

XVI Convegno SeSaMO

Università degli Studi di Cagliari  
Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche e Sociali

3-5 ottobre 2024



SOCIETÀ PER GLI STUDI SUL MEDIO ORIENTE

**TITOLO/TITLE:** Turkey between the past and today's world. Who's and How's the Other?

**PROPONENTE/I – PROPONENT/S:** SAMUELE C.A. ABRAMI, JACOPO FRANCESCHINI, RICCARDO GASCO, ANDREA NOVELLIS

**Chair:** Jacopo Franceschini

**Discussant:** Jacopo Franceschini

**Panelists:**

- 1) Alexandra Iulia Oprea (Center for Middle East and Global Order)
- 2) Simona Scotti (Topchubashov Center)
- 3) Yusuf Selman Inanç (Central European University)
- 4) Samer Sharani and Sinem Taştan (Sabancı University)
- 5) Berfin Çakın (Scuola Normale Superiore)

**ABSTRACT (1500 parole/words):**

Situated at a geopolitical and geographical juncture, Turkey's history and politics are shaped by a continuous dialogue between its internal dynamics, regional setting, and engagement with the wider world. From the Ottoman Empire to the birth and consolidation of the modern Turkish Republic until nowadays, the question of identity has been central to Turkey's evolution. This is because it grapples with its multiethnic, multicultural, and heavy historical heritage while forging a path forward in an ever-changing global landscape. These peculiarities originate and characterize how Turkey sees itself and others, from identity questions to nation-state-building processes until national role conception in the international arena. Despite a wide body of literature, one can bring it down to a concept that captures all these nuances, namely "Turkey's in-betweenness" (Rumelili & Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 2017).

Scholars of Turkish history and politics have long emphasized the complexities inherent in Turkey's quest for modernization and its search for a distinct identity amidst the shifting tides of geopolitics. From the reforms of the Tanzimat era to the secularization efforts of the Kemalist period, Turkey has navigated a delicate balance between tradition and modernity, between East and West, while contending with the legacies of its imperial past (Yavuz, 2020). Although Turkey's socio-political realm has passed through watershed periods and frequent ruptures, some elements have been periodically re-emerging: center-periphery dynamics, the quest for strategic independence, struggle for democratization, civil-military balance, and the omnipresent question related to the "Turkish way of Islam." All of this has historically been coupled with macro and micro dynamics involving people, state, society, leaders, and international relations (Mufti, 2023).

For instance, the Kurdish issue represents a well-documented case encompassing ethnopolitics and security realms (Yegen, 2023). Another one is the Turkish state's foundational elements in terms of centralization of power and the looming top-down approach. This has recently become evident in increased authoritarianism that, despite building on the strong Kemalist state apparatus, has been gradually reshaped by new political figures blending Turkish nationalism, nativism, and populism with Islamism (Gumuscu, 2024). This evolving landscape also reflects in the shifting identities and roles of the "internal others" within the national narrative, marking a continuous redefinition of opposition and dissent.

Turkey's socio-political influences and dynamics over the construction of identities cross the physical borders, reaching the digital realm. Digital penetration in Turkey is witnessing a considerable increase with an impact on several milieus: the young demographic population and in social media usage; the development of nationalism constructions accompanied by melancholia or nostalgia for the past; the (re)creation of collective identities for

minorities, ideological and religious movements (Islamists and Neo-Kemalists) until Turkish diasporas and foreign policy exploitations. (Zagidullin, Aziz & Kozhakhmet, 2021)

Moreover, in recent decades, Turkey has set itself as a key player in regional and global affairs, asserting its influence in the Middle East, Europe, and beyond. Some have lately defined it as a “modified middle power” (Altunışık, 2023), highlighting once again the (apparent or actual) ambiguity of Turkey’s foreign policy and its impact on how the “others” perceive it. An overarching theme regards Turkey’s self-other relation with Europe that includes ebbs and flows regarding identity, institutional and normative frameworks as well as its impact on Turkey’s domestic dynamics (Ruacan, 2020). If this type of relation traditionally applied to Turkey’s perception of and within the West, its increased foreign policy activism has reproduced similar – yet different – dynamics in other regions, ranging from the Middle East to Africa, from the Balkans to Central Asia. Although in a different fashion, sociopolitical dynamics pertaining to minorities like Azeri and Turkmen are relevant elements to understanding Turkey’s presence in different areas, whether being in the form of increasing visibility through soft power or increasing political or military presence in conflicts at its borders, such as in Syria, Iraq, and the Nagorno-Karabakh.

Against this backdrop, the concept of “self and other” offers an eclectic lens to understand Turkey’s complex relationships with internal and external actors, shedding light on the nuances of its identity formation process and its quest for a greater role in the international arena (Gülsah Çapan & Zarakol, 2019). To investigate Turkey’s identity, politics, and role in international affairs, our panel encourages a multidisciplinary approach that draws on insights from history, political science, sociology, and international relations. This panel invites contributions examining Turkey’s responses to historical and contemporary challenges through the lens of “self and others.” This approach aims to offer fresh perspectives to our understanding of Turkey’s position in the global context. We encourage submission of papers related, but not limited to, the following topics:

- Constructing the Other: Ideologies, Ethnic Identity and Minority Rights in Turkey
- Polarization and Political Othering in Contemporary Turkey
- Turkey’s Foreign Policy and the Quest for Regional Leadership
- Turkey, the West and the Others
- Gender, Migration, and Social Inclusion in Turkey
- Historical Narratives and Turkey’s Quest for Identity
- Power dynamics: state, institutions, and political actors
- Making sense of “in-betweenness” in today’s multicomplex world
- Turkey’s geographical liminality: Who’s and How’s the other?
- Turkey’s construction and reinvention of identities in the digital sphere

### **Bibliography**

[Altunışık, M. B. \(2023\). The trajectory of a modified middle power: An attempt to make sense of Turkey’s foreign policy in its centennial. \*Turkish Studies\*, 24\(3–4\), 658–672.](#)

[Gülsah Çapan, Z., & Zarakol, A. \(2019\). Turkey’s ambivalent self: Ontological insecurity in ‘Kemalism’ versus ‘Erdoğanism.’ \*Cambridge Review of International Affairs\*, 32\(3\), 263–282.](#)

[Gumuscu, S. \(2024\). The AKP and stealth Islamization in Turkey. \*Turkish Studies\*, 1–27.](#)

[Mufti, M. \(2023\). Turkey at 100: Between Constancy and Change. \*Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi\*, 20\(78\), 5–20.](#)

[Ruacan, I. Z. \(2020\). Fear, Superiority, Self-Identification and Rejection: Turks’ Different Attitudes to Europe since the Late Ottoman Era. \*Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies\*, 22\(5\), 684–700.](#)

[Rumelili, B., & Suleymanoglu-Kurum, R. \(2017\). Brand Turkey: Liminal Identity and its Limits. \*Geopolitics\*, 22\(3\), 549–570.](#)

[Yavuz, M. H. \(2020\). \*Nostalgia for the empire: The politics of neo-Ottomanism\*. Oxford University Press.](#)

[Yegen, M. \(2023\). Ethnopolitics to geopolitics: The Turkish State and the Kurdish question since 2015. \*British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies\*, 50\(4\), 943–961.](#)

Zagidullin, M., Aziz, N., & Kozhakhmet, S. (2021). Government policies and attitudes to social media use among users in Turkey: The role of awareness of policies, political involvement, online trust, and party identification. *Technology in Society*, 67, 101708.

## ABSTRACTS:

### **Cultural Heritage Projects as Tools of Turkey's Faith-Based Diplomacy in the Balkans by *Axandra Iulia Oprea***

The peculiarities of Turkish secularism- in which the state controls and instrumentalizes religion to its aims, the status "boost" of Diyanet (Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs) and its network organizations and their increasing role abroad as well as the alleged competition and conflict between "faith diplomats" versus "career diplomats" indicate that faith-based diplomacy in Turkey has gained more weight in foreign politics. This paper explores the cultural-historical dimension of Turkish faith-based diplomacy in the Balkans. Cultural heritage projects affect symbolic geographies of power and "offer successful platforms in shaping cultural sovereignty beyond the boundaries of nation-states". I will analyze Diyanet's involvement in cultural heritage conservation projects, and compare the Islamic narratives linked to these projects in different South Eastern European countries, by assessing their purpose and reception in host societies. I will examine the changing discourse regarding the cultural heritage projects of Diyanet and Turkey's network organizations through the reports they published and media coverage. I will focus on discourses and activities of the following organizations: Turkish Diyanet Foundation, Turkey Maarif Foundation, Union of International Democrats), Yunus Emre Institute, Center of Islamic Studies, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research, Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association and Turkic Council.

### **Understanding Turkish foreign policy tools through the prism of the Second Karabakh War by *Simona Scotti***

In the 2020 Karabakh conflict, Turkey played a direct role, to the point of actively contributing to shifting the balance in favor of Baku. Literature on Turkey's involvement in the Southern Caucasus has overlooked the intermingling between the domestic and systemic variables explaining the Turkish foreign policy in the area.

This paper aims to detect those elements that not only allow us to understand Turkey's role concerning the causes of the conflict but also to use this case for tracing potential future scenarios within the broader context of regional-international politics. Like in many conflictual realms, Turkey has proposed itself as both a game-changer and a balancing actor through different tools.

Turkey's involvement is considered as part of its "new" foreign policy: quest for strategic autonomy; and capacity to balance between traditional alliances in the West and new "marriages of convenience" in the East. The Turkish foreign policy behavior is analyzed through a domestic angle, where recent institutional changes evolved into new mechanisms of decision-making that depend on another thin equilibrium between a new nativist-nationalist rhetoric, regime survival strategies, and fragile economic credentials.

Analyzing Turkey's role in the South Caucasus can offer new explanatory metrics to understand evolving regional realities and security challenges.

### **"Ambiguous Secularism": How Sufi Networks Re-Asserted Their Influences in Turkey (1925- 1980) by *Yusuf Selman Inanç***

#### Abstract:

Once hailed as the only secular Muslim-majority country, Turkey currently witnesses the presence of influential Islamic communities. Among them, despite the state's ban in 1925, Sufis are among the most visible through their schools, charities, and financial institutions. Therefore, this paper revolves around two main questions. What were the primary dynamics contributing to the resurgence of religion in Turkey between 1960 and 1980? How was a prohibited tradition like Sufism integrated into the broader process of religious resurgence during this period? To seek answers, it looks at the case of the widespread İsmailağa community, which is based in Istanbul but has roots in the countryside and follows the Naqshbandi Sufi order. While looking at certain social dynamics such as migration, relaxation of secularism policies, and incorporation of Islam into national identity after the 1960 coup, it emphasizes the concept of "ambiguous secularism" characterizing the state's anti-Sufi policies, in cases like permitting banned sheiks to become imams or letting Sufis get organized under "associations" (*dernekler*) or "foundations" (*vakıflar*). Hence, this paper will briefly touch on the ban on Sufism in 1925, move towards the emergence of new groups in Istanbul, and attempt to explain how ambiguities allowed Sufis to re-assert their influence on society.

### **Identity Performance in Turkey: Canceling Liminal Identity by *Samer Sharani and Sinem Taştan***

Identity groups in a nation-state may compete with each other over how their state should appear to the world. This contestation swirls around how such groups form their state's identity. In order to 'impose' a desired identity, they 'perform' it in various ways, such as emphasizing certain holidays, walking in the street in specific attire, posting on social media a particular dish of food, and the like. This research investigates the post-2016 identity performances in Turkey, exploring how various ideological groups vie to shape the nation's collective identity. Since 2010, surveys have shown ideological competition between conservative, Kemalist, nationalist, and political Islamist groups. By examining this context, we argue that Turkish identity groups conceal identity cleavages and liminality inherent in Turkish identity through 'bridging' performances. Examples include headscarf-wearing women identifying as Kemalists and the celebration of the 3rd of May as a unifying symbol of Turkishness. As such, performing Turkishness bridges identities *negatively* by staving off the contestation between the four identity groups and by fleeing into a safe space, which is not yet established. The aim is to show how those contesting identities generate anxiety due to their intensive exclusivity and vehement clashing, undermining a strong self-image of Turkey in front of external others, mainly states, and internal audience, mainly citizens.

### **Exploring Emotions in Erdoğan's Discourse: nWhy is Transnational Populism Appealing to Muslim publics by *Berfin Çakın***

Public opinion surveys often show that Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is the most trusted leader in the MENA region, while he is also portrayed as a populist leader. Unlike Western nationalist right-wing populisms and South America's left-wing authoritarian populisms, Erdoğan's emphasis on Islamic civilization and neo-Ottomanism against Western/colonial power establishes an ummah (us)/West (them) dichotomy in his discourses, distinguishing his populism from other cases. Although the existing literature has extensively focused on the analysis of Erdoğan's populist discourses at home and abroad, the emotional background of his discourses, particularly regarding Middle East issues, remains underexplored. This study seeks to identify which emotions are the main drivers for the support of Erdoğan in Muslim societies. Based on the media statements of Erdoğan from 2009 to 2022, the study conducts emotion analysis through the NRC Intensity Emotion Lexicon and reveals that negative emotions (anger, fear, sadness, and disgust) predominate over positive emotions. More specifically, when sub-themes are examined, "Neo-Ottomanism" and "Ummah" both share a dominance of positive emotions (trust, joy, and anticipation), while "Anti-Establishment" and "West" are characterized by more negative emotions such as anger and disgust.

## **PROFILO ACCADEMICO DEL/DELLA/DEI/DELLE PROPONENTE/I – SHORT BIO OF PROPONENTS**

**Andrea Novellis** is a Ph.D. candidate in Political Studies at NASP - University of Milan. His research focused on rebel governance and power-sharing during civil wars and he has conducted fieldwork in Turkey, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and Sri Lanka. He is co-founder of the Italian Network for Kurdish Studies (RISC). He has published on feminism and nationalism in the Kurdish movement, and his work has been presented at various international conferences.

**Riccardo Gasco** is a Ph.D. Candidate in Political and Social Sciences at the University of Bologna. He holds a background in International Relations and Diplomatic Sciences, which he obtained from the University of Genoa and the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. His current research interests are focused on Türkiye's foreign policy, the Middle East, and Türkiye's relations with NATO and Russia. His research project investigates the foreign policy behavior of emerging middle powers, using Türkiye as a case study. He divides his time between Italy and Türkiye for research and work purposes. Currently, he is a Visiting Research Fellow at Sabanci Univerisiy.

**Jacopo Franceschini** is a Ph.D. Candidate at the International Relations Department of Kadir Has University (Istanbul), focusing on cybersecurity and cyber governance and regulation in Turkey and the Mediterranean region. Differences and commonalities among strategies, approaches, and legislation in cybersecurity in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries are his main areas of expertise and interest. Jacopo is currently research coordinator at theSquare-Mediterranean Centre for Revolutionary Studies and has worked as a researcher on security matters in several think tanks between Belgium and Turkey, such as the European Neighbourhood Council (Brussels), Friedrich Naumann Foundation, and Istanbul Policy Center. He holds a Master's in Law from the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart (Milan) and a Specializing Master's in Middle

Eastern Studies at ASERI (Graduate School of Economics and International Relations of Milan).

**Samuele C.A. Abrami** is a PhD candidate at the UCSC in Milan, where he is also subject expert in the courses of Geopolitics and History and Institutions of Asia. He is research assistant at the International Center for Contemporary Turkish Studies and Ce.St.In.Geo. Samuele is now visiting researcher at Sabancı University in Istanbul, where he is working on his project about the link between internal and external dimensions in Turkish Foreign Policy as well as on Türkiye's relations with the EU, Balkans and Wider Mediterranean. Since 2023, he is part of the Türkiye- Europe Future Forum, of the German-Italian Spinelli Forum, and a CM-Lerici recipient at the Stockholm Institute for Turkish Studies.

**INDIRIZZO/I EMAIL/EMAIL ADDRESSES:**

[Andrea.novellis@unimi.it](mailto:Andrea.novellis@unimi.it) ; [jacopofranceschini5@stu.khas.edu.tr](mailto:jacopofranceschini5@stu.khas.edu.tr) ; [samuelecarloayrton.abrami@unicatt.it](mailto:samuelecarloayrton.abrami@unicatt.it) ; [riccardo.gasco2@unibo.it](mailto:riccardo.gasco2@unibo.it)