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PERCEPTIONS OF TURKEY IN COLOMBIA: A DISCOURSE-ORIENTED ANALYSIS OF <i>TURKEY IN MY HEART</i>	KOLOMBİYA'DA TÜRKİYE ALGISI: <i>KALBİMDEKİ TÜRKİYE</i> ÜZERİNE SÖYLEM ODAKLI BİR İNCELEME
<p><b>ABSTRACT</b></p> <p>This article examines how Turkey is represented and discursively constructed in <i>Turkey in My Heart</i>, the memoir of Fernando Panesso Serna, Colombia's first ambassador to Turkey. It aims to analyze how the perception of Turkey in Colombia has evolved from the 1890s to the present and to identify the thematic dimensions through which this transformation becomes visible. The study begins by examining the historical background of Turkey-Colombia relations and their development in the 21st century. The study adopts an idiographic approach and employs thematic analysis to explore how knowledge about Turkey was transmitted to Latin America through orientalist stereotypes. It argues that perceptions of Turkey were shaped not primarily through interstate relations, but through social interactions generated by successive waves of "turcos" migration. In this respect, the memoir is approached as a valuable source that reveals the transformation of bilateral relations through personal testimony. The findings reveal that Turkey was initially constructed not as a geographical or political reality, but as an ethnic and cultural representation shaped by the "turcos" discourse. In conclusion, since the 2000s, the transformation of bilateral relations between Colombia and Turkey has led to the gradual decline of orientalist and exotic perceptions of Turkey, giving way to more differentiated social and institutional frameworks and resulting in a more stable and coherent image of Turkey in Colombia.</p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Turkey-Colombia, memoirs, Fernando Panesso Serna, Latin America, Turcos.</p>	<p><b>ÖZET</b></p> <p>Bu makale, Kolombiya'nın Türkiye'deki ilk büyükelçisi Fernando Panesso Serna'nın hatıratı <i>Kalbimdeki Türkiye</i> (Turquia en mi corazón) üzerinden Türkiye'nin nasıl çerçeveslendiğini ve Türkiye ülke imajının hangi söylemler aracılığıyla inşa edildiğini incelemektedir. Çalışmanın temel amacı, Kolombiya'daki Türkiye'ye dair algının 1890'lardan günümüze nasıl değiştiğini ve bu dönüşümün hangi temalar üzerinden görünür kılındığını ortaya koymaktır. Çalışmada, öncelikle Türkiye-Kolombiya ilişkilerinin tarihsel arka planı ve bu ilişkilerin 21. yüzyıldaki gelişim süreci ele alınmıştır. Ardından, Kolombiya'daki Türkiye'ye yönelik algı, "turcos" göç dalgalarının yarattığı toplumsal temaslar üzerinden irdelenmiştir. Bu bağlamda, hatıratın, ülkelerarası ikili ilişkilerin dönüşümünü bireysel tanıklıklar üzerinden görünür kılan bir anlatı ve kaynak olarak işlevi analiz edilmiştir. Çalışmada idiografik bir yaklaşım benimsenmiş olup tematik analiz yoluyla Türkiye'ye dair bilgilerin oryantalist stereotipler aracılığıyla Latin Amerika'ya nasıl aktarıldığı incelenmiştir. Bu çerçevede, "turcos" söylemi ve göçmen temelli algı üzerinden oluşturulan Türkiye imajının coğrafi ve siyasal bir gerçeklikten öte etnik ve kültürel bir temsil olarak inşa edildiği görülmüştür. Sonuç olarak, 2000'li yıllardan itibaren Kolombiya ile Türkiye arasındaki ikili ilişkilerde yaşanan dönüşümle birlikte, ülkedeki Türkiye'ye yönelik orientalist ve egzotik algının geride bırakıldığı; bu algının hem toplumsal hem de kurumsal düzeyde farklılaşarak daha sağlam ve tutarlı bir çerçeveye oturduğu görülmektedir.</p> <p><b>Anahtar kelimeler:</b> Türkiye-Kolombiya, Hatırat, Fernando Panesso Serna, Latin Amerika, Türkler.</p>

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## Introduction

This study examines the representation of Turkey in the memoir of Colombian diplomat Fernando Panesso Serna. It analyzes the discursive elements—such as key words, metaphors, and narratives—through which Turkey is constructed and positioned as a cultural, economic, and political actor. Fernando Panesso Serna, who served as Colombia’s first ambassador to Turkey from 2011 to 2015, authored a memoir titled *Turquía en mi corazón (Turkey in My Heart)* in collaboration with the Center of Latin American Studies of Ankara University in 2021. Published in both Spanish and Turkish, the book consists of six chapters and offers insights into the experiences, observations, and reflections of Ambassador Panesso Serna on the evolution of diplomatic relations between the two countries following his appointment to Turkey.

The first part of the book discusses Ambassador Panesso Serna’s appointment to Turkey, his career, feelings, and thoughts, followed by his first impressions of Turkey, his expectations, and sources of information about the country. The following chapters detail his diplomatic contacts during his tenure as ambassador, the steps taken to strengthen bilateral relations between Turkey and Colombia, and his key memories from this process. The last chapters of the book emphasize the similarities between Turkey and Colombia and the soft power elements that have contributed to the recognition of Colombia in Turkey and Turkey in Colombia from the past to the present. This book is not only the memoir of a diplomat but also a valuable source that sheds light on dimensions of bilateral relations that often remain invisible in official documents. In particular, it reveals the connections between cultural representations and diplomatic encounters from the perspective of an ambassador. By treating the discourses in the memoir *Turkey in My Heart* as data, this study seeks to identify what they represent and the purposes they serve. The primary aim of this study is to contribute to the literature on the evolution of Turkey-Colombia relations, which gained momentum following the update of the Latin American Initiative Action Plan in 2006, and to serve as a resource for future research based on the new findings and insights obtained. This article adopts an idiographic approach as its methodology, aiming to provide an in-depth analysis of the ambassador’s personal narratives and discourse rather than examining Turkey-Colombia relations from a broader foreign policy perspective. This approach provides a unique perspective on the shaping of diplomatic relations by centering on the ambassador’s personal experiences. This study is guided by four research questions. It addresses how Turkey is discursively constructed in Fernando Panesso Serna’s memoir, *Turkey in My Heart*, and through which themes, metaphors, and narrative strategies this representation is exposed. It further explores how these representations relate to broader historical and cultural perceptions of Turkey in Colombia, particularly in connection with the “turcos” phenomenon. Finally, it investigates whether and how these representations reflect a transformation from orientalist imaginaries to more experience-based and differentiated perceptions. In line with these research objectives, this investigation contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it advances a discourse-analytical approach to diplomatic memoirs by conceptualizing them as sites where international perceptions are narratively constructed and negotiated. Second, it connects migration history, the “turcos” phenomenon, with the formation of perceptions of Turkey in Colombia. Third, it provides an original case study on cultural and discursive aspects of Turkey-Colombia relations, a topic that remains largely underexplored in the existing literature.

This study suggests that the evolution of Colombia–Turkey relations cannot be properly explained without examining how the two countries have perceived each other over the course of time. To sum up, individual memoirs, cultural and historical encounters, and diplomatic approaches are aligned to shape a more differentiated and multidimensional partnership —one that further develops through institutional dialogue, academic cooperation, and cultural diplomacy.

### Methodology

This article examines the development of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Colombia following the establishment of their embassies, drawing on the discourses in *Turkey in My Heart*, a memoir by Ambassador Fernando Panesso Serna, the first Colombian ambassador to Turkey. The main goal of this study is to look at how Colombian diplomat Fernando Panesso Serna describes Turkey in his memoir. This study employs qualitative content analysis as its primary methodological framework. In this method, thematic coding is used as a systematic way to sort and organize the data. The coding process focuses on diplomatic, economic, and cultural elements that feature prominently in the ambassador’s accounts. In this regard, the study’s findings are expected to serve as a valuable reference for future research on Turkey-Colombia relations.

The memoirs were treated as raw qualitative data. Therefore, the findings should be understood as illustrative rather than generalizable. Prior to the coding process, Panesso’s memoirs were carefully reviewed, as they provide important information regarding the deepening of diplomatic relations between Turkey and Colombia. During this initial stage, reflective notes were taken to support subsequent analysis.

The qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to carry out the inductive coding process. This tool enables manual coding and provides a range of advanced features, such as automated text analysis, sentiment analysis, and frequency analysis. Once the memoirs were uploaded into the program, a line-by-line coding was conducted. While the study follows a thematic coding process, the analysis is guided by a discourse-analytical perspective, especially drawing on Said’s orientalism. In this context, the analysis employs an interpretative methodology to elucidate the production of meanings and representations within the text. The analysis focuses on identifying Panesso’s views on Turkey, the evolution of bilateral relations with Colombia, and his reflections on cultural, political, or social similarities and differences between the two countries. Upon completing the coding stage, the categorization phase began, during which key themes from Panesso’s discourse were grouped into overarching categories. Within this framework, subthemes were developed under three main headings: (1) initial perceptions and orientalist imaginaries of Turkey, (2) the formation of the “los turcos” discourse and migration-based representations, and (3) the transformation of perceptions through diplomatic engagement and cultural interaction. Based on these main categories, subthemes were further developed to capture the complexity of the discourse. The Spanish version of Fernando Panesso’s memoirs was used as the primary source for this study, and the excerpts selected for analysis were translated into English by the author of this article.

To clarify the analytical framework of the study, it is necessary to briefly define the key concepts that guide the analysis. In this context, “perception” refers to how Turkey is understood and interpreted by the diplomatic actor, while “image” expresses the totality of

representations and connotations attributed to Turkey within a specific cultural context. “Discourse” refers to the system of meanings in which these representations are constructed and expressed, particularly through language, narratives, and symbolic expressions.

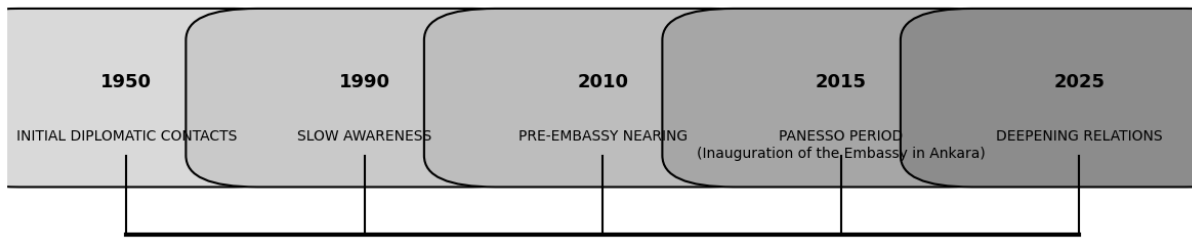
Additionally, based on Said’s (2003) concept of Orientalism, the study examines how certain stereotypical and simplified representations of Turkey are produced and reproduced within these narratives. In this regard, “representation” is considered not as a neutral reflection of reality, but as a process shaped by historical, cultural, and discursive dynamics, constructed contextually.

### **Historical and Conceptual Background of Turkey–Colombia Relations**

Colombia, located at the northwestern tip of South America, occupies a strategic geopolitical position that makes it a key player on both regional and international stages. Its vast territory, privileged geography, abundant resources, and complex historical background grant the country a distinctive significance in today’s global geopolitical context (Fernández, n.d.). Given this background, Juan Manuel Santos Calderón, the president of Colombia at the time of the inauguration of the Colombian Embassy in Ankara, during his two terms, characterized his foreign policy as a transformative process. In comparison with President Alvaro Uribe Velez, President Santos instead pursued a regional and international isolation foreign policy to a more active and participative actor in the regional and international area (Sanchez & Campos, 2018, p. 82). In that sense, President Santos’s foreign policy was based on being diverse and multilateral, using economic diplomacy to attract foreign investment and strengthen Colombian commercial alliances with different states such as Brazil, Chile, or Argentina (Sanchez & Campos, 2018, p. 82). Due to this multilateral agenda, his first period focused on opening new embassies around the globe in order to universalize its international relations as a state, including embassies such as Trinidad and Tobago, Turkey, Indonesia, and the United Arab Emirates (Sanchez & Campos, 2019, p. 82). In addition, as mentioned earlier, his foreign policy, while more globalized than his predecessor’s, sought to establish economic and commercial liberalization (Rojas, 2019).

In this context, Colombia’s geopolitical importance has made it one of the focal points of Turkey’s Latin American approach, prompting Ankara to adopt measures designed to strengthen bilateral cooperation. Building on this, diplomatic ties between Turkey and Colombia were first formalized in 1959 with the signing of the Friendship Agreement. After Turkey’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs proclaimed 2006 as the “Year of Latin America,” relations began to expand across multiple fields (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). The mutual opening of embassies marked the start of a more dynamic phase, fostering closer political, economic, and cultural cooperation. During this period, Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos visited Turkey, an occasion that resulted in the conclusion of several agreements. The opening of embassies in both Ankara and Bogotá, as well as high-level diplomatic exchanges, has strengthened political ties. Trade agreements and investment partnerships have also helped to improve economic cooperation (Cardoso & Turhan, 2018, p. 401). Additionally, cultural and educational collaborations, facilitated by institutions such as the Yunus Emre Institute and academic exchange programs, have fostered a greater mutual understanding between the two nations (Küçük, 2022).

### Colombia-Turkey Relations - Horizontal Infographic Timeline



**Source:** Author's own elaboration.

In addition to these diplomatic and cultural advancements, Turkey aims to increase its trade volume with Colombia, its third-largest trade partner in Latin America after Brazil, to 5 billion USD in the near future (Independent Türkçe, 2022). As indicated above, relations between Turkey and Colombia have strengthened recently, not only at the diplomatic and economic levels but also through collaboration in humanitarian and social policy domains. During the bilateral presidential visits in 2011 and 2015, several agreements were signed to improve cooperation in various areas (Levaggi, 2013, pp. 111–112; Kayacık, 2025b, p. 10). Additionally, key mechanisms such as the Joint Commission on Agricultural Cooperation, the Joint Commission on Culture, Education, and Sports, and the Joint Economic Affairs Commission were established to further institutionalize collaboration (El Tiempo, 2022). In an article in Colombia's *El Tiempo* newspaper, then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that Turkey wants to improve its ties with Latin American countries through its multilateral and humanitarian diplomacy. In this context, Colombia is a special partner (El Tiempo, 2022). It is worth emphasizing that Colombia has emerged as the key country where Turkey has established its most significant institutional presence in Latin America. 2022 marked significant progress in the development of bilateral relations between Colombia and Turkey. In May 2022, then-President Iván Duque visited Turkey, during which the relations between the two countries were elevated to the level of strategic partnership (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025). In April 2022, then-Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu visited Colombia as part of his Latin American tour and held meetings with Iván Duque and his counterpart, Colombian Foreign Minister Marta Lucía Ramírez. During this visit, the Turkish Maarif Foundation held its official inauguration. Following the opening of its representative office in Venezuela in 2021, the Foundation established its second regional office in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia (AA, 2022). During his summit with Duque, President Erdoğan stated that the opening of the regional representative office of the Anadolu Agency in Bogotá, In addition to the Maarif Foundation, it contributed significantly to the development of bilateral relations, and the daily flights of Turkish Airlines to the region also offer enormous potential for the development of bilateral relations (Directorate of Communications, 2022; Kayacık, 2025b).

In this broader diplomatic and institutional context, the role of individual actors becomes particularly important. In this context, Fernando Panesso Serna offers valuable insights into how these relationships are perceived and narrated on a personal level. He was born in Pereira, the capital city of Risaralda, a department in northern Colombia, on December 13, 1951. He is a politician, intellectual, diplomat, and businessman. He studied at the Faculty of Mines at the National University of Colombia in Medellín. As a politician, he was named Governor of

Antioquia from 1987 to 1988. In addition, he was named director of the budget in the Ministry of Finance, Consul of Colombia in New York, and also vice minister at the Ministry of Development in Bogota, Colombia. Moreover, he was the chairman of the Fourth Ibero-American Encounter of Heads of State and Government. Besides that, during Santos' administration, he was named the first ambassador of Colombia to Turkey (the first resident Colombian ambassador in Turkey) and afterwards, ambassador of Colombia to Ecuador (Panesso, 2021).

In *Turkey in My Heart*, in his first chapter, "Music of Wanderings," Panesso recounts his early experiences of traveling abroad. In general, he reflects on his visits to places such as Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, Mexico, the United States, Brazil, Argentina, Korea, Japan, and China. While some of these journeys were undertaken as a tourist, others were carried out in professional capacities, including his role as Colombia's consul in New York. Throughout the memoir, Panesso conveys his personal impressions and engages with the political, economic, and social contexts he encountered during these travels. These include, for instance, his observation on South Korea's economic development, the capitalist system in the United States, and the social climate in Peru following the death of Juan Velasco Alvarado (1968-1975). Due to his experiences, Panesso is not only a professional in the public sector with an extensive career but also an individual who has seen and discovered other cultures, which enables him to appreciate and understand global and cultural richness (Panesso, 2021).

Drawing on his experience as both a diplomat and a politician, Panesso demonstrates a strong awareness of Colombia's position and interests within the international system. In this sense, *Turkey in My Heart* goes beyond a personal account of his tenure as ambassador of Colombia in Turkey. Instead, it provides a reflective perspective on how Turkey is perceived in Colombia and highlights its growing significance in the context of bilateral relations, particularly in terms of economic cooperation and diplomatic interaction.

### **Discursive Analysis of Turkey's Perception**

This section demonstrates the results of the thematic analysis and elaborates on the arguments through a close reading of selected passages. The findings presented in this study are based on a systematic coding process conducted using MAXQDA. The analysis resulted in the identification of three main thematic categories: (1) initial perceptions and orientalist imaginaries, (2) representations based on migration and the discourse of the Turks, and (3) the transformation of perceptions through diplomatic and cultural interaction.

Within these categories, several subthemes were identified, including representations of Turkey as exotic and distant, the homogenization of Ottoman migrants under the label of "turcos," and the gradual reconfiguration of perceptions through direct experience and institutional engagement. The use of MAXQDA facilitated the organization, comparison, and visualization of these themes, allowing for a more systematic interpretation of the recurring patterns in Panesso's narrative.

#### **1. Initial Perceptions and Orientalist Imaginaries**

Examining Ambassador Panesso's statements about Turkey prior to his arrival in the country, it is evident that his knowledge was shaped by limited and often indirect sources. As has been noted in the existing literature, early Latin American encounters with the Ottoman

Empire were primarily mediated by travel documents that were heavily influenced by European narratives and focused more on monuments than on social realities (Taboada, 2023, p.152). In this sense, Turkey appears in his first perceptions as distant, enigmatic, and unfamiliar. His limited awareness of Anatolia's complex historical background reflects the predominance of Eurocentric historiography within the Latin American educational system. Consequently, Anatolia and Turkey occupy a foreign, remote, and somewhat enigmatic position in Ambassador Panesso's perception. Moreover, Panesso's portrayal of Turkey through its relationship with deserts, camels, and exotic landscapes demonstrates that the traditional orientalist view persists in Latin America's perception of Turkey. This perception can be better understood within the broader framework of Orientalism, which constructs the East as fundamentally different, static, and inferior in contrast to a rational and superior West, often relying on generalized and historically entrenched representations (Said, 2003, pp. 300–301; Hotaman, 2025, p. 1916). For this reason, Panesso dedicates the opening passage of his memoir to a candid evaluation of his own prior knowledge of Turkey before assuming his post as ambassador. His discourse demonstrates how personal imagination and collective reflection shaped a distorted image of the country. While he recognized Turkey's strategic geopolitical position and was aware of its imperial past, his vision remained filtered through Orientalist stereotypes. As he recalls:

Mientras esperaba con ansiedad el despegue del vuelo que me haría atravesar el Atlántico para poner rumbo por primera vez hacia Turquía (por aquellos días del año 2011 no contábamos aún con un vuelo directo que comunicara Bogotá con Estambul), recordaba aquellas vivencias pasadas que pavimentarían el camino que finalmente me instalaría en el corazón de la Anatolia. Asimismo, y de forma simultánea, con cierto nerviosismo me reconocía a mí mismo como algo ignorante acerca de lo que allí me encontraría. Aunque había estudiado la gran importancia geopolítica de Turquía y su infinita historia, la grandeza del Imperio Otomano, además de la enorme belleza de Estambul, imágenes de camellos y zonas desérticas construían una equivocada y prejuiciosa visión de lo que podría ser Turquía. (“Las mil y una noches” rondaba en mi cabeza). (Panesso, 2021, p.4)

#### Translation

As I anxiously awaited the takeoff of the flight that would carry me across the Atlantic to set course for Turkey for the first time (back in 2011, we still didn't have a direct flight connecting Bogotá with Istanbul), I recalled those past experiences that would pave the way for me to finally settle in the heart of Anatolia.” At the same time, and simultaneously, with a certain nervousness, I recognized myself as somewhat ignorant of what I would encounter there. Although I had studied Turkey's great geopolitical importance and its endless history, the grandeur of the Ottoman Empire, and the immense beauty of Istanbul, images of camels and desert landscapes conjured up a mistaken and prejudiced view of what Turkey might be like. (“The Thousand and One Nights” was running through my head). (Panesso, 2021, p. 4)

This text indicates the role of orientalist depictions—camels, deserts, and *One Thousand and One Nights*—in figuring Ambassador Panesso's imagery. Within a discourse analysis framework, such images correspond to what Edward Said (2003) demonstrated as “orientalist representations,” in which the East is cast as the exotic and backward “Other.” The Orient is portrayed as Ambassador Panesso's use of these figures indicates how Latin American imaginations of Turkey were not only scarce but also mediated through cultural stereotypes at a considerable distance from the country's modern realities.

Ambassador Panesso further demonstrates his confusion associated with national identities, revealing a deeper historical layer of misunderstanding. He admits:

¿Acaso turcos y árabes no eran la misma cosa? (en América Latina todos los “turcos” son árabes, porque sus antepasados llegaron con pasaporte otomano). ¡Qué tan pobre puede ser el conocimiento desde el trópico al lado occidental del Atlántico! (Panesso, 2021, p. 5)

#### Translation

Weren't Turks and Arabs the same thing? (In Latin America, all 'Turks' are Arabs, because their ancestors arrived with Ottoman passports). How poor can knowledge be from the tropics to the western side of the Atlantic! (Panesso, 2021, p. 5)

In this regard, Ambassador Panesso provides insight into the persistent misidentification of “turcos” with Arab immigrants in Latin America. Popularly grouped under the collective label “turcos”, this confusion has roots in the migration waves from Ottoman territories to the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which many arrivals carried Ottoman passports regardless of their ethnic background (Awad, 2025, p. 61; DeLugan, 2016, p. 149). The diplomat's testimony exposes that such collective confusions continue into the twenty-first century, shaping even his own professional expectations before engaging directly with Turkey.

Another point of Ambassador Panesso's narrative concerns the scarcity of Colombian experiences with Turkey prior to his appointment. He frankly recognizes the following:

Pero no me juzgue anticipadamente, atento leyente, ya que por esos tiempos no había tenido yo aún la fortuna de conocer a algún colombiano que hubiese estado en Turquía y me sacara de este error conceptual y cultural. Recuerde que por ese entonces no llegaban a las otrora tierras otomanas los cerca de 40.000 compatriotas míos que hoy en día se estima llegan anualmente y se convierten inmediatamente en los mejores embajadores de este mágico país. Entienda que apenas estábamos comenzando el proceso de enamoramiento colombo-turco que en el presente observamos consolidado. (Panesso, 2021, p. 5)

#### Translation

However, dear reader, please refrain from making premature judgments, as I had not yet had the opportunity to meet a Colombian who had visited Turkey and could rectify my conceptual and cultural mistakes. Remember that back then, the roughly 40,000 of my compatriots who now arrive annually in the former Ottoman lands and immediately become the best ambassadors of this magical country hadn't yet come. Understand that we were only just beginning the Colombian-Turkish courtship process that we now see fully consolidated. (Panesso, 2021, p. 5)

This confession situates his ignorance not as an individual flaw but as part of a wider absence of exchanges between the two nations. By contrasting the lack of Colombian travelers to Turkey in the early 2010s with the tens of thousands who visit annually today, Panesso frames his personal journey as symbolic of a broader transformation in bilateral encounters. His discourse thus moves from personal bias to collective discovery, constructing a narrative of Turkey as a country that has shifted from being distant and unknown to becoming an increasingly familiar partner.

Finally, Panesso openly acknowledges the collective image of Turkey circulating in Colombian society as recently as the early twenty-first century:

Y es que en nuestro imaginario colectivo hasta hace unos años (afortunadamente hoy totalmente cambiado y en poquísimo tiempo). Turquía era un país en el que se transportaban en camellos y alfombras voladoras sobre inmensas dunas en cuyos bajos se encontraban oasis repletos de palmas con dátiles. ¿Se podría tener una distorsión mayor sobre un país? (Panesso, 2021, p. 65)

### Translation

And the fact is that in our collective imagination, until a few years ago (fortunately, that's now entirely changed in a very short time), Turkey was a country where people traveled by camel and flying carpet over immense dunes, at the foot of which lay oases filled with date palms. Could there be a greater distortion of a country? (Panesso, 2021, p. 65)

This text highlights how mythical depictions defined Colombia's perception of Turkey. From the discourse analysis perspective, Ambassador Panesso constructs a contrast between an "imagined Turkey" and the lived reality he later encountered, showing how direct experience reshapes his perception. Overall, these passages highlight how Panesso Serna frames his initial impressions of Turkey as a narrative of misconceived assumptions, cultural misconceptions, and gradual awareness. His personal journey of discovery indicates the trajectory of Colombia's broader interaction with Turkey—from orientalist stereotypes to a multi-dimensional and dynamic cooperation.

## 2. From Mutual Distance to the Birth of the *Turcos* Stereotype

As mentioned above, although diplomatic relations between Turkey and Colombia were established in 1959 (Panesso, 2021, p. 69), the geographical distance and cultural disparities between the two nations have historically hindered the advancement of their bilateral relationship. Initially, the establishment of mutual awareness did not arise through diplomatic channels, cultural exchange, or commercial activities; rather, it stemmed from the migration of Ottoman subjects during the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Flórez and Márquez, p. 353-360). These immigrants, originating from Ottoman territories such as Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, were classified as "turcos" within Colombian society due to possessing Ottoman-issued passports. The term "turcos" does not refer to a homogeneous ethnic group but rather to a diverse population originating from different parts of the Ottoman Empire, most of whom were not ethnically Turkish (Klich & Lesser, 1996; Hu-DeHart, 2009). On top of that, the intensified waves of "turcos" migration from the 1860s onward, especially for territories such as Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Chile, and Cuba, can be explained by the enduring existence of negative and stereotypical perceptions of the Ottoman-Turkish image in Latin America (Kayacık, 2025c, pp. 161-163).

It can be stated that the primary factors motivating these migration movements at that time were the economic hardships faced in the affected regions of the Ottoman Empire, the escalation of social conflicts, and the perception that living conditions were superior in the Americas (Karpas, 1985; Ekinçi, 2008, pp. 45-47; Kayacık, 2025a, p. 433). In this context, a notable number of immigrants of Ottoman origin who emerged in various spheres of Latin American public life have occupied prominent positions ranging from political and diplomatic roles such as presidents, ministers, and diplomats, as well as writers, poets, artists, and business figures (Kutlu, 2012). Moreover, many of these communities were actively involved in print culture by publishing newspapers and journals, which not only facilitated the maintenance of intra-community connections but also allowed them to establish a presence within the host societies (Çatalbaş, 2024).

As Ambassador Panesso also explains, the local communities in Colombia, unaccustomed to the social complexities of these migrant groups, categorize all of these individuals under a single classification: "*los nativos bautizaron con el mote de 'turcos', a pesar de no ser,*

*estrictamente hablando, oriundos de Turquía.*" ("The natives nicknamed them 'Turks,' even though, strictly speaking, they weren't from Turkey" Panesso, 2021, p. 48). When so-called "turcos" began to establish a presence within the local economic and social fabric—in the early period as merchants and later as entrepreneurs—they integrated into Colombian communities while striving to preserve their cultural traditions, often perpetuating orientalist stereotypes. As he indicates, their influx into the region coincided with a time characterized by the idealization of European immigrants in Latin America, while facing prejudices against Asians and Middle Easterners. These migrants from the Levantine regions of the Ottoman Empire arrived in Latin America after taking on arduous journeys, frequently going through processes of identity transformation, such as the modification of their names by customs authorities. These migrants primarily entered sectors such as itinerant trade and commerce, in contrast to the "ideal European agricultural worker" that was promoted by state migration policies. This position exposed them to social stigmatization and simultaneously fostered persistent stereotypes, including the "mercachifle" and the "turco comerciante," in Latin American cultural production. In this regard, the Ottoman migratory experience demonstrates the cultural ruptures that result from identity reconfiguration and the orientalist representations that are based on their economic activities (Cañas Bottos & Plasil, 2022, pp. 50–53; Kayacık, 2025c, p. 164). Over time, this cultural interaction established the basis for the early perception of Turkey in Colombia, with "turcos" becoming integrated into Colombian society through trade, social connections, and marriage while still being depicted through orientalist representations. In this context, Panesso expresses the difficulties faced by immigrants in settling and being accepted in Colombia with the following statement:

Es indispensable aclarar que este proceso de adaptación y progreso, además de la aceptación por parte de las sociedades receptoras, no se dio de la noche a la mañana. Bastantes penurias y esfuerzos tuvieron que pasar las primeras generaciones de inmigrantes para que sus descendientes pudieran hacerse a un lugar y a un respeto entre las altas esferas latinoamericanas... ¡Sí que lo consiguieron! Basta con tan solo dar tres ejemplos para evidenciar hasta dónde han llegado: Carlos Menem, presidente argentino de origen sirio entre 1989 y 1999; Abdalá Bucaram, de origen libanés, presidente del Ecuador entre 1996 y 1997; y Carlos Slim". (Panesso, 2021, p.57)

#### Translation

It is essential to clarify that this process of adaptation and progress, as well as acceptance by host societies, did not happen overnight. The first generations of immigrants had to endure considerable hardship and effort for their descendants to earn a place and respect among Latin America's elite... and they did it! It suffices to give just three examples to illustrate how far they have come: Carlos Menem, Argentine president of Syrian origin from 1989 to 1999; Abdalá Bucaram, of Lebanese origin, president of Ecuador from 1996 to 1997; and Carlos Slim. (Panesso, 2021, p. 57)

In the context of Turkey-Colombia relations, these migration narratives form an initial and indirect cultural interaction that considerably marked Colombia's first depictions of "turcos", often labeled Arab Ottomans with Turkishness. Overall, this legacy constitutes a foundational structure in the historical moment of the "turcos" stereotype and its long-lasting place in the Colombian imagination. Fawcett and Carbó (1998, pp. 3- 4) demonstrate that Syrian-Lebanese immigrants in Colombia, although relatively limited in number, rapidly achieved a significant presence, particularly in the Caribbean coastal regions. Initially involved in trade, they soon extended their activities into industry, agriculture, and even the political sphere. Between approximately 1880 and 1930, a steady influx of migrants from Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine contributed significantly to the country's social and economic

landscape. As Panesso also notes, these early arrivals passed through Puerto Colombia, one of the maritime gates near Barranquilla, before crossing through the Magdalena River and into the Andean interior. In the enduring years, these immigrant groups settled into communities in the commercial corridors like Santander, Norte de Santander, Bogotá, Tolima, Huila, and Valle del Cauca and remote Pacific and Caribbean towns like Buenaventura, Lorica, and Maicao (Panesso, 2021, p. 63).

### 3. From Diplomatic Formality to a Growing Mutual Recognition

This chapter indicates that the two countries have entered a process of discovering and getting to know each other closely, while previous passages discussed the perception of Turks in Colombia and the obstacles posed by mutual distance. Formalized in 1959, diplomatic relations evolved into a multi-dimensional strategic partnership by the 2000s. The establishment of cultural diplomacy, student scholarships, and direct flights provided a basis for strong cooperation, with direct experiences over time shaping the perceptions of both nations toward each other.

In this regard, Ambassador Panesso reflects that his evocative comments on religion, morality, social behavior, and everyday life in Turkey highlight how social differences transform an instrument of learning rather than separation. “Parecidos.. Pero muy distintos. La religión es uno de los factores que diferencia de manera más marcada a turcos y colombianos. También se observa cómo la disciplina musulmana trae consigo altos niveles de confianza en la comunidad.” (Trans.: “Similar.. But very different”. Religion is one of the factors that most clearly distinguishes Turks and Colombians. It is also observed how Muslim discipline brings with it high levels of trust within the community” (Panesso, 2021, p. 94). As seen, Panesso offers an effort to understand the “other” based on his field observations, replacing established orientalist images of Turkey and creating a form of understanding based on mutual interaction without exoticizing the “other.”

On the other hand, Panesso brings together the historical and cultural memories of Turkey and Colombia through figures that have been incorporated into the cultural imaginaries of both societies. According to Panesso, both countries are societies that build their national identities around heroes, and these symbols could pave the way for these two countries to use cultural diplomacy to shape their national image. The text argues that a narrative of cultural convergence is formed through the characters and authors of telenovelas such as ‘Betty la Fea’, ‘Soliman Magnifico’, ‘García Márquez and Mondragón’, as well as through popular culture icons from Turkey and Colombia. Thus, the “other” now looks more closely like oneself. With these similarities in mind, Panesso argues that both societies experience life as “*la vida visceral, apasionada, y por momentos*” (Trans.: *The visceral, passionate, and at times*) (Panesso, 2021, p.91) and draws a deep cultural parallel based on this emotional intensity and closeness.

Also, he mentions that Turkish series, such as “*One Thousand and One Nights*”, “*Fatmagül*”, “*Ezel*”, and “*Mother*”, have reached a wide audience in Colombia and the region as a whole and have made a strong impact. This widespread reception indicates the growth of a cultural knowledge framework regarding Turkey, shaped by multiple exposures to cultural and historical figures and images that enhance Turkey's visibility to Colombian audiences. The audience’s strong identification with melodramatic narrative structures and the transformation of the television landscape (Ferreira, 2023) contribute to the success of these productions. This

connection is established through “stories that feel close to viewers, with relatable characters,” as well as narrative elements that resonate deeply with audiences, such as “a clear love story—a traditional, captivating, and unique romance” and “moral identification with the protagonists, grounded in values such as redemption, loyalty, respect for family, and perseverance,” as Giuliana Cassano notes (Cassano,2022, p.6). Overall Turkish television dramas, as is well-known, in Latin America have been the subject of a growing body of scholarship in recent years, which has underscored their important cultural influence throughout the region.

At this stage, the widespread impact created by influential writers of Colombian literature such as Gabriel García Márquez and Alvaro Mutis in Turkey also demonstrates that the two countries now recognize each other through shared emotions and similar narratives despite geographical distance and language differences, thus serving as a clear symbol of the strengthening cultural foundation of bilateral relations.

## Conclusion

In our study, we analyzed how Turkey is generally framed in Panesso Serna’s memoir, *Turkey in My Heart*, based on the prominent themes in the memoir. By focusing on a diplomatic anecdote, the study also emphasizes how personal narratives can reveal dimensions of international relations that remain invisible in official accounts, particularly the interaction between cultural representation and diplomatic experience.

Specifically, perceptions of Turks and Turkey in Colombia during the period from the establishment of relations between Turkey and Colombia to the opening of the embassy were examined through Panesso’s narratives. It was found that the first part of Panesso’s narrative contained orientalist elements related to Turkey, while after the encounters, a process of witnessing based on mutual respect and closeness began. The Turkish perception already prevalent in Colombian society during that period formed the basis of stereotypes and orientalist representations related to Turkey.

Considering this historical and cultural background, Panesso’s memoir, *Turkey in My Heart*, recounts the course of bilateral relations between Turkey and Colombia, offers primary, original testimony, and brings to light personal observations, feelings, and cultural touchpoints not found in official documents, as seen through the eyes of primary witnesses of the time. In these memories, it is particularly evident that Turkey, which was represented in the eyes of Colombian society with certain stereotypes such as “exotic,” “mysterious,” and “other,” developed a positive image of itself and strengthened mutual ties with Colombia in the 2000s, along with increased cultural awareness and the development of economic relations.

As a result, due to the lack of direct interaction, Turkey was primarily remembered in the region through orientalist and exotic depictions. Additionally, it has been observed that Turkey, initially considered different and exotic, has transformed into a more familiar yet distinct entity with the growth of mutual diplomatic and cultural exchanges. Notably, Turkey is currently promoting social rapprochement with Colombian society and creating a transnational impact through prominent Turkish cultural symbols and figures, including media series, historical narratives, and elements that have become integral to national culture. In this context, the study reveals that perceptions of Turkey are not static; rather, they are discursively constructed frameworks that evolve in response to historical circumstances and reciprocal interactions.

Finally, incorporating these kinds of perspectives of different actors, including diplomats, migrants, and cultural producers, can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how national perceptions are formed, negotiated, and transformed over time.

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**Declaration of Conflict/Çatışma Beyanı:** It is declared that there is no conflict of interest between individuals or institutions in the study. / Çalışmada kişi ya da kurumlar arası çıkar çatışmasının olmadığı beyan olunur.

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