

**BETWEEN NOSTALGIC GLORY AND PRESENT MALAISE: THE PARADOX
OF NEO-OTTOMANISM IN TURKEY**

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of Neo-Ottomanism in contemporary Turkey and its broader implications for Turkish society. It begins by exploring the various interpretations of this phenomenon, emphasizing its multifaceted nature and the political instrumentalization of imperial nostalgia. While this project may seem contemporary, it is, in fact, a recurring feature of modern Turkish history. We will analyze how its revival has shaped political discourse, national identity, and societal dynamics. The article then presents a range of political initiatives aimed at reintegrating Ottoman symbols into everyday life, illustrating how these efforts seek to reshape cultural identity and reinforce a sense of historical continuity. Furthermore, it delves into the economic, social, and political transformations driven by the Neo-Ottoman project, with particular attention to its impact on national policy, social cohesion, and daily life. Despite attempts to revive past grandeur, these transformations have not translated into tangible benefits for society. Instead, a growing disparity emerges between the rhetoric of imperial splendor and the economic struggles faced by citizens. By applying the concept of "malaise," this study explores the tensions and contradictions within the Neo-Ottoman project, highlighting the disconnect between state-driven historical narratives and lived realities. Ultimately, it seeks to illuminate the complex dynamics of Neo-Ottomanism and the gap between political aspirations and everyday experiences.

Keywords: Neo-Ottomanism, Identity, Nostalgia, Malaise, Desubjection

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Nostalgik İhtişam ve Günümüz Bunalımı: Türkiye’de Yeni Osmanlıcılığın Paradoksu

Öz

Bu makale, günümüz Türkiye’sinde Yeni Osmanlıcılığın ortaya çıkışını ve Türk toplumu üzerindeki geniş kapsamlı etkilerini ele almaktadır. Öncelikle, bu olgunun farklı yorumlarını inceleyerek çok boyutlu doğasını ve imparatorluk nostaljisinin siyasi amaçlarla nasıl kullanıldığını vurgulamaktadır. Her ne kadar Yeni Osmanlıcılık güncel bir olgu gibi görünse de aslında modern Türkiye tarihinde tekrarlayan bir unsurdur. Makalede, bu ideolojik yeniden canlanmanın siyasi söylemi, ulusal kimliği ve toplumsal dinamikleri nasıl şekillendirdiği analiz edilmektedir. Ardından, Osmanlı sembollerinin günlük hayata yeniden entegre edilmesine yönelik çeşitli siyasi girişimler ele alınarak, bu çabaların kültürel kimliği nasıl yeniden inşa ettiği ve tarihsel süreklilik duygusunu nasıl güçlendirdiği gösterilmektedir. Bununla birlikte, makale Yeni Osmanlı projesinin yol açtığı ekonomik, toplumsal ve siyasi dönüşümleri inceleyerek, özellikle ulusal politika, toplumsal uyum ve günlük yaşam üzerindeki etkilerine odaklanmaktadır. Geçmişin ihtişamını yeniden canlandırma girişimlerine rağmen, bu dönüşümler toplum için belirgin faydalar sağlamamıştır. Aksine, devletin imparatorluk ihtişamına dayalı söylemi ile halkın yaşadığı ekonomik zorluklar arasında bir dengesizlik gözlemlenmektedir ve bu fark giderek daha belirgin hale gelmektedir. Bu çalışma, “bunalım” (malaise) kavramını kullanarak, Yeni Osmanlı projesinin yarattığı gerilimleri ve çelişkileri ele almakta ve devletin tarih anlatıları ile bireylerin yaşadığı gerçeklik arasındaki kopukluğu irdelemektedir. Sonuç olarak, bu makale Yeni Osmanlıcılığın karmaşık dinamiklerini irdelemeyi ve paradokslarını analiz ederek tartışmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yeni Osmanlıcılık, Kimlik, Nostalji, Bunalım, Öznesizleşme

Introduction

In 1923, the Republic of Turkey was officially proclaimed, marking the definitive end of the Ottoman Empire. This pivotal moment was followed by a series of reforms led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, aimed at secularizing and modernizing the social fabric of the new nation—a process often viewed as a form of Westernization. Despite the comprehensive efforts of the 1920s to dismantle the Ottoman institutions and structures, the legacy of the empire continues to resonate within Turkish society today. Periodically, the memory of this imperial past is revived, particularly by political figures who center their platforms around a “neo-Ottoman” ideology, making it a cornerstone of their political agendas (Navaro-Yashin, 2002: 96; Çınar, 2005: 142; Özyürek, 2006: 156).

Hakan Yavuz is one of the scholars who has extensively examined the phenomenon of imperial nostalgia, demonstrating that it has frequently been mobilized in contemporary Turkish history by various political actors, albeit with differing objectives. In his work (2020), he delineates a typology of several forms of Ottomanism, among which he identifies the “Özalist” model, initiated by Turgut Özal, President of Turkey in [year]. According to Yavuz, this particular form of imperial nostalgia was “reflective, open-ended, and cosmopolitan” (p. 162), advocating a Neo-Ottomanism that was compatible with liberalism, multiculturalism, and pro-Western geopolitical orientation. A key characteristic of this model was its emphasis on “building bridges” with Turkish communities outside of Turkey. The objective was thus to “revive and reframe” the progressive, cosmopolitan, and universal elements of the Ottoman Empire as a counterbalance to the rigid Kemalist tutelage (p. 124). Yavuz also identifies a resurgence of Ottomanist discourse in the politics of Necmettin Erbakan, where Islam functioned as the primary framework through which the memory of the imperial past was reconstructed. This project aimed to emphasize Islamic identity and assert Turkey’s leadership role in the Muslim world rather than prioritizing economic considerations. More contemporarily, Yavuz discerns a Neo-Ottomanism adopted by the AKP government, characterized by an increasingly restorative and regressive form of imperial nostalgia. This iteration detaches itself from historical reality, as reflected in the construction of Ottoman memory within popular culture, architecture, and historical dramas. Moreover, the AKP’s Neo-Ottomanism attempts to restore the Islamic character of the empire in domestic discourse—privileging its religious dimension over its cosmopolitan nature—by selectively reproducing narratives of past glories (p. 140). In foreign policy, this approach manifests in Turkey’s assertion of its “historical responsibility” toward

post-Ottoman territories and peoples (p. 202), seeking to reinforce its influence in these regions.

To summarize, contemporary Neo-Ottomanism is rooted in a nostalgia that selectively and often inaccurately reconstructs symbols, ideas, and events from the past, portraying the Ottoman era as a “golden age.” It serves as a utopian narrative that shapes the modern understanding of Ottomanism, anchoring it in conservative Islamic values. Romanticizing the past while critiquing the present, this nostalgic discourse reflects deep-seated and unresolved tensions between religion and nationalism, tradition and modernity, conservatism and progress.

Another scholar, Nagehan Tokdoğan, in *Neo-Ottomanism and the Politics of Emotions in Turkey: Resentment, Nostalgia, Narcissism*, examines the role of emotions in shaping political discourse under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). She explores how Neo-Ottomanism has been strategically deployed as a political narrative to cultivate a specific sense of national identity and reinforce popular support for Erdoğan’s regime. The author identifies three key emotions that underpin contemporary Turkish politics within the framework of Neo-Ottomanism: 1- Resentment – This emotion is actively mobilized by the AKP, fostering a discourse of victimization directed against secular elites, Western powers, and so-called “anti-Turkey” forces. By portraying Turkey as a nation that has long been marginalized but is now reclaiming its rightful status, this resentment serves as a justification for various government policies. 2- Nostalgia – The neo-Ottomanist narrative invokes nostalgia for Turkey’s imperial past to foster national unity and reinforce a sense of collective pride. This idealized vision of the Ottoman era is framed in opposition to the modernization and secularization policies implemented during the Republican period. 3- Collective Narcissism – This concept refers to a form of national self-perception in which Turkey is viewed as inherently exceptional and deserving of greater geopolitical prominence. The Neo-Ottomanist discourse not only glorifies the country’s historical grandeur but also legitimizes its contemporary regional ambitions, reinforcing the belief that Turkey is destined to play a leading role on the global stage.

According to the author, this political strategy is deeply embedded in an emotional framework centered on victimization. She argues that the Neo-Ottomanist discourse strategically highlights historical humiliations and grievances, particularly those associated with Westernization, which is often portrayed as an attack on Islamic identity and Muslim heritage. As Tokdoğan asserts: “Neo-Ottomanism has been constructed through a transfer to the people, under Erdoğan’s leadership, of (a) a narrative of victimization claimed for nearly

a century by the Turkish right more generally and by Islamic conservatives in particular and (b) the emotional sites that accompany this narrative. Erdoğan adopts the narrative of past victimization through his language and actions, which constantly urge the people to remember this past” (Tokdoğan, p. 63). Through this approach, the AKP effectively channels collective emotions—resentment, nostalgia, and nationalism—to reinforce its political legitimacy and sustain mass support.

Given the various political mobilizations of the term over time and the multitude of elements to which Neo-Ottomanism is linked depending on different ideological currents, defining the concept remains a challenge. It is not a monolithic term but rather a polysemic narrative. Despite being central to various political projects over the years, the concept of Neo-Ottomanism remains highly contested. For some, it is less a concrete heuristic concept (Mongrenier, 2013) or a formal political ideology endorsed by governing authorities and more of an inclination or metaphor. Furthermore, the term is more commonly employed by foreign nations (Moyeuvre, 2020) than by Turkish officials themselves, often to describe what is perceived as Turkey’s “imperial reflex”—an attempt to reassert influence in former Ottoman territories, particularly in the Middle East and the Balkans (Jabbour, 2019). Yavuz, for his part, defines Neo-Ottomanism as an “emotional, nostalgic identity” that seeks to shape Turkish society based on a perceived Ottoman and Islamic heritage (p. xii). He further characterizes it as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, simultaneously functioning as an ideology, an identity, an emotional framework, a model of modernization, and/or a set of conservative values.

Contemporary “Neo-Ottomanism” is now primarily associated with the AKP’s foreign policy, which seeks to expand Turkey’s economic, political, and cultural influence on a global scale, positioning the country as a key geopolitical actor. This approach is characterized by a distinct model that not only emphasizes economic growth but also advocates for conciliatory regional diplomacy. A defining feature of this policy was the “zero problems with neighbors” strategy, which played a central role in Turkey’s foreign relations between 2010 and 2013 (Davutoğlu, 2010; Sazak & Kurc, 2018). Additionally, Turkey’s foreign policy under this framework is marked by a continuous pursuit of international recognition (Jabbour, 2017: 59). This influence extends beyond the economic sphere, as evidenced by Turkey’s free trade agreements with numerous North African and Middle Eastern nations, to encompass cultural diplomacy and soft power. Key aspects of this cultural outreach include the global distribution of Turkish television series depicting the Ottoman past, promoting

Turkish language instruction abroad, and establishing cultural centers to foster Turkey's historical and cultural ties with various regions. In this sense, contemporary international policy, often labeled as "Neo-Ottoman" is designed to enhance Turkey's strategic presence at both regional and global levels.

However, this aspiration of AKP to revive the grandeur of the past appears not to be confined solely to the international arena. As Moulec (2016) highlights, this geopolitical ambition also serves a domestic political purpose: to re-legitimize the Ottoman heritage and its conservative ideology. Neo-Ottomanism has increasingly permeated civil society, altering its landscape, reshaping the social fabric, and altering the national landscape through a growing array of symbols, narratives, and representations. This resurgence is reflected in the renaming of infrastructures, public celebrations honoring historical figures, and the increasing visibility of Ottoman symbols. References to pivotal battles in national history and the naming of key infrastructures after Ottoman sultans reinforce this effort to revive and glorify the empire's former grandeur.

This ideological project has also been inscribed into public spaces. Grand historical narratives are amplified through elaborate spectacles designed to reimagine and celebrate Ottoman splendor. Cultural policies play a central role in disseminating imperial myths, exemplified by the construction of the Istanbul 1453 Panoramic Museum, which glorifies the conquest of Constantinople. Similarly, monumental urban development projects contribute to fostering imperial nostalgia, including the restoration of significant Ottoman architectural landmarks such as palaces and public buildings, as well as the construction of Çamlıca Mosque, Istanbul's largest mosque, perched atop the city's highest hill. These structures, inspired by Ottoman architectural styles and dedicated to commemorating Ottoman history, serve as carefully curated memory markers that reinterpret the past within a contemporary framework.

Political discourse further reinforces this neo-Ottoman revival. The ruling party employs a range of rhetorical and symbolic strategies to embed the memory of the empire within contemporary society. Frequent references to the historical greatness of the Turks, state-sponsored commemorations of sultans and national heroes—most notably the celebration of the 1453 conquest of Constantinople—and the increasing use of Ottoman Turkish terminology in official speeches all contribute to the construction of a nostalgic imperial narrative. In the vision of the "New Turkey" promoted by the AKP, where conservatism is elevated as a guiding principle, references to the Ottoman past have become omnipresent.

Moreover, Neo-Ottomanism has gradually shaped what Elias (1996) and Heaney (2013) refer to as the "national habitus," integrating itself into everyday

life and functioning as a form of social knowledge internalized by Turkish citizens. This shift has given rise to new social and public rituals (Berezin, 2002: 39), contributing to the forging of a “New Turkey” that paradoxically constructs its national identity upon the foundations of an “old” historical legacy. In other words, this movement seeks to create a contemporary national identity while anchoring it in historical, cultural, and religious references associated with the Ottoman past (Yavuz, 2016). As Yavuz (2020) articulates, “As an ideology, Neo-Ottomanism is built on the sense of an imagined past and gives people a set of attitudes and a program of action in restructuring society and the state, especially with a view toward the role of religion in both.” (p. 19). Through this process, Neo-Ottomanism not only redefines Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy but also reshapes its collective memory and national consciousness.

However, the increasing invocation of the Ottoman past inevitably brings this model into conflict with the Kemalist state project and the foundational principles of secularism (Marcou, 2012). Once perceived as a burden that constrained progress (Yanık, 2016), the imperial legacy has been reframed as a strategic “asset” reinforcing Turkey’s hegemonic aspirations. In this context, nostalgia for the Ottoman Empire is cultivated and selectively reinterpreted to legitimize contemporary political ambitions and expansive national projects (Fentress & Wickham, 1998).

These rapid and profound societal transformations are poised to impact individuals navigating this evolving landscape significantly. They find themselves in a society undergoing deep structural shifts, where the future is largely framed by two seemingly contradictory forces: a nostalgic longing for a bygone era and the unrestrained advance of neoliberalism. This dual lens renders Turkey’s trajectory more ambiguous than ever, creating a pervasive sense of uncertainty. This opacity is further reinforced by the inherent contradictions within Neo-Ottomanism, which is structured around multiple dichotomies. At its core, nostalgia serves as both an aspiration for the new (“neo”) and a revival of the past (“Ottomanism”), embodying a tension that oscillates “between preservation and progress, recovery and innovation, fidelity to tradition and the pursuit of originality” (Martin-Cardini, 2016: 7).

Neo-Ottomanism also juxtaposes symbols of hypermodernity with traditional references, presenting itself as both a locally grounded societal project and an ideology with global aspirations. It incorporates elements of continuity, such as economic liberalism, while simultaneously embracing ruptures, particularly in its break from the Kemalist paradigm that had long defined Turkey’s political and cultural identity. Thus, we observe the intertwining of

different dualities, between tradition and modernity, local identity and global ambition, continuity and rupture.

All these dualities inherent in Neo-Ottomanism inevitably impact the processes of subjectivation for individuals who find themselves in a rapidly transforming social context. Citizens must navigate a social fabric being reshaped from the top down, even as they struggle to adapt to this new reality. The historical references that once anchored their identity and connected them to the nation's shared past are now being questioned, replaced by new symbols and narratives imposed heteronomously.

Thus, a stark contrast emerges between the idealized grandeur projected in political discourse and the complexities of lived experience. While the neo-Ottoman project is officially framed as inclusive and multicultural, it often perpetuates exclusionary dynamics, particularly for minorities. On the one hand, religiosity and conservative values are actively promoted, yet this emphasis inherently alienates the pro-Western secular elite. Furthermore, the project reinforces hegemonic masculinity, diminishing the roles and rights of women. The discrepancy between grandiose rhetoric and socio-economic realities remains unaddressed mainly, as do the material conditions endured by much of the population. While the authorities invoke the imperial past as a model of societal harmony and strive to revive the Ottoman Golden Age, contemporary Turkey has been described as "angry" (Öktem, 2011), "divided" (Howe, 2004), "neoliberalizing" (Coşar & Özdemir, 2012), "governmentalized" (Erol et al., 2016), and "deeply patriarchal" (Özyegin, 2015: 3) nation.

Moreover, statistical data indicate a rising number of citizens desiring to emigrate, citing diminished prospects and an uncertain future. This sense of disillusionment is compounded by the shrinking space for public dissent, particularly in the aftermath of the Gezi protests and the intensified repression following the failed coup attempt of 2016.

In *Malaise dans la société. Soumission et résistance* (2010), Jan Spurk employs the concept of malaise to describe the manifestations of social and economic contradictions, emphasizing the tensions between the promises of modernity and the realities experienced by individuals. He highlights people's struggles to find meaning in a world of uncertainty and instability. According to Spurk:

"On the one hand, we do not live in a historical period defined by great hopes, ambitious social and cultural projects, or grand aspirations for autonomy. On the other hand, there is

very little commitment to an alternative way of living. Yet, this is not a period of complete stagnation either; we are experiencing a malaise (...). The current situation is opaque, and the decline of traditional nation-state institutions further exacerbates this malaise.” (p.12)

This sense of malaise aptly characterizes what many individuals in Turkey seem to be experiencing today under Neo-Ottomanism. They find themselves in a society undergoing profound transformations, where historical references, dominant narratives, symbolic figures, and value systems are being redefined. The rapid expansion of neoliberalism, radical urban transformation, and the persistent evocation of the Ottoman past— despite the pressing need for forward-looking projects—further exacerbate this upheaval. Simultaneously, they are confronted with a vision of the future that appears exclusionary, marked by growing discontent, soaring inflation, and increasing socio-economic precarity—yet they lack the means to challenge it.

The public sphere no longer serves to debate and envision alternative future projects. The Gezi protests and the post-2016 coup crackdown have significantly intensified surveillance under the pretext of protecting citizens, further reinforcing restrictions on public space and its occupation. As a result, individuals find themselves in a form of liminality, a “horizon of expectation” (Koselleck, 1990, cited by Spurk, 2010: 35), in which no viable alternatives seem to emerge. Many express uncertainties and a growing inclination to emigrate, feeling increasingly excluded in an environment where opportunities for meaningful participation seem to diminish.

This article aims to explore how individuals in present-day Turkey position themselves in relation to Ottoman nostalgia, which political authorities sustain through various means. The concept of nostalgia is difficult to define. As Svetlana Boym states:

“At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time.... In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time.” (2001: xv)

In the context of Neo-Ottomanism, however, nostalgia appears to be instrumentalized for explicitly political purposes, aiming to reshape society. As

such, nostalgia is no longer connected to the past itself but instead serves contemporary agendas: as shown by Davis (1979), nostalgia has little to do with history itself because it is rooted in present psychological and political needs. Within the Neo-Ottoman framework, nostalgic discourse is both critical of the present and romanticizes the past, particularly the period before the decline of the Ottoman Empire: as stated by Yavuz (2020), authorities use the Ottoman past "(...) as a vehicle for authoritarian and Islamic sentiments as well to promote new moral codes, political ideals, and sociocultural narratives. He wants to invoke the memories of the Ottoman Empire to unify and integrate Turkey's various ethnic and religious identities into a more cohesive nation." (p. 16)

Furthermore, nostalgia, as a romanticized connection to the past, can also function as a defense mechanism, especially when the government lacks compelling alternatives to offer. In this sense, it serves as both an emotional refuge during crises and a psychological resource for resisting contemporary challenges (Sedikides et al., 2004).

This article will begin by examining the social and societal impacts of the Ottoman revival in contemporary Turkey. After briefly addressing the political motivations behind this imperial resurgence, it will explore the social manifestations of this trend and how it permeates daily life. The article will investigate the mechanisms and symbols through which Ottoman memory is "reinvented," projected, and maintained across various social spaces, all to construct a "new Turkey."

In the second part of this article, we will explore whether this imperial nostalgia affects the process of subjectivation in contemporary Turkish society. Specifically, we will examine whether "Neo-Ottomanism," promoted as a hopeful project and envisioned as the foundation for a new social identity, is reflected in the future aspirations of individuals today. Drawing on opinion polls and statistical data, we will seek to understand the general "state of mind" prevailing in Turkey. We will observe a stark contrast between the idealized grandeur promoted by political authorities advocating Neo-Ottomanism and the lived realities of the population. Despite being presented as a project of collective benefit intended to revolutionize society, the actual form of Neo-Ottomanism seems to primarily serve the ruling class's interests while vastly "overwhelming" ordinary citizens. The excessive scope of the program, coupled with the rising cost of living resulting from massive urban transformations, directly impacts the daily lives of the populace. Moreover, the conditions created by this top-down imposition of Neo-Ottomanism diminish individuals' capacity to act as autonomous agents. With little control over their lives in the face of these changes, individuals find it

increasingly difficult to shape or manage their own existence, leading to a process of desubjectivation.

(Re)Emergence of a “Neo-Ottoman” Inclination in Contemporary Turkey

The emergence of a “neo-Ottoman” inclination in contemporary Turkey is subject to varying interpretations regarding its origins. For Danforth (2014), the rediscovery of the Ottoman past began as early as the 1940s, evident in official speeches and the government’s efforts to “Turkify” certain aspects of the old regime.

Çetinsaya (2003), on the other hand, traces the term’s appearance to around 1946, a period during which religion and the memory of the Ottoman Empire were reintroduced into Turkish politics.

However, some scholars suggest that “Neo-Ottomanism” is not a term coined by Turkish politicians but by foreign observers who detected a growing trend within Turkey. Barchard (1985) used the concept to describe a potential resurgence of Ottoman imperialism and Turkey’s shift towards the Middle East in the event of deteriorating relations with the European Union. Constantinides (1996) argued that the term was first employed by Greeks, particularly about Turkey’s 1974 intervention in Cyprus.

As Yanık (2011) notes, the term “Neo-Ottomanism” began to appear more frequently in the political discourse of the early 1990s and then again in the 2000s, particularly after the electoral success of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). These periods signaled the emergence of a new approach to foreign policy, one rooted in the Ottoman example, which sought to reassert Turkey’s influence both regionally and globally. Neo-Ottomanism is often associated with Turgut Özal, who served as President of the Republic of Turkey from 1989 to 1993. Özal’s interest in the Ottoman past is evident in his speeches, where he frequently employs historical references to the Empire, thereby embedding Ottomanism into the fabric of Turkish identity. He viewed Turkey as a “natural bridge” (Gruen, 1991: 390) linking the West and the Middle East, advocating for a foreign policy that preserved the country’s connections with the Western and Islamic worlds.

From a national perspective, the resurgence of the Ottoman specter, manifesting as a ghostly echo of the past, is reflected at the societal level through various cultural initiatives. For instance, Turkish classical music began to be broadcast on the radio, and the vocabulary associated with the Ottoman era started to permeate television programming (Çolak, 2006). Additionally, history

textbooks from this period were specifically curated to glorify the grandeur of the Ottoman past, ensuring its integration into the nation's collective memory. This era was also characterized by unprecedented growth, significant economic liberalization, a free trade policy facilitating new partnerships, and an openness to international engagement. The combination of these factors fostered a renewed interest in the Ottoman legacy and sought to position Turkey as a prominent player on the global stage.

Following the death of Turgut Özal, the essence of the Ottoman spirit persisted into the latter half of the 1990s, albeit in a transformed manner. As Çınar (2001) illustrates, this period gradually integrated Ottoman symbols—encompassing architecture, art, and calligraphy—into the Turkish public sphere. Notably, the Istanbul City Hall commemorated the 700th anniversary of the Empire by organizing a series of events across the country, including scientific meetings, exhibitions showcasing Ottoman art, classical music concerts, and film screenings that celebrated the imperial heritage.

The neo-Ottoman inclination re-emerged in the 2000s, now characterizing the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). This revival of Neo-Ottomanism is often associated with Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2009 to 2014. However, he himself has distanced himself from the term. During his tenure, Davutoğlu aimed to enhance modern Turkey's influence over former Ottoman territories, a strategic initiative likely motivated by the stagnation of Turkey's EU accession process (Moyeuvre, 2020: 4). In these assertions, Davutoğlu specifically emphasizes Turkey's reintegration into the Middle East, which he views as both the historical and geographical destiny of the nation (Brink-Danan, 2011). He asserts that "the path to progress for Turkey goes through its past." 2002 marked a resurgence of debates surrounding Ottomanism; however, this time, the discourse expanded beyond its traditional confines of foreign policy ambitions to influence social life significantly.

We are now witnessing a gradual integration of Neo-Ottomanism into individuals' daily lives. This phenomenon manifests through a persistent projection of images and symbols that evoke the imperial past across various societal domains. This sustained presence of neo-Ottoman elements serves not only to reinforce historical narratives but also to shape contemporary identities and cultural practices within Turkey.

Ottoman Nostalgia Since 2002

As Polo and Üstel demonstrate, public cultural policies under the AKP

have undergone significant changes, reflecting a deliberate effort to rehabilitate Ottoman heritage. The authors observe that this transformation involves “the delegitimization of the Kemalist edifice” (Polo & Üstel, 2014). This rehabilitation is manifested through various initiatives, including the redevelopment of urban spaces, the restoration of imperial buildings, and the establishment of museums dedicated to reviving the memory of the Ottoman Empire. Such efforts, coupled with reoriented cultural policies, indicate a desire not only to reintegrate the past into the present and evoke nostalgia but also to forge a “new Turkey” built on reexamined foundations.

Moreover, political discourses often present an idealized image of the Ottoman Empire, portraying it as the archetype of a multicultural, pious, and harmonious society (Ergin & Karakaya, 2017). Some proponents even describe it as the “model” of beauty, goodness, and truth (Walton, 2016). Politicians encourage the younger generation to engage in traditional sports such as archery and horse riding and to preserve ancestral crafts like illumination (Birgün, 2021a). Additionally, there is an emphasis on learning the Ottoman language (Tokdoğan, 2020: 85).

This shift marks a clear break from the modernization efforts of the Kemalist regime, which sought to replace symbols of the imperial past—viewed at the time as a “dark period” of Turkish history—with secular cultural values inspired by the West. Therefore, the current rehabilitation of Ottomanism involves a reinvention of collective memory tailored to contemporary contexts, which serves the interests of the present and aims to cultivate a new social character within Turkish society.

These efforts are further complemented by substantial economic investments aimed at reintroducing the vestiges of Ottoman history into the public sphere. In their quest to restore the country to its former glory and position Istanbul as a “global” city, authorities have initiated extensive renovation projects focused on imperial heritage and the construction of new buildings that draw inspiration from various elements of Ottoman architecture. Notable examples include the monumental Çamlıca Mosque, which is modeled after the iconic Blue Mosque and stands prominently on one of Istanbul’s highest hills. Additionally, renaming new infrastructures after Ottoman figures—for example, Istanbul’s third bridge, Selim I’ in memory of the Sultan who ruled from 1512 to 1520—underscores the authorities’ intention to imbue public spaces with Ottoman symbolism. The projection of nostalgia in contemporary society also encompasses the establishment of museums, including the “Museum of History-Panorama 1453” and Miniatürk, which is dedicated to showcasing the former

Ottoman territories outside of Turkey. The inauguration of these grand new structures evokes the narrative of conquest, particularly regarding the fall of Constantinople in May 1453, to captivate and impress the populace. These events often serve as platforms for displaying posters featuring prominent imperial figures; for instance, during the rally organized by the AKP at the TT Arena stadium on May 27, 2012, a poster featuring Sultan Abdülhamid II was prominently displayed alongside that of the current President of Turkey.

Additionally, the construction of the grandiose presidential palace, inaugurated in 2014, serves as a physical embodiment of the “sultanesque” inclination of the current government. The palace’s architecture reflects Ottoman grandeur, and official guests are greeted in a meticulously designed atmosphere that evokes the imperial past. Upon their arrival, they are welcomed by a ceremonial guard dressed in costumes representing warriors from ancient Turkic states (Diken, 2015), accompanied by military songs from the late Ottoman Empire (Sémo, 2015). This staging reinforces the imagery of a revived imperial legacy.

Beyond governmental spaces, this renewed interest in the Ottoman past has also permeated the daily lives of Turkish citizens. Some business owners have chosen to name their establishments after Ottoman figures or themes (emlakulisi.com, 2012), and it is not uncommon to see vehicles adorned with the tuğra, the stylized seal of the Sultan, proudly displayed as a symbol of Ottoman heritage. Interestingly, this trend can also be viewed as an act of symbolic resistance, as it contrasts with the practice of other segments of society—those aligned with “old Turkey”—who display images or signatures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk on their cars as a way to express their secular and republican values. This juxtaposition underscores the ongoing cultural divide within Turkey, with Ottoman symbols serving as a counterpoint to Kemalist imagery in the public sphere.

The omnipresence of symbols related to the Ottoman Empire has sparked intrigue among scholars, leading some to describe the gradual emergence of a phenomenon termed “banal Ottomanism” (Ongur, 2015: 417). This notion suggests that the imperial specter and its various manifestations have permeated not only public spaces but also the private lives of individuals, mainly due to the role of media and popular culture in disseminating these symbols. Through entertainment, these channels promote idealized portrayals of the Ottoman past, which historians often contest.

Television series such as “The Magnificent Century” (Muhteşem Yüzyıl), inspired by the life of Suleiman the Magnificent, and the highly symbolic “Diriliş:

Ertuğrul" (translated as "The Resurrection"), which recounts the adventures of Ertuğrul, the father of the Empire's founder, are prime examples of this cultural phenomenon. Following this trend, "Kuruluş: Osman" ("The Foundation") was launched in 2019, further exploring the early stages of the Empire's establishment through Ertuğrul's son. Additionally, films like "Fetih 1453" ("Conquest 1453") achieved considerable national acclaim, depicting the conquest of Constantinople.

Among these productions, one series stands out: "Payitaht Abdülhamid" ("The Capital"). Premiering on February 24, 2017, this show portrays the last thirteen years of Sultan Abdülhamid II's reign, during which he faced significant internal opposition from the Young Turks and external pressures from foreign powers. The timing of the show's release, just months after the failed coup attempt of 2016, suggests it was intended to convey a powerful message to the public. It served not only as a reminder of the historical shifts in governance but also as a cautionary tale regarding the potential consequences of dissent within the nation.

In this context, the narratives presented in these series and films play a crucial role in shaping contemporary Turkish identity, reinforcing the government's vision for society while simultaneously influencing public perception of the Ottoman past. Normalizing these symbols in daily life reflects a broader ideological shift as the government seeks to forge a new social identity rooted in a reimagined historical narrative. The proliferation of these series, which romanticize life in the Ottoman Empire, has enabled Turkey to enhance its international influence, mainly through their broadcast in the Middle East and other regions. This global dissemination of Turkish imperial culture via popular media serves as a strategic tool for amplifying Turkey's "soft power" and advancing the "Neo-Ottoman" agenda.

Moreover, nostalgia for the Ottoman past is becoming commodified—consumed, exchanged, negotiated, and exported. This phenomenon, often termed "Ottomania," embodies a revival of imperial memory through anachronistic reinterpretations tailored to modern commercial practices. Examples of this trend include promotional offerings such as Burger King's "Sultan Menu" during Ramadan and merchandise featuring the Ottoman coat of arms on T-shirts, illustrating how nostalgia is monetized in contemporary society.

As individuals navigate this rapidly evolving landscape, they find themselves in a society where the Kemalist framework of the past is actively challenged and replaced by alternative narratives (Polo & Üstel, 2014). However, the "new" model proposed is built upon an eclectic mix of anachronistic elements

that are sometimes contradictory. This complexity has led some scholars to characterize this trend as “neo-Ottoman retro-futurism” (Morvan & Logie, 2019: 95), highlighting the juxtaposition of historical nostalgia with a vision for the future that draws heavily from a selective and idealized view of the past.

In this context, blending Ottoman symbols into contemporary life reflects broader social dynamics as the state seeks to redefine national identity while engaging with global cultural currents. The appeal of “Ottomania” not only invokes a sense of pride in historical heritage but also forges connections with audiences beyond Turkey, reinforcing the government’s narrative of a resurgent and influential nation on the world stage.

The reintroduction of Ottoman symbols into public spaces and popular culture aims to construct an alternative standard narrative and shape the national habitus in alignment with this historical perspective. However, implementing such a project has significant implications, particularly for the subjectivation process among individuals within society.

Contemporary Malaise, Loss of Meaning and Desubjectivation

As demonstrated, the reintegration of Ottoman heritage into contemporary society emerges as a flagship project of the “new Turkey.” In its strictest interpretation, “Neo-Ottomanism” reflects the ruling authorities’ desire to revive the Empire in a renovated or modernized form, evolving alongside the neoliberal world—evident in the economic investments and urban development projects aimed at reintroducing imperial memory. These efforts to rehabilitate the past are embedded within the commercial logic of contemporary neoliberalism, serving to justify its principles. However, at the societal level, many individuals increasingly struggle to adapt to the profound transformations occurring in the country. It seems contemporary history is being written without their participation or at their expense. Consequently, statistical analyses reveal a stark discrepancy between the miraculous promises and rhetoric about a future splendor reminiscent of the imperial era and the actual experiences of individuals in contemporary society. Despite the substantial economic investments made by authorities to support these initiatives, opinion surveys indicate widespread unease among the populace.

First, we observe that inflation remains at a high level. The table below illustrates its evolution by year in Turkey. It is also noteworthy that the figures provided by official institutions, such as the Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK), and those published by Enflasyon Araştırma Grubu (ENAG) differ significantly. Founded in 2021, ENAG is a research group composed of independent

economists and academics in Turkey. This group publishes its own inflation rates as an alternative to the official data announced by TÜİK. These discrepancies may also contribute to public distrust regarding the officially reported figures.

Table 1. Annual Inflation Trends According to the Turkish Statistical Institute and the Inflation Research Group

Years	Turkish Statistical Institute (TÜİK)	Inflation Research Group (ENAG)
2025 ¹	44,33	83,4
2024 ²	71,60	113
2023 ³	64	127
2022 ⁴	64,27	137,55

The year 2025 is also problematic. Oğuz Oyan (2025), for instance, argues that despite the government's initial anti-poverty efforts, summarized by the three Y's (Yolsuzlukları, Yoksulluğu ve Yasakları bitirmek – ending corruption, poverty, and prohibitions), the economic reality remains dire. Currently, 80% of wage earners in Turkey receive a salary below 1.5 times the minimum wage, placing many on the brink of the hunger threshold (açlık sınırı). Citing Korkut Boratav, Oyan even asserts that although economic indicators may not necessarily point to a full-scale economic crisis, a significant portion of the population is experiencing severe social distress. For him, Turkish society is “a society struggling against hunger and destitution” (açlıkla mücadele eden bir sefalet toplumu). Furthermore, this poverty is profoundly unequal and increasingly polarizes society. It reflects what he describes as a “dual social structure” (ikili toplum yapısı). On one side, large segments of society struggle with various forms of deprivation. At the same time, on the other, a privileged class—primarily composed of capital owners—continues to accumulate wealth at an accelerating pace.

¹ Tuncer, Anıl Can (2025)

² Utucu, Sait Burak (2024)

³ BBC News (2024)

⁴ BBC News (2023)

Moreover, some reports have even mentioned a confidence malaise (“güven bunalımı”) in various institutions (education, employment, justice, etc.), accompanied by a sense of economic crisis due to persistent instability and volatility (Şirin, 2024). It also appears that the younger generation is the most affected by this situation. This is particularly interesting, as authorities advocating neo-Ottomanism generally place them at the center of their discourse. They are encouraged to develop an appreciation for Ottoman arts, and numerous new museums established by the government showcasing imperial history, such as the Panorama 1453 History Museum, are designed to appeal to them and shape them into the “new generation of conquerors of tomorrow.” However, statistics indicate that this social group is also experiencing a deep sense of malaise. An IPSOS survey (2021) reveals, for example, that young people lack confidence in the future and experience profound existential pessimism and distress (Tele1, 2020). We also identify a deep social discouragement manifested by the disengagement of actors from the labor market and the education system: 28% of young people in Turkey are, therefore, part of the NEET generation⁵; they would be without training, diplomas, and work. Although increasingly in debt, the younger generation is engaging less and less in the search for a job: in January 2021, there were more than a million young people (Dokuz8haber, 2021) in this case. However, this does not include those who have graduated but cannot find a job. Today, 272,000 university graduates, having lost all hope of finding work, say they have stopped looking for it (Birgün, 2021b). This lack of prospects is also reflected in marriage rates, which have declined due to financial constraints (Akman, 2024). According to a recent study conducted by the Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA), affiliated with the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (İBB), titled “Marriage Costs in Istanbul 2024”, the figures provide a clear summary of the situation. The research indicates that the cost of setting up a new household has increased by 69.4%.

Many thus see leaving the country as their only alternative. In 2023, the number of people emigrating from Turkey increased by 53% compared to the previous year, reaching 714,579. Among the emigrants, 55.2% were men, while 44.8% were women. When examining the age distribution of those who left Turkey, the 25-29 age group accounted for the highest percentage at 15%. This was followed by the 30-34 age group at 12.9% and the 20-24 age group at 12.5% (Ticaret Gazetesi, 2024). It has been revealed that well-educated young people choose to emigrate not only for economic reasons but also in search of a fairer legal system and a society based on meritocracy. Among the reasons cited in

⁵ According to the OECD, the NEET group refers to young people who are neither employed nor enrolled in education or training.

surveys on brain drain, the lack of broader prospects, which forces researchers to conduct only smaller-scale, lower-quality research, stands out. Bureaucratic obstacles and an environment lacking opportunities are major deterrents, discouraging professionals from pursuing research (Kulisin Başkenti, 2025). Others claim they have no alternative but to leave the country, feeling unhappy, anxious about the future, and insecure (Kösedağı, 2020). According to Gallup's Global Emotions Report (Yeşil Gazete, 2020), Turkey ranks among the top three countries out of 100 in terms of feelings of anger, stress, and sadness. Turkish citizens were found to be the most irritable in Europe, while Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Turkey ranked as the countries where people experience the least sense of pleasure. Moreover, the suicide rate is also increasing: there were 2,301 cases of voluntary deaths recorded in 2002, compared to 3,161 in 2018 (Şahin, 2019). Among the reasons given to explain such acts, we find, in addition to illness and relationship problems, the economic crisis, impoverishment, unemployment, and fear of the future (Cumhuriyet, 2021a).

Thus, there exists a stark contrast between the narrative of power, excess, and the rediscovered splendor that the authorities of the "new Turkey" aim to project and the lived experiences of citizens, who find themselves increasingly burdened by debt to meet their basic needs (Cumhuriyet, 2021b). The situation has escalated, and some individuals have avoided using public infrastructure designed to evoke Ottoman grandeur due to perceptions of excessive costs (odatv, 2016). In response to the controversy surrounding the exorbitant toll prices, MP Uğur Aydemir remarked that citizens on limited budgets could just as easily opt for "old roads" rather than the newly constructed ones (Gazete Duvar, 19.11.21).

The same observation applies to museums built since 2002 that highlight Ottoman history. Panorama 1453 History Museum, which narrates the conquest of Istanbul by Mehmet II, is ranked among the three most visited museums in Istanbul, alongside Yerebatan Sarnıcı (Basilica Cistern) and Miniaturk (Turizmin sesi, 2019). However, it is also known to be an integral part of school visit itineraries (Pérouse, 2017a), a situation that inflates visitor numbers.

Another irony of fate is that Turkey is currently grappling with a housing crisis despite the extensive urban regeneration efforts to resurrect imperial memory. This situation has given rise to the "#barınamıyoruz"⁶ movement

⁶ This student protest movement against rising housing costs began with a demonstration in Istanbul's Yoğurtçu Park, Kadıköy. Protesters highlighted the severe shortage of student housing—only 700,000 dormitory spaces for 10 million students—along with exorbitant private dorm fees and nationwide rent

(translated as “we cannot take shelter”), which mobilizes students who, due to financial constraints, are unable to secure housing in university dormitories. These students occupied a public park to spend the night to express their discontent with the astronomical rental prices and highlight their lack of alternatives (Kendrick, 2021).

This situation is also evident in the construction market, where rising costs and declining demand exacerbate the sector’s difficulties. In 2023, housing sales dropped by half compared to the previous year. In the first six months of 2024, sales amounted to only a quarter of those in 2023. Moreover, in April and May 2024, construction costs increased by 72%. As production conditions become more challenging, sales continue to decline (Yalçın, 2024).

The national grandeur envisioned through the neo-Ottoman project struggles to manifest at the societal level; indeed, as individuals experience increasing impoverishment, the project fails to resonate with their realities. Consequently, although the neo-Ottomanist initiative is ambitious, it does not seem easy to establish itself in the minds of citizens as a viable pathway to the future.

The statistics mentioned above suggest an overarching sense of malaise (Spurk, 2010): individuals do not find themselves in a historical moment marked by significant hopes, nor do they inhabit a period of “dead calm.” Rather, viable alternatives that could facilitate a new mode of coexistence struggle to materialize (Spurk, 2010: 12).

In addition to the economic repercussions stemming from the neo-Ottoman ambitions, this malaise also manifests at the level of subjectivation. As previously discussed, the neo-Ottoman project seeks to cultivate a new social character and national habitus, thereby shaping individuals increasingly rooted in conservative references and a reinterpreted collective history. However, this project is imposed in a heteronomous manner, allowing little room for the expression of individual subjectivities. As such, the neo-Ottoman initiative endeavors to reshape worldviews and alter the motivations behind individuals’ actions, effectively promoting a form of subjectivation akin to “ready-to-wear” (Lauru, 2013).

Moreover, the selective mobilization of specific historical references by politicians at the expense of others raises significant concerns as it fosters divisions and polarizes society. A notable instance of this occurred when the

increases of 70% to 290%. By spending the night in the park, they sought to draw public attention to the crisis and prompt a response from authorities (<https://x.com/barinamayanlar>).

Alevis objected to the decision to name the third bridge after Sultan Yavuz Selim, arguing that this choice reflected a denial of the massacres committed against their community during his reign⁷. This decision, they contend, obscures the collective memory of a significant portion of the population (Tekin, 2016).

Moreover, Neo-Ottomanism permeates various spaces occupied by individuals, transforming the public sphere into an arena that no longer accommodates the expression of singular subjectivities or serves as a “[a] stage where different social projects confront each other” (Spurk, 2010: 16). In this context, movements of dissent, demonstrations, and divergent opinions are swiftly repressed.

Historically, there have been multiple attempts at resistance by individuals seeking visibility and recognition. For example, marches held on March 8 for International Women’s Day and the pride parades organized by the LGBTI+ community aimed not only to advocate for the rights of these groups but also to counter the erasure imposed by authorities. However, the Gezi movement⁸, along with the failed coup on July 15, 2016⁹, has intensified the government’s authoritarian stance towards the opposition, severely constraining any efforts that could facilitate the mobilization of subjectivities within the public sphere.

Neo-Ottomanism, as it is conceptualized and implemented today, is also inherently polarizing, as it establishes gender hegemony within the political sphere. This hegemony is based on a highly masculinized public space, an Islamized and nationalized cultural domain—positioned as anti-Western and anti-modern—as well as on “conservative” family-oriented policies and a sex-

⁷ The Alevis are a religious and cultural community in Turkey, estimated to constitute 10–15% of the population. They hold historical grievances against Ottoman Sultan Selim I (r. 1512–1520) due to his policies toward Shi’a and Alevi communities. Before launching his 1514 campaign against the Safavid Empire, they claimed to have been persecuted under his rule in Anatolia, although this claim remains contested by some historians. Estimates suggest that between 40,000 and 70,000 Alevis were killed. For his supporters, however, Yavuz Sultan Selim is a key Ottoman ruler. Despite his short reign, he expanded Ottoman control eastward, curbed Safavid influence in Anatolia, and ended the Mamluk Sultanate, securing dominance over the Arab world (Gazete Duvar, 2016).

⁸ The Gezi Movement refers to a wave of protests that emerged in May 2013 in Turkey, initially triggered by public opposition to the planned urban redevelopment of Gezi Park, one of the last remaining green spaces in Istanbul’s Taksim Square. What began as a localized environmental protest quickly escalated into a nationwide movement, reflecting widespread dissatisfaction with government policies, perceived authoritarian tendencies, and restrictions on civil liberties.

⁹ A faction within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to overthrow the government of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, citing concerns over democratic backsliding and government overreach. However, the coup failed within hours due to strong civilian resistance, resulting in the deaths of over 250 people and injuring more than 2,000.

segregated social structure (Cindoglu & Ünal, 2017). The cultural legitimacy of this narrative is reinforced through persistent references to Islam and a reimagined form of Political Masculinities (Özbay & Soybakış, 2020).

The actors are immersed in a society undergoing significant upheaval, unable to oppose or openly express dissent towards the social project imposed upon them. This situation leads to a desubjectivation of individuals who bear the economic and social repercussions of a national program in which they feel excluded. Subjectivation, as defined by Wieviorka (2004: 286), entails “the possibility of constructing oneself as an individual, as a singular being capable of formulating one’s choices and resisting dominant logics, whether economic, community, technological, or otherwise.” It represents the opportunity to establish oneself as a principle of meaning, to assert one’s freedom, and to chart one’s trajectory.

However, contemporary circumstances suggest that the pervasive sense of unease arises from individuals lacking both the means to resist the social changes thrust upon them and the avenues for potential action. Consequently, they find themselves unable to transcend their suffering, reinforcing a cycle of disenfranchisement and alienation.

Despite the desubjectivating conditions, there are instances where scenarios for overcoming the prevailing sense of unease are articulated by individuals, who occasionally evoke the memory of the Gezi protest movement. This significant uprising, which unfolded in 2013 in Istanbul, was initially sparked by the authorities’ plans to demolish Gezi Park and reconstruct 18th-century barracks that would house a commercial complex. This urban development initiative prompted mobilization among residents and environmentalists concerned about the loss of one of the city’s few green spaces, as it involved the felling of trees.

However, the movement quickly gained traction, attracting diverse groups who joined in solidarity, including secular middle-class citizens, ethnic and religious minorities, gender minorities, members of the LGBTI+ community, feminist activists, and football fans. These participants seized the opportunity to voice their indignation not only against the urban project but also against the erosion of their economic and social agency (Türkmen, 2020: 131). The Gezi uprising is also remembered for the violence employed by police to suppress activists, signaling the onset of an authoritarian shift in the country.

Thus, the recollection of the Gezi movement in contemporary discourse is significant on multiple levels: it serves as a reminder of collective resistance,

highlights the diversity of opposition to oppressive policies, and symbolizes the potential for reawakening a spirit of dissent within a society grappling with growing authoritarianism. The memory of the Gezi movement evokes a profound nostalgia for the mobilization of diverse subjectivities united in resistance, rallying around a shared goal: to denounce arbitrary decisions made by authorities. This uprising is often highlighted for its remarkable heterogeneity, encompassing various identities and social backgrounds among its participants.

However, the Gezi uprising also crystallizes the expression of political polarization in Turkey. Through their protest, individuals not only voiced their concerns about the environmental degradation of the park—an area they wished to preserve—but also articulated their dissatisfaction with the broader societal transformation unfolding around them, which they felt was being imposed upon them. In this context, supporters of the “old” Turkey sought to oppose the representatives and values of the “new” Turkey. Their resistance symbolized a confrontation with the neo-Ottoman architecture of the proposed shopping center, a quintessential emblem of neoliberalism and a representation of the socio-political changes they vehemently opposed.

Some scholars, such as Ertür (2016), argue that the barricades constructed during the Gezi protests, in both form and visual language, serve as “counter-monuments” of resistance. The location of these tensions is equally symbolic, as Gezi Park borders Taksim Square, home to one of the icons of the past: a statue of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This square, akin to a “Place de la République,” has historically functioned as a convergence point for political and popular gatherings.

Today, Taksim Square features a colossal mosque capable of accommodating four thousand people, opposite the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM). This center, once regarded as a symbol of republican cultural policies, was inaugurated in 1969 and closed in 2008. Upon its reopening in 2021, it featured a play depicting the life of Hezarfen Ahmet Çelebi, a 17th-century Ottoman scholar, as its premiere event. This development suggests that the institutions of “old” Turkey are not immune to the infiltration of symbols and references associated with the “new” Turkey.

Moreover, the Gezi Uprising is regarded by its supporters as a pivotal event within the national narrative that cannot be erased from collective history (Ince, 2021). The memory of this resistance remains ingrained in the collective consciousness as an alternative political experience (Pérouse, 2017b). Consequently, the Gezi movement exemplifies the mobilization of diverse subjectivities within the public sphere, united by a common aspiration for self-

assertion. Its recollection evokes a profound nostalgia for expressed indignation, a longing that starkly contrasts with and opposes the narrative authorities seek to impose through the neo-Ottoman project. In this context, Gezi's memory serves to revive the hope that an alternative to the prevailing conditions—characterized by discomfort, alienation, and desubjection—has been not only conceivable but already realized.

Another potential avenue for overcoming the current situation is to emigrate from the country, where the conditions for subjectivation appear increasingly unattainable. In April 2021, 64% of young adults indicated they would consider leaving if offered another nationality. Additionally, surveys reveal a staggering 97% increase in the number of individuals migrating from Turkey between 2016 and 2018 (BirGün, 2021c), with a recorded 330,289 departures in 2019. This trend is not limited to higher education students; it also encompasses affluent young entrepreneurs, with 23,000 businesspeople reportedly leaving the country in 2021 (Tarhan, 2021).

While the economic crisis is a significant factor driving this brain drain, it is not the sole reason. Many individuals attribute their desire to emigrate to the erosion of democracy and the deterioration of fundamental freedoms, adversely impacting their ability to achieve subjectivation (Tarhan, 2021). Consequently, these actors seek environments that offer more significant opportunities and a framework conducive to realizing their identities as subjects, allowing them to (re)gain a sense of autonomy.

Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to trace the evolution of Neo-Ottomanism across different periods of history. It becomes evident that imperial nostalgia has been mobilized at various times by different actors, often for distinct purposes. In every case, however, this nostalgia has been instrumentalized to present citizens with a societal project rooted in an idealized vision of the Ottoman Empire. This tendency reemerged in 2002 and has since expanded into multiple spheres of society: in the public space, through the renovation of imperial buildings and the reintroduction of sultans' names; in the private sphere, with the proliferation of television series depicting the lives of Ottoman rulers; and in foreign policy, where Turkey has sought to expand its influence over former Ottoman territories.

Nevertheless, Neo-Ottomanism remains a concept with ambiguous definitions. For some, it is merely a "projection" of select Ottoman elements onto contemporary society, serving prevailing political ambitions. However, the drive to rehabilitate a bygone past in a reinterpreted form extends beyond mere

nostalgia; it represents a comprehensive socio-political project with significant political, economic, and social implications, both domestically and internationally. Within Turkish society, the impact of this project is undeniable. A fundamental reshaping of social character is underway, evidenced by state-led efforts to transform the urban landscape and redefine national identity. However, individuals increasingly find themselves in an “in-between” space, where the symbols, narratives, and references that once provided social cohesion have been overexploited, anachronistically mobilized, and recontextualized within a neoliberal framework. As Morvan and Logie (2019: 96) argue, individuals are now expected to situate themselves within a “recovered” Ottoman era.

Despite state efforts to reshape values and transform Turkey’s urban and ideological landscape, individuals struggle to adapt to this imposed vision—largely due to the economic burden it entails. The imperial society portrayed by the authorities as harmonious, pious, multicultural, and grandiose seems incompatible with the lived reality of many citizens, who grapple with rising inflation and economic hardship. This discrepancy has been conceptualized in this article through Jan Spurk’s notion of malaise, which describes a liminal state where everything could change, yet nothing truly does. Despite the glorification of imperial splendor in official discourse, a pervasive malaise persists. The current implementation of the Neo-Ottoman project and its impact on the cost of living has exacerbated social inequalities, leading to growing precarity and deepening societal polarization.

Thus, while the past is increasingly celebrated, hopes for a brighter future are fading. Many citizens— particularly the younger generation—see emigration as their only alternative, as the country no longer aligns with their expectations. Moreover, this newly constructed national narrative, which aspires to be legendary, unfolds without meaningful engagement from individuals. Instead of offering reassurance about the future, these radical social transformations have led to widespread desubjectivation, as many fail to recognize themselves in this imposed narrative. In this context—where history is rewritten, the present is fraught with precarity, and the future remains uncertain—many individuals have lost all hope for a better tomorrow, as reflected in numerous surveys. While overcoming these challenging circumstances is theoretically possible, it raises a critical question: At what cost?

Çıkar Çatışması Bildirimi: Yazarlar, çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

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