



## THE ECHOES OF THE RECONSECRATION OF HAGIA SOPHIA AS A MOSQUE IN THE CONSERVATIVE MEDIA\*

AYASOFYA'NIN YENİDEN CAMİYE DÖNÜŞTÜRÜLMESİNİN MUHAFAZAKÂR  
MEDYADAKİ YANKILARI

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**Abstract:** This article aims to reveal the entanglement of domestic and foreign political dimensions in the interpretation of the recent conversion of Hagia Sophia Museum in İstanbul, Turkey, into mosque, through a thematic analysis of the coverage of the topic in two conservative media outlets -*Yeni Şafak* and *Türkiye* newspapers- between July 1 and September 15, 2020. The findings are grouped in five headings: how the reconsecration is defined, reflections on the causes of the conversion into museum in the Kemalist period, explanation of the causes of the recent decision of reconsecration, the significance of Hagia Sophia in the so-called war between Turkey and global power elites, and replies to the opposition. It is concluded that the foreign policy aims of pursuing an assertive stance vis-à-vis the Western world and forging a unity in the Islamic world under the leadership of Turkey, and the domestic policy aim of consolidating Justice and Development Party's power in the culturally and politically polarized atmosphere in Turkey are intertwined in the eyes of the conservative proponents of the government.

**Key Words:** Hagia Sophia Mosque, Justice and Development Party, Turkish Politics, Turkish Foreign Policy, Media Coverage

**Öz:** Bu makale geçtiğimiz yıllarda Ayasofya Müzesi'nin yeniden camiye çevrilmesi sürecinin algılanışında iç ve dış politika unsurlarının birbiriyle nasıl iç içe girdiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu amaçla konunun 1 Temmuz-15 Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasında muhafazakâr kanattan iki basın kuruluşunda -*Yeni Şafak* ve *Türkiye* gazeteleri- nasıl ele alındığı tematik analizle incelenmiştir. Bulgular beş başlık altında gruplandırılmıştır: camiye dönüştürmenin nasıl tanımlandığı, Kemalist dönemde müzeye dönüştürme kararının sebepleri üzerine düşünceler, yeniden camiye dönüştürme kararının altında yatan sebeplere ilişkin açıklamalar, küresel güç odakları ile Türkiye arasında var olduğu öne sürülen savaşta Ayasofya'nın yeri ve muhalefete yanıtlar. Batı dünyası karşısında iddialı bir pozisyon alınması ve Türkiye'nin liderliğinde İslam dünyasında bir birlik oluşturulması yolundaki dış politika hedefleri ile Türkiye'nin kültürel ve politik kutuplaşma atmosferinde Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin gücünün pekiştirilmesine yönelik iç politika hedeflerinin hükümetin muhafazakâr kanattaki destekçileri nazarında iç içe geçtiği sonucuna varılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ayasofya Camii, Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, Türk Siyaseti, Türk Dış Politikası, Medya İçeriği

## INTRODUCTION

The Church of Hagia Sophia, the "Holy Wisdom" in Greek, was built in 537 in Constantinople, the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. It had been the imperial church and the seat of the patriarch, thus the principal church of Orthodox Christianity for nine centuries. When the city was conquered by the Ottoman Empire in 1453, Hagia Sophia was immediately transformed into a mosque on the orders of the conqueror, Mehmed II, as a symbol of victory of Islamic civilization. After service to Islam for almost 500 years, a secular future was designated for the building by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the young secular Turkish Republic. Between 1934 and 2020, it has been a museum representing the long and multilayered history of Constantinople/İstanbul, capital of two historic empires. Hagia Sophia was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985 and has drawn millions of visitors every year.

Hagia Sophia Museum's conversion into mosque in the summer of 2020 by the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, JDP) government aroused much interest in Turkey, in Islamic countries and in the Western world. One of the pearls of İstanbul, Hagia Sophia is no longer simply a tourist attraction but a matter of politics. At first glance, the decision of reconsecration seems like a pure domestic policy issue as the government responds to the long-standing demands of the conservative electorate. The opponents may argue that the decision is manipulative rather than responsive, which does not change the underlying assumption that the decision addressed the domestic public opinion. However, some observers such as Ziad Jamaledine (2020) argue that this was a politically calculated decision to support the ambitious aim to play a leading role in the Middle East. It was expected to forge a populist unity in the fragmented Islamic world. That President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan saluted "the resurrection of Hagia Sophia" as "the harbinger of the liberation of Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and footsteps of Muslims' will to leave hard days behind", and that this political gesture coincided with a period of revived foreign policy activism led many commentators including proponents and opponents of Erdoğan to interpret this act as a symbol of Turkey's "brave", "assertive" or "neo-Ottomanist" foreign policy.

This paper assumes that the recent reconversion of Hagia Sophia Museum was not simply a reckoning with the Kemalist regime or/and an attempt to bind the conservative electorate by materializing a long-standing conservative dream. Rather, domestic and foreign political dimensions are entangled. It must be taken into consideration that the Justice and Development Party has been pursuing the ideal of an assertive foreign policy, particularly since the last decade. Putting that ideal into practice required favorable international conditions such as the Arab Spring, which facilitated the involvement of Turkey in the remolding of the region, as well as a domestic consolidation of power so that the political circles that may constitute an impediment to a radical reorientation of Turkish foreign policy are disabled. The culmination of those opportunity structures allowed a certain foreign policy activism in the last couple of years, which will be depicted in the second section.

It is attempted in this article to reveal the entanglement of domestic and foreign political dimensions in the interpretation of the decision among the pro-government conservatives through a media analysis. Political consolidation for domestic or foreign policy aims is not done once and for all; it requires a constant discursive construction of identity and a political translation process that are usually carried out via media. This is not to say that an analysis of media coverage would reveal the intentions of the government behind the decision to reconsecrate Hagia Sophia. For a comprehensive understanding, an unmediated study of the rhetoric and practice of the government is needed in the first place. In other words, this article does not claim to draw conclusions about the JDP government's intentions but confines itself to the echoes of the decision in the conservative media. Nevertheless, media-politics relationship is an intricate and complicated one, and media content can provide some insight. Study of media coverage is

preferred because understanding how the decision to open Hagia Sophia resonated in the media quarters that constitute an important link between the government and its primary audience will provide a valuable input in comprehending the whole issue.

The abovementioned specific aim of focusing on the entanglement of domestic and foreign political dimensions is the first major difference of this study from some recent studies on media coverage of the Hagia Sophia issue. Secondly, most of those studies focus on how the matter is presented in the Western and Middle Eastern media (See Acar, 2020; Arif, 2021; Öztürk, 2022; Saleem et al., 2021; Yeşil and Ulaş, 2020). There is one study written by Mısırlı and Erdoğan (2020), which studied the coverage of the topic in the Turkish media. They analyzed two newspapers from the conservative wing and two newspapers from the left wing to explain how different discourses on the matter are constructed. However, that study is limited to the first page of the newspapers and to one single day. The aim of our study, on the other hand, is to have a deeper understanding of the proponents' perspective, including the international dimensions of the meaning attached to this decision in conservative circles. To this aim, content of both news and columns between July 1 and September 15, 2020, in two major newspapers that are supportive of government policies in different degrees (*Yeni Şafak* and *Türkiye*) were analyzed in a qualitative way.

The article starts with a depiction of the importance of Hagia Sophia in the symbolic repertoire of Turkish conservatism, and the evolution of the JDP governments' Hagia Sophia policy. Then, the main assumptions and hypothesis about the entanglement of domestic and foreign policy are clarified. Lastly, findings of the research are discussed under five sub-headings: how the reconsecration is defined, reflections on the causes of the conversion into museum in the Kemalist period, explanation of the causes of the recent decision of reconsecration, the significance of Hagia Sophia in the so-called war between Turkey and global power elites, and replies to the opposition.

## 1. A BRIEF STORY OF THE "OPENING" OF HAGIA SOPHIA

For both the Christian and Muslim worlds, Hagia Sophia represents a religio-civilizational symbol. Arıboğan, with reference to Vamık Volkan's frequently referred concepts "chosen trauma" and "chosen glory", analyzes the Hagia Sophia case as psychopolitical symbol in the making of collective memories and identities of Christians and Muslims. She argues that it is a chosen object of "recalling" (*anamnesis*) that serves a "collective social dream". The conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans was a "collective trauma" for the Christians, defined as "a knife stabbed into Christendom's heart" (Arıboğan, 2021: 40-41). The Christchurch Mosque attacks in New Zealand in March 2019 that killed 51 people display how this interpretation could turn into a weapon in the hands of fundamentalists. The shooter, in his manifesto, had warned the Turks that "the Hagia Sophia will be free of minarets and Constantinople will be rightfully Christian owned once more".

Arıboğan (2021: 49-50) argues that the museumification in 1934 was a “collective trauma” in mass psychology of the Turkish people too. It was a “great loss” – the loss of the imperial grandeur and the muting of the voice of Islam. It was “the subjugation of the Turkish society to the condition of ‘obliged amnesia’ by the republican staff in cooperation with the West” and reopening Hagia Sophia to worship would signify “the recalling of the forcefully effaced”. In other words, museumification was perceived by certain sections of the society as a concession to the West, or even worse, a voluntary submission. It was also perceived as the culmination of the construction of a secular nationhood that excluded Islamic elements and Ottoman heritage from national identity. Çelik and Schrode (2019) describe the way the museumification of Hagia Sophia was seen by Islamist groups “as a symbol of secularist suppression of Turkey's Islamic identity, with the hope and expectation that one day it would once again become a mosque”.

In the 1960s, the Turkish National Student Union (*Milli Türk Talebe Birliği*), the youth organization of National Outlook tradition that raised President Erdoğan and many other conservative leaders, started to celebrate the “Conquest Day” with massive rallies and to call for conversion of Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, one of the major ideologues of Islamism in Turkey, made a historic speech on Hagia Sophia at a meeting of the Turkish National Student Union in 1965. He heralded the opening of Hagia Sophia in those words:

“Just like all roads leading to Rome, all the issues of the Turkish cause of spiritual salvation end up in Hagia Sophia and in the hands that made it a museum. Hagia Sophia should be opened. It should be opened, reversing the dark fortune of the Turk. Keeping Hagia Sophia closed is keeping all mosques and the very concept of mosque closed. Because they are all just places, Hagia Sophia is the soul...

Keeping Hagia Sophia closed is a crime equivalent to cursing God, spitting on the Qur'an, throwing Turkish history into toilet hole, defiling the honor of the Turk, and capturing the Turkish homeland.

Youth! I don't know whether it's today or tomorrow, but Hagia Sophia will be opened. (...) Hagia Sophia, the doors of which are sealed by those whose hearts are sealed by Allah, will be opened to the hearts of the pious Turkish youth. They tried to seal the pious youth in the same way they did to Hagia Sophia, but they could not stop the influx that increased day by day, they could not do anything but wait with horror for the day of the snowball. This unstoppable flood will open Hagia Sophia” (Akıncılar Derneği, 2013)

Since then, not only Islamic oriented movements but also the Turkish nationalist movement, which adopted the idea of “Turkish-Islamic synthesis” in the 1970s onwards, have pursued the dream of “opening Hagia Sophia”. Indeed, it was a member of the parliament from the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*), Yusuf Halaçoğlu, also the former president of the Turkish Historical Society, who introduced for the first time a legislative proposal for opening Hagia Sophia to worship as a mosque in November 2013. The Nationalist Movement Party

and The Justice and Development Party, now partners of the electoral People's Alliance, have been adversaries back then. At the time, the JDP followed a cautious line, avoiding both drawing criticisms from outside and offending the conservative public inside (Eldem, 2015). Nevertheless, two small churches that also bear the name "Hagia Sophia" (one in İznik and the other in Trabzon) were converted from museum into mosque in 2011 and 2013. As an implicit response to the bill introduced by Halaçoğlu, deputy prime minister Bülent Arınç has reminded those earlier conversions, and said "We are now looking at the grieved Hagia Sophia and wishing its happy days are coming, if god allows" (T24, 2013).

Most notably, The Anatolian Youth Association, a cognate political movement in the National Outlook tradition, organised campaigns in the last decade for converting Hagia Sophia (Croke, 2021). They collected 15 million signatures with the motto "Break the chains!" in 2013 (Yeni Şafak, 2013). They occasionally organized demonstrations in front of the museum (Owen, 2015; Yackley, 2012). As the climate warmed, the government took some small steps. In 2015, head of the Directorate of Religious Affairs recited Koran in Hagia Sophia on the occasion of the opening of a calligraphic work exhibition (Habertürk, 2015). In 2016 an imam was officially appointed to the pavilion (Hünkar Kasrı) outside Hagia Sophia, which was already open to prayer. As part of this house of prayer, ezan (call to prayer, five times a day) was read and transmitted through speakers on Hagia Sophia's minarets (Anadolu Ajansı, 2016).

Erdoğan did not publicly back the calls for conversion until 2019. In a rally in Tekirdağ in mid-March, he scolded those who shouted "Open Hagia Sophia", telling them to crowd the Sultan Ahmet Mosque next to Hagia Sophia first and then make such demands. He also said that it was a setup by some dishonorable people, probably implying the Gülenists. Nevertheless, he added that he knew very well when to take that step, and how to conduct it in realpolitik (T24, 2019). In just a few weeks, he told in an election rally that they were planning to change Hagia Sophia's status from museum to mosque after elections (Reuters, 2019).

One year later, on July 10, 2020, Turkey's Council of State, the supreme court for administrative cases, cancelled the 86-years-old cabinet decree that had changed the status of Hagia Sophia from mosque to museum. The High Council had previously turned down a similar application on the grounds that it would be an interference into the jurisdiction of the executive. A later submission to the court by an association devoted to the preservation of historical waqf buildings was made in 2016, and it had been waiting on the court's desk since then (Croke, 2021). The court revoked the cabinet decision of 1934 on the grounds that the waqf charter, settled very soon after the conquest of İstanbul, openly designated the use of building as a mosque. Immediately after the legal decision, a presidential decree was issued. The first Friday prayer, on July 24, which hosted 350.000 people according to official figures, turned into a display of popular support for the government which made a "collective dream" since the 1960s come true.

## 2. ENTANGLEMENT OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN POLICY

The abovementioned history of the “Cause of Hagia Sophia” generally explains why any conservative party would make the decision of reconversion to mosque but does not specifically explain the quick acceleration if not a shift in the JDP’s formerly cautious Hagia Sophia policy. One major assumption is that the establishment of two new conservative parties, Future Party (*Gelecek Partisi*) and Democracy and Progress Party (*Demokrasi ve Atılım Partisi*), by former prominent figures of the JDP in late 2019 and early 2020 may have alerted the government. The presidential system in Turkey that requires 50%(+1) of the votes to be elected, compels the government to consolidate the right-wing electorate which is potentially divided between the ruling alliance and some opposition parties such as the abovementioned new parties, the Good Party (*İyi Parti*), established in 2017 by former members of the Nationalist Movement Party, and Felicity Party (*Saadet Partisi*) coming from the National Outlook tradition.

The aim of broadening the electoral support is at most half of the story. Foreign policy background is as important to comprehend the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia as domestic causes. The decision was made at a time when Turkey had been taking defiant steps in its region one after another. By the summer of 2020, Turkey had already become quite active in international politics at the cost of tensions with the West at multiple fronts. In October 2019, Turkey launched the “Operation Peace Spring” in Syrian territory, the third military operation since 2016, aiming to contain PKK terror and establish a safe-zone to relocate Syrian refugees. The operation deepened the divide between Turkey and the West. While the US President Donald Trump issued sanctions against some Turkish ministers and institutions, many European governments suspended arms exports to Turkey. Turkey held her ground and launched the “Operation Spring Shield” in February 2020.

At around the same time, Turkey opened its borders with Greece for the refugees to leave, blaming the West for leaving her alone in shouldering the burden of refugee crisis. In the meantime, Turkey got officially involved in the civil war in Libya in January 2020, sending troops and combat drones to support the National Accord Government forces. Turkey’s involvement in Libya was also linked to the aim of protecting her economic and political interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. The long-standing tension between Turkey and Greece regarding their overlapping claims over continental shelf had escalated since 2018, when rich gas reserves were discovered. Tensions have flared up as Turkey launched drilling operations off Cyprus. Turkey’s military interference in Libya and her drilling operations were harshly condemned by a joint statement of foreign ministers of Egypt, United Arab Emirates, Greece, Cyprus, and France in May 2020. They urged Turkey to “fully respect the sovereignty and the sovereign rights of all states in their maritime zones in the Eastern Mediterranean” and “fully respect the UN arms embargo, and to stop the influx of foreign fighters from Syria to Libya” (The Arab Weekly, 2020).

Turkey responded by describing the group as an “axis of malice” (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020).

Given this background, it is assumed in this study that the reopening of Hagia Sophia as a place of worship is first and foremost a symbolic manifestation of Turkey’s assertiveness in international politics, which is also expected to yield favorable results in domestic politics. It is a declaration to the West that Turkey is powerful enough to take up the expected negative reception of this decision by the West, and a call to the East to support that declaration. The major source for this assumption is the speeches of Erdoğan himself. In his televised address to the nation in July 10, President Erdoğan said that with her recent steps Turkey showed that she is no longer an object of time and space, but an active subject. His speech is full of references to moments of victory and trauma in the history of Islamic civilization and Turkish nation.

“Today, Hagia Sophia is experiencing one of its resurrections that it has witnessed many times since its construction. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia heralds the liberation of Masjid al-Aqsa. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the footsteps of the will of Muslims all over the world to get out of a period of interregnum. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the rekindling of the fire of hope not only for Muslims but also for all aggrieved, victimized, oppressed, and exploited people. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia signifies that we, as the Turkish nation, Muslims, and all humanity, have new words to say to the world. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the manifestation of our recollection of moments of leap in our history, from Bedir to Malazgirt, from Niğbolu to Çanakkale. The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is a symbol of our determination to protect what our martyrs and veterans inherited to us, if necessary, at the expense of our lives” (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2020).

In that framework, the aim of this study is to have an empirically detailed and analytically strong understanding of how the government’s perspective in the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia is welcomed, translated, and transferred to the masses by the conservative media. To this aim, not only the news but also the commentaries of columnists between July 1 and September 15 in two major newspapers that are supportive of government policies (*Yeni Şafak* and *Türkiye*) were analyzed in a qualitative way. Thematic analysis method is followed, and common themes are identified. Findings are presented and discussed under five sub-headings: how the reconsecration is defined, reflections on the causes of the conversion into museum in the Kemalist period, explanation of the causes of the recent decision of reconsecration, the significance of Hagia Sophia in the so-called war between Turkey and global power elites, and replies to the opposition.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1. Depiction of the decision**

A study of how the decision is nominally defined in the media reveals some common patterns of meaning attached to it. Besides some generic depictions like



“the closing of a bleeding wound” or “breaking of chains”, the definitions below stand out:

- Correction of a historical mistake (Selek, 2020)
- Symbol and proclamation of fully independent and nationalist Turkey (Orakoğlu, 2020; Öztürk, 2020, July 24; Şeker, 2020, July 28; Uğur, 2020, July 28)
- Beginning of the revival of the soul of Ottoman state, which is the last and most sophisticated representative of Islamic civilization (Kaplan, 2020, July 26)
- Exit from a period of interregnum (Yıldırım, 2020), [repeating Erdoğan]
- Realization of the ideal of Red Apple (*Kızıl Elma*) (Er, 2020 July 11; Miş, 2020, July 14), [referring to the symbolic repertoire of the pan-Turkist movement in Turkey]
- Strike to the continuing Western dream of a revival of Byzantium (Er, 2020 August 15)
- Triumph of Crescent over the Cross (Er, 2020, July 11)
- A torch in our march towards “2071 Turkey, a Global State” (Er, 2020, July 14)
- A symbol of Turkey’s leadership in the Muslim unity and revival (Kaplan, 2020, July 26)

Most of the columnists also define the reconsecration as an equivalent to the “reconquest of İstanbul”. This and the definitions mentioned above display how Hagia Sophia is perceived as a religio-civilizational symbol. Its conversion from museum into mosque is celebrated as a revival of the impoverished Muslim world against the West. Turkey’s role in this revival as the heir to the Ottoman Empire is emphasized. Judging from title only, the event is presented as a matter of international politics.

### **3.2. Causes of the decision to turn Hagia Sophia into museum**

A deeper analysis must start with the examination of evaluations for the museumification of Hagia Sophia in 1934, which is defined as a “mistake” at best. Two simultaneous and intertwined factors that are mentioned are the “secularist mentality” and “lack of sovereignty”.

According to the conservative historical narrative, Turkey was geographically contracted, politically suppressed, and culturally colonized in the early republican period. There are various appearances of this narrative in the newspapers examined. According to one columnist, museumification was an application of rigid secularism and an announcement of giving up the vision of global domination and all imperial pursuits. By abolishing the post of caliphate, the Turkish republic had voluntarily withdrawn its claim to lead and represent the Muslim world. Hagia Sophia was a symbol of denial of any continuity between the Ottoman state and the Republic (Yıldırım, 2020).

It must be noted that many columnists prefer to highlight foreign pressure than domestic will. One writer states that the decision was not the result of domestic

will but a plot, a *fait accompli* of imperialist Crusaders and Mason lodges (Er, 2020, July 11). A common reference we see in almost all evaluations is the Lausanne Treaty. Lausanne Treaty has finalized the World War-I for the new republican Turkey. For the Kemalists, it is a victory that corrected the earlier Sevres treaty while, for the Islamists, it is an abandonment of Ottoman lands. Turning Hagia Sophia into museum is considered in the newspapers as the result of a hidden foreign pressure, which is embodied in the so-called secret protocols of Lausanne Treaty (Er, 2020, July 14; Koç, 2020, July 12; Korkmaz, 2020, July 29; Şeker, 2020, July 31) The selection of the date July 24, the anniversary of Lausanne Treaty, for the actual reopening of Hagia Sophia to the public with a Friday prayer reflects a symbolism, which is found very meaningful by the columnists (Korkmaz, 2020, July 15; Korkmaz, 2020, July 24).

Regarding Atatürk's role, most columnists are cautious not to criticize the founder of the republic. It is implied that the reconsecration decision is not a reversal of a decision made by Atatürk himself. They claimed that the cabinet decree was legally dubious, for many signatures including that of Atatürk were forged (Er, 2020, July 11; Korkmaz, 2020, July 7; Yeni Şafak, 2020a), or for it was built on misguided information (Erhan, 2020). In the news and commentaries, it is emphasized that Atatürk did not change the waqf status of the mosque, preparing the ground for the recent legal decision (Yeni Şafak, 2020b; Yeni Şafak, 2020c; Kılıçarslan, 2020). The focus seems to be on the international pressure on the Turkish republic, which has made her deny the continuity with the Ottoman past and exclude religious elements from national identity. Opening of Hagia Sophia on the anniversary of Lausanne is thus marked as the beginning of revival.

### 3.3. Causes of the recent decision of reconsecration

Turkey is now considered powerful enough to repeal the "secret articles" of Lausanne Treaty (Korkmaz, 2020, July 24). Various dimensions of Turkey's current independence are highlighted by different authors. Technological advances in Turkey under the JDP is one of them. Turkey is no longer dependent on foreign technology and equipment, but she provided many states with health equipment during the pandemics, and makes her own ships, planes, drones etc. (Er, 2020, July 14). It is also stated that Turkey has changed its cultural outlook under JDP. Turkey stopped admiring and emulating colonizers' culture. A columnist argues that Turkey does no longer have an "inferiority complex", and is self-confident enough to cope with the worry "what would West say" (Saydam, 2020).

This cultural and psychological change manifests itself in Turkey's changing international position. Turkey is resolutely setting game in the Eastern Mediterranean, Libya, Syria, Azerbaijan, Somalia, Bosnia, Qatar etc. One of the columnists argues that Turkey now has the power and courage to say "Threats will get you nowhere, bring it on, if you dare!" to the West. Opening Hagia Sophia to prayer is the announcement of this new position (Koç, 2020, September 3). Further notes about Turkey's assertive foreign policy and its consequences will be analyzed in detail in the next sub-heading.

Erdoğan's leadership in this cultural and political renaissance and his role in the opening of Hagia Sophia is frequently emphasized. Erdoğan is represented as a long-time supporter of the reconsecration. There are news about him having promised in a foreign interview he gave 26 years ago that Hagia Sophia will one day become mosque (Yeni Şafak, 2020d). Realization of this promise confirms that he is the last ring of the chain of great leaders (Karagül, 2020, July 24). He is also praised by multiple columnists for wisely waiting for a legal decision, which guarantees that a later government cannot take the decision back with a decree (Ekinci, 2020; Öztürk, 2020, July 28).

### **3.4. The Significance of Hagia Sophia in the So-Called War Between Turkey and Global Power Elites**

The opening of Hagia Sophia coincided with the fourth anniversary of the coup attempt against the government on July 15, 2016. Erdoğan's statements about the coup that defined it as an attempt to occupy Turkey aroused excitement and anti-western sentiments, which was also reflected in the newspapers in question. Many columnists examined in this study depicted their interpretation of "Western plots against Turkey by global power elites" and Turkey's response to them, with a special emphasis on Hagia Sophia.

In multiple commentaries, there are references to the concept of the "Clash of Civilizations". It is depicted as an idea invented 30 years ago by the West, designating Islam as the new enemy. According to the writers, Turkey was capable of giving the show away by mobilizing Muslim societies thanks to its cultural and historical bonds. Thus, war against Islam turned into a war to "stop Turkey". Coup attempt on 15 July 2016 was the peak of this war. However, Turkey stopped the destruction, creating lines of defense outside its borders. Hagia Sophia is considered as the symbol of this rise (Karagül, 2020, July 27; Türkyılmaz, 2020).

According to one columnist global powers had a "One coin, one state, one religion" project. Hagia Sophia was going to be the temple of one religion if 15 July attempt was successful. Its failure and Turkey's Hagia Sophia move destroyed that project (Uğur, 2020, August 13). For another columnist, the same multinational project is called "fate Andulusia". If the coup had been successful Hagia Sophia was going to be a church. Turkey was going to be contained and destroyed. However a breach was opened and "the latest Crusade" is stopped in Anatolia (Karagül, 2020, July 24).

Reconsecration of Hagia Sophia is defined as a political gesture in this confrontation. It is noted that the people of İstanbul did not really need a new mosque, as Erdoğan said one year ago. It is a political move that underlines the independence of Turkey and that gives a message to both West and the Islamic world. It is a foreign policy act because it is a revision in Lausanne, like Hatay's becoming a Turkish province in 1939 or like the Montreux Convention (1936) regarding the regime of straits. The same is wished for Cyprus, Kirkuk, Mosul and the "Turkish islands" (Kılıçarslan, 2020).

It is stated by a writer that the Atlantic axis had lost its monopoly of global power, and rising powers appeared. Turkey is now one of them, an axis on its own (Karagül, 2020, July 13). Hagia Sophia case conveys the message that Turkey is becoming a center country, a game-maker, and the leader of Muslim world in the construction of a new world order (Kaplan, 2020, July 13). In that framework, there are many news about the letter of the Head of Directorate of Religious Affairs to Muslim religious leaders (Yeni Şafak, 2020e) and about how the process had been monitored closely in the Muslim world. Greetings of secular and religious leaders as well as of ordinary people from Palestine, Iran, Malaysia, Libya, Pakistan etc. are announced (Yeni Şafak, 2020f; Yeni Şafak, 2020g; Yeni Şafak, 2020h; Yeni Şafak, 2020i). While there is the expectation that heads of state from Qatar and Libya will join the first prayer (Er, 2020, July 14), there is also reaction to the criticisms from pro-American, pro-Israeli axis in the Muslim world, namely to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt (Kılınc, 2020, July 15; Kılınc, 2020, July 25).

### 3.5. Replies to the opposition

Even in the representation of domestic opposition parties' position regarding the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia, it is seen how foreign policy is a major criterion. The opposition parties are all criticized for being estranged from the people and for having an embedded relationship with the West. Different sections of the opposition get their share of criticism.

The secularist Republican People's Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, RPP) is harshly criticized in the first place for being alien to their culture and past. It is highlighted that the RPP leader Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu and İstanbul metropolitan mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu did not join the first prayer. This is interpreted as a display of how the RPP is distant to the national and moral values of the people, and how it acts in accordance with the Western club (Korkmaz, 2020, July 22).

İmamoğlu, who is from the RPP but has a conservative outlook, is particularly targeted. His "disrespectful" attitudes during his visit to the tomb of Sultan Mehmed II, his definition of the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia as "unnecessary" in an interview with a Greek media outlet, and his preference for participating in a conference about Lausanne Treaty rather than the first prayer, are repeatedly mentioned by many columnists. He is assaulted as a Hellenophile (Koç, 2020, July 12; Koç, 2020, July 26). A columnist said if İmamoğlu had been the president he would keep Hagia Sophia as a museum because he would carefully carry out the orders of the Western club (Korkmaz, 2020, July 15).

It is argued in the news that the opposition raised more objection to Turkey's theses and interests than the enemies did. The RPP and Greece are defined as the two actors who most fervently objected to the decision (Yeni Şafak, 2020j). Thus, the RPP supporters are labelled as "Byzantines inside us", idolatrous followers of the West, completely loyal to the theses, policies, and interests of the Western states (Korkmaz, 2020, July 14).

Nationalist and Islamist parties of the rival alliance are more moderately criticized than the RPP. Felicity Party, which has an Islamist social base, was criticized for not sharing the enthusiasm in the grassroots (Miş, 2020, July 30). Opposition parties recently established by former JDP leaders Davutoğlu and Babacan are particularly targeted. These politicians had criticized the government for using common values like Hagia Sophia as a card to cope with the political results of economic crisis, in other words, for politicizing Hagia Sophia. The columnists examined here define those criticisms as “distortion” and “mumbling”, and argue that Hagia Sophia is over any daily political rivalry (Selek, 2020). Nevertheless, a columnist states that the government’s Hagia Sophia action consolidated the devout electoral base and prevented in advance any shifts in votes to those parties in the next elections (Uğur, 2020, August 13).

## CONCLUSION

This research is based on a qualitative study of the coverage of the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into mosque in two major newspapers which reflect and translate the government’s perspective. In the first part of the article, the place and importance of Hagia Sophia in the symbolic repertoire of Turkish conservatism is traced. Museumification of Hagia Sophia in 1934 has been a psychopolitical symbol -a “trauma”- in the making of collective identity, while “opening Hagia Sophia” has been a common dream for Islamist and Turkist wings of Turkish conservatism alike. However, for nearly two decades, the Justice and Development Party governments led by Erdoğan followed a cautious policy, until they decided to put Hagia Sophia in the political agenda in 2019.

In the second part, the idea of an interplay of domestic and foreign policy factors in the quick evolution of the JDP’s formerly cautious Hagia Sophia policy is advanced. It is argued that neither references to the historical significance of the “cause of Hagia Sophia” for Turkish conservatism nor explanations solely based on short-term domestic policy aim of broadening electoral support in the face of growing competition in the right wing of political spectrum would be inadequate. Major changes in Turkish foreign policy that put Turkey at odds with the West in the late 2010s are depicted. Given this background, it is argued that the reopening of Hagia Sophia is a symbolic manifestation of Turkey’s assertiveness in international politics, which is also expected to yield favorable results in domestic politics.

In the third part, the argument is tested with respect to the interpretation of the matter in conservative media quarters. Findings are presented under five sub-headings. Findings of the study support the hypothesis that foreign policy objectives and domestic political concerns are entangled in the resonation of the decision to convert Hagia Sophia into mosque among the conservative. To begin with, even the very definition of the reconsecration by the columnists examined, displays how Hagia Sophia is perceived as a symbol the revival of the Muslim world against the West under Turkey’s leadership. Presentation of the event in the pro-government media as a matter of international politics is further observed in the

discussion of the causes of museumification of Hagia Sophia in 1934. Even when the secularist mentality is blamed, the estrangement from Islamic culture and Ottoman past is still explained by the Western imperialist pressure on Turkey, which is embodied in the so-called secret protocols of Lausanne Treaty. Hence, the opening of Hagia Sophia on the anniversary of Lausanne Treaty is thus celebrated as the beginning of Turkey's independence and reembracement of its Islamic/Ottoman identity under the leadership of Erdoğan. It is stated that Turkey is now self-confident and powerful enough to act not only as a sovereign state but a globally influential one.

The coup attempt on July 15, 2016, is perceived as a response of the global power elites to this new assertive position of Turkey. Turkey's determination to open Hagia Sophia is represented as the triumph of the will to fight back against those global projects of "recapturing" İstanbul. Hagia Sophia is considered a symbol of the war against Islamic civilization, and there is a call for unity in the Muslim world against this war. Finally, media coverage of the attitude of domestic political opposition regarding the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia also demonstrates the central role of foreign policy. Even though the domestic political aim of consolidating the JDP power among the devout and nationalist electorate seems the dominant impetus in this topic, prominent figures of the opposition are depicted as followers and servants of the West, who are thus alienated from their own culture.

This study hopes to offer some insight into the study of the political motivations behind the decision to reconvert Hagia Sophia into a mosque through an analysis of how the topic is represented in the conservative media outlets. Yet, it must be noted that future studies must focus directly on the speeches of the government's and the JDP's spokespersons to this broader aim. This article, on the other hand, is limited to analyzing the echoes of the decision in those media that link the government and its primary audience. Beside this intended direct empirical contribution, it is also sought to make a contribution to the broader literature on the past and present of Turkish conservatism as well as to the literature on the determinants of political decision-making with a special emphasis on the entanglement of domestic and foreign policy issues.

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**EXTENDED ABSTRACT:** Hagia Sophia, the "Holy Wisdom" in Greek, has served as the principal church of Orthodox Christianity for nine centuries. Upon the conquest of Constantinople/İstanbul, it was immediately converted into a mosque on the orders of the

conqueror, Mehmed II, as a symbol of victory of Islamic civilization. After service to Islam for almost 500 years, it was turned into a museum in 1934 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the leader of the young secular Turkish Republic. Hagia Sophia was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985 and has drawn millions of visitors every year. Hagia Sophia Museum's reconsecration as a mosque in the summer of 2020 by the Justice and Development Party government aroused much interest in Turkey, in Islamic countries and in the Western world. At first glance, the decision of reconsecration seems like a pure domestic policy issue as the government responds to the demands of the devout electorate, for whom Hagia Sophia is a both a "trauma" and a "collective dream". In the face of old and new rival conservative parties, Justice and Development Party might have preferred to put the matter in the political agenda and consolidate its power. However, the coincidence of the decision with a rising activism in Turkish foreign policy forces the scholars to have a closer look at the impact of foreign policy in the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia. The decision was made at a time when Turkey had been taking defiant steps in its region one after another. Turkey launched two operations in Syria in October 2019 and February 2020, sent troops and combat drones in support of the National Accord Government in the civil war in Libya in January 2020, and accelerated her drilling operations off Cyprus in 2020 to protect her economic and political interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. These foreign policy moves caused some reaction in the Western world such as sanctions, suspension of arms exports, letters of condemnation etc. At such a moment, Erdoğan decided to abandon his cautious approach and open Hagia Sophia. It is thus assumed in this article that the reopening of Hagia Sophia is a symbolic manifestation of Turkey's assertiveness in international politics, which is also expected to yield favorable results in domestic politics. The aim is to reveal the entanglement of domestic and foreign political dimensions in the interpretation of the decision among the pro-government conservatives through a media analysis. Rather than drawing conclusions about the Justice and Development Party government's intentions, this article confines itself to an analysis of the echoes of the decision in the conservative media. Study of media coverage is preferred because understanding how the decision to open Hagia Sophia resonated in the media quarters that constitute an important link between the government and its primary audience would provide a valuable input in comprehending the Hagia Sophia issue. In order to reveal the entanglement of domestic and foreign political dimensions, representation of the decision in two major media outlets close to the government are examined. Both news and commentaries of columnists between July 1 and September 15 in Yeni Şafak and Türkiye newspapers are analyzed in a qualitative way. Thematic analysis method is followed, and common themes are identified. The findings are grouped in five headings: how the reconsecration is defined, reflections on the causes of the conversion into museum in the Kemalist period, explanation of the causes of the recent decision of reconsecration, the significance of Hagia Sophia in the so-called war between Turkey and global power elites, and replies to the opposition. Findings of the study support the hypothesis that foreign policy objectives and domestic political concerns are entangled in the interpretation of the decision to convert Hagia Sophia into mosque in conservative media quarters. To begin with, even the very definition of the reconsecration by the columnists examined, display how Hagia Sophia is perceived as a symbol the revival of the Muslim world against the West under Turkey's leadership. Presentation of the event in the pro-government media as a matter of international politics is further observed in the discussion of the causes of museumification of Hagia Sophia in 1934. Even when the secularist mentality is blamed, the estrangement from Islamic culture and Ottoman past is still explained by the Western imperialist pressure on Turkey, which is embodied in the Lausanne Treaty. Hence,

the opening of Hagia Sophia on the anniversary of Lausanne Treaty is thus celebrated as the beginning of Turkey's independence and reembracement of its Islamic/Ottoman identity under the leadership of Erdoğan. It is stated that Turkey is now self-confident and powerful enough to act not only as a sovereign state but a globally influential one. The coup attempt on July 15, 2016, is perceived as a response of the global power elites to this new assertive position of Turkey. Turkey's determination to open Hagia Sophia is represented as the triumph of the will to fight back against those global projects of "recapturing" İstanbul. Hagia Sophia is considered a symbol of the war against Islamic civilization, and there is a call for unity in the Muslim world against this war. Finally, media coverage of the attitude of domestic political opposition regarding the reconsecration of Hagia Sophia also demonstrates the central role of foreign policy. Even though the domestic political aim of consolidating the power of the Justice and Development Party among the devout and nationalist electorate seems the dominant impetus in this topic, prominent figures of the opposition are depicted as followers and servants of the West, who are thus alienated from their own culture.

**GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET:** Yunancada "Kutsal Bilgelik" anlamına gelen Ayasofya dokuz yüz yıl boyunca Ortodoks Hıristiyanlığın baş kilisesi olarak Hıristiyan dünyasına hizmet etmiştir. Konstantinapol/İstanbul'un fethinden hemen sonra kilise Fatih Sultan II. Mehmed'in emriyle İslam medeniyetinin zaferinin sembolü olarak camiye dönüştürülmüştür. İslam dünyasına yaklaşık beş yüz yıl hizmet verdikten sonra, 1934 yılında seküler genç Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin lideri Mustafa Kemal Atatürk tarafından müzeye çevrilmiştir. 1985'te UNESCO Dünya Mirası Listesi'ne girmiştir ve her yıl milyonlarca ziyaretçi çekmektedir. Ayasofya Müzesi'nin 2020 yazında Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi hükümeti tarafından yeniden cami haline getirilmesi gerek Türkiye'de, gerek Müslüman ülkelerde ve gerekse Batı dünyasında büyük bir ilgi çekmiştir. İlk bakışta, Ayasofya'yı camiye dönüştürme kararı yalnızca bir iç politika meselesi gibi görünmektedir; zira hükümet muhafazakâr seçmen için bir "travma" ve "kolektif hayal" olarak önem taşıyan Ayasofya konusunda seçmenin talebine yanıt vermektedir. Bunun yanı sıra, gerek eski gerekse yeni kurulan rakip muhafazakar partiler karşısında Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin konuyu gündeme getirerek gücünü konsolide etmek istemiş olması mümkündür. Öte yandan, Ayasofya meselesinin Türkiye'nin aktif bir dış politika izlediği bir döneme denk gelmesi araştırmacıları dış politikanın meseleye etkisine yakından bakmaya sevk etmektedir. Ayasofya'nın yeniden açılması kararı Türkiye'nin bölgede üst üste cüretkâr adımlar attığı bir sırada alınmıştır. Türkiye Ekim 2019 ve Şubat 2020'de Suriye'de iki operasyon düzenlemiş, Libya iç savaşı sırasında Ulusal Mutabakat Hükümeti'ne destek olarak Ocak 2020'de bu ülkeye asker ve insansız hava aracı göndermiş ve 2020'de Doğu Akdeniz'deki ekonomik ve politik çıkarlarını korumak üzere Kıbrıs açıklarında doğalgaz arama operasyonlarını hızlandırmıştır. Bu dış politika hamleleri Batı dünyasında Türkiye'ye yönelik yaptırımlar, silah ihracatının askıya alınması, kınama mektupları gibi bir dizi tepkiye yol açmıştır. Erdoğan'ın Ayasofya konusunda önceki temkinli yaklaşımını bir kenara bırakmaya karar vermesi işte böyle bir dönemde gerçekleşmiştir. Bu makalede Ayasofya'nın yeniden açılmasının her şeyden önce Türkiye'nin uluslararası siyasetteki iddialılığının sembolik bir tezahürü olduğu ve ayrıca bunun iç siyasette de olumlu sonuçlar vermesinin beklendiği varsayılmaktadır. Çalışmanın amacı, kararın hükümeti destekleyen muhafazakârlar tarafından algılanışında iç ve dış politika unsurlarının birbiriyle nasıl iç içe girdiğini medya analizi yoluyla ortaya koymaktır. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi hükümetinin niyetlerine ilişkin çıkarımda bulunmak yerine çalışma kendisini kararın muhafazakâr medyadaki yankılarının analizi ile sınırlamaktadır. Medya içeriği incelemesi tercih edilmiştir zira Ayasofya'yı yeniden açma kararının hükümet ve öncelikli hedef kitlesi arasında önemli bir bağlantı noktası teşkil eden medya

çevrelerinde nasıl yankı bulduğunu anlamak Ayasofya meselesini kavramak konusunda değerli bir girdi sağlayacaktır. Bu çerçevede iç ve dış siyaset boyutlarının birbiriyle nasıl iç içe geçtiğini ortaya koymak üzere camiye çevirme kararının hükümete yakın iki büyük medya kuruluşu tarafından nasıl temsil edildiği incelenmiştir. Yeni Şafak ve Türkiye gazetelerinde 1 Temmuz 2020 ile 15 Eylül 2020 tarihleri arasında yayımlanan haberler ve köşe yazıları niteliksel olarak analiz edilmiştir. Tematik analiz yöntemi izlenmiş ve ortak temalar belirlenmiştir. Bulgular beş başlık altında gruplandırılmıştır: camiye dönüştürmenin nasıl tanımlandığı, Kemalist dönemde müzeye dönüştürme kararının sebepleri üzerine düşünceler, yeniden camiye dönüştürme kararının altında yatan sebeplere ilişkin açıklamalar, küresel güç odakları ile Türkiye arasında var olduğu öne sürülen savaşta Ayasofya'nın yeri ve son olarak muhalefete yanıtlar. Çalışmanın bulguları, Ayasofya'nın camiye dönüştürülmesi kararının muhafazakâr medyada algılanışında dış politika hedefleri ile iç siyasi kaygıların iç içe geçtiği hipotezini desteklemektedir. İncelenen köşe yazarları tarafından yeniden camiye dönüştürme kararının nasıl tanımlandığı bile, Ayasofya'nın Türkiye'nin önderliğinde Batı'ya karşı İslam dünyasının yeniden dirilişinin bir sembolü olarak algılandığını göstermektedir. Olayın hükümet yanlısı medyada bir uluslararası siyaset meselesi olarak sunulması, Ayasofya'nın 1934 yılında müzeleştirilmesinin nedenlerinin tartışılmasında da gözlemlenmektedir. Sekülerist zihniyet sorumlu tutulsa bile, İslam kültürüne ve Osmanlı geçmişine yabancılaşma yine Batılı emperyalistlerin Türkiye üzerindeki Lozan Antlaşması'yla cisimleşen baskısı ile açıklanmaktadır. Bu nedenle, Ayasofya'nın Lozan Antlaşması'nın yıl dönümünde ibadete açılışı, Türkiye'nin bağımsızlığının başlangıcı ve Erdoğan'ın önderliğinde İslami/Osmanlı kimliğini yeniden kucaklaması olarak kutlanmaktadır. Türkiye'nin artık sadece egemen bir devlet olarak değil, küresel ölçekte etkili bir egemen devlet olarak hareket edebilecek kadar özgüven sahibi ve güçlü olduğu belirtilmektedir. 15 Temmuz 2016'daki darbe girişimi, küresel güç odaklarının Türkiye'nin bu yeni iddialı konumuna bir yanıtı olarak algılanmaktadır. Türkiye'nin Ayasofya'yı açma kararlılığı, İstanbul'u "yeniden ele geçirmeye" yönelik küresel projelere karşı mücadele etme iradesinin zaferi olarak temsil edilmektedir. Ayasofya İslam medeniyetine karşı yürütülen savaşın bir sembolü olarak görülmekte ve Müslüman dünyası bu savaşa karşı birlik olmaya çağırılmaktadır. Son olarak, iç siyasi muhalefetin Ayasofya'nın cami olarak yeniden açılmasına ilişkin tutumuna söz konusu medyada nasıl yer verildiği de dış politikanın bu meseledeki merkezi rolünü göstermektedir. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi'nin dindar ve milliyetçi seçmenler arasındaki gücünü pekiştirmek yönündeki iç siyaset hedefleri bu başlıkta baskın itici güç gibi görünse de, muhalefetin önde gelen isimleri Batı'nın yandaşları ve hizmetkarları olarak tasvir edilmekte ve bu yüzden kendi kültürlerine yabancılaştıkları öne sürülmektedir.