allowing for an analysis of how cultural producers exercise agency in relation to specific institutional settings, market structures, and political constraints. In doing so, this research brings concepts and analytical insights from Media Studies and Production Studies into dialogue with International Relations scholarship. This section of the

⁴⁸ For exemplary work please see: Matt Davies, “You Can’t Charge Innocent People for Saving the World: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Politics of World Order,” *International Political Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 449–473; Kyle Grayson, “How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 378–393; Schmid, Julian. 2020. “(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (5): 690–712; Der Derian, James. 2009. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Routledge.

⁴⁹ For exemplary work, please see Miranda J. Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8; Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Vicki Mayer, *The Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

Introduction situates the dissertation within the discipline of International Relations by briefly introducing the key literatures, scholars, works, and concepts that inspired this project. These literatures and works shared here will be examined in greater detail in the forthcoming *Concepts and Tools* chapter.

This research employs an analytical lens through which national identity and foreign policy are understood as fluid and relational practices. Building on Campbell's emphasis on 'states are never finished as entities' and identity as a continually reproduced concept through practices of difference,⁵⁰ such as situating the Self towards an Other, it examines the political consequences of such practices in the context of Ottoman-themed television series. In his work, Campbell shifts the understanding of security from the realm of military concerns to the discursive and aesthetic domain by conceptualizing it as a practice rather than a material condition.⁵¹ He argues that security is not merely measured or sustained through material capacities; rather, it is constituted through discursive practices that define threats and, in doing so, produce and reproduce the boundaries of the political "Self" in relation to an "Other." His claim that the articulation of danger functions as a condition of possibility for political identity provides a robust theoretical framework for analyzing how symbolic codes such as the past, civilization, and threat operate in the construction of national identity. This understanding of national identity in relation to foreign policy resonates with the analytical lens of this thesis and is reflected in the cultural artifacts examined in this project. The practice of identity formation - structured around perceived threats and articulated through distinctions between "us" and "them" - is particularly visible in Ottoman-themed television series, which form the empirical focus of the study. In these productions, representations of identity and threat

⁵⁰ Campbell. *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and The Politics of Identity*, 11.

⁵¹ Ibid, 1-8.

delineate the boundaries of the national through visual aesthetics and narrative forms, rendering them both culturally and politically salient.

Building on this understanding of the production of the national identity, the project turns to aesthetic practices of identity formation, mobilizing Bleiker's concept of the "aesthetic turn".⁵² Bleiker conceptualizes aesthetics as an alternative mode of political understanding and representation, leading the way to the examination of cultural artefacts' political nature. He argues that no representation, including the most systematic empirical inquiry, can capture reality as it is, since all representation necessarily involves interpretation and abstraction.⁵³ Therefore, "The power of aesthetics, and its political relevance, lies in the explicit engagement with this inevitable process of abstraction".⁵⁴ They involve a decision about how to project a given situation within a world of endless possibilities, a choice that itself embodies a form of agency in shaping meaning, but not necessarily in determining how it will be received. Where He demonstrates how aesthetic practices, whether in literature, film, or visual culture, expand the horizons of political imagination through representation, including the making of national identity which speaks to the core of this dissertation's investigation

Closs Stephens extends this discussion by shifting attention from representation to affect. She shows how everyday practices operate as affective sites in which distinctions between "us" and "them" are quietly produced and felt, allowing the nation to momentarily flicker into presence through ordinary and often unnoticed experiences.⁵⁵ She asks the question of 'How do ideas about 'us and them' take form in ordinary spaces, in ways that are both deeply felt and hardly noticeable?'.⁵⁶ This approach shifts the analytical focus away from spectacular

⁵² Roland Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 509–533.

⁵³ Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 46.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁵⁶ Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political*, 1.

moments of national representation toward the mundane and the habitual. It highlights how national belonging is not simply articulated or symbolized but felt through affective atmospheres embedded in everyday life.

All these interventions point to the moments of seemingly ordinary or unserious practices, foregrounding how power, identity, and belonging are produced not only through explicit political discourse but also through affective and aesthetic practices. After anchoring the main approach of the dissertation in this understanding of the national identity and foreign policy, I gradually narrow the focus and turn to thinking with scholars of popular culture. The dissertation examines television series and other cultural artefacts that are seemingly mundane as key entry points for examining the entanglements of politics, national identity, and foreign policy. Therefore, zooming in on the Popular Culture and World Politics literature, provides productive encounters. Grayson, Davies, and Philpott intervene in the discipline of International Relations by foregrounding the popular culture–geopolitics–identity nexus, in which cultural production becomes integral to the construction of national identities and geopolitical imaginaries.⁵⁷ This nexus underscores how cultural texts and practices not only circulate representations of the nation but also shape collective understandings of Self and Other in ways that inform geopolitical imaginaries.⁵⁸

Within this context, TV has made its way into the discussion through works such as Matt Davies’s reading of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which treats popular culture as a

⁵⁷ Kyle Grayson, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott, “Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture–World Politics Continuum,” *Politics* 29, no. 3 (2009): 155–63.

⁵⁸ For exemplary works in this literature, please see Matt Davies, “Work in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” *International Political Sociology* 4 (2010): 178–94; Kyle Grayson, “How to Read *Paddington Bear*: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*,” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2013): 378–93; Jason Dittmer, “Captain America’s Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* (2005); Julian Schmid, “(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2020); Jutta Weldes, “Going Cultural: *Star Trek*, State Action, and Popular Culture,” *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999): 117–34.

mediating site between theoretical reflection and the lived experiences of everyday life. Rather than positioning television itself as a geopolitical form, Davies uses *Buffy* to bring into view questions of work, subjectivity, and everyday experience that remain largely marginal within IR.⁵⁹ Robert Saunders, on the other hand, in his article, theorizes television as a unique arena for geopolitical intervention, arguing that television serials with dramatic storylines are not just engaged in representing world politics; rather, they are involved in making geopolitics, identities, and threats. Through the formulation of a typology for “geopolitical television,” he demonstrates how television series offer audiences an aesthetic and emotional “way in” to international politics.⁶⁰ On the basis of these insights, this thesis seeks to examine television dramas, especially Turkish soap operas, as popular culture in its role as a mediator between everyday life and world politics by representing and disseminating narratives of identity, memory, and geopolitics.

While the nexus between identity and aesthetic practices has been unpacked by PCWP scholars, the scholars of the literature point out the current limitations and overlooked areas in the discipline. Brought into researchers’ attention in 2021 by Rhys Crilley and reaffirmed in 2024 by Matt Davies and Aida Hozic, the literature can benefit from unpacking the practices of the production process of popular culture, and everyday practices of its producers.⁶¹ According to these scholars, this approach can open new horizons in the study of PCWP by highlighting the human dimension of cultural politics and raising questions about the type of power at play in the cultural site. Building on this insight, this study turns its attention to

⁵⁹ Matt Davies, “Work in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*,” *International Political Sociology* 4 (2010): 178–94.

⁶⁰ Robert A. Saunders, “Small Screen IR: A Tentative Typology of Geopolitical Television,” *Geopolitics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 691–727.

⁶¹ Aida Hozic and Matt Davies, “Popular Culture and World Politics,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Rhys Crilley, “Where We At? New Directions for Research on Popular Culture and World Politics,” *International Studies Review* 23 (2021): 164–180.

cultural producers as a group of actors whose practices are consequential for International Relations, and to the work through which they produce popular culture.

Several IR literatures engage with the everyday practices of ordinary people in relation to world politics; however, the cultural producers remain as an understudied realm in IR, including the PCWP literature. While an established body of work, particularly in fan studies, examines how audiences receive and interpret meaning, the production side of popular culture has received far less sustained analytical attention. Other resonant fields in IR such as Feminism⁶² and International Political Sociology⁶³ contributed to the debates of ordinary people in IR significantly. Especially Feminist scholars, such as Enloe and Daigle provide significant inspiration for the current research. Daigle, in her book where she aims to unpack how bodies are governed in Cuba with a focus on Cuban women shifts the understanding of power from formal political and economic structures and locating it within intimacy, affect, and everyday relationships shaped by global inequality.⁶⁴ Similarly, Enloe in her work asks the question of where are the women and why were they made invisible in international political structures, and de-centers power from states, elites, and formal institutions and shows that power operates through everyday social relations, especially gendered ones.⁶⁵ While their works focus on different empirical subjects, their theorization of power has become an

⁶² For exemplary work, please see: Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014); Megan Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015); Carol Cohn, "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12, no. 4 (1987): 687–718; Lee Ann Fujii, "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 231–241.

⁶³ For exemplary work, please see Tugba Basaran, Didier Bigo, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and R. B. J. Walker, eds., *International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines* (London: Routledge, 2017); Didier Bigo and R. B. J. Walker, *International Political Sociology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Zoë Jay, "Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences": Genre, Politics, and Fun at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest, *International Political Sociology* 17, no. 4 (December 2023); Ruben Kremers and Lena Rethel, "Curated Power: The Performative Politics of (Industry) Events," *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2024).

⁶⁴ Megan Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

inspiration for this research. They theorize power as relational, negotiated and ambiguous that operates through everyday social relations, acknowledge a group of people, especially women, not as victims but as subjects who exercise agency in international politics. Together, they work around unpacking how international politics is constituted through embodied practices, affective relations, and the lived experiences of ordinary people.

Drawing inspiration from these influential works, this dissertation aims to examine the position of cultural professionals in International Relations by exploring how negotiations of power and identity unfold through their everyday work within cultural sites, thereby revealing the networks of power embedded in cultural production. While my work does not center around Feminist IR or offer an ethnographic reading of the field like the previously mentioned feminism research, it benefits from the concept of *accidental ethnography*⁶⁶ through including the observations during the fieldwork as important parts of the data. In this way, it attempts to go beyond the verbal statement of producers and make the production process and the producers more visible in the realm of International Relations. Due to their special position between art, commerce and ideology, I render them as active participants of meaning-making, hence the politics, and explore the ways in which they position themselves in relation to sovereign power and how they challenge or negotiate it through micro-practices.

This focus of the project on cultural producers foregrounds them as actors in foreign policy and brings the question of “agency” in the discussion. It sheds light on the ways in which the abstract concepts such as “identity” and “foreign policy” and political structures have been produced at a daily level by sector professionals. As already discussed previously, meaning-making practices, everyday decisions and ordinary people have inevitable political effects that

⁶⁶ Lee Ann Fujii, “Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data,” *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 4 (2015).

can influence broader structures; however, there is still a space to further explore how these practices are taking place in the popular culture sector, through which processes, and by whom. Solomon and Steele's article, *Micro-moves in International Relations*, conceptualizes micropolitics in a way that provides this research with a valuable analytical lens to unpack these dynamics more systematically. Their conceptualization opens the space for practices of everyday life in IR and sees global systems and structures through the lenses of lived, embodied, and experiential processes.⁶⁷ This focus on the embodied processes create the space for the investigation of everyday subjects, and their involvement in the making of international politics. As they put it "A promise of micropolitics ... is that it seeks out an agency for individuals and groups."⁶⁸ This understanding of micropolitics repositions agency away from the state and formal institutions and places it within the actions and practices of individuals and collectives. This approach to micropolitics strongly resonates with the focus of this project on cultural producers and their daily creative practices that contribute to the production and circulation of international political meaning.

By examining how producers of television dramas negotiate, embed, and circulate geopolitical narratives, the analysis draws on micro-political insights to highlight the often-overlooked forms of agency that shape popular culture and, by extension, international politics. Building on this and adding a different layer to the discussions on the agency of culture professionals in international politics, Jay's recent work becomes inspirational. She investigates the Junior Eurovision Song Contest as a site of international politics. She shows that in these events; agency is works as a relational concept. In referring to "children and adults", Jay emphasizes that agency in these events is co-produced by child performers and the adults surrounding them, such as producers, coaches, choreographers, parents, and institutional

⁶⁷ Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, "Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory," *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 2 (2017): 267–91.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 272.

decision-makers. It highlights how children's creativity intersects with adults' guidance and control, all shaped by class, race, gender, and maturity.⁶⁹ Her relational understanding of *agency* also resonates with my analysis of how agency is co-constructed between cultural creative workers, producers, and the state, around themes such as nationhood, identity, and commerce. It is not always a power or authority given by broader structures such as state, but it can be constructed at the everyday level through micro practices and enable ordinary people to produce and reproduce meaning that connects to broader structures like foreign policy. This perspective allows me to examine how seemingly small, everyday decisions and practices of cultural producers can be deeply political and have broader structural implications. Together, this literature on popular culture and micropolitics demonstrates that aesthetic practices, popular culture and their producers are not peripheral but central to understanding how foreign policy is produced and narrated, contested, and consumed.

Building on existing scholarship on Popular Culture and World Politics with micro-moves in International Relations, this research takes the investigation a step further by examining the kinds of agency cultural producers exercise in international politics. It does so by unpacking their everyday work practices alongside the narratives they produce as part of their professional roles, and by exploring how their personal, professional, and national identities intersect, and what crystallizes at these intersections. Through this lens, the study pays particular attention to how power and agency operate within the field of cultural production. Power in this work is conceptualized as a fluid and relational form that circulates across networks of production and the state, rather than being held or exercised unilaterally. It is not treated solely as institutionalized authority and exercised through mechanisms such as funding, censorship, or access to filming locations, but also as something that circulates within

⁶⁹ Zoë Jay, "Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences': Genre, Politics, and Fun at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest," *International Political Sociology* 17, no. 4 (December 2023).

the cultural sector itself. Power emerges through the everyday choices, negotiations, and creative decisions undertaken by producers, directors, and other cultural workers as they navigate shifting political contexts and geopolitical priorities. These micro-practices of meaning-making enable cultural producers to act as active participants in international politics.

This approach also helps to make visible the power structures within which cultural producers operate, while allowing for a more precise articulation of the relationship between agency and power. Here, agency refers to the scope of action and influence cultural producers exercise within the field of production, particularly in shaping meaning-making processes through their creative and professional practices. The outcomes generated through this agency give rise to a form of power that is neither fixed nor institutionalized in the manner of state authority yet nonetheless operates as a significant mode of influence grounded in knowledge production and representation. While this agency can be relational as unpacked by Jay through the interaction of producers within the cultural field or with the state,⁷⁰ it is also defined by the context the producers are working in. Therefore, rather than treating agency as emerging only from interaction and relationality, the research brings contextual agency into the picture, understanding it as enabled or constrained by the specific structural, institutional, temporal, and spatial conditions in which actors operate. In this sense, agency is not uniform but varies across political regimes, historical moments, and cultural settings, foregrounding situational possibilities rather than interaction alone.

While existing IR scholarship provides valuable tools for conceptualizing power in popular culture as relational and fluid,⁷¹ it pays limited attention to how the agency of cultural producers, exercised through their production practices, actively shapes international politics.

⁷⁰ Jay, “*Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences’: Genre, Politics, and Fun at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest.*” 14-15.

⁷¹ Solomon & Steele, *Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory*, 267–91; Jay, “*Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences’: Genre, Politics, and Fun at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest.*” 14-15.

To address this gap, this research adopts a production-centered, practice-oriented framework that can capture the everyday decisions, negotiations, and creative choices through which meaning and power materialized. Works of Media and Production Studies scholars provide valuable insights into the context of cultural production and everyday practices. Particularly, drawing on Banks's focus on cultural work as situated, value-laden labor⁷² and Caldwell's emphasis on production cultures and the reflexive practices of industry professionals,⁷³ I bring into attention the institutional and creative logics structuring the field. Within this tradition, producers and cultural workers are foregrounded as analytically central yet unevenly positioned agents, revealing how creativity, professionalism, and agency are politically constructed and differentially valued within media industries.⁷⁴ This approach helps the current research in conceptualizing agency as both relational and contextual. Rather than treating cultural producers' agency as an attribute possessed by autonomous actors, it understands agency as emerging through networks of relations, between producers, institutions, audiences, and state and market actors, while simultaneously being conditioned by specific political, industrial, and historical contexts. This dual approach allows for an analysis of how everyday production practices not only reflect but also actively negotiate and rework broader structures of power, international politics.

Through this multilayered understanding of agency of cultural production in International Relations, this dissertation illuminates how cultural producers engage with foreign policy and national identity making. Sometimes they navigate and reproduce

⁷² Mark Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁷³ John T. Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁷⁴ Miranda J. Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8; Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Vicki Mayer, *The Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

geopolitical narratives, and at times they challenge or contest them through their creative and professional practices. This form of agency in meaning-making, particularly within popular culture, has power in world politics, as cultural artefacts circulate widely and shape people's political imaginaries through their affective and easily accessible forms. By situating cultural production within broader transnational power dynamics, the thesis highlights how the producers of popular culture participate in shaping the symbolic and affective dimensions of global politics.

By integrating these perspectives into the fieldwork – relational interviews with cultural producers, and visual and discourse analysis of on-screen representations - this research contributes to the International Relations literature by approaching cultural producers as foreign policy actors and by foregrounding the micro-practices through which international politics is enacted. Bringing together micropolitical approaches in IR and production-oriented media studies, the study conceptualizes cultural producers' agency as simultaneously relationally produced and contextually conditioned, grounded in the everyday practices through which international meaning and power are continuously negotiated. By attending to these micro-level dynamics and individual agencies, this project situates cultural production as a key site for exploring how and where foreign policy is produced and projected; representations of national identity are constructed and circulated, and how cultural producers operate in these structures as non-traditional actors in foreign policy.

Research Questions

To investigate the aforementioned processes and the evolving political dynamics within the cultural sector and its relationship with the state and political institutions, this dissertation is guided by the following central research question and sub-questions:

Central RQ: How does cultural production serve as a medium for negotiating Turkey's national identity and foreign policy in the context of changing geopolitical priorities?

Sub RQ: How is this shift negotiated in the field by the cultural producers?

Theoretically, this project aims to study traditional International Relations (IR) concepts by foregrounding cultural producers, especially television professionals, and reaffirming the significance of television in the digital age. Focusing on the production and circulation of Ottoman-themed dramas, it develops a holistic reading of the sector that integrates two dimensions: the representations offered on-screen and the insights drawn from cultural producers' everyday work behind the scenes. Bringing these levels together allows for an analysis of the complexities of cultural production as both a site for political meaning creation and a space of agency for cultural workers. In this framework, cultural producers are not treated as passive transmitters of state ideology but as active agents whose everyday negotiations, compromises, and creative decisions contribute to the continual reproduction and contestation of power in contemporary Turkey.

This project further theorizes the entanglement of power and the political as co-produced processes situated at the intersection of foreign policy and cultural production, emphasizing the agency embedded in everyday production dynamics. As mentioned earlier, drawing inspiration from interdisciplinary approaches such as International Political Sociology - where International Relations intersects with cultural studies, feminism, and related fields - it foregrounds the embodied experiences of specific groups engaged in politics. Theoretically, this project contributes to Popular Culture and World Politics by reconceptualizing cultural producers as agents in international politics and by locating the production of national identity and geopolitical meaning within everyday practices of cultural production. By constructing an interdisciplinary framework, it extends the concept of agency to cultural producers as actors in

international politics, exploring how they generate meaning through embodied experiences and how identity is constructed and negotiated in practice.

The interdisciplinary approach of the project comes from its engagement with Media and Production Studies to unpack the power relations within the television industry and to foreground the micro-politics of creative labor and further theorize the role of cultural producers in international politics. Foundational works in production studies such as the books of Caldwell, Banks and Mayer,⁷⁵ and the anthropology of cultural labor from Mahon,⁷⁶ demonstrate how creative workers navigate tensions between commerce, politics, and cultural meaning-making. More recent contributions further situate these dynamics within transnational contexts: Algan and Kaptan show how political authorities in Turkey use cultural engineering to shape the television industry,⁷⁷ while Yeşil highlights the strategic mobilization of historical dramas for counter-hegemonic narratives aimed at Muslim audiences.⁷⁸ Taken together, this literature shifts the analytical focus from states and audiences to producers, revealing the layered and contested processes through which cultural products mediate world politics. This approach opens a way for analyzing how cultural producers align themselves with, or contest, shifting configurations of state power through their micro-practices. When put into dialogue with the IR literature, it helps me conceptualize cultural production as a constitutive force in the making of national identity - particularly by foregrounding a non-Western case and its cultural projection across the MENA region.

⁷⁵ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, eds., *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009); John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008).

⁷⁶ Maureen Mahon, "The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 29 (2000): 467–92.

⁷⁷ Ece Algan and Yeşim Kaptan, "Content Is Power: Cultural Engineering and Political Control over Transnational Television," *International Communication Gazette* 85, nos. 3–4 (2023): 325–44.

⁷⁸ Bilge Yeşil, "Promoting Turkish History and Civilization: Television Dramas and Muslim Audiences," in *Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024), 117.

As a complement to the theoretical framework, the thesis centers Ottoman-themed soap operas created between 2011-2025 as its empirical case. It builds on the empirical works on the growing influence of Ottoman-themed soap operas by approaching the genre through a new theoretical lenses and method, specifically turning the analytical lens to production practices to reveal the political dynamics and power relations within the Turkish soap opera sector. Early analyses of the soap operas framed the international popularity of these series as a form of “soap opera diplomacy” and soft power,⁷⁹ though others cautioned that their geopolitical impact is often overstated or contested.⁸⁰ For example, Miriam Berg conducted extensive research on Turkish drama serials, focusing on how their international circulation functions as a tool of soft power and shapes audience perceptions of Turkey’s culture, identity, and geopolitical presence especially in the Arab contexts.⁸¹

Regarding their domestic effects, scholars such as Carney and Özçetin examined series like *Magnificent Century* and *Diriliş: Ertuğrul* mobilize competing visions of the Ottoman past, where questions of necro politics, populism, and cultural elitism intersect with the AKP’s neo-Ottomanist agenda.⁸² Amzi-Erdoğdular and Ergin & Karakaya further complicate the picture by distinguishing between state-led Ottomanist narratives and the popular fascination with “Ottomania,” suggesting that historical dramas operate at the nexus of official ideology

⁷⁹ B. Senem Çevik, “Turkish Soap Opera Diplomacy: A Western Projection by a Muslim Source,” *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (2015); Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, “Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera Colonialism,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2361–85.

⁸⁰ Marwan M. Kraidy, “Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt-Turkey Row over Television Drama,” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (2019); Marwan M. Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, “Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere,” *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): 17–29.

⁸¹ Miriam Berg, *Turkish Drama Serials: The Importance and Influence of a Globally Popular Television Phenomenon* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023).

⁸² Burak Özçetin, “‘The Show of the People’ against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey,” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019): 942–57; Josh Carney, “Resur(e)cting a Spectacular Hero: *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 93–114; Josh Carney, “ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey’s (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*,” *Middle East Critique* (2019).

and consumerist nostalgia.⁸³ Together, this body of work illustrates that Ottoman-themed dramas are simultaneously domestic battlegrounds for identity politics and transnational actors in Turkey's cultural diplomacy, producing ambivalent outcomes for notions of soft power. While these works constitute a basis in understanding their function of soft power and identity making, I would like to build on their focus and go beyond their interpretation as means of soft power. Therefore, this research focuses on the micropolitics of the cultural site where everyday negotiations of identity and foreign policy take place through the practices of Turkish cultural producers and transnational media networks. While the mentioned studies provide a strong foundation for understanding the role of historical dramas in soft power and identity-making, they largely overlook the micropolitics of the cultural production site itself, where everyday negotiations of identity and foreign policy are enacted by cultural producers. This dissertation addresses this gap by providing an empirical investigation into these production processes, exploring the transnational dynamics of the sector and how personal, professional, and national identities intersect in shaping on-screen representations and broader political narratives.

In order to contribute to the empirical and theoretical literature, this project adapts a suitable methodological approach that is slightly different than the previous works in Popular Culture and World Politics literature. The thesis employs a combination of critical discourse analysis and visual analysis to examine the evolving representations of Turkishness on screen alongside official discourses of political figures. In addition, the research design aims to produce a reflexive space wherein cultural producers reflect on themselves by juxtaposing their interpretations of their own work with the on-screen representations that they have produced through relations interview with them. These reflections of the cultural producers are not

⁸³ Leyla Amzi-Erdogdular, "Ottomania: Televised Histories and Otherness Revisited," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 879–93; Murat Ergin and Yağmur Karakaya, "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomanism: Navigating State-Led and Popular Cultural Representations of the Past," *New Perspectives on Turkey* (2017), Cambridge University Press.

treated as transparent but subjected to critical analysis by the researcher within the larger structures of meaning and power.

This framework moves beyond the traditional focus on text analysis and representation in Popular Culture and World Politics (PCWP) literature by adapting Caldwell's concept of 'cultural self-portraits' from media studies into the notion of 'cultural (Self-)portraits.' This concept describes how media industries reflexively narrate and legitimize their own labor practices and power relations through production talk and behind-the-scenes discourse,⁸⁴ which helps with unpacking the context they are working in. The individual self-reflections of the producers come together to form a collective portrait that is neither homogeneous nor complete. The adaptation of this term as (Self-)Portraits serves to foreground my positionality as a researcher, acknowledging my role as a co-producer of meaning who assembles contingent and situated collective portraits through dialogical research encounters shaped by interpretation, interaction, and power relations.

As a methodological tool, this approach enables the analysis of media power not only through texts or political economy, but also through the ways industries symbolically theorize themselves. It provides cultural producers with a platform to reflect on their work and the dynamics within which they operate through relational interviews and welcomes insights into the practices, decisions, and negotiations that produce meaning within the industry. Through this approach, the project captures the micropolitics of production, highlighting the agency of cultural producers as non-traditional actors in shaping national identity and foreign policy. Methodologically, this research contributes to the field of Popular Culture and World Politics by moving the focus from representation and reception towards cultural production, as well as by developing a reflexive, dialogical approach that places cultural producers at the forefront as politically relevant subjects.

⁸⁴ Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*, 14.

Thesis Structure

This dissertation is structured around six chapters in total: Introduction, Theoretical and Methodological Framework, three analytical chapters referred to as “Frames”, and Conclusion. Borrowed from cinema and television, the concept of the frame refers to the boundary of what is visible on screen at any given moment. Used metaphorically, each Frame functions as an analytical unit that deliberately foregrounds certain dimensions of cultural production while holding others temporarily in the background. Rather than offering a linear or exhaustive account, each Frame zooms in on a specific dimension of the broader story. These dimensions include representation, political dynamics and agency within the sector, and the broader political projection of soap operas across borders. In doing so, the Frames operate as overlapping and relational perspectives that collectively assemble a more complex picture of cultural production. Each Frame brings together textual analysis, production discourse, and producers’ embodied experiences, treating the human dimension of cultural labor not as supplementary context but as integral to how meaning and power are produced. This structure of the Frames function like a magnifying glass. By narrowing the field of vision, it makes visible the micropolitical processes, negotiations, and tensions that broader structural analyses often leave unseen. At the same time, the Frame remains aware of its own partiality: what is foregrounded in one Frame may recede in another, underscoring that cultural production cannot be captured from a single vantage point. Taken together, these three Frames create a composite picture of how Ottoman-themed dramas mediate the intersections of culture, identity, and foreign policy in contemporary Turkey.

The theoretical framework chapter develops a conceptual and methodological toolkit to analyze how Turkey’s cultural sector and foreign policy co-constitute each other under the state’s neo-Ottoman ambitions, with a focus on cultural artifacts and their producers as key

political actors for this research. It first situates soap operas, especially the Ottoman themed series within debates on popular culture, everyday politics, and treating nostalgia as a bridge between past, present, and future and a lens through which historical themes are reactivated in cultural production. It then bridges theory and method by defining discourse as both verbal and visual representation, spanning on-screen portrayals and the statements of political authorities. Crucially, these forms of discourse are read in relation to producers' self-reflections. By adapting Caldwell's notion of "cultural self-portraits" into "cultural (Self-)portraits," the analysis brings together producers' reflexive accounts of their work with a critical engagement with their creative output, allowing insight into how meaning, agency, and power are negotiated across production and broader political projection. Methodologically, the project connects to this approach and employs relational interviews with industry professionals, fieldwork observations, and critical discourse and visual analysis of TV dramas and political speeches, while also interpreting silence as a meaningful form of agency. Finally, the chapter explores how cultural producers, through everyday negotiations and mundane decisions, shape discourses of identity and power, underscoring their role as non-traditional actors in the articulation of national identity and foreign policy.

Frame I focuses on the Turkish television screen and aims to provide an overview of how Turkish TV and the representational practices of Turkish identity have changed over time, and what it potentially means. It starts by examining the changes in the Turkish political sphere after 2011 and their alignment with the cultural sector. For example, the TV rating system shifted from an American audience-measuring company to a pro-government Turkish firm, prioritizing rural and pro-government audiences over a more diverse viewership, which in turn shaped production preferences. The first part also provides a space to reflect on TV series before 2011, considering how they portrayed Turkey's international affairs at the time in the productions, so that the reader can track the changing narratives in time. The second section

constitutes the level of representation and text analysis of the selected shows. It critically examines what is projected on television through the most-watched Ottoman-themed TV series by analyzing their plotlines, key scenes, and visuals. While not offering a comprehensive analysis of these shows, it identifies moments where identity-building through popular culture occurs at the everyday level. Incorporating producers' comments on these productions and their approach to representation, the section aims to investigate motivations behind the current representations on TV, and what they tell us about the current government's political agenda.

Frame II shifts the lens to the TV production site, focusing on the sets and the power dynamics within which producers operate, and aims to tease out the “human” process of meaning-making. The chapter's first part examines the rising success of the Turkish TV sector and its evolving ties with political actors over the years. It further illustrates how this success has been leveraged for nationalist projects and highlights changing sector dynamics with the emergence of new production companies. The chapter then delves into the layered landscape of Turkish drama production, exploring the motivations and identity negotiations in the lives and work of cultural producers. By unpacking their everyday practices in a rapidly politicizing environment, this section investigates how producers contribute to national identity-making and how they perceive their own positionality. It also provides a space to reflect on the connections between their personal motivations and the outcomes of their creative work.

Frame III extends the analysis to the broader political projection of Turkish television, focusing on the Ottoman-militarist genre and its reception in the MENA region, to demonstrate how meaning is never fixed and how cultural production and international politics are closely intertwined. The first section traces the circulation of Turkish television series in the MENA region, showing how producers became unexpectedly entangled in diplomatic processes as their work came to be read through state-aligned narratives. The second section turns to

moments of diplomatic crisis, examining how Turkish soap operas became sites of political contestation and triggered counter-productions across the region, thereby revealing television's complex and multidirectional dynamics rather than a linear exercise of soft power. The final section shifts the focus to micro-level practices and the agency of producers, highlighting transnational collaborations and demonstrating how industry actors navigated political crises, adapted the sector, and mediated between state ambitions and cultural production. Taken together, Frame III illuminates the entanglement of power, politics, and cultural production, foregrounding cultural producers as non-traditional actors in International Relations.

The conclusion of the thesis aims to bring together what has been studied regarding the changing discourse in political sites as the intersection of political processes. It highlights the productivity that comes from the entanglement of the mentioned political processes at the cultural site and elaborates more on the questions of power and political at the cultural level. The conclusion also attempts to answer a research participant's question, "Where am I as a creative worker?" which signals the ambiguity in their political position. After outlining this dissertation's contributions to the literature, it offers reflections on potential directions for future research in this area.

STAGING THE PAST, PROJECTING THE NATION: CONCEPTS AND TOOLS

In contemporary Turkey, television screens have become battlegrounds of memory and political imagination, reaching audiences far beyond the country itself. Here, rival visions of the Ottoman past compete to define who the nation seeks to become, both internally and on the world stage, that goes beyond defining who the nation once was. This dissertation begins from this cultural conjuncture, arguing that the production and circulation of historical dramas are central to the ongoing negotiation of national identity and foreign policy, with their producers being actively involved in this process. Understanding this interplay requires a theoretical approach that treats identity not as a fixed essence, but as a process continually made meaningful by people, institutions, and narratives. It further calls for an interdisciplinary framework capable of exploring and theorizing the role of cultural producers within these dynamics. Correspondingly, the methodology is closely aligned with the conceptual framework, placing meaning-making practices and embodied experiences of cultural workers at its core.

As an interpretivist project, the research also incorporates reflexivity, allowing for critical reflection on how the researcher's positionality shapes the construction of this research and situates the researcher as one of the interlocutors in the project. This chapter therefore serves a dual purpose: it establishes the theoretical framework and outlines the methodological toolkit for this study. It first maps the conceptual terrain linking national identity and foreign policy to cultural production, providing the foundation for understanding how cultural site and political action are intertwined. Later, it moves into methodological considerations and reflexive notes of the researcher which leads the way to the first analytical chapter: Frame I.

The Nexus of Cultural Production, National Identity and Foreign Policy

Throughout modern Turkish history, shifts in foreign policy orientation have consistently aligned with discursive redefinitions of national identity. This relationship is particularly evident in the increased prominence of Europe-oriented narratives during periods of intensified European Union accession efforts, and the reverse during periods of disengagement, but never fully fixed on one single definition. In the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy has shifted from a predominantly EU focus to greater engagement with the Middle East, reflecting the dynamic link between foreign policy aspirations and national identity. This pivot has been underpinned by ideological currents such as neo-Ottomanism and political Islam, which have redefined the symbolic frames of national identity.

This fluid structure of the national identity is well defined by post-structuralist perspective, arguing that no state possesses a prediscursive, stable identity; rather, identity is always produced and reproduced through discourse in relation to its foreign policy.⁸⁵ Accordingly, state identity should be understood as subject to historically specific practices and narratives. This constant negotiation of identity is apparent in Turkey's long-lasting positioning between the East and the West. In this sense, the construction of national identity is closely connected to foreign policy and international alignment of the state. Campbell, in his groundbreaking work, *Writing Security*, explains this connection very clearly. In his book, he analyzes U.S. foreign policy, particularly during the Cold War and post-Cold War interventions, as discursive practices through which American national identity is constituted by the continual production of threats. According to his analysis, national identity is constituted through processes of differentiation, where the "self" emerges in relation to an "other." Certain

⁸⁵ Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* 105; Senem Aydın-Düzgit, *Constructions Of European Identity: Debates and Discourses on Turkey and the EU*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 3.

figures, events, or groups become marked as dangers, around which modes of representation crystallize, helping to stabilize otherwise contingent meanings.⁸⁶ In his words, “the constitution of identity is achieved through the inscription of boundaries which serve to demarcate an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside;’ a ‘self’ from an ‘other;’ a ‘domestic’ from a ‘foreign.’”⁸⁷ This notion helps us understand how identity construction is performative and always constituted in relation to an outsider, whether a domestic enemy or a foreign subject. Therefore, national identity is a fluid construct that depends on the state’s current context, just like Turkey’s identification as “European” when wanting to detach from the Middle East and vice versa. What is crucial for this project in this construction is how, where and by whom these discourses are produced in relation to the “Other”. These questions open up the space for examining the sites where discursive performances take place, such as cultural production, through which foreign policy and national identity are continually narrated and contested.

In the post-structuralist framework, discourse is considered a key performance in the construction of identity, with its significance extending beyond mere linguistic practice. In this project, discourse is conceptualized as a social practice that both shapes and is shaped by power relations, serving as a constitutive dimension of human interaction through which claims to truth are structured.⁸⁸ It is precisely this constitutive role of discourse that renders its political dynamics significant, particularly in relation to why certain representations and narratives emerge as dominant while others are marginalized or excluded, thereby revealing the contingent nature of meaning.⁸⁹ Every act of privileging one representation over alternative possibilities constitutes a political choice as it will be discussed more in detail later in this

⁸⁶ Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and The Politics of Identity*, 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 8.

⁸⁸ Iver B. Neumann. "Returning Practice To The Linguistic Turn: The Case Of Diplomacy". *Millennium: Journal Of International Studies*. (2002), 629.

⁸⁹ Jenny Edkins, *Poststructuralism and International Relations: Bringing the Political Back In* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999), 46.

chapter. The way a subject or event is depicted profoundly shapes meaning-making practices and can generate multiple, and at times competing, versions of truth. Crucially, this also applies to representations circulating within ostensibly “innocent” domains such as popular culture and entertainment, where national narratives are aestheticized, and rendered commonsensical. This perspective underscores the assertion that “identity is always discursively constituted,” linking back to the construction of Turkish identity in relation to the EU or the Middle East, that materializes on the speeches of the officials and in cultural production landscape. National identity, therefore, is situated as inherently fluid, never fixed, and continually reproduced through shifting discursive practices.⁹⁰

This project is interested in how these representative discourses and meaning they carry are constructed and by whom, and how the negotiation of meaning-making takes place in the construction of a new national identity that is closely intertwined with Turkey’s evolving foreign policy aspirations. If national identity is constituted through discourse, as post-structuralist scholars argue, this raises the question of the cultural conditions through which such discourses become intelligible and widely shared. It is at this point that David Campbell, drawing on Benedict Anderson, argues that “the nation” should be understood as an *imagined political community* - a cultural artifact that exists only insofar as it is represented textually.⁹¹ This move allows Campbell to ground his ontological claim about the non-essential, contingent nature of national identity in historically specific cultural practices. Building on his argument, he highlights how these interpretations help us to understand national states as unavoidably paradoxical entities which do not possess prediscursive, stable identities.⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid, 132.

⁹¹ Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and The Politics of Identity*, 11.

⁹² Ibid.

Anderson traces the rise of nationalism to print capitalism and the spread of vernacular publications, which synchronized the consumption of texts and fostered a shared sense of collective belonging.⁹³ These shared modes of textual consumption provide the cultural conditions of possibility for the discursive production of national identity that Campbell theorizes. In this sense, cultural practices, including shared narratives and symbolic forms, provide the discursive ground upon which the contingent, politically constituted national identity that Campbell describes can be imagined, reproduced, and contested. Cultural sites thus emerge as fertile grounds for such identity practices.

While Anderson's cultural observation focuses on the birth of print capitalism and its aftermath, contemporary societies are shaped by a far wider and more complex cultural systems with the rise of satellite television and the internet, which gives a different dynamic to meaning. What distinguishes our time is the combined impact of globalization and digitalization: although national identities continue to be produced, they now emerge through the constant mixing and rearticulation of diverse cultural elements. The unprecedented speed of circulation of news and images exposes individuals to vast amounts of information on a daily basis. This speed and accessibility increasingly blur the line between the domestic and international, everyday life and high politics, and empowering new actors in international politics.⁹⁴ Moreover the interactive communication systems introduced by social media have transformed the spread of ideas from a largely one-directional process into a continuous, contestable negotiation of meaning in real time. People today are directly confronted with foreign policy choices in real time, following leaders' statements on platforms like X about conflicts unfolding thousands of kilometers away, while simultaneously comparing these narratives with alternative perspectives. In this environment, daily life becomes more politicized, and aesthetic

⁹³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).

⁹⁴ Corneliu Bjola, James Pamment Cassidy, and Ilan Manor, "Public Diplomacy in the Digital Age," *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14, no. 1 (2019): 93.

forms of communication- memes, short videos, emotionally charged images - become crucial tools for shaping perceptions of foreign policy and international events.

As cultural systems become increasingly dense, accelerated, and saturated, the volume and diversity of representations to which individuals are exposed rises significantly. Consequently, questions of aesthetics become central to political analysis. In these circumstances, politics is produced and communicated not only through formal discourse or institutional channels but also through images, narratives, emotions, and visual styles. As Bleiker reminds us, representation lies at the heart of the politics of aesthetics, for there is always a gap between representation and what is represented. It is precisely this inevitable difference that becomes the site of meaning, struggle, and contestation.⁹⁵ Rather than treating this gap as a deficiency to be ignored or overcome, aesthetic approaches in International Relations take it as a productive space where alternative understandings can emerge.⁹⁶ In contemporary contexts, aesthetic forms of communication - from television to the internet - draw attention to the politics of aesthetics, which are directly tied to how reality is represented. Every act of representation is inherently political, as it involves privileging one depiction of reality over others. Such choices, whether conscious or unconscious, shape how reality is perceived and understood. The political, therefore, often resides in the aesthetic form itself, even when it is not explicitly articulated. Building on this, Bleiker argues that aesthetic engagement with politics opens space to reflect on political dilemmas in new ways, introducing alternative forms of knowledge and practice into the political sphere - not only through works of art themselves but also through the insights and understandings they generate.⁹⁷ Consequently, the images and content we encounter daily on television carry an inescapable political dimension.

⁹⁵ Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics*, 4.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 14.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 3.

Aesthetic practices are now deeply embedded in everyday life, shaping individuals' perceptions, interpretations, and emotional engagement with their surroundings, often at a subconscious level. As these practices are continuously reproduced and negotiated through daily routines and popular entertainment, culture should not be regarded as static. Instead, it evolves through the dynamic interaction of everyday practices and popular culture, allowing individuals to establish and renew connections across local, national, and international contexts.⁹⁸ For example, a TV show consumed in the intimacy of a home can mobilize shared emotional repertoires such as pride and nostalgia that resonate with national histories while simultaneously circulating through transnational media networks.

Edensor, with his work on national identity and everyday, argue that the nation becomes reified at the cultural level and becomes visible in the details of everyday life.⁹⁹ He illustrates how these mundane practices acquire political relevance, shaping both national identity and perceptions. In this way, he says "A sense of national identity then is not a once and for all thing, but is dynamic and dialogic, found in the constellations of a huge cultural matrix of images, ideas, spaces, things, discourses and practices."¹⁰⁰ In this context, the television shows we watch daily and the memes we circulate online cannot be understood as politically irrelevant or merely neutral reflections of reality; rather, they operate as cultural sites where national meanings are produced, negotiated, and reinterpreted through the interaction between representational forms and audience perceptions.

The analytical focus on the everyday has had a broad repercussion in the discipline on IR, prompting scholars to reconsider where and how the international is constituted in mundane moments and practices. In their article, Guillaume & Huysmans develop the everyday as an analytical category that foregrounds lived experience, affect, and routine practices as central to

⁹⁸ Tim Edensor. *National Identity, Popular Culture, And Everyday Life*. (Oxford: Berg. 2002.), Preface, vii.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 47–49.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 17.

political life.¹⁰¹ Rather than approaching the everyday as a depoliticized or merely private realm, they argue that it is precisely through mundane, repetitive activities that political meanings are stabilized and rendered commonsensical. Their intervention is particularly interested in how emotions, habits, and embodied experiences mediate broader political structures, including security and identity, thereby situating the international within the textures of ordinary life. Similarly, in their editors' introduction to the special issue on Everyday International Relations, Björkdahl & Hall & Svensson explicitly conceptualize the everyday as a site of international relations. Their contribution lies at establishing everyday IR as an analytical orientation that shifts attention away from elite decision-makers and formal institutions toward the micro-politics embedded in ordinary practices.¹⁰² They argue that international relations are continuously produced through routine actions and social practices that are often overlooked in mainstream IR, including media consumption, mobility, and everyday encounters with representations of the world. From this perspective, such practices become key arenas where international power relations are reproduced and occasionally contested in lived and experiential terms.

Building on this conceptualization of the everyday, scholars have further emphasized the central role of affect in the making of national and international. Stephens, for instance, contributes to this discussion by arguing that nationality is often experienced as a feeling, mostly in the mundane moments which makes everyday spaces politically charged sites. She notes that "This might include feelings of togetherness experienced at a stadium or concert hall, the act of singing as part of a crowd noting the currents of energy that pass between bodies or the 'forcible affect' of sharing a language with others. These mundane spaces and moments become special because the artefacts circulating in everyday life - music, film, or novels - are

¹⁰¹ Xavier Guillaume and Jef Huysmans, "The Concept of 'the Everyday': Ephemeral Politics and the Abundance of Life," *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 282–284.

¹⁰² Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall, and Ted Svensson, "Everyday International Relations: Editors' Introduction," *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 124–126.

oriented toward the mobilization affect instead of education.¹⁰³ As such, these artefacts are treated as non-serious/informal objects, but still hold the power to constitute powerful sites through which national affects are generated, intensified, and negotiated. In this approach, soap operas and performative arts provide fertile ground for the production of collective emotions, facilitating the affective delineation of belonging, and the ongoing construction of the boundaries between “us” and “the other.”

The abovementioned framework on the everyday IR, aesthetics and the making of the “nation” and “international” provides the basis for this projects’ theorization of cultural production. In doing so, it draws attention to actors, practices, and forms of knowledge that are typically excluded from conventional accounts of foreign policy. As meaning is continuously produced, reproduced, negotiated, and contested in contemporary contexts, cultural production emerges as a key site that connects the local, the national, and the international. By looking at cultural texts, as well as cultural production and circulation, from the point of view of everyday International Relations, this project aims at creating a concept of sites of cultural production and circulation that are understood as those areas where the production of imaginaries of foreign policy takes place. Instead of seeing cultural production and its meaning as fixed or singular, it emphasizes the idea that the same cultural production may have multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings depending on its circumstances of circulation in both domestic and international environments. These cultural texts may be seen as finding meaning both simultaneously as narratives that fit into, or are appropriated from, accounts of high diplomacy, as well as finding meaning in relation to the micro-politics of the process of production. In this manner, the project shifts the analytical focus to the moments, encounters, and engagements of everyday life through which the idea of the international is imagined.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 10.

Drawing on the conceptualization of the everyday as a site where the international is experienced and produced through routine practices, this part of the literature review briefly examines nostalgia in cultural production to analyze how and why the past is mobilized on television screens in specific ways. Rather than providing a comprehensive theorization of nostalgia, this discussion offers an analytical entry point into the emergence of period pieces and situates the growing prominence of historical television dramas in Turkey within the broader context of everyday cultural production. Turkey's increasing production and export of historical dramas and TV series reflect how popular culture mediates between domestic audiences and international viewers, actively shaping perceptions of Turkish identity and its geopolitical positioning through the representations it provides. What is particularly interesting is that the last decade has witnessed an unprecedented level of interest in the production of period dramas, despite their production costs being significantly higher than those of regular television series.¹⁰⁴ This sustained investment suggests that their value cannot be explained by economic considerations alone. Rather, nostalgia plays a central role in accounting for both the scale and persistence of Ottoman-themed television productions in Turkey, as these series mobilize affective attachments to the past that resonate across individual and collective memory.

Svetlana Boym describes nostalgia not only as a longing for the past, but also a yearning for a home that no longer exists (or may not have existed at all).¹⁰⁵ As such, nostalgia generates fantasies of the past that are shaped by present needs and, in turn, exert a direct influence on how futures are imagined and enacted.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, when a particular image of the past comes to dominate a given cultural moment, such as the Ottoman nostalgia in contemporary Turkey,

¹⁰⁴ Interviewee J, producer; Miriam Berg, *Turkish Drama Serials: The Importance and Influence of a Globally Popular Television Phenomenon* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2023), 19.

¹⁰⁵ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xviii.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, xvi.

it becomes analytically necessary to examine the conditions and needs that give rise to this fantasy of the past. Boym's concept of restorative nostalgia is particularly useful for understanding this process in the context of national identity formation. Restorative nostalgia attempts to recreate the past through actions like the rebuilding of monuments or the creation of traditions, which are often accompanied by strong levels of symbolic formalization and ritualization.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, the nation-state is created not only as a political construct based on the social contract but also as an emotional and symbolic construct through the charisma of the past. Using the concept in his analysis of the *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, Carney employs restorative nostalgia to distinguish between competing televisual engagements with the Ottoman past, arguing that while *The Magnificent Century* invites a more reflective and plural reading of history, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* exemplifies a restorative nostalgic project that seeks to reconstruct and authorize an idealized proto-Ottoman past as a stable moral and political reference for the present.¹⁰⁸

Extending this affective and political understanding of nostalgia to the realm of mass media, Ryan Lizardi emphasizes that mediated nostalgia in contemporary mass media functions as an ideological and commercial tool. In contemporary media environments, nostalgia shapes both individual and collective perceptions while connecting local cultural products to global audiences,¹⁰⁹ which becomes particularly visible in the Turkish case. The focus on the Ottoman past from different points of view has created different audiences, which allows the audience to associate their political views with different representations of history and thus establish a connection between personal identity and collective memory. While the conservative Turkish audience show more positive reactions towards more militarized visions

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 42

¹⁰⁸ Josh Carney, "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (proto) Ottoman Past in *The Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*," 116.

¹⁰⁹ Ryan Lizardi, *Mediated Nostalgia: Individual Memory and Contemporary Mass Media* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 12–15.

of the Ottoman past on screen, other audiences might engage with different visions, such as the ones that highlight the imperial ostentation like the *Magnificent Century*. Thus, as these TV series travel globally, local forms of nostalgia meet global audiences, and different meanings and receptions are created through different cultural and political settings. In this respect, nostalgia can be understood as a powerful cultural tool that can be strategically employed to support different visions of history while still maintaining the potential for negotiation and reinterpretation.

The increasing prominence of nostalgia in popular culture shows a significant transformation in the production and circulation of political meanings. In recent years in Turkey, nostalgia has evolved from a primarily aesthetic or affective device to a strategic political resource within cultural production. These developments demonstrate the ongoing negotiation of identity, as authorities seek, yet never fully achieve, the stabilization of its meaning. Nostalgia participates in this process selectively, invoking specific visions of the past while allowing for reinterpretation and contestation. Consequently, popular culture serves as a critical analytical site where political dynamics and nostalgic narratives converge, constructing and reinforcing social categories such as national identity.

Scholars within the Popular Culture and World Politics literature emphasize that popular culture artifacts and modes of interpretation play a crucial role in producing and transmitting meanings that shape power relations.¹¹⁰ Especially in recent years, popular culture has become a central arena where competing ideologies clash, especially through value-laden productions in television, music, and contemporary art, now in social media.¹¹¹ Tracing the layers of popular culture, from production processes to thematic shifts, can provide insight into

¹¹⁰Grayson, *How to read paddington bear: Liberalism and the foreign subject in a bear called Paddington*, 380.

¹¹¹ Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*, 16.

the political contexts in which these artifacts are created.¹¹² Drawing on this literature, this research focuses on the nexus between soap operas with their production and circulation processes, and foreign policy, aiming to further advance the debate.

Despite its power to reflect the existing structures or produce new ones, popular culture should not be understood solely as a site where power or identity is produced within a society in a top-down way, based on the assumption of a direct link between production intentions and reception outcomes. Popular culture does not function solely as a propaganda tool or a one-way communication medium from the state to society. Instead, it operates through a complex dynamic in which meanings are continuously produced and reproduced through audience interaction. The advent of digitalization has intensified this process by expanding the production and circulation of cultural products and enabling messages to reach transnational audiences. These audiences often receive and interpret messages in fragmented ways that are beyond direct control, thereby influencing world politics in novel ways,¹¹³ particularly in an era of high-speed circulation and easy access to cultural content from across the globe. Consequently, as Clarke emphasizes, cultural diplomacy, which recycles a country's cultural products to serve foreign policy goals, involves uncertain outcomes and is shaped by how these products are consumed and reproduced abroad.¹¹⁴ The circulation and reception of these products, both domestically and internationally, further influence how meanings are constructed, contested, and negotiated. Additionally, the changing feature of the communication through social media, where the audience can directly engage with the politicians and producers further blurred the lines between the cultural, political and the

¹¹² Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon, "Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics," in *Harry Potter and International Relations*, ed. Iver B. Neumann and Daniel H. Nexon (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 14–15.

¹¹³ Grayson, et al, *Pop Goes IR? Researching the Popular Culture-World Politics Continuum*, 157.

¹¹⁴ David Clarke, "Theorising the Role of Cultural Products in Cultural Diplomacy from a Cultural Studies Perspective," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 2 (2016): 149.

popular.¹¹⁵ Consequently, the fluid meanings produced through popular culture and enabled by its global reach demand careful examination.

International Relations scholarship recognizes popular culture as a site of contestation, especially in the digital era, where meanings are constructed through narratives embedded with political dynamics. The literature on Popular Culture and World Politics, as well as aesthetic turn in IR, emphasizes that representation is inherently political, and that popular culture constitutes a central space for that. Representation in popular culture plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of political and security issues. For example, Der Derian's work on *Virtuous War* demonstrates that contemporary understandings of conflict are mediated through media, simulation technologies, and the military–entertainment nexus.¹¹⁶ Der Derian demonstrates that war is rendered distant, sanitized, and morally framed through visual and narrative regimes that obscure the boundaries between reality and representation.¹¹⁷ These processes generate forms of consent and affective engagement that precede and surpass formal political debate. Consequently, popular culture not only reflects world politics but also actively shapes how violence, security, and legitimacy are conceptualized and normalized.

Similarly, in her analysis of the Abu Ghraib images, Lene Hansen reveals the mechanisms of affective and political construction in representations of violence, thus dissolving the boundaries of documentation and narration.¹¹⁸ Through her emphasis on the impact of images on the construction of world politics, Hansen reveals how "visual representations can be seen to produce regimes of responsibility, legitimacy, and response in world politics."¹¹⁹ All together, these interventions demonstrate that popular culture is a

¹¹⁵ Julian Schmid, "(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* (2020), 695.

¹¹⁶ James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military–Industrial–Media–Entertainment Network* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 1-15.

¹¹⁸ Lene Hansen, "How Images Make World Politics: International Icons and the Case of Abu Ghraib," *Review of International Studies* 41, no. 2 (2015): 263–265.

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 263-265. Similar arguments can be found in the works of following scholars as discussed above: Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Jutta Weldes, *Cultures of*

constitutive site in which political meanings are created and circulated where world politics is made sensible.

Nonetheless, grasping the politics of popular culture requires attention not only to how certain subjects are represented in the artefacts, but also to their production processes and power structures through which they are produced. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of popular culture as a dynamic site where identity, ideology, and power intersect, without assuming a direct or linear relationship between the intentions of producers and the outcomes experienced by audiences. Beyond studying representation alone, it is crucial to ask how these meanings are encoded - what motivations, institutional pressures, and production processes inform the creation of these cultural artefacts. Doing so allows us to illuminate the production networks and power relations through which macro-level structures such as national identity and foreign policy are enacted, reproduced, and negotiated via micro-level practices within cultural sites. The next section brings the level of production and micro-practices into the attention, and theorizes what the role of cultural producers in world politics might be.

1.2. Cultural Producers and Their Agency in Foreign Policy

While the representation aspect of popular culture is crucial in understanding the politics of culture, I am interested in a more specific point that can shed light on how these representations are produced, by whom and through which processes. Therefore, I argue that cultural producers should be a part of this conversation. While the Popular Culture and World Politics literature still offers valuable insights for micro-dynamics of politics, the mechanisms through which political structures operate; the actors involved and the power relations they

Insecurity: States, Communities, and the Production of Danger (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Cynthia Weber, *"I Am an American": Filming the Fear of Difference* (Bristol: Intellect, 2011); Kyle Grayson, "How to Read *Paddington Bear*: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2013): 378–393.

generate remain underexplored. Therefore, one of the key objectives of this project is to theorize these meaning-making practices by foregrounding cultural producers as political actors by asking the following questions: how are these meaning-making practices negotiated and produced in practice by their producers? To what extent do these producers, with their perspectives on the world, influence what audiences see? And how do these mechanisms operate at the interface between the state and popular culture sites? What can the answers to these questions tell us about micro practices of foreign policy and national identity? Addressing these questions requires a more refined examination of the micro-sites of production, and the types of agencies in play in those sites. Only by attending these granular processes we can understand how abstract structures are enacted, how ordinary actors can intervene, and how broader systems of meaning are continually contested and reshaped. Thanking the scholars of the popular PCWP for leading the way for these new explorations, I would like to contribute to this debate by turning the spotlight to the producers of popular culture and their embodied experience in the process of meaning-making.

The idea of investigating the role of ordinary people and a certain group of professionals in International Relations is not new to the IR discipline. The PCWP literature mostly focused on the fan studies to understand the reception of cultural artefacts, and engaged with the effect of the audience in international relations.¹²⁰ The other resonant realms of IR, such as postcolonial studies have created an analytical space through their focus on marginalized groups, the subaltern the ways in which cultural practices practices of everyday everyday life express and contest the embedded hierarchies of power that colonialism and imperialism left.¹²¹

¹²⁰ For exemplary works, please see Jason Dittmer and Klaus Dodds, "Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences," *Geopolitics* 13, no. 3 (2008): 437–57; J. Furman Daniel and Paul Musgrave, "Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017): 503–16; Marwan M. Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere," *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): 17–29.

¹²¹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994); Sankaran Krishna, *Postcolonial Insecurities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Additionally, post-structuralist approaches similarly helped creating an analytical space through the deconstruction of dominant meanings, identities and demonstration of the ways in which these are constantly being created, contested, and undermined in everyday life.¹²² Additionally, insights from International Political Sociology literature emphasize how macro-level political structures are constituted through micro-level practices, professional routines, and localized meaning-making processes, drawing attention to how power operates through routine actions and social relations rather than solely through formal institutions.¹²³ This approach draws attention to how security, authority, and political order are enacted through the actions of specific actors and expert communities, as well as through ordinary and taken-for-granted practices. Taken together, this literature provides a strong foundation for examining cultural production sites as spaces where international politics is enacted, narrated, and contested beyond elite institutions alone and offers an inspiration for the study of a selected group in relation to world politics. Nevertheless, cultural producers as a group have not taken the center place in these interventions.

As the central aim of this project is to foreground the perspectives and insights of cultural producers, specifically the soap opera producers, the Feminist International Relations offers valuable theoretical and methodological resources. While this project does not center Feminist IR in its investigations, the literature's emphasis on ethnographic and interpretivist approaches represents an important source of inspiration for this research, which allows an

¹²² For exemplary work, please see David Campbell, *Writing Security: The United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Jutta Weldes and Diane Saco, "Making State Action Possible: The United States and the Discursive Construction of 'the Cuban Problem,'" *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 361–395; Matt Davies, "You Can't Charge Innocent People for Saving the World: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and the Politics of World Order," *International Political Sociology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 449–473; Kyle Grayson, "How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 378–393; Angharad Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

¹²³ For exemplary work, please see Tugba Basaran, Didier Bigo, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and R. B. J. Walker, eds., *International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines* (London: Routledge, 2017); Didier Bigo and R. B. J. Walker, *International Political Sociology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

analysis attentive to practices, knowledge, and power relations in cultural production. The Feminist IR literature has long foregrounded the everyday practices, embodied experiences, and often-invisible forms of labor through which global politics is sustained and reproduced. For example, in her book, Enloe's research questions the systemic erasure of women from the international politics by asking the now famous questions "where are the women?"¹²⁴ By decentering the power from state, elites and formal institutions, Enloe shows how power and global relations are reproduced through everyday social relations. In a similar manner, in her research on Cuba, Daigle redefines power by moving the focus of analysis from the political and economic structures to the regulations of bodies, particularly Cuban women.¹²⁵ Instead of seeing Cuban women as passive actors in political structures, she defines power as relational, negotiated and ambiguous highlighting the agency of women as its exercised within asymmetrical global relations. Although their research focuses on different empirical realities, their shared understanding of power as relational, negotiated, and embedded in everyday social relations is a major source of inspiration for this research. Both of them highlight different forms of agency that are located outside of formal institutions, emphasizing how agency is exercised through everyday moments and interactions.

Finally, being a methodological inspiration, Lee Ann Fujii's "Shades of Truth and Lies" explores how people's narratives about violence and war blur the lines between truth and fiction, which becomes an inspiration also for the methodology of this project. Instead of focusing on the factual accuracy of such narratives, Fujii focuses on their interpretive and relational aspects and argues that political testimony needs to be understood in relation to the social context and power relations in which it is produced.¹²⁶ Together, these works reframe the everyday as a site of political significance, treating ordinary people not as passive subjects but

¹²⁴ Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, 39.

¹²⁵ Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century*, 12.

¹²⁶ Fujii, Lee Ann. "Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence." *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 231–241.

as active participants in the making and contestation of power, with an engagement of their narratives where they reflect on their embodied experiences. In this research, I draw inspiration from these feminist and interpretivist approaches to examine cultural producers as similarly situated actors, those whose creative practices illuminate how politics and power are negotiated, embodied, and reimagined in the cultural realm.

In examining to the everyday work of cultural producers, through which I argue they participate in world politics, Steele and Solomon provide a useful conceptual and analytical tool which I greatly benefit in this project. In their article on micro-moves, they shift the analysis to lower levels where such structures as national identity are enacted and contested. By urging scholars to attend to everyday politics and micro-moves, they demonstrate how “ordinary people in global politics” participate in the production of international order and how these seemingly mundane practices illuminate broader and more abstract power structures.¹²⁷ As they put it, “a promise of micropolitics ... is that it seeks out an agency for individuals and groups.”¹²⁸ Instead of reducing individuals to passive carriers of ideology, a micropolitical lens foregrounds their embodied, experiential, and situated practices as politically consequential. This perspective opens up sites that can reshape how we understand global politics and the position of ordinary people within it and provides a conceptual lens for examining power relations in the cultural production sector. By identifying social spaces like television sets, film studios, and international expos as micropolitical spaces, this approach emphasizes the production of meaning through embodied experience and the agency of cultural producers in the creation of national imaginaries and foreign policy narratives.

Taking a similar approach and contributing to the question of agency in popular culture through analyzing cultural events, Zoë Jay’s article investigates the Junior Eurovision Song

¹²⁷ Solomon and Steele, *Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory*, 269. A similar approach can be seen also in the following work: Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall, and Ted Svensson, “Everyday International Relations: Editors’ Introduction,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 123–30.

¹²⁸ Solomon & Steele, *Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory*, 272.

Contest as a site of international politics, drawing on scholarship on young people in global politics.¹²⁹ Crucially, she theorizes agency not as a binary of whether children possess it, but as a question of how, where, and when it is exercised. Jay locates this agency within the cultural sphere, showing how it is negotiated relationally between children and adults whom they work together, be it their parents or producers of the show, and through intersecting structures such as class, race, gender, and maturity. In this way, international politics is symbolically and affectively enacted through genre-bound narratives and aesthetic practices. Her relational understanding of agency resonates with this project's view of how agency is co-constructed between creative workers, producers, and the state around themes of nationhood, identity, and commerce, while her use of genre and affect offers a valuable lens for analyzing how narratives are shaped and contested within broader geopolitical discourses.

The micro-political lens, with its emphasis on relational agency, provides a crucial inspiration for this project, shapes the way how I am going to study this very specific group of foreign policy actors: cultural producers. However, an analysis of this sector that solely focuses on individual cases and neglects the significance of broader power relations would be incomplete. This requires a better understanding of the structure and the practices of the sector than what is currently available to us in the field of IR. In order to study cultural producers, namely television professionals involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of Turkish soap operas, this project will use an interdisciplinary approach by incorporating relevant insights from both Media and Production Studies, as well as International Relations. By approaching cultural production as a site of international politics, the project examines how

¹²⁹ Zoë Jay, "Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences": Genre, Politics, and Fun at the *Junior Eurovision Song Contest*, *International Political Sociology* 17, no. 4 (December 2023).

IR theories are embedded within the structures of the production sector, while also accounting for the forms of contextual agency exercised by cultural producers within these structures.

Considering the importance of cultural producers as meaning-makers in contemporary politics, I find it crucial to engage with relevant works from both Media and Production Studies, as they provide the necessary conceptual and methodological approaches to study the dynamics of identity, power, and politics within the cultural sector. The following paragraphs aim to utilize some of the most influential works in the literature mentioned above to describe the significance of cultural producers as a group and how it could be theorized.

Cultural space is a zone in which a variety of cultural forms exist in various relationships with one another. However, instead of a particular historical ordering of forms, there are powerful hegemonies in place in which certain cultural formations dominate. Nevertheless, neither of these hegemonies remains uncontested in these sites.¹³⁰ As Mahon notes, in analyzing cultural production, it is crucial to recognize the extent to which “members have control over the means of cultural production and how this relates to internal power relations.”¹³¹ The social position of cultural producers is different from that of consumers of productions due to their ties to national or commercial interests and their work within structures of power organizations.¹³² They stand at the central point of this contestation and political struggle between the forces, such as art and commerce, with the capacity they hold in the production of meaning.¹³³ While the field of cultural production both reflects and constructs social categories and identities, cultural producers play a pivotal role by “creating new subjects and new subjectivities, articulating shared experiences, and constructing social identities.”¹³⁴ It

¹³⁰ Sherry B. Ortner, *Not Hollywood: Independent Film at the Twilight of the American Dream* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 8.

¹³¹ Mahon, *The Visible Evidence Of Cultural Producers*, 471.

¹³² Ibid, 469.

¹³³ Banks, M. *The Politics of Cultural Work*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 8.

¹³⁴ Mahon, "The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers", 470.

is precisely through their everyday negotiations - between artistic expression and commercial imperatives, between national projects and transnational markets - that these producers engage that capacity, and it is through this process that politically meaningful representations are made and circulate.

Production studies, situated at the intersection of cultural studies and media studies, foregrounds the experiences of cultural workers, offering a productive entry point for examining the political agency of cultural producers in this dissertation. Within this field, the focus on production cultures highlights the tensions between individual agencies and the broader social, institutional, and economic conditions in which that agency is embedded. For example, Vicki Mayer's *Below The Line* critiques production studies' traditional focus on elite, creative producers by foregrounding the invisible and undervalued labor that sustains the contemporary television economy.¹³⁵ Through ethnographic case studies, Mayer demonstrates how distinctions between "above-the-line" and "below-the-line" work reproduce hierarchies of creativity, professionalism, and labor value aligned with neoliberal political economy.¹³⁶ The book reframes television production as a site where identities, subjectivities, and economic value are co-produced through everyday practices of work. Additionally, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* edited by Banks, Conor and Mayer brings together ethnographic and practice-oriented analyses.¹³⁷ The volume foregrounds producers and production cultures as key sites where creativity, professionalism, and power are constructed and contested. The book challenges text- and audience-centric paradigms by revealing how

¹³⁵ Vicki Mayer, *The Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹³⁶ Here, "above-the-line" refers to creative decision-makers such as writers, directors, producers, and lead actors, whose work is associated with authorship, visibility, and symbolic value. The term "below-the-line" on the other hand refers to technical and support labor, including camera operators, editors, set designers, and crew members.

¹³⁷ Vicki Mayer, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

media industries reproduce hierarchies and inequalities through everyday work practices. Finally In *The Politics of Cultural Work*, Miranda J. Banks conceptualizes media production as situated, and value-laden labor shaped by institutional norms and power relations.¹³⁸ The book challenges celebratory accounts of creative work by revealing how discourses of passion and professionalism obscure precarity and inequality within cultural industries. Banks's analysis foregrounds the politics of everyday labor practices and the production of worker identities within media production. This perspective allows for a more nuanced and coherent examination of cultural producers as they both work and live within these intersecting structures.¹³⁹ These works offer the conceptual and methodological means to research cultural producers not only as creative beings, but as agents situated within intersecting structures of power, political economy, and institutional constraint, thus offering the opportunity to research contextual agency. They allow this dissertation to pay attention to the ways in which cultural producers simultaneously work, negotiate, and act within the daily practices through which international political imaginaries are produced and disseminated.

The main inspiration for this dissertation from this literature has been Caldwell's *Production Culture* book, and the concept he uses "cultural self-portraits" in order to explain the self-reflections of cultural producers.¹⁴⁰ Although the concept itself is not frequently used as "cultural self-portraits", it is developed as a central framework throughout the book and for this project it provides a crucial analytical entry point to the world of cultural producers. Cultural self-portraits allow for an industrial self-theorizing for Los Angeles-based film and video production workers through interviews, observations of production sets in addition to combining interviews with participant observation on production sets and analyzing trade discourses (such as behind-the-scenes materials, industry panels, DVD extras, trade press). In

¹³⁸ Banks, M. *The Politics of Cultural Work*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

¹³⁹ Mayer, Banks Caldwell, *Production Studies: Cultural Studies of Media Industries*, x.

¹⁴⁰ Caldwell, *Production Culture*, 14, 126.

this seminal work, Caldwell investigates the practices and belief systems of industry workers, emphasizing that while production is shaped by broader economic forces; film and television industries also function at a micro-social level as cultural communities,¹⁴¹ moving beyond treating media industries solely as sites of economic organization or textual output. These communities not only produce mass or popular culture but also embody cultural practices that construct identities, forge consensus, and sustain collective interests. What he sets out to capture is a process of industrial self-reflection: the ways in which media workers, producers, directors, crew members, and technicians actively interpret, and theorize their own labor, identities, and hierarchies in a broader system. Rather than viewing “production talk” as anecdotal or secondary to texts, Caldwell approaches it as a form of cultural sense-making and self-ethnography.¹⁴²

This dimension of his approach is particularly relevant for this project, as it highlights how these producers create their own culture in complex power relations, connect to broader political structures and experience the processes of identity-making through their work. It brings into light the mechanisms in which their everyday practices mediate between macro and micro-political processes, thereby shaping the construction of larger political structures. Central to Caldwell’s analysis is the concept of self-theorizing, through which production workers reflect on their practices and employ these reflections in creative and technical decision-making, thereby demonstrating industrial reflexivity.¹⁴³ His work, therefore, exceeds the boundaries of industrial processes, serving as a bridge between the micro and the macro.

Building on this, the main aim of this project is to create a space for the self-reflections of Turkish cultural producers, and partially Turkish soap opera buyers from the MENA region, to investigate how they theorize their places in broader political structure and where their

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 1-14.

¹⁴² Ibid, 316.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 14-15.

“agency” lies in the construction of the traditional IR themes. Bringing together insights from multiple disciplinary literatures, the project investigates agency in two ways: relational and contextual agency. IR theories provide an account of relational agency, particularly through its exploration of subjects in relation to power structures. From this perspective, subjects do not simply possess agency; rather, agency is continuously produced and reshaped through relational dynamics. Production Studies takes a different turn in its exploration of contextual agency. In other words, the agency of cultural producers is understood in relation to the specific environments in which they operate, from film sets to broader political regimes. In bringing these literatures together, it is possible to explore how cultural producers, both consciously and unconsciously, contribute to the making of foreign policy at the micro-level in processes of meaning-making. At times, their agency manifests as the contestation of dominant ideologies within an increasingly constrained cultural field; at other times, it takes the form of alignment with sovereign power through practices such as self-censorship. This allows for an examination of how professional and personal identities intersect with official ideologies and the end products they are producing.

Unlike Caldwell’s book, this research does not only investigate the production site but extends the analysis to include the circulation of Turkish dramas, thereby introducing a transnational dimension that places foreign policy dynamics at the center of cultural production. In doing so, my aim is not to master knowledge about cinematography or technical details, but rather to understand how the political is embedded in everyday production practices, what the power relations in this community are like, and how these practices relate to international politics. In doing so, I move beyond Caldwell’s emphasis on industrial self-legitimation and ask how production cultures position themselves within the context they work in and in relation to state power and foreign policy agendas. By bringing production and circulation together, I show how cultural labor both reflects and shapes broader political and

cultural structures, and how seemingly ordinary cultural producers intervene in world politics through the transnational movement of cultural artefacts. These interventions unfold amid structural constraints and shifting motivations, particularly when cultural production intersects with larger political crises, yet they also reveal how individual agency persists within restrictive political and institutional frameworks. Although my research is closely connected to the discipline of International Relations and engages with world politics, it foregrounds cultural producers as non-traditional agents in global political processes, where I aim to contribute to the literature of International Relations.

While I find the concept of cultural self-portraits as a useful tool for the investigation of agency, I adapt it slightly to better suit my research context and use it as *Cultural (Self-) Portraits*. This adaptation allows me not only to foreground the self-theorizing practices of cultural producers, but also to position myself reflexively within the research process. I construct these portraits through sustained conversations with my interlocutors, working with the perspectives, details, and silences they provide. My task thus becomes one of connecting individual accounts into a larger, collective portrait (which is never perfectly completed) that situates cultural producers within the field of world politics, which will be explored further in the methodology section.

These dynamics where ideology, market pressure and individual stances, are particularly pronounced in the militarist and period drama genres, which blend familiar themes of love, family, and community conflict with dramatized depictions of Ottoman and early Turkish history. While not documentary in nature, these productions rely on both historical consultants and the imaginative contributions of writers and directors to craft narratives that resonate with audiences. The result is a hybrid cultural form: stories that dramatize history

while embedding universal human emotions, allowing viewers at home and abroad to relate to them.

When we think of these theoretical insights shared previously in this section along with the empirical case of this research, we see that the affective power of soap operas extends well beyond Turkey's borders, engaging shared historical memories across the former Ottoman world and broader Turkic and Islamic communities. Productions such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman* foreground themes of Turkishness and Islamic unity, blending action-driven spectacle with collective identity formation. Their influence transcends entertainment: *Ertuğrul* inspired Turkish language learning among international audiences and even symbolic gestures, such as the erection of a statue of Ertuğrul Gazi in Pakistan, which was publicly endorsed by then-Prime Minister Imran Khan as a promotion of Islamic values and a counter to Western cultural influence. However, reception varies across contexts. In the Gulf region, for instance, Ottoman-themed soap operas were banned on the MBC Group network from 2018 to 2021, with critics, including the Global Fatwa Index, accusing the productions of exporting Turkish political agendas under the guise of cultural content. Similarly, Egypt and the UAE produced their own Ottoman-themed series, *Kingdoms of Fire* (2019–2020), to counter Turkey's narrative, illustrating how cultural production can become a contested site of historical and political meaning in transnational television.

By centering the cultural production site of Turkey, especially the Ottoman-themed soap operas, this project demonstrates that cultural production is not simply a top-down extension of state power or a site where political imaginations take place, but a dynamic terrain of negotiation. Writers, directors, actors, and producers exercise agency in ways that complicate state narratives, embedding their work in broader struggles over identity, belonging, and power. Turkish soap operas reveal that national identity and foreign policy aspirations are actively shaped not only through narratives on screen but also through the backstage practices

of production. Decisions about scripts, casting, visual aesthetics, and distribution are informed by commercial pressures, artistic ambitions, ideological expectations, and the constraints of smaller or semi-authoritarian media systems. Broadcasters play a decisive role in commissioning and purchasing content, influencing both domestic and transnational circulation.

Cultural producers thus occupy a heterogeneous and situated position: they are neither passive transmitters of state ideology nor entirely autonomous professionals. Through their everyday negotiations, the meanings of “the national” and “the political” are continuously produced, contested, and transformed. The Turkish television drama sector, therefore, serves as both a laboratory of political struggle and a vehicle for foreign policy projection, offering a particularly rich site for examining how cultural production shapes, and is shaped by, broader political structures. This case highlights how cultural production operates as a space of contestation, negotiation, and meaning making, making it an instructive context for understanding the interplay of political, national, and international. The next section therefore outlines the methodological design guiding this study.

2.1. How to Study Soap Operas?

This dissertation employs a multi-method design consistent with its theoretical framework, designed to capture the practical dimensions of cultural production and its relation to foreign policy. Moving between on-screen representations and the testimonies with self-reflections of producers, it adds a new layer to existing scholarship on Turkish soap operas, which have been widely studied across disciplines. A big part of this literature has concentrated on how popular dramas function as sites for Turkey’s national identity construction and act as soft power means in the world, particularly in the case of Ottoman-themed soap operas. For example, *Magnificent Century* has been read as embodying a reflective and contested

nostalgia,¹⁴⁴ in regards to how Ottoman history has been reproduced in contemporary Turkey through popular culture, leading to Ottomania.¹⁴⁵ Meanwhile *Resurrection Ertuğrul* adds a new layer in the reproduction of Ottoman history by advancing a restorative, state-backed narrative aligned with the AKP's neo-Ottoman ambitions, thereby linking cultural production directly to both domestic politics and Turkey's international image.¹⁴⁶

Scholars from different disciplines have further contextualized these dynamics within broader debates on the intersection of media, nationhood, and soft power. On the debates of nationhood, Çevik, for example, situates Turkish soap operas within a longer trajectory of state-led nation-building through mass media, beginning with the establishment of TRT in 1964, and underscores their role as instruments of soft power aligned with neo-Ottoman foreign policy and the commodification of Ottoman-themed goods.¹⁴⁷ In parallel, Amzi-Erdogdular examines the phenomenon of "Ottomania," demonstrating how televised histories reconfigure national identity through imperial imaginaries that both reproduce and contest notions of "otherness."¹⁴⁸

Adding an international dimension to the literature along the lines of soft power, Miriam Berg has conducted comprehensive research on Turkish television dramas. She examined how the dramas' international circulation operates as an instrument of soft power and influences Arab audiences' perceptions of Turkey's culture, identity, and international position. Similarly, Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi conceptualize Turkish popular culture as "neo-Ottoman cool," noting its resonance in the Arab public sphere, where it projects a modern yet

¹⁴⁴ Josh Carney, "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*," *Middle East Critique*, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ M. Ergin and Y. Karakaya, "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomania: Navigating State-Led and Popular Cultural Representations of the Past," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 56 (2017): 33–59.

¹⁴⁶ B. Özçetin, "'The Show of the People' against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22, no. 5–6 (2019): 942–957. Josh Carney, "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*," *Middle East Critique*, 2019; J. Carney, "Resur(e)cting a Spectacular Hero: *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey," *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 93–114.

¹⁴⁷ Senem B. Çevik, "Turkish Historical Television Series: Public Broadcasting of Neo-Ottoman Illusions," *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 227–242.

¹⁴⁸ L. Amzi-Erdogdular, "Ottomania: Televised Histories and Otherness Revisited," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 5 (2019): 879–93

tradition-rooted Turkish identity. Nevertheless, as Kraidy's later work illustrates, these cultural exports are not uncontested. The Egyptian boycott of Turkish series highlights the entanglement of media flows with geopolitical rivalries, and it shows that dramas operate not only as cultural diplomacy but also as contested instruments of influence in regional power struggles.¹⁴⁹ While bringing the geopolitical and economic dimensions of soap opera circulation in the region together, the existing body of research on the topic largely overlooks the micro-level dynamics of production and circulation. These dynamics include but not limited to the agency of cultural producers. The micro level dynamics extends from the technicalities of production practices to contestation of meaning at the production level where producers often make sense of national identity in relation to their individual and professional identities. All these micro practices create a conscious or unconscious negotiation of the sovereign power' narratives and decisions in the sector.

While the current literature on Turkish soap operas offers valuable insights into the interaction between official state ideology and the cultural sector, there occurs a need to unpack two key dimensions to better understand how cultural production and foreign policy co-constitute each other. One dimension would be the micro-level dynamics of everyday production, which foreground the agency, negotiations, and practical constraints shaping cultural producers' work; and the other is the sector's relation to the macro-level mechanisms through which identity contestations are projected, interpreted, and negotiated internationally. First, examining the everyday dynamics within the site of production is crucial as it can provide us with a bigger picture of production networks and power relations. Without acknowledging the human dimension of production, it is not possible to explore how identity negotiations and contestations unfold in the field and under what conditions. This focus also enables us to track

¹⁴⁹ Marwan M. Kraidy, "Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt-Turkey Row over Television Drama," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* (2019), Brill Academic Publishers.

the ways in which the sector itself operates when there is a drastic change in official ideology and broader political structures, allowing us seeing different types of power and agencies in play alongside of sovereign power. Second, whether or not these productions were intentionally designed as tools of soft power, they have reached diverse audiences, particularly in the MENA region. Yet the ways in which they are received, especially when mediated through state officials, have given rise to contestations over identity and history at an international level with the involvement of these popular culture artefacts, particularly concerning the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and contemporary Turkey's role in the region. This suggests that identity struggles are shaped simultaneously by transnational audiences and by the professionals who create and circulate these cultural products, raising questions about how such tensions of broader political systems are negotiated within and beyond Turkey's cultural site and also transnational television industry.

This research empirically focuses on the production and circulation of Ottoman-themed soap operas produced including and following the *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014), positioning them in a critical engagement with, and sometimes a counter-narrative to, dominant official representations of Ottoman history. By tracing these series from 2011 to 2024, the dissertation examines how evolving portrayals of Turkishness intersect with changes in Turkey's geopolitical positioning, television production networks, and transnational circulation. Additionally, it centers the role of cultural producers in this positioning and investigates the kinds of agency they hold in the production of national identity and foreign policy. While the investigation aims to highlight the complexities in the Turkish cultural production sector and its transnational dynamics, the analysis focuses on three selected cases of soap operas.

In order to address the layers of investigation embedded in this research, this dissertation adopts a multi-method approach that combines: 1) visual analysis of

representations of “Turkishness” presented in the soap operas, 2) relational interviews with television professionals from Turkey and the MENA region, 3) critical discourse analysis of representative narratives in soap operas, interview data, and state official’s discourses on the subject as reflected in the media. This multimethod approach makes it possible to unpack the relations between what is produced and consumed on screen, how and in which political structure the production process unfolds, and what the relationship between these two domains reveals about the entanglement of cultural production, national identity, and foreign policy. Central to this methodological choice is the aim of putting the self-reflections of cultural producers in dialogue with the cultural texts they create and the broader political systems within which they operate.

Following this approach, the data for visual analysis and discourse analysis from the soap operas were collected systematically. At a minimum, the first and last episodes of each season were examined, with particular attention given to Ottoman-themed and militaristic productions. While the broader sample includes approximately seven different series, three were selected as key cases due to the crucial role they played in shaping shifts in Turkish cultural production and the articulation of neo-Ottomanism. For the selected key series, such as *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014), *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014-2019), and *Establishment: Osman* (2019-2025), a greater number of episodes were analyzed. During this process, crucial moments illustrating portrayals of Turkishness; representations of “enemies,” character developments, gender depictions, and discourses aligning with contemporary government narratives were carefully noted. These observations serve as the empirical basis for both visual and discursive analyses, ensuring that interpretations are grounded in repeated, context-sensitive engagement with the texts themselves. In addition to these categories, special attention was given to the overall composition of marketing posters, and the sites of their public display.

To explore how Turkishness and history are visually constructed in television dramas, this dissertation adopts elements of Gillian Rose's approach to visual analysis.¹⁵⁰ As Rose emphasizes, images have profound social effects: they do not only visualize difference but also render visible the constructed nature of categories such as nation, gender, or tradition,¹⁵¹ which are some of the important categories in the analysis of showcased visuals in the dissertation. The construction of these categories is never innocent or neutral; rather, they actively shape how audiences perceive and engage with the social world. In this sense, visual materials are not treated merely as reflections of broader discourses but as productive sites where meanings are made and contested, through the producers of them as active agents in this construction. While not offering a full-scale visual analysis throughout the dissertation, the focus here lies on showcasing visual representations of Turkishness through a selection of key images from the chosen soap operas. The images shared and analyzed in this text are mostly promotional posters. Nevertheless, the reading of visual representations also includes significant scenes from the shows; however instead of taking screenshots of the moments, a link to the scene is shared in the footnotes as static images are insufficient to convey the affective and narrative intensity of these moments. These selected moments and materials help me to explore how social categories and political imaginaries are visually encoded.

This perspective further requires attending to how images are looked at, the practices and modes of seeing that give them social force.¹⁵² As Bleiker puts it, "Images work at numerous overlapping levels: across national boundaries and between the physical and the mental world."¹⁵³ What an image means depends not only on its visual form but also on the contexts in which it circulates and the ways it is consumed. The same drama poster, for

¹⁵⁰ The following book has been an inspiration in this regard: Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 4th ed. (London: SAGE, 2016),

¹⁵¹ Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 17.

¹⁵² Ibid, 18.

¹⁵³ Roland Bleiker, *Visual Global Politics* (London: Routledge, 2018), 11.

instance, might appear on a billboard in Istanbul, a digital platform in Cairo, or a fan forum in Latin America, acquiring new connotations in each setting. Images, therefore, are not merely representational but they operate as political forces in their own right, carrying an excess of meaning that resists definitive interpretation.¹⁵⁴

Rose's insistence on the agency of images is particularly useful here: visual texts have a material presence and an interpretive power that exceeds authorial intent or state discourse.¹⁵⁵ They do not simply mirror social reality; they represent it in specific, partial, and politically consequential ways. In tracing these dynamics, this dissertation pays close attention to the interplay between vision and visibility: not only to what can be physiologically seen on screen, but to how cultural and political structures shape the conditions of seeing, what is made visible, and what remains unseen. Therefore, this data has been read as a part of the bigger picture, in tandem with other discursive data.

While the visual representations in soap operas certainly form part of the broader discourse, analyzing them solely within discourse analysis risks flattening their specifically visual dimensions. Visuals do not just *say* something; they show and frame in ways that language alone cannot capture. Posters, promotional images, and carefully staged scenes communicate through composition, color, spatial arrangement, gaze, and symbolism, all of which actively construct meaning. Visual analysis, therefore, offers the necessary tools to unpack how these images represent Turkishness, and how it is constructed in relations to its "the Other" beyond what is articulated in dialogue or textual discourse. Despite not offering a visual analysis throughout the thesis, treating the selected images under the visual analysis framework, especially in Frame I, ensures that their materiality, circulation, and modes of

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 25.

¹⁵⁵ Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*, 22.

seeing are accounted for, rather than being subsumed under the logic of verbal or textual narratives.

As mentioned in the theory section, discourse plays a central role in the construction of “national identity” by positioning the Self in relation to the Other, and this insight underpins the methodological approach of this project. To unpack these ways of construction and the power relations they inhabit, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) will be used as a primary method. CDA is not just a method but a theory-informed approach that links discourse to broader social and cultural structures, emphasizing that language both reflects and helps constitute social reality, including identities, power relations, and inequalities.¹⁵⁶ In this project, the understanding of discourse goes beyond mere language and encompasses narrative structures and representational practices through which meaning is produced, circulated, and contested. Therefore, the CDA allows for the analysis of how Turkish soap operas and related state discourses actively shape national identity, reinforce or contest power, and interact with non-discursive practices such micro decisions in production of artefacts. Its self-reflexive and emancipatory stance further encourages critical examination of dominant narratives while remaining aware of the researcher’s interpretive position, making it particularly useful for understanding the intersection of political, national and international in the cultural production context.

While the visual dimensions of discourse will be examined through a framework inspired by Rose’s *Visual Methodologies*, other discursive structures, ranging from overarching themes and selected dialogues in the soap operas to official statements by state actors, will be analyzed using CDA. This approach emphasizes that language is not a neutral medium of

¹⁵⁶ Senem Aydın-Düzgit, “Critical Discourse Analysis in Analysing European Union Foreign Policy: Prospects and Challenges,” *Cooperation and Conflict*, 49, no. 3 (2014): 356–57.

communication but a site where power, ideology, and social inequalities are both produced and reproduced. CDA investigates how discourse, whether in texts, talk, or media, constructs social realities, legitimizes authority, and maintains or challenges hierarchical structures. Van Dijk highlights the interplay between micro-level linguistic choices (e.g., vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric) and macro-level social structures, showing how everyday language, both reflects and shapes broader ideological patterns,¹⁵⁷ which offers a productive site of investigation for the micro-macro design of this research. A key component of CDA is the attention to context: discourses are always situated within historical, cultural, and political settings that influence their production, interpretation, and effects. This approach helps unpack power relations that control both public discourse and the minds of audiences,¹⁵⁸ showing how Turkish soap operas and related state discourses shape beliefs, identities, and political ideologies. Additionally, it highlights how cultural producers mediate, contest, and reproduce power in everyday production practices, linking media narratives to broader social hierarchies and political dynamics. To operationalize this framework, the study focuses on Ottoman-themed soap operas, mostly with militaristic narratives produced from 2011 onward and broadcast on the national channel TRT as well as pro-government outlets such as ATV.

While the representational practices in the soap operas provide the data for visual and critical discourse analysis to unpack how Turkishness is constructed through popular culture, they offer little into the micro dynamics of the cultural production site. In order to understand how the producers of this meaning and representations act as foreign policy agents, applying a method that would account their self-reflections and everyday practices is crucial. Relational interviews in this context offers an opportunity for unpacking how producers make sense of

¹⁵⁷ Teun A. van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed., ed. Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin (Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2015), 354.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 358.

the world they are living and working in, and how they construct meaning.¹⁵⁹ Being an interpretivist method, in relational interviewing the data emerges from the interaction of the researcher with the research participants instead of a free-flowing, external knowledge. Here, the task for the researcher is to treat this interaction as a part of data as it can help unpacking how people construct meaning.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, the outcome of the interviews conducted for this research are more than an interview transcript. The interaction between the researcher and the participants and non-verbal ways of communication are treated as a part of the knowledge constructed in this project.

Relational interviews in this sense helps to engage with cultural producers at a deeper level and to unpack the human side of the story, being the most significant part of Cultural (Self-) Portraits by giving the stage to cultural producers to reflect of their work. This method complements the critical discourse analysis, examining not only what is explicitly communicated on screen or during interviews, but also how micro-practices engage with the ideas about identity and foreign policy. These relational interviews with producers enable the study to trace how cultural producers engage with dominant state narratives, revealing the ways in which these narratives are accommodated, or subtly negotiated in everyday production practices. Together, these methods enable a detailed mapping of where producers' agency lies in the construction of dominant discourses, and how their micro-moves negotiate institutional constraints, ideological expectations, and commercial imperatives. In doing so, they illuminate how media producers participate in the production and reproduction of social categories, including national identity and associated identities such as gender and profession, as well as the structural conditions that sustain them.

¹⁵⁹ L. A. Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach* (London: Routledge, 2018), 8.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 8.

The concept of cultural (self-)portraits guides the methodology of this research as much as it informs the theoretical framework and connects to the relational interviews conducted with the producers. While the concept provides a space for the self-reflections of producers, it also positions me, as the researcher, within the analysis as one of the constructors of the story. The knowledge produced here comes from a cooperation and interaction with the research participants. Nevertheless, this interaction does not always come in the form of clear verbal explanations. Sometimes, it comes from the decisions of participants regarding when and who to talk, or not to talk, which often projects the sense of hierarchy the participants place themselves in relation to the researcher.¹⁶¹ Such moments foreground the limits of direct inquiry and require a reflexive engagement with what the research encounter makes visible indirectly.

As Daigle observes, learning to understand and interpret silences and exclusions, what is not said, often becomes nearly as important as what is articulated explicitly.¹⁶² My curiosity was therefore rarely rewarded with straightforward answers. While I learned something from each interlocutor, this learning frequently unfolded in unexpected ways, and I often did not learn what I initially set out to discover.¹⁶³ While producers' self-theorizing is most readily accessed through their verbal accounts, key elements of the broader puzzle remain implicit or unresolved. From time to time, these dimensions surfaced through silences, gestures, hesitations, or everyday practices that acquire meaning only within the relational dynamics of the research encounter. Weaving together such verbal and non-verbal elements is thus not a process of assembling a complete or coherent picture but an attempt to produce a contingent and situated construction which is shaped by specific interactions and positionalities through which knowledge is generated.

¹⁶¹ Elisabeth Schweiger and Kerstin Tomiak, "Researching Silence: A Methodological Inquiry," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 12.

¹⁶² Megan Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), p.39.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

The interviews with the producers were conducted across different periods and locations. In total, I interviewed more than 35 sector professionals. Of these, 25 were based in or working for Turkish productions and companies, including soap opera producers (in administrative leadership roles), directors, advisors, costume designers, actors and actresses, screenwriters, post-production editors, and distributors. The remaining 10 interviewees were television professionals from across the MENA region, primarily located in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, where they work for leading broadcasters that acquire and distribute Turkish soap operas. Their durations were all differed between half an hour to two hours, and maybe more, which shows how they acted as individual snapshots of their positions. The concept of Cultural (Self-)Portraits found its fullest expression in these interviews, as cultural producers used the space to reflect on their work, articulate their professional identities, and situate their practices within the shifting political dynamics of the contexts in which they operate.

This methodological approach cannot be considered as an ethnographic work due to the limitations of time, financial, and professional capacity in the sector and in my PhD studies. Nevertheless, the fieldwork conducted for the interviews provided opportunities to observe production networks in practice. At various moments, these encounters evolved into what Fujii conceptualizes as *accidental ethnography*: unplanned observations that occur outside formal interviews or structured research settings, yet offer valuable insights into the researcher's social positioning and the broader contexts in which research participants operate.¹⁶⁴ Paying systematic attention to such moments, conversations before or after interviews, informal interactions, or situational observations, proved crucial not because of what they revealed about isolated instances, but because of what they suggested about the wider political and social

¹⁶⁴ Lee Ann Fujii, "Five Stories of Accidental Ethnography: Turning Unplanned Moments in the Field into Data," *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 4 (2015): 526.

worlds in which both interlocutors and researcher were embedded. These encounters revealed multidimensional individuals rather than treating cultural producers as single-dimensional members of a homogeneous professional community.¹⁶⁵ The moments and different form of interactions shared in the field illuminated aspects of context and power relations that could not be fully captured through interviews or primary sources alone. They allowed me to observe how people make sense of the world around them: how meanings are parsed and assigned to signifiers, how taken-for-granted forms of knowledge operate, and how power and authority shape which interpretations are foregrounded while others are marginalized.

I completed the first part of my fieldwork from mid-December 2022 to mid-January 2023 in İstanbul. During this period, I had the chance to collect first-hand data by talking to cultural producers and learning about their production practices, how they perceive their role in Turkish foreign policy, the power structures in the soap opera sets, and various details regarding each production. In the first part of the interviewees, the research participants were the people who took part in the production of the three key shows for this project, (*Magnificent Century*, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, *Foundation Osman*, and *Alparslan: Great Seljuk*). Additionally, I had the chance to talk to a few academics who work on similar topics, researching transcultural media, to learn more about their experiences with similar research processes.

The participants who answered the questions from the shows' production teams involved producers (CEOs of the production firms), international operations managers of the production firms, directors, art directors, scenarists, history advisors, actors and post-production editors. While the criteria for soap opera selection are based on their themes, national and international success, in addition to the political responses they received, I have selected my participants according to their roles in the creative and administrative sides of the

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 527.

production. Most of the participants who were able to provide information about the production process and were not restricted by contractual obligations agreed to be interviewed. Most potential participants were initially contacted via e-mail, where I briefly introduced the project and inquired about their availability and willingness to participate in an interview. In cases where participants did not respond to my e-mails or had not provided an e-mail address, I made additional efforts to contact them through social media and direct messaging. This approach was primarily directed at participants who were publicly active on these platforms, allowing me to reach out via professional or personal accounts while respecting their visible communication preferences. Despite these efforts, I was unable to contact many of the individuals I had originally intended to interview. Therefore, after scheduling a few interviews with the production team from the *Magnificent Century*, I have decided to follow a snowball technique to reach out to the other series' teams via the first interviewees. I kindly asked every participant I interviewed to put me in touch with another team member, and none of the participants turned down this request. In this way, I could expand my network of interviewees and contacts and observed how the whole sector is connected. This technique showed me that despite the genres of the soap operas I am researching being completely different from each other and they are perceived as two different ends of the spectrum (*The Magnificent Century* and the productions such as *Resurrection: Eruğrul*), the people in the sector know each other quite well.

The interviews were planned with the relational approach in which I prioritized being present in my interactions and actively listen. During the analysis, I took a critical approach about the shared meanings, placing the participants' understanding and sense-making efforts

at the forefront of empirical investigation.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, I focused on thick descriptions¹⁶⁷ and worked on elaboration, clarification, reflection, and illustration of my participants' understandings during the interviews.¹⁶⁸ The data of the research emerged dynamically through dialogue between the researcher (me) and the interviewees; not only in the forms of vocal expressions, but also in the ways of social interaction.

The interview questions are prepared in a semi-structured interview format, where there were pre-set questions, but the conversation could also flow relatively freely depending on the responses I received from the participants. During the preparation, I was mindful of the power structures, such as the hierarchies in the shows' sets and my position in relation to others, and worked with an ethical sensibility to minimize the harm to my participants and myself.¹⁶⁹ Before and during the interviews, I emphasized the anonymity of their responses and did not share their names or opinions with other participants. All participants received a participant information sheet and consent form prepared by me under the supervision of my supervisor, that included comprehensive information about the research. The documents were all prepared in Turkish for logistical reasons in the first part of the fieldwork, and they were shared with each participant before the interviews. Every participant is recommended to read the documents carefully and to ask any questions they may have before signing the consent forms. In addition to the comprehensive information about the Ph.D. research, the information on the consent forms included points about the recording process during the interviews and how the information they provide will be managed, stored and used for future research. Those who did not have the chance to sign the forms (last-minute changes to online meetings) were asked to

¹⁶⁶ Joe Soss, "Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations," in *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*, ed. Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006), 132.

¹⁶⁷ Thick description here refers to describing a social action in enough depth and context that its meaning becomes clear, not just what happened, but what it meant to the people involved.

¹⁶⁸ Soss, *Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations*, 136.

¹⁶⁹ Fujii, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*, 2.

provide oral consent, and online meetings on Zoom are also recorded based on the consent of each participant.

Every participant was reminded of the main points of the information sheet before starting the interviews, such as the voice recording, having the option of not replying to the questions they are not comfortable with, and reserving the right to withdraw from the research within two months after the interview. The meetings with the academics for academic consultation were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken. Every participant from the production networks was interviewed at least once, and sometimes follow-up interviews occurred to clarify some details and to ensure a coherent interpretation of data. The variation in the time participants devoted to the interviews signals that the sector is highly diverse in how it approaches the issues addressed in this research, despite the fact that the pre-set questions were largely similar and contained roughly the same number of questions. I met with the interviewees mostly in their workplaces, which gave me the chance to visit the sets of two soap operas (*Resurrection*: Ertuğrul and *Foundation*: Osman) several times and contact other cultural producers on the spot.

The second part of the fieldwork took place from April 2023 to July 2023, in Cannes, France; Ankara, Turkey; and via Zoom for participants located elsewhere. In April 2023, I visited MIPTV, an annual international expo in Cannes, where TV industry professionals from around the world gather to trade content. Before joining MIPTV, I identified potential interviewees who will be attending the expo and e-mailed them to ask for a quick chat during the expo. This visit provided a unique opportunity to meet TV sector professionals in person, observe the political economy side of soap opera circulation firsthand, and engage with key actors I could not reach through other channels, such as TRT (the Turkish national broadcaster) workers and the main distributors of Ottoman-themed soap operas. It also enabled me to identify and meet soap opera buyers from the MENA region, a task that would have been

difficult without the guidance of Turkish distributors and organizers of MIPTV. During the three-day expo, I conducted brief, focused conversations with professionals from various firms to discuss international market dynamics and state policies regarding the exportation of soap operas. Following these initial interactions, I secured agreements for more in-depth interviews, which took place in follow-up meetings that continued until late July in 2023, conducted either in person in Turkey or via Zoom. All of these meetings followed the same ethical procedures outlined in the first fieldwork section. For non-Turkish-speaking participants, the information and consent forms were translated into English, and Zoom meetings were recorded only with the participants' consent, solely for transcription purposes.

As a part of the interpretivist methodology, during the analysis of these interviews, there were a few points to be taken into consideration. First, what mattered during the analysis was not how often certain words appeared, but how and in which contexts they appeared and what kind of power relations they signaled. As Fuji states, “an interpretive methodology assumes that explanations of these or any other empirical phenomena must start with an investigation into the meanings that people give to particular forms of social action and the social worlds and cultural forms these actions help to constitute.”¹⁷⁰ Therefore, during the interpretation of the interview data, it was crucial first to capture how research participants defined and made sense of key concepts, and how these meanings shaped their perceptions and practices in the sector. As the interviews provided several snapshots of individuals that work in a common sector, the goal was not to achieve a singularly accurate, objective snapshot of their world. Instead, the aim was “to develop an explanation of how people socially - that is, intersubjectively - construct and understand the worlds in which they are embedded and the logics they use to navigate those worlds.”¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ Fuji, *Interviewing in Social Science Research: A Relational Approach*, 2.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 74.

Second, my positionality in the field was a crucial part of the data collection and analysis. During the data-gathering process, particularly through interviews, my position was frequently read as political due to my gender, the university at which I study, and the fact that I reside outside Turkey. This perception was not only attached to who I was, but also to how my research was imagined. On one occasion, for instance, a potential participant suggested that I change the title of my dissertation altogether, objecting to the presence of the terms “critical” and “Turkish identity” in the same sentence. The concern stemmed from an assumption that the word “critical” signaled an attack on a nation (given the Turkish connotation of it outside of theoretical contexts), rather than a methodological or theoretical approach. Such moments revealed how research encounters were shaped by broader anxieties about nation and belonging, by the boundary drawn between “us” and “others”. These anxieties in this specific example were closely tied to my experience of living and studying abroad, and to how Turkey has been perceived by Western academic circles lately. His assumption of me coming from such an institution, therefore holding the same values, positioned me as an external or oppositional in the eyes of the participant. Had the same questions been asked by, for example, a forty-year-old Turkish man studying in Ankara, it is highly likely that the responses, and their interpretations of the research title, would have differed significantly from mine. In such a scenario, participants might have felt less compelled to pre-emptively defend their work against accusations of political critique, and more inclined to take for granted a shared national and institutional frame of reference. Probably, references to “criticism” or “identity,” may have been approached with less suspicion, or folded more easily into narratives of professional expertise and industry practice rather than framed as potential political risk.

Occasionally, this positioning rendered my presence as a researcher potentially dangerous to the participants, because my job was perceived as “political” by some participants, despite they never considered their job in the cultural site as “political” at all.

When explicitly asked about politics, participants frequently described their work in terms of cultural representation - most often as that of “cultural ambassadors” whose primary aim was to introduce Turkey to the world in the best possible light. Yet, in the course of broader conversations, it was often possible to identify moments saturated with political meaning, even when these were not named as such by the participants themselves. These encounters helped me practice letting go of the assumption that particular words or subjects have widely shared meanings.¹⁷² Instead, the meaning we attribute to our, identities, and certain concepts are deeply shaped by individual experiences, expectations, and motivations. In this case, this disjuncture appeared to stem from two intertwined dynamics: first, an anxiety around being positioned as “political” subjects, particularly in a context where cultural production has increasingly become a risky field due to closer alignment and cooperation with state institutions; and second, a dominant understanding of politics as confined to formal institutions and statehood, rather than as something that also operates through culture, representation, and everyday practices. This positioning of the subjects in relation to the other also gave a certain shape to the conversations we had and the contexts they were held.

My position as a woman who has a Turkish origin also affected how I interpreted the data which left me in ambiguity from time to time during the analysis. Being deeply familiar with the context (I grew up within similar social and political dynamics) and holding well-defined political views required me to critically engage with and, at times, question my initial interpretations. Acknowledging that the researchers’ positionality and reflexivity is crucial in interpretivist research, I sought to remain attentive to the distinction between participants’ meanings and my own analytical assumptions. In order to respect the knowledge shared by my participants and to maintain the reliability of my analysis, I followed three techniques. First,

¹⁷² Soss, *Talking Our Way to Meaningful Explanations*, 132.

when there were times that I was not sure about what the interlocutor meant by a certain phrase, I contacted back to the participant to follow up with additional questions, which made me feel very lucky to have worked with individuals who were so generous with their time and patience. Second, I used a triangulation method where I tried to read all three different types of data, that are visuals, official discourses and narratives of the producers, holistically and in constant dialogue with one another. This was the “critical” part of the analysis, as not every information came in the clearly formulated sentences. Finally, I greatly benefitted from consulting with my supervisor and the peers regarding my preliminary interpretations and the ways to transform my intuitions into analytically valuable insights.

The recent developments in the Turkish cultural sector, where increasing pressure on professionals has become visible, underscore the importance of protecting participants’ anonymity. Even when some participants expressed willingness for their names to be disclosed (this was interestingly communicated as their “braveness” in resisting current political situation), I insisted on keeping them confidential, given my position as a researcher observing the evolving cultural landscape in Turkey. Once data collection was complete, it became clear why some of the potential participants rejected an official interview and chose to remain silent despite assurances of anonymity. Their hesitations often reflected how they perceived the cultural field and their personal motivations, for instance, considering their work as a matter of state security issue or fearing repercussions from authorities due to distrust of foreign researchers.

This realization once the fieldwork was over demonstrated what Fujii argues, that meta-data, the contextual information surrounding interviews, is as crucial as the testimonies themselves. They reveal how the current social and political climate shapes what participants feel able to share. As Fujii notes, “By failing to attend to meta-data, analysts risk misinterpreting ambiguities, overlooking important details, drawing incorrect conclusions, and

leaving informants vulnerable to reprisals for having talked to the researcher”.¹⁷³ Silences, in particular, required careful handling: “one explanation does not fit all”, and attentive researchers recognize that “words can hide just as silences can reveal”.¹⁷⁴ The things left ambiguous or unsaid constitute the actual insight into the meaning-making and negotiations at stake.¹⁷⁵ In this sense, understanding both what is said and what is withheld provides a richer insight into the interplay between cultural production, state pressures, and individual agency within the Turkish media field. In these moments, my instincts as a researcher, combined with the triangulation of methods in this study, helped me interpret and analyze the situations more effectively.

Taken together, these methodological and theoretical considerations, ranging from the collection of visual and discursive data to the careful attention to participants’ silences and meta-data, establish the foundation for the forthcoming analysis. The following chapter applies these approaches to the selected Ottoman-themed soap operas, examining how Turkishness, identity, and political narratives are constructed and contested at a representational level, drawing parallels with the current government’s geopolitical aspirations.

¹⁷³ Lee Ann Fujii, “Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence,” *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 232.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 239.

¹⁷⁵ Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Birgit Poopuu, “Preparing for Fieldwork Interviews,” in *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty and Birte Vogel (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 72.

FRAME 1 - FROM FUTURE ASPIRATIONS TO HISTORICAL HEROISM ON TV: SHIFTING FROM THE WEST TO THE EAST

The Turkish TV has been changing in the last years, especially with the appearance of more Sultans, warriors and imperial themes on the screen than ever before. This nostalgic theme quickly became embedded in everyday life: In 2010s, one could suddenly see Ottoman-themed objects like gold-leafed coffee cups and palace-style accessories filling market stalls and souvenir shops across the country. This explosion of Ottoman nostalgia in popular culture and everyday life did not come solely as a coincidence but came hand in hand with the changing domestic and international policies of the Turkish government, which provided fertile ground for its growth.

Turkish foreign policy in the last decade is drifting away from its almost a century-long Western orientation and strategizing closer ties with the Gulf countries and taking on a lead in the MENA region.¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, this regional leadership role takes its inspiration from Turkey's glorious Ottoman history, the cultural production shows a simultaneous and similar tendency in the imagination of Turkish identity and its regional role. This situation creates a realignment between the foreign policy ambitions and the cultural production in contemporary Turkey, which is more than a top-down process, but includes several dimensions of power relations between the state and the sector and within the sector itself. Especially after the second half of the 2010s, the TV in Turkey has been changing with the emergence of Ottoman-themed soap operas, making the cultural production site a place where Turkey's national identity and geopolitical positioning are negotiated. Although the site of cultural production in Turkey extends beyond nationalist and militarist Ottoman-themed soap operas, this project focuses on

¹⁷⁶ Ali Bakir, "Turkey's Security Role in the Gulf Region: Exploring the Case of a Newcomer," *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 5 (2023): 816.

the co-constitution of foreign policy and the cultural sector, and therefore centers its analysis on Ottoman-themed productions.

Drawing on Hutchison's conceptualization of "everyday artifacts of world politics," this chapter treats popular Turkish TV series as cultural objects that mediate forms of international political meaning. Rather than mere entertainment products, these series function as material and visual artifacts whose circulation, aesthetic choices, and symbolic repertoires participate in the making of transnational imaginaries about history, power, and the state. As Hamilton similarly argues, everyday artefacts offer valuable insights into how ordinary people understand the world and their place within it, shaping and reflecting broader political imaginaries, and creating them is also a form of world politics practice.¹⁷⁷ Seen through this lens, the material elements of popular historical dramas, such as costumes, crowns, weapons, or spatial design, become artefacts that contribute to the production of world-political meaning far beyond their immediate narrative function.

This first analytical chapter of the thesis investigates Turkish television screen and aims to provide an overview of how Turkish TV and the representational practices of Turkish identity have changed over time along with the changes in Turkish political sphere, and what it potentially means. Before analyzing the soap opera texts and representational changes in the projection of Turkish identity, the chapter first aims to map out why TV is still important to investigate in a digital age, and how it has been changing in Turkey structurally in the past decades. This section unpacks the new regulations on Turkish TV since 2010 where the authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government and neo-Ottoman ambitions in Turkish foreign policy emerged which had direct effects on the Turkish cultural scene. The chapter later on progresses to the level of representation by investigating the mostly watched Ottoman-themed TV series. This section introduces the most-watched period pieces in Turkey since

¹⁷⁷ Caitlin Hamilton, *The Everyday Artefacts of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 7.

2011, outlines what key Ottoman-themed series offer, and explains how they diverge from earlier soap-opera productions in the country. The analytical focus on the representational level provides a recap of plotlines and visual illustrations from the chosen soap operas such as the posters and looks at the codes of national identity and how Turkishness positions itself in relation to Others in these storylines. In addition to the analysis of what is present on the TV screen, the section also integrates the statements of cultural producers collected through relational interviews and read the cultural texts and their testimonies together.

Through this multilayered approach, the chapter examines how these productions both construct new social categories and reflect existing ones, operating at the intersection of broader political structures and societal dynamics. It locates cultural production within the domain of everyday politics, demonstrating how representative practices are constitutive of- and constituted by- routine engagements with power, meaning, and identity. Consequently, the scale of analysis follows how changes in the landscape of the television screen indicate changes in dominant political imaginaries, underlying structures of thought, and power relations, and how these changes are reproduced, negotiated, and contested in the everyday work of cultural producers.

1.1. Everyday, Media and Cultural Production in Turkey

According to research by the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK), in 2024, Turkish people spent an average of 3 hours and 43 minutes per day watching television, with 91.9% of respondents considering TV the most reliable source for news. Social media usage during the same period averaged 3 hours and 12 minutes per day, still competing with the consumption of traditional media channels.¹⁷⁸ In 2023, RTÜK reported an average daily TV

¹⁷⁸ RTÜK, “Medyametre Kamuoyu Araştırması Yayınlandı [Medyametre Public Opinion Survey Results Announced],” 2024, <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/rtuk-“medyametre”-kamuoyu-arastirmasi-yayinlandi/5106>

viewing time of 3 hours and 54 minutes,¹⁷⁹ highlighting the continued centrality of television in media consumption habits in Turkey.

This significant amount of time spent in front of the TV on a daily basis makes television production an important site for investigating how the power of the macro-order is negotiated and contested at the micro-level,¹⁸⁰ particularly in the Turkish context, despite the rising interest in digital platforms such as Netflix, Disney+, and Mubi. Even if the messages conveyed on a platform that continues to be consumed at such high levels do not directly shape people's lives, they play a significant role in processes of knowledge production. What individuals are routinely exposed to as part of everyday life substantially influences their imaginaries of particular structures, concepts, and social relations. At the same time, the boundaries between television and digital media have become increasingly blurred, as the vast majority of television series are now also accessible through digital platforms such as YouTube and other online streaming services. As a result, content produced for television circulates far beyond the TV screen, reaching wider and more diverse audiences through digital infrastructures, while television and digital production logics increasingly overlap and inform one another in the Turkish context.

While social media and digital platforms are undeniably powerful, the high level of television consumption in Turkey, combined with its extended circulation through digital channels, underscores TV's continued significance as a key site for cultural and political observation in Turkey. It remains a central arena in which the tension between cultural homogenization, where global norms and content circulate widely, and cultural heterogenization, where local practices, preferences, and adaptations persist, can be

¹⁷⁹ RTÜK, "Medyametre Medya Kullanım Alışkanlıkları Araştırması [Medyametre Public Opinion Survey Results Announced]," 2023, <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/medyametre-medya-kullanim-aliskanliklari-arastirmasi/4856>

¹⁸⁰ Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson, "Everyday International Relations," 125.

examined.¹⁸¹ This sustained engagement highlights television's role in everyday media practices, shaping not only how news and entertainment are consumed, but also how cultural values, social norms, and collective narratives are experienced, negotiated, and reproduced in daily life.

As much as the representations of certain social structures like national identity and genders on screen is crucial to analyzing the relation between popular culture and the ongoing political processes,¹⁸² reading them without their context provides an incomplete picture. A holistic understanding of television in a given country requires situating it within the broader context of the power relations, institutional frameworks, and regulatory structures that shape both its production and function. This context, I believe, is best provided when the end products on the screen are in conversation with the producers' intentions and experiences, in addition to the political structure they are produced in. This is because many film and television professionals critically analyze and theorize their work in intricate ways, with industry knowledge being carefully coded and managed. Thus, it is essential to consider both the on-screen products they create and the social groups behind them, rather than analyzing one in isolation from the other.¹⁸³ Therefore, knowing the background of how the TV sector is transformed and what has changed in time in terms of the resonance of social and political issues in soap operas is worth a look. The next section presents how soap operas aired on TV engaged the political issues of their time in the 2000s, especially foreign policy directions, to put the changes over the last fifteen years into context.

¹⁸¹ Shawn Shimpach, "Introduction," in *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*, ed. Shawn Shimpach (London: Routledge, 2019), 8.

¹⁸² Matt Davies, "You Can't Charge Innocent People for Saving the World: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Politics of World Order," *International Political Sociology*, 34, no. 2 (2006): 449–473; Kyle Grayson, "How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject," *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 378–393; Schmid, Julian. 2020. "(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness." *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (5): 690–712.

¹⁸³ John Thornton Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 2.

1.2. From Dreaming the Future to Imagining the Past

Turkish TV series have long been a part of society's daily routine, especially watched in the evenings to relax after a long day at work or household responsibilities. Nevertheless, this everyday entertainment has never been detached from the country's social realities and political undercurrents. Especially since the early 2000s, where the TV got liberalized with more private channels and Turkish productions started replacing Latin American telenovelas, most of the time it was possible to find hints in the storylines about Turkey's political and social developments. While watching a family show, it was possible to see a protagonist commenting on the country's political agenda, whatever that was in the week the episode was aired. Often, these little hints signaled how society thinks/ feels or should think/ feel about the political agenda of the government through the story of that fictional character. It wasn't unusual to see these moments of collective thinking embedded in small parts of sitcoms. In fact, there were also satirical humor shows with the critique of the government's current ideology or policies, encouraging audiences to reflect more critically.

Within this diverse TV landscape, Turkey's foreign policy trajectory also found a space for public scrutiny. The country's European Union accession process emerged as one of the most debated foreign policy issues of the late 1990s and early 2000s, capturing widespread attention. Consequently, this topic made its way onto Turkish television and even soap operas during the 2000s, albeit in a manner markedly different from the neo-Ottoman narratives promoted by the government today. When the EU issue was addressed, multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives could be heard within the narrative of the series. This reflected the strategy of TV production and the importance of incorporating the voices of diverse segments of society into the production.

If we look at the examples from the most watched soap operas from the early 2000s, we can see that the actors, scenes, and plots featured in these TV series have generally portrayed

a culturally and politically hybrid Turkey, where Western lifestyles are often intermingled with Islamic cultural practices. Thus, these series have served as a medium for the representation of Turkey's dual identity.¹⁸⁴ Period pieces, especially the ones that center the Ottoman era, were not a significant part of Turkish soap opera production. However, shows like *Hatırla Sevgili* (2006–2008)¹⁸⁵ depicted modern Turkey's turbulent political history from the 1950s to the 1970s, focusing on the personal and emotional stories of characters set against real historical events. In the ones that narrated the story of contemporary fictional characters, it was possible to observe the current political agendas of the state, such as the EU accession process. Nevertheless, the portrayal of the political agenda was not didactic, but integrated into the dialogues of these TV series' characters as a resonance of real-life issues, and such scenes did not take up too much space. Even in the short time spent on such a subject, the discussions around the EU accession have always brought the complexities of the Turkish identity on TV, and the paranoia and anxieties of the Turkish people around political moves in an (almost) uncensored way.

For example, one of the episodes of *Avrupa Yakası* (*The European Side*) summarizes this point very well. The show was considered to be one of the most successful sitcoms ever made in Turkey, and it was aired between 2004-2009 on ATV, a private and independent channel of the time that is a conservative and pro-government channel today. It was aired for 5 seasons and had 190 episodes in total, which are still watched by millions on YouTube today.¹⁸⁶ The show tells the humorous story of the Sütçüoğlu family, who live in Nişantaşı, a modern and rich neighborhood of İstanbul, along with the staff of the *Avrupa Yakası* magazine

¹⁸⁴ Bahar Rumelili and Rahime Suleymanoglu-Kurum, "Brand Turkey: Liminal Identity and Its Limits," *Geopolitics* (2017): 561.

¹⁸⁵ Translates as "Remember, Darling". The series depicts the impact of major historical events, including elections, coups, and periods of political repression, while portraying the influence of authoritarian figures and ideological conflicts on everyday life, showing how personal and political histories intertwine.

¹⁸⁶ The Youtube channel of the series is available via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/@AvrupaYakasi>

and their close acquaintances. In the 37th episode of the series aired on 12 January 2005, right before Turkey's accession negotiations started with the EU, we watch a scene where the EU accession and the anxieties it brings due to the potential change it will lead in the Turkish culture.¹⁸⁷ Volkan, the son in the family who can be defined as the “macho/conservative type” older brother to his sister Aslı, has a nightmare during his nap. He dreams of waking up one morning, going to the living room of the flat which he shares with his parents and his younger sister, to have a family breakfast. On this “nightmare”, Volkan slowly realizes that Turkey has become a member of the EU, and it is already shaping the social manners in the society at his everyday life. He gets his first disappointment after seeing his family members with their hair turned blonde, eating cereals for breakfast instead of a Turkish breakfast which is known for its rich variety of food on the table. Later on, their neighbor Selin pays a visit to the flat to ask for a cup of coffee. She gets asked to pay 1.5€ by Volkan's mother, and the mother faces a strong reaction of Volkan as “Mom, what are you doing? We shouldn't ask for money from our neighbor for a cup of coffee, this is very inappropriate!”. The resistance of Volkan elicits a surprised reaction from the Turkish neighbor, who exclaims "Oh mon Dieu!"¹⁸⁸ instead of the Turkish equivalent, “Aman Allahım!”, showing even the most natural reactions and the language has become Westernized. The event is followed by the visit of his two close male friends in the flat who are portrayed as two heterosexual men throughout the series. In the nightmare, Volkan dreams of them as a gay couple whose sexualities are supported by family and friends, and it overwhelms Volkan with disappointment and anger. All characters in the scene explain the difference in their attitudes and lifestyles as “being a natural part of the European Union” and are surprised by Volkan's confusion. The nightmare ends with Volkan

¹⁸⁷ The short clip of the scene can be accessed via the following link: *Avrupa Yakası*, “Sütçüoğlu Rezidansı'nda Avrupa Birliği Rüzgarı,” YouTube video, posted by *Avrupa Yakası*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BLx8SxOQNT0>.

¹⁸⁸ The exclamation means “Oh my God” in French.

screaming “My God, I want to wake up already! I don’t want to be European; it left no emotions in you!”.

The scene in the series takes 12 minutes, the longest that the EU accession and its possible effects on the society has ever been narrated in the show. Meanwhile, the scene signals the “subconscious” paranoia around adapting a completely new identity with the EU accession, it neither goes beyond a storyline for a sitcom nor has a pedagogic approach that relates to Turkish foreign policy dynamics. The scene remains a small, fun part of the show that reflects the big part of society’s imaginaries around “Europe” and current considerations about a big political step portrayed around the Turkish identity’s controversial compatibility with the EU.

Similar scenes where the fictional characters bring up the EU accession at smaller levels can be also seen in TV series such as *Çocuklar Duymasın* (2002-2005, 2010-2014) aired on ATV, *Yabancı Damat* (2004-2007) aired on Kanal D and in others from time to time. The subtexts of the dialogues give a very similar message that comes with the “unknown” after the accession and what kind of sacrifices Turkish people will have to make for their cultures. These messages transferred in the storylines of these series tell us that Turkey managed to preserve its unique identity throughout the years: Both a part of the Eastern and Western worlds, but in its unique way. According to the storylines, the society might be European, but never as European to be “emotionless” or “strictly regulated by a political institution like the EU” as the other European countries like France or Germany. The hospitality, and generosity but also the Western values such as democracy and a secular state made the Turkish culture a mixture of European and Anatolian. This touch on political issues in the soap operas made the cultural site of Turkey connected to real-life issues that feed the details in the storylines, but not a significant site where there were intense political processes in play and new subjectivities were forced onto the audience.

An interesting example regarding a deeper connection between the foreign policy agenda of Turkey and cultural production is the series aired on the national broadcaster TRT 1, titled *Avrupa Avrupa* (2011-2013), that aired during Egemen Bağış's tenure as EU Minister. TRT 1 is currently known as the government's one of the most important ideological tools and the main platform for the period pieces that portray different eras of the Ottoman Empire. However, in 2011, *Avrupa Avrupa* was dedicated to the idea of “what would happen if Turkey entered the EU”, which is the only case in recent history where a foreign policy agenda of Turkey inspired an entire TV production, with the imaginary of a possibility. The series portrays the imaginaries around how the life of Turkish people would change if Turkey became a full member of the European Union, around the daily life of the resident of the “Avrupa” building and the relations between two neighboring families. One of the families is a traditional Turkish family with a housewife and a truck driver husband with two kids, and the other one is a couple coming from Belgium whose kid studies abroad, and who are considered to be “European” than the other family. The storyline thus explores the tensions and interactions between different identities that are on different ends of the Europeanization spectrum, highlighting how these distinct cultural and social backgrounds coexist within the same building and navigate their relationships.

The series starts with the night when Turkey's full EU is approved. While everyone is preparing for this achievement, there is a general panic around the building regarding adapting to “European standards” in cleaning, food, and fashion. In the storyline, Egemen Bağış, who is then the Minister of the European Union pays a visit to one of the families residing in the “Avrupa” building in honor of this political achievement, and the storyline continues in the next episodes without the Minister. Despite there is not enough data available that supports this series being a state-led production, the involvement of a Minister in the first episode of the

series and the platform it is aired on, the national broadcaster, signals the state involvement in the production.

The series had a final with its 91st episode in 2013 despite the good ratings it received with no further explanation from the channel. Ali Eyüboğlu, who is a columnist for *Milliyet* newspaper commented on the ending of *Avrupa Avrupa* by signaling “other dynamics” in the decision-making process of the channel regarding their choices for the series.¹⁸⁹ Despite he is hesitant to elaborate further on his point in his column, the start of “the Resurrection Ertuğrul” at TRT 1 only a year after the end of “Avrupa Avrupa” signals the new “cultural empire” of Erdoğan was in preparation. Just like that, the Turkish state turned the wheel from a pro-European to neo-Ottoman ambition both in its foreign policy and its involvement in the culture. These examples illustrate how international politics, cultural production, and everyday life in Turkey are deeply intertwined, with the links between them intensifying and power relations being actively reshaped in recent years, particularly through the strategic use of popular media. In the following section, I shift the analytical lens to the transformations in Turkey’s television landscape after 2010, situating these changes within the country’s evolving political context.

1.3. Autocratization and Ottomanization of the TV

With the revival of Turkish television and the expansion of the domestic television industry, the 2010s witnessed a cultural landscape shaped by the simultaneous rise of authoritarian governance and neo-Ottoman ambitions in Turkish foreign policy. These parallel developments created a dynamic within the cultural sector that was unprecedented, showing the deepening entanglement of politics and popular media in this period. This entanglement became increasingly institutionalized following significant changes in the structure of the

¹⁸⁹ Ali Eyüboğlu, “Avrupa Avrupa’yı TRT Neden Bitirdi?” *Milliyet Cadde*, November 8, 2013, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/cadde/ali-eyuboglu/avrupa-avrupa-yi-trt-neden-bitirdi-1788790>.

judiciary and its relation to the executive branch via the 2010 Constitutional Referendum in Turkey.

The referendum allowed for reforms that increased the ruling party's (Justice and Development Party – known as Ak Parti in Turkey) influence by granting the president greater control over judicial appointments, thereby shifting the balance of power and reducing judicial independence. This paved the way for increased executive control over critical state institutions. Against this backdrop, in 2013, the Gezi Park protests, initially a small environmental movement opposing urban development plans, escalated into nationwide demonstrations reflecting broader discontent with government policies. The government's harsh and uncompromising response, marked by police violence and the suppression of dissent, deepened concerns about the erosion of democratic norms and heightened the perception of growing authoritarianism in the country.¹⁹⁰ The impact of these protests continues to resonate within the cultural and civil society spheres, where numerous civil society actors, such as Osman Kavala, remain imprisoned, and talent managers like Ayşe Barım, along with the actors she represents, continue to face investigations for their alleged involvement in the demonstrations.

The political landscape of Turkey shifted further in 2014 when Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was elected as President, transitioning from the role of Prime Minister to a position with increasingly centralized powers. Although traditionally a ceremonial role, Erdoğan redefined the presidency, using it as a platform to exert greater influence over government policies and institutions. During this period, pressures on independent media, civil society, and political opposition groups intensified significantly. What began as a government fight against the “parallel structure” - followers of Gülen movement - and its media outlets,¹⁹¹ quickly spread to

¹⁹⁰ Akkoyunlu, “The Five Phases of Turkey’s Foreign Policy under the Akp”, 253.

¹⁹¹ Please see the exemplary report by Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Turkey: Crackdown on Opposition Media*, December 19, 2014 via <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/19/turkey-crackdown-opposition-media>

other media organizations and opposition voices. The government employed legal measures, regulatory restrictions, and intimidation tactics to stifle dissent, silence critical voices, and consolidate its power, marking a transformative era in Turkey's political and social trajectory. The structural changes also made an impact on the culture sector, which made the everyday site of cultural production a realm where different political processes intersect at a micro level, from the construction of a new national identity to the mobilization of non-traditional means for foreign policy.

The AKP government has increasingly utilized economic means and ideological apparatus such as schools and media to consolidate their vision of Islamic Turkish identity characterized by neo-Ottoman revivalism.¹⁹² Especially with the changing dynamics in the media sector and internationally growing drama sector, the site of production has become subject to new regulations and incentives that make the sector worthy of scholarly attention contrary to the idea that “TV is dying”.¹⁹³ The politicization of the soap opera sector through the authoritarian regulations of the government following 2010 can be observed at several layers, from the Radio and Television Supreme Council's (RTÜK) structure to the management of TV series both in digital platforms and traditional TV.

State intervention in the content of TV shows increased over time through RTÜK, gradually shaping what could and could not be broadcast. This process eventually led to the disappearance of certain shows from Turkish television, reflecting the broader impact of political pressure on the media and entertainment sectors. With the rising authority of the Council on the TV sector, many TV channels had to pay large amounts of fines to the state if the content of their production was not in line with the RTÜK policies. The majority of the

¹⁹² Ece Algan and Yeşim Kaptan, “Content Is Power: Cultural Engineering and Political Control over Transnational Television,” *International Communication Gazette* 85, nos. 3–4 (2023): 327; Zeynep Sertbulut, “‘They Don’t Care What We Watch’: On Ratings and Culture-Making in the *Dizi* Industry,” *Visual Anthropology Review* (2024): 3.

¹⁹³ Mark Sweney, “‘Traditional TV Is Dying’: Can Networks Pivot and Survive?” *The Guardian* (2024).

finances show that the policies of RTÜK were very much in line with religious-conservative standpoint of the Turkish government, and the Council has had no tolerance for intimate scenes, LGBT+ characters, consumption of alcohol, or criticism of the government on the screen. One of the countless examples regarding the authoritarianization of TV is the ban of one of the longest-aired shows on Turkish TV, *Olacak O Kadar*” which translates roughly to *“That’s How It Goes”*. The show had been on air since 1986, used comedic satire to highlight and critique societal and political issues which was also aired on TRT1 in its early years. During the years it was produced, it was aired on different private channels and was taken off the air during the rule of AKP in 2010 when it was still on air on Fox TV. According to the creator and the host of the show, Levent Kırca, his show and the channel it was aired on received countless threats from the government, and in the end, they had to cancel the show to protect the channel,¹⁹⁴ showing the tolerance for political satire in contemporary Turkey was decreasing.

Second, the change in the ratings system signaled whose societal visions and preferences matter for the content of TV productions, which means a great deal in understanding how the change in everyday is politically constructed. In 2012, Turkey's Television Audience Measurement Committee (TIAK) terminated its contract with the American company AGB Nielsen Media Research and started working with Kantar Media, a multinational media consultancy company.¹⁹⁵ In the new contract, the rating standards for Turkish TV changed from education level to income level. It means that the prerequisite for the people chosen as a group to measure the success of a TV show used to be college graduates but with the change in 2012, this prerequisite became “households who have a washing machine and a fridge.” With this turn, the taste of the low-middle-income households independent from their education level started shaping the cultural production which made

¹⁹⁴ Sözcü. 2012. “‘Programım Tehditte Yayından Kaldırıldı’ [My Program Was Taken off the Air under Threat],” 2012, <https://www.sozcu.com.tr/programim-tehditle-yayindan-kaldirildi-wp61968>

¹⁹⁵ Zeynep Sertbulut, “‘They Don’t Care What We Watch’: On Ratings and Culture-Making in the Dizi Industry,” *Visual Anthropology Review* (2024): 2.

ratings a part of the new political structure.¹⁹⁶ Crucially, this shift meant that a particular audience segment, with its own political inclinations, was suddenly prioritized over others. This taste of the chosen audience started setting the tone not only for mainstream media content but for the broader public discourse. In this sense, television ratings became closely connected to meaning-making mechanisms, influencing societal norms and contributing to the transformation of everyday life into a politically structured space.

Third, during the polarization period in the early 2010s with the social movements and political pressure, many of the sector workers, especially those whose jobs were more visible to society such as actors and actresses were criticized for supporting the Gezi Park protests.¹⁹⁷ The criticisms went beyond them being called “elitists” for supporting the protests, and many of the workers were blacklisted in the sector and lost their jobs, which resulted in the apoliticization, or at least the political silence of the sector workers with visible jobs. As mentioned in the introduction part of this thesis, we can still see its lingering effects which continue to shape career decisions, public expressions, and the overall willingness of visible media figures to engage with political or social issues.

Finally, the regulation of the TV through the Supreme Council (RTÜK) spread to digital platforms such as Netflix.¹⁹⁸ In 2020, Turkish authorities denied permission for a Turkish-made Netflix original’s - “If Only” - production in the country after reviewing the script, in which one of the five characters was gay.¹⁹⁹ Following the dispute, Mahir Ünal, the deputy chairman of Turkey's ruling party, tweeted his expectation that Netflix would “demonstrate greater sensitivity to Turkish culture and art through deeper collaboration in the future.”²⁰⁰ A similar

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 8.

¹⁹⁷ Sertbulut, “They Don’t Care What We Watch’: On Ratings and Culture-Making in the Dizi Industry”, .3-4.

¹⁹⁸ Algan, Kaptan, “Content Is Power: Cultural Engineering and Political Control over Transnational Television”, 327.

¹⁹⁹ Rachel Savage, “Netflix Pulls Show as Turkey Objects to Gay Character,” *Reuters*, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/netflix-pulls-show-as-turkey-objects-to-gay-character-idUSKCN24M2BK/>

²⁰⁰ BBC, “Netflix Cancels Turkish Show *If Only* in Row over Gay Character,” 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-53489296>

scenario took place in another Netflix original called “Love 101”, and before the show was aired, the script of the show was changed due to the pressure, and the gay character was removed.²⁰¹ These expectations from internationally renowned digital channels reinforced the idea of “national and local art.”

All these interventions on TV with the reason of “national values” have led to a call for a “national and local art whose logic is not a foreigner to Turkey” by President Erdoğan.²⁰² Stating a criticism of the Western values on TV, the call of Erdoğan also implies what had been done wrong by the previous governments in the cultural sector: Forgetting the country’s roots, Ottoman history, and Muslim values. The tweet by Fahrettin Altun in 2018, saying 'Your political hegemony has ended; your cultural hegemony will end as well' is also a confirmation of this call that challenges the time’s cultural scene and signals a significant change. These official statements highlight a state acutely aware of the power of representation and meaning-making practices, particularly in shaping national identity. Popular culture serves as a unifying force, creating narratives that define 'us' and distinguish 'us' from the 'other' within political contexts.²⁰³ Through its emotional and visual dimensions, television and film play a crucial role in crafting representations that shape and reproduce collective identities.²⁰⁴ Therefore, the first steps of the new cultural hegemony were taken in the TV sector and led to the establishment of TRT Tabii, the digital platform of TRT where the channels content can be followed digitally in addition to the originals. Many of TRT Tabii’s original productions center on historical

²⁰¹ K. Behzat Sharpe, “Love 101, Netflix Turkey, and Homophobia,” *Duvar English*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/05/01/love-101-netflix-turkey-and-homophobia>.

²⁰² Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, Yerli ve Milli Anlayış Her Konuda Olduğu Gibi Kültür-Sanatta da İdealimiz Olmalı[“Domestic and National Understanding Should Be Our Ideal in Culture and Arts as in Every Subject”], 2018, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/92787/-yerli-ve-mill-anlayis-her-konuda-oldugu-gibi-kultur-sanatta-da-idealimiz-olmali-#>

²⁰³ Grayson, “How to read paddington bear: Liberalism and the foreign subject in a bear called Paddington”, 380; Roland Bleiker and Constance Duncombe. “Popular Culture and Popular Identity.” *Popular Culture and World Politics Theories, Methods, Pedagogies*, edited by Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton. (Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015), 42.

²⁰⁴ Bleiker and Duncombe, “Popular Culture and Popular Identity.” 42.

dramas that highlight Turkish heroes and convey patriotic or nationalistic themes, and the platform is often described as Turkey's 'local and national streaming service'.²⁰⁵

Despite political pressure through RTÜK fines, the rise of state-led platforms, and official criticism of certain productions, some current dramas still challenge the government's authoritarian media control and openly depict secular–religious tensions. Two prominent examples of this genre are *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* (2022-Present)²⁰⁶ and *Kızıl Goncalar* (2023- 2025).²⁰⁷ These dramas not only defy political criticism but also carve out a space for resistance within the soap opera industry. Their continued production and the significant audience interest they attract prevent the cultural arena from being entirely dominated by political institutions. By carefully balancing bold narratives with subtle portrayals, they demonstrate how agency at the production level and the support of the society can maintain creative autonomy and preserve diverse perspectives in an increasingly restricted media environment.

On the other side of the spectrum, there are soap operas produced as a response to the call for creating more “local and national art” that have a patriotic tone aligned with the government's discourse about Turkey's national identity: The period pieces that center the Ottoman Empire. In this process, dizis became a site of major local political contestation, where the new imaginary of the Turkish self was constructed as the continuation of the glorious Ottoman.²⁰⁸ Therefore, Ottomania as the cultural counterpart of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish

²⁰⁵ Anadolu Ajansı, “TRT'nin dijital platformu tabii 2. yaşını kutluyor,” *Anadolu Ajansı*, 7 Mayıs 2025, <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur/trtnin-dijital-platformu-tabii-2-yasini-kutluyor/3560043>.

²⁰⁶ *Kızılıcak Şerbeti* is a Turkish TV series that focuses on the challenges faced by two families with different cultural backgrounds. It primarily revolves around Doğa and Fatih who come from contrasting cultural environments. After a quick marriage, they navigate the ensuing complexities in their lives. The story highlights not only their personal struggles but also the cultural clashes that arise from their backgrounds.

²⁰⁷ *Kızıl Goncalar* places a strong emphasis on the conflict between secular and religious identities in Turkey by focusing on Meryem, a young woman deeply embedded in the life of a conservative religious sect. The sect is portrayed as a significant influence on her worldview, values, and daily life, illustrating the power and limitations of strict communal and spiritual frameworks. Meryem's journey is one of navigating her devotion to her faith and her sect's expectations while confronting the challenges of a relationship with Levent, whose secular and modernist ideals starkly contrast her upbringing.

²⁰⁸ Sertbulut, “They Don't Care What We Watch': On Ratings and Culture-Making in the Dizi Industry.” 2.

politics combined with autocratization has become a new trend on TV.²⁰⁹ While this genre has steadily expanded its place within Turkey's cultural production sphere, the cultural field itself has increasingly become a site of identity contestation. This dynamic intensified particularly after the government's harsh reaction to the highly successful costume drama *Magnificent Century* (2011–2014) for its portrayal of Ottoman history.

What became internationally the most influential period piece, *The Magnificent Century*, triggered a significant identity crisis at home with the political figures like Erdoğan and his cabinet openly criticizing the show. The reactions were not limited to the official censure of the series. They also restricted the production team's access to public spaces and, according to one of the creative workers of the show, actively supported the creation of alternative storylines.²¹⁰ These interventions brought questions about the power of representation to the forefront and raised broader debates about what constitutes an acceptable projection of Turkish history and identity in today's political context, and why.

2.1. Characters of the Nation: Ottoman Television Dramas and National Imaginaries

Currently, Turkish TV presents a heterogeneous image that accommodates different types of shows from cooking programs to a high number of soap operas. The research shows that the Turkish people watch TV mostly in prime time, between 20:00 and 23:00 which is a time slot spared for soap operas in the major channels. In this period, channels such as TRT, the national public broadcaster, and ATV, a leading pro-government channel, consistently rank among the most-watched stations, maintaining strong audience shares according to recent viewing data.²¹¹ Based on these statistics, we can say that watching soap operas in the evenings

²⁰⁹ Murat Ergin and Yağmur Karakaya, "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomania: Navigating State-Led and Popular Cultural Representations of the Past," *New Perspectives on Turkey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 36.

²¹⁰ Interviewee C, art director.

²¹¹ TİAK, *Televizyon İzleyici Ölçümü – 2024 Yılına Genel Bakış*, 2024 raporu. <https://tiak.com.tr/duyurular/turk-toplumu-tv-izleme-davranislari-2024-yilina-genel-bakis&no=1>

has become a routinized everyday practice²¹² for Turkish people, which makes these productions crucial in the formation and circulation of social and national imaginaries.

Building on the literature on everyday politics and national identity-making, it can be argued that the consumption and production of these soap operas elevate them beyond mere entertainment. The effect they generate plays a significant role in shaping and reinforcing collective identities. According to Closs Stephens, nationality is frequently experienced as an emotional sensation. This can encompass feelings of unity or the "forcible affect" that arises from sharing a common language. Soap operas and performative arts serve as powerful platforms for fostering a sense of togetherness, shaping the definitions of "us" and "the other."²¹³ When we closely look at the Ottoman themed soap operas, we can see this process is particularly significant in the Turkish context, where the themes and narratives of the shows frequently align with broader political and cultural agendas. These productions not only entertain but also act as mediums through which historical narratives are reimagined, and collective memories are reproduced and reinforced.

This routinized practice of producing and consuming the TV shows requires attention for two reasons: First, it can unpack how the macro-order of power is negotiated at a micro level,²¹⁴ particularly through the construction of specific representations of a shared past and their resonance with international politics. Second, it can shed light on the implications of producers' everyday choices for the nation and the reconstruction of its identity,²¹⁵ as well as the type of power these producers wield through their engagement with political processes. Recognizing this mechanism makes it even more important to acknowledge the political space embedded within different forms of media, including seemingly apolitical genres like soap

²¹² Ronald Ranta and Atsuko Ichijo, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics*, 2nd ed. (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 29.

²¹³ Closs Stephens, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political*, 17.

²¹⁴ Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson, "Everyday International Relations: Editors' Introduction." 125.

²¹⁵ Ronald and Ichijo, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics*, 31.

operas. These everyday cultural products carry narratives, values, and representations that help shape how people understand politics and society. In this sense, examining the political work performed by soap operas is crucial for understanding how power operates in the politics of the everyday. The intensity of production and consumption of soap operas in Turkey signals how this sector has become a crucial site where the tastes and perceptions of the audience might have been shaped; and in return, their perceptions shape the production practices.

This analysis focuses on the rise and significance of militaristic, Ottoman-themed television series in Turkey, examining both their cultural impact and their links to broader political agendas. The data shared previously points to how commonly the pro-government channels, such as ATV and TRT, have been watched especially in the prime time. These channels are the ones where most of the militaristic genre of Ottoman-themed soap operas are aired throughout the last decade, that constitute the main focus of the analysis. As mentioned earlier, this specific focus does not signal to a homogenous TV landscape in Turkey where there are only government back period pieces in place. While in parallel to this genre, other themes such as love, family, and friendships are also on display on these channels, this newly and strongly emerging theme requires closer attention to research the politics in the “dizi” sector. Therefore, in this chapter, I offer a new look at the changing dynamics of TV by zooming in on this historical-militaristic genre that strongly occurred after 2011. The main reason for focusing on this case is to shed light on the sudden emergence and popularity of the genre in the 2010s, to understand how these series secured their place on television and what they represent. It also aims to investigate how the platforms and professionals within this genre operate at the intersection of foreign policy and cultural production, particularly in the context of Turkey's neo-Ottomanist foreign policy.

After 2011, Turkish TV turned to the past, mining Ottoman nostalgia for storytelling, while forward-looking projects such as EU accession faded from view. What made these shows

different than before is not only the nostalgic atmosphere of them but also the way they are produced in a strategic way as an intensifier factor to Turkey's identity negotiations, triggered as a response to another representation of the Ottoman history in Turkish popular culture. In order to understand the nostalgic character of the content, we can refer back to the classical work of Byom, where she explains nostalgia as "a long for a home that no longer exists or never existed."²¹⁶ She further develops her point where she theorizes nostalgia as the imagination of the past which is determined by the needs of today for future aspirations. So nostalgia has a function to operate as a mechanism that addresses the current problems and designs for tomorrow. It doesn't matter whether how we imagine it reflects the truth of what we had in the past, but it is imagined in a way to heal something today. Thinking with Boym's understanding of nostalgia, then, the emergence of Ottoman nostalgia in Turkey right when the government's authoritarian tendencies started to receive resistance from the public and the relations with the EU reached an impasse is not a coincidence. Rather, the imagination of the Ottoman served as a guideline to reconstitute a national identity for Turkey when the long-lasting EU inspirations have almost come to an end. It also acted as a defense mechanism for external threats and reaffirmed the country's future international aspirations through the everyday production of banal nationalism.²¹⁷ In domestic politics, this discourse is mobilized through a narrative of reclaiming Turkey's long-neglected Ottoman grandeur and reasserting leadership across former Ottoman territories.

The reemergence of the "Ottoman" concept in high politics and popular culture has become a tool for shaping people's perceptions of who they are collectively, where they should aim to go, and what sets them apart from the 'Others,' as conveyed through representations on television. This spread of the theme from high politics to popular culture is conceptualized as

²¹⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xvi.

²¹⁷ Ezgi Elçi, "Politics of Nostalgia and Populism: Evidence from Turkey," *British Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (2022): 699.

Ottomania referring to the popular-cultural counterpart to the state-driven neo-Ottomanism project, constructed in relation to audience interests and consumption practices.²¹⁸ According to the sector workers, this process operates not only ideationally but also commercially: Ottoman history has acquired a kind of global brand value that television networks and producers have been quick to commodify, shaping choices about which stories to stage and how to stage them²¹⁹. At the same time, both researchers and sector workers agree that state-level neo-Ottomanist discourses converged with the spectacular success of series like *Magnificent Century*, so that political orientations and mainstream historical dramas began to feed into one another, informing casting, spectacle, and the privileging of certain moral exemplars.²²⁰ Consequently, these representations of Turkishness through well-known historical figures in TV shows provided a framework for drawing the line between the self and the other, as no representation can perfectly replicate its object of inquiry; each one undergoes a process of interpretation and abstraction.²²¹

Through their portrayal of the Ottoman past, popular TV series in Turkey operate as sites of political meaning-making, illustrating how nostalgia and selective history are mobilized to construct national identity. Therefore, the choice of one representation over another is inherently a political act with significant political implications.²²² In modern Turkey's cultural sphere, the Ottoman Empire is mostly represented as a narrative of glorious heroism, exemplifying what Turkey should aspire to in its international positioning and emphasizing its 'unique' civilization as superior to the 'West.' To decode these messages, the following sections will start the empirical analysis of the chosen shows, and present what appeared on Turkish

²¹⁸ Murat Ergin and Yağmur Karakaya, "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomanism: Navigating State-Led and Popular Cultural Representations of the Past," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 57 (2017): 34

²¹⁹ Interviewee D, screenwriter.

²²⁰ Interviewee H, director.

²²¹ Roland Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 46.

²²² Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity*, 4.

television over the past decade and what they meant. While this section does not provide a comprehensive analysis of soap opera representations and their reception, it highlights key moments where identity-building and the strategic use of nostalgia for contemporary purposes are most apparent.

2.2. Mediating History: National Identity and Representation

The Ottoman nostalgia as a soap opera theme in Turkey became a trend following the *Magnificent Century* (MC henceforth) aired on a private channel, Show TV, between 2011-2014, and from that point forward, the rise of Ottomania in Turkish popular culture became unstoppable. The production of the MC came as a surprise to the Turkish audience, since it was the first mainstream soap opera came to the TV after a long time with high production quality and different from what the audience watched in the 1980s and 1990s. According to the producer of the show, the main aim of the MC was to produce a period piece at the standards of Hollywood like the *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019) or *Tudors* (2007-2010), and to have an international as much as a domestic success on TV sector. He said when they did this work, they had a dream that this would be world-class content that could be watched in the international arena just like an American production that could be broadcast in many countries.²²³ After designing the set with the biggest talents in Turkey and taking one of the biggest financial risks in his life, the hard work of the production paid off, both in Turkey and abroad. *The Magnificent Century* became the first Turkish series to have its launch at MIPCOM, Cannes, announced globally with a premiere, and accompanied by a special premiere event and invitation.²²⁴ It achieved massive global export and it is still aired all around the world after ten years of its final episode.²²⁵ From a business perspective, the Ottoman

²²³ Interviewee A, senior manager of the production company

²²⁴ MIPCOM is an annual international trade show for the television industry held in Cannes, France, traditionally in the month of October.

²²⁵ Josh Carney, "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*," *Middle East Critique* (2019): 102.

nostalgia infused with pop elements, making the show accessible to a broad audience, can be interpreted as a commercial strategy by the producer. However, the series have more to offer than an entertainment, especially considering its impact on Turkey's national identity and foreign policy negotiations.

The Magnificent Century centers on the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest-reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and his powerful and influential wife, Hürrem Sultan who was an odalisque in the Ottoman Imperial Harem. The show is set in the 16th century and follows Suleiman's reign, portraying not only his military conquests and efforts to expand the empire but also the complex dynamics within the Ottoman court. The series is designed to have an international success exploring how Hollywood filmmakers employ strategies like casting famous actors and drawing from real-life tragedies based on historical events and figures to captivate audiences and enhance dramatic impact. The creative team behind the series revealed that they had been briefed by the producer about the show's international aspirations, although initially, they found it hard to believe due to the unprecedented level of success envisioned in the sector.²²⁶ From the outset, the aim was to create something unmatched in the history of Turkish TV and cinema, both regarding the cinematography and the storyline quality, which necessitated breaking all conventional stereotypes associated with the design of a costume drama.

While the show narrated a local story, the life of an Ottoman Sultan and his beloved wife, the visual quality of the scenes including the shooting techniques, decoration of the set, and the effort put into the design of costumes seemed to be inspired by the Hollywood standards.²²⁷ The overall visuals of the show from the costumes to the palace decoration is also designed to reduce cultural differences to a minimum to reach a broad audience by using

²²⁶ Interviewee D, costume designer

²²⁷ Deniz Özalpman and Katharine Sarikakis, "The Politics of Pleasure in Global Drama: A Case Study of the TV Series, *The Magnificent Century* (*Muhteşem Yüzyıl*)," *Global Media and Communication* 14, no. 3 (2018): 261.

universal symbols and color codes. The team emphasized that they did not approach the production as a pedagogical tool to educate Turkish society about its history or through the lens of national identity. The whole story was designed to be a groundbreaking show in the entertainment sector, but they always maintained respect for historical accuracy and objectivity in their portrayal of the characters through the regular meetings with history advisors.²²⁸ However, the portrayal of historical characters with a touch of popular cultural elements and human emotions such as intrigue, love, and lust did not align with the imagination of Ottoman by the Turkish government. Even before the series premiered, the release of the first trailer ignited tensions between the producers and the government. A misunderstanding arose regarding the portrayal of the main character, Sultan Süleyman, with concerns that his private life would be depicted in a derogatory manner.²²⁹ The government's swift reaction and its immediate criticism of the production team highlighted the sensitivity and contentiousness surrounding the topic. Therefore, the *MC* started the contestation of Turkish identity Ottoman imaginary on screens, even before the first episode was officially aired.

While the *MC* is a show that has been widely successful in the world, it did not match the Turkish government's preferred imaginaries of the Ottoman Empire and separated itself from the ones that come later to counter the narrative. Therefore, studying the representations and production dynamics of the *MC* provides valuable insights into how Turkishness is being constructed today through cultural production, and also facilitates comparisons between representations in different shows. In order to spot the differences in the Ottoman imaginaries in this work and in the ones that come later with the government's support, I would like to point out a few dimensions to focus on and investigate the politics of production at this level. These points, or rather the categories, I look at include but not limited to the depiction of gender roles,

²²⁸ Interviewee H and Interviewee I, directors

²²⁹ Interviewee B, International operations director of the production company

costumes, depiction of war scenes, narratives of nationhood, and the overall feeling it leaves on the audience for creating a systematic framework of comparison. Following the *MC*, the same categories will be investigated in the shows of *Resurrection Ertuğrul* (2014-2019) and *Foundation: Osman* (2019-Present) as they represent the two most successful examples of their genre for comparison.

At the heart of the plot of the *Magnificent Century*, there is a woman and his relations to the biggest governor of his time: Sultan Süleyman: Her journey from a captured slave to one of the most powerful women in the Empire. Her influence on Suleiman and her maneuvering within the harem led to political power struggles, alliances, and conflicts among the sultan's advisors, his family, and other members of the royal court. The series explores themes of ambition, betrayal, loyalty, and love, drawing on the opulent visuals of the Ottoman palace to bring to life this period of Turkish history. The plot of the show offers a dramatic look at how personal relationships and ambitions can shape political outcomes and provides insight into how Ottoman culture and Islamic traditions influenced the court's operations.

The series starts with a ship rocking on the waves of the Bosphorus, filled with captured women, including Alexandra, who will become Hürrem Sultan in a short time. As the ship approaches Istanbul, the majestic skyline of the Ottoman capital looms in the distance, contrasting sharply with their dramatic situation. The ship reaches the bustling port, filled with the sounds of men shouting orders and seagulls crying. Alexandra's eyes reflect a mix of fear and defiance as she takes in the grandeur of the city that will be her new reality. Turning to a fellow captive, she asks with a bitter edge, "Have we arrived at the Ottoman hell?", which is a line that is not possible to have on TV today due to government policies, according to the producers of the show.²³⁰ The rest of the story is built upon the resistance to Alexandra not being a slave and then her smart plans to make Sultan Süleyman fall in love with her, which

²³⁰ Interviewee H and Interviewee I, directors

ended up being a legendary love story that ruled the world and became the center of the series. Despite the series including strong messages regarding the glory of the Ottoman Empire and presenting scenes of important wars, it is easy to tell that the series is not designed to be a militaristic show that addresses the nationalistic desires of people at the discursive level. Rather, it projects the glory of its time with the visuals of luxury; from the decoration of the palace with golden details to the rich amount of food prepared in the palace which constitutes of the attractive value of the show for international audience.

The main poster of the series that has been released to introduce the show and is still on display on IMDb also projects the main idea of the series: Glory, power, and intrigue (See Image I). The subtitle of the show, *Aşk-ı Derun (Deep Love)*, also points out how central the love story is in the show. In the poster, while the main character of the show, Sultan Süleyman, is posing in the middle, the background and the other characters signal that the family relations of the dynasty and the everyday life in the palace constitute the main plot. On the right side of Sultan Süleyman stands Hürrem Sultan, and right behind her is Mahidevran, who is Süleyman's consort, the mother of his eldest son, and Hürrem Sultan's principal rival in the palace. On the left side of Sultan Süleyman is his mother, Hafsa Sultan, known for her influential position within the imperial court; behind her stands his Grand Vizier, Pargalı İbrahim Paşa; and further behind, his sister, Hatice Sultan. There are no militaristic items such as swords or armor, but rather a flashy look of the palace with the choices of gold color in the background, bright light on the characters, and the beautiful women of the dynasty with low-neck dresses and tiaras.

*Image I: removed for copyright purposes.*²³¹

²³¹ The poster of the show contains the title "Muhteşem Yüzyıl: Aşk-ı Derûn" above a central image of Halit Ergenç as Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent in ornate Ottoman royal attire, flanked by the show's female leads (including Hürrem) and a Janissary figure. The image foregrounds the series' opulent court aesthetic, with rich gold, red, and brown tones evoking imperial Ottoman costume and set design. You can access the image through the following website: "The Magnificent Century," IMDb, access date 16 June 2026, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt1848220/>.

Often described as a “pop work with inspiration from the history” by its production team, the *Magnificent Century* offers a historical fiction that is easy to watch, nevertheless, narrating a very influential figure and family for the Turkish society was not an easy due to collective sensitivities. The production team worked with some of the best Ottoman history experts in the country to not make fatal mistakes regarding the main historical events. In the writing of some scenes, the team faced strong opposition from the history advisors regarding “not touching the people's perception of history that is ingrained in their minds, otherwise they would be stoned.”²³² Consequently, when it comes to sensitive issues like the personal relationships of the Sultan and his family, as they are perceived as the symbols of the “glorious state”, the team chose not to bring the subject on the screen even though they could be documented facts. Even in a pop work like this, the series demonstrates how nostalgia has been selectively mobilized to prevent societal backlash and how the representation of everyday life is intertwined with broader social and political structures.

In addition to nostalgia and collective memory, these series operate within a broader commercial network. Therefore, the commercial objectives of the production, such as meeting sponsor demands or aligning with market expectations, often played a significant role in shaping the show. During the production process, the team reported experiencing tensions between fulfilling the demands of creating a popular work and avoiding interference with the public's perception of history, striving to accurately represent widely recognized facts. They noted that these issues occasionally became problematic, forcing a choice between economic considerations and the evocation of nostalgia. For example, in some of the episodes and posters we see the women of the dynasty wearing tiaras despite it wasn't a state tradition in the Ottoman Empire (See Figure 1). The choice of whether to use tiaras for the show came with a long

²³² Interviewee F, history advisor.

discussion among the team; and eventually they were used as a part of the costumes despite they were not traditional accessories during the reign of Sultan Süleyman. According to one of the production workers, the decision was made following the request of the sponsor which was an important jewelry brand of its time,²³³ and it fit the image of the dynasty in a Western sense. This decision ensured the continued financial support from the sponsor. Also, such choices may partly explain the show's broad international appeal, as tiaras carry a recognizable meaning in international politics. They introduced a Western element into the visual narrative that is easily understood by all: the tiara as a symbol of power and royalty.

While the MC attracted the attention of the audience and broke rating records in Turkey and was successfully sold abroad, the focus of the TV series and the way the main characters are portrayed started a political debate regarding Turkey's ancestors and how they should be presented to the public. According to the directors of the show, the characters were portrayed as objectively as possible without caricaturing any character as completely good or completely evil to create a sense of empathy in the audience.²³⁴ However, when compared with the overall discourse of the production team, it becomes evident that this claim of objectivity operated within the boundaries of prevailing Turkish societal values, aiming not to provoke strong backlash. As a result, the narrative still relied on a form of glorification, even if more subtle and calibrated, and was therefore not entirely objective. Nevertheless, according to the government, the characters that constituted the foundational figures of Turkish historical consciousness were almost humiliated in the way the *MC* portrayed them.

By criticizing especially, the romantic threads that are foregrounded in the series and claiming that Turks do not have such ancestors as presented in the show, Turkey's current President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signaled a different interpretation of Ottoman history while

²³³ Interviewee F, advisor.

²³⁴ Interviewee C, art director; Interviewee H and Interviewee I, directors.

this pop-culture product entered the agenda of Turkish politics. Accusing the scenarists and director of the famous TV show of not showing the reality of Turkey's glorious Ottoman past,²³⁵ the Turkish government decided to counter the *MC*'s interpretation of history in cultural production. The other Ottoman-themed soap opera, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014-2019) has been released on the Turkish national broadcaster TRT, produced upon request with the state support²³⁶ to counter the *MC*.²³⁷ Following its release and the considerable public attention it attracted, the show's militaristic narrative became a catalyst for the resurgence and mainstreaming of this genre on Turkish television.

An interesting aspect of the production teams behind two notable shows, *The Magnificent Century* (*MC*) and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (*RE* henceforth), and later *Establishment: Osman* (*KO* henceforth) (2019–2025), is that parts of their creative teams consist of the same professionals. *The Magnificent Century* introduced a new dynamic to costume dramas, carving out its own niche within the industry. The creative team, having to learn the intricacies of producing period pieces from the ground up and adhering to international standards, became pioneers and the first experts in their field.²³⁸ Some parts of the *MC* creative team were hired to produce *RE* due to their expertise such as costume designers. Despite their expertise and profession are not debatable on the issue, the outcome of the two shows became very different at the representational level. The reason of this was the different

²³⁵ Fatima Bhutto, "How Turkish TV Is Taking Over the World," *The Guardian*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/13/turkish-tv-magnificent-century-dizi-taking-over-world>.

²³⁶ Bilge Yeşil, "Promoting Turkish History and Civilization: Television Dramas and Muslim Audiences," in *Talking Back to the West: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2024), 117, <https://doi.org/10.5406/jj.13027256.10>
The moral support from the government can be observed in the discourses of state officials and their visits to the set of the opera. For a sample of news, please see the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. 2015. "President Erdoğan Visits Set of *Diriliş Ertuğrul*". (2015); Yeni Şafak. "Erdoğan Praises *Ertuğrul* TV Series for Reacquainting World with Ottoman History", (2019). <https://www.yenisafak.com/en/life/erdoganpraises-ertugrul-tv-series-for-reacquainting-world-with-ottomanhstory-3479750>

²³⁷ Carney, "Resur(e)cting a Spectacular Hero: *Diriliş Ertuğrul*, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey," 95; Özçetin, "The Show of the People' against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey." 943.

²³⁸ Interviewee C, art director

aims and perspectives of their producers, which shows how the focus on different aspect on representation can change the whole political narrative of an everyday artefact. Unlike the *MC*, the main target of the *RE* was not the international audience, because “what doesn't work in Turkey doesn't work abroad, so they needed to convince this country first.”²³⁹

Another additional factor for the change in the narratives is also the structural differences in the sets and production organizations of the soap operas. Despite the producers of both shows, *MC* and *RE*, being very successful in most of the jobs they produce, the level of their involvement made a big difference in the projection of these stories, which also relates to the vision of the productions. The *MC* was created as the project of Meral Okay, the scenarist of the show who was independent from the production company. Therefore, based on the interviews conducted with the production crew, while know that the whole team worked so closely, the producer of the *MC* century was not closely involved in the storyline as there was already a different screenwriter of the show. Nevertheless, the *RE* and *KO* were created as the master project of their producer who is a historian by training and actively takes part in the scenario writing and weekly meetings of the crew. Consequently, as his initial ideals were different than creating a pop work at the level of Hollywood standards, he is more involved in the production of the story which changes the texture of the show.

While the *MC* portrays the golden ages of the Ottoman Empire, *RE* sheds light on a more undocumented period of time: 13th century and narrates the life of Ertuğrul, the father of Osman I who is the founder of the Ottoman Empire. The series revolves around the journey of Ertuğrul Bey as he leads the Kayı tribe through trials of survival, justice, and faith. The reason why this specific period is chosen could be serving two things: First, narrating a glorious victory starting from the beginning and showing how much heroic effort, it took to build a glorious empire when a Turkic tribe rose from its ashes. This idea is already embedded in the

²³⁹ Interviewee E, scenarist

title of the show, the *resurrection* of a nation which aligns with the imagination of the government and its plan to counter the luxury and intrigue narrative in the MC. It touches upon the collective memory of the audience with a different approach, and the affective mechanism in the show motivates people who are living in the modern Turkey to establish ties with their past and to become a regional, if not a global leader, leader again like their ancestors. Second, the undocumented period provides more space for the imagination and fiction parts of the series which helps painting the picture of an original image that is designed to remain eternally young and heroic²⁴⁰. The selection of a hero from an era with limited historical documentation reflects a form of restorative nostalgia, which allows for the imaginative reconstruction of the past in ways that resonate with contemporary narratives and preferences.²⁴¹ To explore how this period of history is represented and what it reveals about the shifts within the cultural sector, as outlined in the framework for the MC, I turn my gaze to the historical militaristic genre and its presentation to viewers. I identify key junctures at which nationhood and international politics are articulated in official posters and selected scenes from the series, analyzing them through the same categories applied in the case of *Magnificent Century*: representations of gender, costume choices, depictions of warfare, discourses of nationhood, and the broader emotional effects these elements produce for audiences.

The first episode of the show opens with an intense, masculine scene in which Ertuğrul forges a sword in the Kayı Tribe's encampment, accompanied by the chant "Haydır Allah! Haktır Allah!" (translated as "Allah is the ever-Living, Allah is the Truth"). He is dressed in a patched garment of fur and leather, his face glistening with sweat and streaked with soot. The episode immediately positions him as the hero of the show, when Ertuğrul and his soldiers rescue a group of prisoners held by the Templars, including Halime Hatun and her family, who

²⁴⁰ Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 49.

²⁴¹ Carney, "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*." 107.

is going to be his wife in the upcoming episodes. The rest of the episode slowly sets up the narrative for the rest of the show, as we witness the tribe's search for a permanent homeland and the unfolding of early conflicts, alliances, and moral codes that will shape Ertuğrul's journey and the political landscape around him.

From the very first moment, the show signals the central themes of honor, survival, and faith which is in line with Erdoğan's definition of the Ottoman ancestors as heroes who spent most of their lives at the back of a horse²⁴². Unlike *Magnificent Century*, the whole narrative is heavily action-oriented, with a significantly greater number of battle and combat sequences. Consequently, most of the series unfolds outdoors or within the tribe's yurts, which shifts the visual rhetoric of heroism away from symbols of wealth and luxury and toward depictions of struggle, endurance, and martial skill as markers of virtue. These choices emphasize heroism and virtue as something actively demonstrated, rather than inherited or ceremonial, and highlight a sense of collective effort and resilience within the tribe. Notably the women in the show, unlike in the MC, also take part in the fighting scenes as combatants relatively frequently, which expands the notion of collective effort within the tribe. These visual choices and the story build a version of Turkish historical identity that focuses on courage and the solidarity of the community, rather than on luxury or courtly elegance, and they reinforce a clear set of moral and cultural values for the audience.

The narrative of the show mentioned above is also strongly coded in the visual marketing materials like the posters distributed for different platforms. Examining the posters for *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* reveals a clear difference in genre compared to *Magnificent Century*, even though both series are period pieces. These posters (See Image II and Image III) are taken from the Twitter account of the network that aired the show (TRT1), and IMDb's

²⁴² Rengin Arslan, "Muhteşem Yüzyıl, Erdoğan'ın Tepkisiyle Gündemde" [The Magnificent Century is on the Agenda with the Reaction of Erdoğan], *BBC Türkçe*, 2012, http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2012/11/121126_magnificent_century

current cover page for the show. At the first glance, we can see that the posters are designed with darker colors and in a more masculine setting compared to the *MC*'s poster (see Image II and Image III). First of all, in the posters chosen by the official channel of the show and the online platform of the movie database, all characters are men, with the main character placed at the center. Despite there are other posters available on the internet where the female characters make an appearance, their styles are away from being luxurious and sexual.²⁴³ Also, instead of ostentation in the costumes and the background setting, there is a militaristic and masculine message in the costumes of these men that are made of leather, fur, and armor. Additionally, the men's positioning in the poster and the way they hold their swords give the message of Turks as a group that is brave and ready to fight.

The visual representations in these posters and in the show seems like it takes most of the inspiration from the past due to the nostalgic atmosphere of the story. Nevertheless, according to the creative team, the show heavily employs the codes of 21st-century Western cinema. This is because the Turkish audience is largely alienated from its history and may not recognize stylistic codes from earlier periods, a phenomenon that also reflects Turkey's Westernization process in cultural and political spheres. One of the creative workers stated, "In the Metropolitan Museum, there is a 13th-century dress from the Seljuks that is silk and has huge bird patterns on it, but it is impossible for them to make a man look like a hero with such a costume."²⁴⁴ Additionally due to the few documentation about the stylistic choices of early Ottoman times, there was not enough examples for the creative team to base their designs on. This is why the visual representations of these shows frequently involve the current understanding of masculinity and power, which is created through dark colors and lots of swords and armor.

²⁴³ For examples, please see: <https://tr.pinterest.com/pin/dirili-erturul-afii-afileri-afi-resimleri-in-2024--901282944171494450/>

²⁴⁴ Interviewee D, Costume designer

Image II: removed for copyright purposes²⁴⁵

Image III: removed for copyright purposes²⁴⁶

The Resurrection: Ertuğrul's nationalist-militarist concept continued with its sequel *Establishment: Osman* (2019-2025) as its chronological next step. The show centers around the life of Osman I, the founder of the Ottoman Empire, and explores the early years of the Empire's establishment, and continued with great success on TV until the very last episode. In this second part of the sequel, Osman Bey, the youngest son of Ertuğrul Gazi, rises to power and lays the foundations of the Ottoman Empire in the series. The plot is structured around his battles, strategic alliances, and struggles against internal and external enemies, particularly the Byzantine Empire and Mongol invaders.

Throughout the series, both the focus of the plot and stylistic choices were consistent with its predecessor: *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*. Historical heroism, fights, nation, and religion are emphasized in almost every scene, and the concept of "virtue" is built on these themes. Osman, the main character of the show is present in every fight despite his role as the state's man. The shooting technique and angles of the fighting scenes are different than what people are used to

²⁴⁵ The poster for "Resurrection: Ertuğrul" shows Engin Altan Düzyatan as Ertuğrul Bey at the center, flanked by his fellow warriors in rugged leather and chainmail armor, set against a starry night sky. The dark, weathered tones and weaponry emphasize the show's nomadic-warrior aesthetic. You can access the image via the following website: TRT 1 (@trt1), X post, October 24, 2017, <https://x.com/trt1/status/922714331451744256>.

²⁴⁶ The poster for "Resurrection Ertuğrul" contains Ertuğrul Bey and four companions charge forward with swords, an axe, and a bow drawn, their leather and lamellar armor evoking the Kayı tribe's warrior aesthetic. Looming above them, a ghostly Crusader knight in chainmail and a cross-marked helm frames the scene as a civilizational confrontation, with the gold "Diriliş Ertuğrul" title below. You can access the image via the following website: "Resurrection: Ertugrul," poster, IMDb, accessed June 16, 2026, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt4320258/mediaviewer/rm1336337408/>.

seeing on TV; sometimes it reminds of the scenes from video games with the camera turning around the protagonist which makes these slow-motion scenes more interesting to watch. Every fighting scene includes a pep talk from Osman to its soldiers and chanting of tekbir (shouting Allahuekber) before and at the moment of attacks. The bad guys who are the enemies of Turks in this genre are mostly portrayed in a caricaturized way, which takes their “human” side away and leaves no room for empathy towards the “Other”. They always look better equipped for a fight with their armor, fortresses, and shiny swords, but somehow the prayers and the fighting techniques of the strong and humble Turks always overcome the arrogant “infidel”. For example, the Byzantine commander in *Establishment: Osman* is depicted almost as the epitome of a “bad man” in cinematography, who is always angry, speaks in a certain tone with a furious and revengeful look on his face, and is not compassionate towards even his soldiers.²⁴⁷ This narrative structure not only reinforces a clear dichotomy between good and evil but also functions as a tool for constructing a collective identity rooted in moral superiority and resilience. Additionally, it frames the Turks’ external relations in the show, portraying them as morally supreme figures in opposition to the “bad” other, which adds a layer of international political perception.

When we look more at the gender depictions of the show, we see that the main women characters of the tribe are the wife, daughters, and daughters-in-law of Osman, and they are not isolated from the public unlike the women in the MC who spent their lives in a palace. These characters are always in touch with people and take an active part in the organization of collective events, which puts their supportive involvement in nation-making before their femininity and gives them a sense of virtue. One of the creative workers of the show touched upon this issue by noting that they cannot place Osman, the main character’s mother, or his

²⁴⁷ A scene of the Byzantine commander in the *Establishment: Osman* can be watched via the following link starting from 1:00:30. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXsC9B1OMis&t=11s>

wife in an immoral position where human flaws would be visible, because any mistake on their part would reflect as a mistake of the state.²⁴⁸ This perception personifies the understanding of the Turkish state and the normative expectations projected onto it. In this way, femininity is depicted not as an individual or personal attribute but as a set of socially sanctioned roles that support collective and national ideals.

The stylistic choices made for female characters further complement this portrayal. Their clothing, particularly their traditional bead-decorated head coverings and modest attire, visually encodes a sense of moral uprightness. Rather than foregrounding sexuality, these aesthetic decisions contribute to a visual language that frames women as embodiments of virtue. Through such design choices, the show strengthens its broader narrative framework by presenting women as stabilizing moral figures whose presence supports the cultural and ideological coherence of the tribe.

Overall, the series strongly emphasizes “Turkishness” infused with Islamic motifs, with characters expressing constant gratitude to Allah in both good and bad situations. However, this portrayal amplifies the role of Islam in the 13th century Kayı tribe. While the tribe was indeed Muslim, Islam at the time was neither as institutionalized nor as central to political identity as the series suggests, given that it had only recently become integrated into the cultural practices of the Kayı tribe.²⁴⁹ In addition to religious emphasis, the series also mentions other Turkic groups such as “Meskhetian Turks”²⁵⁰ as their friends which is a narration that is in line with the Turkish government’s initiative to have closer cultural and political ties with Turkic states recently with the formation of a common Turkic alphabet.²⁵¹ This timely emphasis on the subject shows that meanwhile the series is inspired by the past, it also has elements that reflect

²⁴⁸ Interviewee D, creative worker.

²⁴⁹ Interviewee F, history advisor.

²⁵⁰ Establishment: Osman, Episode 170. Available at: <https://www.atv.com.tr/kurulus-osman/170-bolum/izle>

²⁵¹ *Anadolu Agency*, “Turkic States Reach Agreement on Common 34-Letter Alphabet,” September 11, 2024, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/world/turkic-states-reach-agreement-on-common-34-letter-alphabet/3327560>.

the current political discussions in the country. Moreover, the leadership style of the main hero, Osman, resonates with the speaking style and gestures of the AKP leaders such as Erdoğan and other well-known mayors and ministers. Phrases frequently used by Erdoğan such as "What we have done will be the guarantee of what we will do" and religious expressions like "elhamdülillah"²⁵² are echoed in Osman's dialogues, creating a sense of continuity between historical and contemporary Turkish leadership. This stylistic overlap not only strengthens the image of Osman as a strong, visionary leader, but also reinforces the narrative of unbroken national greatness, implicitly suggesting that the qualities of leadership seen in the modern political sphere are part of a timeless Turkish tradition.

2.3. Beyond Osman and Ertuğrul: The Modern Turkish Saga

The sequence that started with *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman* now continues with *Establishment: Orhan/The Rise of Orhan (2025-present)*, airing on the same TV channel. Both series, *RE* and *EO*, have become highly successful examples of the militarist-historical genre, achieving strong ratings in Turkey and reaching international audiences as the first Turkish TV series with over 10 million YouTube subscribers.²⁵³ *Establishment: Osman* achieved export revenue of \$20.4 million over 34 episodes, with a per-episode price of \$600,000, considered a record in the market.²⁵⁴ However, these two being the most successful early examples of the genre, they triggered the mass production of similar historical pieces produced by different production companies that are almost specialized in period pieces. Each of these pieces takes a Turkish "hero" at the center of their plotlines and builds their stories

²⁵² For a sample scene, please see Episode 170, between 1:06:10 – 1:06:25. Available at: <https://www.atv.com.tr/kurulus-osman/170-bolum/izle>

²⁵³ "Kuruluş Osman YouTube'da 10 Milyon Aboneye Ulaştı! [Establishment: Osman Has Reached 10M Subscribers]." 2024. ATV. November 13, 2024. <https://www.atv.com.tr/haberler/2024/11/13/kurulus-osman-youtubeda-10-milyon-aboneye-ulasti>.

²⁵⁴ Forbes Turkey. "Ses, Kamera, Oyun." *Forbes Turkey*. Accessed December 29, 2024. <https://www.forbes.com.tr/makale/ses-kamera-oyun>.

around them similar to the classical Hollywood superhero movies, but with a touch of real historical and national characters just happened in the cases of Ertuğrul and Osman. Some of the most recent and well-known ones aired on TV are the following: *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* (2017-2021) aired on TRT 1, *Alparslan: The Great Seljuks* (2021-2023) aired on TRT1, *Barbaros Hayreddin: Sultan's Edict* (2022-2023) aired on TRT1, *Barbarossa: Sword of the Mediterranean* (2021-2022) aired on TRT1. There are more examples on the digital platform of the National Broadcaster, TRT Tabii, that also center on the lives of prominent figures in Islamic intellectual and cultural history such as Rumi and İbn-i Sina.²⁵⁵

Despite the names differing, all these TV shows that are produced in the nationalist-militarist genre have a lot in common. Many of them are produced by the same production company, so historical dramas have become a subcategory of their production business for some firms. They all put the story of a national “hero” at the center and glamourize it with discourses of Turkishness and Islam, where the concept of virtue in the storyline is built. “The heroes often make grand statements about life and the nation, which presents them as wise and respectable while leaving little room for their human flaws. The main characters and their family do not commit moral failings, because the audience associates these characters with the concept of a “strong state”, and their mistakes are seen as the mistakes of the Turkish state,²⁵⁶ reflecting their role as embodiments of the state, and necessitating the maintenance of its sacred aura.

The series subject to this research include big portions of fighting scenes where the actors and actresses mastered the use of swords and horse-riding and there are very few comedic scenes in them which makes these shows very militaristic-heavy. To prepare for these scenes, some actors revealed that they underwent three months of training before filming

²⁵⁵ *Rumi* (2023): <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt14533598/>; *Young İbn-i Sina* (2023): <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt21279302/>.

²⁵⁶ Interviewee E, director

began, learning horseback riding and swordsmanship.²⁵⁷ Gender depictions do not differ either; women are not passive in the collective issues and state, they are rather portrayed as the significant supporters of the main hero (who is always a male) but their femininity is not highlighted in regard to their sexuality as much as in the MC. Another significant aspect is the stark contrast between the portrayal of the Turkish 'Self' and the enemy 'Other.' While the *MC* is not as objective in their portrayal of characters as the producers claim, in this genre, the distinction is exaggerated, often depicting the 'Other' as a caricatured villain in opposition to the heroic Turk. This marking of the Self and the Other is one of the main reasons why the fighting and war scenes are so prevalent in the series; they not only fulfill the time requirements set by the channels for the weekly episodes but also serve to reinforce the conflict between the two sides.

Although the majority of these series follow similar themes and are handled in almost the same way with no innovations introduced, the production of such series continues in Turkey. This growing number of productions in this genre is subject to varying interpretations among industry professionals. Some attribute it to a resurgence of domestic interest,²⁵⁸ suggesting that these shows resonate with the Turkish people's desire to reconnect with their historical and cultural roots after years of neglect.²⁵⁹ This perspective highlights a broader cultural movement where the audience seeks stories that reinforce a shared identity and pride in their past. Others, however, see this trend as a direct reflection of the Turkish government's current cultural and international policies, which prioritize narratives that promote national pride and unity around neo-Ottomanism that aims to reclaim the glory of that time. These professionals argue that the genre capitalizes on Turkish society's responsiveness to stories of heroism and triumph, tapping into a collective emotional state that is easily stirred by depictions

²⁵⁷ Interviewee G, actor

²⁵⁸ Interviewee L, post-production editor

²⁵⁹ Interviewee E, director

of historical glory.²⁶⁰ This interpretation shows how state influence and national sentiment are deeply intertwined, shaping both the content and popularity of these productions. The convergence of these factors such as audience interest, rediscovery of cultural identity, and political agendas creates a fertile ground for the proliferation of these historical narratives.

The financial realities in the sector combined with personal and ideological factors bring another dichotomy for the producers. Industry professionals who are producing the nationalist-militarist genre state that they no longer profit from the shows they produce for the domestic audience. This is largely due to the high production costs associated with war and tribal scenes, which require large crews and intricate setups. The only profit they can make in today's circumstances with costume dramas is through exportation. Despite the exportation rates of many of the shows fall short of the success of *Kuruluş: Osman*; the producers continue to produce these shows, citing their primary motivation as '*introducing the national heroes to the children of Turkey*.'²⁶¹ However, when such explanations come from professionals working for the national broadcaster (TRT), it raises questions about whether their motivations extend beyond personal ideals and financial motivations. Unfortunately, these questions were left unanswered by the producers but the silence in these moments signaled its own site of politics²⁶² and points to significant dynamics in the state-cultural production structure: Self-censorship appears to play a significant role, likely influenced by broader political and cultural pressures. This atmosphere of self-censorship, particularly among those affiliated with national broadcasters, suggests that these narratives are shaped as much by external motivations as by genuine enthusiasm for historical storytelling. As a result, this genre, though widely celebrated, operates at the intersection of art, commerce, and state influence, aiming to create a continuum between Ottoman history and contemporary Turkey, particularly through its representations. It

²⁶⁰ Interviewee G, actor

²⁶¹ Interviewee K, producer of historical/militarist genres

²⁶² Roxani C. Krystalli, "Narrating Victimhood: Dilemmas and (In)Dignities," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 1 (2021): 133.

reflects a complex interplay of cultural, political, and economic factors that shape both its production and reception.

Chapter Summary and Discussion

This chapter examined how an ideological project, neo-Ottomanism in the Turkish case, made its way to the cultural sector and how a certain genre of soap operas functioned as a means of national identity remaking aligned with the new geopolitical aspirations of the government. While doing that, it looked at how this national identity negotiation came into play on TV through soap operas by examining the representations of Turkishness and Ottoman history on the *Magnificent Century* and other militaristic genres such as *Resurrection Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman*. In this layer of the political nature of soap operas, the chapter examined how the state has become an integral actor in cultural production through identity-making initiatives and shifting television representations. From a theoretical perspective, these representations exemplify the interplay between culture and politics, demonstrating how media both reflects and influences broader societal and international dynamics. The series operate within a feedback loop, where their portrayals serve specific aims and, in turn, generate consequences for audience perception, national discourse, and geopolitical imagination. To sum up, these historical and militaristic TV dramas should be read not merely as entertainment, but as everyday artifacts that participate in the practices of world politics through their depictions. Their popularity and evolving narratives are closely intertwined with Turkey's domestic and foreign policy trajectories, reflecting and reinforcing ideological, cultural, and political ambitions.

At the same time, this chapter provided an entry point to the analysis of cultural production by laying the background of the Turkish media landscape and illustrating the transformation of popular media discourse over time. By introducing the key works examined in this project, it situated these productions within broader debates on national identity and

nostalgia, showing how the past is selectively mobilized in the present. The analysis demonstrated that nostalgia in these series is not a neutral aesthetic choice but a political one; however, its deployment is never fixed or unilateral. Rather, it is continuously negotiated at the intersection of creative visions, market imperatives, and ideological necessities.

The new imaginaries of Ottoman history have found their place mostly in the national broadcaster of Turkey and the government supporter channel ATV, and they have been engraved in the everyday routine of the audience. It seems like the leading productions of this genre such as *Establishment: Osman* have been welcomed and appreciated by domestic and also international audiences based on what the figures tell us. While this part of the story demonstrates the involvement of sovereign power in cultural production from the outside, there is also a notion of power operating within the sector, where cultural producers exercise their own agency in production decisions. This chapter thus opened up a space to consider where and how producers negotiate their professional stances, the constraints they face, and the political imaginaries they engage with throughout the production process.

The sudden emergence of these series, often produced by relatively new production companies following criticism of the AKP government for the MC, raises important questions about power and production networks. This power manifests both within the sector, where producers operate within a system and create meaning through representation, and in the relationship between the state and the sector. As illustrated in this chapter, the tension between ideological influence and commercial success highlights the complex power relations at play. However, power extends beyond state ideology, as illustrated by the significant involvement of producers in every aspect of production, showing that agency in cultural production is negotiated across multiple levels.

The next chapter turns the lens from the TV screen to soap opera sets and production practices in order to examine the other dynamics at play and the kinds of agency producers

enact within these processes. It takes a deep dive into the field of cultural production, investigating the practices of world politics within popular culture through the embodied practices of producers. To truly understand the fluidity of power within production networks, it is necessary to look beyond what is presented on screen and trace the connections that exist behind the scenes. Therefore, the upcoming chapter examines how production networks contribute to political processes such as national identity-building and foreign policy, exploring the spaces where power relations manifest. The chapter explores the rise of Turkish soap operas, their links to nationalist projects, and the ways producers navigate the tensions between professional roles, ideological commitments, and commercial demands. It also focuses on Turkey's thriving TV industry, highlighting how it has been harnessed for nation-building, and investigating the political entanglements of cultural producers within a rapidly commercialized and politicized sector. By analyzing the practices of production and circulation, we can better map the intricate and often hidden dynamics that shape how these narratives are created and received.

FRAME 2 - BENEATH THE BINARY: NAVIGATING THE EVERYDAY OF CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Having mapped the outward form and political resonance of historical dramas, this chapter now turns to the layers that lie beneath their polished surfaces. While the examination of the discursive and visual representation in the shows is essential for understanding how national identity is remade, this approach only allows us to see the story from one angle, which is the most visible to the eyes of the audience. However, what is not immediately available to the audience is how these representations are produced, through which motivations and mechanisms in the sector, and what they tell us about the production networks and power relations. Instead of remaining with what appears on screen, this chapter ventures into the less visible spaces where decisions are made, negotiations take shape, and creative agency quietly unfolds. These less visible spaces form a cultural arena where multiple cultural formations coexist within uneven power relations, shaped by dominant hegemonies yet subject to ongoing contestation. Rather than representing a stable or unified field, cultural production occurs within a zone of struggle in which meanings, identities, and values are negotiated through everyday practices.

What happens before an Ottoman court comes to life on television? Who determines how history should look, sound, or feel? What motivates the sector professionals to take part in the production of period pieces beyond earning their lives? By following these questions off the stage, the chapter explores the intricate interactions and everyday maneuvers through which cultural producers participate in shaping national narratives and international politics. In doing so, it moves beyond representational analyses and the familiar account of state-industry relations to illuminate the production networks in which a range of actors, from policymakers to screenwriters and distributors, are entangled. This approach makes it possible to examine

not only what national identity looks like on screen, but how it is crafted, contested, and negotiated along changing geopolitical aspirations of a country through the daily practices of those who bring these stories into being.

The process of industrial cultural production has never been smooth or straightforward when it comes to encoding an ideology in an artefact, but contestation and contradiction of those ideologies have increasingly become routine aspects of the production.²⁶³ Without looking more deeply into the production networks, one might assume that the sovereign power's top-down influence is the only form of power at play in contexts such as Turkey, leaving creative workers with no agency in shaping subjectivities or the political meanings embedded in these dramas. Such an approach risks producing a polarized view of the sector, dividing it into two opposing camps and obscuring the more complex dynamics at work. On one side, there appears to be a secular or current oppositional group whose creative practices and professional networks align more closely with Western production cultures. On the other, a conservative camp seems to resonate with the government's neo-Ottomanist agenda. At first glance, these camps look neatly divided and ideologically driven, yet neither operates independently from the commercial dynamics that structure the sector. This binary, while compelling, ultimately reduces a far more intricate landscape to an oversimplified picture of an industry that is among the largest in the world, one populated by professionals with diverse backgrounds, motivations, and networks that intersect in far more complex ways than such a divide suggests. Situated between art and commerce, as well as national projects and transnational markets, cultural producers possess neither complete autonomy nor total passivity.²⁶⁴ Instead, their control over the means of cultural production remains uneven and is continuously negotiated through internal power relations within the industry.

²⁶³ Mahon, "The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers." 473.

²⁶⁴ Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work*, 8.

A deep dive into what seems like “two camps” and investigating the human sides of the politics of culture can reveal how identity contestation works within the industry and contribute to the literature by bringing the human aspect into understanding Ottoman-themed soap operas. While several works in the literature examine the political aspect of these series at a text analysis level²⁶⁵ - highlighting their parallels with government agendas - the sector calls for a new analytical approach. This chapter offers such an approach by shifting the focus from on-screen representations of “Turkishness” to the underlying production dynamics. Drawing on production studies, this chapter approaches media production as a site where creativity, professionalism, and power are constructed through everyday labor practices. By foregrounding the experiences of cultural workers, this perspective highlights the tension between individual agency and the institutional, economic, and political structures within which that agency is exercised. It explores the interplay between state-industry relations, everyday experiences and practices of producers, and their identity negotiations, shaped both by personal experience and broader political structures. By focusing on mundane moments, invisible labor, and everyday negotiations, we are able to do the work of tracing how identities, subjectivities, and political meanings are coproduced through the television industry often well beyond the intentions of both state actors and individual producers.

This human-centered lens enables a deeper understanding of the complex power relations that define the sector, revealing the political through interconnected layers - from state influence on internal industry practices. Examining the “mundane” moments and micro-moves of professionals in their everyday work enables us to trace how macro-level power is

²⁶⁵ For examples, see Çevik, “Turkish Soap Opera Diplomacy: A Western Projection by a Muslim Source,” Article 6; Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, “Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera Colonialism,” *International Journal of Communication* (2013); Cagri Yalkin, “A Brand Culture Approach to Managing Nation-Brands,” *European Management Review* 15, no. 1 (2018); Carney, “ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey’s (Proto) Ottoman Past in Magnificent Century and Resurrection Ertuğrul.” 101-120.

negotiated, contested, and at times,²⁶⁶ opening a different door in seeing how international politics is practiced at the micro level. Through the producers' self-reflections, referred to as (Self-)Portraits in the project, the research foregrounds non-elite constructions by highlighting the agency of cultural producers in shaping Turkish identity. Their reflections are understood not as anecdotes about producers, but as modes of industrial self-theorizing, in which producers themselves attempt to comprehend their own activity, identity, and status in a larger system of power. This approach allows us to view abstract structures, such as national identity, through the lenses of lived, embodied, and experiential processes.²⁶⁷

This chapter begins by situating the soap opera sector within Turkey's broader financial and political structures, tracing the emergence of the so-called "two camps" through the personal experiences of cultural producers. It then explores how these producers navigate and negotiate the questions of "identity," both their identities and the national identity they help shape through their work. The chapter concludes by analyzing the multiple forms of power at play in cultural production, moving beyond a singular focus on sovereign power, and offers a theoretical reflection on the agency of cultural producers in the making of the political.

1.1. Locating the Soap Opera Industry in Cultural Production

*"All we do is entertainment, maybe we introduce Turkish culture to the world, but there is nothing political about it. Who are we to influence a country's foreign policy?"*²⁶⁸ one of the participants remarked. This seemingly straightforward dismissal captures a common self-perception within the industry, yet it also reveals the deeper tension at the heart of television production in Turkey. Soap operas are not apolitical entertainment; neither their circulation is. On the contrary, their mass appeal and rootedness in everyday life make them inherently

²⁶⁶ Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson, "Everyday International Relations: Editors' Introduction." 125.

²⁶⁷ Solomon and Steele, "Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory." 275.

²⁶⁸ Interviewee K, distributor.

political texts. Their significance lies not only in the narratives they construct but in the economic and institutional frameworks that shape their production. The primary characteristic of a TV series is its reliance on economic marketability; storylines must be crafted to attract large, diverse audiences, which often necessitates the reduction of complex issues into easily consumable tropes.²⁶⁹ This process of simplification and repetition, however, is not passive; it involves a continuous negotiation between cultural norms, market pressures, and narrative form.²⁷⁰ This nature of soap operas requires attention to how they are located in a given political context and how these negotiations take place in the industry.

Ranking 3rd in the exportation of TV series worldwide, following the United States and the United Kingdom,²⁷¹ Turkey's soap opera production sector has become one of the most significant areas of business for Turkish trade, which came along with a new perspective and strategy for the sector. Especially between 2020 and 2023, global demand for Turkish soap operas surged by 184%, with Spain, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt leading the trend.²⁷² Turkish TV series continued to expand their global audience in 2024, exporting over 300 productions to 200 countries and generating more than \$500 million in revenue.²⁷³ This unstoppable rise of the sector has drawn the attention not only of domestic and international investors, along with the audiences, but also of the Turkish state due to the economic returns of the exportation and the impact it has on the audience. The TV production sector used to be supported through the budget of the Turkish Ministry of Culture in areas such as content production and advertisement. In 2018, the Ministry announced preparations for a new Cinema Law, which

²⁶⁹ Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1985), 93–94.

²⁷⁰ Solomon & Steele, “Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory”, 270

²⁷¹ *The Economist*, “The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect,” 2024.

²⁷² Aytac, Üner and Esiyok, “Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas: A Case Study”, 241.

²⁷³ Duvar English, “Turkey’s TV Series Industry Earned over \$500 Million from Exports in 2024,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-tv-series-industry-earned-over-500-million-from-exports-in-2024-news-65557>.

would include a mechanism to provide financial support for Turkish TV series that are exported abroad as well.²⁷⁴ With the new structure, the Ministry of Commerce was included in the picture, and the TV production sector was classified as a category of “Entertainment and Cultural Services”²⁷⁵ under the Service Exporters Association (an initiative of the Ministry of Commerce) to support the global reach of Turkish TV productions. The Committee for Entertainment and Cultural Services comprises 11 members from the television and expo organization sectors, with two TV series production companies occupying the roles of chair and vice-chair, which demonstrates the prominence of the TV series industry within this category. The initiative supports the sector by providing them with grants for their international expo participation and other international advertisement initiatives. This ostensibly bureaucratic shift from the Ministry of Culture to the Ministry of Commerce, dismissed by some distributors I interviewed as “just a matter of budgets between ministries, nothing political.”²⁷⁶ Nevertheless, the way the sector is branded as a value in exportation carries symbolic weight, signaling a redefined state perception of television production.

These milestones of commercial success have since transformed production strategies within Turkey. Today, many soap operas are crafted with international distribution in mind from the outset. One notable example is the restructuring of episodes: while the domestic market continues to favor lengthy episodes often exceeding 150 minutes,²⁷⁷ producers now incorporate multiple mini-finales or cliffhangers within a single episode. This format makes it easier to divide episodes into shorter segments tailored to the pacing and formatting expectations of global audiences, thereby enhancing their exportability.

²⁷⁴ Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism to Support Turkish TV Series Abroad," *Institute of Strategic Thinking (SDE)*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.sde.org.tr/haber/kultur-ve-turizm-bakanligi-turk-dizilerini-yurtdisinda-destekleyecek-haberi-7619>.

²⁷⁵ Entertainment and Cultural Services. Service Exporters Association website: <https://hib.org.tr/en/sectors/entertainment-cultural-services/>

²⁷⁶ Interviewee K, Turkish distributor.

²⁷⁷ Aytaç, Üner and Eşiyok, “Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas: A Case Study”, 247.

The theme of economic success determined one of the interview questions for this project, which was asked to everyone interviewed, from creative workers in Turkey to Turkish distributors and buyers from the MENA region. First and foremost, industry insiders contend that the international success of Turkish soap operas goes beyond being a new export category. My question of “How do you interpret the international success of the productions you worked for?” was very frequently answered along the same lines: “Even if the state had exerted every effort to advertise Turkey abroad, it could not have achieved what we are accomplishing today.”²⁷⁸ Highlighting the widespread popularity of Turkish soap operas all around the world, they believe that the sector has made a great international success not only through the financial value of their production. Through the nature of their work that creates stories from Turkish culture, they are convinced that they managed to contribute to the nation-branding of Turkey organically and introduce Turkish culture all around the world. By articulating this claim, producers and distributors position themselves as de facto cultural ambassadors, celebrating their entrepreneurial acumen and challenging the state’s exclusive prerogative over Turkey’s international image. This narrative not only underscores their agency in shaping global perceptions but also forges a shared professional identity, one in which the TV sector is recognized as a cornerstone of Turkey’s soft power rather than merely a content-creation enterprise, also by scholars.²⁷⁹

Most industry insiders attribute this international success to Turkish producers’ ability to weave compelling narratives, complete with expertly timed cliffhangers that resonate across cultural boundaries.²⁸⁰ Nevertheless, this explanation alone does not fully account for why

²⁷⁸ Interviewees B, C, H and I, all creative workers.

²⁷⁹ For relevant literature, please see; Nihan Anaz and C. C. Özcan, “Geography of Turkish Soap Operas: Tourism, Soft Power, and Alternative Narratives,” in *GeoJournal Library*, vol. 121 (Cham: Springer, 2016); Senem B. Çevik, “Turkish Historical Television Series: Public Broadcasting of Neo-Ottoman Illusions,” *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019); Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, “Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera Colonialism,” *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2361–85.

²⁸⁰ Ibid,

Turkish productions are especially popular in the MENA and Central Asia regions, often more so than other well-produced and internationally acclaimed shows. A key reason lies in the cultural and aesthetic proximity of Turkish series to these regions, which creates a sense of both *familiarity* and an *alternative reality* for audiences.²⁸¹ This potential was first recognized by prominent TV professional Fadi İsmail, who worked for MBC, the leading media conglomerate in the MENA region, in the early 2000s. During a screening of a Turkish series at the Antalya Film Festival, İsmail observed striking visual and cultural similarities between Turkish and Arab content. He remarked, “If I block my ears and just watch the scenes showcased at the festival, I could imagine this being an Arab drama.”²⁸² According to İsmail, the resemblance between Turkish and Arab actors, as well as shared cultural elements, such as food, daily rituals, and religious practices, enabled Turkish content to be embraced by MENA audiences with ease.²⁸³ Additionally, for many Arab women, Turkish soap operas offered an alternative reality in which women have more rights and are treated with greater respect by men, within a cultural setting that closely resembles their own, which made these shows particularly appealing.

However, the very cultural and visual characteristics that foster affinity in the MENA region may act as barriers in other parts of the world. While these elements positively influence Turkish series' reception in culturally proximate regions, they can limit the appeal of ready-made Turkish content in areas such as Korea or Western Europe.²⁸⁴ In such cases, where local audiences may not relate to the aesthetic or cultural markers of Turkish productions, buyers often opt to purchase only the format or storyline rather than the full, pre-produced series.

²⁸¹ Miriam Berg, “The Importance of Cultural Proximity in the Success of Turkish Dramas in Qatar,” *International Journal of Communication* 11 (2017): 3415–30.

²⁸² Interview with Fadi İsmail, Buyer from the region

²⁸³ Interview with Fadi İsmail, Buyer from the region

²⁸⁴ Interviewee K, distributor from Turkey.

Although less visible to general audiences, this practice still contributes significantly to the global success of the Turkish television industry.

In the early 2010s, Turkish series were sold at relatively low prices, making them especially attractive to markets where local production industries were underdeveloped and acquiring ready-made content was a more cost-effective option. However, as Turkish dramas began gaining international acclaim and commercial momentum, their market value rose accordingly. By 2015, in the wake of the global success of *The Magnificent Century*, a Turkish series was sold to a Middle Eastern broadcaster for \$300,000 per episode - a record-breaking sum in the regional market at the time. Remarkably, this deal was sealed even before the show's plot was publicly revealed, highlighting the growing international confidence in Turkish television production.²⁸⁵

This commercial transformation of Turkish soap operas - driven by global demand, format innovation, and rising production value - has not gone unnoticed. As these dramas have proven their power not only to entertain but also to shape perceptions and reach millions across borders, their cultural and strategic potential has begun to attract the attention of the Turkish state. This growing recognition has led to new forms of institutional involvement, signaling a broader shift in how the sector is structured and governed. On the surface, these trends and the rise of state's involvement in TV series' production can be interpreted as contributing to the establishment of two seemingly contradictory fields. It is in this context of an evolving institutional and ideological landscape that the arrival of television series themed around the Ottomans in the 2010s facilitated the emergence of apparently separate groups and systems of hierarchy. However, such a simplistic approach would only serve to obscure the complex and nuanced picture, as the following sections explore in more depth the dynamics and power structures that underpin these supposed splits within the field.

²⁸⁵ Interview L, Distributer from Turkey

1.2. Crystallizing Production Networks and Hierarchies

The emergence of Ottoman-themed television series in the 2010s coincided with Turkey's growing international success in the television industry and paralleled the government's embrace of neo-Ottoman discourse in both domestic and foreign policy, which led to the so-called groupings within the industry. According to the creative workers of the show, *The Magnificent Century*, "both created a wave of its own and also rode an already existing wave" which is the neo-Ottoman policies the government produced in the 2010s. In particular, the international acclaim of the show was strategically leveraged by both the industry and the state to construct a new Ottoman historical narrative to counter the portrayal of history in the *MC*, once again through television dramas. This convergence of cultural production and state interests fostered the development of a new genre centered on dramatized portrayals of Ottoman historical figures. As this genre took shape, a distinct sub-sector emerged within the television industry: one increasingly oriented toward reproducing nationalist narratives tied to Ottoman history. Bolstered by state support, ranging from official visits to sets to prime-time broadcasts on the national channel TRT, this sub-sector grew quickly. Consequently, it contributed to a new hierarchy within the industry and, from outside, gave the impression of a growing polarization between state-supported productions and other, less politically aligned content.

The sub-sector had a start with the initiative of the TRT, the Turkish national broadcaster. According to the research of Bilge Yeşil, following the *Magnificent Century*, TRT, which aspired to counter the historical narratives of the show, had an unsuccessful try with the series titled *Bir Zamanlar Osmanlı: Kiyam [Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire: Rebellion]* (2012). Signaling that the planned cultural project was more than a one-off attempt, TRT Director General İbrahim Eren enlisted Mehmet Bozdağ, via the production company

Tekden Film, to produce a new series. While Bozdağ was a young producer at the time who was a historian by education, he quickly became the producer of the most well-known period pieces today, following the success of the *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014-2019). Kalın stated that these new series, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, aim “strengthening the nationhood sentiment of the Turkish people by teaching how the Turkish state came into existence.”²⁸⁶ The first episode of the series was televised on the national broadcaster on 10 December 2014, a few months following the final episode of *The Magnificent Century*.

Having a big success with this production, the series was internalized by the government as the first step of an alternative discourse for Turkish identity and history. As opposed to the reaction the *Magnificent Century* faced, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* received the support of the government. Senior state officials, including President Erdoğan, visited the set of the series and were photographed with the cast; these images were subsequently disseminated to the public via the official website of the Presidency of Turkey,²⁸⁷ signaling an advertisement of the project and close ties with the production team. These acts exemplify how popular culture can be mobilized for political messaging, through symbolic endorsement, the alignment of state figures with cultural narratives, and the strategic dissemination of such associations to the public.

Although *Resurrection Ertuğrul* was produced as the first steps for a “national and local art whose logic is not a foreigner to Turkey”²⁸⁸ as part of a new cultural project, its international success came organically, especially in the Gulf countries and Asian countries like Pakistan. Seeing the potential in such productions, the Turkish government took advantage of their success and included the team of the show in its official foreign visits. On 9 May 2017, Mustafa

²⁸⁶ Yeşil, “Promoting Turkish History and Civilization: Television Dramas and Muslim Audiences.” 117.

²⁸⁷ Ibid, 119.

²⁸⁸ Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, *Yerli ve Millî Anlayış Her Konuda Olduğu Gibi Kültür-Sanatta da İdealimiz Olmalı* [“Domestic and National Understanding Should Be Our Ideal in Culture and Arts as in Every Subject”], 2018, <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/92787/-yerli-ve-mill-anlayis-her-konuda-oldugu-gibi-kultur-sanatta-da-idealimiz-olmali-#>.

Varank, the advisor of Erdoğan, tweeted a picture where President Erdoğan is chatting with two lead actors from *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and the producer of the show, Mehmet Bozdağ in his private jet on his personal Twitter (Now X). He added the caption “Our President chatted with the Resurrection (Diriliş) series team, who had attended the groundbreaking ceremony in Kuwait, on the return journey. Resurrection is immensely popular there as well.”²⁸⁹ From that moment, Turkey’s cultural sector saw a surge of new, Ottoman- and Seljuk-era dramas produced by a host of recently established companies specializing in historical period pieces.

Placing a historical character at the center of the shows and telling heroic stories, the thread of militarist genre has continued with *Payitaht: Abdülhamid*; *Barbaros: Sword of the Mediterranean*; *Alparslan: Great Seljuks* and so on, which slowly brought the production networks and their connection to the current political elite into light. For example, the production company of *Resurrection Ertuğrul*, Tekden Film was owned by a former AKP parliamentarian; Bozdağ Film, producer of *Establishment: Osman* was founded following the departure of Mehmet Bozdağ from Tekden Film.²⁹⁰ The production company of series such as *Awakening: Great Seljuk*, Akil Film, previously produced documentaries and promotional videos for TRT. The owner of the production company for shows such as *Payitaht: Abdülhamid* and *Barbaros: Sword of the Mediterranean* is a high school friend of Bilal Erdoğan, son of President Erdoğan. The space opened for this genre in the culture sector through the current political agenda of the government has led to the formation of a new network that has close ties with the current government. What began as an organic soft-power success has thus evolved into an orchestrated historical-drama complex, wielded as an instrument of domestic cohesion and international influence.

²⁸⁹ Mustafa Varank (@varank), “Diriliş ekibiyle dönüş yolundayız; Kuveyt’teki temel atma töreninde Cumhurbaşkanımızla sohbet ettik. Diriliş orada da çok seviliyor,” Twitter, May 5, 2017, 3:21 p.m., <https://x.com/varank/status/861991983698632705>.

²⁹⁰ Yeşil, *Talking Back to the West Book Subtitle: How Turkey Uses Counter-Hegemony to Reshape the Global Communication Order*, 119.

The formation of the new sub-network in the culture sector was faced with passive resistance from a group of artists who are not comfortable with the emergence of a new hegemonic narrative and do not feel they belong to this political project. The passivity of resistance stems from the changing dynamics of the culture industry, relying more on covert acts of protest rather than direct criticism. One of the examples of these acts happened during the 2016 Pantene Golden Butterfly Awards (Altın Kelebek Ödülleri), one of Turkey's most prestigious television and music award ceremonies. During the event, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* won the award for Best TV Series of the year, but the moment became controversial due to how the cast and crew were treated on stage. An actor from the show, Cavit Çetin Güner, was not allowed to give an acceptance speech by the host of the ceremony Okan Bayülgen, an outspoken media figure advocating civic activism over partisan politics, unlike other winners. The incident drew backlash on social media, with Güner calling the award "perforce" and criticizing the organizers' treatment.²⁹¹ The incident reflected tensions between the show and parts of the entertainment industry, likely tied to its nationalistic themes and alignment with government narratives. Bayülgen later apologized, attributing the incident to a miscommunication with a stage assistant. He also claimed that the controversy resulted in a 2.5-year period of professional hardship, during which he was reportedly unemployed.²⁹² The struggle in the culture sector of a well-known and influential cultural figure of Turkey like Okan Bayülgen, following this incident was already emblematic of broader realignments. This incident and the polarization it symbolizes in the culture sector signaled a new hegemonic narrative in the culture sector.²⁹³

²⁹¹ "Diriliş Ertuğrul Ekibi Ödülünü İade Etti (The Resurrection Ertuğrul Team Returned the Award)," *NTV*, November 15, 2016, <https://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/yasam/dirilis-ertugrul-ekibi-odulunu-iade-etti,wBk15Tl4kOVirB4GiZtFg/mHlOnqSopUSw27fe2kE3FQ>

²⁹² Okan Bayülgen, "Beni Cumhurbaşkanı Şikayet Etiler, 2.5 Sene İşsiz Bıraktılar" (*They Complained About Me to the President, They Left Me Unemployed for 2.5 Years*), *Independent Türkçe*, October 16, 2022, <https://www.indyturk.com/node/271956/haber/okan-bayulgen-beni-cumhurbasina-sikayet-ettiler-25-sene-issiz-biraktilar>.

²⁹³ Özçetin, "'The Show of the People' against the Cultural Elites: Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey," 949.

Across my interviews for this project, the polarization of the sector that came with the new hegemonic narrative- referred to in this research as the “two camps” - became evident. One camp consists of a newly emerging group in the cultural sector with close, often executive-level ties to the state. Their productions, as seen in media coverage, political reactions, and some staff interviews, tend to reproduce the state’s neo-Ottoman discourse through nationalistic storylines. The other camp is the secular group, whose narratives were dominant since the founding of the Republic, but who now increasingly feel marginalized by the growth of the other camp, as symbolized earlier by the case of Okan Bayülgen. Within the group of Ottoman-themed TV series producers, like the MC, this camp claimed to detach itself from the national feelings, but rather focused on their artistic production without any political ties attached to it.

This sense of polarization among the two camps was a big part of the interviews conducted, especially with the *Magnificent Century* staff as they were a big group who felt marginalized in the process. This feeling of marginalization often referred to them not being appreciated for their success and being left out in the productions of other period-pieces, frequently emerged during their reflections on their work and in their perceptions of the other camp’s productions. An interviewee who worked at the creative side of the *Magnificent Century* explained how the process looked from within the industry and affected their work. They pointed out that filming permits for cultural spaces such as mosques were abruptly revoked without explanation toward the end of the show. On one occasion, when she arrived to set up their set decorations at one of the venues, she was informed that the *Magnificent Century* team was no longer allowed to film there. Instead, they were told that *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* would be filmed at the location.²⁹⁴ The reallocation of filming venues symbolizes more than a logistical hurdle; it points to the selective support of cultural narratives that align

²⁹⁴ Interviewee C, art director

with the state's desired image of the past and present. As such, the creative team's experience reflects a broader politicization of cultural production, where historical dramas become tools of contestation over collective memory and identity.

The sense of marginalization repeated itself among other interviews within the same group, with the changing political structure in Turkey and the increasing support of the government for a certain genre of soap operas. Knowing that the MC became a very successful predecessor of the period pieces produced in Turkey, as a researcher, I was curious about how the experience in the genre has been utilized by other productions. While receiving more detailed answers on this question, one of the interviewees' responses also highlighted the feeling of marginalization under the new term. When asked whether they received job offers from the emerging genre, another informant claimed that they've been excluded from the nationalistic productions due to their political stance and the polarization in the industry as follows: "They know what political side we're on, of course, they wouldn't want us."²⁹⁵ Despite having contributed to the foundational success of the period drama genre in Turkey through *Magnificent Century*, this worker finds themselves sidelined as the state's cultural agenda shifts. When I asked individuals working on other projects within this sub-sector how they became involved in those productions, the most common response I received was "through people I knew in the industry." Several participants noted that recruitment practices in the television drama production sector differ somewhat from those in other sectors; rather than relying on formal job postings, positions are often filled informally - by asking around when a need arises. This insight confirms an earlier statement by a *Magnificent Century* team member and suggests that informal recruitment processes can facilitate the formation of closed networks or cliques within the industry. It reveals the extent to which soft power mechanisms, like

²⁹⁵ Interviewee F, advisor

popular television, are becoming instruments of ideological consolidation, with creative professionals caught in the crossfire of cultural hegemony.

In addition to the feeling of exclusion from the militaristic genre, some of the producers revealed the feeling of paradox in the narrative produced in the *Magnificent Century*, which was the main reason for the political reactions. A creative worker of the show explained their feelings as follows:

*“First, Russia bans the show, saying it glorifies the Ottomans too much, people protest, and it’s aired again. Then we’re in the studio and guys in Janissary costumes storm in yelling, ‘You’re disrespecting our ancestors, take this show down!’ And you’re just left thinking: wait, did I offend the Ottomans, or did I praise them too much? Where do I even stand in all this?”*²⁹⁶

While there is no confirmed news regarding the ban in Russia mentioned by the interviewee, his confusion comes from the opposite reactions they received within Turkey and internationally. He reveals that representing the Ottoman past is not a neutral act. Rather, it is deeply entangled with present-day political anxieties and identity struggles—both within Turkey and beyond. At its core, his response carries an existential confusion for the creative team, capturing the difficulty of navigating state sensitivities, public opinion, and international politics when dealing with national history.

Similar reflections on the show's contrasting reception by different audiences were echoed by other interviewees, leading to more serious consequences not only in their professional lives but also in their private lives. They reported receiving numerous inquiries from international platforms; meanwhile, no Turkish media outlet showed interest in interviewing the creative team. On the contrary, they were accused of being Mossad agents on live TV by one of the advisors to President Erdoğan. According to them, they faced serious professional setbacks after working on the show, largely due to the marginalization it triggered

²⁹⁶ Interviewee B, costume designer

within the local industry. Some of the creative workers felt the obligation to relocate abroad for the security of their families, after receiving death threats from groups accusing their work is “disrespecting the ancestors.”²⁹⁷ However, thanks to the show's high ratings and immense international success, the threats eventually subsided. “Without such success, though, they would have torn us apart,” the interviewees claimed. Beyond professional setbacks, the testimonies reveal how deeply the politicization of cultural production has permeated the personal lives of those involved. Being publicly associated with a series criticized for offering a less heroic or more nuanced portrayal of national history made them targets. On the one hand, the show's international success offered a form of protection, elevating its visibility and making direct censorship or repression more politically costly. On the other hand, that very visibility intensified scrutiny and deepened the resentment of nationalist groups who perceived the series as a betrayal of foundational myths.

These developments show how what might seem like neutral editorial decisions, such as set design, casting, or narrative focus, have become loaded with political significance and pushed a group of professionals towards the margins of the sector. While the early Republic’s “Western” aesthetic and today’s push for a more “national-local” orientation in Turkish television might appear to belong to entirely different cultural worlds, the fieldwork I have done reveals a more entangled and layered reality. The producers I spoke with do not just reflect ideological shifts; they live and navigate them daily. As Mahon argues, positioned differently from audiences, cultural producers work within structures tied to national and commercial interests, and that inevitably shapes what stories get told and how.²⁹⁸ Nevertheless, there’s more to the picture. Despite the political polarization and the increasingly sharp lines drawn around acceptable content, the sector is still small enough that people across ideological divides

²⁹⁷ Interviewee H and Interviewee I, creative workers

²⁹⁸ Mahon, *The Visible Evidence of Cultural Producers*, 469

continue to share professional spaces, and the political economy still weighs the ideological ambitions. Even when tensions simmer below the surface, networks overlap, collaborations continue, and working relationships persist. It's not just about top-down pressure or state influence; it's also about how people within the industry adapt, resist, or find ways to keep going, sometimes all at once. The highly criticized content of yesterday could be rewarded tomorrow for the financial gains it brings to the country. These dynamics make the industry's everyday work a constant space of both constraint and negotiation.

2.1. Beyond the Divide: The Layered Landscape of Turkish Drama Production

Based on some of the personal experiences of the interviewees and an outlook on the sector, a polarization among the soap opera industry seems to have emerged in the 2010s; however, this divide was not felt the same by everyone working in the industry. The diversity of experiences within the changing landscape of the sector highlights its complexity, where economic imperatives intersect with ideological agendas. This duality is encapsulated in the testimony of the producer who remarked, "Without such success, they would have torn us apart." Their account illustrates how financial viability and international recognition can serve as both protective mechanisms and points of contention in an environment where cultural production is politically charged. Therefore, an assessment of the industry without a political economy dimension would give a missing picture of the story.²⁹⁹ While the economic reasons are significant determinants of the state incentives on the soap opera sector and the motivation of the producers, the intersection of these economic interests with state ideology creates a complex structure. Producers often find themselves navigating a delicate balance between market demands and ideological expectations.

²⁹⁹ Julie F. Codell, "Introduction: Political Economy and the Nation of Culture," in *The Political Economy of Art: Making the Nation of Culture* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), 17.

A striking example regarding the tension between ideology and economy can be found in the example of *Magnificent Century* and the awards it brought to the production company. The show, known as an international success and a domestic political target by the government, projected this duality significantly. As mentioned earlier, some of the creative workers of the show found themselves in tough positions after being targeted by conservative groups, which led some of them to leave the country after receiving life threats from a group of conservatives. Despite these experiences of the team, the show's producer, Timur Savcı, was awarded "Best Exporter of the Year" by the Turkish Exporters Assembly in 2018, at a ceremony attended by President Erdoğan. This episode highlights the political dilemma between promoting products for their economic value and maintaining a narrative that aligns with nationally sanctioned ideals. *The Magnificent Century* demonstrated that political priorities may shift when economic gains are at stake. As noted by an administrator at the production company, the show's global success eventually led the state to acknowledge its "quality"³⁰⁰ - a diplomatic remark that sugarcoats the underlying dynamics. In contrast, the creative workers pointed to a more pragmatic rationale behind the easing of tensions: the financial gains the show generated and the international attention it brought to the production team. Their accounts suggest that the state's apparent endorsement was less an appreciation of artistic merit and more a strategic concession to the show's economic and symbolic value abroad. Consequently, more institutional support was extended to Turkish soap opera producers in general, recognizing the sector's potential to generate revenue and enhance Turkey's standing in international trade.

Another example of the economic nature of state-sector dynamics can be observed deeper in the industry work and production networks as well, especially at the executive level. Although *The Magnificent Century* and the newer, militarist-themed series such as *Establishment: Osman* project different historical narratives and seem to belong to different

³⁰⁰ Interviewee G, Producer

camps, their production teams, especially at an executive level, are in contact and exchange technical know-how and personnel. One of the executives from *The Magnificent Century* noted with genuine respect that, despite ideological distinctions, they are close friends with the administration of the show³⁰¹, a relationship that proved instrumental in my securing interviews across different genres of work. Both production companies take place in the Entertainment and Cultural Services Committee of the Service Exporters' Association, a state-affiliated export body, further illustrating how economic interests and institutional affiliations foster collaboration across ideologically divergent cultural producers. These overlapping networks complicate assumptions about polarization in the sector, revealing a field where ideological boundaries are often secondary to shared material interests and export-driven objectives.

This cross-genre collaboration extends beyond mere acquaintance, functioning instead as a form of peer mentorship that sustains and elevates Turkey's period drama production standards. In spite of the statement from some of the professionals above, there are some instances of professionals who started to advance their careers in the *Magnificent Century* and then moved to the militarist genre. Two of the creative workers I interviewed with from the *Magnificent Century* told me that before the show, there were not many people specializing in the modern production of costume dramas in Turkey, and the show became their school where they learned how to visually design everything.³⁰² While they were gaining their expertise there, they also had the chance to raise a new generation of designers, who are currently working for other costume dramas in Turkey no matter the genre. One of these people who has worked in both series mentioned how he was recruited personally by the executives of the *Establishment: Osman* after working for the MC for years. They defined the team they are

³⁰¹ Interviewee J, senior manager of a production company

³⁰² Interviewee B and Interviewee C, creative workers.

working with utmost respect by complimenting the show's producer's "deep historical knowledge and unwavering dedication."³⁰³ This account stands in contrast to the narratives of marginalization and ideological partisanship expressed by other *Magnificent Century* staff, suggesting either an exceptional case or pointing to a more complex dynamic at play. It may reflect how relationships on the personal or creative level can diverge from broader institutional tensions, or how financial collaboration and ongoing contracts may temper criticism and foster professional diplomacy. Whether this indicates genuine cross-ideological respect or a form of strategic self-censorship remains open to interpretation, but it underscores the layered and sometimes contradictory nature of the cultural production field.

In sum, rather than simply mirroring cultural fault lines, the relationship between these two flagship genres and their production networks reveals a deeply layered industry ecosystem. Financial incentives drive both competition and collaboration, while state support channels resources and subtly shapes narrative priorities. Beneath these political and economic currents lies a vibrant nexus of creative labor with designers, writers, and technical crews whose expertise circulates fluidly across ideologically divergent projects. Broadly speaking, while creative workers often bear the brunt of polarization, facing reputational risks, precarious employment, and even personal threats, executives with stronger ties to the state and the capitalist market remain relatively insulated in the case of financial success. Their positions afford them access to both state-sponsored opportunities and market-driven security, allowing them to navigate shifting ideological terrains with greater flexibility. This disparity underscores the uneven distribution of risk and agency within the cultural production field, where political tensions are felt most acutely at an everyday level by those with the least institutional power.

³⁰³ Interviewee B, creative worker.

3.1. Intersecting Identities in Cultural Production: Motivations, Perceptions, and Practice

Cultural production is not merely shaped by institutional mandates or national narratives, it is also profoundly influenced by the individual motivations, identities, and worldviews of those who create it. The multilayered structure of the sector does not come solely from a top-down force or polarization with clearly defined boundaries. Looking deeper into the personal motivations of cultural producers in taking part in the Ottoman-themed projects, we can see how cultural producers connect their individual experiences to national and international aspects, through what takes them to work every day beyond earning a living. In doing so, their personal identities and lived experiences are continuously negotiated with the national identity they are helping to produce onscreen. While there are certain top-down dynamics at play at the executive level as explained previously, the way they see the structure they work in is reflected in their everyday work which has a significant effect on the final product.

The question of agency in the production of these cultural artefacts arises as a significant concept in this project to unpack how politically dominant narratives are negotiated, reproduced or resisted by the producers. The question here is not whether cultural producers have agency in the productions they make, but rather where and how they exercise this agency in their everyday work.³⁰⁴ Many film and television workers critically analyze and theorize their tasks in complex ways, reflecting on dimensions of production that lie beyond the purview of their audiences.³⁰⁵ Hence, it is important for this project to understand the space where a lot of mundane choices by this group of people are made in their everyday lives, and what it means to national identity.³⁰⁶ Only in this way we can investigate how agency is co-constructed

³⁰⁴ Jay, "Be Creative, Be Friends and Share Cultural Experiences": Genre, Politics, and Fun at the Junior Eurovision Song Contest." 1-18.

³⁰⁵ Caldwell, *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice In Film and Television*, 2.

³⁰⁶ Ranta and Ichijo, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism: From Everyday to Global Politics*, 31.

between creative workers, producers, and the state, around themes such as nationhood, identity, and commerce.

As Ranta and Ichijo argue in their book, the metaphor of creating a recipe and a cookbook captures the significance of mundane, everyday choices in shaping national identity. By adding or removing ingredients, changing and adapting recipes, individuals transform and manipulate not only flavors and textures but also meanings, which can be used as a vehicle for engaging with and expressing national identities.³⁰⁷ I believe that a similar approach can be used for cultural production, especially in the artefacts that aim to remake the national identity, in understanding the mundane choices cultural producers make in their workdays. Whether driven by producers' personal motivations, the exigencies of the political system, or commercial imperatives, these seemingly small decisions cumulatively shape how history is represented, and national identity is performed. The following section turns to producers' motivations and perceptions in order to unpack how such everyday decisions are understood and implemented by cultural workers themselves.

3.2. Motivations and Perceptions of Soap Opera Production

While structural constraints and political pressures shape the production environment, micro-level moments deserve closer attention in examining the politics of cultural production. Producers' motivations offer a particularly revealing entry point into this terrain. When we delve deeper into the personal motivations of producers participating in Ottoman-themed soap operas, we find that, beyond the fundamental goal of earning a living, a motivation common to all workers, there are several other driving factors at play.

Interestingly, just like there is an alignment in the lived experiences regarding polarization in the sector, there are similar motivations behind the producers in taking part in

³⁰⁷ Ibid, 32.

the production of the *Magnificent Century*: free artistic expression and to produce a show unlike anything previously made in Turkey.³⁰⁸ When asked whether they felt a national connection to the themes they were producing, the show's creative workers often presented themselves as professionals who approached their work objectively. They distanced themselves from both nationalistic and pedagogical intentions, while still maintaining respect for historical facts in their production.³⁰⁹ A couple of interviewees attributed the show's success to their objective approach to the story. As one put it: “We truly didn’t approach this from a perspective of national belonging. Maybe that’s why it was successful. For us, it was the story of a slave woman becoming the most powerful empress in the world.”³¹⁰ The emphasis on “objectivity” is notable, especially considering the highly politicized context of Ottoman history in contemporary Turkey. Rather than indicating political neutrality, producers’ claims to objectivity may serve as a strategic approach that enables them to distance themselves from explicit nationalist expectations while legitimizing their creative decisions. In this context, objectivity operates less as an absence of ideology and more as a discursive tool that producers use to navigate a polarized cultural environment.

While the creative team did not express any pedagogical motivations, such as a desire to 'educate the Turkish people about their ancestors,' they consistently emphasized their respect for history and took pride in a production that required significant effort and dedication. They claimed that even during periods of intense criticism from the government, for example objections to the portrayal of women's cleavage, they remained committed to drawing inspiration from original historical sources rather than conforming to politically imposed narratives, in an effort to create something original.³¹¹ Since the aim of the series was not to

³⁰⁸ Interviewee B, C, H and I, creative workers

³⁰⁹ Interviewee C, creative worker

³¹⁰ Interviewee H and I, creative workers

³¹¹ Interviewee C, creative worker

shape a sense of national identity, the responses likewise lacked a connection between elements of national identity and the personal backgrounds or experiences of the creative workers. The only form of nationalism that emerged was a sense of pride in the show's international success and the visibility it brought to Turkey. This form of pride was repeatedly described in professional, rather than ideological terms of recognition, audience, and quality of the production. In these processes, therefore, national identity might be seen not as a driving force, but as a consequence of professional and commercial success.

When we turn the lens to the more nationalistic/militarist-oriented Ottoman-themed soap operas, on the other hand, it is possible to see a theme of “reminding the forgotten past” as a main motivation and success indicator for their producers. Almost every interviewee I talked to stated that the nostalgic nature of the shows they produce is one of the biggest motivations they have, and they believe that they are serving to heal society by “filling a gap” that exists in the modern Turkish collective memory.³¹² This “gap” very often referred to the establishment of the modern Republic by Atatürk through subsequent revolutions in the social and legal areas where the country adapted a Western lifestyle rather than preserving the caliphate and living in accordance with Sharia law. The theme of “filling the gap” therefore seems to connect not only to a state-level project but also to their professional and personal experiences – a motivation that connects the individual to the social and political. One of the interviewees expressed his personal experience as follows:

“I remember the period of my childhood. I was born in the 1980s. At that time, even mentioning the Ottoman Empire, let alone talking about it, was like... In the '90s and early 2000s, there was a sharp distinction like ‘that (Ottoman times) was an era, that era is over,

³¹² Interviewee D, screenwriter; Interviewee E, director, Interviewee O, producer.

that state is over, this state (modern Turkey) exists now'. There are some deficiencies in our historical chains."³¹³

The neo-Ottoman ideology on the rise in Turkey's national identity making and foreign policy that resonates in the cultural area is seen as a positive impact by the director. According to him, the sharp distinction between the Ottoman Empire and the newly established Turkish Republic, which is considered to be established with a big flaw, started to be balanced with the current government and through their support for cultural production in related themes. His interpretation resonates with Jenny Edkins' work on memory politics, particularly the notion of an imagined community bound by shared history and culture. In this context, memory and commemoration play a crucial role in the production and reproduction of collective identity, mostly directed by a powerful group.³¹⁴ In this logic, this cultural project helps countries like Turkey to make peace with their history and original selves; this is why, he said, he respects what he produces more than other TV shows without an agenda and a lack of ethical considerations.³¹⁵

Nevertheless, some of his family members who oppose the current government are not particularly supportive of his work, as they perceive it as part of an ideological project. This reveals a point of intersection and contestation between his professional identity, the national narrative reproduced through his work, and his private life. Despite that, the mission of the project he is working on is one of the things that makes him go to work willingly and with love.³¹⁶ What he as a producer believed they were doing through this connection to history was deeply political, not as an abstract stance but as something enacted through everyday production choices. By foregrounding history as relevant to the present, they sought to produce

³¹³ Interviewee E, director.

³¹⁴ Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16–17.

³¹⁵ The interviewee here refers to the show "The Stickman" that a production that dramatizes the notes a real-life therapist took about a client. The details of the show can be found here: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt22467674/>

³¹⁶ Interviewee E, director.

meaning within popular culture, translating broader political and historical concerns into narrative, character development, and aesthetic decisions.

Another comparable motivation comes from one of the executives of a militarist-themed show, who drew attention to the dominance of the Western 'superhero' figure and emphasized the need to counter it by drawing on Turkish history: rich, in his view, with its own heroic figures. This impulse was rooted in a personal experience: having grown up watching American superheroes, he now translates that memory into a form of socio-political action. He aims to produce soap operas that offer Turkish children homegrown heroes, rather than exposing them solely to fictional Western characters. As he explains

*“Young people admire superheroes like Batman and Spiderman, but why don’t we have stories from our own culture? Those are mostly fictional characters—fun to watch, sure—but they come from made-up worlds, often because those cultures do not have much history. We, on the other hand, have a rich history spanning over a thousand years, full of untold stories.”*³¹⁷

This comment ties into broader discussions around the reimagining of the past, particularly as these shows often narrate undocumented or loosely recorded historical periods, beginning in the 13th century. The blending of real historical figures with fictionalized narratives of heroism introduces a subtle pedagogical dimension to the producer’s motivations. By coding significant Ottoman-era figures as 'superheroes' for younger audiences, the series communicates values of heroism and collective identity in a format that is both emotionally resonant and easily accessible. In casting these figures as national heroes, the producers aim not only to entertain but also to install a sense of pride and continuity; teaching young viewers that courage, justice, and sacrifice are not foreign ideals imported from the West, but intrinsic

³¹⁷ Interviewee O, producer.

to their own cultural heritage. This narrative strategy also functions as a form of soft pedagogy, subtly conveying ideological themes such as the unity of the ummah, the civilizing mission of the sultans, or the moral integrity of foundational statesmen, without overt didacticism. In doing so, the reframing of historical subjects as heroes both reclaims the past from Western-centric tropes and embeds contemporary political aspirations within a mythopoetic framework.

Resurrection: Ertuğrul, Foundation: Osman and others of the same genre have become examples of a cultural material's power to create a new "self" through the combination of ideological narratives with the visual and discursive representations.³¹⁸ Despite the story being told to repair the flaw in the historical chain is usually appropriated by powerful groups for their own political or commercial purposes,³¹⁹ the producers chose not to reflect on this aspect but focused on the 'favor' they are doing for a nation. Bringing in a specific period with certain representations of Turkishness, the cultural artifacts present an alternative image for the nation which could be the glory Turkey would have if these ties to the Ottoman origins were sustained in the early years of the Republic. Since memory and commemoration are vital to the production and reproduction of the nation-state by creating an imagined community, the state's initiatives in the cultural sector are found useful in reintroducing Ottoman history into Turkish identity.

The pattern of motivations observed in militaristic-themed soap operas offers a common narrative foundation; however, it does not indicate the existence of a cohesive sub-sector or unified creative network. While these productions often revolve around themes such as heroism, sacrifice, and national pride, they sometimes diverge in how they frame these values and in the extent of their affiliations with state institutions. One creative worker from a prominent series, for example, distinguishes his production from others in the same genre by

³¹⁸ Grayson, "How to read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the foreign subject in a bear called Paddington", 380; Bleiker and Duncombe. "Popular Culture and Popular Identity."42.

³¹⁹Edkins, *Trauma and the memory of politics. In Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 17.

emphasizing “Turkishness” over Islam, a notable deviation from the religious emphasis commonly found in similar shows.³²⁰ Taking pride in this distinction and narratively separating their work from others is one of the moments where the agency of creative workers becomes visible. Rather than simply reproducing dominant ideological lines, they engage in subtle acts of positioning that reflect both personal beliefs and strategic considerations.

Based on conversations with the producers, the heterogeneity within the genre extends beyond differing emphases on national identity; it is also shaped by the institutional contexts in which these shows are produced, particularly the television channels they are affiliated with. As one interviewee noted, their ability to negotiate ideological nuances is closely tied to the degree of creative freedom granted by the channels they work with. Even though most major broadcasters operate within a pro-government media environment, this does not necessarily translate into uniform editorial control. Instead, producers experience varying degrees of autonomy, which in turn affects how explicitly they engage with religious, nationalist, or historical themes. A creative worker explains his experience as follows:

I: This (our work) is a bit more commercial, but I have to take TRT's work aside a little bit. Because as far as I see in TRT, there is a situation like this: Let's do it however it works.

C: Is there more of a political concern?

I: Yes, there is.

C: You are currently producing this series for a private channel. Do you feel freer?

I: Of course, because one is a state channel and one is a private channel.³²¹

The interviewee's perception of greater creative freedom on a private channel stem from the differing relationships producers have with the state across corporate settings. At the

³²⁰ Interviewee E, director

³²¹ Interviewee D, screenwriter.

national broadcaster, ideological priorities often take precedence over financial considerations, directly constraining the creative team's autonomy during production. This dynamic underscore the state's control over the means of production, particularly at TRT, and helps explain the relatively lower production quality of its historically themed shows, which are produced in large quantities primarily to saturate the airwaves with official historical narratives and thus reproduce state ideology in everyday life. According to the interviewee, TRT's productions aim to establish continuity with a selectively curated "suitable" historical past that connects to the present, prioritizing domestic reach over artistic quality or profitability. However, the same professional also noted that much of the creative work is driven by their "boss," the executive producer, who has shaped the project's vision over many years and remains deeply involved in story development, an unusual level of influence in the sector. This creates a paradox of freedom: while the show is branded as more commercial compared to those on the national broadcaster, it nonetheless experiences significant creative input from a figure closely tied to state officials, illustrating the complex negotiation between commercial interests, state influence, and creative agency.

3.3. Production Technicalities, Everyday Work and Agency

As the chapter has illustrated, producers' motivations and perceptions provide a dynamic force in the shaping of production practices. Instead of asking if producers have agency in producing national identity narratives, this chapter has explored where, when, and how agency is produced in practice. Throughout the analysis - sometimes on the surface, sometimes between the lines - the chapter has traced not only how producers wield narrative influence within broader political, institutional, and commercial projects of storytelling but also how they have interpreted that process personally and negotiated it within their work.

Beyond producers' motivations and perceptions, micro-level practices in the most important sense constitute the production of political imaginaries through popular culture. The

power that producers enjoy in reproducing and circulating certain discursive formations is of a quite different character from the sovereign power commonly ascribed to the state. It is not centralized or fully controllable; instead, it is a power that operates through continuous negotiation and contestation.³²² Crucially, the power exercised by creative workers come from the agency they have in their jobs, and often manifests in the mundane and technical aspects of production; during writing, shooting, and editing where abstract ideological narratives become embedded in specific visual and narrative choices.

Among the many strategies used to reinforce dominant political imaginaries, one of the most impactful is the construction of the storyline. Central characters are frequently coded as “national heroes,” encouraging audiences to reimagine the past in alignment with elite discourses. Some interlocutors emphasized that in what they consider high-quality productions within period pieces, these characters are portrayed with depth, with their flaws, emotions, and moral dilemmas that are intentionally woven into the plot to humanize them and add narrative complexity.³²³ Nevertheless, the screenwriter of one of the shows that is considered to be the best of its genre explained his process of writing about the main character as follows:

In Turkish society, the main character holds an immensely significant place in people's minds. So, when I write that scene, I do so with full awareness of this. I am constantly portraying the character as a leader. He represents the highest level of the state—he is “the state”. So, when we say, “the state wouldn't do that,” what we really mean is “the character wouldn't do that”... For example, his wife would not make a mistake, because in the perception of society, she is the mother of the state.”³²⁴

This analysis is concerned not only with how popular culture shapes audiences’ imaginaries of abstract political concepts, but also with how the production process itself

³²² Ruben Kremers and Lena Rethel, “Curated Power: The Performative Politics of (Industry) Events,” *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2024).

³²³ Interviewee B, creative worker.

³²⁴ Interviewee D, Screenwriter.

reveals how such concepts are perceived and implemented by producers within their working environments. This screenwriter's assertion that he imagines the main character as "the state" embodied in a person is particularly revealing in this regard. This statement highlights the personification of power, whereby the state is envisioned not as an institutional structure but as a sanctified individual figure.

The portrayal of the state as a morally elevated and charismatic individual blurs the boundary between institutional authority and personal leadership. This blurred distinction mirrors contemporary political realities in Turkey, where political power is increasingly associated with the figure of the state leader, who is positioned as the primary, and often unquestioned, source of authority. Within such a framework, political loyalty is reconfigured as personal devotion, and the leader comes to embody both the face and the essence of statehood. Through coding protagonists as national heroes, personifying the state in human form, and weaving moral imperatives into their story arcs, these productions exemplify a sophisticated cultural strategy: One that naturalizes the current political order and molds popular consciousness to align seamlessly with elite visions of history and authority. In doing that, aggrandizing the main characters with no flaws, the creative worker is taking a precaution to protect himself and his team from a public backlash in the meantime reproducing the dominant state narrative regarding the Ottoman ties of Turkish identity.

Another notable example of production practices comes from a post-production editor, who developed a self-censorship reflex over time to have a seamless work relation within the network of the militarist genre. They shared that they are working on a busy schedule where he has to edit movie-length episodes each week (2.5 hours on average) for the national broadcaster. Even in these busy moments, he mostly self-censors the points he thinks that could be seen as "problematic" by the eyes of someone who has more power in the sector such as the senior managers of the channel or a political authority. He said he learned the framework of

censorship in years which he mentions as “the sensitivities of the order” through the warnings he received from different authorities. Very often there is an intermediary who acts as a buffer zone between the channel and the post-production editors. Revisions come from them before the final product reaches the channel, which has turned into a mechanism where creative workers learn to look at things with the eyes of the “powerful”. Despite the separation of participants between the state channel and private channels in terms of self-censorship, the whole genre is built on similar values, which are of the government’s political Islamist and Ottomanist ideology. Therefore, regardless of the agency they have with the choices they make in their work routine, they frequently reproduce and contest elite discourses and the systems of power in everyday political sites.

There are countless examples that illustrate how, over time, creative producers learn to operate within a politicized media environment, developing an acute awareness of the ideological terrain and exercising their agency within increasingly narrow margins, particularly in the aftermath of controversies or political reactions, such as those directed at the *Magnificent Century*. These micro-negotiations do not suggest passive compliance; rather, they point to an ongoing process of adaptation and calibration in which creative workers navigate both symbolic expectations and material constraints. When it comes to their understanding of their own role in shaping Turkey’s national identity and international image, however, the interviews reveal significant divergences.

When it comes to their understanding of their own role in shaping Turkey’s national identity and international image, however, the interviews reveal significant divergences, particularly in how cultural workers assess symbolic recognition, material reward, and the ethical implications of global visibility. For some, the fact that the story they have helped construct circulates globally and reaches millions is itself a form of affective reward. As Interviewee D reflected:

“You’re standing behind a project that speaks to the world—by accepting what the project is saying, how it is saying it, and how it’s been designed. You’re saying: ‘Look, these things happened on this land, in this history.’ From the outside, parts of it might look like nationalist glorification, but for us, they may reflect a deeper truth. In the end, this show was sold to 65 countries: it’s internationally recognized. Even if I don’t gain anything financially from that, it still creates a kind of mental satisfaction.”

Yet this sense of pride is not de facto in the sub-sector. For some others, the disjuncture between the global success of the show and their own material conditions reflects deeper structural problems. Another interviewee sharply critiqued the labor dynamics underpinning the industry, describing it as *“a system of exploitation.”* As he put it:

“If I’ve been exploited and yet presented abroad as the face of the production, how can I feel I am representing myself with dignity? Yes, this may be one of Turkey’s cultural exports, but am I not allowed to speak up about the fact that my labor is being used without fair compensation?”³²⁵

These two divergent perspectives that coexist within the same production ecosystem highlight the uneven distribution of reward perceptions and agency among cultural workers. While the narrative content of these shows may serve the state’s ambitions of soft power and global branding, the internal dynamics of production might reflect exploitative labor practices, unresolved tensions, and competing ethical orientations. In this sense, even as creative workers contribute to the global image of Turkey as a culturally powerful, historically rich nation, their lived experiences reveal the contradictions and discontents behind the spectacle. What is often celebrated as a national success abroad is, for some, a site of dispossession at home. This

³²⁵ Interviewee G, actor

ambivalence becomes a crucial part of understanding how national identity is not only projected outward, but also contested internally, through labor, emotion, and dissent.

What emerges from these accounts is a picture of agency not as a fixed capacity held by individuals, but as a relational and contingent force that is co-constructed between creative workers, executive producers, and state actors. This co-construction unfolds around key themes such as nationhood, identity, and commerce, where each actor brings different stakes, constraints, and motivations. Creative workers might find meaning in crafting narratives of belonging and pride, but they also navigate exploitative conditions and institutional pressures.

3.4. Gatekeeping the Sector and the State

The triangle between creative workers, executive producers, and state actors, where the agency of cultural producers is constantly negotiated, holds a certain ambiguity that is difficult to access yet important to unpack. This obscurity becomes more visible when it comes to executive producers, whose position at the crossroads of politics and economy gives them a significant role that is not easy to grasp. What makes it particularly challenging is their hesitation to articulate the nature of their work, especially when questions touch on political influence or financial restraints. Often, these moments of vagueness signal more than mere reluctance, they point to the complexities of operating within a system where silence can be strategic. Throughout the research process, particularly during interviews and informal encounters, a recurrent theme of “silence” began to emerge, particularly among the Turkish producers who occupy executive roles in their companies. Several executives initially agreed to participate in formal interviews but later hesitated to respond to specific questions, especially those relating to state involvement or ideological positioning. Others preferred to engage in long, open-ended conversations under the condition that they remain informal, often expressing curiosity about my project and its intentions, only to ultimately decline an official interview.

These moments revealed a disjuncture between what could be shared privately and what could be recorded publicly. I choose not to reveal the details of those informal conversations due to ethical considerations. Nevertheless, I believe that the observations made during those encounters offer a productive space for exploring how they reflect their respective positions, even though I have excluded all “off the record” information that was provided to me in these meetings.

While these silences - whether in the form of rejecting an official interview, avoiding elaboration on certain points, or relying on template responses that could be found elsewhere and that diminished the intimacy of an in-person setting - were often explained to me as outcomes of bureaucratic restrictions or demanding schedules. They nevertheless appeared to signal more than mere logistical obstacles. As Fuji argues, silences are as valuable as the testimonies themselves because they indicate how the current social and political landscape is shaping what people might say to a researcher.³²⁶ In this context, silence itself becomes a form of speech, an embodied strategy that reflects the constrained agency of those positioned closest to the nexus of power and visibility. For executive producers, whose roles often involve maintaining delicate balances between market demands, state interests, and creative aspirations, withholding becomes a way to navigate this tension without fully disclosing it. This interpretive gap - the unspoken, the deferred, the off-the-record - must be taken seriously as part of the ethnographic field, pointing not only to the limits of access but also to the contours of power that shape what can and cannot be said within Turkey’s contemporary media landscape.

These moments of hesitation revealed another layer of the political in the cultural sector through the way it has been perceived and treated in contemporary Turkey, especially when it comes to the historical/military projects where there can be a big involvement of the state.

³²⁶ Fujii, “Shades of Truth and Lies: Interpreting Testimonies of War and Violence.” 232.

Remembering Löfflmann's work about Hollywood and Pentagon cooperation where he investigates how production practices and representations co-constitute popular discourses of national security in the US,³²⁷ I have found that the production process itself is often perceived as security issue by the top managers of the sector. This issue which is approached as a state secret that should not be shared with others, was beyond what was seen on the screens or in the collaboration. It revealed itself when it came to sharing their experiences and knowledge on the issue with an outsider because the information they hold onto was described as the "strongest weapon one can have"³²⁸ in one of the informal conversations. During these moments, I found myself figuring out my position in these power dynamics, where it was clear to me that my position as a researcher revealed some trust issues and signaled how cultural production is sometimes considered a security issue by professionals. Especially during my encounters with people whose work is supported by the state, I was often considered an outsider; sometimes in the form of a little harmless student and sometimes as a potential threat to the country who is spying on this very important agenda of the state and culture collaboration and leaking information to foreign/enemy circles. It signaled the role of gatekeepers that the managers of the sector play when it is needed.

A part of my encounters with the executive level of the sector aimed to unpack the relations between the state and the sector more and explore how creative work is treated in the "corporate accumulation imperatives"³²⁹ when capitalist production meets with authoritarian tendencies. Multiple producers shared that currently, producing a period piece in Turkey is highly costly due to the rising inflation in the country and the need for more actors and materials for these shows. One particularly revealing encounter was during an interview with a senior executive from a production company that continues to create militarist-themed content for

³²⁷ Georg Löfflmann, "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and the Cinematic Production of National Security," *Critical Studies on Security* 1, no. 3 (2013): 280.

³²⁸ From an informal conversation with a research participant

³²⁹ Banks, *The Politics of Cultural Work*, 7-9.

TRT, the national broadcaster. During our interview, he expressed frustration about production costs, noting that it no longer makes financial sense to produce these shows solely for the domestic market. Only through international sales, he explained, can they recover the expenses incurred. Contrary to public perception, he added that they do not receive sufficient state support, despite widespread assumptions that such productions benefit from generous government incentives. When I asked about the international success of their shows, aware that their productions do not enjoy the same global reach as *Establishment: Osman*, he confirmed my assessment.³³⁰ Expecting that the company might consider a genre shift as a strategic move if profitability remains elusive, I was surprised when he insisted that they would continue producing period pieces. This response left me with more questions than answers and prompted reflections on the complex relationships between production companies, the state, and TRT. It also lent further support to Yeşil's framework on state–producer dynamics in Turkey.³³¹ While profit generation is generally the primary goal of cultural industries, this case underscores how structural conditions and specific national contexts can shape the practices and outcomes of media production in significant ways. This encounter also opens the possibility that producers and the state may be collaborating across multiple sectors beyond the television industry.

When I tried to reach out to other production companies that have produced Ottoman-themed content for the national broadcaster (TRT) and pro-government TV channels, I came across one of the biggest challenges of the fieldwork: not being seen or completely being ignored by potential participants. After countless e-mails, the only way to reach out to my target group was the snowballing technique, where other senior managers put me in touch with them or met them at one of the biggest TV expos, MIPTV 2023 face to face. Thanks to the compact nature of the culture sector of Turkey, the snowballing technique for the interviews was

³³⁰ Interviewee O, producer

³³¹ Yeşil, “*Transnationalization of Turkish Dramas: Exploring the Convergence of Local and Global Market Imperatives.*” 50.

especially useful. With the help of a participant, I could get the contact information of my target company and reach out to one of the key participants of my research. After a few phone calls and an exchange of texts with his assistant where I shared the research information sheet and consent form for participants, I got invited to their studio where the soap opera was shot, and his office is located. The day of my visit was the day I realized the unspoken words or rejections would be as important as the words spoken to me for my research and they can be read as a part of the bigger discourse of the production sector in Turkey.

On the day of the interview, it took me 45 minutes to go to the studio by car which is located in the middle of a forest and was decorated like a little town from the early years of the Ottoman Empire with models of a palace and yurts where some of the actors were touring around on horses. After a couple of security checks at the entrance, I was directed to sit and wait at a cafe near the set until someone came and accompanied me to the office of my interviewee. When I was brought from the cafe to the office, which was located right on the top of the hill with a view of the sets, I sensed a different hierarchy and authority compared to my communication with managers from other production companies. The location of his office, very private and on top of the hill, and how he was surrounded by almost exclusively men who were working for him already showed that I was in a conservative setting. After the introductions, I opened my notebook to start taking notes, considering that I had shared the necessary information with him earlier on. The moment my notebook was on the table before I mentioned voice recording and asked for his consent, I was stopped in a rush by the participant and warned not to make any notes or to record the conversation. He clearly stated that this was a preliminary meeting, and he wanted to get to know me better, because “information is the most important weapon one can use”, and why would he share his work secrets or strategies with a foreigner? After listening to my research more in detail, he made it clear that studying such an important topic about “our” history and this cultural project at a university abroad is

problematic, despite the show they produced has been sold to hundreds of different countries in the world. It did not take long until I realized his sense of *problem* comes from a nationalist way of thinking where the Western agent (I was the symbol of that agent in that setting) is the ‘Other’ that caused harm to the Turkish nation long in history, which was one of the motivations of his project’s idea. Therefore, he felt the necessity to be careful with the information he shared with others from Western institutions.

At the end of our preliminary meeting, he agreed to interview me in our second meeting on one condition: No lies or insults about the Turkish state, nation, and religion in the final product of my research. Despite our agreement on the point that in an honest academic work, there should not be any biased statements such as lies and insults, he did not manage to meet me for the second time, therefore we could not conduct an official interview. The news was communicated to me by his assistant, and I was told that the company was remarkably busy with the release of a new series. Despite not having the chance to ask my interview questions and hear his answers in a more official setting, having the chance to meet with the brain of a very successful historical series and to observe the settings the team works in could still tell me something about the political: how the knowledge is produced and protected. The conditions he set for an interview and the way he handles information, almost like a national security issue, signaled his nationalist sensitivities and the motivation for these productions.

Another similar but less surprising instance I experienced was with the official television of Turkey, TRT, due to its clear position as a state institution. Being the first TV channel in Turkey and still a strong institution with a direct connection with the state, the channel has been utilized actively by the Turkish state for domestic and foreign policies all around the world with different branches such as TRT World. Therefore, the insights of the channel professionals to understand their institutional culture and power dynamics in the sector were significant for my research.

These challenges to reach out to people who are at the center of Turkey's state-culture cooperation encouraged me to visit the MIPTV in April 2023, an international expo that takes place in Cannes, France, every year for the TV industries from all around the world to come together to trade TV content. During my visit there for three days, I had the chance to directly talk to leading channels and distributors including TRT as one of the main broadcasters and distributors of Ottoman-themed soap operas. In this very limited time at the expo, we had an interesting touch-and-go chat about the market and the production policies of the state with the TRT officials. During our informal conversation at Cannes, I hoped to get an appointment from their Ankara office so that I could visit them for a formal interview. While I was hopeful about an official interview with their marketing manager, they avoided promising me anything because there are so many researchers who would like to interview with the channel to study their impact; however, the institution is quite protective when it comes to sharing information.

A few months after the expo, I got in touch with the team leader I met at Cannes and asked whether they had heard anything from the top management regarding the approval for an interview. It turned out that the official approval still hadn't been granted. However, due to my limited time in Turkey, the manager generously agreed to talk to me without giving any official consent for the interview. We agreed on having an informal conversation where I can take notes for further research, and in case the institutional approval comes later, I would send my questions to them and get their written answers. So, I visited their office and was welcomed warmly. There was no structured interview format like question-answer or recording, but our informal conversation continued along the lines of the points I was interested in for my project. I was often apologized for not being able to conduct an official interview despite the way I came from İstanbul and was told there were so many more researchers waiting in line for an interview with a TRT official. As a middle manager in a state institution, it was clear that a

contribution to the research of an outsider, no matter how much he trusted the person, was not possible for him without official approval.

First, it was clear from the way they preserved information due to the points I was interested in could relate to the state-culture sector relations and a grandiose project, so they had the power to be a gatekeeper for the state's cultural projects as a state-funded institution. Second, it was made clear that the distribution of these shows (mostly the Ottoman-themed ones by TRT) has the task of cultural transmission around the world from the institution's perspective. Therefore, they were aware of their active participation in the foreign policymaking of Turkey.

Taken together, these encounters illustrate how the political dimensions of cultural production in Turkey are not only embedded in the content of historical dramas, but also in the conditions of their making, circulation, and narration. Production culture in this context means walking a tightrope between entrepreneurial drive and state security for some producers. Beyond the usual challenges of financing, casting, and distribution, producers must constantly signal their political loyalty through staged hospitality in forested studios, refusals to record conversations, or deference to official channels; treating story ideas as strategic assets. These gestures are not simply performative but operate as modes of negotiation, revealing how knowledge is curated, protected, and withheld within a system where culture is viewed as both commodity and national mission. Turkey's booming historical drama industry thus becomes a site where creative agency is exercised not despite political entanglement but through it. The field, then, is not simply a site of data collection; it is a terrain where power, trust, and authorship are constantly negotiated, revealing the contours of a media landscape where what can be said, and by whom, is deeply shaped by the structures of visibility, loyalty, and control.

Chapter Summary and Discussion

This chapter has sought to move beyond the level of text-analysis and the perceived polarized imaginaries of Turkey's cultural field, commonly framed as a binary between secular and neo-Ottoman camps, by tracing the everyday experiences, motivations, and negotiations of cultural producers themselves. While the ideological divide has undeniably shaped the terrain of television drama production, especially around Ottoman-themed soap operas, this study has shown that the reality on the ground is far more layered and porous. Through seemingly mundane yet deeply consequential choices, such as how to portray historical figures, which storylines to foreground, and what aesthetic codes to adopt, producers participate in the ongoing construction and contestation of the nation. Their agency is neither fully autonomous nor fully constrained; rather, it is co-constructed at the intersection of state power, market imperatives, and personal convictions.

By zooming in on the everyday work of cultural producers, this chapter has illuminated a more heterogeneous and fragmented media landscape than a simplistic binary of “state-aligned” versus “secular-oppositional even within the same production, individuals hold vastly different orientations toward their work. While some see themselves as contributing to a cultural and political project they support; others view their roles as primarily artistic or economic, separated from the ideological frame of the final product. Many navigate these conflicting demands simultaneously, striking pragmatic compromises to sustain careers in a competitive and politicized industry. These nuanced positions demonstrate that contestation and contradiction are not anomalies, but routine aspects of cultural production in Turkey's television sector.

This chapter contributes empirically by foregrounding the perspectives of creative workers who are often overlooked in top-down analyses of media power. Drawing on interviews across different genres and institutional affiliations, it presents a textured account

of how professionals experience, negotiate, and sometimes resist the ideological work embedded in their productions. Crucially, it shows that while national identity codes appear on screen as coherent narratives, they are negotiated in the background across multiple layers of production. Cultural producers draw on their own life experiences, educational backgrounds, and professional motivations, rendering national identity-making a far more intricate and contested process than is often assumed. These narratives uncover how cultural producers engage with national identity not only through overt political alignment, but also through aesthetic decisions, interpersonal dynamics, and personal motivations rooted in memory and belonging.

Conceptually, the chapter offers a shift in analytical focus: from cultural texts and state discourse to production networks and everyday labor. By doing so, it adds to the literature on media and nationhood a more relational and grounded understanding of how national identity making in culture is enacted, not simply as a state strategy, but as a collaborative and often ambivalent process shaped through human interaction. In emphasizing the “everyday” and the “mundane,” the chapter shows how macro-level ideologies are reinterpreted, stretched, or quietly subverted through the micro-level decisions of those working behind the scenes.

Ultimately, the Turkish television industry emerges not as a monolithic apparatus of state propaganda, nor as a battlefield of rigid oppositions, but as a complex and layered ecosystem where ideology, commerce, and creativity intersect. The chapter argues that cultural production in contemporary Turkey operates through a dynamic co-constitution of state agendas and producer agency, wherein power is exercised as much through informal networks and institutional affiliations as through artistic judgment and professional survival. Yet, within this landscape, the experiences and positions of creative workers and executive producers diverge significantly. While creatives often describe themselves as navigating aesthetic challenges, political expectations and financial constraints; executives tend to operate at the

intersection of political caution and economic strategy, locating themselves closer to the realms of discretion, control, and gatekeeping. Recognizing these layered and uneven dynamics is essential for understanding how national identity is not just represented on screen, but materially and affectively produced through the differentiated labor and positionalities of those who make it.

Having analyzed both the on-screen imaginaries and the sectoral production practices of Turkish television dramas, the next and final analytical chapter turns to broader geopolitical projection of these cultural products beyond the national production context. It examines how cultural production becomes entangled in diplomatic crises and explores how transnational media networks exercise agency in negotiating, circumventing, or reconfiguring seemingly authoritarian political decisions that seek to regulate cultural circulation.

FRAME 3 - KINGDOMS OF SOAPS: GEOPOLITICS OF TURKISH TV IN THE MENA REGION AND TRANSNATIONAL AGENCY

“One day in 2018, we got a phone call. He said - I can’t remember the exact date - ‘as of today, no more Turkish TV series.’”

This line, taken from the interview with a Turkish soap opera buyer working in the MENA region, encapsulates the abruptness with which political decisions can reshape entire cultural market. What sounded like a routine industry update via a call, in fact, was the beginning of a multi-year ban on Turkish television dramas across several Middle Eastern networks, an incident that revealed the fragility of transnational media flows and the unpredictable ways in which politics can both interrupt and be shaped by cultural circulation.

It was this very event that first drew me into the world of Turkish soap operas and ultimately propelled me toward writing a PhD thesis in International Relations about them. I still remember reading a short report in an international magazine: the Saudi-owned network MBC had suspended all Turkish series amid escalating diplomatic tensions between Turkey and Saudi Arabia.³³² What seemed at first like a minor dispute over entertainment programming soon appeared to signal something far more profound. These supposedly “light” cultural products were, in fact, deeply embedded in the fabric of regional geopolitics. Yet this moment also raised a set of critical questions. Did this intervention truly mark the end of Turkish television series in the region, particularly in an environment where audiences can access to multiple digital platforms such as YouTube and other online streaming platforms? If not, what

³³² Al Jazeera, “Saudi Network Ban on Turkey TV Shows ‘Is Political’: Minister,” March 6, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/6/saudi-network-ban-on-turkey-tv-shows-is-political-minister>

exactly was being targeted through the ban, and why were television series singled out as the first objects of contestation amid otherwise dense and ongoing trade relations?

These questions point beyond the surface-level narrative of prohibition and toward the politics of cultural production and circulation. Rather than treating the boycott as a definitive rupture, this project approaches it as a moment of crisis management and symbolic negotiation, asking how industry actors, largely invisible in media headlines yet central to the organization of transnational cultural exchange, responded to and navigated this political disruption. By foregrounding the perspectives of producers, distributors, and other cultural intermediaries, the analysis seeks to illuminate what remained invisible in dominant accounts of the ban. What motivated the development of this analytical Frame is precisely this gap between what was made visible in public discourse and what remained hidden in the everyday practices of cultural production.

As we can see in this example, in an increasingly hyper globalized world where news, social media content, and cultural artefacts travel across borders in an instant, soap operas can reach vast international audiences, sometimes regardless of whether their producers ever intended such circulation or political consequences. This rapid mobility means that cultural products, particularly those embedded with strong national identity codings or historical projections from specific perspectives, can generate political effects far beyond their original contexts. All around the world, as everyday audiences engage with these narratives, they encounter affective and aesthetic entry points into world politics, making television dramas unlikely yet potent mediators of geopolitical meaning.³³³ These mechanisms of the popular culture products sometimes generate soft power, much like Hollywood productions influenced

³³³ Robert A. Saunders, "Small Screen IR: A Tentative Typology of Geopolitical Television," *Geopolitics* 24, no. 3 (2019): 691–727.

the world during the Cold War.³³⁴ Nevertheless, if the projected values and perspective do not match with the audience, they may also produce contentious outcomes. These outcomes can simply be disliked and ignored by the audience. However, if a show's depiction of historical events, national symbols, or cultural norms clashes with local values or political sensitivities, there may be more concrete results that can be seen in broader political structures, including boycotts or regulatory interventions.³³⁵ These reactions demonstrate that media products are not neutral commodities; they actively participate in negotiating political values, memory, and power across borders, shaping international perceptions and at times generating unintended diplomatic consequences. More importantly, all these broader structures are negotiated with the involvement of particular groups in the cultural site, such as the industry workers.

When we think of a diplomatic crisis like what happened between Saudi Arabia and Turkey in 2018 which followed with the ban of Turkish soap operas in the region, what appears on the international stage often seems to be the work of state actors alone where they project their power onto micro settings. But from a broader perspective, international politics is not practiced solely in international summits or in the corridors of foreign ministries. It is also exercised in the cultural production sites through different forms of power. In the process of meaning-making, especially for the products that can provide different political imaginaries to the audience, cultural production site becomes a zone of mediation in which political meanings are translated, filtered, and reshaped. In this zone, cultural producers practice their agency where their micro-moves work toward balancing political preferences of the setting they are working in, commercial imperatives, and everyday sensibilities of the audience.³³⁶

³³⁴ Joseph S. Nye Jr., "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008): 98.

³³⁵ For example, the "Band in China" episode of *South Park* was banned in China because it criticized the Chinese government and the country's media censorship practices. "South Park China: Writers in mock apology after Beijing censorship." *BBC News*, October 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49968867>

³³⁶ Caitlin Hamilton, *The Everyday Artefacts of World Politics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 7.

When I began my fieldwork in 2023, I set out to speak precisely with those professionals who had experienced the diplomatic crisis spreading around the cultural sector firsthand, such as Turkish distributors and regional buyers from MENA, whose daily work had suddenly become working through a crisis. This transnational engagement enabled me to extend my analytical framework and the concept of cultural (self-)portraits beyond the Turkish context, allowing for an exploration of production and circulation networks that operate across national boundaries. Central to this inquiry was an interest in how industry workers in the region navigated such politically charged moments, not merely as sectoral actors, but as multi-dimensional individuals positioned within overlapping professional, cultural, and political fields. How did they interpret the unfolding crisis, and how did they locate themselves within a conflict framed at the level of inter-state relations?

Approaching their experiences alongside those of actors in the Turkish production sector added an additional layer to my own positionality as a researcher. While my interlocutors in Turkey often engaged in more personal and reflective conversations, interactions with MENA-based industry professionals were frequently marked by more cautious, scripted responses, or, at times, by silence altogether. Lacking shared markers such as national origin or citizenship, I occupied the position of a complete outsider to their professional worlds. This asymmetry shaped both the depth and the form of the data produced, highlighting how access, trust, and disclosure are unevenly distributed within transnational research settings.

Against this backdrop, this chapter widens the analytical lens on Turkish television and examines how cultural production acquires geopolitical significance in a shifting regional landscape. It asks: How do cultural producers, not only in Turkey but across the region, negotiate diplomatic crises? How do their micro-level decisions inform both the political field and the media industries in which they operate? By exploring the political reception,

negotiation, and contestation of Turkish dramas in the MENA region, the chapter shows that international politics is enacted not only in formal diplomatic arenas but also in the everyday practices of cultural workers and in the transnational journeys of the stories they create. It reveals how meanings travel across borders, are reinterpreted in local contexts, and become embedded in wider struggles over identity, legitimacy, and regional power. The chapter first investigates the transnational flow of Turkish television series beyond national boundaries, placing their global reach in perspective with the political dynamics of the MENA region. Then, the geopolitical meaning of Ottoman-era representations is discussed, together with the political reactions culminating in bans and restrictions on Turkish soap operas. Finally, this chapter moves from macrolevel diplomatic tensions to everyday practices, examining how media actors negotiate and respond to these crises through routine professional actions and micro-level forms of agency.

1.1. Turkish TV Series Travelling Beyond the National Borders

The international export of Turkish TV series establishes them as a key national trademark and also serves as a powerful tool of soft power, boosting cultural influence, tourism, and economic growth. Forbes Turkey states that between 2018 and 2024, Turkey's drama exports grew by almost threefold, including the productions for national TV and for digital platforms.³³⁷ The narratives, aesthetic styles, and representations of everyday life presented in Turkish dramas cultivate a sense of familiarity and attraction among viewers abroad, thereby strengthening Turkey's cultural influence in regions ranging from Latin America and South Asia to the Middle East and the Balkans.³³⁸ The soft power generated through these series has concrete economic implications: filming locations featured in popular shows often experience

³³⁷ *Forbes Turkey*, "Ses Kamera Oyun," 2024, <https://www.forbes.com.tr/haberler/ses-kamera-oyun>.

³³⁸ Nihan Anaz and C. C. Ozcan, "Geography of Turkish Soap Operas: Tourism, Soft Power, and Alternative Narratives," in *GeoJournal Library*, vol. 121 (Cham: Springer, 2016).

spikes in tourist interest, while the heightened global demand for Turkish content encourages further investment in domestic production capacities and growing purchase of the Turkish content.³³⁹ Ultimately, the cultural appeal of Turkish TV dramas circulates back into the national economy, creating a mutually reinforcing cycle of soft power, tourism, and industry growth.

Despite there are no publicly available statistics regarding the export of TV series to certain countries or regions, according to the previous researchers' works and the insights of sector professionals, we know that MENA region is a big market for Turkish TV series.³⁴⁰ Turkish dramas' presence in the region goes back to mid 2000s with being a good alternative to Western dramas. The first big exportation was the show titled *Gümüş* (Noor), broadcasted on MBC, and had an unexpected success in the region. The melodrama centered on the evolving romance between a wealthy businessman and a young woman navigating modern and traditional expectations. The first wave of Turkish soap operas in the region continued with *Binbir Gece* (1001 Nights), a romantic drama built around Şehrazat's morally fraught decision to spend a night with her employer to fund her son's medical treatment, setting the stage for a deeper engagement with Turkish melodramatic storytelling. As demand grew, a second wave followed with TV series like *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) and *Yaprak Dökümü* (The Falling of Leaves), which further diversified thematic content while maintaining emotional and moral frameworks relatable to MENA viewers.³⁴¹ The expansion was facilitated by pan-Arab satellite networks, especially MBC, the channel at the center of this chapter. MBC strategically positioned Turkish dramas as regionally palatable yet modern alternatives to

³³⁹ Istvan Egresi, ed., *Alternative Tourism in Turkey: Role, Potential Development and Sustainability* (Cham: Springer, 2016), 249.

³⁴⁰ Berg, Miriam. *The Importance of Cultural Proximity in the Success of Turkish Dramas in Qatar*. *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 11, 3415–3430 (2017).

³⁴¹ Marwan M. Kraidy, *Reality Television and Arab Politics: Contention in Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

Western imports, thereby accelerating their cultural circulation and embedding them more deeply into Arab media ecologies.³⁴²

The big interest of the Arab audience for Turkish dramas has been studied widely through Media Studies and International Relations Scholars.³⁴³ This success is commonly explained by cultural proximities between Turkey and the region, stemming from shared religious traditions and a common historical legacy rooted in Ottoman imperial rule. This cultural proximity in addition to the Westernized character of the Turkish lives as projected in these shows created a good alternative for "culturally alien" Western soap operas in the region.³⁴⁴ According to Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, Turkish TV series diversified thematic content in the region's TV while maintaining emotional and moral frameworks relatable to local viewers.³⁴⁵ Additionally, the "modern Muslim" profile that the exported series project creates an image of Turkey as a part of the region. This blend of familiarity and difference is particularly resonant for Arab women viewers, who often interpret Turkish dramas as presenting alternative models of womanhood and public visibility within a culturally recognizable framework,³⁴⁶ providing them a new vision for their lives.

This framework through which Turkish television series were positioned for the MENA region, that is simultaneously familiar in terms of lifestyle and distinct through their selective

³⁴² Omar Al-Ghazzi and Marwan M. Kraidy, "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere," *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): pp. 8–34.

³⁴³ Zafer Yörük and Pantelis Vatikiotis, "Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera 'Colonialism'," *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013); N. Anaz and C. C. Özcan, "Geography of Turkish Soap Operas: Tourism, Soft Power, and Alternative Narratives," in *GeoJournal Library*, vol. 121 (Cham: Springer, 2016); Marwan M. Kraidy and Omar Al-Ghazzi, "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere," *Popular Communication* 11, no. 1 (2013): 17–29; Marwan M. Kraidy, "Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt–Turkey Row over Television Drama," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 12, no. 2 (2019); B. Senem Çevik, "Turkish Soap Opera Diplomacy: A Western Projection by a Muslim Source," *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (2014); Miriam Berg, *TV Series and Transnational Audiences: Turkish Television Drama in the Middle East* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

³⁴⁴ Egresi, *Alternative in Turkey: Role, Potential Development and Sustainability*, 256.

³⁴⁵ Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere," 20–22.

³⁴⁶ Berg, "Turkish Drama Serials as a Tool for Soft Power"; Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, "Neo-Ottoman Cool," 17–29.

incorporation of modern elements, closely intersected with the Turkish government's broader geopolitical imaginaries. As scholars of International Relations have shown, popular culture is a domain through which people routinely make sense of world politics, forming emotional attachments and geopolitical imaginaries through everyday consumption.³⁴⁷ Turkish TV dramas, in this sense, contribute to shaping how viewers imagine Turkey's cultural identity and its place in the region. Through these shows, in much of the MENA region, Turkey is increasingly positioned within the symbolic category of "us," while Western dramas occupy the space of the cultural "other." This alignment dovetails with the Turkish government's geopolitical ambition to reassert influence across former Ottoman geographies and cultivate leadership in the region. Compared with twenty years ago, when Turkey was more firmly oriented toward and identified with Europe, the contemporary soft power generated through TV dramas supports a shift toward a more regionally embedded identity, one that is both nostalgically familiar and aspirationally modern.

Tying back to the previous scholars, among other commodities that are exchanged between Turkey and the region, sticks out as one of the most politically significant trademarks. The reason of this does not solely lie under market value. They produce a form of political value that exceeds both the material and symbolic value of other commodities exchanged between Turkey and the MENA region. Their political significance derives from the way they function: their embeddedness in the sphere of everyday politics, where political meanings are not imposed through formal institutions but are reproduced through ordinary, repetitive, and affect-laden practices of daily life.³⁴⁸ As serialized narratives consumed in domestic settings, these cultural artifacts penetrate private spaces and sustain long-term engagement with Turkish

³⁴⁷ Jutta Weldes, "Popular Culture, Science Fiction, and World Politics: Exploring Intertextual Relations," in *Popular Culture and World Politics*, ed. Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton (E-International Relations, 2015), 1–16; Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics, and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006); Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

³⁴⁸ Solomon & Steele, "Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory," 267–291.

social imaginaries in the easiest way possible, as TV has become a part of the Arab family routines.³⁴⁹ Through aesthetic choices and representations of family, gender relations, urban modernity, and historical continuity, Turkish TV series normalize particular visions of society and power in ways that resonate with audiences' lived experiences. This routinized exposure enables a subtle form of political influence. This influence is not grounded in persuasion but in familiarity, recognition, and emotional attachment.³⁵⁰

Within this context, the regional success of Turkish television dramas has generated a specific regime of visibility, through which Turkey becomes present and affectively meaningful in the everyday lives of MENA audiences. Visibility here does not merely mean representation or media presence. It signifies a relational process through which cultural forms render political actors legible and emotionally proximate.³⁵¹ By translating geopolitical presence into everyday cultural intimacy, these series transform abstract notions of national identity, history, and modernity into lived and consumable experiences. This mode of visibility operates below the explicit political discourse, yet precisely for this reason it is politically potent: it shapes what is seen as familiar, desirable, or normal.³⁵² The production of such visibility, however, also renders Turkish television series vulnerable to contestation, as their capacity to circulate political meanings through everyday life positions them as sites of symbolic struggle. This form of visibility can help explain why they later become targets of organized boycotts in the region.

³⁴⁹ Interviewee P, buyer from the region.

³⁵⁰ Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson, "Everyday International Relations: Editors' Introduction," 123–130.

³⁵¹ Solomon and Steele, "Micro-Moves in International Relations Theory," 270–271.

³⁵² Björkdahl, Hall, and Svensson, "Everyday International Relations," 126–128.

1.2. The Ottoman Era in the Shows

The wave of Turkish TV shows continued towards the end of 2010s, with the more historical themed productions which did not have any prior Turkish examples in the region. While the *Magnificent Century* also became a big hit in the region as it triggered the geographic memory through pop elements, the real change in the audience interest to Turkish TV series came with more nationalistic/ militaristic heavy series. The first example of this soap opera genre, *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, was created with full government support in 2014, and it circulated widely across international markets in the following years, marking a shift in the region's consumption of Turkish television content. Regional buyers often note that, with the exception of *Magnificent Century*, most of the Turkish made period pieces did not initially attract substantial attention from MENA audiences. Their more limited reception, in comparison to *Magnificent Century*, can be partly attributed to the markedly different historical narratives, identity imaginaries, and aesthetic registers articulated by *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, as elaborated in Frame I. Buyers from the region also emphasized that political considerations within their own countries played a significant role in shaping the reception of these overtly nationalistic series. In several cases, broadcasting authorities intervened in the circulation of such content, concerned that the promotion of historical narratives closely aligned with Turkey's governmental priorities might conflict with their domestic political agendas or regional alliances.³⁵³

It is within this turn toward Ottoman-themed and overtly nationalistic productions that producers appear to have become more visibly and actively entangled in international political arenas. While the early circulation of Turkish dramas in the MENA region had largely been driven by melodramatic narratives and cultural proximity, the global expansion of these

³⁵³ Interviewee N buyer from the region; Interviewee L distributor from Turkey; Interviewee P buyer from region

historical series in the 2010s introduced a qualitatively different dynamic. High-profile instances, such as Minister Mustafa Varank's public reference to an Ottoman-themed production team accompanying a diplomatic visit to Qatar, Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro's visit to the set of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, and the series' producer's prominent public presence in Pakistan articulating messages of inter-state "brotherhood", suggest that cultural producers increasingly functioned as geopolitical intermediaries. This development complicates conventional accounts of soft power by indicating that national identity narratives are not only consumed abroad but also actively performed through the international mobility and public visibility of media professionals themselves.

As producers and productions became more visibly entangled with geopolitical narratives, their circulation increasingly attracted the attention of political authorities in recipient countries, rendering Turkish television content subject to scrutiny, intervention, and strategic recalibration. The interventions from recipient countries' political authorities had a direct impact on how these dramas were distributed and perceived across the MENA region. As Ottoman-themed series began to spread throughout the region, the dynamics of the television sector started to shift in tandem with broader geopolitical realignments and changing economic priorities of the region's countries. What initially appeared as a diplomatic crisis and a dislike of Turkey's history projections in 2018 gradually evolved into a more complex political process such as boycotts. This process placed soap operas within international politics in ways that extend beyond traditional notions of soft power, towards their function in everyday politics and complexity of production networks.

Slightly before and during the soap opera crisis, Turkey's shifting ambitions in cultural and foreign policy also began to clash with regional transformations, creating a set of unexpected and hybrid dynamics. While Ankara increasingly projected itself as a central actor

and cultural leader in former Ottoman geographies, the region itself was undergoing significant political reconfigurations, ideological tensions, and new alliances following the Arab Spring. This friction produced a distinctive outcome: Turkish TV series became entangled in competing regional narratives, simultaneously functioning as instruments of influence, objects of resistance, and platforms through which local actors aimed to articulate their own geopolitical imaginations. In turn, this dynamic added another layer of political dynamic to the work of sector professionals both in Turkey and in the region.

While I concur with existing scholarship that highlights Turkish TV series as a form of soft power, particularly in the MENA region, it is important to recognize that in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian contexts with changing geopolitical aspirations, their transnational circulation introduces additional layers to the dynamic between international relations and popular culture circulation. These dramas shape social norms, recalibrate cultural perceptions, and enhance producers' and distributors' agency, revealing that their political significance is more multifaceted than soft power alone can account for.

1.3. Bans, Restrictions, Politics Reactions: Background of a Soap Opera Crisis

The political life of Turkish soap operas in the MENA region comes sharply into focus through moments of diplomatic crisis, with Turkey's relationship with Saudi Arabia offering a particularly interesting entry point. The relations between Turkey and Saudi Arabia had already been on unstable ground due to their sharply divergent positions on the uprisings that reshaped the region in the past decade. The two states found themselves on different sides of regional transformations and power struggles, which gradually eroded mutual trust and

increased competition for political influence and leadership within the region.³⁵⁴ The rift deepened in 2017, when Ankara openly sided with Qatar during the Gulf crisis and opposed the blockade imposed on Doha by Riyadh and several other Arab states, following accusations that Qatar supported Islamist movements and maintained close ties with Iran. Turkey's decision to support Qatar went beyond a rhetorical stance: Ankara sent cargo planes loaded with food and other basic supplies to help Qatar withstand the embargo.³⁵⁵ This move was widely publicized and perceived as a direct challenge to Saudi Arabia's regional leadership, marking the beginning of a more visible and sustained diplomatic crisis between the two countries.

Tensions escalated further with the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, known for his critical stance toward the Saudi government, in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul.³⁵⁶ The killing of the journalist, and the way Turkish authorities managed both the investigation and the strategic release of information, brought the already fragile diplomatic relationship to a breaking point. According to analyses of the incident, Turkey adopted an unusually assertive communication strategy: rather than resolving the crisis through quiet diplomacy, Ankara deliberately internationalized the affair by shaping the narrative in global media spheres.³⁵⁷ Turkish officials selectively disclosed surveillance footage, audio recordings, and investigative findings to international outlets, allowing Turkey to frame the murder as a premeditated, state-directed operation.³⁵⁸ This sustained flow of information not only kept the story at the center of global attention but also maximized political pressure on Riyadh by challenging Saudi Arabia's

³⁵⁴ Sevda Korhan & Yusuf Çınar, "Post-Arab Spring Turkey-Saudi Arabia Relations on Shaky Ground: Diverging and Converging Dynamics," *TESAM Akademi Dergisi* 11, no. 2 (2024): 761-791; Gönül Tol and David Dumke, eds., *Aspiring Powers, Regional Rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the New Middle East* (Orlando: Middle East Institute/University of Central Florida, 2020).

³⁵⁵ Birol Başkan, "Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations," *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 14, no. 53 (2017): 86

³⁵⁶ Başkan, *Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing Regional and Bilateral Relations*, 86.

³⁵⁷ TRT World Research Centre, *Murder in the Consulate: The Khashoggi Affair and the Turkish–Saudi War of Narratives* (Istanbul: TRT World Research Centre, 2018)

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

credibility and narrative control. By sustaining the story's visibility in the international press, Turkey positioned itself as the defender of transparency, rule of law, and moral high ground, while implicitly targeting Saudi Arabia's international credibility and leadership claims.

This incident intersected with ongoing cultural and media dynamics alongside intensifying political confrontation, setting the stage for cultural products, such as Turkish historical dramas, to be mobilized or contested as part of broader struggles over regional influence and legitimacy. Saudi Arabia is the owner of the Gulf's largest broadcasting conglomerate, the MBC Group (Middle East Broadcasting Center), which occupies a dominant position in the regional media landscape and has long been one of the largest buyers of Turkish dramas, contributing significantly to their circulation across the Middle East. Through its extensive satellite network, programming capacity, and control over regional content flows, MBC Group wields substantial power in shaping which cultural products circulate across Arab markets, and when political tensions arise, this power becomes an instrument with clear geopolitical implications. In such contexts, entertainment industries stop being solely commercial domains; they become arenas in which states project narratives, signal alliances, and articulate shifting regional hierarchies.

In 2018, following escalating diplomatic tensions with Turkey, Turkish TV series were abruptly banned from being purchased or aired in countries where MBC operates. One of the regional buyers I talked to explained this process as *'the decision was communicated to them directly and unilaterally by state officials through a phone call'*.³⁵⁹ The media professionals working at that time were tasked not to sign more agreements with Turkish production companies, and in fact, to take the Turkish TV series off the air which were included in the

³⁵⁹ Interviewee G, buyer from the region.

broadcaster's weekly plans and in their digital platforms for years by then, leaving a gap to be filled in the MBC's digital libraries.

While MBC's first reaction was to move already purchased Turkish content behind a paywall in their digital platforms and stop the new contracts for scripted Turkish content, the ban quickly expanded across the region going beyond MBC and Saudi Arabia. Within a short period of time, several other channels and countries such as United Arab Emirates adopted similar measures without an officially announced decision but often justified through various pretexts. One participant interpreted this regional alignment as "*siding with the powerful actor in the Gulf.*"³⁶⁰ Another industry professional explained that although their platform continued to carry Turkish series, they did so as not to provoke political sensitivities: "*We kept the Turkish content, but in a very discreet way - not with the usual marketing - because we didn't want to trigger hostility in the region.*"³⁶¹ This suggests that the ban reflected a broader political calculus, where media actors adjusted their strategies to align with shifting regional power dynamics, actively taking part in the international positioning of the state they work in. This move positioned regional media platforms as participants in regional power struggles in addition to their commercial role.

The lifting of the ban on Turkish dramas revealed how deeply cultural policy in the region is intertwined with shifting diplomatic relations and Saudi Arabia's broader influence over transnational media flows. Diplomatic tensions eased in April 2022 with President Erdoğan's visit to King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, followed by reciprocal high-level engagements.³⁶² Although no public statement was made regarding the reversal of the ban just

³⁶⁰ Interviewee H, Distributor from Turkey

³⁶¹ Interviewee O, buyer from the region.

³⁶² Republic of Turkey Directorate of Communications, *President Erdoğan: "On the Occasion of My Visit, We Will Review Turkey-Saudi Arabia Relations in All Its Dimensions"* (2022), <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-we-agreed-with-saudi-arabia-that-we-need-to-reactivate-a-great-economic-potential>.

was the case with the start of the ban, a few months after these visits MBC signed a five-year content agreement with two major Turkish production companies, Ay Yapım and Medyapım, widely interpreted as a clear signal that the restriction had effectively been lifted.³⁶³ As of 2026, the Turkish content is continued to be purchased in the region, however with the changing dynamics in the market following the 3 year-long ban, which will be elaborated later in the chapter. What made this ban politically and economically significant, however, was not only MBC's compliance but also how transnational cultural sector professionals worked through it. Another important aspect the case showed is the way other regional broadcasters followed suit, reflecting Saudi Arabia's capacity to shape media flows across the region. The placement of Turkish content behind a paywall and its removal from free-to-air channels underscored both Saudi Arabia's dominance in regional media markets and the instrumental role that television dramas can play in diplomatic and commercial negotiations.

Saudi Arabia was not the only case where Turkey's diplomatic relations and geopolitical aspirations turned into a soap opera crisis. In 2020, Egypt became another important actor in the region that a similar reaction to the Turkish TV series but stating a publicly available criticism to the content of the shows spreading around the region. This soap opera crisis between Egypt and Turkey goes back to 2013, when political tensions spilled directly into the cultural sphere. Following the ousting of President Mohamed Morsi and Ankara's vocal criticism of the military takeover, several groups within Egypt's artistic and media community called for a boycott of Turkish dramas.³⁶⁴ Statements circulated by prominent figures associated with the Egyptian Cinema Syndicate and other cultural actors urged satellite channels to halt broadcasts of Turkish series, framing their appeal as a reflection

³⁶³ Sputnik Turkey, "Turkish Production Companies Reach Agreement with Saudi Broadcasting Giant: 4-Year 'Embargo' Officially Ends," October 20, 2022, <https://anlatilaninotesi.com.tr/20221020/turk-yapim-sirketleri-suudi-arabistanli-yayin-deviyle-anlasti-4-yillik-ambargo-resmen-sona-erdi-1062518872.html>.

³⁶⁴ Egyptian Artists Sound the Call to Boycott Turkish Soaps," *Hürriyet Daily News*, August 6, 2013, <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/egyptian-artists-sound-the-call-to-boycott-turkish-soaps-52158>.

of the “Egyptian street’s” rejection of Erdoğan’s stance and what they described as Turkey’s support for the Muslim Brotherhood.³⁶⁵ As a result, some broadcasters temporarily suspended Turkish content, illustrating how geopolitical disagreements were quickly translated into pressures on transnational cultural flows.

What was already a geopolitical concern regarding Turkey’s soft power in 2013 re-emerged as an even greater threat with the production and exportation of Ottoman-themed TV series to Egypt in the late 2010s. The global success of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul*, which was created to counter the narratives of the *Magnificent Century* with a big enthusiasm in Turkey, faced a strong criticism in Egypt. Seemingly, following the exportation of *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and other similar themed Turkish productions to the region drew the attention of the government and religious bodies. In 2020, the Global Fatwa Index, one of the Middle East’s oldest and most influential bodies responsible for issuing religious edicts made a statement on the show. In the edict, Turkish soap operas like *Ertuğrul* were accused of being a colonial campaign over former Ottoman domains and Muslim countries as follows:

*"They (Erdogan and his followers) export to the people and nations the idea that they are the leaders of the caliphate, responsible for supporting Muslims worldwide and being their salvation from oppression and injustice, while also seeking to implement Islamic law. They hide the fact that their main driver in these colonial campaigns is what Erdogan reaps from material and political gains."*³⁶⁶

Egypt’s case illustrates how the meaning attributed to Turkish television series is not fixed but contested and fluid, particularly in international contexts where historical narratives

³⁶⁵ Kraidy, “Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt-Turkey Row over Television Drama,” 150.

³⁶⁶ Middle East Monitor, “Egypt fatwa bans Ertugrul, Turkish soaps,” (2020) Available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200212-egypt-fatwa-bans-ertugrul-turkish-soaps/>.

are politically charged. Whereas the Saudi ban was largely understood as an extension of contemporary diplomatic tensions, relatively detached from the actual content of the shows, the reactions emerging from Egypt, most notably through the Global Fatwa Index, reframed the debate by foregrounding the nationalistic and historical narratives promoted by Turkish productions. This shift introduced a colonial register into the discussion, demonstrating how the same cultural texts can be reinterpreted through different political and historical lenses across the region. Nevertheless, in both cases, especially with Egypt, the situation has been interpreted as an “economic reasoning under seemingly political and ideological one” by the distributors from Turkey and buyers from the region,³⁶⁷ signaling the region’s vision for a stronger local media industry.

According to the participants’ observations and the research on the issue, Egypt used to be the pioneering force in the soap opera production and circulation in the Middle East in the early 2000s. Subject to debate, the reasons for the decline of the Egyptian drama in the region were mostly stated as the centralized control of TV production which made the only available dramas as the ones that gained the regime’s approval. This change occurred after the government change in 2013 which saw the democratic margin provided by Mubarek was the main catalyst for the revolution.³⁶⁸ As Egyptian series lost visibility across regional markets, Turkish producers increasingly filled this space with high-production-value content offered at comparatively competitive prices. At the same time, Turkey’s growing dominance, especially through the rise of Ottoman-themed series, was perceived by some Egyptian commentators and institutions as a challenge to domestic cultural industries, prompting responses that can be read as efforts to protect the national television sector.

³⁶⁷ Interviewee L, distributor; Interviewee P, buyer

³⁶⁸ Abdalla F. Hassan, *Media, Revolution and Politics in Egypt: The Story of an Uprising* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), 103–108.

Simultaneously with these developments, MENA's regional production and consumption dynamics underwent significant transformation, not only in Egypt or Turkey, but also in the Gulf where cinema and cultural production increasingly emerged as strategic sectors for growth. In retrospect, the producers' tendency to interpret political controversy as a potential opportunity for market reconfiguration appears consistent with these broader regional shifts. Under Vision 2030, the Saudi state launched an ambitious strategy to diversify its economy beyond oil, explicitly including "promoting culture and entertainment" among its core objectives.³⁶⁹ As a result, cultural and creative industries (CCI) have become central: public and private investment flows into creative infrastructure - museums, theaters, cinemas, event venues, creative hubs - have increased dramatically.³⁷⁰ A key institution in this transformation is Ithra: since 2018, Ithra (King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture) has operated as a multipurpose cultural hub; combining cinema, theater, library, exhibitions, children's museum, and incubator -like "Idea Lab" spaces to foster local artistic and creative production.³⁷¹ Through Ithra, the Kingdom has not only expanded opportunities for local cultural production and public consumption but also started building a national creative economy with tangible economic output: between 2019 and 2023, the Saudi film and cinema sector alone reported over 126 million USD in non-oil revenues.³⁷²

This emerging infrastructure and industry arguably challenge the existing regional order in audio-visual production and circulation. While historically Egypt, then Turkey, shaped much of the Middle Eastern television market, Saudi Arabia is actively constructing a new cultural ecosystem. During my fieldwork, cultural sector workers from Saudi Arabia frequently

³⁶⁹ Ithra, *Charting the Transformation: Culture and Creativity in Saudi Arabia*, 2022, https://www.ithra.com/files/2216/6186/1276/ITHRA_CHARTING_THE_TRANSFORMATION_EN_W ebsite_compressed.pdf.

³⁷⁰ Basmah Albasrawi, "Saudi Arabia's cultural sector enters new era of growth," *Arab News*, 15 November 2025.

³⁷¹ Ithra, *Charting the Transformation: Culture and Creativity in Saudi Arabia*, 2022, https://www.ithra.com/files/2216/6186/1276/ITHRA_CHARTING_THE_TRANSFORMATION_EN_W ebsite_compressed.pdf.

³⁷² The Vision Program Realization Office, *A Story of Transformation 2023*, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2023.

described their engagement with national-level strategies and cross-regional collaborations, often framing their work as part of a broader, state-led cultural transformation whose strategic dimensions were not always publicly articulated. Rather than operating solely as a domestic cultural policy, this process points to the gradual reconfiguration of cultural production and circulation as an instrument of regional influence.- Since 2022, there have been grassroots initiatives and think tanks such as *Kingdom Creatives*,³⁷³ founded by Brandie Janow, to bring the cultural workers together and to strengthen the creative economies, further embedding this transformation within transnational professional networks.

These developments in the region suggest that cultural and creative industries have been transformed into strategic spaces where economic ambitions and political projects intersect. While cultural production is increasingly framed as an engine of economic diversification, it remains closely shaped by ideological concerns and shifting geopolitical relations. As a result, the circulation of cultural content is neither stable nor purely market-driven, but contingent, negotiated, and sensitive to broader regional dynamics. Within this dynamic transformation, the cultural industry workers play a significant role, no matter if they work under authoritarian rules. Currently, this configuration underscores the limits of state-centered explanations, inviting a more holistic understanding of cultural and creative industries; not as simple extensions of ideology, but as fields shaped by economic rationalities, political constraints, and the strategic agency of industry actors. This dynamic becomes particularly visible in the counter-productions from the region where Turkey's historical imaginary through soap operas has been contested with another TV series.

³⁷³ Kingdom Creatives, "About," Kingdom Creatives, <https://kingdomcreatives.io/about/>

1.4. Rewriting the Past: *Kingdoms of Fire* and the Counter Productions in International Relations

The pushback against Turkish soap operas, especially those with militaristic Ottoman themes, was not limited to bans or fatwas; it also materialized through counter-productions within the region. Accusing Turkey of presenting a distorted interpretation of Ottoman history, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Egypt produced *Kingdoms of Fire* in 2019. This show was aired following the Saudi Arabia's ban, and as a direct challenge to the growing popularity of Turkish dramas and their cultural influence and Turkey's one-sided history projection in the region.³⁷⁴ This move demonstrates how television becomes a contested arena in which competing geopolitical imaginaries are articulated, a dynamic well recognized in International Relations scholarship.³⁷⁵ Operating within a field of contested historical meaning, this response transformed transnational television production into a narrative struggle instead of traditional diplomacy means, adding another layer to the involvement of cultural producers in diplomatic and geopolitical contestations. What is crucial here is that such counter-productions reveal that transnational television dramas cannot be understood merely as market-driven cultural goods; rather, they operate within broader struggles over meaning, memory, and political influence.

Seen from this perspective, Turkish television series, especially those within the nationalistic and militaristic genre that circulate beyond national borders, cannot be reduced to commercial products alone. Nor do productions such as *Kingdoms of Fire* operate solely within the logic of entertainment markets. The messages encoded through representation in these series are decoded by audiences with different cognitive frameworks shaped by distinct

³⁷⁴ Semih Idiz, "Turkish-Saudi Animosity Spills Over into Cultural Sphere," *Al-Monitor*, November 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/turkey-saudi-arabia-animosity-spills-over-cultural-sphere.html>; Michael Arnold, "Egyptian Declaration Against Turkish Historical Dramas Fits a Regional Push," *TRT World Research Centre*, 2020, <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/analysis/egyptian-declaration-against-turkish-historical-dramas-fits-a-regional-push/>.

³⁷⁵ Bleiker, "The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory," 509–33; Grayson, Davies, and Philpott, "Pop Goes IR?," 155–63.

understandings of history, identity, and the world. In this process, the series contributes to how diverse audiences imagine themselves and their “Others,” thereby generating political incentives to reinterpret or counter Turkey’s increasingly globalized historical narratives. In this sense, serialized narratives provide everyday viewers with affective and aesthetic entry points into world politics.³⁷⁶ Simultaneously, they also mobilize those involved in their production such as writers, directors, actors, and industry professionals, to participate in international politics through the representational choices they make and the meanings they generate in their routine creative work.

Kingdoms of Fire exemplifies how large-scale television production in the MENA region has become a strategic site where cultural ambition, geopolitical rivalry, and historical narration intersect. The series was produced by UAE-based Genomedia Studios and broadcasted on the channels of the Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC). The series is considered to be the largest historical drama production in the Arab world in decades. The series reportedly cost Genomedia approximately USD 40 million to produce, making it the most expensive drama production in the MENA region, particularly significant given Egypt’s declining influence in the sector over the past decade.³⁷⁷ The series was directed by the famous British director Peter Webber, who formerly directed the movies like *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (2003) and *Hannibal Rising* (2007).³⁷⁸ Given the vacuum in the regional production sector, the fact that the series produced to counter Turkey’s historical narrative became the largest production in decades is telling. It illustrates how the creation of popular cultural artefacts is deeply embedded in political agendas and geopolitical contests. Cultural production here did

³⁷⁶ Saunders, “Small Screen IR: A Tentative Typology of Geopolitical Television.” 691–727.

³⁷⁷ Ahmed Megahid, “TV Drama Challenges Historical Narrative of Ottoman Conquest in the Arab World,” *The Arab Weekly*, November 10, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/tv-drama-challenges-historical-narrative-ottoman-conquest-arab-world>

³⁷⁸ “MBC airs new drama series *Kingdoms of Fire* based on Ottoman empire,” *BroadcastPro Middle East*, 2019, <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/mbc-airs-new-drama-series-kingdoms-of-fire-based-on-ottoman-empire/>.

not emerge only as a response to market demand; but it became a strategic tool through which states seek to assert influence, contest narratives, and reconfigure regional imaginaries.

The show focuses on the final years of the Mamluk Sultanate and its confrontation with the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Selim I, portraying the Ottomans as aggressive imperial actors and the Mamluks as defenders of Arab autonomy. This framing directly challenges the heroic Ottoman narratives popularized in Turkish productions such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* and *Establishment: Osman*, which portray the Empire as just and benevolent toward the diverse nationalities and minorities under its rule. The cast is led by prominent Egyptian actor Khaled El-Nabawy as Tuman Bay II, alongside Mamdouh Tamam, Rashid Assaf, and Muna Wassef, whose performances anchor the series' nationalistic and anti-Ottoman tone.³⁷⁹ Rather than stabilizing a single version of the past, *Kingdoms of Fire* exposes the instability of historical meaning in a region where televised narratives are reworked in response to shifting political alignments. In doing so, the series foregrounds not the power of history itself, but the conditions under which history becomes mobilizable through popular culture.

The production of this series offered a significant entry point for examining the geopolitics of cultural production in a non-Western context, particularly through the everyday practices and decision-making processes of cultural producers whose involvement in international politics often remains informal and indirect. At the same time, the research process itself revealed important methodological constraints. Despite repeated attempts, I was unable to secure interviews with members of the production team for this project. This absence is not merely a limitation of access but also reflects the political sensitivity and opacity that frequently surround large-scale cultural productions embedded in geopolitical contestations. While interviews given by the show's producers to various media outlets offer some insight

³⁷⁹ MBC airs new drama series 'Kingdoms of Fire' based on Ottoman Empire," *BroadcastPro Middle East*, November 2019, <https://www.broadcastpromem.com/news/mbc-airs-new-drama-series-kingdoms-of-fire-based-on-ottoman-empire/>.

into how the series was framed and publicly justified, these accounts remain necessarily partial and strategic. As media-facing narratives, they tend to foreground official rationales, promotional language, and retrospective coherence, while leaving aside internal contestations, ambivalences, and informal negotiations that often shape cultural production practices. Acknowledging these limitations is therefore necessary to avoid overstating the extent of access to producers' lived experiences, while still allowing these mediated articulations to be treated as analytically meaningful within broader geopolitical and cultural discourses.

For example, the creator of the show, Mohamed Soliman Abdul Malek spoke to *The Arab Weekly*, and said that *"Young Arabs get their knowledge from drama works, not from books...This is why we have to utilize this media and not let one party present its own view though it uncontested."*³⁸⁰ An Egyptian TV and cinema critic Tarek al-Shenawi also makes a similar comment about the series: *"This type of drama is very important because it gives young viewers a chance to know history."* While the intention to teach the younger generation about their own view of the history resembles the Turkish producers' motivation to introduce Turkish heroes to young Turkish audience, the approach in this Arab series also highlights a conscious engagement with contested historical narratives. Especially Abdul Malek's comment underscores a recognition of the formative power of popular media and the potential for it to shape collective memory. Unlike purely educational initiatives, drama allows for an emotional and narrative-driven connection to history, which can be particularly effective in reaching audiences who might not engage with formal historical texts.

The series eventually couldn't reach the success of Turkish historical productions in the region; however, they managed to get the message across. After being created with such ambitions, the series stayed on air only for one season with 14 episodes. The series received

³⁸⁰ "TV Drama Challenges Historical Narrative of Ottoman Conquest in the Arab World," *The Arab Weekly*, November 10, 2019, <https://the arabweekly.com/tv-drama-challenges-historical-narrative-ottoman-conquest-arab-world>

5.3 points on IMDb, receiving a diverse set of comments from the audience regarding its historical accuracy.³⁸¹ Nevertheless, the series made it to the newspapers and news channels of Turkey,³⁸² widely interpreted as a politically motivated, anti-Ottoman counter-narrative produced by UAE and Egypt to challenge Turkey's growing cultural influence in the region.

When Turkish producers were asked about the series, most reported that they had not watched it, while generally framing such counter-productions as a predictable reaction among regional rivals contesting historical interpretation. Their reactions conveyed no sense of concern or competition; instead, they consistently expressed confidence in the quality, popularity, and narrative strength of Turkish productions, which they regarded as remaining largely unmatched in the region.³⁸³ What proved more revealing in these conversations, however, was not their assessment of *Kingdoms of Fire* itself, but the comparative examples they mobilized to make sense of it. Several distributors repeatedly invoked Israel as a contrasting case. Despite Turkey's self-positioning as a political advocate for Palestine and a leader within the Muslim world, they noted that the trade in television series between Turkey and Israel has continued uninterrupted. Their comparison underscores a broader dynamic: while historical dramas may become focal points of symbolic and geopolitical confrontation, cultural circulation in the region is not governed solely by ideological alignment or diplomatic positioning. It is also sustained by commercial logics that can, at times, override geopolitical

³⁸¹ *Kingdoms of Fire*, TV series, created by Muhammed Soliman Abdul Malek, 2019– (series), IMDb, accessed January 6, 2026, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10198930/>

³⁸² “Ateş Krallıkları: Tartışma yaratan Osmanlı karşıtı ve 40 milyon dolar bütçeli Arap dizisi” (*Kingdoms of Fire: The Controversial Anti-Ottoman Arab Series with a \$40 Million Budget*), *BBC News Türkçe*, November 22, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-dunya-50511571>; “Araplardan tartışmalı Osmanlı dizisi *Ateş Krallıkları*” (*Controversial Ottoman-Era Series Kingdoms of Fire from Arab Producers*), *NTV*, https://www.ntv.com.tr/galeri/yasam/araplardan-tartismali-osmanli-dizisi-ates-kralliklari-JdRtJgO_lkGNvUHjO43DyA; “Osmanlı'yı anlatan 40 milyon dolarlık *Ateş Krallıkları* dizisi: Propaganda mı, tarihi gerçeklik mi?” (*The \$40 Million Kingdoms of Fire Series on the Ottomans: Propaganda or Historical Reality?*), *Euronews Türkçe*, December 2, 2019, <https://tr.euronews.com/2019/12/02/osmanliyi-anlatan-40-milyon-dolarlik-ates-kralliklar-dizisi-propaganda-m-tarihi-gerceklik-m>.

³⁸³ Interviewee K, distributor; Interviewee J, producer; Interviewee C, art director

tensions - an observation that resonates with regional buyers' insider accounts emphasizing the economic dimensions of the ban.

What remains ambiguous in this story is the question of timing and sequencing: whether the institutional and infrastructural expansion of the region's cultural sector was already underway prior to the ban on certain foreign content, or whether this crisis itself opened a strategic window for accelerating cultural production including politically charged content. In a context where state power and political involvement shape television production across the Middle East, this ambiguity raises a further question about agency: how did producers themselves navigate moments of international political crisis, and how did they position their work, collaborations, and professional identities amid shifting geopolitical tensions? Addressing these questions requires turning to the perspectives of sector professionals, whose accounts illuminate how cultural production is negotiated at the intersection of state ambitions, market logics, and individual strategic choices.

2.1. Working in the Shadow of Politics: Micro-Practices in the Sector

Cultural workers in the MENA region, especially the Gulf countries, and their everyday professional practices constituted an important component of this research, as they are indispensable agents in the circulation of Turkish television dramas. Despite I could not reach out to the producers of the *Kingdom's of Fire*, I had the chance to talk to people who are in the decision-maker roles in the industry regarding purchasing TV content. They were all experienced in their jobs, working for at least twenty years in the industry; and they all had have worked with Turkish content. Their self-reflexive accounts are therefore crucial for understanding how popular culture artefacts are internalized, negotiated, and reproduced, as well as the processes through which meaning is rearticulated across contexts. Due to many producers and buyers in the region declining to participate, this section necessarily draws a

more limited set of interviews than those conducted in Turkey. This unevenness of access is not merely a methodological limitation, but also indicative of the political sensitivities that surround cultural production and circulation in the region.

Nevertheless, the narratives of those who did take part offer valuable insights into how media professionals navigate political constraints, exercise agency through micro-level practices, and manage the everyday politics embedded in their work. Their accounts portray an industry that is neither fully autonomous nor entirely constrained, but one that operates in the interstices of state authority, audience expectations, and regional market pressures even in the highly authoritarian contexts.

What does it mean, then, to be a producer or buyer in the Middle Eastern television market? To address this question, it is first necessary to explain why I conceptualize buyers, those occupying positions that determine which products enter national markets and broadcast to Arab audiences, as cultural producers in their own right. What came out of the long conversations is that these professionals situate themselves not merely as cultural intermediaries or simply content buyers, but as actors whose work requires a high degree of sociological awareness of local cultural norms.³⁸⁴ Much like those directly involved in television production, they must continuously negotiate regime requirements, audience sensibilities, and market imperatives.

Interviewees describe their professional practices as being shaped by the sociology of television consumption in the region, where extended families often watch television collectively, melodrama remains a dominant genre, and audience loyalty to specific formats carries significant commercial value. Buyers therefore make evaluative decisions not only about which products are most compatible with audiences, but also about the limits within which foreign cultural values can be introduced into local contexts. These acts of selection and

³⁸⁴ Interviewee N, buyer from the region; Interviewee P, buyer from the region

negotiation position them as key agents in the reproduction and re-signification of television texts. Their role extends beyond the decision of what to purchase to include choices related to language, dubbing, and localization, the practices that actively shape how a program is received, and embedded within everyday cultural life.

These conversations also point to the ways in which long-standing professional networks intersect but are not necessarily dependent on formal diplomatic initiatives. A senior interviewee emphasized that their relationships with Turkish vendors were established well before recent efforts by Turkish embassies to facilitate industry connections, in some cases extending back decades through sustained professional exchange.³⁸⁵ Read in this way, such accounts suggest that cultural circulation in the region is often structured through accumulated trust and sector-specific familiarity, rather than being primarily driven by state-led cultural diplomacy.

The institutional structures within which these professionals operate significantly condition the scope of these professionals' agency, particularly in mediating between state power and societal expectations. One of the most important pieces of information to know about the media sector of the region is the importance of Ramadan. This month, known as a festive period for Muslims when they practice their religion with fasting, praying and donating to those in-need, is the liveliest month of the year for the TV sector in MENA.³⁸⁶ The sector workers usually prepare the rest of the months to bring something new and good to the audience's screens, so that they can enjoy it during this month with their family.³⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the scale and thematic scope of Ramadan television production in the Gulf are closely linked to changes in oil prices, as both advertising revenues and state-supported media investments

³⁸⁵ Interviewee O, regional buyer

³⁸⁶ Berg, *Turkish Drama Serials: The Importance and Influence of a Globally Popular TV Phenomenon*, 26; Kraidy, "Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool: Geopolitics and Media Industries in the Egypt–Turkey Row over Television Drama," 153.

³⁸⁷ Interviewee P, buyer

continue to rely heavily on hydrocarbon-based public spending. As some industry interlocutors noted, a strong start to the year in oil markets is commonly read as a signal of a lively Ramadan television season, shaping expectations not only for that period but for the broader annual programming cycle.³⁸⁸ This also highlights how shifting economic conditions are directly tied to the scale of cultural production.

Additionally, especially countries like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, the regime's cultural and religious restrictions in addition to cultural sensitivities mainly draw the frame for the possible purchases in the TV sector each year. There are some red lines when it comes to TV content, such as sexually explicit content, LGBTQI characters in the shows; alcohol and drug usage and anti-regime or anti-religion statements are absolutely not accepted.³⁸⁹ One of the participants summarizes what their idea for the content they acquire for the traditional TV as *"We want the dad and the daughter to be sitting on the sofa together and for nobody to be cringing when something appears on screen, that's the main objective."*³⁹⁰ However, at the same time, the decision-makers in the sector would also like to put the audience in conversation with different channels, where they can open up to the world, especially since it has been the trend in the Saudi Arabian political landscape. The same interviewee shared that there are certain channels dedicated to this vision, and there the producers *"want to open up your possibilities. We want to let you (especially women) imagine the possibilities and then we want to guide you towards being able to fulfill to become the best version of yourself."* This strategy signals an effort to operate within regime-centered boundaries while simultaneously identifying "wiggle room" that allows for aspirational narratives and subtle forms of social imagination. Similar to the role played by Turkish television dramas in articulating a modern

³⁸⁸ Interviewee L, distributor

³⁸⁹ Interviewee P, buyer.

³⁹⁰ Interviewee P, buyer.

Muslim imaginary, such content enables audiences to envision alternative futures without directly challenging prevailing moral or political constraints.

Taken together, these statements highlight the agency exercised by media professionals who, despite functioning within authoritarian structures, actively negotiate regulatory and cultural limitations. In this context, Turkish television series have emerged as a particularly suitable fit for the region's media environment. Since the 2010s, Turkish broadcast television has been shaped by regulatory frameworks and moral sensibilities that closely resemble those prevailing in the Gulf, facilitating the circulation of Turkish dramas by aligning them with expectations of family-oriented and morally acceptable content.

2.2. Negotiating a Diplomatic Crisis Through Everyday Practices

The overwhelming popularity of Turkish television dramas among audiences in the MENA region, combined with authoritarian state decisions, most notably the Saudi-led ban on Turkish content, placed media professionals in a profound structural dilemma. As several interviewees emphasized, Turkish series had filled a vacuum in the region after the fall of Egyptian TV dramas and had become an indispensable component of regional programming schedules and revenue models. Nevertheless, at the same time, top-down political decisions such as the Turkish soap opera ban that came into force in 2018 rendered their circulation increasingly risky. This tension pushed television professionals in the region, sometimes in cooperation with Turkish producers, into a position where they had to negotiate, on a daily basis, between authoritarian constraints and audience demand, two forces that were often directly at odds.

While “the call” from a state authority that tells the TV professional to put away all the Turkish TV content acquired, the discourses of the interviewees consistently highlighted this decision and the process came after it as something that could be managed, worked around,

or softened through professional tactics rather than interpreting it as a fixed and absolute prohibition. These accounts constitute what can be read as their cultural self-portraits and how they usually see their power in these structures. The media workers present themselves as pragmatic cultural producers who operate in the grey zones of regulation instead of being passive recipients of state power, as the commercial necessities also constitute a push force for a negotiation and contestation of such decisions. Their narratives reveal a form of everyday politics, enacted not through overt resistance, but through routine decisions about distribution, financing, and production.

As the beginning of the ban on 2018 constituted a big crisis in the sector knowing how much the Turkish TV shows were integrated into the weekly schedules of the region's TV channels, the professionals stated that it became a very big work stress for them. This decision was huge in the time's sectoral conditions, came into force very suddenly before the channels prepare an alternative, and due to the political nature of Saudi Arabia, it was non-negotiable. Nevertheless, the sector workers work around some strategies to fulfill the needs of an authoritarian decision and commercial imperatives. When asked about the what was their first week like after they learned the ban, one of the most frequently mentioned strategies involved relocating Turkish content from free-to-air television to subscription-based platforms. As one sector professional explained:

“So, what happened is there's a lot of hiding behind your finger in the Arab world. The first thing we did was take them off all our screens, and then we kept them behind the pay window. On Shahid, you have content that is available for free and content that is available if

*you subscribe to it. So, we put the Turkish behind subscription, so it was not available for you for free anywhere on TV.”*³⁹¹

This practice allowed broadcasters to demonstrate formal compliance with state directives while continuing to capitalize on the strong demand for Turkish dramas. By placing content behind paywalls, professionals reduced their public visibility without fully eliminating its circulation. This tactic exemplifies how authoritarian decisions are often negotiated through informal practices that blur the line between obedience and circumvention. In everyday terms, professionals frame this not as resistance, but as a necessary economic adjustment, one that protected revenue streams while minimizing political exposure.

The ban affected not only the already purchased content, but also the new agreements with the Turkish producers so that the near future of the TV sector was not very safe. Suddenly the content that fits the region’s cultural sensitivities and taste the most was gone, in a time where the Arab production was still not as strong as Turkey’s production capacities. Therefore, a second strategy involved the use of intermediary countries and firms to sustain commercial ties with Turkish distributors. This practice became particularly salient in Egypt, where interviewees described how political alignment with Saudi Arabia did direct business with Turkish companies increasingly difficult. As one Turkish distributor recalled:

*“Since Egypt is following Saudi and mostly doing what they are doing in terms of foreign politics, they also had the issue of doing business directly with the Turkish companies. I remember we had to find a company in between from some neutral country, and then we did business through that.”*³⁹²

³⁹¹ Interviewee P, buyer from the region

³⁹² Interviewee H, Distributor from Turkey

Such arrangements ensured that official documentation would not reveal direct transactions between Egyptian and Turkish firms, effectively insulating professionals from political scrutiny. This solution shows how foreign policy conflicts are translated into bureaucratic obstacles, which media workers then navigate through transnational networks. Here, solidarity does not take the form of ideological alignment, but of shared professional interests and mutual dependence across borders.

Finally, what turned out to be the most transformative response for the Arab TV sector to the ban involved shifting from the purchase of finished Turkish content to the acquisition of Turkish expertise and formats. As access to Turkish series became increasingly restricted, professionals in the region sought to replicate their narrative appeal and production quality through collaboration. This strategy entailed buying scripted and unscripted formats so that the regional sector could work on the production of the purchased idea. This came along with importing directors, scriptwriters, and technical crews from Turkey, as well as sending regional professionals to Turkey for training to get the know-how of the Turkish production sector.

A content buyer from Dubai described this process in detail as follows:

*“So, we’re like, OK, we cannot get Turkish drama. People love Turkish drama. The second-best thing to do is to get Turkish expertise and to get Turkish stories. I did Beirut (The Bride from Beirut, an adaptation of İstanbullu Gelin), which is the first experiment that we did on that. So, we went to our partners in Turkey, and we said, we want your directors, we want your crew, and we want the expertise that you bring to the production values. We want your script because you guys know how to write amazing scripts, and we will adapt it.”*³⁹³

³⁹³ Interviewee E, buyer from the region

This strategy produced content for the TV dramas that were officially categorized as “Arabic” while remaining deeply embedded in Turkish storytelling techniques. As such, it represents a form of negotiated cultural translation rather than straightforward substitution. Importantly, these practices also restructured economic relations and sectoral collaborations with Turkey, despite continued in a hidden manner for a while, shifting the flow of value from content purchase to knowledge transfer.

All these strategies described by the distributors and buyers from the region highlight a form of everyday politics in the media industries, where compliance and resistance are not opposite categories but overlapping practices. Rather than openly contesting state decisions, professionals reworked the material conditions of exchange, allowing transnational collaboration to persist in altered and less visible forms which makes their work inherently political in micro ways. In this sense, solidarity among media workers did not rest on ideological or political alignment, but on shared professional interests, mutual economic dependence, and a common commitment to sustaining production flows in an unstable political environment. These practices underscore the agency of cultural producers who, even under authoritarian and geopolitically charged conditions, actively reshape the circulation of media through pragmatic, transnational, and often invisible forms of negotiation.

The aftermath of the media relations between Turkey and the region was very different than before. While the purchase of ready-made content continued, there occurred a specific resistance towards the nationalist content provided by Turkey. This hesitation coincided with the broader political context in which the export of such content overlapped with the Turkish soap opera ban, rendering nationalist narratives especially sensitive. Nevertheless, such decisions do not really affect viewership of the Turkish content since they are available on digital platforms like Youtube, but it is rather a pressure on the economic side of the story since

it does not allow more purchase of the content. As several interviewees noted, large media companies and content buyers in the region are closely tied to state funding and oversight, which necessitates heightened caution when acquiring politically charged or nationally assertive content from abroad.³⁹⁴

At the same time, interviewees consistently emphasized that the ban produced unintended consequences for the regional television industry. Throughout the 2010s, Turkish dramas had dominated the market due to their affordability, high production values, and strong audience appeal. The sudden restriction on access to this content compelled regional producers to reassess their reliance on imports and invest more heavily in domestic production capacities. Reflecting on this transformation, one content buyer remarked:

*“The best thing that happened to Arabic drama is Turkish drama... Turkish drama is here to stay. It came; it was number one. Then it disappeared, and now it’s back. But it’s not back to where it was before, because then it had no competitor.”*³⁹⁵

These reflections suggest that authoritarian intervention, rather than erasing Turkish influence from the region, contributed to the emergence of a more competitive and self-confident Arabic drama sector. While Turkish series continue to enjoy significant popularity, their former dominance has been diluted by locally produced alternatives that draw on Turkish know-how while asserting regional cultural specificity. In this sense, the ban reshaped rather than severed transnational media relations, transforming Turkish influence from a position of market dominance into one of indirect inspiration and technical reference.

³⁹⁴ Interviewee R, buyer from the region.

³⁹⁵ Interviewee N, buyer from the region

Today, both the Turkish and Arab television sectors are undergoing significant transformation as rapid digitalization reshapes production, distribution, and circulation practices, even within authoritarian contexts. The expansion of streaming platforms has fundamentally altered the meaning of “local” production, reconfiguring professional aspirations and market orientations across the region. As one interviewee observed, for many emerging Arab producers, success is no longer defined by selling content to national or regional broadcasters such as MBC, Saudi TV, or Dubai TV. Instead, their primary ambition is to secure distribution deals with global streaming platforms such as Netflix or Amazon, thereby enabling their work to reach international audiences.³⁹⁶ This shift signals a profound change in professional mindset and industry logic. Whereas earlier production models were oriented toward state-backed or regionally dominant broadcasters, contemporary producers increasingly frame their careers in transnational terms, positioning global platforms as both economic and symbolic gateways to legitimacy. In this context, digital streaming not only disrupts existing power hierarchies within authoritarian media systems but also introduces new forms of dependency and negotiation, as local producers must now navigate the content standards, algorithmic visibility, and contractual regimes of global platforms alongside enduring state controls.

This part of the research shows that producers and buyers in the MENA region operate within a media landscape shaped simultaneously by political pressure, commercial imperatives, and audience expectations. Even amid diplomatic crises and shifting regional alliances, their daily work involves ongoing negotiation, improvisation, and strategic adaptation, practices that are neither fully constrained by the state nor entirely driven by the market. Taken together, these interview accounts demonstrate that even in highly authoritarian contexts, cultural

³⁹⁶ Interviewee N, buyer from the region

producers retain a degree of agency exercised through everyday professional practices. By deploying strategies such as paywalls, intermediary markets, and knowledge transfer, media workers negotiate the intersection of foreign policy, market logics, and audience demand. Their cultural self-portraits reveal an industry that does not merely transmit state ideology, but actively mediates it, embedding geopolitical tensions into the routine practices of television production and distribution.

Chapter Summary and Discussion

Turkey's political tensions with Egypt and Saudi Arabia underscore the extent to which cultural production operates as a practical arena of international politics. As Turkish television dramas circulate globally, positioning Turkey as one of the world's leading exporters of scripted television, the projection of national identity and historical narratives acquires a complex and unpredictable character. What travels across borders is not merely entertainment, but selective representations, imaginaries, and discourses that become open to reinterpretation and misrecognition beyond the control of domestic producers or policymakers. At the same time, the persistence of Turkish television dramas on digital media complicates the efficacy of media bans and government-led restrictions. Indeed, the persistence of media content via online streaming services challenges purported media control in the territory in the context of the digitally networked world in a globalizing context. This emphasizes the idea that circulation is actually a site of political contest in its own right.

From a political economy perspective, these dramas function simultaneously as sources of economic influence and points of vulnerability. Their commercial success grants them diplomatic visibility, yet this same visibility renders them particularly susceptible to disruption during periods of geopolitical tension, sanctions, or boycotts. Television exports thus reveal the dual nature of cultural industries as instruments of soft power and as fragile sites exposed to shifting international alignments. In this context, the chapter complicates dominant

approaches to soft power through its argument that cultural influences do not simply follow a linear progression from state-level initiatives, but are, instead, negotiated and often unintentional processes in association with non-state actors.

Crucially, this chapter has shown that cultural producers themselves occupy a central position within these transnational negotiations. Rather than acting solely as conduits of state ideology, producers, distributors, and buyers exercise dispersed forms of agency through everyday professional practices. Their narrative choices, distribution strategies, and adaptive “workarounds” mediate between state authority, market logics, and audience expectations, transforming distribution networks into infrastructures of power where meanings are continuously made and remade.

Although the lifting of the ban in 2021 following the normalization of diplomatic relations signaled a partial return to pre-crisis media exchanges, the episode demonstrates that television production remains a contested site in ongoing struggles over national image, historical interpretation, and regional influence. Drawing on insights from media anthropology, everyday international relations, and production studies, this chapter has argued that television is not merely a cultural industry but an everyday site where geopolitics is enacted in practice. The routines of producing, distributing, and adapting television dramas reveal how global politics becomes embedded in, and reshaped through, the mundane labor of cultural producers, particularly in contexts where television continues to play a central role in daily life. Overall, the findings of this chapter support the arguments of the larger project to date to emphasize that popular culture cannot be seen as a supplementary dimension of international politics but rather as a constitutive space in which power and authority are being constructed.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I aimed to examine how macro-level political and ideological structures of foreign policy and national identity are produced, negotiated, and transformed through the everyday practices of cultural production. I did so by analyzing changing on-screen representations of Turkishness in relation to shifts in Turkish foreign policy, and by tracing and reconstructing the (self-)portraits of cultural producers as central actors in production and circulation of popular culture. By foregrounding cultural producers as non-traditional actors in International Relations, the project shows how everyday practices of cultural production co-constitute foreign policy processes and become embedded in broader diplomatic relations beyond state-centric frameworks.

The 2010s marked an unprecedented period in Turkish foreign policy and the remaking of national identity, during which Turkey's long-standing aspiration for European Union membership appeared increasingly out of reach. As political tensions between the EU and Turkey intensified, the Turkish government began to reposition the country as a regional power, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). This repositioning was articulated through narratives that framed Turkey as a humanitarian leader and a protector of migrants from the region, as well as through claims of extensive humanitarian engagement. This turn toward the MENA region is often interpreted by scholars as a Neo-Ottoman foreign policy orientation. This foreign policy shift also manifested itself in the field of cultural production, especially on Turkish televisions.

During the 2010s, Turkish television dramas achieved remarkable international success, and following the neo-Ottomanist narratives of state official, the Turkish society witnessed the emergence of a distinct sub-sector of Ottoman-themed historical series. The reason for the rising number of Ottoman themed soap operas was in part a response to the global popularity of the *Magnificent Century* (2011–2014) and its portrayal of the Ottoman

history. As a response to this popularized narrative projected through the series, the Turkish government supported the production of other period series that are in line with the official narrative. Despite some of them were highly successful in Turkey, the broader geopolitical projection of these series into the MENA region was met with political resistance, complicating the idea of “soft power through Turkish soap operas”, most notably through broadcasting bans imposed by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. At the central motivation of this research there is this convergence of shifting foreign policy dynamics and television drama production in Turkey, which can help IR scholars unpack this dynamic. By focusing on the site of soap opera production, this project demonstrates how popular television dramas and foreign policy imaginaries increasingly co-constituted one another, revealing the entanglement of cultural industries with Turkey’s shifting international positioning in the years that followed. Into the 2020s, these dynamics increasingly placed cultural producers, such as actors, talent managers, screenwriters, and directors, at the forefront of political tensions, as their heightened public visibility conferred a new layer of political subjectivity. The March 2025 imprisonment of Ekrem İmamoğlu, among other developments in the past decade, exposed workers in the production sector to growing political pressures directly attributed to their political stance in such developments, serving to further underscore their expanded role within the nation’s contemporary political struggles.

Upon this framework, the project’s empirical focus is situated on the Ottoman-themed television series produced in Turkey spanning from 2011 through 2024, paying particular attention to three demonstrative cases. Included are the *Magnificent Century* (2011-2014), a globally successful period drama that ignited considerable political controversy in Turkey, and additionally *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* (2014-2019) and *Establishment: Osman* (2019-2025), both of which receiving significant government support in direct opposition to the portrayal of Turkish history in *The Magnificent Century*. Taken together, the series coincided with the onset

of neo-Ottoman foreign policy ambitions under Turkey's current government, as well as a significant global expansion of Turkish television dramas. These converging factors make this case a particularly productive landscape in which to examine how cultural production falls hand in hand with shifting geopolitical priorities.

Proximity to the government remains a primary lens through which the categorization and judgment of Turkish historical television production occur. Adopting this perspective, labelling productions such as *Resurrection: Ertuğrul* as a top-down project aligned to state narratives appears possible, with the *Magnificent Century* then appearing as a more resistant or marginal production in contrast to the contemporary government's preferred historical imagination. However, interpretations such as this runs a risk of oversimplification in regard to production processes in that key cultural texts are reduced only to their assumed political alignments. In reality, there is a great deal more complexity in production networks and dynamics, entailing multiple actors, constraints, and negotiations which cannot be captured in their entirety only through a binary distinction between content categorized as state-aligned and oppositional. Regardless of the formal or informal relationship a particular production enjoys with the state, a degree of maneuverability remains within the practices of everyday production, granting producers in the cultural sector a particular kind of power to shape these national narratives. Popular culture thus becomes a site where political imaginaries are not only articulated but also continuously negotiated and contested at the everyday level, through storytelling choices, characterizations, aesthetic decisions, and narrative emphases. This function of popular culture positions cultural producers as key but often underestimated agents in foreign policy. Their work enables them to participate in meaning-making practices that circulate rapidly and widely beyond national borders, that has direct or indirect effect on a country's international image, or diplomatic relations. Through their work, producers do not simply reproduce fixed narratives; rather, they mediate daily between state discourses, market

dynamics, and transnational audiences, adding another layer of complexity to how foreign policy meanings are culturally produced.

3 Frames of the Thesis

With a focus on Turkish Ottoman-themed television dramas, this dissertation aims to look at foreign policy - cultural production axis through three interrelated analytical frames. Across all three frames, cultural producers are treated as central analytical actors whose self-theorizations and professional practices are taken seriously as sites of knowledge production. The concept of “Frame” is borrowed from cinema and television and refers to the boundary of what is visible on screen at any given moment. Used metaphorically, each Frame functions as an analytical unit that deliberately foregrounds certain dimensions of cultural production while holding others temporarily in the background. In each frame, rather than treating texts, institutions, or the broader political projection of soap operas as autonomous domains, this dissertation brings these materials into sustained conversation with producers’ (Self-)portraits throughout the analysis. This conversation seeks to unpack what renders their work political and how producers position themselves in relation to the state, market dynamics, and their own individual motivations. At the same time, this dissertation adopts a reflexive stance that recognizes the researcher’s own interpretive labor as constitutive of the analytical process. As a researcher, I acknowledge that I am not external to the knowledge I produce but become part of the (self-)portraits of cultural producers that emerge through analysis through my positionality as a Turkish woman who studies at a Western institution.

The first analytical frame of the dissertation examined transformations in Turkish television as a representational field. It traced the on-screen portrayal of Turkish identity and international positioning, and how shifts in Turkey’s political landscape post-2011 reshaped these representations, production structures and audience measurement practices. With its focus on the selected Ottoman-themed series, the frame analyzed the key scenes, visuals, and

narratives to unravel how Turkishness is constructed in each production. Identity-construction via popular culture and its engagement with government agendas was demonstrated through reading these representational practices together with their producers' own reflections. The analytical focus of Frame II shifted to an in-depth investigation of the production sector to illuminate how meaning is produced through examination of power relations, everyday practices, and institutional structures of the Turkish television sector. Foregrounding producers' motivations, identity negotiations, and self-perceived positionality, as well as the sector's growing political entanglements, reveals in this frame how cultural producers actively take part in national identity-making within the increasingly politicized Turkish production environment. Frame II succeeds to bring producers beyond single-dimensional professional categories and interprets the multi-dimensionality of their self-portraits, allowing a convergence of interpretations of their work and personal motivations in a heterogeneous portrait of sector professionals. With Frame III, the focus pivots to the circulation of Turkey's television series beyond the nation's borders, and the geopolitical frictions which emerged as neo-Ottoman narratives expanded into the MENA region. Examination of the manner in which broadcasting bans between 2018 and 2021 were negotiated and circumvented by the sector workers in both Turkey and the MENA region, cultural producers are foregrounded in this frame as non-traditional actors in International Relations. It demonstrates that, despite political constraints, cultural production continued to co-constitute not only Turkey's foreign policy but also those of other countries, becoming an integral part of broader diplomatic relations.

In total, these three frames unpack the cultural production, negotiation, and contestation of foreign policy narratives across sites of popular culture and extend far beyond conventional diplomatic arenas. Instead of treating foreign policy as a domain confined to state institutions, the analysis rather demonstrates how television dramas operate as cultural infrastructures through which Turkey's international positioning is articulated, negotiated, and made legible

to diverse audiences. Furthermore, the analysis reveals a consequential yet indirect role of cultural producers as non-traditional foreign policy actors. Their everyday agency, exercised in basic decisions over political restrictions, representational strategizing, aesthetic choices, or storylines, these producers actively take part in the making, translation, and contestation of Turkey's foreign policy meanings. Crucially, it is this participation which highlights the manner in which the foreign policy is actively shaped through seemingly mundane cultural practices as much as through official statecraft.

This dissertation rethinks foreign policy by shifting attention away from narratives as representations in popular culture artefacts and instead towards the everyday practices, political-economic conditions, and power relations via which narratives are produced, circulated, and constrained. Here, cultural producers are foregrounded as active agents, bringing the everyday dimensions of foreign policy into analytical focus. The project does not analyze Turkish historical television dramas that put the nationalistic and militaristic themes at the forefront as top-down instruments of state discourse. Rather, it examines how foreign policy meanings are co-produced through the routine practices, creative decisions, and strategic negotiations of writers, directors, producers, and broadcasters operating within politically charged and commercially constrained environments. In doing so, the dissertation argues that, in addition to sovereign power that has the authority to regulate the broader TV and diplomacy landscape, there exists a different modality of power exercised by cultural producers. This form of power stems from cultural producers' innate capacity to reinterpret, negotiate, and occasionally contest their assigned tasks, even under conditions of top-down political pressure and restraint, rather than in some formal authority or decision-making control. This power resides in their agency over everyday choices such as narrative framing, character development, visual aesthetics, and decisions about what to emphasize, soften, or omit. Through these seemingly minor yet cumulative decisions, producers are able to carve out small

spaces of meaning-making, where they align, distance, or subtly rework foreign policy and national identity narratives in ways that reflect their ethical sensibilities, political awareness, and professional judgment. While not necessarily opposing state power, these forms of agency often operate in parallel with it, shaping the way foreign policy narratives are translated into cultural form.

This dissertation reconceptualizes concepts of foreign policy and national identity making as lived, practiced, and negotiated phenomena, rather than purely elite-driven abstraction, through situating the concepts within the mundane process of cultural production and circulation. International politics has become embedded in everyday media work through production of historical dramas, which have emerged as sites where foreign policy is enacted through ordinary and often invisible decisions spanning casting and script revisions to export negotiations and funding arrangements. Rather than strategic coherence, this focus exposes the creative agency and structural constraints faced by cultural producers operating through friction, improvisation, and compromise. This study contributes to a thicker understanding of foreign policy as a contested social practice through foregrounding these everyday forms of power – power shaped by the accumulated effects of routine decisions by a certain group of people not frequently brought into light by the IR discipline in the same volume as traditional state intentions.

This project's approach to foreign policy and cultural production expands concepts of power beyond solely sovereign institutions and formal authority. The concepts are instead dispersed across uneven relationships between state institutions, regulatory bodies, cultural producers, and market forces, all of whose agency operates through often informal decisions and routines as opposed to overt political acts. Producers exercise a distinct, non-sovereign form of power rooted in their capacity to translate, negotiate, delay, soften, or reframe political meanings within the constraints of censorship, commercial risk, and the opportunities/risks of

transnational circulation. This form of power complicates rather than displaces state power – it instead reveals the manner in which foreign policy is shaped through forms of authority which are multi-layered and sometimes contradictory. Additionally, it reveals that foreign policy and national identity making processes are neither unified nor stable, instead they are continuously assembled through everyday practices of cultural production and circulation. National identity and foreign policy imaginaries emerge not as coherent narratives imposed from above, but as fragmented and situational constructs shaped by production logics, audience expectations, export markets, and geopolitical sensitivities. The movement of historical dramas across borders recalibrates, contests, or mutes meanings, giving birth to multiple and sometimes conflicting articulations of the nation.

Contributions to International Relations

This dissertation's contributions to the International Relations literature are threefold.

Theoretically, this project contributes to the Popular Culture and World Politics literature, and more broadly to International Relations, by following the reconceptualizing foreign policy through the everyday practices of cultural production and by treating cultural producers as active agents of foreign policy, rather than as peripheral or derivative actors. Moving beyond elite discourse and formal decision-making, this dissertation does not claim to be the first to challenge state-centric approaches in International Relations, nor to introduce popular culture as a site of world politics. Indeed, critical traditions and the Popular Culture and World Politics literature have already demonstrated that popular culture constitutes an important arena in which political meanings, identities, and power relations are articulated and contested. Building on this body of work, the dissertation advances the discussion by shifting analytical attention from popular culture as text or representational outcome to the actors and practices through which popular culture is produced and circulated.

Rather than conceptualizing popular culture primarily as a medium through which foreign policy meanings are communicated or received, the study foregrounds cultural producers as active agents of foreign policy and national identity making. By examining their everyday work, embodied experiences, and multi-dimensional identities, the dissertation shows how foreign policy meanings are produced and negotiated within cultural industries, alongside and in interaction with formal political spaces. In doing so, it expands the analytical terrain of International Relations not by adding popular culture as a new object of study, but by re-centering production practices and cultural producers themselves as key sites and actors through which foreign policy is made meaningful in a transnational context.

Building on this shift, the dissertation advances a practice-oriented understanding of agency and power by foregrounding the non-sovereign forms of power exercised by cultural producers in their everyday work. While operating under political pressure and institutional constraints, producers are shown to hold a distinct form of agency rooted in their capacity to negotiate, reinterpret, and occasionally contest assigned tasks through routine decisions over narrative framing, character development, visual aesthetics, and what is emphasized, softened, or omitted. This research draws from Media and Production Studies, adapting the concept of cultural (self-)portraits in effort to analyze the producers' reflexive accounts as a form of self-theorization. This approach allows cultural producers to articulate their own understandings of power, identity, and constraint, while simultaneously positioning the researcher as co-producing theory with them. This dissertation's integration of the producers' self-reflections into the analytical framework reveals how foreign policy meanings are constructed through cultural labor, while also contributing a reflexive and relational mode of theorizing agency, bridging Media Studies and International Relations in the study of popular culture and world politics.

This dissertation recognizes the structural and contextual limits of its foregrounding of cultural producers as active agents of foreign policy. Their power should not be read as evidence of producers' control over foreign policy outcomes, as the producers' power examined here is deeply shaped by political and market constraints, is indirect, and deeply situation specific. The limitations of these analytical choices is not a shortcoming, but deliberate, aimed at the micro-political processes through which foreign policy meanings are negotiated within cultural production.

Methodologically, this dissertation creates a sustained analytical dialogue between on-screen discursive representations and producers' embodied experiences, all through the lenses of foreign policy and national identity. Rather than treating representations and production practices as separate analytical domains, the study approaches them as mutually constitutive, with producers' reflections, negotiations, and everyday experiences unfolding in direct relation to the narratives, images, and aesthetic choices they help to produce. Upon this design, the dissertation foregrounds cultural producers' everyday experiences; an actor group rarely examined in International Relations, as a central site of analysis, without reducing the methodological approach to producers alone. Access to the field and the methodological choices of study were shaped by the choice to conduct the research within Turkey's fragile political environment, one where cultural workers often occupy politically exposed and precarious positions within such government-adjacent cultural endeavors. The difficulty of eliciting open accounts, along with moments of silence, hesitation, and strategic ambiguity, became analytically significant rather than merely limiting. These constraints offered insight into producers' positionality, perceptions of risk, and practices of self-censorship, revealing how power operates not only through explicit expression but also through absence, restraint, and what remains unsaid on their accounts.

Analysis of the multi-dimensional identities through which agency is exercised was made possible by examining national identity remaking processes and foreign policy practices through the cultural producers' lens of their day-to-day work and their production. Here, producers emerge as multi-dimensional individuals acting as political subjects, citizens, and economic actors navigating the overlapping moral, material, and ideological pressures from above, as opposed to solely creative workers or administrative professionals. Interviews and observations reveal how the workers actively reinterpret, negotiate, and relate to their assigned tasks in ways shaped by ethical boundaries, personal histories, and political sensibilities, allowing producers to emerge as multi-dimensional individuals despite their limited control over the broader contours of their respective projects. This approach conceptualizes agency not as a binary of resistance or compliance, but as situated, relational, and embedded in everyday practices, contributing to broader debates on power and agency in International Relations.

The methodological contribution of the dissertation lies in creating space for cultural producers to theorize their own practices and positions, drawing on and adapting a concept from media and production studies. Production talk is treated in this dissertation as a unique form of cultural sense-making and situated self-ethnography and reads discursive narratives of the cultural producers as cultural (self)-portraits. This study analyzes how producers theorize their own labors, constraints, and institutional hierarchies through a coded language, reflexive commentary, and strategic silences, instead of simply treating their interviews as informal conversations and repositories of merely factual information. By foregrounding reflexivity as both a methodological resource and an object of analysis, the dissertation captures how power is embedded in everyday interpretive practices, offering a nuanced account of agency that operates through sense-making, negotiation, and ethical positioning rather than overt authorship or resistance.

Empirically, this dissertation contributes to the study of Turkish television dramas by examining Ottoman-themed soap operas as a critical site for understanding the expanding role of cultural production in foreign policy and national identity making. The study draws on the global trade successes and international visibility of Turkish soap operas, situating these productions within a highly globalized media environment where cultural products circulate transnationally and acquire political significance beyond national borders. The Turkish case thus offers an instructive empirical example of how cultural producers operate at the intersection of domestic politics, international markets, and foreign policy concerns, highlighting the indirect yet consequential role they play in shaping political meaning under conditions of global circulation.

Building on and extending existing scholarship on Ottoman-themed dramas, I shift the empirical focus from representational outcomes and soft power effects to the micropolitics of cultural production in this project. Earlier studies have paid little attention to production sites themselves, in which everyday negotiations over meaning making occur, instead analyzing these series as instruments of cultural diplomacy, domestic identity politics, or soft power. This dissertation addresses that gap by providing an empirical account of how cultural producers navigate political pressures, market demands, and personal commitments in their daily work. This study demonstrates how foreign policy and national identity narratives are not simply reflected on screen, but actively negotiated, mediated, and contested through cultural labor's daily routines, tracing how professional, personal, and national identities intersect within such practices.

The understanding of foreign policy has already been widened beyond formal diplomatic arenas through critical approaches in International Relations, including post-structuralist, feminist, and post-colonial scholarship. Building on this critical route, I argue that foreign policy is not confined to the corridors of ministries of foreign affairs, but also takes

shape on television sets, in production meetings, and in the informal conversations that occur during lunch breaks in studio cafeterias. Attending to these everyday spaces makes it possible to see how foreign policy meanings are negotiated through routine interactions and ordinary work practices, and how international politics becomes embedded in cultural production in ways that often remain invisible in more conventional IR accounts. What this study adds to these existing approaches is the systematic foregrounding of cultural producers as a distinct group of actors, alongside a methodological and analytical framework for examining cultural production in relation to foreign policy and national identity making.

This perspective is closely connected to the forms of power and agency examined throughout the dissertation. Even in contexts where state involvement is strong, such as sudden bans on particular television series or intensified regulatory pressure, foreign policy meanings are not simply imposed from above. Instead, these interventions are met with ongoing negotiations and adjustments within production processes, revealing how power operates through everyday practices rather than through complete control. While these forms of agency are limited and situated, they nonetheless point to the persistence of meaning-making practices even under highly constrained political conditions.

Looking to the future, this dissertation opens several pathways for further research in International Relations. Specifically, deeper engagements with sites of cultural production - perhaps through methods of extended ethnographic research - can allow for a fine-grained analysis of informal production and transnational media networks, and of the everyday interactions through which foreign policy imaginaries are produced, enacted, and contested. Approaching cultural production in this way allows scholars to conceptualize cultural producers, sector workers, and intermediaries as part of broader foreign policymaking assemblages, rather than as actors operating at the margins of international politics.

Such an approach would be particularly beneficial for considering regional political entanglements by tracing the ways in which cultural industries participate in the constitution of regional power dynamics. This is specifically relevant in contexts such as Turkey–MENA relations, where television industries, distribution networks, and audience reception are deeply embedded in wider geopolitical and economic processes. Continuing the threads established within this current dissertation’s exploration of the enactment, translation, and, indeed, resistance of foreign policy within everyday professional practice, future study could continue to hone this particular direction of inquiry by employing a broader spectrum of analyses into transnational production and distribution systems. In particular, closer attention to emerging trends related to digital platforms and distribution routes of these international platforms would help foreign policy scholars understand the broader dynamics in which sector players, such as producers, operate - dynamics that are still under-examined within the discipline.

In a broader sense, the field of International Relations may gain from alternative research perspectives that could be achieved through greater consideration of the cultural networks and ecologies of production. Comparative research, especially through the use of non-Western and transnational cases, would help to better understand the ways in which foreign policy is encountered by world politics and is, in turn, constantly reconstituted through cultural production.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ahmet Mithat Efendi. *Felâatun Bey and Râkım Efendi*. Istanbul: Turkey İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2018 [1875].

Akkoyunlu, Karabekir. 2021. “The Five Phases of Turkey’s Foreign Policy under the AKP.” *Social Research* 88 (2): 243–270. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2021.0014>.

Albasrawi, Basmah. “Saudi Arabia’s cultural sector enters new era of growth.” *Arab News*, November 15, 2025. https://www.arabnews.jp/en/business/article_159054/

Algan, Ece. 2020. “Tactics of the Industry Against the Strategies of the Government: The Transnationalization of Turkey’s Television Industry.” In *The Routledge Companion to Global Television*, edited by Shawn Shimpach, 445–448. New York: Routledge.

Algan, Ece, and Yeşim Kaptan. 2023. “Content Is Power: Cultural Engineering and Political Control over Transnational Television.” *International Communication Gazette* 85 (3–4): 325–344. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17480485231152879>.

Alpan, Başak. 2014. “‘Europe-as-Hegemony’ and Discourses in Turkey after 1999.” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2013.864184>.

Amzi-Erdogdular, Leyla. 2019. “Ottomania: Televised Histories and Otherness Revisited.” *Nationalities Papers* 47 (5): 879–893. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2018.83>.

Anaz, N., and C. C. Özcan. “Geography of Turkish soap operas: Tourism, soft power, and alternative narratives.” In *GeoJournal Library*, vol. 121. Cham: Springer, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-30542-8_7.

Aral, Berdal. 2019. “‘The World Is Bigger than Five’: A Manifesto of Turkey’s New International Outlook.” *Insight Turkey* 21 (4): 71–95. <https://doi.org/10.25253/99.2019214.05>.

Aras, Bülent, and Pınar Akpınar. “The role of humanitarian NGOs in Turkey’s peacebuilding.” *International Peacekeeping* 22, no. 3 (2015): 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2015.1033374>.

Arnold, Michael. “Egyptian declaration against Turkish historical dramas fits a regional push.” *TRT World Research Centre*, 2020. <https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/publications/analysis/egyptian-declaration-against-turkish-historical-dramas-fits-a-regional-push/>.

Arslan, Rengin. 2012. “Muhteşem Yüzyıl Erdoğan’ın Tepkisiyle Gündemde.” *BBC Türkçe*, November 27. http://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler/2012/11/121126_magnificent_century.

Aydın-Düzgit, Senem. “Critical Discourse Analysis in Analysing European Union Foreign Policy: Prospects and Challenges.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 49, no. 3 (2014): 356–57. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836714532983>.

Aydıntaşbaş, Aslı. 2025. “Empowered Abroad, Erdoğan Arrests His Top Domestic Rival.” *Brookings Institution*, April 3. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/empowered-abroad-erdogan-arrests-his-top-domestic-rival/>.

Aytaç, Ayşe İpek, Mehmet Üner, and Elif Esiyok. 2024. “Internationalization of Turkish TV Soap Operas.” *Rutgers Business Review* 9 (2): 240–251.

Bakir, Ali. 2023. “Turkey’s Security Role in the Gulf Region.” *Turkish Studies* 24 (5): 809–831. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2023.2182686>.

Banks, Miranda J. 2007. *The Politics of Cultural Work*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Basaran, Tugba, Didier Bigo, Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet, and R. B. J. Walker, eds. 2017. *International Political Sociology: Transversal Lines*. London: Routledge.

Başkan, Birol. "Turkey between Qatar and Saudi Arabia: Changing regional and bilateral relations." *Uluslararası İlişkiler* 16, no. 62 (2019): 85–99. <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.588947>.

Bayülgen, Okan. 2022. "Beni Cumhurbaşkanına Şikayet Ettiler." *Independent Türkçe*, October 16. <https://www.indyturk.com>.

Berit Bliesemann de Guevara and Birgit Poopuu, "Preparing for Fieldwork Interviews," in *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty and Birte Vogel (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021), 72, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46433-2_5.

Berg, Miriam. 2017. "Turkish Drama Serials as a Tool for Soft Power." *Participant Journal* 14 (2).

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

Bhutto, Fatima. "How Turkish TV is taking over the world." *The Guardian*, September 13, 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/sep/13/turkish-tv-magnificent-century-dizi-taking-over-world>.

Bigo, Didier, and R. B. J. Walker. 2007. *International Political Sociology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Bjola, Corneliu, Jennifer Cassidy, and Ilan Manor. "Public diplomacy in the digital age." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14, no. 1-2 (2019): 83-101. <https://doi.org/10.1163/1871191X-14011032>

Bleiker, Roland. "The aesthetic turn in international political theory." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 30, no. 3 (2001): 509–533. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298010300031001>

———. *Visual global politics*. London: Routledge, 2018.

———, and Constance Duncombe. "Popular culture and popular identity." In *Popular culture and world politics: Theories, methods, pedagogies*, edited by Federica Caso and Caitlin Hamilton. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 2015.

Bliesemann de Guevara, Berit, and Birgit Poopuu. "Preparing for Fieldwork Interviews." In *The Companion to Peace and Conflict Fieldwork*, edited by Roger Mac Ginty, Roddy Brett, and Birte Vogel, 65–83. Cham, Switzerland: Springer/Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

Björkdahl, Annika, Martin Hall, and Ted Svensson. 2019. "Everyday International Relations." *Cooperation and Conflict*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836719845834>.

Buzan, Barry, Ole Wæver, and Jaap de Wilde. 1998. *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers

Caldwell, John Thornton. 2008. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Campbell, David. 1999. *Writing Security*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Carney, Josh. "Resur(e)Recting a Spectacular Hero: Diriliş Ertuğrul, Necropolitics, and Popular Culture in Turkey." *Review of Middle East Studies* 52, no. 1 (2018): 93–114. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rms.2018.6>.

———. 2019. "ResurReaction: Competing Visions of Turkey's (Proto) Ottoman Past in *Magnificent Century* and *Resurrection Ertuğrul*." *Middle East Critique* 28 (2): 101–20. doi:10.1080/19436149.2019.1599534.

Clarke, David. "Theorising the role of cultural products in cultural diplomacy from a cultural studies perspective." *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 22, no. 2 (2016): 147–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286632.2014.958481>

Closs Stephens, Angharad. 2022. *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Codell, Julie F. "Introduction: Political economy and the nation of culture." In *The political economy of art: Making the nation of culture*. Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008.

Cohn, Carol. 1987. "Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (4): 687–718. 687. 10.1086/494362.

Crilley, Rhys. "Where we at? New directions for research on popular culture and world politics." *International Studies Review* 23, no. 1 (2021): 164–180. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isr/viaa027>.

Çevik, B. Senem. 2014. "Turkish Soap Opera Diplomacy: A Western Projection by a Muslim Source." *Exchange: The Journal of Public Diplomacy* 5, no. 1 (2014). <https://surface.syr.edu/exchange/vol5/iss1/6/>

Daigle, Megan. 2015. *From Cuba with Love*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Davies, Matt. 2006. "You Can't Charge Innocent People for Saving the World: Buffy the Vampire Slayer and the Politics of World Order." *International Political Sociology*. 34 (2): 449–473. 10.1111/j.1749-5687.2010.00099.x.

Davutoğlu, Ahmet. *Strategic depth: Turkey's international position*. London: Küre Publishing, 2001.

Der Derian, James. 2009. *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. London: Routledge.

Dittmer, Jason, and Klaus Dodds. 2008. "Popular Geopolitics Past and Future: Fandom, Identities and Audiences." *Geopolitics* 13 (3): 437–57. doi:10.1080/14650040802203687.

Duvar English. 2025. "Turkey's TV Series Industry Earned over \$500 Million." January 20. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/turkeys-tv-series-industry-earned-over-500-million-from-exports-in-2024-news-65557>.

Edensor, Tim. *National identity, popular culture, and everyday life*. Oxford: Berg, 2002.

Edkins, Jenny. *Poststructuralism and international relations: Bringing the political back in*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999.

———. *Trauma and the memory of politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

Egresi, Istvan, ed. *Alternative tourism in Turkey: Role, potential development and sustainability*. Cham: Springer, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-47537-4>.

Elçi, Ezgi. 2022. "Politics of Nostalgia and Populism." *British Journal of Political Science* 52 (2): 697–714. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123420000666>.

Enloe, Cynthia. 2014. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ergin, Murat, and Yağmur Karakaya. 2017. "Between Neo-Ottomanism and Ottomania." *New Perspectives on Turkey*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2017.4>.

Ertuğrul, Kürşad, and Öznur Akcalı Yılmaz. "The otherness of Turkey in European integration." *Turkish Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 48–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1396895>.

European Commission. *Turkey 2006 Progress Report*. SEC(2006) 1390 final. Brussels, November 8, 2006. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/turkey-progress-report-2006_en

Forbes Turkey. 2024. "Ses, Kamera, Oyun." <https://www.forbes.com.tr/makale/ses-kamera-oyun>.

Fujii, Lee Ann. "Shades of truth and lies." *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (2010): 231–241. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309353097>

———. "Five stories of accidental ethnography: Turning unplanned moments in the field into data." *Qualitative Research* 15, no. 4 (2015): 525–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794114548945>.

———. *Interviewing in social science research: A relational approach*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203756065>.

Furman Daniel, J., and Paul Musgrave. “Synthetic Experiences: How Popular Culture Matters for Images of International Relations.” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (2017): 503–16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx053>.

Grayson, Kyle. “How to read *Paddington Bear*: Liberalism and the foreign subject.” *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (2003): 378–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-856X.2012.00506.x>.

———, Matt Davies, and Simon Philpott. “Pop goes IR? Researching the popular culture–world politics continuum.” *Politics* 29 (2009): 155–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9256.2009.01351.x>.

Guillaume, Xavier, and Jef Huysmans. “The concept of ‘the everyday’: Ephemeral politics and the abundance of life.” *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 278–296. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836718815520>.

Gülbay, A. “İç ve dış politika boyutları ile yeni osmanlıcılık [Ottomanism with domestic and foreign policy dimensions].” *Uluslararası Toplumsal Bilimler Dergisi* 7, no. 4 (2023): 259–284.

Gürpınar, Hüseyin Rahmi. *The dandy (Şıpsavdi)*. Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2019 [1911].

Hale, William. *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*. 3rd ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2013.

Hamilton, Caitlin. *The everyday artefacts of world politics*. London: Routledge, 2021.

Han, Ayça. 2025. “TRT’de Dizisi Kaldırılan Senarist.” *PolitikYol*, April 6.

Hanioğlu, M. Şükrü. *The Young Turks in opposition*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Hintz, Lisel. 2016. ““Take It Outside!”” *European Journal of International Relations* 22 (2): 335–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066115588205>

———. 2021. “The Empire’s Opposition Strikes Back: Popular Culture as Creative Resistance Tool under Turkey’s AKP.” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 48 (1): 24–43. doi:10.1080/13530194.2021.1885849

Hojić, Aida, and Matt Davies. "Popular Culture and World Politics." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies*. 17 Jul. 2024; <https://oxfordre.com/internationalstudies/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.001.0001/acrefore-9780190846626-e-814>.

Idiz, Semih. “Turkish-Saudi animosity spills over into cultural sphere.” *Al-Monitor*, November 2019. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2019/11/turkey-saudi-arabia-animosity-spills-over-cultural-sphere.html>.

Kingdoms of Fire. TV series. Created by Muhammed Soliman Abdul Malek. 2019–. IMDb. Accessed January 6, 2026. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10198930/>.

Korhan, Sevda, and Yusuf Çınar. “Post-Arab Spring Turkey–Saudi Arabia relations on shaky ground: Diverging and converging dynamics.” *TESAM Akademi Dergisi* 11, no. 2 (2024): 761–791.

Kraidy, Marwan M. 2019. “Boycotting Neo-Ottoman Cool.” *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*. 12. 149-165. 10.1163/18739865-01202010.

Kraidy, Marwan M., and Omar Al-Ghazzi. 2013. "Neo-Ottoman Cool: Turkish Popular Culture in the Arab Public Sphere." *Popular Communication* 11 (1): 17–29. doi:10.1080/15405702.2013.747940.

Krause, Keith, and Michael C. Williams. 1997. *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Kremers, Ruben, and Lena Rethel. "Curated power: The performative politics of (industry) events." *International Political Sociology* 18, no. 1 (2024): 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ips/olab038>.

Krishna, Sankaran. 1999. *Postcolonial Insecurities*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Krystalli, Roxani C. "Narrating victimhood: Dilemmas and (in)dignities." *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 1 (2021): 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2020.1865606>.

Kurowska, Xymena. 2019. "When One Door Closes, Another One Opens? The Ways and Byways of Denied Access, or a Central European Liberal in Fieldwork Failure." *Journal of Narrative Politics* 5 (2): 71–85. <https://jnp.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/default/article/view/101>

Kutlay, Mustafa, and Ziya Öniş. 2021. "Turkish Foreign Policy in a Post-Western Order." *International Affairs* 97 (4): 1085–1104, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiaab094>

Kutuk, D. 2022. "Show and Tell: How Turkish TV Shows Found Fandom in the Balkans." *TRT World*, March 24, 2022. <https://www.trtworld.com/article/13118069>.

Löfflmann, Georg. 2013. "Hollywood, the Pentagon, and National Security." *Critical Studies on Security* 1 (3): 280–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2013.820015>

Mayer, Vicki. 2011. *The Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press.

Mayer, Vicki, Miranda J. Banks, and John Thornton Caldwell. 2009. *Production Studies*. New York: Routledge.

"MBC Airs New Drama Series *Kingdoms of Fire* Based on Ottoman Empire." 2019. *BroadcastPro Middle East*. <https://www.broadcastpromem.com/news/mbc-air-new-drama-series-kingdoms-of-fire-based-on-ottoman-empire/>

Megahid, Ahmed. 2019. "TV Drama Challenges Historical Narrative of Ottoman Conquest in the Arab World." *The Arab Weekly*, November 10. <https://the arabweekly.com/tv-drama-challenges-historical-narrative-ottoman-conquest-arab-world>

Middle East Monitor. 2022. "Egypt Fatwa Bans *Ertugrul*, Turkish Soaps." <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200212-egypt-fatwa-bans-ertugrul-turkish-soaps/>.

Neumann, Iver B. "Returning practice to the linguistic turn: The case of diplomacy." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (2002). <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298020310031201>

———, and Daniel H. Nexon. "Introduction." In *Harry Potter and international relations*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

Nye, Joseph S., Jr. 2008. "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616 (1): 94–109. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699>

Ongur, Hakan Ounce. "Identifying Ottomanisms: The discursive evolution of Ottoman pasts in the Turkish presents." *Middle Eastern Studies* 51, no. 3 (2015): 416–432. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24585897>.

Ortner, Sherry B. 2013. *Not Hollywood*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Özalpman, Deniz, and Katharine Sarikakis. "The politics of pleasure in global drama: A case study of the TV series, *The Magnificent Century (Muhteşem Yüzyıl)*." *Global Media and Communication* 14, no. 3 (2018): 249–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766518780168>

Özçetin, Burak. 2019. "Populism, Media and Popular Culture in Turkey." *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 22 (5–6): 942–957. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549418821841>

Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem. *The carriage affair (Araba sevdası)*. Istanbul: Turkey İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2017 [1896].

Presidency of the Republic of Turkey. 2018. *Yerli ve Millî Anlayış Her Konuda Olduğu Gibi Kültür-Sanatta da İdealimiz Olmalı* ["Domestic and National Understanding Should Be Our Ideal in Culture and Arts as in Every Subject"]. <https://www.tccb.gov.tr/haberler/410/92787/-yerli-ve-mill-anlayis-her-konuda-oldugu-gibi-kultur-sanatta-da-idealimiz-olmali-#>.

Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "Turkish Foreign Policy During Atatürk's Era." Accessed December 5, 2025. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkish-foreign-policy-during-ataturks-era.en.mfa>.

Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs. “Turkey–NATO, Together for Peace and Security Since 60 Years.” Accessed December 5, 2025. <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey-nato-together-for-peace-and-security-since60-years.en.mfa>.

Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate for EU Affairs. “History.” Accessed November 28, 2024. https://www.ab.gov.tr/history_53840_en.html.

Ranta, Ronald, and Atsuko Ichijo. 2022. *Food, National Identity and Nationalism*. 2nd ed. Palgrave Macmillan.

Rose, Gillian. *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials*. 4th ed. London: SAGE, 2016.

Rumelili, Bahar. “Turkey’nin Avrupa’yı Yeniden İnşası: Üyelik ve Vatandaşlık [Turkey’s Reconstruction of Europe: Membership and Citizenship].” *Marmara Journal of European Studies* 23, no. 2 (2015): 82–84. <https://doi.org/10.29228/mjes.78>.

———, and Rabia Suleymanoglu-Kurum. “Brand Turkey: Liminal Identity and Its Limits.” *Geopolitics* 22, no. 3 (2017): 549–570. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1270269>.

Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Saunders, Robert. “Small screen IR: A tentative typology of geopolitical television.” *Geopolitics* 24 (2017): 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1389719>.

Schmid, Julian. 2020. “(Captain) America in Crisis: Popular Digital Culture and the Negotiation of Americanness.” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33 (5): 690–712. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1708864>

Schweiger, Elisabeth, and Kerstin Tomiak. "Researching silence: A methodological inquiry." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 51, no. 1 (2022): 78–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829821999487>.

Sertbulut, Zeynep. "They don't care what we watch: On ratings and culture-making in the dizi industry." *Visual Anthropology Review* 40, no. 2 (2024): 246–255. <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12330>

Sharpe, K. Behzat. 2020. "Love 101, Netflix Turkey, and Homophobia." *Duvar English*, May 1, 2020. <https://www.duvarenglish.com/columns/2020/05/01/love-101-netflix-turkey-and-homophobia>.

Shaw, Stanford J., and Ezel Kural Shaw. 1977. "The Era of Modern Reform: The Tanzimat, 1839–1876." In *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Steele, Brent J. 2008. *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. London: Routledge.

Solomon, Ty, and Brent J. Steele. 2017. "Micro-Moves in IR Theory." *European Journal of International Relations* 23 (2): 267–291. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066116634442>

Soss, Joe. "Talking our way to meaningful explanations." In *Interpretation and method: Empirical research methods and the interpretive turn*, edited by Dvora Yanow and Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, 132–152. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2006.

Subotić, Jelena. 2016. "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change." *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12 (4): 610–627. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fpa.12089>

Sula, İsmail Erkam. “Turkish foreign policy in the early republican period: An ‘international society’ approach.” *Marmara SBD*, no. 1 (2021): 6–8. <https://doi.org/10.14782/marmarasbd.886649>.

The Economist. 2024. “The Third-Largest Exporter of Television Is Not Who You Might Expect.” *The Economist*, February 15, 2024. <https://www.economist.com/culture/2024/02/15/the-third-largest-exporter-of-television-is-not-who-you-might-expect>.

The Vision Program Realization Office. *A story of transformation 2023*. Riyadh: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2023. <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/jvllaxpl/story-of-transformation-2023.pdf>

Tol, Gönül, and David Dumke, eds. *Aspiring powers, regional rivals: Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the new Middle East*. Orlando: Middle East Institute/University of Central Florida, 2020.

Tombuş, H. Ertuğ, and Berfu Aygenç. 2017. “(Post-)Kemalist Secularism in Turkey.” *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 19, no. 1: 70–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2016.1201995>.

TRT World Research Centre. *Murder in the consulate: The Khashoggi affair and the Turkish–Saudi war of narratives*. Istanbul: TRT World Research Centre, 2018. https://researchcentre.trtworld.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Murder_in_Consulatev2.pdf

Uras, Umut. 2018. “Saudi Network Ban on Turkey TV Shows Is ‘Political’: Minister.” *Al Jazeera*, March 6, 2018. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/3/6/saudi-network-ban-on-turkey-tv-shows-is-political-minister>.

van Dijk, Teun A. "Critical Discourse Analysis." In *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed., edited by Deborah Tannen, Heidi E. Hamilton, and Deborah Schiffrin, 466–85. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.

Weber, Cynthia. *Imagining America at war: Morality, politics, and film*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Weldes, Jutta. "Going cultural: Star Trek, state action, and popular culture." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 28, no. 1 (1999): 117–134. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298990280011201>.

———, and Diane Saco. "Making state action possible: The United States and the discursive construction of 'the Cuban problem,' 1960–1994." *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 25, no. 2 (1996): 361–395.

Yavuz, M. Hakan. 1998. "Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy." *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 7, no.12, (1998), 19–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669929808720119>

———. 2020. *Nostalgia for the Empire*. Oxford University Press.

Yeşil, Bilge. 2024. *Talking Back to the West*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Yörük, Zafer, and Pantelis Vatikiotis. "Soft power or illusion of hegemony: The case of Turkish soap opera popularity." *International Journal of Communication* 7 (2013): 2361–2385. <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/1880>