

TURKISH TV SERIES IN BULGARIA AND RUSSIA:
THE TERRIBLY CHARMING TURK IN THE GLOBAL MEDIA MATRIX

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A DISSERTATION

in

Communication

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania

in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

2021

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To my children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Dean Marwan M. Kraidy. Marwan and I met during the last semester of my master's program at Penn GSE, when my hopes and interest in pursuing a doctoral degree had nearly withered away. The timely raindrops that precluded this withering were Marwan's humanity, mentorship, and encouragement of my interdisciplinary global communication research interests, which remained a constant throughout my time at Annenberg. Marwan's detailed feedback on my writing, presence during my conference presentations, and our casual chats at CARGC, many of which demystified academia for me, modeled marvelous mentorship and teaching which I hope to pay forward.

I am also deeply indebted to the kindness and generosity of my committee members, Dean Michael X. Delli Carpini and Dean John J. Jackson. They not only taught memorable classes and answered my numerous questions patiently, but they made me feel accepted in academia, the lifeblood of this dissertation.

My fantastic cohort and especially Diami, Heather, Lauren, and Ryan, as well as the superstars of the Center for Advanced Research in Global Communication (CARGC) formed the backbone of my community at Annenberg. Kimberly Woolf, Murali Balaji, and the student members of the Professional Development Committee also immensely enriched my Annenberg experience. The delightful building and weather reports from Deborah Porter, chatting with security personnel, IT staff, and the wonderful people of

room 200 as I equipped myself with candy and coffee for the day also made daily life at Annenberg fun and enjoyable.

At home, my children Celine and Bilgin (aka Bigoo) energized me every day and bad days at grad school morphed into good days when I returned home to them. For them, I hope to have modeled the value of lifelong learning, persistence in challenging times, and resolve in the pursuit of dreams. I was able to pursue this dream thanks to my husband Gurkan's unbridled support throughout the entirety of my Penn grad school adventure. From encouraging me to apply to the best programs, to effectively countering my bouts of self-doubt, anxiety, and mother's guilt, to inviting his parents Afet and Gunay to assist us with childcare for months at a time, Gurkan's support was crucial and exceptional. Meanwhile, Afet and Gunay's steadfast moral support throughout the entire endeavor fueled me with motivation.

Finally, when I attended the Annenberg doctoral graduation ceremony as a first-year student, a graduate exclaimed that she is the first doctor of her family. I shared this with my brother Yakub—my first teacher—who reminded me that I would be the first doctor in our family tree. I am so grateful to my parents, Ismail and Iman, for teaching me to value education and the courage to uproot their lives and escape from persecution in Bulgaria, providing me with multiple miraculous opportunities of which my Annenberg PhD will shine among the brightest.

ABSTRACT

TURKISH TV SERIES IN BULGARIA AND RUSSIA: THE TERRIBLY CHARMING TURK IN THE GLOBAL MEDIA MATRIX

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In the last decade, Turkish television series transformed from a mostly local product to a global phenomenon with perplexing popularity even in countries adversarial to Turkey. Through the study of public discourse and media texts about Turkish series in Russia and Bulgaria, this study answers: *What transpires when transnational media from the Other traverses and settles in the Self's media sphere?* Findings indicate that viewers, the majority of whom are women, value Turkish series for their high production quality and for presenting an alternate modernity that values family and is devoid of rampant individualism and liberalism, revealing underlying issues related to the everyday lives of viewers. Alongside their popularity, Turkish TV series are also perceived as a threat to national sovereignty in Bulgaria, and actively countered in Russian media through orientalist media texts, positioning Turkey exclusively as *East* and Russia as *West*. This global media study that triangulates Russia, Bulgaria, and Turkey, highlights the complexity of culture, the mutually constitutive relationship of popular culture and geopolitics, the role of women in global media and geopolitics, and the interconnectedness of global media, which I term the *global media matrix*.

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PREFACE

After my father escaped to Turkey from Bulgaria, a Turkish family in the neighboring apartment building befriended us. They frequently invited us over to watch Turkish movies on their VCR and color television—a truly special combination in the late 1980s. VCRs were as rare as denim and chocolate, and though we had a TV, it was not in color and Bulgarian National Television (BNT) broadcast for only a few hours daily. Also, Turkish media, the Turkish language, and even our Turkish names were banned, so it felt fortuitous to be invited to watch Turkish movies. Eventually, my mother learned that her new friend's husband worked for the Bulgarian government. The plan was to dissuade us from going to Turkey by showing us the terrors of life in Turkey through the Turkish movies. Popular singers such as Ibrahim Tatlis, Kucuk Emrah, and Ceylan whose music we had heard through smuggled cassette tapes starred in these tragic melodramatic movies. Besides the heartbroken, destitute, or murdered protagonists that we cried after, we also watched as children worked, mendicants and guns abounded, and water was sold—all unheard of in Bulgaria. No matter. Going to Turkey was my life's dream.

My dream came true following a loss. When I was a graduate student in Tokyo, an uncle sold my grandmother's house. Though I was a proud urbanite from Varna, Bulgaria's third largest city on the Black Sea coast, my grandmother's house in Lopushna, our Turkish village in Bulgaria, was a dear token of my childhood. In this

house, I had spent every summer of my childhood, listened to grandpa's *Keloğlan* stories, watched grandma make *kabaklı kolaç*, and played with my cousins. From this house I witnessed a protest for the first time; a protest that had sparked in the neighboring village after police killed two Turks, on the weekend that we went to bid farewell to loved ones before leaving Bulgaria.

I wanted to see the house before it was demolished, and to finally realize my recurring dreams of returning to Bulgaria after 15 years. The Tokyo to Istanbul direct flight would make both of my dreams come true. The trip felt staged from the moment I put on my headphones on the Turkish Airlines flight, and Turkish superstar Tarkan's voice emanated with the cover of Asik Veysel's folk classic, "I'm on a long narrow road, I walk all day, I walk all night." I took a photo of the first Turkish inscription in a public domain that I had ever seen: the "no smoking" sign in the bathroom of the airplane. I was finally going to be normal—just a Turk who would go to a bookstore and buy Turkish books, see Turkish store signs and street signs, and hear Turkish spoken in the streets.

I quickly recovered from my naiveté as I was naturally treated like a foreigner in Turkey. I was a 26-year-old who, after coming of age in Southern California and attending university in New York, had arrived in Istanbul following nearly four years of immersion in Japanese language and culture. Even after living in Turkey for nearly a decade, I still do not feel "normal," like a native, in Turkey, or elsewhere. When I told an aunt that I switch to the Bulgarian Turkish dialect to sound like our relatives, she

responded that I could never sound like them because I have had so many other experiences.

Admittedly, my experiences in diverse political, social, and economic spheres on three continents preclude me from being native anywhere, while enabling me to feel at home everywhere. My native land rejected me from birth and persecuted my Turkish community as despicable remnants of the Ottoman Empire, in tandem, teaching me invaluable lessons about being an *undesired minority*, biculturalism, and persistence. My first airplane flight took me to Italy, to my first encounter with the wondrous West, where I was a *refugee*, yearning for payphone tokens to prolong conversations with cousins and friends, desperately seeking to clutch the self I had left in Bulgaria. My second airplane flight transformed me into a *resident alien* in sunny San Diego, where I relinquished my former troubled identities and my past, determined to pass for American to avoid the dreaded “where are you from” question. Eventually, I sought new adventures and in Japan I became a *gaijin* (foreigner), and in Turkey, an American *expat* or *macur* (migrant from Bulgaria). I did not have the freedom to reject these labels, imposed on me as consequences of wider historical, political, and socio-cultural developments. Fortunately, the labels came prepackaged with profuse lessons in languages, cultures, people and politics, and amply afforded and colored this study.

This study, including the study design and my interpretations and analyses, are driven by my positionality as a woman from the Turkish community in Bulgaria, raised during adolescence in a working-class family in Southern California. Subsequently, I

lived in Japan, first as an undergraduate exchange student and later as a graduate student, in the privileged position of being perceived as a white American woman. After Japan, I lived in the upper echelons of society in Istanbul, Turkey, for nearly a decade, as an author educated in the US and Japan and the partner of a medical doctor. I returned to Philadelphia to pursue my second master's and doctoral degrees, as a mother of two children, benefiting from my life experiences in deeply engaging with scholarship about media, propaganda, culture, American hegemony, sociolinguistics, and global politics among others.

As my subjectivity directs my research questions and shapes my interpretations, it is important for me to note here that I do not feel embittered against Bulgaria. I feel a tenderness for my country of birth that is still home to many relatives and friends—Bulgarian and Turkish. Also, I am cured of my inexplicable yearning for all things Turkish and do not feel resentful against Turkey for not accepting me as native. With Russia, I have had a more distant, yet affective experience, an outcome of intimate Bulgaria-Russia relations during socialism. I was terrified of the Russian red berets, yet Russian was my favorite subject at school. Also, due to the cultural proximity of Bulgaria and Russia, I find that like in my Bulgarian hometown Varna, I tend to overplay my cosmopolitanism and underplay my Turkish cultural markers in my trips to Moscow.

Underplaying elements of my Turkish culture comes naturally to me; a repercussion of the Bulgarian forced assimilation campaign that outlawed being Turkish and consuming Turkish media. Thus, that Turkish TV series in Bulgaria and Russia

would become an adored and enduring media phenomenon following centuries of anti-Turkish sentiment is truly intriguing to me. This development also gives me hope. After all, the enmity between the countries and the injustices to which my community was subjected were orchestrated by elites. Now, as millions of Bulgarian and Russian viewers demand and watch hours and hours of Turkish series, they deem the power of the elite over the construction of their geopolitical imagination rather weak. Notably, the majority of viewers who demand the series are women, and the political elite who inveigh against them, men. I have hope that through women's empowered voices, Turkish TV series will further promote intercultural communication and potentially avert wars.

INTRODUCTION

Turkish television series star Songul Oden is affectionately known in Bulgaria as “Bulgaria’s pearl.” She appeared on the Bulgarian *Slavi Show* in 2009, where media mogul Slavi Trifonov questioned her ability to cook and belly dance and dedicated only a few minutes of the interview to her work. In the few minutes that Trifonov allowed Oden to speak, she emphasized cultural proximity, and stated that as a Turk, she felt at home in Bulgaria. Trifonov concluded the interview by remarking that regardless of religious differences, historical events or beliefs by narrow-minded people, “You and athletes are the best ambassadors of peace and love. You did what politicians from your country could not.” The famously anti-Turkish nationalist Trifonov was referring to the popularity of Turkish television series in Bulgaria, of which Oden’s *Pearl* was the second to enter and enchant. *Pearl* was declared the most watched television program within months of premiering (Spasov, 2009), prompting Oden’s visit to Bulgaria. As Oden could not have foreseen that sexist, orientalist interview, Trifonov could not have predicted that Turkish television series would occupy an inextricable space of everyday life in Bulgaria, indefinitely.

Turkish television series have also been popular for nearly a decade in Russia, a reality that regularly precipitates reactions from the Russian government and media, most drastically in late 2015, when following the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish forces

near the Turkey-Syria border, Duma deputies proposed banning Turkish television series, calling them “rubbish” and “outright popularization of Muslim men” (“MP Batysheva,” 2015). This proposal was not implemented, possibly because it was nonviable, as Russian viewers consume Turkish series through various streaming and social media platforms in addition to television. Instead, Russian television series targeting fans of Turkish series emerged. Russian women watched *Eastern Wives*, a docuseries about Russian women in nuptial plight with Middle Eastern men, advertised as the truth “behind the spectacular screen of expensive Turkish TV series” (“Oriental Wives,” 2015). State-owned news channel Russia 24’s “special report” *Natasha’s Love, Turkish Tears*, also zoomed in on the misery of Russian women in intimate relationships with Turkish men in Turkey (Russia 24, 2016).

Concurrently, though relations froze at the height of the downed jet crisis, a new Russo-Turkish project sprouted: *East/West*, “the first Russo-Turkish drama” (TV Channel Domashny, 2016). A Russian production company filmed *East/West* in Ukraine and in Turkey, about one year after the Crimea crisis and as fighting between Ukraine and Russia ensued in Ukraine. Distributed as *Eastern Sweets* on a channel notorious for pro-Russian propaganda (“Ukrainians besiege,” 2016; Koshiw, 2016), Ukrainian actors on Ukrainian soil embodied Russians in a most flattering representation of Russia in the series at a time when any hint of a pro-Russian discourse in Ukraine was vilified. Meanwhile, Turkish actors amplified orientalist stereotypes, undergirding a Russian

script with declarations such as “They destroyed Constantinople. Remorseless. They destroyed half of Europe!” (Tikhonova, Shulgina & Eleonskiy, 2016b).

Indeed, there is much to be perplexed about when considering the popularity of Turkish television series in Russia and Bulgaria and their extensive geopolitical relations with Turkey: Russia as competitor, Bulgaria as a nearly five-century victim of Ottoman dominion which ended with Russian intervention following the Russo-Turkish War of 1878. Slavic brotherhood and Orthodox Christianity sealed Bulgarian loyalty to Russia and the two countries were the closest of allies during socialism. Since the collapse of socialism in 1989, both countries are struggling socially and economically with new political structures in a neoliberal world, in which Turkey is an important trade partner to both. Meanwhile, Russia and Turkey continue to tango between centuries-long feuds and aspirations for Balkan and Eurasian leadership on the one hand, and collaborative anti-West posturing on the other.

In a truly epoch-making development, Bulgarians and Russians have become fervent consumers of Turkish TV series. Turkish TV series, imported profusely in Bulgaria since 2008 and in Russia since 2012, continue to mesmerize viewers in both countries. This curious development considering extensive hostile entanglements between the countries motivate this study. In particular, I ask: *What transpires when transnational media from the Other traverses and settles in the Self's media sphere? More specifically, considering geopolitical tensions spanning centuries, how do Bulgarian and Russian public spheres contend with the imports and popularity of Turkish*

series? What is the public discourse about the Turkish TV series in Russia and Bulgaria? What are geopolitical implications for the popularity of Turkish series in Russia and Bulgaria? What can these tell us about broader issues of media and global communication?

Inconsequential until the last decade, Turkish TV series such as *Magnificent Century* are regularly featured in global media and increasingly the target of study in academia. *Magnificent Century*, a drama that was sold to over 100 countries (Buyukkosdere, 2018) was characterized by then Prime Minister (now President) Erdogan as “an attempt to insult our past, to treat our history with disrespect and an effort to show our history in a negative light to the younger generations” (Toksabay & Villelabeitia, 2011). Erdogan’s main critique was that *Magnificent Century* libelously depicted Sultan Suleyman as preoccupied with harem intrigues and hedonism, when he had spent 30 years on horseback expanding the Ottoman Empire (Subasi, 2012). Consequently, Turkish Airlines removed *Magnificent Century* from its in-flight programming (Batuman, 2014), but exports of the drama were not only allowed, but they also proliferated, even in former Ottoman realms such as the Middle East and the Balkans, to the dismay of local elite, clergy and nationalists (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Mihalakopoulos, 2013; Celikkol & Kraidy, forthcoming). Hundreds of Turkish TV series continue to be exported and enjoyed by over 700 million viewers in more than 146 countries (Ustuk, 2019), and Turkey gained fame as the world’s second highest exporter of television series after the United States (“Turkish TV series aim,” 2016). Of

importance is also that viewer numbers of Turkish series reflect television broadcasts, but Turkish series are also a streaming success (Singh, 2020). Turkish TV series are also viewable on Netflix and the first Turkish-produced Netflix original series was released in December, 2018¹ (Marshall, 2018).

Alongside their global popularity, Turkish series are also targets of bans, boycotts, and protests (“Golden Dawn MP protests,” 2013; Flower, 2009; Tursunbaeva, 2014; “Bangladeshi directors,” 2016; Sharma, 2018; Synovitz, 2018; Kraidy, 2019; Najibullah, 2019; Antonopoulos, 2020; Mohyidin, 2020). However, viewers, the majority comprising women, continue to demand and watch the series online (Salamandra, 2012; Alankus & Yanardagoglu, 2016; “Egypt fatwa bans,” 2020). The perceived threat posed by Turkish series appears to be from the intimate to the nation-state scales. The popularity of Turkish TV series fueled women’s expectations and empowerment, and accelerated divorces in the Arab world and Bangladesh (Paschalidou, 2013; “Bangladeshi directors,” 2016). Russian media targeted at women explicitly warns women against Middle Eastern intimate partners, as women migrate *en masse* to Turkey in the face of Russian

¹ Netflix’s *The Protector* was produced by O3 Media founded in 2014 in Turkey; a subsidiary of Saudi MBC production company O3 Production Services (“O3 Medya,” n.d.). The Turkey-Saudi Arabia rift over Qatar propelled MBC to abruptly cease airing Turkish television series on its satellite network in March 2018, a move viewed as a threat to Turkish global soft power (El-Beahry, 2018). However, O3 Medya continues to operate in Turkey and to distribute Turkish television series globally. Why Netflix chose to commission O3 instead of a local production company remains uncertain.

demographic concerns to the dismay of President Vladimir Putin and the Orthodox Church (Nemtsova, 2016; Bloch, 2017; Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018).

Remarkably, the perceived threat of the Turkish series is not limited to the domestic sphere, and again, the personal is political and international (Enloe, 2014 [1989]). Through a multiple modernities approach, Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) conceptualize the recently transformed terrible-to-tempting image of Turks in the Arab world as *neo-Ottoman cool*, “grounded in a Turkish modernity that has been attractive to Arabs because it manages to combine a variety of hitherto separate and seemingly contradictory political, economic and socio-cultural elements in one seductive ‘package’” (p. 26). They argue that *neo-Ottoman cool*, the Turkish national brand grounded in syncretic modernity, positioned Turkey as a pivotal state and a great power through soft power elements such as media, popular culture, diplomacy and political rhetoric. *Neo-Ottoman cool* is enticing because of a reduced Western role promulgated by the ruling party’s non-West diplomatic strategies, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s anti-West rhetoric, and counterhegemonic popular culture storylines. *Neo-ottoman cool* is a useful way to approach Bulgaria and Russia as well, as perpetual historic antagonistic entanglements with Turkey are also a reality of those countries. However, the concept requires further clarification, or perhaps extension, because a reduced Western role or counterhegemonic popular culture storylines may not be appealing in Bulgaria and Russia, as both countries are engaged in a modernity marathon to prove their West-based worthiness to the world. Thus, as productive as it is, Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi’s (2013) vast

survey of Arab public discourse remains firmly rooted and applicable to the Arab world. Also, gender is undertheorized, yet a critical component based on the viewership of the series. That is, Turkish modernity is enticing to women, and women demand a reconfiguration of their relationships and lifestyles as seen on Turkish TV series, with social, political and economic consequences, inspiring divorces, travel to Turkey, and favoring Turkish products.

There is a vast and growing literature of Turkish series which I explore in depth in chapter one, however, the studies tend to be discipline-specific and epistemologically hyper-focused, and reading the budding literature is like turning a broken kaleidoscope: scattered fragments with the unrealized promise of a discernable image. In this interdisciplinary study, I aim to provide a fuller picture of the phenomenon of Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia. The fragments in the kaleidoscope of this study are the media, history, geopolitics, international relations, culture, modernity, gender and societal change in Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey from a global, comparative perspective that situates Turkish series as a global media phenomenon, influenced by global trends, and related to other global productions and making politics. Media and geopolitics are at the center of the kaleidoscope and calibrating the other variables. As the terms international relations and geopolitics are frequently conflated in scholarly and popular literature, in the following sections I provide a brief background of the fields' inception, development, and forays into the study of popular culture.

International relations, geopolitics, popular culture

International relations and geopolitics are often used as synonyms in media and academic literature, but originate from two distinct traditions, albeit both based on European political thought. Though often traced to Thucydides, international relations (IR) came into being as a field of study at the end of World War I in 1919, with a founding myth of preventing a similar catastrophe (Acharya & Buzan, 2019), grounded in Eurocentric thought and American social reality and interests. Traditionally, international relations is based on problem-solving IR theories that “uphold the dominant social and political order in the discipline and global politics” (Weber, 2017, p. 48) including Realisms, Liberalisms, and Social Constructivisms. Hoffmann (1977) declared that IR is an American social science, shaped and enriched by numerous foreign-born scholars who “wanted to find out the meaning and the causes of the catastrophe that had uprooted them, and perhaps the keys to a better world” (p. 47). One such scholar is political geographer Gerard Toal² who was propelled to study geography as an undergraduate because his university did not have an IR program, and pursued graduate study in the US from a “radical geography” perspective (van Efferink, 2012) after his childhood in a politically charged border village of Ireland and North Ireland³. Toal is best known for

² Also known as Gearóid Ó Tuathail. I will refer to him as Ó Tuathail to refer to publications published under this name, and as Toal elsewhere.

³ Toal published under his Irish name Gearóid Ó Tuathail until 2010, a name that came to be associated with critical geopolitics, since the publication of his *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* in 1996.

his work on critical geopolitics, which developed as a reaction to the tradition of geopolitics.

Geopolitics as a field of study began in Germany. The term *geopolitics* is modeled after the Swedish *geopolitik*, coined in 1899 by Rudolf Kjellén, a graduate student of German geographer Friedrich Ratzel whose organic theory of the state entitled *Lebensraum* argued that expansion of state territory is a sign of strength (Ratzel, 1897 as cited in Ó Tuathail, 1996; Kjellén, 1899 as cited in Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dittmer & Bos, 2019). Karl Haushofer founded the *Journal of Geopolitics* in 1924, and along with Ratzel and Kjellén, Alfred Mahan and Nicholas Spykman in the US and Halford Mackinder in Great Britain constituted the *geopolitical tradition* of classical geopolitics: a white-supremacist theoretical language about international affairs that viewed states as a living organism à la Social Darwinism, sought to further their states' interests and expand territorially, and at its worst, provided the intellectual basis of Nazi foreign policy (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Dittmer & Bos, 2019). Haushofer's association with Hitler's friend Rudolf Hess and World War II caused academics in the US and Europe to eschew the term and the field until Henry Kissinger popularized it in the 1970s to signify great power rivalries (Dodds, Kuus & Sharp, 2013) and Gerard Toal, John Agnew and John Pickles led the effort to revive geopolitics in academia (Adams, 2009), following the critical theory orientation of international relations scholars.

Critical theory officially joined the international relations domain in the early 1980s spurred by Cox (1981). Cox's (1981) article entitled "Social Forces, States and

World Orders: Beyond International Relations Theory” made a case for critical theory by arguing against the positivism-grounded problem-solving theory which was a tenet of realism. Problem-solving theory was appropriate during the Cold War, however, the recent uncertainty in power relations catalyzed by various non-state actors warrants a critical approach in order “To reason about possible future world orders now...to encompass basic processes at work in the development of social forces and forms of state, and in the structure of global political economy.” (Cox, 1981, p. 130). In addition to Cox, Andrew Linklater and Craig Murphy also made critical interventions in international relations (Jones, 2001) that led to “alternative” IR theories such as Marxisms, Poststructuralisms and Anarchisms that counter and aim to transform the dominant social and political order in IR and in global politics (Weber, 2015). Jutta Weldes (1999) and Michael Shapiro (1999) argued for turning away from cultural and political elite texts and prioritizing the study of popular culture. Meanwhile, Enloe (1989/2014) made a compelling case for the personal as international, arguing that studying women’s everyday lives exposes the vast political power that operates in international politics. Danchev (2015) posited, “contrary to popular belief, it is given to artists, not politicians, to create a new world order” (p. 91). Political geographers also began to question “common sense” in geography and geopolitics.

Critical geopolitics commenced with French geographer Yves Lacoste who launched the journal of radical French geography, *Hérodote* (Saunders and Strukov, 2018; Ó Tuathail, 1996). Lacoste inspired scholars in the Anglo-American world, and

geographers including Gerard Toal, John Agnew and John Pickles reacted with an effort to define and engage with critical geopolitics (Adams, 2009). John Agnew and advisee Gerard Ó Tuathail, following Kissinger's popularization of the term *geopolitics*, argued for the reconceptualization of geopolitics as a political discourse, differentiating between practical (politicians, military commanders, etc.) and formal (strategic thinkers, public intellectuals, etc.) geopolitical reasoning (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992), calling for the deconstruction of elite discourses and traditional geopolitics that pose as neutral and carry a baggage of national interests. At the time, Ó Tuathail and Agnew (1992) defined *geopolitics* as a "discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics and represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas," positing thus that "the study of geopolitics is the study of the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states." (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Later Toal was reluctant about defining *critical geopolitics*, designating it as a problematic; a process instead of a concept with an essence (Ó Tuathail, 1996), though I find Agnew's (2013) definition useful. Agnew (2013) defines critical geopolitics as a *critical sense* in approaching world politics; a cognizance of the divisions of geographical space and foreign policy that rely on assumptions and schemas that are socially constructed and in no way reflective of a natural geopolitical order.

Though *critical geopolitics* was popularized in academia with Toal's *Critical Geopolitics: The Politics of Writing Global Space* (Ó Tuathail, 1996), Toal later credited mentor Peter Taylor with coining the term (Ó Tuathail/Toal, 2013). Another concept

central to this study, *popular geopolitics*, is also misattributed to Toal, and I turn to its genealogy next.

Political geographer Joanne Sharp, inspired by Simon Dalby's *Creating the Second World War* (Dittmer, 2018) countered Ó Tuathail and Agnew's (1992) focus on elite geopolitical texts and introduced the study of popular culture to political geography (Saunders & Strukov, 2018). Sharp (1993) enriched critical geopolitics with an additional component of geopolitical reasoning: "the popular" (Sharp, 1993), insisting that in order to construe geopolitical narratives, elites draw on hegemonic discourses that are in circulation through culture and reproduced through the media. Sharp (1993) emphasized that texts that are not direct products of statecraft are read with less suspicion, and thus "the political encoding of such texts is more subtle and thus more easily reproduced" (p. 493). She argued against "the sharp distinction between the 'high' politics of statecraft and the 'mass' politics of the media," (p. 502) indicating that while media representations tend to be hegemonic, elites themselves are also socialized through media and tend to write in line with the common sense of their readership.

Though Sharp (1993) made a compelling case for the study of popular culture in political geography, "The space within critical geopolitics to engage the connections between geopolitics, popular culture, and various media forms was staked in the 1990s with Ó Tuathail's designation of a tripartite conception of geopolitical practices." (Purcell, 2019). In the introduction to their edited book, Ó Tuathail with Dalby (1998) added *popular geopolitics* to their previously theorized *formal* and *practical geopolitics*

in what became a tripartite conception of geopolitics. Dowler and Sharp (2001) critiqued critical geopolitics as a “Western form of reasoning, dominated again by white, male academics” where “a few women are allowed into the footnotes of some works” and political geography is “reduced to a genealogy of heroic men, significantly not just when discussing the masculinist history of geopolitical strategies of elite practitioners, but also in the interventions of ‘critical geopoliticians’ themselves” (p. 167). This critique is still made and valid (Saunders & Strukov, 2018; Anaz & Purcell, 2010). Resonating with Sharp’s call to blur the lines between politics and popular culture, popular texts are also increasingly the target of study by critical international relations scholars.

Grayson, Davies and Philpott (2009) made the first strides toward the formal study of popular culture in international relations, grounding their theory on the work of a number of cultural and post-colonial theorists. Citing Hollywood/Pentagon collaboration among others, Grayson, Davies and Philpott (2009) identified a research agenda for the study of popular culture in international relations, arguing that popular culture and world politics are entangled.

Even at the extreme polar ends, popular culture cannot be divorced from world politics nor world politics from popular culture...conceptualizing them as a continuum brings sensitivity to how political phenomena are, at times, diminutively positioned as properly residing within the sphere of popular culture and, at others, positioned as important products of world politics despite being intertextual, mutually constitutive and even

materially entangled through cycles of production, distribution and consumption.

(Grayson, Davies & Philpott, 2009, p. 158)

They argued that pedagogy should also reflect the popular culture-world politics continuum, and founded a master's degree program in Popular Culture and World Politics at Newcastle University, using the acronym PCWP to refer succinctly to the relationship of popular culture and world politics. The edited *Popular Culture and World Politics: Theories, Methods, Pedagogies* (Caso & Hamilton, 2015) was published by E-International Relations Publishing.

The political geographers' edited book response arrived in 2018: *Popular Geopolitics: Plotting an Evolving Interdiscipline* (Saunders & Strukov, 2018). Thus, scholars in IR and political geography came to appreciate the relationship of popular culture and geopolitics, due in no small part to Cox (1981) and the catchy concept of *critical geopolitics*. However, studies and scholars in these fields continue to originate and be about Anglophone communities, including the UK, US, and Australia, and men continue to dominate scholarship. Even studies that originate as critical political geography tend to reify Western hegemony. For example, Anaz and Purcell (2010) situated their audience reception study of the Turkish film *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* in critical geopolitics and conducted a survey of Turkish audiences to discern geopolitical impact. They argue that the film is *anti-geopolitical*, that is, counterhegemonic, and that

it forms an *alternative geopolitics* in which it constructs “an informal geopolitical language for Turks to visualize Turkey’s own geopolitical alternatives and responsibilities in the region” (Anaz & Purcell, 2010, p. 46). That is, the producers and many viewers came to view Turkey as a pivotal regional power with responsibilities of bringing justice to those suffering from Western hegemony. By conceptualizing counterhegemonic storylines and global politics as *anti-geopolitical* and *alternative geopolitics*, Anaz and Purcell (2010) reify Western hegemony, which is antithetical to critical geopolitics.

But what of the true realm of popular culture: cultural studies, media studies, and communication studies? Scholars generally tend to dwell within the bounds of their disciplines make cursory references, if any, to theories of critical IR and critical political geography. For example, in a special issue entitled “Geopolitics and the Popular” of the *Popular Communication, The Journal of Media and Culture* Burkart and Christensen (2013) posit that while traditional public diplomacy persists “new forms of strategic positioning are also taking shape by way of using ‘the popular’ and ‘the imaginary’ in novel ways” (Burkart & Christensen, 2013, p. 4). A perfunctory glance at media and communication literature reveals that deploying the popular is far from being a new form of strategic positioning (Lawson, 1953; Schiller, 1971; MacCann, 1973; Dorfman & Mattelart, 1975; Jarvie, 1992; Martín-Barbero, 1993; García Canclini, 1995).

Burkart and Christensen also briefly cite Toal and Dalby’s *Rethinking Geopolitics* (1998), stating that in line with them they view “geopolitics as not only international

relations and foreign policy making but also as contemporary political and economic transformations within which communication, culture, and media play an integral role in the global balance of power.” (Burkart & Christensen, 2013, p. 4). Further, they conflate IR and critical geopolitics and assert that “the emergence of a critical geopolitics [is a] response to the end of the ideologically laden Cold War era” (Burkart & Christensen, 2013, p. 4) though as I chronicled in earlier sections, critical theory was introduced by IR scholar Cox (1981), who argued that the end of the Cold War necessitates a rethinking of global relations critically. Certainly, global developments also influenced Toal, however, as evidenced, critical geopolitics emerged from Toal’s life and career circumstances, which also caused his recent turn away from the critical⁴.

In any case, international relations and geopolitics and their critical counterparts are epistemologies that originate and are still deeply situated in Anglo-American scholarship, and thus insufficient for this study. IR was “built on the assumption that Western history and Western political theory *are* world history and political history [emphasis in original]” and had it originated elsewhere, IR would have looked vastly different (Acharya & Buzan, 2019, p. 3). This Anglophone/Eurocentric tradition naturalizes categories such as *individual* and *nation-state* which is counterproductive to understanding the international, as “cultures/civilizations/peoples... do not ‘map onto’ the

⁴ In 2018 he was awarded a National Science Foundation grant entitled *The Geopolitical Orientations of People in Borderland States*, “to inform the development and conduct of foreign policy in the U.S. and other states.”

https://www.nsf.gov/awardsearch/showAward?AWD_ID=1759645

nation-states of the world” (Seth, 2013, p. 25). Similarly, concepts such as “popular culture” and “world politics” are complex and contested (Weldes & Rowley, 2015). In an ambitious attempt to globalize IR, Acharya and Buzan (2019) conceptualized *global IR*, which is remarkably similar to critical transculturalism (Kraidy, 2005), albeit with the latter’s focus on culture, which should be prioritized in IR as well. In the following section I explain how I plan to supplement these and expound the analytical approach of this study.

Analytical Approach

I will use critical geopolitics and PCWP theories to develop a framework of the interplay of transnational popular culture and politics that is also informed by critical transculturalism (Kraidy, 2005). Critical transculturalism is a global communication framework that counters the global reductionism of cultural imperialism and celebratory cultural pluralism, with a critical, historically informed, and nuanced focus on exogenous and endogenous circuits of power that pervade the local, and dialectically, the global. This framework considers power in intercultural relations by combining agency and structure in international communication analysis. Kraidy (2005) identifies translocal and intercontextual social practice as the site of agency and posits that dialogical and dialectical dimensions of international communication must be analyzed concurrently, while considering the active links between production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction. Additionally, critical transculturalism’s synthetic approach to culture recognizes that while cultural mixture is generally shaped by unequal intercultural

relations, hybridity is not synonymous with dominance and instead structural and discursive forces shape the hybrid components of cultures.

Thus, along with this nuanced view of cultural hybridity, and informed by critical IR and critical geopolitics, I approach popular culture and global politics as a mutually constitutive continuum (Sharp, 1993; Grayson, Davies & Philpott, 2009; Weldes & Rowley, 2015). As popular culture inspires, represents, and constructs global politics, global politics similarly influences popular culture. I see this continuum as an arena for the spatialization of global politics that complicates spatial scales (global/regional/national/local) and does not take them for granted (Tsing, 2005). That is, spatial scales are constructed and not given, and this is a crucial factor in my analysis and understanding of local/national/regional/global popular culture and global politics. Additionally, in line with Sharp (1993), I understand that elites have recourse to hegemonic discourses that circulate in culture and are reproduced by media, and that media texts that are not (perceived as) official statecraft are read with less suspicion.

I study the interplay of various discursive and material structures with lived experience to deconstruct global media phenomena translocally and intercontextually through cultural and political texts, taking into account the active links between production, text, and reception in the moment of cultural reproduction (Kraidy, 2005). In other words, I problematize “the relationship between subject, object, and text, or, more prosaically, that between sight, sites, and cites” (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 71), and question masculinist, Eurocentric and Anglophone conceptions of media and global politics. I

align my critical stance with global IR (Acharya & Buzan, 2019), specifically to subsume IR theories from Turkey, Bulgaria and Russia that will augment understanding of global politics. Further, by focusing on Turkish TV series that are consumed by millions of Bulgarian and Russian women, I answer Enloe's (1989/2014) call to reveal gendered discursive practices on which international relations depends and illuminate women's unacknowledged role in global politics and the personal as international, through transnational Turkish TV series.

In this study, I use the terms *Turkish TV series* and *Turkish series* interchangeably. Turkish TV series are indexed by a panoply of terms in popular and scholarly literature, including *Turkish TV series*, *Turkish dramas*, *Turkish telenovelas*, *Turkish soap operas*, or simply *Turkish series*. Ozturkmen (2018) even argues that they are distinct genre, and insists the Turkish term for series, *dizi*, is most germane. However, using *dizi* would reify American and Western European TV series which are simply known as TV series, as the general, the norm, the unmarked, and in turn relegate *dizi*, *telenovela*, *musalsal*, etc. to the *Other*, the particular, the marked. Also, within the Turkish TV series genre, there are many subgenres such as comedies, historical series, crime series, sitcoms, soap operas and so on, and this is why I refrain from using the terms *Turkish drama* and *Turkish soap opera*.

Another term with multiple connotations that warrants operationalization for this study is *popular culture*. In this study, I use *popular culture* to refer simply to media produced for mass heterogeneous audiences, such as TV series. That is, popular culture in

this study is not to be understood as resistance to the hegemonic, produced by the people, or unofficial. In fact, in media contexts such as Russia and Turkey where major television channels are owned by the government or media groups with intimate ties to the government, binaries such as *popular/official* and *private/public* do not apply—not to imply that those binaries are clear-cut elsewhere. Meanwhile, Bulgaria is ruled by a government that is sympathetic to and directly influenced by the European Union, and Russia and Bulgaria’s attempts at emulating Western European and American modernity tends to translate to productions that mimic the West, in which case, *popular culture* again is not “of the people.” I now turn to the research design of the study, including the research methods and data corpus.

Research Methods

Context and Interpretation

First, I situate my research in terms of the relations and tensions in scripting the geography and enacting and the politics of the contemporary nation-states of Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey. That is, in order to understand what it means to consume or contest Turkish series as an ethnic Bulgarian or Russian, I seek to understand what being *Bulgarian* and *Russian* means to the people themselves, in terms of national and religious identity, history, and geo-political entanglements with the hegemonies of Western Europe/US and Turkey.

In studying texts and discourse, I seek to uncover the constructed geopolitical imagination (Agnew, 2003) of Bulgarians and Russians, and how their cultural hybridity

is hierarchized (Kraidy, 2005). In other words, in order to understand the human experience of engaging with Turkish series and its vertical intertextuality (Fiske, 1987), I also study the historical context and present-day socio-cultural and geopolitical realities of people living in Russian and Bulgarian territories to understand how the whole experience relates to the distinct parts and the parts relate to the whole experience (Gadamer, 2004). I focus on how Turkish TV series' discourses mediate reality, and how lived experience, the reality, mediates the consumption of the series (Martín-Barbero, 1993) and enables an intercontextual analysis of "structures and discourses [that] operate in a variety of contexts to shape different hybridities, and how, in turn, hybrid cultural forms reflect at once the presence of hegemony and its limitations" (Kraidy, 2005, p. 156). I understand context as an open structure, and not "a pure original point, an objective space/time coordinate, or a final resting place" (Ó Tuathail, 1996, p. 56). Relatedly, in line with Tsing (2005), I view spatial scales as claimed and contested constructions, as "proposed, practiced, and evaded, as well as taken for granted" (p. 58).

Further, I consider language the primary portal for accessing human experience and the center of gravity of this study. Hermeneutics is based on language and understanding. Language, and specifically *parole* or discourse of language, is the data of human science, "the spoken events communicated at a specific time in a specific place" (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 265). In order to interpret, I engage in a dialectic of explanation and understanding, first by guessing (Ricoeur, 1976). To do this, Ricoeur (1976) outlines the following: first, study the meaning of the text as a whole; second, study it is on its

own terms, almost as a unique genre; third, find horizons of meaning, such as metaphoric and symbolic language. A horizon of meaning also includes history and understanding entails the fusion of historical horizons with the horizon of the present (Gadamer, 2004). That is, my expectations are dialectically related to the text, which means that interpretation is “a mediation or construction between each interpreter’s own language and the language of the text” (Polkinghorne, 1983, p. 226). According to Gadamer (2004),

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out this fore projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there.

(p. 269)

Thus, through hermeneutics and a self-reflexive awareness of my positionality and subjectivity of my interpretations, I will avoid the “God trick” (Haraway, 1988). That is, I do not pretend to have a view that is contemporaneously situated everywhere and nowhere. This is important, because as my knowledge of socio-cultural realities, history,

politics, and other entanglements in the regions I study are vital, they could also be a liability and result in antagonistic interpretation if I dwell on my lived experience as a member of the persecuted Turkish minority in Bulgaria, as a Bulgarian inferior to Russians, or on my status as perpetual outsider in Turkey. Oppositely, I could engage in an unwarranted romantic interpretation of the texts, colored by my nostalgia for Bulgaria, admiration of Russia, or an internalization of Turkey as my motherland. That is why as I remain conscious of my life experience, I look to it to inform, not dominate my interpretation of texts. In interpreting texts, I also apply semiotic analysis, to which I turn in the next section.

Textual/Discourse Analysis and Beyond

In studying texts, I concur with Eco (1979) and view every cultural entity semiotically, as a *sign*, “*everything* that, on the grounds of a previously established social convention, can be taken as *something standing for something else*” [emphasis in original] (Eco, 1979, p. 16). Additionally, to study how power structures hierarchize cultural hybridity (Kraidy, 2005), I look to the notions of *metamessage* (Bateson, 2000), frame analysis (Goffman, 1986) and *myth* (Barthes, 1972). Bateson’s (2000) concept of the *metamessage* posits that there are two messages in any communication: the basic text and the meaning that is superimposed on the basic message to indicate how the basic message should be understood. How we understand also depends on how it is framed (Goffman, 1986) and its functions as a myth.

Myth is a second order semiological system, in which the sign in the first system functions as a signifier, with the essential function of naturalizing concepts. There is no limit to the signifiers of myths, and the main distortion of myths is that they are values camouflaged as facts; facts that are perceived as natural, not historical. In order to read and decipher myths, Barthes (1972) recommends focusing on the empty signifier, focusing on the full signifier, and/or focusing on the mythical signifier. For example, in analyzing the myth of Turkish backwardness in Bulgaria and Russia, I would “let the concept fill the form of the myth without ambiguity” (Barthes, 1972, p. 128), and discern how references to Turkey and to Turkish culture are used as examples, as symbols of this backwardness. If I focus on the full signifier, I would “clearly distinguish the meaning and the form, and consequently the distortion which the one imposes on the other” (Barthes, 1972, p. 128) and decipher the myth and how it is distorted. That is, for example, if classical music is posited as superior and lacking in Turkish culture, I may point to the origin of classical music in Western Europe, and thus posit that in terms of classical music, Russia, Bulgaria and Turkey are equal, and perhaps delve deeper and point to the legacy of French hegemony on Russian and Bulgarian culture that evokes this kind of myth. I would not focus on the mythical signifier, because that is the domain of the myth-consumer who accepts the distorted mythical signifier. To complement my analyses, I also prioritize analyzing linguistic and thematic elements, as I discuss below.

As our conceptual system is metaphorical (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008), I pay careful attention to metaphors used in texts to understand how Russians and Bulgarians

understand the phenomenon of Turkish series, as “two conceptual domains...correlated and consequently establish mappings from one domain to another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008, p. 247). For example, headlines about the Turkish series such as “Turkish Invasion” and “Don’t Shoot at the Series” elucidate the bodily experiences through which metaphorical mappings are shaped and constrained, in this case, national memory of Turkish invasions that warrant defense.

In addition, in studying the texts, I discern contextualization cues, which provide clues to the type of language event and how interlocutors should behave (Gumperz, 1982). Contextualization cues are implicit signals of communication that are useful in discerning meaning from texts, and could be the code itself, the dialect, style switching, lexical and syntactic options, formulaic expressions, conversational openings, closings and sequencing strategies. In analyzing Russian television series representing Turkish culture, for example, deployed contextualization cues unveil sought positioning and accentuation, such as the use of the word *God*: emphatic *Allah* when uttered by Turkish actors, and *Gospod* when spoken by Russian actors.

I compound my microanalytical linguistic approach with a broader thematic analysis. “To be human, is to be concerned with meaning, to desire meaning,” argues van Manen (1990, p. 79) and asserts that phenomenological themes as “structures of meaning” (van Manen, 1990, p. 79) can enable the study of the human experience. In order to isolate themes, van Manen (1990, pp. 92-95) recommends three ways of studying texts: holistically (“What sententious phrase may capture the fundamental meaning or

main significance of the text as a whole?”), selectively (“What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described?”) and the line-by-line approach (“What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon or experience being described?”). I follow van Manen’s (1990) holistic, selective and line-by-line method for comprehensive meaning mining and study the vast data corpus through an iterative process, instead of choosing only one of the methods. For example, to discern possible shifts in public discourse of the Turkish TV series in Bulgaria, I first arranged the data chronologically and read for initial reactions to the TV series and the potential evolution of themes and topics. I then approached the data holistically and found a glaring posturing in support of or against the series. Following this, I selected the data that was most relevant in answering the research questions. Finally, through a detailed semiotic and linguistic line-by-line approach, I searched for saturated meaning in individual words, phrases, and pauses, and coded texts according to additional themes, such as nationalism, cosmopolitanism, tradition, political crisis, and so on. In addition to these methods, I applied multimodal discourse analysis, the topic of the next section.

I find Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2001) strata for multimodal discourse constructive for comprehensive data collection and analysis, particularly for audiovisual texts. The strata, or the various levels of multimodal communication, allow for systematic categorization and interpretation of the data. The strata include the non-hierarchical modes of discourse, design, production, and distribution as the domains of practice and

role of meaning-making. That is, they all have equal meaning-making potential. This allows for a comprehensive account of not only the discourse, but also the signification produced by the design, production and distribution of the drama. Thus, I took into account how all of the separate, non-hierarchical components combined to make meaning, including how everything from language to music to scenery is used to encode meaning (Hall, 1973). I analyze with an eye for how the modes can reinforce each other, fulfill complementary roles, or be hierarchically ordered. This allows for a wider analytic lens and questions such as: do all modes work in tandem? Or is the design the dominant mode, followed by the discourse, where the production and distribution are the least essential components? This approach directed my attention to elements and meaning that I would have otherwise missed.

For example, in addition to analyzing the aural and visual elements of the Russian TV series *East/West*, studying the production and distribution contributed to a wealth of meaning. I found that the production of the TV series began at the height of the Russo-Turkish crisis in 2015 and filmed in Ukraine soon after the Crimea crisis. Ukrainian actors acted as Russians and cast Russia in the best light, and Turkish actors propagated orientalist stereotypes. Further, *East/West* was broadcast as *Eastern Sweets* on a television channel notorious for pro-Russian propaganda, also the former employer of an *East/West* producer. In this way, by way of Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) strata for multimodal discourse, I am able to systematically and comprehensively analyze the multiple components of texts.

However, my rigorous approach is not limited to text analysis. Though textual analysis is sufficiently defended (Fursich, 2009; Phillipov, 2013) and for the purposes of limiting the scope and conducting a manageable study my primary foci are texts, I undertook multiple triangulation (Polkinghorne, 1983) to validate my analyses. Multiple triangulation includes my fieldwork and member checks in Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey. In the span of five years, I conducted the following additional research to substantiate my textual analyses:

1. Semi-structured interviews in Turkey with two actors who have starred in exported Turkish television series;
2. semi-structured interviews in Turkey with four journalists and writers;
3. participant observation and informal conversations about Turkish series in Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey;
4. focus group with three Russian women married to Turkish men;
5. a single-question survey in Turkey, replicating an *East/West* scene by asking Turkish participants from various socioeconomic backgrounds to name famous Russians.

As a result of my extensive research and multiple triangulation, I am confident that my analyses are proximate to reflecting the lived experience of consuming, contesting, and promoting Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia.

In sum, my research framework is composed of a spectrum of micro to macro semiotic, linguistic, thematic, and discourse analyses. I approach every text first by situating it in its context, which I view as a perpetually contingent open structure that mediates the production of the texts while constructing perceived reality, as perceived reality mediates the consumption of the texts (Martín-Barbero, 1993). My search for meaning begets exposition of historical, cultural, geopolitical, and social factors; that is, a fusion of historical horizons with the horizon of the present (Gadamer, 2004). My methods hinge on deep semiotic and linguistic analysis as I situate the text in its context, since language is the foundational mediator of the context and the text.

I view every present element in texts as a meaningful sign (Eco, 1979), but I also question the absence of signs and listen to silences. For example, I note elements such as the absence of facial hair of men positioned as European, or the lack of Russian actors in the production of a Russian drama that employed Ukrainians in their stead. Relatedly, I apply mythological analysis (Barthes, 1972) to scrutinize broad “common sense,” beliefs, and hybridity (Kraidy, 2005) and investigate the use of metonyms, metaphors (Lakoff & Johnson, 2008) and contextualization cues (Gumperz, 1982) as the linchpin of cultural reproduction.

In more practical terms, I begin with a broad analysis and narrow down gradually to the minutest elements. First, I begin with the meaning of the text as a whole and on its own terms (Ricoeur, 1976), reading it holistically (van Manen, 1990). That is, the first step of my analysis of any text is to discern the broadest meaning, to have a general sense

of why the text was produced, how it purports to function, and various possible ways that it is likely to be understood by readers. In these first few readings of a new text, I aim to absorb the entirety of the text and remain cognizant and cautious of details that may preclude me from doing so. Also, this broad approach allows me to prepare for the second phase of my analysis, which is a selective reading (van Manen, 1990), to pinpoint elements that are most relevant to my research endeavor. At this stage, I note significant components, themes, developments, and phrases and as I do, I concurrently prepare for the third phase of my analysis. In the third phase, I approach the text line-by-line, reading for metaphoric and symbolic language (Ricoeur, 1976; van Manen, 1990), as well as other linguistic elements such as code and register switching, formulaic expressions, and metonyms. I also look for the signs positioned as marked (the deviant) and unmarked (the norm).

Data Corpus

This is a comparative study in which Bulgaria and Russia are equivalent categories. The chapter about Turkey (chapter one) serves to define the global phenomenon of Turkish television series and investigate state intent. In the chapters that follow, I elaborate on data corpus identification and selection for the respective components and contexts of the study. Below I present a concise list the data on which I rely from Bulgaria, Russia, and Turkey to answer the research questions.

Russia

1. Seventy-one news articles, op-eds, blog entries, and other materials that are widely available and accessed by the public on Yandex.ru and Google.ru, selected due to the absence of a Russian-language news database. I provide more details about the search and selection in chapter two.
2. *East/West*, a Russian TV series advertised as the first Russo-Turkish TV series and framed as a modern sequel to two Turkish historical dramas that were popular in Russia, *Magnificent Century* and *Kurt Seyit and Alexandra*, all narratives of Russian female and Turkish male protagonists.
3. Russian docudrama *Eastern Wives*, advertised as “the truth behind the spectacular screen of Turkish series” (Oriental Wives, 2015).
4. State-owned television channel Russia 24’s special report *Natasha’s Tears, Turkish Love* (Russia 24, 2016), with a similar format and identical soundtrack as *Eastern Wives*.
5. Promotional materials about *East/West* and *Eastern Wives* from Channel Domashny, the leading television channel for women in Russia, Ukraine and the CIS countries, and home to most Turkish TV series as well as the Russian TV series mentioned above.
6. Production and distribution data, including distribution outlets, social media posts shared during production and interviews with directors and producers related to *East/West* and *Eastern Wives*.

Bulgaria

1. Seventy-one news articles, op-eds, blog entries, and other materials that are widely available and accessed by the public on Google.bg. In the absence of a Bulgarian-language news database I opted for Google.bg. I expound on the search and selection in chapter two.
2. Four television talk shows about Turkish series (bTV, 2014; Hello Bulgaria, 2014; News 7, 2014; Mladenova and Todorova, 2009).
3. Radio talk show (Simeonov, 2011).
4. “*For*” and “*Against*” *Turkish Series* panel (Red House Centre, 2010).
5. Comments to a promotional post for Bulgarian TV series *Sunny Beach* in a major Facebook group page for Bulgarian fans of Turkish television series.
6. Nineteen tweets expressing an unfavorable opinion toward the Turkish series. Twitter is used by a fraction of the population in Bulgaria (Statcounter, n.d.) and since tweets about Turkish series were limited in number selection was straightforward.
7. Parodies about Turkish series, with a comparatively large number of views.
 - a. *If Life were a TV Series* parody by Tipichno, the “First Bulgarian web series” with 377,000 subscribers as of August 2020. It was a four-part parody of American sitcoms, Indian series, Turkish series, and a reality show with more than 788,000 views (Tipichno, 2016).
 - b. Viewer comments to the parody *If Life were a TV Series* (above).

- c. *Turkish series yeah!* parody of Turkish series by Gengster with 16,000 subscribers as of August 2020 and more than 32,000 views (Gengster, 2013).
- d. A skit about Turkish TV series broadcast in 2010 in *Alaminut*, a bTV comedy series with nearly 85,000 YouTube views (Paskov, 2016).

Turkey

1. News articles, op-eds, blog entries, and television industry communication.
2. Legislation related to the production, distribution, and subsidies of television series.
3. News, speeches, press releases and articles from the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey related to TV series, totaling 56. I detail search and selection in chapter one.

I now turn to some aspects of the significance of this research, which I explore in greater depth in the concluding chapter.

Significance of Research

In this study, I illuminate the interconnectedness of global media, politics, and culture. As I outline in the chapters that follow, Bulgarian, Russian, and Turkish television developed in tandem with, and concrete links to, global television.

Transnational flows of TV influences, genres, and programs have been in existence for as long as television has. Thus, when they are produced, distributed, and consumed, Turkish

TV series are by no means local, unadulterated cultural or generic content, because they exist in and are a product of a dynamic global media sphere. From scriptwriters to the actors to the set designers, to the distributors of the TV series, and the viewers themselves, all of these individuals are accustomed to, reproduce and expect certain criteria that entail underplaying certain elements such as religion and highlighting urbanization, modernity, and strong female roles. Inversely, as Turkish series underplay various elements and emphasize others in line with global trends, Russian productions do the same: they seek to project a Russian modernity as superiority over Turkey in response to the popularity of Turkish series in Russia, CIS countries, and Ukraine through productions such as *Eastern Wives* and *East/West*. Meanwhile, Bulgarian television productions are also competing with Turkish series and do this with an oversaturation of themes and tropes from Hollywood productions, eliciting backlash from Bulgarian viewers over corrupted morality, consumerism, and rampant individualism. Thus, Bulgarians and Russian elites who attempt to counter Turkish series, succumb to Western hegemony.

This study also illustrates a more complex understanding of culture. Public discourse of the Turkish series in Russia and Bulgaria reveals a hostility to wholesale adoptions of Western individualism and liberalism. Meanwhile, Russian productions reveal the imposed cultural hierarchy by cultural elites. Of startling significance is the myth of Western European and American cultural superiority in both Russia and Bulgaria, where proximity to Western European high culture is deployed as validation of

Russian and Bulgarian modernity and served unproblematically in a nationalist package. For example, the most cultured Bulgarians speak English and live lives unbounded by Bulgarian tradition and morality. Meanwhile, in Russian *East/West*, protagonists laud and militantly police French art and consume French wine, to symbolize their cultural superiority and perform Russian greatness.

Additionally, this study highlights the mutually constitutive relationship of global popular culture and politics. For example, the Russian series *East/West* promised “the truth and only truth” about Turkey (Hvichiya, 2016; “Evgeniya Loza,” 2016) following the Turkish downing of a Russian military jet that severed Russo-Turkish relations, even enacting a travel ban between the countries. Additionally, the actors who performed Russian greatness did so as Ukrainians on Ukrainian soil, about one year after the Crimea crisis and as fighting between Ukraine and Russia ensued. In Bulgaria, Turkish series are culpable of toppling nationalist narratives of the Ottoman Empire (Atanassov, 2009) and as instruments to sway elections (Georgieva-Stankova, 2013). Meanwhile, the Turkish government commissions, promotes, and finances numerous Turkish TV series.

Furthermore, the role of women in shaping global politics is salient in this study. Women form the majority of Turkish series viewers, and though their formal political role is limited in Bulgaria and Russia, the attention that Turkish series garner spotlights the central role of women as political agents. That is, through my work, I contribute to literature on the private as the global and show how women act as political agents in their everyday lives (Enloe, 1989/2014). That is, I argue that transnational popular culture

illuminates human agency, disrupts hegemonic geopolitical discourses, and constitutes international relations through the empirical evidence of Russian and Bulgarian female viewers of Turkish television series and this influence on international relations. I explore the contributions of this study in greater depth in the conclusion. In the chapter overviews that follow, I detail how this study will contribute in the manner described in this section.

Chapter Overviews

In chapter one, I provide a historical account of Turkish series, leading to their global circulation and as a budding new topic of global academic study. Surprisingly, despite numerous attributions to the Turkish government in deploying the TV series as an instrument of soft power, there is no systematic study of the discourse of the Turkish government. *What is the official government discourse about the television series? What is the Turkish government intent regarding the export of Turkish TV series?* These are questions that I undertake in this chapter through a systematic analysis of Turkish government discourse about the Turkish series, including news, speeches, and press releases. Through a critical political economy approach, this chapter grounds my comparative study and illuminates the intimacy and codependency of global politics and popular culture. I argue for the merits of studying popular culture in official political discourse, as a gauge of national concerns and geopolitical strategies.

In chapter two, I expand on the global popularity of Turkish television series from chapter one by exploring how Turkish television series captivate audiences. I juxtapose empiric evidence from Russia and Bulgaria to uncover what fascinates viewers, considering Russia and Turkey's centuries-long adversarial relations and Ottoman dominion in Bulgaria for nearly five centuries. *What makes Turkish TV series appealing to Russian and Bulgarian viewers, considering that Turkey is their Other?* This chapter grapples with this question with a discourse analysis of over 140 articles from Russia and Bulgaria. While reasons such as high production quality and compelling storylines overlap, the principal distinction between the two countries is the appeal of a Turkish modernity in Bulgarian public discourse; a modernity where independent women and contemporary capitalist lifestyles are not at odds with traditional family values.

In chapter three, I elaborate on the global popularity of Turkish television series explored in chapter one and the fascination facets according to Russian and Bulgarian audiences established in chapter two, by shifting from fascination to fear expressed in Bulgarian public discourse. During socialism in Bulgaria (1944-1989) national identity was defined mostly according to a victimized Bulgarian past of the nearly five-century Ottoman rule. Abundant socialist Bulgarian state-sanctioned cultural production framed the former Ottoman rulers as backward and barbaric in an effort to reaffirm Bulgaria's national identity as a European country with modern European potential that was crippled by the Ottoman Empire. These media texts constructed the predominant images of Turks and Turkey in the Bulgarian imagination until 2008, when the import of Turkish

television series began, met with an unprecedented popularity that carried them to prime time. After more than a decade since the first imports, Turkish television series continue to dominate ratings in Bulgaria (“Nikolaos,” 2020) and their unprecedented popularity showcases multiple Bulgarian anxieties. In this chapter I answer the following questions: *How do Bulgarians who inveigh against their compatriots’ love for the Turkish series perceive this phenomenon? What fears does neo-Ottoman cool activate?* To answer these questions, I analyze op-eds, blogs, debates, video parodies and tweets that disparage the series. Critics bemoan the deterioration of Bulgarian intellect, culture, and productivity ostensibly caused by the Turkish series, framed at worst as an existential threat to Bulgaria, and as best as a cultural invasion from the East.

In chapter four, I turn to Russia, a country with resources and motivation that effectively wages a media and culture war to fight Turkish TV series. A pronounced declaration of war against the Turkish TV series was when Duma deputies proposed banning them soon after Turkey downed a Russian military jet in late 2015. However, the Turkish TV series were not banned. Instead, robust orientalist television productions that promised to reveal the truth about Turkey, a truth purported to be absent in the Turkish series, were produced and distributed on Channel Domashny, the main distributor of Turkish TV series that targets female viewers from Ukraine to Central Asia. In this chapter, I analyze three such productions and their promotional materials: the docuseries *Eastern Wives*, the drama *East/West*, special report *Natashkina’s Tears*, and Channel Domashny promotional materials. In this chapter, I ask: *How do Russian productions*

attempt to counter neo-Ottoman cool? How does Russian media define and perpetuate the geo-cultural signifiers East and West? More generally, what can transnational media illuminate about gender, culture and modernity? I argue that *neo-Ottoman cool* is fought by Russian media by weaponizing culture against Turkey with classic orientalism (Said, 1978) to sustain Russian Eurasian power. This, in tandem with antagonistic geopolitical developments and socio-political issues in Russia, including rising conservatism, intimate partner violence, and dire economic conditions that have propelled many Russian women to Turkey since the early 1990s (Bloch, 2017). This chapter demonstrates how political agenda can be enacted in spaces of popular culture, by extending the breadth and depth of the dynamics of the intersection of geopolitics and popular culture in considerations of East and West.

In the conclusion, I summarize the findings from the former chapters to answer the main research question: *What transpires when transnational media from the Other traverses and settles in the Self's media sphere?* Embracing the popular culture of a traditionally denigrated culture is engendered by variegated complex dynamics that are dialogic with local social realities. Their shared appreciation for high production quality aside, Bulgarian and Russian viewers value the Turkish series for various reasons. Bulgarian viewers' experience of uprooted families and overbearing liberalism since the end of socialism neutralized historic enmity and provided a ripe environment for Turkish series that offer the possibility of an alternate modernity; one where traditional community and family values do not have to be sacrificed, reminiscent of times past.

Meanwhile, Russian viewers turn to Turkish series for escapism and a palpable promise for a better life that leads many women to literally escape to Turkey from destitute economic conditions and prevalent intimate partner violence; a proclivity since the 1990s following the demise of the Soviet Union that collapsed the economy (Bloch, 2017), and recently fueled by Putin's propinquity to the Orthodox church and the decriminalization of domestic abuse ("Moscow domestic violence," 2018).

The potency of the Turkish series in leveraging the geopolitical imagination of Russian and Bulgarian viewers is construed as threatening to nationalists and political elites. In both countries, whether fearing or fighting the Turkish series, perpetuating an image of Turkey in adversarial terms is a worthwhile endeavor, one related to national memory and nationalist rhetoric, as well as an aspirational idealized modernity of the West. As viewers are not a *tabula rasa* and spatial scales are mutually constitutive (Martín-Barbero, 1993; García Canclini, 1995; Hall, 1973; Kraidy, 2010), Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia are a new interaction in a pre-existing, dialectic context, which I term the *global media matrix*. In following chapter, I start with Turkey, outlining the history, expansion, and Turkish government initiatives related to the Turkish series.

CHAPTER 1: FLOWING TURKISH TV SERIES

A teenage Turkish girl from Bulgaria boarded a Bulgarian Balkan Air airplane in Istanbul on a crisp late December night in 1987. Millions of viewers in Turkey held their breath watching the live Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) broadcast as she descended the airplane stairs to reunite with her parents following a prolonged separation. In reply to a reporter's comment about appearing tired, Aysel Ozgur mentioned that it was because she was traveling for two days. This did not deter the agenda and the live broadcast, as cameras followed her to the Turkish capital, Ankara, to meet Prime Minister Turgut Ozal. What led to this spectacular media event? This was the real-life crescendo of a Turkish television series, *To Be Born Again*.

To Be Born Again was a tear-jerking government-commissioned series broadcast during the TRT-monopolized mass media environment based on Aysel's life and the forced assimilation process of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. However, when the millions of viewers tuned in on December 27 for the third episode, a voice-over announced that due to technical difficulties *To Be Born Again* would not be broadcast. The series abruptly ceased and three days later real-life Aysel's arrival in Turkey was live on the air. Bulgarian authorities released Aysel in exchange for the halting of *To Be Born*

*Again*⁵ (Krusteva, 2007; TRT Belgesel, 2016; TRT Belgesel, 2018; Cokum, n.d.). This Turkish TV series was a crucial factor in diplomatic negotiations between Bulgaria and Turkey that ultimately ceased the Bulgarian practice of detaining children of parents who had escaped to Turkey, reuniting Aysel and over one hundred other children with their parents.

Politically potent Turkish television series persist, and they are no longer limited to one television channel within the borders of Turkey. They are now a global media phenomenon, viewed on television by more than 700 million people in more than 145 countries, and also accessed widely on video-on-demand (VOD) streaming services such as YouTube and Netflix (Ustuk, 2019). Turkish television series are the second most globally exported series after American series (“Turkish TV series aim,” 2016). How did the Turkish TV industry transform from a single television channel state monopoly to a vast global media industry?

In this chapter, I provide a historical and academic study overview of Turkish series, leading to their global distribution. Subsequently, I study official presidential discourse to uncover state intent behind the export of the series, because despite numerous attributions to the Turkish government in deploying the TV series as an

⁵ Ironically, the forced assimilation process of Turks in Bulgaria was named the “Rebirth Process.” As the Bulgarian government sought the renascence of ethnic Turks into Bulgarian, *To Be Born Again* represented a renascence into freedom bestowed by Turkey. As the Bulgarian government sought to purify Bulgaria of all remaining vestiges of five-century Ottoman rule, the Turkish government exploited the persecuted minority for a nationalistic spectacle and performance of regional power.

instrument of soft power, there is no systematic study of the Turkish government. Since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has effectively harnessed all political power especially since the failed coup attempt in 2016, I look to presidential communication such as news, speeches, and press releases about television series to answer: *What is the official government discourse of the television series?* In order to trace the development of the Turkish series from their humble beginnings to a global phenomenon warranting profuse official rhetoric, I begin with a brief history of the Turkish series, the topic of the next section.

Brief History and Study of Turkish TV Series

Television broadcasting began in Turkey in 1968 with the public Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Commercial television channels were unconstitutional and TRT prioritized the dissemination of education and culture (Algan, 2020). The import of mostly American television series to distract Turkish viewers from their everyday lives began in the early 1970s (Cankaya, 1986; Serim, 2007). In 1974, TRT decided to produce its own movies and mini-series for television based on classic Turkish literature, most notably the mini-series *Forbidden Love*⁶, the first Turkish series

⁶ Based on Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil's 1899 novel, *Aşk-ı Memnu* [Forbidden Love]; produced again in 2008, becoming a global sensation. Other productions in 1974 included Aziz Nesin's *Yaşar Ne Yaşar Ne Yaşamaz* [Yasar Neither Lives nor Doesn't], Sait Faik's *Kumpanya* [Theatrical Company], Ömer Seyfettin *Hikayeleri* [Omer Seyfettin's Stories] and *Beş Türk Hikayesi* [Five Turkish Stories].

to be exported, sold to France in 1975 (Cankaya, 1986; Atalay, 2019). The first long-running Turkish television series is *The Mothers-in-Law*, with 950 episodes broadcast from 1975 to 2004 (Cankaya, 1986; “Everlasting TV series,” 2020). The Turkish TV series with the most episodes is *Mrs. Ferhunde*, with 1780 episodes aired between 1993 to 1999 (“Everlasting TV series,” 2020).

The export of Turkish TV series hastened in the 1980s. In 1986, TRT sold 52 TV series and documentaries to nine countries, mostly in Europe, and also Russia and Japan⁷ (TRT, 1990). Some European countries bought the productions to cater to Turkish migrant workers. In Russia, the imported Turkish TV series *Lovebird/Wren*, based on the 1922 novel by Resat Nuri Guntekin spurred the robust translation and sale of Turkish literature (“Lovebird TV Series,” 2014). TRT monopolized airwaves until 1990 when nepotism and neoliberal economic policies initiated a new era in Turkish broadcasting (Behlil, 2010).

In 1990, Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal’s son, partner of Swiss-based Magic Box, launched Star 1, the first commercial—and illegal—satellite channel broadcast from Germany, endorsed by Ozal and received enthusiastically by advertisers and the public (Behlil, 2010; Yesil, 2016). Within a few years, with the amendment of the constitution legalizing commercial radio and television channels, commercial television channels proliferated, and millions of satellite dishes protruded from rooftops and balconies in

⁷ Exported productions include the following: *Mardin-Münih Hattı* [The Mardin-Munich Line], *Acımak* [To Pity], *Çalıkuşu* [Wren/Lovebird], *Yarın Artık Bugündür* [Now Tomorrow is Today], *Aşk-ı Memnu* [Forbidden Love], *Parkta Bir Sonbahar Günü* [An Autumn Day at the Park], *Kartallar Yüksek Uçar* [Eagles Fly High].

Turkey (Kaptan & Algan, 2020). During this period, there was a shift from TRT's formerly didactic approach to broadcasting to one that prioritized viewer preferences and advertising agencies and their clients (Yesil, 2016; Algan, 2020; Erguvan & Kocak, 2020). Viewer preferences led to a demand for Turkish TV series and the drastic decrease of imported television series. However, though imports decreased, numerous Turkish series were produced as derivative works or adaptations initially mostly of American, and recently, of Japanese and Korean TV series (Birsin, 2019; Khan & Won, 2020).

The robust production of Turkish TV series in the 1990s and their pirated distribution abroad prompted the sale of *Crazy Heart* to Kazakhstan in 1997, sold at \$30 per episode to obviate piracy (Yesil, 2015; Algan, 2020). Serendipity, neoliberal policies, and demand gradually brought Turkish TV series to primetime in the Middle East, the Balkans and the rest of the world. Turkish TV series exports valued at \$271,000 USD in 1986 (TRT, 1990) and \$10,000 USD in 2004 ("Turkey world's second highest," 2014) rose to \$350 million USD in 2019, and 150 Turkish series reached over 700 million television viewers in 146 countries (Ustuk, 2019; "Turkey's TV series exports yield," 2019).

There are two global television channels with twenty-four-hour Turkish TV series programming, the Timeless Dizi Channel (TDC) and Kanal D Drama. Timeless Dizi Channel (TDC), launched in 2019, reaches five million households in 14 countries. It is available in Albanian, Arabic, Bulgarian, Croatian, English, Macedonian, Polish, Romanian, Serbian, Spanish, Turkish ("First Global Turkish Drama Channel," 2019;

Timeless Dizi Channel, n.d.). Kanal D Drama, launched in 2018 in Latin America, is the first channel dedicated to Turkish series dubbed in Spanish. It is available in 13 countries, including in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Panama, Peru, Paraguay and Uruguay, and as of 2020, it is also available in France, Albania, Kosovo and the US. There are more than 1,500 Turkish series in Kanal D Drama's catalog (Regan, 2020; Thema, 2020; Thema, n.d.).

Alongside their global distribution on television screens, Turkish TV series migrated to other platforms. *Otisabi*, the first Turkish series produced for YouTube in 2013, was followed by *Zero One* in 2016 (Yanardagolu & Turhalli, 2020). Netflix began to broadcast in Turkey in 2016, followed by local online streaming platforms Blu TV and Puhu TV (Yanardagolu & Turhalli, 2020). Meanwhile, Turkish TV series are viewable on Netflix globally and constitute their own category in the platform. The first Turkish-produced Netflix original series, *The Protector*, was released in December 2018 (Marshall, 2018).

Turkish TV series also increasingly attract academic study and scholars from a number of countries and disciplines are engaged in their study. A pressing question for numerous scholars is what in particular is appealing to viewers of Turkish series in various geographies, explored with audience reception studies. A panoply of audiences were studied in Bulgaria (Georgieva-Stankova, 2013), Egypt (Yanardagolu & Karam, 2013; Anaz, 2014), Albania (Balaban, 2015), Qatar (Berg, 2017; Berg, 2020), Bosnia and Herzegovina (Aydos, 2017), Kosovo (Rahte, 2017), Morocco and Greece (Ozalpman &

Sarikakis, 2018), Kazakhstan (Rymbayeva, 2019), Pakistan (Malik, Haq & Mukhtar, 2019), and Greece (Pothou, 2020). High production quality, realism, and beautiful actors and scenery of Turkish series are often invoked by viewers. The vast majority of viewers are women, many of whom report that through the Turkish series they reflect on their own lives as they grapple with the demands of womanhood. In the next chapter (chapter 2), I explore in detail the popularity of Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia as reflected in public discourse.

Viewing Turkish series often translates into a desire to travel to Turkey and consume Turkish products. Tourist flows to Turkey increase in proportion to the hours of Turkish series aired, propped further with the termination of Turkish visa requirements in a number of countries (Balli, Balli & Cebeci, 2013; Anaz & Ozcan, 2016). Guzel & Aktas (2016) similarly found that as Athenians watched Turkish series, their desire to travel to Turkey increased. Kantarci, Basaran and Ozyurt (2017) compared inbound tourism to Turkey from Bulgaria and Saudi Arabia and found that one year after the beginning of the Turkish series broadcasts, there was a drastic increase in Saudi Arabian tourists, and a more gradual increase in Bulgarian tourists. While they interpreted the gradual increase of tourists from Bulgaria in terms of no effect, unlike Anaz and Ozcan (2016), they missed historical and geopolitical factors that warrant more caution from Bulgarians considering travel to Turkey. Also, as the series gained traction in Bulgaria, there was a noticeable shift away from Bulgarian travel to Greece and toward Turkey (National Statistical Institute, Republic of Bulgaria, 2016a). Product placement (Cakir &

Kinit, 2014; Aydin, 2016) and consumption influenced by Turkish series in Albania (Koksal & Gjana, 2015) and Saudi Arabia (Aljammazi & Asil, 2017) were other readily researched interests of scholars.

Gender issues and representation are another concern of scholars. Turkish series are blamed for normalizing rape (Gokulu, 2013; Yuksel, 2013; Kaya, 2019; Ouardaoui, 2019), and for stereotypical gender representation that dictates traditional gender roles or traps women into sexualized bodies (Ustek & Alyanak, 2017; Yalkin & Veer, 2018; Inceoglu, 2020). These studies are incongruous with reports of strong female leads in Turkish series, which is a commonly attributed reason for their popularity (Paschalidou, 2013; Nawa, 2017).

The burgeoning research on Turkish TV series also manifests a disproportionate preoccupation with and disagreement about the Turkish TV series as soft power. While numerous scholars posit that the television series are applications of Turkish soft power (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013; Cevik, 2014; Berg, 2017; Jabbour, 2017; Constantinou & Tziarras, 2018; Larcher, 2018), others disagree, even with themselves. A case in point is Yanardagoglu and Karam (2013), who first found evidence for soft power and for *neo-Ottoman cool* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013), only to argue later that it is not *neo-Ottoman cool*, but that production and transnational distribution are driven by market imperatives (Alankus & Yanardagoglu, 2016). The ambivalence is evident when the scholars claim that the success of the Turkish series is not due to an application of soft power, “although they were employed as instruments of public

diplomacy for a while” (p. 3626). Nevertheless, Alankus and Yanardagoglu (2016) make an important contribution by identifying factors that create demand and propel the production and distribution of Turkish series, such as glocal economic dynamics, Turkish TV series industry specificities, the genre, and the negotiated readings of audiences. Likewise, Yesil (2015) attributed local and global market and industry dynamics, and Turkish government support for the TV industry as facilitators of the production and transnationalization of the Turkish series. Certain Turkish series in particular drove this transnationalization and I turn to those next.

Most Exported Turkish TV Series

Historical dramas. *Magnificent Century*⁸ is one of the most viewed Turkish series around the globe. It is a historical drama about Suleiman the Magnificent⁹ and his slave-turned-Sultan Hurrem Ukrainian love Alexandra Anastasia Lisowska. *Magnificent Century* was sold to nearly 100 countries (Buyukkoscudere, 2018), and even to former Ottoman realms such as the Middle East and the Balkans (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Mihalakopoulos, 2013; Celikkol & Kraidy, forthcoming). *Magnificent Century* emptied streets, such as in Karachi, Pakistan, as viewers transfixed to the Ottoman harem intrigues (Bhutto, 2019). Viewers from around the globe, attracted to the opulence of the Ottoman

⁸ Premiered in Turkey on January 5, 2011 and continued for 5 seasons with a total of 139 episodes (Tims & B Productions, n.d.).

⁹ The longest reigning sultan who expanded Ottoman lands and Ottoman civilization in law, literature, art and architecture.

Empire, travel to Istanbul to see Topkapi Palace¹⁰, to purchase Ottoman-style jewelry replicas, and to search for Turkish love (Lotoreva, 2020; Bloch, 2017; Cetingulec, 2016; Hodzic, 2013). Meanwhile in Turkey, then Prime Minister (now President) Erdogan denounced the series for degrading Ottoman history while invoking it to bolster his Turkish foreign policy agenda¹¹ (Toksabay & Villelabeitia, 2011; Subasi, 2012).

In response to *Magnificent Century* the Turkish government commissioned another historical TV series, *Resurrection: Ertugrul*, delineating a history and Turkey's contemporary role that is in line with government discourse (Carney, 2019). TRT's *Resurrection: Ertugrul*, which premiered in December 2014, is among the highest rated Turkish dramas, watched by over one billion people in four continents (Karahana, 2018; Khan, 2020). It is a historical drama about the 13th century story of Ertugrul Ghazi, father of the Osman who founded the Ottoman Empire. On a visit to Bahrain, Erdogan was welcomed with its theme music ("Sixty countries," 2017), he flew the cast and crew to Kuwait on his own plane ("The cast," 2017), and attended the wedding of a cast member ("President Erdogan," 2019). Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro visited the set of *Resurrection: Ertugrul* and emphasized similarities between the series and Venezuela in overcoming difficulties ("Maduro visits set," 2018). Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan endorsed the series for its promotion of Islamic history and ethics,

¹⁰ Topkapi Palace is the historical residence of Sultan Suleiman and Hurrem and the main setting of *Magnificent Century*.

¹¹ See Arsan and Yildirim (2014) for how various media outlets framed Erdogan's critiques of *Magnificent Century*.

and Lahore residents expressed their admiration by erecting a statue of Ertugrul (Butt, 2020). In addition to historical costume dramas, Turkish series are also widely admired for their Cinderella-style love stories, to which I turn next.

Romantic TV series. *Gumus* [distributed as *Noor* in Arabic¹²], a TV series that did not garner much national attention, became a transnational media sensation and transmedia event (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). This story of a provincial woman who weds into an affluent Istanbul family inspired merchandise, fatwas, fashion, beauty, interior design, and divorces in the Middle East¹³ (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). More than 84 million Arabic-speaking viewers, 50 million of whom were women, watched the final episode and swooned over “Turkish Brad Pitt” Kivanc Tatlitug (Delaimi, 2010, as cited in Yanardagoglu & Karam, 2013). In Bulgaria, it was the second Turkish TV series to be imported in June 2009, becoming the most watched program by the end of the summer (Spasov, 2009).

1001 Nights is another Turkish TV series that garnered global acclaim and spearheaded the distribution of the Turkish TV series. *1001 Nights* was among the first Turkish television series to be broadcast globally, including in the Balkans and Latin America. In the Balkans, *1001 Nights* metamorphosed the image of the barbaric Turks propagated in media until then into the beautiful neighbor in the South. *1001 Nights*

¹² *Perla* in Bulgarian; *Serebro* in Russian

¹³ Though Turkish TV series began to be aired in the Middle East in 2006, *Noor* led the phenomenal popularity of Turkish series in the Arab world when it began to be broadcast on Saudi-owned MBC in 2008 (Yanardagoglu and Karam, 2013).

broke ratings records in Serbia (“The TV series 1001 Nights,” 2010), inspired a television talk show look-alike contest in Bulgaria (“Hello Bulgaria chose,” 2009), and prompted the payment of a large sum of money for the visit of the leads in Croatia (“Scheherazade and Onur in Zagreb,” 2010). In Latin America, *1001 Nights* began to be broadcast in 2014 after the suffering Chilean channel Mega took a risk by testing the Turkish series in that market, resulting in high ratings (Staricco, 2015) and the launch of the mass export of Turkish TV series to Latin America (Julio, Fernández, Mujica, Bachman & Osorio, 2015). Massive viewership of *1001 Nights* quickly expanded to Colombia, Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador and Uruguay (Martinez, 2016). Besides this genre, there were also series about crime and military endeavors, which I outline next.

Political and Crime Dramas. *Valley of the Wolves* and *Back Streets* have enjoyed onscreen popularity for more than a decade, in Turkey and abroad. In *Valley of the Wolves* Turkish lead protagonist Polat Alemdar (Necati Şaşmaz) fights the dark forces of the West, namely, American and Israeli conspirators, for 13 seasons. It was sold to 36 countries (Pana Film, n.d.) and aired on Abu Dhabi TV between 2007 and 2012 (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). Meanwhile, the hybrid genre action/adventure/comedy *Back Streets* is about an Istanbul police unit that protects the streets of Istanbul, and as of writing in late December 2020, it is in its 15th season, in which the police unit fights an international crime organization (“Everlasting TV series,” 2020). *Back Streets* is also broadcast long term outside of Turkey as well, such as in Bulgaria since 2011. How did the Turkish government approach Turkish TV series? I explore this in the following section.

State Support for Turkish TV Series

Government subsidies from the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, n.d.), the Ministry of Economy (Ministry of Economy, 2020) and the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce¹⁴ are generously distributed to production and distribution companies. The export of Turkish TV series to bolster the Turkish economy was officially strategized in 2010, a few years after mass exports of the series began in the Middle East and the Balkans. The plan was to embed the series in the Istanbul Electric-Electronic, Machinery and Information Exporters Union and market them like home appliances and other such exports. Foreign Trade Minister Zafer Caglayan outlined how Turkish series would “enter the export table,” by heavily subsidizing producers to market TV series at trade fairs. He explained: “Our people will go to the fairs where they used to buy TV series or movies, [this time] to sell series...” including at MIPTV, NATPE, and Filmart (“Ezel is becoming a product for export,” 2010).

The Turkish government officially participates and goads the participation of production companies in trade fairs such as MIPCOM, the world’s largest entertainment content market expo. In 2015 Turkey was the “country of honor” at the expo, and the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce, the Ministry of Economy, and Ministry of Culture and Tourism financed and provided logistical support for the participation of production companies in the vast expo space they reserved (Istanbul Exporters Union, 2015). In

¹⁴ A detailed PDF of subsidies for “foreign currency earning services” including Turkish series is no longer available on the website though accessible through the Internet Archive https://web.archive.org/web/20190214205358/https://www.ito.org.tr/Rekabeti_Gelistirme/DOVI_Z_KAZANDIRICI_HIZMET.pdf

early 2020, the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce (ICC) announced that the Turkish TV series sector ranks second in exports with \$300 million USD of export, and based on this trajectory of success, ICC would participate in trade fairs of the sector, to continue to contribute to the industry. ICC participation commitments for the promotion of Turkish TV series, films and other content in 2020 included NATPE 2020, MIPTV 2020, MIPCOM 2020, and ATF Asia TV Forum & Market (Istanbul Chamber of Commerce, 2020).

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism subsidizes the film industry with USD 190 million annually, following the surge of tourists from countries with avid consumption of Turkish series (“Minister of Culture,” 2016). According to the Professional Association of Film Producers (FIYAB) in 2016 alone, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism supported 160 film-related projects by granting 30 million Turkish liras (“Copyright law,” 2016). Since 2012 Turkish television series are also gifted to various countries, compliments of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, because “with TV series we can enter every house and spread the influence of Turkish culture” (“Works continue,” 2012). The television series export goal for 2023 is to reach USD one billion dollars (“Minister Celik,” 2014). Further, in 2019, the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM) passed an amendment to the Law on the Evaluation, Classification and Promotion of Cinema Films that subsidizes up to 30 percent of television series and films to increase exports and “for Turkey to be promoted correctly” (“Turkey’s TV series exports,” 2019).

In addition to export-related government support, demand from abroad propels the production of some series. For example, *Magnificent Century Kosem*, the sequel to *Magnificent Century* is a “global favorite” (Carney, 2016) and continued to be produced despite years of low ratings in Turkey. Another example is *Elif*, which based on its low ratings is all but missing from the Turkish market but enjoys immense popularity in Latin America (“Elif,” 2017), even as an award-winner at the Latina Turkish Awards (Trome, 2017). Turkish actors including Engin Akyurek, Songul Oden and Ece Hakim also enjoy a massive global fan base despite missing from the “top celebrity list” in Turkey (Sari, 2017).

Thus, Alankus and Yanardagoglu (2016) claim that the television production sector is driven by the national market and this “should temper any claims that the Turkish government has taken deliberate actions to use TV series to consolidate its soft power” (p. 3621-3622) is questionable. So, what is the Turkish government discourse about Turkish TV series? To answer this question, I now turn to the data corpus and the power-laden words of President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Data Corpus

For a systematic study of the government discourse of Turkish TV series, I searched the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey website for *dizi*, the exclusive word in Turkish signifying *TV series*. The date range of the data is nearly five years, from the earliest available on the website, August 28, 2014 until March 16, 2019. The coup attempt in

2016 jostled Turkish society and institutions, and five years provides a sufficient sample of the period of relative pre-coup attempt stability and post-coup attempt reforms. My search yielded almost one hundred articles, from which I selected those that pertained to TV series. The articles that I discarded were not about *dizi*, but other *series* of events, meetings, and so on. The table below shows the genre of the content as categorized by the website:

Category	Articles
News	29
Speeches	11
Press Releases	2
English	14
Total	56

In the following sections I outline the main themes that emerged from the data corpus.

Findings

Global Competition and Power via Turkish TV Series

Erdogan repeatedly asserted that in order to stifle global competition and become a global economic power, it is vital to nurture Turkish cultural production and the arts, including TV series. Besides direct TV industry gains, the most immediate effect of the Turkish series that translates into economic power for Turkey is tourism, and this is

observed, noted, and harnessed by the Presidency. According to Erdogan, the support given to the cinema and television series industry was effective in expanding Turkish tourism destinations and increasing incoming tourists from 13 to 46 million (Presidency, 2019d). Erdogan credited the Support for Cinema Films with Evaluation and Classification (Law 5224) passed in 2004¹⁵ with boosting the Turkish cinema and television industry to a new epoch, stating that the latest amendment¹⁶ would propel them even further, illustrating the growth of the cinema sector. He reminisced how in 2002 there were nine domestic movies on the big screen, and these increased to 180 in 2018 (Presidency, 2019b).

Soon after the amendment of Law 5224, Erdogan hosted producers, actors, and the Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Nuri Ersoy in the Presidential Complex¹⁷ (Presidency, 2019a). The film industry should become more powerful in the global arena and more productions that reflect Turkish culture and history are necessary, posited

¹⁵ Law 5224

<https://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/Metin1.Aspx?MevzuatKod=1.5.5224&MevzuatIliski=0&sourceXmlSearch=5224&Tur=1&Tertip=5&No=5224>

¹⁶ The amendment was passed in January 2019. Adding television series was a major part of the amendment. <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2019/01/20190130-7.htm>

¹⁷ During this meeting, director, actor and producer Yilmaz Erdogan stated that he was pleasantly surprised by the swiftness of the Parliament General Assembly in passing the amendment that aims to increase the global competitive power of the Turkish film and television series industry. Similarly, screenwriter and producer Bahadır Özdener expressed appreciation for the amendment of the cinema law and the new presidential system, stating that even problems that had fossilized in the industry were solved in the last two weeks. Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Nuri Ersoy reassured attendees that they will continue to work with the industry to develop solutions “at the same [fast] speed” (Presidency, 2019a).

Erdogan. He emphasized the need for a leap in the field of arts and culture and stated that the government is committed to supporting the industry, by any means necessary.

In a speech at the groundbreaking ceremony of the Odunpazari Museum of Modern Art, Erdogan declared that global powers owe their power to the arts and cultural production, "...and we see that the thing that brings them to every area of our daily lives are their culture and art products" (Presidency, 2018a). He asserted that Turkey would be much more powerful if affluent individuals and institutions prioritize investments in culture and art (Presidency, 2018a). Similarly, during the 2018 Presidential Culture and Art Grand Awards Ceremony, Erdogan posited that cultural production is one of the symbols of independence of a nation, comparable to land, the flag, military and money. He explained that cultural power built the most powerful countries in the world, even more so than military power, and that the culture industry impacted various fields including movies, music, clothing, technology and architecture, which propels the Turkish government to embrace its cultural and artistic policies (Presidency, 2018d). He expressed his gratitude to those working in culture and arts, and their contribution to Turkey (Presidency, 2018d). He continued that as with other investments, relying exclusively on government projects and public facilities for endeavors in culture and art would be inappropriate. The role of the state is to enable individuals to persist in these areas, which are "ultimately based on individual effort and individual productivity" (Presidency, 2018d). He concluded by stating that the culture and arts will be a major pillar of Turkey's 2053 and 2071 visions, and he declared his commitment to support the

industry. He expressed satisfaction about the success and global distribution of Turkish series, and encouraged individuals and institutions to persist, compete, and become successful in other fields as well.

Further, Erdogan asserted that Turkey should have an ideal in culture and arts, because local and national inspirations are key to succeeding in global competition in all media, from television series to movies, to novels and computer games (Presidency, 2018c). Erdogan also warned that hostility toward one's own country, society, history and civilization will result in surrender to global popular culture (Presidency, 2018c).

Erdogan Promotes Turkish TV Series, Rails Against Others

The TRT production of a television series honoring Bosnia's first president Alija Izzetbegovic illustrates explicit application of Turkish television series as soft power, which vexed some Serbians (Buyuk, 2017). In a grand event that included a Quran reading in the Presidential Complex, Erdogan thanked TRT for producing *Aliya*, quoted Prophet Muhammad, and lambasted the West for tolerating injustices and the suffering of Muslims, such as the 650,000 Rohingya people who were killed because they are Muslim (Presidency, 2017e; Presidency, 2017d; Presidency, 2017c). Erdogan also mentioned that when he visited Izzetbegovic in the hospital prior to his death, Izzetbegovic implored him to "protect [his] Bosnia," because Bosnia is Ottoman heritage (Presidency, 2017d).

Erdogan also expressed his admiration for *Resurrection: Ertugrul* on numerous occasions, listened to poems read by actors during the commemoration of the conquest of Istanbul (Presidency, 2016a), and indexed the success of the drama with inspiring future

generations by emphasizing that his grandchildren even watch reruns (Presidency, 2016c; Presidency, 2015d; Presidency, 2017a). He visited the sets of *Resurrection: Ertugrul* and *Filinta*, another Ottoman era TRT television series (Presidency, 2015d). During an iftar dinner that Erdogan hosted for actors and athletes, he stated that it is a point of pride for Turkey that movies and television series produced in Turkey are viewed by wide audiences, from the Gulf countries to the West, and that the government will support the industry to carry these achievements further (Presidency, 2016b).

Erdogan also mentioned co-production agreements with other countries. Referring to a potential co-production with India, he posited that there is a need for truth-based television drama screenplays, that they should not be like documentaries or propaganda (Presidency, 2017b). Prior to a trip to Colombia, Erdogan recognized the growing interest toward Turkish series and culture in the region and promised to “take some steps to translate into Spanish those series that reflect our values, our history and our culture.” (Presidency, 2015c).

The presidency repeatedly expressed criticism about television series from other countries. Presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin stated that “we follow, know, and see” the smear campaigns, fake news, and television series in America financed by FETO terrorists¹⁸ (Presidency, 2019c). During a dinner hosted by Erdogan for the President of Religious Affairs Mehmet Gormez and provincial muftis, Erdogan pilloried the negative representation of Turkish clergy on television, in movies and in television series, while

¹⁸ FETO is the term used to denote followers of Fethullah Gulen and the Gulenist movement held accountable for staging the coup attempt in 2016.

underscoring the historical and contemporary importance of the clergy to the Turkish nation (Presidency, 2015e). Erdogan also blamed television series for misdirecting women and belittling the importance of motherhood in a speech he gave during the kickoff of the Women's Empowerment Strategy Document and Action Plan meeting (Presidency, 2018b). Erdogan accused television series of depicting Prophet Mohammed (Presidency, 2015b), and for misrepresenting Turkish history (Presidency, 2015a). He fulminated against the United States for attacking Turkish interests "under the guise of law with its bankers, businessmen, weapon sales, energy investments, television shows, and think-tank reports" (Presidency, 2017f). As Erdogan lambasted media that he perceived at odds with his ideology and agenda, others spoke against Turkish TV series ("Golden Dawn MP protests," 2013; Flower, 2009; Tursunbaeva, 2014; "Bangladeshi directors," 2016; Kraidy, 2019; Najibullah, 2019; Antonopoulos, 2020; Mohidyn, 2020). Yet, the Turkish series traveled far and wide in the last decade.

Analysis

In the span of a few decades, Turkish series morphed into a new Turkish delight that rivet hundreds of millions of viewers around the globe to their televisions, computer screens, laptops, and phones. Since the early 1990s, neoliberal policies transformed the Turkish television industry, and with it, television content in Turkey and abroad. Erdogan intensified neoliberal policies that Ozal had initiated a few decades prior. The most dominant ideology driving Turkish politics since AKP's ascension in 2002 is

neoliberalism, and even voters assumed to vote pro-AKP for their Islamic rhetoric are more motivated by economic policy performance than Islam (Dagi, 2008).

Voters were rewarded with robust economic growth in the first five years of Erdogan's rule, realized with Erdogan's implementation of institutional reforms and policies, in an effort to join the European Union (EU). However, 2007 was a turning point, and the beginning of a stagnant Turkish economy, as Erdogan reversed those policies and shifted away from the EU (Acemoglu & Ucer, 2015; Yilmaz, 2016). This coincided with two significant developments: the appointment of Ahmet Davutoglu as Foreign Minister (2009-2014) and the jump-start popularity of Turkish series in the Middle East and the Balkans around the same time. Davutoglu affirmed his commitment to neighboring states—of former Ottoman lands—and declared his “zero problems with neighbors” policy thus reversing West-gazing Turkish foreign policy that had been the norm since the founding of the republic (Davutoglu, 2001). In the meantime, enthusiastic viewers of Turkish series in the neighboring countries were exposed to starkly divergent images of Turks than they had been taught about in school and watched in local productions. Improved international relations and a booming economy that propped up the television industry along with new narratives of culture, modernity, and societal change, reveals a clear image in the kaleidoscopic success of the Turkish series.

Though Erdogan's words were potent and effectual in supporting the television industry with favorable policies and financial support, producers, distributors, and diplomats laid the groundwork. The government support for the Turkish TV series that

followed was motivated by a desire to resurrect the Turkish economy, and with it, Ertugrul. Though scholars of Turkish TV series tend to postulate economic factors and soft power as a dichotomous elements and argue accordingly, studying the presidential discourse of Turkish TV series complicates these conceptions and points to a multifaceted Turkish appeal instigated by multiple developments, captured with *neo-Ottoman cool* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). Presidential discourse reveals that TV series are primarily valued for inbound tourism, the single most important driver of the Turkish economy, and secondarily, to supplant local representations of Turkey, and disseminate representations that are in concordance with Turkish interests.

Erdogan's heavy preoccupation with economizing all spheres of government and enacting the television series as an instrument of competition to harness global influence echoes Brown's (2015) conception of neoliberalism. Also typical of neoliberal ideology, Erdogan assigns individual responsibility to individuals and institutions with available resources to further the production and distribution of the television series, emphasizing that the government alone cannot be expected to sustain the success of the series. Erdogan motivates such individuals and institutions by dedicating hefty government subsidies and by hosting meetings, iftar dinners, and TV series launches in the Presidential Complex. In trips to Colombia and India, in lieu of more pressing diplomatic matters—or because promoting the Turkish series is also an urgent matter—Erdogan negotiated coproductions and the dubbing of Turkish series into Spanish. Erdogan readily endorses the global sensation *Resurrection: Ertugrul* TV series including by hosting

Venezuelan president Maduro and his wife at the production site, attending a cast member wedding, and flying with the cast to Kuwait, merging popular culture with global politics. Turkish government policies encouraged the export of series and the industry benefited from profits that enabled it to produce even more series of high quality and grow exponentially. Further, foreign markets salvaged television series that did not deliver the required ratings in the competitive market in Turkey (Kaptan & Algan, 2020).

Thus, practical and formal geopolitics worked in tandem with popular geopolitics, and Erdogan reveled in the success of all. However, with the recent turn of zero problems with neighbors to zero friends (Sazak and Kurc, 2018), the Turkish series also suffered repercussions, with bans, boycotts, and alternate narratives of Ottoman history. Erdogan's support for the Muslim Brotherhood inspired a boycott of Turkish series in Egypt (Kraidy, 2019) and their sudden ban in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over Turkey's support of Qatar (Sharma, 2018). Formal and practical geopolitics also galvanized popular geopolitics, including the Saudi Arabian and UAE coproduction *Kingdoms of Fire*, a 14-episode, \$40 million USD television series which uncovers "the fierce history behind the Ottoman state" (Mohyidin, 2020)¹⁹. Meanwhile, though officially banned in Saudi Arabia, Turkish series are produced and distributed by an MBC subsidiary, Saudi-owned O3 Production Services ("O3 Medya," n.d.). O3 continues to operate in Turkey, distribute globally, and to produce Turkish series, most notably *The*

¹⁹ In chapter four, I investigate this topic deeper, with the Russian reaction to Turkish series during the 2015 geopolitical crisis following the shooting down of the Russian jet by Turkish forces.

Protector, the first Turkish series produced for Netflix, underscoring the complexity of global media, and its relationship to global politics.

Global media is also intricately related to national politics, as most famously evident from Erdogan's attacks against *Magnificent Century's* representation of Sultan Suleyman, which he perceives to be discordant with his ideologies and policies. Underscoring the historical and contemporary importance of the clergy to the Turkish nation, Erdogan also lambasted television series that represent Turkish clergy in a disparaging manner. He also inculpated television series for misdirecting women, belittling the importance of motherhood, and for misrepresenting Prophet Mohammed and Turkish history. These, along with his call for an *ideal* in TV series and strongman political status is worrisome, since it implies a cultural homogeneity defined by Erdogan. Additionally, even as he criticizes the United States for attacks against the interests of Turkey with television series, he publicizes the TRT series about Bosnian leader Alija Izzetbegovic incensing Serbia, in a manner analogous with how Turgut Ozal harnessed *Aysel* to position Turkey as a regional power. All of these point to the intimate and intricate global connections of media, part and parcel of the television industry in Turkey since its very inception.

Though series such as *Aysel* and *Resurrection: Ertugrul* are commissioned by the government, for millions of viewers around the globe Turkish TV series are entertainment that do not warrant a critical eye. This is what makes Turkish TV series particularly potent: the geopolitical imagination of audiences as pertains to Turkey is

directly constructed or influenced by Turkish productions, which are in turn produced according to government directives to obviate censorship and penalties. These productions, fine-tuned to Turkish government standards and cultural norms then captivate viewers who travel to Turkey, consume Turkish consumer goods, and even purchase real estate featured in the series. There is thus a cycle of viewership and consumption that fuels the Turkish economy and with it, global Turkish political clout and Turkish cultural validation. Thus, banning Turkish series following geopolitical turmoil results in pressure from viewers to reinstate them, and does not preclude viewers from accessing them on YouTube and through other digital platforms (Salamandra, 2012; Alankus & Yanardagoglu, 2016; “Egypt fatwa bans,” 2020).

All of these developments point to the global media matrix. The first Turkish TV series were produced in the early 1970s after American TV series introduced genre and exemplified the codes and emotes to Turkish actors (Cankaya, 1986; Serim, 2007; Bhutto, 2019). Although Turkish series mostly target domestic audiences, they have been sold globally since the mid-1970s, such as to Western European countries which purchased them to cater to Turkish migrant workers, but also spanning to regions far from Turkey, including Japan (Cankaya, 1986; Atalay, 2019). Eventually, the robust production of Turkish series in the 1990s spurred by neoliberal developments also catalyzed numerous adaptations and derivative works of Japanese and Korean TV series (Khan & Won, 2020). Additionally, multiple companies that are not based in Turkey produce Turkish series, such as the Saudi Arabia’s O3 and the American Karga Seven

Productions. Furthermore, because they exist in the global media matrix, audience expectations in Turkey and abroad oblige Turkish series to downplay certain Turkish realities such as religion and traffic, while overemphasizing others, such as empowered women and tight-knit families. In tandem, a number of Turkish series are self-orientalist and rely on clash of civilizations narratives to propagate an image of a glorious Turkey domestically and abroad. Finally, Turkish series, whether distributed in Turkey or abroad, always arrive in a specific media context that is also dialectical with and dialogic to global media, and also influenced by multiple global sources, as well as social, economic, and political historic precedents and contemporary developments, that is, the global media matrix.

In this chapter, I provided a brief history of the Turkish TV series as well as a literature review of Turkish series as a budding new topic of global academic study. I also conducted a systematic analysis of Turkish presidential discourse to address a pressing concern of scholars and states on the question of Turkish state intent regarding the export of Turkish TV series. In the following chapter, I continue to study the Turkish series as a popular global product, with empiric evidence about their popularity in Russia and Bulgaria.

CHAPTER 2: FASCINATING TURKISH TV SERIES (BULGARIA AND RUSSIA)

The television series *Sultan of My Heart*, a fictional 19th century love story about Ottoman Sultan Mahmud and Russian noble Anna, was publicized with great fanfare in Russia in late December 2018. This was the first ever Russo-Turkish coproduction (Birinci, 2017), produced for state-owned Russian Channel 1, the first television channel of the Russian Federation. The coproduction was between Russian state-owned media giant Gazprom Media KIT Film Studio and the Turkish Maya Productions, represented globally by Global Connection International Media Group²⁰.

Sultan of My Heart is the culmination of a number of geopolitical, economic, social, and media developments. Since 2012, following the *Magnificent Century* sensation and the dozens of other subsequently broadcast Turkish TV series in Russia, Turkey is increasingly regarded as a potent global media power in Russia²¹. Also, other than the usual geopolitical hurdles such as Turkey's support for Crimea and Ukraine and Russo-Turkish friction over Azerbaijan and Syria, there are no fully fledged geopolitical

²⁰ Russian TV series *East/West* was also advertised as the first Russo-Turkish series, but that was not a coproduction. It was produced entirely by Star Media, a Russian production company that hired Turkish actors.

²¹ The only Turkish TV series in the Russian imagination were the 1980s mini-series *Lovebird* and *Milky Way* until *Magnificent Century* broadcasts began in 2012.

crises²² to preclude such a partnership. Since the normalization of relations in late 2016, the proximate relations between Russia and Turkey are celebrated with an expansion of collaboration, including this TV series, a safe investment according to the stellar ratings of Turkish series in Russia within the last decade. Alexander Bondarev, director of production at the Russian KIT Film Studio, hoped that Russian viewers would fall in love with *Sultan of My Heart* as they had with *Magnificent Century* (“Kit Film Studio,” n.d.), while Janik Fayziev, the General Director of the Russian partner KIT Film Studio, reminisced about the goals of the production as follows:

Our partners have rebuilt a huge city, prepared costumes and props of the highest level, and the fact that we managed to get such a big American star for the project as the director of the first two episodes gives us hope that we will be able to make the product international class. The choice of Turkish actors for the *main male roles* was very difficult, because we really wanted balance the image of [Russian] viewers, and *especially female viewers*, about oriental beauty, with the beauty standards of Turkey and in the East.

(“Lost director,” n.d.)

²² Such as the jet crisis at the end of 2015, when Russia severed all relations with Turkey following the 2015 shooting down of a Russian jet by Turkish forces.

The “big American star” Russian executives hoped would make the series “international class” was Hollywood director, screenwriter and producer Bobby Roth. Another critical element and painstaking process was the casting of the male Turkish actors, that were to be in cadence with the “especially female viewers” expectations about “oriental beauty.” Further, producers sought to balance these viewer expectations with the purported “beauty standards of Turkey and the East.” For the Russian producers, it was also “very important for us that the main female role in the series would be played by a Russian actress” (“Kit Film Studio,” n.d.).

The main female role is played by Russians in a number of historical and fictional romances between Russian beauties and Turkish/Ottoman charmers, including Catherine the Great and Baltaci Mehmet Pasha, Roxelana²³ and Suleiman the Magnificent, Anastasia and Sultan Ahmed Han²⁴, Alexandra and Kurt Seyit, Tatiana and Kemal²⁵, and in this most recent TV series, Anna and Sultan Mahmud. Along with these are many more undocumented instances of love and marriage between Russian women and Turkish men (Bloch, 2017). These historical precedents and contemporary romantic entanglements developed in tandem with centuries of turbulent geopolitical relations between Russia and Turkey, making the enthusiastic reception of Turkish TV series in Russia particularly puzzling.

²³ Alexandra Anastasia Lisowska, renamed and known as Hurrem in Turkey, mostly referred to as Roxelana in European history books.

²⁴ *Magnificent Century: Kösem*, sequel of Turkish TV series *Magnificent Century*

²⁵ Russian TV series, *East/West*

In this chapter, I expand on the global popularity of Turkish television series from chapter one, by exploring what audiences find captivating about Turkish series, which dominate primetime ratings consistently, since 2008 in Bulgaria and 2012 in Russia. I begin with digests of Russian and Bulgarian media, leading to the broadcasts of the Turkish series. Subsequently, I juxtapose empiric evidence from Russia and Bulgaria to uncover the specifics of viewers' fascination with the series, considering Russia and Turkey's centuries-long adversarial relations and Ottoman dominion in Bulgaria for nearly five centuries. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) conceptualized *neo-Ottoman cool* following the similarly perplexing popularity of Turkish series in the Arab world, which I adopt here for theoretical orientation to answer the following question: *What makes Turkish TV series appealing to Russian and Bulgarian viewers, considering geopolitical tensions spanning centuries and the othering of Turkey in Bulgaria and Russia?* This chapter grapples with this question with a thematic analysis of over 140 articles from Russia and Bulgaria.

Comparing massive Russia spread over two continents to a small country in the Balkan Peninsula like Bulgaria may appear counterintuitive and counterproductive. However, both countries have had long and consequential geopolitical relations with Turkey: one as competitor, the other as victim of Ottoman dominion. Bulgarian victimhood ended with Russian intervention during the Russo-Turkish War of 1878, another dimension of their geopolitical relationship with Turkey. Slavic brotherhood and Orthodox Christianity sealed Bulgarian loyalty to Russia, and Bulgaria was the Soviet

Union's closest ally, when Turkey mobilized its military on the Bulgarian border as a NATO member admitted to posture against the USSR. Since the fall of socialism in 1989, Russia and Bulgaria are struggling socially and economically with new political structures in a neoliberal world, and they both have minorities with sentimental and nostalgic loyalties to Turkey: the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria, and the Turkic citizens of Russia.

Russian and Turkish relations involve tiptoeing around each other while competing for geopolitical influence. Their geopolitical tango is based on exerting influence over the Caucasus, the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In tandem, normalized relations equal to "a billion-dollar handshake" ("Turkey and Russia," 2016) and a commiserative, unified partnership in their complex relations with the US (Hill & Taspinar, 2006) and Western Europe (Delanty, 2003). Turkey's newfound geopolitical power in the Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans since the disintegration of the USSR and most recently via Turkish TV series (Emsal, 2015; Zubkova, 2015; Malinina and Vasileva, 2017; Aleksanian, 2018; Shamarina, 2020) is disconcerting to Russia, particularly because Russian viewers are also awed by Turkish series. Notably, Russian television has been global since its inception and Turkish series are just one of its many foreign elements. I provide a brief history of Russian television, leading to the arrival and broad distribution of Turkish series in the following section.

Russian Media and Turkish TV Series

Television developed at the height of the USSR-US contest over prosperity and scientific superiority, and concurrently and interacting with TV industries in Western Europe and the US (Roth-Ey, 2011; Imre, 2016). During the 1959 American Exhibition in Moscow, Vice President Richard Nixon irked Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev when he insinuated American superiority by pointing to the American color televisions (Roth-Ey, 2011). Within a few decades, almost everyone in the USSR owned a television, and with that came increasing centralization, control, and didactic programming. Soap opera type television series were produced in the Baltic republics but were not espoused by Soviet central television (Imre, 2016). There were considerable technological, staff and program exchanges along with joint broadcasts and shared broadcast signals between the USSR and other countries, including Western Europe, challenging the predominating view of the Cold War divide between East and West as impenetrable (Imre, 2016). Since USSR disintegration in 1991, television remains the most important information source for most Russians (Mickiewicz, 1999). Russians prefer television to newspapers and radio, and television has the largest heterogeneous audience (Mickiewicz, 2008).

Becker (2004) characterizes post-socialist media in Russia as a neo-authoritarian media system that curtails media autonomy and limits pluralism. Silencing voices of dissent through media control, and mostly television, has been a priority since Putin's presidential tenure began in 2000. Leading television channels are government-owned or owned by media groups with ties to the government (Imre, 2016). Various methods are

used to retaliate for unfavorable coverage of Putin's policies, including applications of tax and criminal law, and death threats and murders of journalists (Becker, 2004; Mickiewicz, 2008). However, a number of factors make effective control impossible for Putin, including the globalization of Russian television, market imperatives, and the aspiration to be a global market power, among others (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). For example, viewers' preference for Western television content such as crime thrillers, soap operas, and game shows inspired the burgeoning post-socialist Russian television sector to replicate Western genres. However, when Russian television programs began to resemble those in the West, the Putin regime intensified attempts to control TV stations and content (Hutchings & Rulyova, 2009). The gradual disenchantment of Russian viewers with American productions and their Russian counterparts, as well as demand for alternate content primed Russia for the popularity of Turkish TV series.

The first Turkish media to be sold to Russia is the mini-series *Lovebird* in 1986, followed by *Milky Way* in 1989, both viewed by millions in the USSR. The third Turkish series, *Magnificent Century*, was the sensation that spearheaded the vast distribution of Turkish series in Russia. *Magnificent Century* aired in 2012 on Channel Domashny, the most popular channel for women in Russia. Though years passed after the initial broadcast, *Magnificent Century* remains firmly rooted in Russian public discourse. Gossip articles about the actors' lives, "the hidden truth" about the women in the harem ("The tent of aging women," 2020), and tourism destinations that became popular following *Magnificent Century* (Shtetinin, 2020) are some recent examples. Russian

producers and directors continue to express their admiration for *Magnificent Century* and their wish to emulate its success (“Kit Film Studio,” n.d.; “Evgeniya Loza,” 2016), voiced still, nearly a decade after the initial broadcast.

By 2013 headlines such as “Turkey Will Have Its Own Hollywood, Named Turkeywood” appeared in Russia, explaining: “It is worth noting that popular Turkish series are in great demand today both in Russia and around the world” (Bektanova, 2013). Two Turkish series, *Love and Punishment* and *Forbidden Love*, were among the most searched on Google and Yandex as Valentine’s Day entertainment (“Google and Yandex,” 2013). By 2014, a quarter of the searched television series on Yandex were for Turkish dramas (“In ‘Yandex,’” 2014), with 80% of searches for *Magnificent Century* (Romanchenko, 2014). In 2015, the Russian production company Star Media, capitalizing on the roaring success of the Turkish series, falsely advertised a project, TV series *East/West*, as the “first Russo-Turkish drama” (TV Channel Domashny, 2016). The widespread popularity of Turkish series was also acknowledged in the Russian parliament, when two State Duma deputies recommended banning them following the 2015 jet crisis (Shilov, 2015).

Meanwhile, Russian viewers continue to enroll in Turkish language classes and travel to Istanbul. The Istanbul must-see is Topkapi Palace, Hurrem and Suleiman’s historic place of residence, and the must-buys are Hurrem’s jewelry replicas (Lotoreva, 2020). In a true attestation of their fandom, Russian fans of *Magnificent Century* created

a website with nearly 800 pages of facts about the series, history, actors, and videos²⁶.

Numerous other fans founded VKontakte and Instagram fan groups and created websites with up-to-date information about Turkish TV series and celebrities²⁷. The highest rated Turkish TV series on KinoPoisk, the Yandex-owned Russian database of information related to cinematic and TV productions are *Waiting for the Sun*, *Love for Rent*, *Insider*, *Forbidden Love*, and *Strawberry Scent*²⁸ (Kinopoisk, n.d.).

Turkish TV series in Russia are broadcast through cable and satellite on television channels Domashny, Romantichnoe, Ruskiy Bestseller, and as of November 2020, Timeless Dizi Channel (TDC), a satellite channel exclusively dedicated to Turkish TV series (SPI International, 2020). Viewers also watch series, some dubbed by fans, on VKontakte and YouTube, in addition to Netflix since 2015, with the perquisite of Russian subtitles as of October 2020 (Tsydenova, 2020). When and how did Turkish series arrive in Bulgaria? I turn to that next following a brief overview of Bulgarian media.

Bulgarian Media and Turkish TV Series

Until the fall of socialism in Bulgaria in 1989, mass media was a monolithic echo of communist ideology. Print media, radio and television were a state monopoly that

²⁶ <https://muhtesemyuzuil.fandom.com/ru/>

²⁷ For example, turkishtvsoapopera.ru, dizimania.ru, teammy.ru, kino-teka.com, turkishtv.ru

²⁸ The next TV series after the top five were, in order of highest rating, *Resurrection: Ertugrul*, *Black Love*, *Magnificent Century*, *Lovebird* (1986), *Lovebird* (2013), *The Pit*, and *Kurt Seyit and Alexandra*. The *Magnificent Century* sequel, *Kosem* was in 17th place. Notably, though a global rating record breaker, the 2012 Channel STS broadcast of *Fatmagul* was cancelled in Russia after four episodes because of low ratings.

catered to the Party-State system (Raycheva, 2009, p. 166) and underwent a double censorship of the Bulgarian Communist Party Central Committee's ideological department and the Committee for Radio and Television (Deltcheva, 1996). The public television channel BNT1 was established in 1959, followed by a second channel in 1974 (Bulgarian National Television, 2013); of the two, BNT1 was the most watched because it covered 90% of Bulgarian territory and offered the most entertainment programs (Deltcheva, 1996), including the numerous feature films dedicated to recounting Bulgarian Ottoman plight. Three national radio programs were broadcast from a central broadcasting station in Sofia (Deltcheva, 1996; Raycheva, 2009) and *Rabotnichesko Delo* [Workers' Deed] was Bulgaria's highest-circulation newspaper during socialism, renamed *Duma* after 1989, as the Bulgarian Socialist Party newspaper (Balabanova, 2013).

The start of democracy in 1989 brought liberalization and deregulation, transforming mass media into a decentralized and pluralistic body, with the renewed role of catalyzing political change (Raycheva, 2009). The first private media to emerge were politically inclined newspapers that appeared only months after the end of socialist rule. The first non-communist newspapers were the Bulgarian Social-Democratic Party's *Svoboden Narod* [Free People], and *Democrazia* of the Union of Democratic Forces (Bakardjieva, 1995). Most popular were *Democrazia* and *Duma* (Raycheva, 2009), reflecting the political environment at the time, polarized between democracy and socialism.

Media oligarchy and press freedom are contemporary concerns, as oligarchs dominate media and promote their businesses and preferred political parties (Antonov, 2014). As of 2015, 283 newspapers were published (National Statistical Institute, 2016c) and most popular dailies are *Telegraph*, *24 Chasa* and *Trud* (Alpha Research, 2016a). Horizont, the state-run national radio station, remains the most trusted, with the largest audience (Bakardjieva, 1995; Alpha Research, 2016b). There are 116 licensed terrestrial transmitter, cable and satellite television program services (National Statistical Institute, 2016b). From those, Nova TV, bTV and BNT1 are the three national television channels with the most viewers (Alpha Research, 2016c). BNT1 is the national public television, while Nova TV and bTV are private television stations, thriving on the popularity of Turkish series since 2008.

Nova TV, the first commercial television channel to be licensed post-socialism, and the first to bring reality television to Bulgaria with *Big Brother* in 2004, broadcast the first Turkish TV series in Bulgaria, *1001 Nights*, on December 8, 2008, in prudently scheduled daytime programming. In this unprecedented reacquaintance with their *Other*, Bulgarians watched unveiled, stunning, single-mother Scheherazade contend with her son's disease and her striking boss's overtures against the backdrop of modern interior design and beautiful Istanbul vistas. In the internationally produced documentary *Kismet: How Turkish Soap Operas Changed the World*, Bulgarian viewer Tzvetelina²⁹ asserted that through *1001 Nights* she reflected on her own love affair with a married superior and

²⁹ The Al Jazeera version of the documentary did not include the Bulgarian viewer.

overcame her anguish (Paschalidou, 2013; bTV, 2014; News 7, 2014). Nova TV held a competition for the lead look-alikes, narrowed finalists to 84, and announced the winners on the *Zdravei, Bulgaria* morning show (“Hello Bulgaria,” 2009). The *1001 Nights* series thus captivated Bulgarian viewers and precipitated a tsunami of Turkish series imports from their southern neighbor.

The second Turkish television series to become a hit was *Perla*³⁰ [Pearl], broadcast on bTV, the second commercially licensed national broadcaster in Bulgaria. *Perla* began to be broadcast in June 2009 and was the most watched program by the end of the summer (Spasov, 2009). Oden was a guest on a number of television shows in Bulgaria, beget by the popularity of the series. She was introduced as “Bulgaria’s pearl” on *Dancing Stars*, and informed contestants that belly dancing is their subsequent dancing challenge (bTV, 2010). She was also a guest on the *Slavi Show*, anti-Turkish media mogul Slavi Trifonov’s late-night show, which also airs on bTV. Oden appeared uncomfortable at times and amused at others, as Trifonov extensively remarked about her appearance, and inquired about her cooking and belly-dancing skills. When Oden politely replied that though she does not know how to belly-dance, she enjoys watching it, Trifonov badgered the female vocalist of his show to belly-dance, and explained in jest, that “All Bulgarian women who do belly-dancing, and they are few, dance only dressed like this, in a formal black dress. First, we listen to Mozart, then we belly dance.”

³⁰ The drama was originally *Gümüş* in Turkish and renamed *Noor* for Arabic audiences.

A third notable Turkish series, *Falling Leaves*, is the most-watched Turkish series in Bulgaria, with over 60% of Bulgarian viewership. It aired on bTV starting November 2009, followed by multiple reruns. The series is based on a novel of the same name by Turkish author Resat Nuri Guntekin, and bears stark likeness to the Bulgarian novel, *The Gerak Family*, by Elin Pelin³¹ (Marinova, 2010b). They are both about the life of a provincial patriarchal family that migrates to a big city and wrestles with urbanization, and the changing value systems and behaviors of the characters. *Falling Leaves* was valued for the nostalgia it imparted to viewers, of big Bulgarian families of the past with warm and heartfelt relationships (Paunov, 2009; Marinova, 2010a; Marinova, 2010b).

By 2010, Bulgarian viewers preferred Turkish television series over national holiday programming, including New Year's Eve entertainment shows, and those eschewing Turkish series were a minority (Plamenov, 2010). By 2011, out of 39 countries at that point, Bulgaria ranked second in Turkish series purchases, following Kazakhstan (Union of Bulgarian Journalists, 2011). More than 80 Turkish series have become an integral part of the mediascape in Bulgaria, with imports increasing every year, and Turkish series appear to have replaced formerly popular Latin and North American television series indefinitely (Spasov, 2009). As in Russia, when Bulgarians are not watching the series, they discuss them with family and friends and on social media, read about upcoming episodes and celebrity gossip, and are booking a Turkish series-inspired tour or business trip to Istanbul. But what exactly awes Russian and

³¹ The perceived likeness extends to the physical appearance of Turkish actor Halil Ergun who Marinova (2010b) observes, resembles Bulgarian actor Grigor Vachkov.

Bulgarian viewers of Turkish TV series and how do the two countries compare? I now turn to the methods and data corpus through which I answer the research questions.

Data Corpus

Russia

In lieu of a Russian article search database, which I could not locate, I searched *yandex.ru*, the Russian equivalent of Google, for *турецкие сериалы* [Turkish series]. Nearly all of the results of the first five pages were websites promoting access to the Turkish series, targeting potential viewers. There was even a prominent Yandex sliding banner at the top of the results with images and titles of Turkish series. Thus, I limited the search to *news.yandex.ru* and selected .ru domain articles. While 469 news items resulted in my search for *турецкие сериалы*, most were from Azerbaijan and Ukraine and this is why I extended my search to *google.ru* with the same search term. Results for the search term appeared until page 35, and again most of Azerbaijan and Ukraine origin. After selecting the .ru domain articles, my search yielded a total of 133 articles, 71 which I selected for analysis. I discarded 62 articles that were repetitive or simply advertised Turkish series. The wide, long-term distribution of Turkish series began in December 2012, and the first article in the results was from January 2013. At the time of the search, the most recent article was dated April 2018. The article categories and quantities appear in the table below:

<i>Article type</i>	<i>analyzed</i>	<i>discarded</i>	<i>total</i>
news about possible ban of Turkish dramas in Russia	16	7	23
other articles about possible ban	3		3
other news	23	10	33
op-ed	8	11	19
entertainment	21	34	55
Total	71	62	133

Bulgaria

In the absence of a Bulgarian language article search database, I searched *google.bg* in Bulgarian for the following terms: турски сериал [Turkish series], турска сапунка [Turkish soap opera], and турски теленовели [Turkish telenovelas]. Turkish series first aired in Bulgaria in December 2008, and the first articles were from January 2009. Thus, the data timeframe spans from the first article that was published in January 2009 until the time of this search, December 2016. Some articles were about the following additional sources, which I also included in the data corpus: *Kismet*, an internationally produced documentary film (Paschalidou, 2013); four talk show discussions (bTV, 2014; “Hello Bulgaria,” 2014; News 7, 2014; Mladenova & Todorova, 2009); a radio talk show (Simeonov, 2011); and a debate about the Turkish series hosted by Red House Culture Association in Sofia (Red House Centre, 2010). I classified every

article that mentioned a search term according to the genre categories summarized in the table below. I transcribed and translated the video texts and radio talk show to English from Bulgarian, Turkish, and French. For the analysis, I selected articles most relevant to the ensuing public debate about the popularity of Turkish series from the op-ed (39), news (25) and blog (7) categories, totaling 71. I noticed the recontextualization of the search terms in 71 additional articles that used the phrase *Turkish series* to underscore a dramatic event or development, or to disparage people or a situation.

<i>Article Type</i>	<i>Analyzed</i>	<i>Discarded</i>	<i>Total</i>
Turkish series mentioned "like a Turkish drama"	0	71	71
Blog entries about popularity of series	7	0	7
Travel (popularity of Turkey as destination, for series)	0	6	6
Op-Ed	39	0	39
News	25	43	68
Entertainment (Joke/Parody)	0	4	4
Entertainment (Celebrity gossip)	0	46	46
Entertainment (Series news/promotional)	0	135	135
Entertainment (Others)	0	53	53
Total	71	358	429

For both Russia and Bulgaria, I selected the articles that most contributed to public discourse about the popularity of the Turkish series. That the number of articles I selected for analysis was 71 for both Russia and Bulgaria is coincidental. I first sorted the articles chronologically to discern potential shifts in discourse. In the Bulgarian articles, there was a pattern of vehement opposition, and thus I coded the articles according to the negative or positive stance toward the Turkish series. I did the same for Russia, but the negative stance toward the series was not as pronounced there. For this chapter, I analyze the articles that postured positively toward the Turkish TV series. In chapters three and four, I delve into anti-Turkish series sentiment and action. I coded the articles, identified emergent discursive themes, and analyzed them contextually. My data analysis approach was conducive to gauging meaning in light of social, political and historical context of the respective countries. I now proceed with the findings.

Findings

Turkish TV Series Mitigate Hegemonic Modernity

Bulgaria viewers were entranced with the Turkish series because they represent and validate a modernity that is compatible with Bulgarian values and lifestyles, and intimately attends to women's rights and social status. In the Turkish series, women fight for their rights and work in "male professions" such as police officers, architects, psychoanalysts, and attorneys, and explore complex human issues in "typical Balkan ways," according to Eneva (2016). Writing for *Kultura*, Bulgaria's oldest publication about art and culture, Pankova (2009) posits that Bulgaria and Turkey both suffer from

the syndrome of cultural lag and incessant comparisons to the European cultural model, which is most strongly reflected on women who feel entirely responsible for children and the obligation of professional development. These issues are embedded into the Turkish series in which the problems of the characters are typically modern: the stress of urban life, shortage of time, and the alienation in the metropolis where communication is restricted to a limited circle of friends and family, which function as both a fortress and a prison. In their yearning for morality, perceived as gone astray along with socialism, Bulgarian viewers are irresistibly attracted to Turkish series, because they juxtapose absolute terms (maternal affection, loyalty among friends, sense of justice) with the relativism of modernity, thereby attempting “to collect the pieces of a broken modernity and reconcile separated lovers, young and old, of different social backgrounds and nationalities” (Pankova, 2009).

In his article entitled “The Scimitar Turned into a Vacuum Cleaner” Georgi Lozanov (2009), the Director of the Council for Electronic Media in Bulgaria (CEM), contrasts the application of Turkish power with scimitars during the Ottoman Empire, with the Turkish series, postulated to be viewed while women perform household labor, such as vacuuming. Lozanov posits that although historically paradoxical, Turkish series revived the comfort of moral values in Bulgarians and that the series soothe the anxiety of present-day Bulgarians about the global world, in which they continue to feel like Balkan provincials. Turkish series show that Turkey cannot be understood through the code of the past, he states, as viewers abandoned historical narratives and espoused those

told through mass media. Further, he posits that the Turkish series render Turkish material and moral life reconcilable with the Western, bringing into the realm of possibility for Bulgarian viewers a modernity in which abandoning Bulgarian values is not a prerequisite; that there can be alternate ways of being modern, such that, being a member of a large mutually dependent family and being modern are not at odds.

Likewise, Turkish series are posited to have a bigger therapeutic effect than Latin and American series because it is easier to identify with the characters due to regional proximity and cultural similarities (“Ani Vladimirova,” 2009; Georgiev, 2010). Tzenkova (2009) posits that the Turkish world on the screen turns is an improved version of Bulgarian reality, and quotes a viewer who states, “as much as we hate to admit it, the Turks are closer to us than Greeks, Latinos, not to mention the European Union.” In Bulgaria, the series function as the new “hearth of the home” (Plamenov, 2010) strengthening intergenerational connections, which were hampered by modernity, dating back to the era of rapid socialist industrialization and urbanization.

The “family hearth” also appeared in Russian media. Alluding to housewives who habitually watched *Magnificent Century* while cooking and postulated to lack motivation since the finale, Kirdyashov (2015) announced, “We, being always on guard of the family hearth, decided to find a worthy substitute for [*Magnificent Century*]” and introduced his list of “Top 10 Turkish TV Shows.” In addition to this article that underscores the predominance of traditional gender roles in Russia, Turkish TV series were credited with

providing young women trapped in traditional gender roles and lacking freedom with new ideas about romantic relationships. Young women now dream of “European romance...[and] expect beautiful love stories, chivalry, attention, gifts, and flowers” reported Kosterina (2017). Additionally, Chij (2013) recounted the Turkish series *Iffet* as an attempt to combine modern social challenges and prevailing views of a religious state, as the young woman lead oscillates between traditional values with modern urban desires in Istanbul. High production quality was also readily credited with the popularity of Turkish series in Russia, the focus of the following section.

High Production Quality of Turkish TV Series

The high production quality, including exciting storylines, beautiful actors, and breathtaking scenery are most attributable to the popularity of Turkish series in Russia (“Russians,” 2015; Karpova, 2016; “Top 20,” 2016; “Seven exciting,” 2017; Kurbanova, 2017). Russian *Cosmopolitan* claims that once you watch the series, “you cannot tear yourself away from these scandals, intrigues and investigations (Yatzkevich, 2017). Viewers lose a sense of reality due to their “scope, luxury, exciting plot and impeccable and realistic acting of the cast” (“Turkish series based on real life,” 2018).

Russians have always been interested in Eastern culture and Russian viewers enjoy the “bright oriental flavor,” the “bright colors,” and the “bright costumes” of Turkish series (“Calikusu,” 2015; Vladkina, 2015; “Turkish TV series,” 2015). Vladkina (2015), in an article entitled “Turkish TV Series Which Managed to Win the Love of TV Viewers” recollects the former monotony of TV series in Russia that bored viewers. She

posits that Turkish series owe their long-term popularity in Russia to the “bright colors, unexpected turns, serious emotions and quite good dramaturgy...so you still have time to enjoy the beautiful views, scenery, and experience incredible emotions along with their heroes.” Similarly, another article attributes the popularity to the “Bright costumes, enticing images, unusual traditions and black-eyed beauties with whom there is always something happening, [and the Turkish series] like a magnet, attract fans of romantic stories and incredible adventures” (“Turkish TV series,” 2015). Additionally, the “bright oriental flavor and ethereal romance” in *Magnificent Century* and *1001 Nights* are irresistible (“Calikusu,” 2015).

Russian celebrities also made news by lauding Turkish series. Legendary singer Laima Vaikule admitted that she is also an avid viewer of the series and appreciates the excellent acting (Yakovleva, Emelyanova & Vetrova, 2017). “If they told me a while ago that I would watch Turkish TV series--I would have laughed! But I watch them. I started with *Magnificent Century*,” announced Vaikule. She appreciates the excellent acting and shared that she learned a lesson to “never deny, condemn or reject what you do not know” (Yakovleva, Emelyanova and Vetrova, 2017), in this case, not to be prejudiced against Turkey and the Turkish culture. It was also newsworthy that Russian singer Evgenia Feofilaktova opened a concert for Turkish singer Mustafa Sandal, sharing on Instagram that she adores Turkish series and their music (“Evgenia,” 2017). Turkish music “catches the soul,” and some viewers watch series for their music, specifically, Toygar Isikli’s music (Kurbanova, 2017).

The high quality of Turkish series also promotes Turkish language learning. When Russian singer Maltam became a finalist in Turkey's *The Voice* and surprised the audience by singing and speaking in fluent Turkish, she "admitted, she learned the language while watching Turkish TV series" ("Maltam," 2015). The fascinating plots propel viewers to learn Turkish, because they are eager to watch the new episodes, and aspire to watch them in Turkish, without depending on Russian dubbing. Yet, even with Russian dubbing, which is usually a voice over, "you still remember the repeated phrases like good morning and so on" (Kurbanova, 2017).

High production quality was also a salient theme in Bulgarian public discourse. Turkish TV series are reputed with seducing the eye with the impeccable work of actors, set designers and camera operators, with bright and luxurious scenography and Istanbul's atmosphere of big city living, instead of only interior scenes (Pankova, 2009; Tzenkova, 2009; Plamenov, 2010). Istanbul is rendered simultaneously as a pulsating, modern, dynamic metropolis of today and an eternal "living" history, preserved in its architecture and landscape, asserts Plamenov (2010).

Other lauded qualities in Bulgaria are the acting, effective dialogue, costume design, free camera movement, authentic décor, classical music, poetry and drama (Pankova, 2009; Tzenkova, 2009; Paunov, 2009; Marinova, 2010a; Plamenov, 2010; Naydenova, 2014). The scenarios are usually based on novels, which give them additional meaning and depth, not like "screen comic books" of American and Latin American soap operas (Lozanov, 2009; Pankova, 2009). Naydenova (2014) also credits

the screenplays with the success of the Turkish series, by proposing that they are based on a love epic that was created in the Middle East (Persian-Arabic-Turkic) such as Tahir and Zuhri, Leyla and Mejnun, Shirin and Suhrev, yet grounded in the concreteness of modern everyday life (Naydenova, 2014). Bulgarian viewers also appreciate the absence of vulgar language, lecherous scenes, and violence, ubiquitous in American, Latin and Bulgarian series (Tzenkova, 2009; Paunov, 2009).

Realism in the Turkish series is also frequently discussed as appreciated by viewers in Bulgaria and Russia. An article entitled “Turkish Series Based on Real Life” points to the potent potential of “incredibly realistic and life [Turkish] series that can conquer the hearts of a huge number of movie fans in all corners of the globe...and penetrate deeply into the soul” (“Turkish series based on real life,” 2018). The Turkish series are “real action games, which are full of love, power, passion and betrayal” and “they have everything considered the most exciting.... the characters act so gorgeously that you believe them 100%. Prepare handkerchiefs!” instructs another article (“Seven exciting,” 2017).

Viewers in Bulgaria also value the Turkish series for their realistic depiction of people and interpersonal relationships. Relationships tend to be respectful and compassionate, and the actors beautiful and natural (Tzenkova, 2009; Paunov, 2009). The Turkish series thus assuage viewers in coping with broken human relationships that followed capitalism’s arrival (Plamenov, 2010). What is the significance of the Turkish

series in Bulgaria and Russia, in light of the findings? I discuss these in the following sections.

Analysis

Cultural Hybridity and Neo-Ottoman Cool

In the course of one hundred and some years, Bulgarians and Russians have endured perpetual changes of governance, imposed modernization and urbanization, a complete upheaval of family and community social relations disrupted by divested religious and moral values, as well as financial crises that resulted in poverty and mass migration. The doors to Western cultural hegemony in Bulgaria and Russia opened wide with capitalism. Russian and Bulgarian approbation of French culture since the Enlightenment morphed into emulation of American culture. Set in geographic and cultural hybridity, Bulgaria and Russia this time were overtaken by American liberalism, by all means aspiring to be Western, conceptually and ideologically. As socialism collapsed in 1989 and the borders opened wide, American and Western European products and media flowed in as liberally as Bulgarians and Russians flowed out of their countries.

By the time the Turkish TV series arrived in Bulgaria in 2008 and in Russia in 2012, disappointment with capitalism and democracy, and disenchantment with American-style liberalism and Hollywood productions was on the national level for both countries. In tandem with this mass disillusionment in Western modernity, there was an

effort to resurrect the practice of Orthodox Christianity, shelved and denigrated as backward during Communist rule. Thus, Russian and Bulgarian cultural hybridity and satiation with the West make the enthusiastic reception of the hybrid Turkish series understandable, though no less surprising considering historical enmity and the othering of Turkey. Bulgarians and Russians have been devastated not only by the drastic and dramatic changes incurred, but also by the attacks on their traditions and identity. For years, the feeling of inferiority was ascertained after migration to Western Europe or the United States, or a simple click of the remote control that exhibited Western prosperity and made Bulgarians and Russians feel like second-class Europeans at best.

Turkish TV series, the vast majority of which primarily target domestic audiences, are appealing to viewers in Turkey, as well as Bulgaria and Russia, precisely because all three are geographically and culturally between and in East and West, all European, but not quite. Turkish series enjoy unprecedented success because they are hybrid texts that cater effectively to the hybrid Bulgarian and Russian culture, and Bulgarian and Russian viewers find Turkish series appealing for similar reasons. The storylines related to modernity and gender, and particularly the strong female characters, high production quality, and realism are often indicated as reasons for the popularity of the series in both countries. However, there is a divergence in the emphasis of the reasons. In Bulgaria, the most underscored reason is the presentation of an alternate modernity, one that is unlike the extreme Western liberalism that is incompatible with religion and community life, which Bulgarians understood as modernity until the arrival

of Turkish series. Most striking were the affective reasons for watching Turkish series. Watching the series made viewers nostalgic for the togetherness of families in the past and helped them cope with their loneliness. On the other hand, in Russia, the high quality of the productions is credited for the popularity of Turkish series and excitement about the plots and actors is the most salient emotion. I now turn to Bulgaria and Russia separately to discuss these in detail.

Bulgaria: Comparable Modernity

After years of Bulgarian national conscience building of the barbaric and backward Turkish enslavers of 500 years, with the arrival of Turkish TV series, the despised *Other* metamorphosed into a relatable human neighbor, sharing quotidian habits, impediments and aspirations. Viewers are overtaken with nostalgia, for a time when families were together in Bulgaria, when the borders were closed, and migrant labor and emigration did not part families and devastate communities. The “Turkish yoke” discourse of socialist Bulgaria is minimized when Bulgarian viewers empathize with the trials and tribulations of urbanization and globalization as the Turks in the series negotiate West-inspired modern lifestyles rooted in tradition and religion. Turkish TV series presented Bulgarians with a modernity compatible and comparable with Bulgarian values. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) found that Arab audiences were enthralled by Turkish TV series because they presented an accessible modernity, one in which Muslim lifestyles and modern conditions are compatible. Western, liberal, individualist modernity

was already fully accessible to Bulgarians, but the Turkish series revealed a modernity that does not sacrifice community, family values and morality.

Thus, coping with modernity, or rather the *comparable modernity* of Turkey, is a related dominant discourse for the popularity of the series; that modern conditions made Bulgarians nostalgic for the past, and the series compensate for a deficit in warm family relationships, communication, community, and meaningful movement forward in life. As hybridity offers transnational media “transcultural wedges for forging affective links between their commodities and local communities” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 148), Turkey’s syncretic, comparable modernity, offers Bulgarian viewers the comfort of moral values, after years of exposure to extreme American and European cultural liberalism. Thus, viewers are captivated by the series because they see their own history since Bulgarians and Turks are similar, carrying Balkan characteristics and showing the way of life in the region (Paunov, 2009; Marinova, 2010b), reflecting Bulgarian and Balkan hybridity. Thus, *neo-Ottoman cool* in Bulgaria, due in no small part to the transnational dissemination of Turkish media, further accounts for Turkey’s rise as a potent regional power, mostly attributed to the comparable modernity portrayed in the productions. Indiscriminate Western mimicry is offset, as *neo-Ottoman cool* legitimated a Bulgarian way of being modern and visually soothed Bulgarians grappling with familial distress, urbanization, and alienation. Though this is not voiced in such terms in Russia, since Russia underwent a similar traumatic trajectory of mass urbanization, emigration, and dire economic circumstances, Russian viewers most probably also look to Turkish series

to alleviate their loneliness and cope with everyday quandaries. But now I turn to the most voiced reason for the popularity of Turkish series in Russia: high production quality.

Russian Women and Terribly Charming Turks

Russian public discourse is buzzing with excitement over the high quality of Turkish TV series, especially the storylines. Russian viewers hold Turkish TV series in high regard, which they compare with previously consumed media, including Russian, Latin American and Hollywood series. Unlike traditional soap operas produced for women engrossed in domestic chores, Turkish series are not made for passive daytime consumption, nor are scenarios restricted to indoor scenes of lascivious immoral relationships and betrayal, as traditional soap operas tend to be. Turkish series are a hybrid text, produced for primetime and in cinematographic style, with generous outdoor scenes and beautiful vistas. The series are not only high quality, but they also prioritize women viewers' preferences and needs. While Russian viewers have a penchant for the bright costumes, colors, and "oriental flavors," many Turkish TV series are based on Turkish/Ottoman history and literature, some in which Russian women protagonists find themselves in Istanbul³². In the historical series *Magnificent Century*, Ottoman slave Alexandra Anastasia Lisowska becomes Sultan Suleiman's consort and the leading female monarch of the Ottoman Empire. In another historical TV series, *Kurt Seyit and*

³² Or like Ukrainian Alexandra Anastasia Lisowska, also known as Roxelana and Hurrem Sultan, the protagonists are claimed as Russian, or appear close enough.

*Alexandra*³³, aristocrat Alexandra and Crimean Turk-Russian soldier Kurt Seyit fall in love and emigrate to Istanbul during World War I (“Here is Kurt Seyit's real Shura,” 2014; “Kurt Seyit and Shura,” 2014). In the fictional love story in *Sultan of My Heart*³⁴, Sultan Mahmud hires Aleksandra Nikiforova, the daughter of an employee in the Russian embassy in Istanbul, to teach his children French.

These storylines are inspired by history, and in each one, a self-assertive Russian woman is wooed, loved and respected by the Turkish protagonist. As significant historical events and interactions between Russians and Turks transpired prior to the arrival of Turkish TV series in Russia³⁵, since 1989, the rush of Russian migrant women laborers, and the millions of Russian tourists, place romantic relationships with Turks in the realm of possibility for many Russian women. Alexia Bloch’s ethnographic study that documents the lives of Russian migrant laborer women in Turkey reports that: “Hurrem’s story is one both Turks and post-Soviet women often mentioned as an example of how Russians and Turks have a long history of erotic encounters, especially in Istanbul, a ‘site of desire’ that *The Magnificent Century* has compellingly portrayed.” (Bloch, 2017, p. 39). Thus, in addition to other television series with which Russian women compare

³³ *Kurt Seyit ve Şura* in the Turkish original, based on a biographical novel by Nermin Bezmen, the granddaughter of Kurt Seyit.

³⁴ Remarkably, due to low ratings, the broadcast of *Sultan of My Heart* ceased in Turkey after only eight episodes, while in Russia it continued until episode 24 (“Why did Sultan of My Heart end,” 2018; “Sultan of My Heart,” n.d.). The sequel of *Magnificent Century*, *Magnificent Century: Kosem* was also popular in Russia and many other countries, and not highly rated in Turkey.

³⁵ Wars, Russian migration to Turkey during World War I, and others.

Turkish series, these historical precedents and Russian women's deteriorated life conditions since the fall of socialism³⁶ all work in tandem and sway Russian women toward Turkish series with an ostensibly neutral appreciation for their high quality. As Bulgarian women identify with Scheherazade and neutralize the Turkish *Other* that was in the service of the state since the start of socialist rule in 1944, Russian women also largely disregard the imposed cultural hierarchies that position Turkey and the Turks as the *Other*, and embrace the series for various reasons, in and because of their everyday lives.

This is how women's indocility (Foucault, 1977/2012) turns into potent geopolitical power, as the Turkish TV series strip Bulgarian and Russian elites of the power to mold the geopolitical imagination of the people³⁷. Women form the vast majority of viewers of Turkish series, and regardless of Turkish government intent, the Turkish series ameliorate and strengthen Turkey's image, and with it, its soft power clout. Since the Turkish series began to be broadcast in Bulgaria, Bulgarian bookstores are filled with Turkish literature (Dankov, 2013), Bulgarians prefer to vacation in Turkey and not brotherly Greece (National Statistical Institute, 2016a), and lists of top Google searches in Bulgaria are filled with queries of Turkish television series' names (Google Trends, n.d.). Turkey is an important trade and investment partner, with investment of about USD\$2 billion, 1500 active Turkish companies, and Turkish contractor

³⁶ I discuss this in detail in chapter 4.

³⁷ Bucur (2018) and Smith (2020) are good succinct sources for women's contributions in world history.

construction projects that amounted to USD1.2 billion (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.). Additionally, Turkey's regional power spanning the Balkans and the Middle East has been recognized by Bulgaria even more so recently. Bulgaria was the only EU member country to support Turkey's safe zone in Syria, criticized in a column entitled "Why Bulgaria is Entering a Turkish Drama" (Milcheva, 2015). Bulgaria also returned Gulen supporters to Turkey and voted against Austria's push for freezing Turkey's accession talks in December 2016 (Gotev, 2016). I do not claim a causal relationship between these events and the Turkish TV series. However, at least to some degree, many of these developments were realized by the ameliorated image of Turks and Turkey in Bulgaria. The Turkish series shattered the post-Ottoman, socialist nation-building efforts in which Turks played the role of the ideal *Other* and were positioned as Bulgaria's perpetual archenemy in all ways antipodal to how Bulgarians imagine themselves. The Turkish series replaced the image of the savage Turks roaming in Bulgarian lands with the neighbor in the South who shares many of the same aspirations and predicaments with the West and Western-style modernity.

Similarly, in Russia, Turkey is the top travel destination for Russians (Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.). Bayir (2019) found that if income levels rise in Russia, tourism to Turkey rises, but if prices in Turkey increase, then Russians travel to cheaper destinations. However, Bayir (2019) did not take into account variables such as Turkish TV series. Though Turkey is a top travel destination for Russians, there was a gradual decrease of tourists from 2004, to the lowest dip in 2012. The broadcast of Turkish TV

series in post-socialist Russia began at the end of 2012 and the steady rise in tourism began in 2013, to the record seven million Russian tourists who traveled to Turkey in 2019³⁸ (“The number of tourists from Russia,” 2020). Russians are also reputed as the third largest foreign buyers of real estate in Turkey³⁹, influenced by TV series and also aspiring to Turkish citizenship (“Turkstat,” 2020; “Daily Sabah,” 2017; “Turkish series attract,” 2017). Finally, many Russian women tourists marry Turkish men, and move to Turkey (“We received Russian brides the most,” 2020). Thus, despite complicated geopolitical relationships at the state level in which Russia and Turkey alternate between conflict and cooperation (and often the two occur simultaneously), relations and exchanges appear more consistent at the everyday human level, only enhanced by the Turkish series. Meanwhile, states cannot ignore the Turkish series phenomenon, and productions such as *Sultan of My Heart* are produced for and aired on public television. Comparing massive Russian and miniscule Bulgarian public discourse of Turkish TV series thus expands Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi’s (2013) notion of neo-Ottoman cool by going past accessible modernity and de-centering the West, to illuminating historical and geopolitical tensions, cultural hybridity, and local reactions to a neoliberal world.

This chapter also reveals the dynamics of the global media matrix. Development of both Bulgarian and Russian media occurred in tandem with global developments.

³⁸ Russians were not allowed to travel to Turkey for about a year after Turkey shot down a Russian jet over Syrian airspace in late 2015, and when travel restrictions were lifted in the second half of 2016, the number of Russian tourists visiting Turkey in 2017 even surpassed the high figures of 2014 (Federal State Statistics Service, n.d.).

³⁹ After Iraq and Saudi Arabia.

Television itself developed at the height of the Cold War, as an instrument of competition signifying American and Russian scientific superiority. Nonetheless, television did not develop in a national vacuum, but instead, with extensive technological, staff, and program exchanges between various countries. Bulgarian television's heavy Russian presence during socialism, including the all-Russian Channel 2, also demonstrates how wider historical and geopolitical realities influence global media. Further, toppled authoritarian socialist rule instigated the profuse import of mostly Hollywood productions in Russia and Bulgaria, which also influenced local productions. However, audiences did not espouse the extreme liberalism of Hollywood productions, nor the uncertainty and precarious lifestyles that arrived with capitalism. The Turkish TV series, driven by neoliberalism and produced with cultural influences from the global media matrix, arrived in these local contexts with a history of Turkish interactions. Viewers were entranced by the Turkish series because of the familiar codes and tropes that circulate in the global media matrix, and also because of their hybrid generic qualities. High production quality, tight-knit families and moral values were appealing to viewers, who compared these to other productions of the global media matrix that they had consumed prior to the Turkish series. Historical precedents and contemporary geopolitical developments also impacted the consumption of Turkish series, as viewers watched what was professed in their schools as barbaric Turks, in fact, resemble a relatable neighbor.

In this chapter, I provided empiric evidence for the popularity of Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia, following the global trends that I discussed in chapter one. In the

following chapter, I delve deeper into a Bulgarian public discourse theme of fear, to study further what transpires when an imperial power returns as potent popular culture.

CHAPTER 3: FEARING TURKISH TV SERIES (BULGARIA)

Albeit an overnight sensation since the initial broadcasts in 2008, Turkish series also incense some Bulgarians. In 2010, channel bTV, one of the main broadcasters of Turkish series, caricatured Bulgarian objections to the Turkish series in a skit on the comedy show, *Alaminut*. The skit begins with a man rushing out of a quintessential socialist-style apartment block carrying a television and an ax, as neighbors look on with curiosity and concern. This disgruntled husband of a Turkish series devotee, on the verge of axing the television, exclaims with exasperation:

Since the Turkish series started, my wife neither washes nor cooks nor cleans...In the morning, *Ferhunde*; in the afternoon, *Feredje*; in the evening, *Kadrie*...I've had it up to here with all this...It's a matter of life and death! If I watch one more series with that Ali Riza, I will fire the small cannon!

(Paskov, 2016)

The pernicious Turkish series are the reason his wife neglects her housework, though he tries to empathize with her need to relax, because she manages a children's kitchen and "it's not easy to steal from children." While the man reflects nationalistic disgust with Turkish series, he simultaneously invokes Bulgaria's more pressing

tribulations, such as dire economic woes, corruption and moral decay attributed to the transition to democracy. He thus lampoons critics of the consumption of Turkish series while highlighting daily struggles, such as living with extended family in small quarters, traditional gender roles, and class stratification. He accentuates Turkish names, and misuses *feredje*, the Bulgarian word for niqab, highlighting what some perceive as the vexing presence of Turkish and Muslim elements on Bulgarian television.

The small cannon that he threatens to fire alludes to the makeshift cannons made from the trunk of cherry trees used by Bulgarians during a failed rebellion against the Ottoman Empire. The skit concludes with the man rhythmically axing the television while singing *Боят настана* [The Fight Just Started]⁴⁰, a patriotic song about the Bulgarian movement for freedom during the Ottoman Empire. This is a meaningful conclusion to the satire, because Bulgarian attempts for freedom were of little avail, and Russian intervention—the Russo-Turkish War of 1878—prompted the Ottoman retreat and established contemporary Bulgaria. Thus, “If the Turkish series invaded, we will wait for the Russian ones to free us” is the jocular response to concern about the Turkish series (Red House Centre, 2010). This short skit cogently captures grievances about the Turkish

⁴⁰ He sings the following verse: *The fight is coming, the heart is beating, our enemies are so close. Be bold brothers, we are no longer wordless slaves...Let's devastate the enemy in this fight, let's proudly prove them that we have crushed the chains, that we are free and slaves no more.* This song which “causes the heart of the true Bulgarian to beat faster and to touch the spirit of glory and heroism of yore Bulgarians” (Kunchev, n.d.) is still taught to middle school students.

series, while astutely critiquing the critics, in a television channel that continues to profit immensely from broadcasting Turkish series.

In this chapter, I elaborate on the global popularity of Turkish television series explored in chapter one and the fascination facets according to Russian and Bulgarian audiences established in chapter two, by shifting from fascination to hostility expressed in Bulgarian public discourse. During socialist rule in Bulgaria (1944-1989) national identity was defined according to a victimized Bulgarian past of the nearly five-century Ottoman rule. Copious socialist Bulgarian state-sanctioned cultural productions framed the former Ottoman rulers as backward and barbaric in an effort to reaffirm Bulgaria's national identity as a European country with modern European potential that was crippled by the Ottoman Empire. These media texts constructed the predominant images of Turks and Turkey in the Bulgarian imagination, until 2008, when the mass broadcasting of Turkish TV series began. After more than a decade since the first imports, Turkish television series continue to dominate ratings in Bulgaria ("Nikolaos," 2020), showcasing multiple Bulgarian anxieties. In this chapter, I explore how public discourse contends with the popularity of popular culture from the *Other*. More specifically, I ask: *How do Bulgarians who inveigh against their compatriots' love for the Turkish series perceive this phenomenon?* In the following section, I provide brief historical and cultural context.

Historical Context

Since at least the 9th century, Bulgarians have been seeking to align their national identity with Western Europe. That is when King Boris forcibly Christianized the Proto-Bulgars to be in line with the rest of Europe, but Bulgaria's consequent adherence to Orthodox Christianity after the Byzantine Empire perpetually detached it from the West. While Catholic Western Europeans were studying scripture and pietism, and moral guidance were key roles of the church, in the traditionally superstition-rich Balkans the focus was on ritual and proper observance (Mazower, 2000).

Thus, according to Western European accounts, Bulgaria and the Balkans lagged in terms of religion, as well as politically and economically, and bridge metaphors were commonly used to describe the Balkans: bridge between East and West, Europe and Asia; and a bridge of stages of growth, including semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, and semioriental, a place where the people "do not care to conform to the standards of behavior devised as normative by and for the civilized world" (Todorova, 2009, p. 3).

Bulgarian intellectuals, well-informed of these perceptions, fragile to Western European cultural hegemony, and inspired by its industrialization and revolutions, were intent on claiming their place in Europe in the late 19th century after independence from the nearly five-century Ottoman rule following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8. Bulgaria continued to be cast as backward, and even the capital, Sofia, was described as "not been entirely civilised as to lose its Old-World charm, its spicy aroma of the East. The veneer of civilization is only skin-deep...you feel, instinctively...that Europe is

behind you; you stand in the shadow of the Orient” (Smith, 1908, p. 9). Bulgarians gradually discovered their own Europeanness and asserted their cultural superiority over the Ottomans while building a “European façade over their apparent Bulgarian backwardness” by counteracting “the tangible vestiges of the Ottoman past on what came to be defined as Bulgarian soil and Bulgarian bodies” (Neuburger, 2004, p. 197-8).

Ottoman rule in Bulgaria followed rule by Austrian-born monarchs, fascism, and socialist rule. Bulgaria was arguably stable during socialism (1944-1989), during which it enacted a nationalist mission of turning Bulgaria’s diverse ethnic and religious mosaic landscape into a minimalist work. Imposed socialist-style modernization was aggressively imposed on all Bulgarian citizens with rampant industrialization and urbanization to reincarnate peasants as a proletariat. However, Bulgarians continued to glorify the West, especially as “enemies of the state” swiftly disappeared or were sent to labor camps indefinitely. Eventually, in 1989, Bulgarians celebrated the fall of socialism but had to live through a slow transition to a market economy and to contend with a new political and economic system that left them even more destitute than before. Meanwhile, massive migration either to urban centers or abroad immensely altered social groups and left villages desolate.

Although the “Turkish yoke” has been open to debate and controversial since the fall of socialism (Yalumov, 2002), according to predominating Bulgarian historiography, Ottoman rule hindered Bulgaria’s development of “the general course of European history by five centuries of Ottoman Turkish barbarism” (Neuburger, 2004, p. 25). This

interruption of “natural historical development” of the Slavic, Orthodox Christian Bulgarian civilization and culture impeded its European progress à la Renaissance and reversed the direction of its “historic momentum” (Fol, 1981, p. 145). Besides being a barrier of natural European progress, because of the Ottomans, Bulgaria and the Balkans were perceived as an intermediate cultural zone, with certain Oriental realities such as the dominance of religion and poor peasantry (Mazower, 2000).

Thus, Bulgaria’s national conscience was overshadowed by an inferiority complex arising from an idealization of Europe’s modernity. After independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, about 30% of the population in Bulgaria was identified as ethnically Turkish (Crampton, 1997), and as the Ottoman Empire and the Turks in Bulgaria were largely blamed for hindering Bulgarian progress, disinfecting the language, culture, and country of all that was backward, Muslim, and Turkish was a salient mission of Bulgaria’s nation-building efforts and socialist policies since Communist rise to power in 1944 (Yalumov, 2002; Eminov, 1997; Neuburger, 2004; Simsir, 1988). In order to accelerate Bulgaria’s pace toward modernity, cleansing Bulgaria of all traces of the Ottomans, and emulating the (mythically) homogeneous nation-state based on the Western European model were prioritized.

Bulgarians and Turks are descendants of the same Turkic tribe (Menges, 1968) and there are no phenotypical differences among the two groups, leaving clothing, names, language, and religion as the demarcation signs between the two groups, accentuated heavily in historical novels and films. These distinguishing markers were also the target

of the forced assimilation campaign, the “Revival Process,” purported to “revive” the Turkish minority’s Bulgarian roots after Todor Jivkov declared that “There are no Turks in Bulgaria.” (Eminov, 1997). Macedonians and Turks were declared to be Bulgarian overnight; Pomaks’⁴¹ and Turks’ names were forcibly changed to Bulgarian and speaking Turkish and all Turkish media was declared illegal (Eminov, 1997; Simsir, 1988; Neuburger, 2004; Penkov, 2011).

Concurrently, state-sanctioned cultural production about the primitive, barbaric, Oriental Turks abounded, to reaffirm Bulgaria’s national identity as a European country with modern European potential that was crippled by the Ottomans. Hostile stereotypes were reproduced through mass media, as numerous Bulgarian movies and mini-series were produced, historical novels published, and poems and songs written, to impart the bitter 500-year history of Bulgarians under Turkish rule. Bulgarians underwent intensive national identity construction through these media texts, as they consumed the representations of suffering of their predecessors in socialist Bulgarian framing and agenda-setting doses. Still resonating widely and accepted as evidence of Ottoman horror, *Time of Violence*⁴² (Nenov & Staikov, 1988) is based on the novel *Time of Parting* (Donchev, 1964). *Time of Violence* was chosen by Bulgarian viewers as the best movie in 100 years of Bulgarian cinematography (Bulgarian National Television, 2015) and is an iconic cultural text most frequently invoked as evidence of the plight of

⁴¹ Ethnic Bulgarian Muslims

⁴² The Bulgarian name of the novel and the movie is literally translated as *A Time of Parting*. The English name used for foreign distribution of the movie is *Time of Violence*.

Bulgarians under Ottoman rule. In the movie, the brutal janissary Kara Ibrahim [Black Ibrahim], abducted as a child to serve the Ottomans, returns to his village to forcibly Islamicize all village residents, including his relatives. Among the most dramatic scenes, Kara Ibrahim instructs the protagonist Manol to “Put on the turban if you don’t want me to turn [the village] into a cemetery.” When Kara Ibrahim slowly descends to kill Manol’s son, Manol exclaims “A turban, a turban! Give me a turban!” A pile of turbans and veils awaits the rest of the villagers’ conversion.

Thus, with this movie and many other cultural productions along similar storylines⁴³, socialist Bulgaria attempted to reclaim the bodies of all self-identified Muslims and ethnic Turks as pure Bulgarians, descendant victims of Turkish slavery and forced conversion. In her memoir, Kassabova (2009) reflects on the violence and horrors of the movie, including scenes of mass rape, slaughter, beheadings and impalement, pointing that it was an instrument of legitimizing the forced assimilation campaign of the Turkish minority. She explains that “schoolchildren and students were encouraged to see...Because the next thought you were supposed to have...was... how could you compare mere name changes with mass rape and impalement?” (p. 113).

Konstantinova (2016) echoes this reflection on Bulgarian National Radio when she contextualizes an interview about Anton Donchev, the author of *A Time of Parting*.

⁴³ Such as *Goat’s Horn*, which Bulgarians chose as the second best movie in 100 years of Bulgarian cinematography (Bulgarian National Television, 2015)

She draws attention to critics of Donchev, who describe him as a “Communist darling” and the novel was a political commission to be used as a political tool, “to create division and generate hatred against local ethnic Turks” during the forced assimilation campaign of the Turkish minority. The novel was censured for lack of historical truth, and as such is an essential element of an ongoing debate about Ottoman historiography, since the fall of socialism in 1989 (Konstantinova, 2016). Konstantinova’s interviewee, historian Andrei Pantev, posits that since the mid 2000s, the fields of history and literature are going through “a silent and fierce dispute” over historical fact and he laments the subjugation of professional historiography to literature when it comes to creating more lasting and comprehensive notions about the past (Konstantinova, 2016).

Nonetheless, these media texts constructed the predominating images of Turks and Turkey until 2008, when the importation of Turkish television series for Bulgarian consumption began, met with an unprecedented popularity that carried them to prime time (as I discuss in the previous chapter). Since then, Bulgarians eagerly watch Turkish television series, while still voicing dissent over the 10-minute daily Turkish language news on BNT1, the state-run national television channel (Papakochev, 2011; “Hello Bulgaria,” 2014; Council for Electronic Media, 2014). Bulgarians who “fought to be freed from the forced cultural intimacy with Turks for 500 years” (Mladenova & Todorova, 2015) and who cannot turn their backs on history (Red House Centre, 2010) cavil over both the series and Turkish language news. Considering the historical adversity, socialist anti-Turkish productions, and the popularity of Turkish series in

Bulgaria, I now proceed with the data corpus and method to answer the main question:

How do Bulgarians who inveigh against their compatriots' love for the Turkish series perceive the popularity of Turkish series?

Data Corpus

The following is a list of the data I selected to answer the research questions:

1. I drew on the public discourse data of the previous chapter, by selecting the data with a negative stance toward the Turkish series.
2. Four television show discussions about Turkish series (bTV, 2014; “Hello Bulgaria,” 2014; News 7, 2014; Mladenova and Todorova, 2009).
3. Radio talk show (Simeonov, 2011).
4. “*For*” and “*Against*” *Turkish Series* panel (Red House Centre, 2010).
5. 19 tweets which expressed a negative opinion toward Turkish series. Twitter is used by a fraction of the population in Bulgaria (Statcounter, n.d.) and the 19 tweets appeared as results to my search *турски сериали* [Turkish series].
6. Parodies about Turkish series, with a comparatively large number of views.
 - a. *If Life were a TV Series* parody by Tipichno, the “First Bulgarian web series” with 377,000 subscribers as of August 2020. It was a four-part parody of American sitcoms, Indian series, Turkish series, and a reality show with more than 788,000 views (Tipichno, 2016).
 - b. Viewer comments to *If Life were a TV Series* parody (above).

- c. *Turkish series yeah!* parody of Turkish series by Gengster with 16,000 subscribers as of August 2020 and more than 32,000 views (Gengster, 2013).
- d. A skit about Turkish TV series broadcast in 2010 in *Alaminut*, a bTV comedy series with nearly 85,000 YouTube views (Paskov, 2016).

Findings

Turkish TV Series are Dangerous Soft Power

A poem shared as a comment to an article about Turkish TV series as soft power (Blajev, 2010) succinctly expresses the predominating view of the critics toward the Turkish series and the viewers. The Bulgarian title of the poem is *Vreme Bezdelno* [A Time of Idleness], a wordplay on the movie *Vreme Razdelno* [Time of Violence]. The poem laments Bulgarians' slavery to the Turkish series which results in their destitution and indolence, concluding "They broke us. But we will be happy, with five hundred consecutive episodes!" Similarly, an audience member of the Red House panel *For and Against the Turkish Series* (Red House Centre, 2010), warns about the dangerous potential of the Turkish series by asserting, "they showed us how it used to be in *Time of Violence*." Lozanov (2015), the director of Council of Electronic Media, apparently acclimated to invocations of *Time of Violence* by those who seek censorship of the Turkish series, riposted that those who are against the Turkish series are nationalists who actually have a desire to watch them and need someone else to remove the temptation. He elaborates further:

In the Turkish series you can't forgive yourself that you accept that the *enslaver* does not look like the one from *Time of Violence* but like you, that you start to like him, that you cry with his tears and become happy with his joys. You know that if your comrades from the hunting team know what you watch, they will blame you that you are not a patriot and not even a man, despite the fact that in the chalga music that they listen to are sound rhythms also left from that same slavery. (Lozanov, 2015)

Chalga is a Bulgarian music genre that flourished with the liberty of democracy and capitalism that persists and dominates Bulgarian music since the fall of socialism in 1989. Notorious for its Middle Eastern rhythms leading to "tensions over Bulgarian culture, morals and values" (Sotirova, 2013), chalga, like Turkish series, appeals to Bulgarian cultural hybridity, but its Middle Eastern elements are perceived as threats to Bulgarian national identity.

The threats and danger of Turkish series were amply discussed in Bulgarian public discourse. Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations are among the principal worries of nationalist Bulgarians and the articles averse to the series carry a discourse of fear towards the previous Islamic invader and enslaver from the Orient. The headlines mention that the series are "dangerous" ("K. Metodiev," 2011), a "cultural invasion" (Dankov, 2013), a "shiny façade of imperial politics" (Avramov, 2010) that "crossed off

Turkish slavery” (Dimitrova & Andreev, 2011). They warn about the impending “Islamization of Bulgaria” (Georgiev, 2010) and explain “How Bulgaria Turkified. Again.” underscored by a large photo of a black burqa-clad woman (Kasabova, 2016). As the Ottoman invading armies of the past, “Turkish series march in the world” (“Turkish series march,” 2013). “The Turkish cultural invasion in Bulgaria is accelerating” (Stamboliev, 2016a), “It aims to bring to amnesia Bulgarian historical memory” (Stamboliev, 2016b) and “captured even the eternal enemy—Greece” (Webcafe.bg, 2012). Critics of the viewers lament the “Two Turkeys in our heads” (Bedrov, 2013) and clamour “The cultural schizophrenia of the Bulgarian” (Dichev, 2016). Other views are that the series are “Turkish foreign policy” (Blajev, 2010) and “changing the world” (Lilov, 2015).

Dominant anti-Turkish TV series discourse mostly stems from nationalists who are intent on protecting their mythically homogeneous nation and monolithic primordial Bulgarian culture from the equally mythically homogenous Southern neighbor with an imperial fetish and monolithic Islamic culture, who uses the series as a potent instrument of soft power. Also, those antagonistic to the series flaunt their nationalism and patriotism, while describing viewers and television channels as treasonous. The Turkish series activate the fear system of the Bulgarian nationalist brain, and its primary existential preoccupation is to rescue the Bulgaria nation of an imminent Neo-Ottoman threat and the Bulgarian culture of a cultural invasion that is bound to Islamicize and

Turkify Bulgarians, through these hybrid media texts that indiscriminately arrest vulnerable Bulgarians of all ages, genders, and socio-economic status.

Dimitrova and Andreev (2011), writers for Deutsche Welle (DW), Germany's international broadcaster, also expressed disappointment that Bulgarians have forgotten the hatefulness and prejudices towards Turks that emerged during Ottoman rule, and instead are awed by *Perla* and company. Soap operas are not only a profitable entertainment product, but they are also gradually turning into an effective instrument of Turkish diplomacy, the article posits, as they "opened the eyes of Bulgarians and Greeks for the essence of life in Turkey today and helped them shake off the clichés that were under the common denominator 'Turkish yoke.'" They also warn that then-Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu characterized Ottoman rule in the Balkans as harmonious, while observers note neo-Ottomanism, engendering anxiety in Turkey's neighbors. One of those observers is political scientist Kaloyan Metodiev (Red House Centre, 2010) who, at a debate about the Turkish series, argued that since it was founded, modern Turkey is transfixed on reclaiming North and Western territories to realize its imperial dreams. Metodiev cautioned that Turkish series act as political instruments with powerful cultural influence in Bulgaria. Metodiev further posited that "Turkish series are a barrier to the Europeanization of Bulgaria and its full integration in Europe." (Red House Centre, 2010)

Similarly, according to Bedrov (2013), the Turks in the series challenge the Turks in history textbooks. There are two types of Turks, according to the article, in heads and

on screens, and neither is the truth. That is, there are two extreme views of the Turks, those of the brutal Ottomans taught in school, and the beautiful Turks emanating from the television screens. The article expresses Bulgaria's perpetual mistrust and fear of a Turkish invasion and scorns Bulgarians who trust hotels, restaurants, and vacation resorts in Turkey. It highlights the dichotomy of protesting the muezzin in Bulgaria, while posing for photos in front of mosques in Turkey, and the use of "grand bazaar," which means "cheap goods" in Bulgaria, and is the first destination of Bulgarian tourists in Istanbul. The association of cheap goods with the Grand Bazaar in Bulgaria is not coincidental. Turkish series are also positioned as cheap, low culture, as I discuss in the following section.

Turkish TV Series are Low Culture

Instead of watching Turkish series, Bulgarians should cling to and cultivate Western Europe's embrace of European Union (EU) membership, and not give credence to the modern, secular Turkey poses to be in the series, which is really an ulterior motive to secure EU membership, clamour opposers. They assert that the Bulgarian public gaze should be positioned toward the West, not the East. Nationalists opposed to the Turkish series or Western European-inclined Bulgarians "pretending to be of a higher culture" (Daskalov, 2012) proclaim that they do not watch the Turkish series (Red House Centre, 2010; bTV, 2014; "Hello Bulgaria," 2014). In response, others assert that they do watch the series, but would not admit to it ("Hello Bulgaria," 2014; Daskalov, 2012; Angelova,

2011). Whether or not they watch them, however, one fact is clear: the public sphere discourse directed at opposing the Turkish series has not treated other foreign series similarly. For example, earlier popularity of American and Latin American series did not provoke such public debate, much less the discourse of invasion (Red House Centre, 2010).

Turkish series pose a threat to Bulgaria, as they subject weak Bulgarians to addictive potent Turkish culture and language, and cheap entertainment causing detriment to Bulgarian intellect. They instruct Bulgarians in patriarchy, threatening to “draw in” Bulgaria to “the Orient” instead of Western Europe (“Why we hate,” 2010). In the parody “If Life were a TV Series” (Tipichno, 2016), a number of cultural expressions particular to the Turkish culture are on orientalist display, including kissing an older relative’s hand, offering tea, responding with “Thank God” in answer to “how are you,” and the expression “May it be a sign of good” at any hint of uncertainty⁴⁴.

Aversion to Turkish series also derives from the overly melodramatic stories which elicit viewer tears, since protagonists usually die at the end (Tipichno, 2016; Gengster, 2013). Even good news such as winning the lottery are occasions to cry (Gengster, 2013). A tweet reads: “My biggest fear is that one day Turkish series will all

⁴⁴ The representation of Turkish series and culture was judged as accurate by numerous comments to this parody which was viewed more than 737,000 times on YouTube and has about 16,000 likes. Parody critiques were about misrepresenting language and religion, and comments to the video included “Why [did the actor say] Thank God even though Turks believe in Allah,” “Turks speak a foreign language not Bulgarian,” and “It’s a Turkish series but they don’t speak Turkish.”

end and people in Bulgaria will not have anything to cry about.” However, the prospect of tainting an aseptic Bulgarian culture is reason for even more trepidation, as I outline in the following section.

Turkish TV Series Adulterate Pure Bulgarian Culture

Georgiev (2010), writing for the newspaper *Desant*, propounds that Bulgarians are famous for bowing to foreigners and lauds Skat TV⁴⁵: “First it was daily Soviet movies, then American action movies, and that now viewers rotated 180 degrees to the Orient.” He deplores television channels that rushed to become cosmopolitan and Western and bemoans that only Skat TV airs local, Bulgarian movies. He reviles “anti-nationalist channels” bTV and Nova TV for their mass broadcasts of Turkish series, and he likens them to a fictional TV channel in Israel that would provide nonstop series in praise of the Third Reich, or in Japan, of the US Navy and their nuclear weapons. Blajev (2010), a popular news website writer, is also critical of Nova TV and bTV for Turkish drama distribution that will impede “state level problems from now on, as public opinion has already forgotten about the propaganda that was beat into their heads during Communism, and they started to love everything Turkish and teary.” He also woefully

⁴⁵*Desant* is published by Skat TV, a television network notorious for propagating hate speech and intolerance toward non-ethnic Bulgarians. Skat TV is the mouthpiece for Valeri Simeonov, the nationalist owner-turned-politician who founded his own far right party, the National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria. This was formerly Volen Siderov’s platform, the journalist-turned-founder of the other nationalist party Ataka, but following the rift with Simeonov, Siderov voices his right-wing extremist ideologies on his network, TV Alfa.

credits the Turkish series with the decreasing political power of Ataka, a far-right political party, because Turkey is “earning increasing affection from the Bulgarian public, not with brute propaganda, but with a cheap rig, the television series” (Blajev, 2010).

The zenith of the “invasion of the soaps” was the airing of the scandalous *Magnificent Century* dedicated to the “Turkish tyrant” Suleiman I, his harem, and the “magnificence” of the Ottoman Empire (Dankov, 2013). Thus, this “invasion of the soaps” persists as a detrimental aftereffect to the Bulgarian culture and national conscience and there is a desire for Bulgarian productions (Red House Centre, 2010; bTV, 2014; Georgiev, 2010). “They turn us into zombies for 9 hours and a half with Turkish series” reads the heading of (Todorova, 2012), and the subheading scorns “Bulgarians know who Kivanc Tatlitug is, but don’t know Rusi Chanev.”⁴⁶ Georgiev (2010), reflecting the patriotism of his media outlet, states his preferences for the movies *Captain Petko Voivoda* and *Notes on Bulgarian Uprisings* and declares that he is infuriated at being made a Turk, a Gypsy or Euroatlantic; that he is ultimately Bulgarian and prefers his native culture, including authentic Bulgarian movies in which Bulgarians are not shown as freaks or regretful-European, but as primordial Balkan people.

Kasabova (2016) is also an adherent of a pure Bulgarian culture and nation, and describes Turkey as a tumor, in *Lentata*, a website that claims to publish truth undisclosed in mainstream media. In her article entitled “How Bulgaria Turkified. Again”

⁴⁶ Rusi Chanev is a famous Bulgarian actor who starred in 30 movies since 1966.

Kasabova (2016) describes Turkey as a relapsed malignant tumor that was in remission for 138 years⁴⁷. Relapse of the disease began with the Turks in Bulgaria and Turkish language news, broadcast since 2020, despite public dissent and protests. The second stage of the tumor is the imposition of Turkish life and culture through Turkish series, and the series have completely deformed the Bulgarian value system, writes Kasabova (2016). The third stage of the tumor, according to her, is the censorship of Bulgarian history textbooks and with it the Bulgarian collective consciousness; that Bulgarians transformed from slaves to citizens, as though they did not give their children in the blood tax⁴⁸, but simply lent their well-meaning neighbors eggs and milk. The fourth stage was when the insolent minarets began to stick out across the churches, and veiled Bulgarians started to appear in Bulgarian schools. She views the Movement for Rights and Freedom (MRF) party as a Turkish party that exercises control over Bulgaria and recommends amputating a part of the body to stop it from national suicide.

Turkish Names and Language are Agitating

Critics of the Turkish series repeatedly accentuate the exorbitant quantity of Turkish series, the dissemination of the Turkish language, and the vexing Turkish names. Georgiev (2010), writing for *Desant*, states that in a country where even the Turkish

⁴⁷ Since 1878, the end of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria.

⁴⁸ This is how Bulgarians refer to the Ottoman Janissary Law, which stipulated *devşirme* or child-levy. That is, taking children by force to raise them as subjects for the sultan, as janissaries, the elite military corps.

language is obnoxious to every Bulgarian and bothers the national sense, they “poison Bulgarians with mushy stories of various Scheherazades, Onurs, Osmans, and Incis, played by Istanbul's fledgling stars.” Kasabova (2016) laments that “Bulgarians have dinner with Ali, Orhan and Ferhunde,” and disdainfully informs of the boom of Bulgarian babies named after Turkish actors. Turkish names were a salient topic during the *Slavi Show* I discuss in chapter 2 as well, when Trifonov presented a spoof of a scenario for a Turkish series to Oden, in which she would play “Yıldız” and he “Mümün,” which he repeated emphatically eight times, prompting an uproar of laughter from the live audience.

The Red House Centre for Culture and Debate in the Bulgarian capital Sofia hosted a panel on the Turkish series entitled “For and Against the Turkish Series”⁴⁹ (Red House Centre, 2010). During the panel, political scientist Metodiev warned that the majority of babies in Smolyan were named after actors of the Turkish series. A young audience member, Georgi, commented “It bothers me that when I sit to have dinner at night, I turn on the TV and have to hear if Mehmed got someone pregnant again and this and that.” Panelist Hlaif asked, “What if his name is Michael or John? Does that not bother you?” to which Georgi replied: “No, that doesn’t bother me. Do you know why? Because you know what you said in the beginning about us having to turn our backs on history to watch the series? Well, that’s not going to happen.”

⁴⁹ Panelists included sociologists Milena Yakimova, Veselin Bosakov and Kristina Vladimirova; Bulgarian National Radio Director, Alexander Mihailov; political scientist Kaloyan Metodiev; and Nidal Hlaif, a Syrian movie director and Bulgarian national.

In this context Stamboliev (2016b), a writer for the nationalist *Desant* fulminates against the “costly, though futile” Council of Electronic Media for allowing the “seedy soap operas” that attempt to burnish Turkey’s image and present it as a culturally proximate country. He asserts that this is an idealized image where every year young girls and women are stoned to death by relatives for sinning, an ancient custom, not “described by Homer, or more precisely Omer.” Either deliberately or inadvertently, with hyperbolic sensationalism, he positions Turkey parallel to extreme conservative Islamist culture, using the names to mark East and West, an argument to highlight the ancient Greek author Homer, broaching Bulgarian historical admiration and mimicry of Greeks, while with “Omer” alluding to a backward Middle Eastern influence through the Turkish dramas.

Additionally, binge-watching Turkish series would facilitate Turkish language-learning of the “Turkish language named the most euphonious language in the world (no joke !!!).” (“Why we hate,” 2010). There is no indication as to how Turkish came to be known as “the most euphonious language in the world” but the note in parentheses that states “no joke!!!” is a clear statement of consternation, indicating that if anything, it should be designated as the most cacophonous language in the world. The Turkish language is ubiquitous because of the Turkish series. A Bulgarian tweet reads: “Enough with these Turkish series Penno!” [Answer in Turkish]: “Mind your own business Kiro!” Another tweet asserts that “With all of these Turkish series, bTV Lady should rename itself to bTV Hanim,” paradoxical because the word *lady* is also not Bulgarian,

demonstrating that English is not viewed as a foreign threat. The following are other tweets lamenting the quantity of Turkish series, names, and the promotion of Turkey through the series.

Tweet 1: KADIR KADIR KADIR [Turkish name]. These Turkish series are crazy, I'll stop listening to the radio just because I want to stop hearing commercials about Turkish series.

Tweet 2: "Hey neighbor what are you doing on the roof?" Answer: "I'm greasing the antenna with lard, so that it can't receive these Turkish series anymore" #idea

Tweet 3: Mrs. Hillary, You've been watching too many Turkish series, huh?

Tweet 4:

1. You pay for Turkish series, advertising mosques, museums, sultans, harems, legends, treasures, skyscrapers, limousines, beauties, mountains and beaches
2. You air them from morning till night, even overnight
3. You wonder why people will kill themselves for tourism in #Turkey

The Turkish names in the series are repeatedly emphasized, particularly to express outrage at the naming of babies after Turkish drama characters, or annoyance at the mere sound of Turkish names, not other foreign names (Red House Centre, 2010; Kasabova,

2016). Thus, according to the critics, watching Turkish series exposes viewers to Turkish names, teaches them Turkish, instills Turkish culture, and promotes tourism to Turkey. Worse, watching too many Turkish series instead of working could cause you to lose a presidential election--as the tweet facetious Hillary tweet. The antidote to Turkish series may be spreading lard on the antenna to hinder reception of the series, because Muslims traditionally eschew pork.

Analysis

Turkish TV Series Threaten Bulgarian Sovereignty

A dominant discourse in opposition to the airing of the series was based on fear: that Turkish dramas are a cultural invasion, and a prognosis of an imminent Neo-Ottoman invasion, dialogic with Bulgarian history and Ottoman past. The exigent nationalistic outcries, as though undergoing a national post-traumatic stress disorder, warned of the Turkish series-promulgated Islamization and Turkification of Bulgaria. Women's oppression in Turkey should warrant rejection of the series by the Bulgarian public because it is a backward country, the opposers clamored, disregarding the traditional gender roles that persist in Bulgaria and oblivious to the fact that Bulgarian women identify with the series because they are also struggling with negotiating Western-style modernity with traditional gender roles. Meanwhile, television channels were declared treasonous, and viewers urged to turn to the West and away from Turkey, which was described as a tumor. Most Bulgarians shared an aversion for Turkish-language media

texts that originate in Bulgaria, perceived as demands for power, including the daily ten-minute Turkish-language news, and the Turkish version of a patriotic Bulgarian song. Additionally, whether in support of or against the series, the significance of *Time of Violence* to present day national conscience is irrefutable. Bulgarian viewers voted in the Bulgarian National Television poll and chose the movie as the best in Bulgaria's 100-year cinematic history, blazoned in a glitzy award program. *The Goat's Horn* was awarded second place, another movie about the brutal Ottomans, demonstrating that alongside their preference for Turkish drama, viewers cling to a primordial Bulgarian national identity, an identity that continues to be negotiated, contested and mediated.

Investigating the principal fears of the critics as I did in this chapter underscores a few additional issues. First, there is a history of imported television series in Bulgaria that did not receive such backlash, such as Brazilian telenovela *Escrava Isaura* which aired in the mid-1980s, followed by a plethora of American series after the fall of socialism in 1989. It is possible that the sheer quantity of Turkish series inspires critics, though this was not the case with the American series. Deriding Turkish series entails a performance of loyalty to the Bulgarian nation. Responsible, cultured, educated citizens must deride and despise the Turkish series, because consuming Turkish media is a cultural and material existential threat, cheap and disgusting entertainment. Juxtaposed with the majority of Bulgarian voices that love the Turkish series for their high quality, as well as the classic terms to describe "others," it is clear that the critics are mostly reacting to consuming the media of the "other."

Also, even as they perform nationalism and high culture with their criticism, the critics' expertise of the content, style, music, and camera techniques is apparent. For example, in the *Gengster* (2013) parody that describes enjoying Turkish series as disgusting and immoral as necrophilism, evidence of sustained viewership by the critics is apparent from description of the typically-sad endings of the series: "You have to start crying. Not because you're sad. But because you waited for two months for the main protagonists to have sex, but then one of them simply pops!" Further, a number of YouTube comments to the *Tipichno* (2016) parody affirm the accurate representation of the Turkish series, including "I've seen this Turkish series," "It's amazing! Exact and true!" and "100 [%] Truth."

During socialism, Bulgarian nation-building entailed constructing a victimized identity that pointed to Ottoman rule for Bulgarian shortcomings. This tradition continues, this time with the Turkish series. According to the critics, Bulgarian troubles would dissipate if the series do. Clenching narratives of Bulgaria's Turkish Other constructed during socialist nation-building shelters a primordial Bulgarian national identity while Bulgarian social, political, and economic hurdles are imputed to the Turkish series. However, they are vastly outnumbered by the majority of Bulgarians who are ardent fans of the dramas, and it thus appears that deriding Turkish series to showcase Bulgarian nationalism will persist for as long as the series do.

The main catalyst for the outcry against Turkish series is their Turkish origin. Turkish series are viewed neither as benign nor banal television entertainment, but in

dialogue with Bulgarian Ottoman plight and national identity construction, and as threats to the Bulgarian nation. Turkish TV series are a new interaction between Bulgaria and Turkey in the global media matrix, and the majority of those opposed to the Turkish series do so to clutch Bulgarian nation-building constructions of Turks as the *Other*. Additionally, to some, Turkish series pose a threat to the purported pure Bulgarian culture, while others argue that they orient Bulgarians to Eastern culture when it should be adherent to the Western. Though the Turkish series have enticing plots and high production quality according to viewers, those opposed invoke the Bulgarian movies, mini-series, and history lessons learned in school, lest they be forgotten, and the neo-Ottomans invade, illuminating again the pre-existing dialectic media dynamics of the global media matrix encountered by transnational media.

Following the global popularity of Turkish series that was the topic of chapter one, and concrete reasons for their popularity in Bulgaria and in Russia in chapter two, in this chapter I examined the fears that are triggered by the Turkish series in Bulgaria. In the following chapter I turn to Russia, where the influence of Turkish series and neo-Ottoman cool is also perceived as threatening and begets repelling.

CHAPTER 4: FIGHTING TURKISH TV SERIES (RUSSIA)

In early 2012, five young Russian women staged what is arguably the loudest outcry for women's rights in Russia, with reverberations persisting nearly a decade later. Named the Pussy Riot, the women staged a *punk prayer* at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, in protest of sexism, Orthodox Church patriarchy, and Putin's alignment with the church. Their viral video unsettled Russian politics by invigorating the opposition in a year that Putin was running for reelection, resulted in the imprisonment of members, and spellbound Western media and academia, who continue to invite members to speaking engagements. In one such event at the University of Pennsylvania in late December 2020, Pussy Riot founder Nadezhda Tolokonnikova described Russian television, to which she was heavily subjected to in prison while sharing a room with about 40 women, as "...a weird mix about [sic] soap operas, some TV shows that promote cops...and Russian political propaganda...I started to actually understand the reasons why [millions of Russians] support Putin, because they consume this amount of propaganda on a daily basis" (Tolokonnikova, 2020). The broadcast of *Magnificent Century*, which spurred the mass import of Turkish series in Russia, began about four months after Tolokonnikova was convicted for hooliganism. Although devoid of the Pussy Riot glitz and global attention, millions of unassuming women attracted the

attention of the Russian government and media for their mundane act of consuming Turkish TV series, ineluctably tied to their everyday lives.

In this chapter, I build on the former chapters by highlighting developments in Russia where Turkish TV series are garnering much attention from Russian production companies, television channels, and the government. In chapter one, I outlined the history and global popularity of Turkish TV series, which I established empirically in chapter two by studying Russian and Bulgarian public discourse. In chapter three, I investigated antipathy and fear of Turkish TV series in the Bulgarian context, expressed at times as surrender because Bulgaria lacks resources to produce TV series of comparable quality. In this chapter, I turn to Russia, a country with abundant resources and motivation that effectively wages a media and culture war to fight the influence of Turkish TV series, and *neo-Ottoman cool* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013).

The Russian government, and the myriad of production companies and television channels with direct and indirect ties to the government are attentive to the popularity of Turkish TV series in Russia. An explicit government riposte was in late 2015, at the behest of then Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev for sanctions against Turkey following the downing of a Russian jet by Turkish forces over the Turkey-Syria border area. Yevgeny Gerasimov, the Duma chairman of the Commission for Culture and Mass Communications proposed banning Turkish television series in Russia, calling them “rubbish” (Gerasimov, 2015; Petrov, 2015). Tatyana Batysheva, a member of the commission, imputed blame to the Turkish series for the “outright popularization of

Muslim men” and publicizing the “wonderful life of the harem” (“MP Batysheva,” 2015). The proposal was ineffectual because in addition to television Russian viewers watch Turkish series on various streaming social media platforms, and perhaps this is why they were not banned. However, in line with Putin’s approach to rap that “...if it is impossible to stop it, it should be taken over and navigated in a particular way” (“Putin wants,” 2018), Russian television productions that promised to reveal truths about Turkey purported to be absent in the Turkish series were produced and distributed on Channel Domashny, the main distributor of Turkish TV series that targets female viewers in the vast geography spanning from Ukraine to Central Asia.

As Russia severed ties with and banned travel to Turkey, Russians watched stories of *Eastern Wives*: Russian women married to Middle Eastern men, advertised as the truth “behind the spectacular screen of expensive Turkish TV series” Channel Domashny (“Eastern Wives,” 2015). State-owned news channel Russia 24 aired *Natasha’s Love Turkish Tears*, a “special report,” featured in a similar format and identical soundtrack as *Eastern Wives*, spotlighting predicaments of Russian women in Turkey (Russia 24, 2016). Meanwhile, *East/West*, a new production advertised as the first Russo-Turkish series and “based on real events” was produced the height of the Russo-Turkish crisis (Hvichiya, 2016). According to the director, Denis Eleonsky, the idea behind the series was to show the truth about Turkey (“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016). In promoting *Eastern Wives* and *East/West*, Channel Domashny published a number of didactic articles using photos and anecdotes from the series to warn Russian women

tempted to embark on a relationship with a Middle Easterner (“Eastern love,” n.d.; “Turkish Marriage,” n.d.).

In this chapter, I ask: *How do Russian productions attempt to counter neo-Ottoman cool? How does Russian media define and perpetuate the geo-cultural signifiers East and West? More generally, what can transnational media illuminate about gender, culture, and modernity, and their relationship to geopolitics?* To answer these questions, I analyze three Russian productions and their promotional materials: the docuseries *Eastern Wives*, the drama *East/West*, special report *Natasha’s Tears*, and Channel Domashny promotional materials, which I detail in the following section.

Data Corpus

I selected the docudrama *Eastern Wives*, television series *East/West*, and *Natasha’s Tears*, *Turkish Love* based on the temporal proximity of their production and distribution to the Russo-Turkish geopolitical crisis of 2015, and because they were promoted as a direct rejoinder to the Turkish series. Also, all three productions are available on YouTube which was not the case until 2017, which means that producers aim for a continued and wide viewership and allows for easily accessible verification of my findings.

I look to the Channel Domashny website materials as a supplement of the processes of production and distribution as they illuminate the encoding structures of the producers and distributors, in summary text form. I also take into account how *East/West*

is marketed on the production company Star Media website. As the *Eastern Wives* production company Ron Film website was not live as of writing, I analyzed Ron Film founder Konstantin Boroshnev's (pseudonym: Konstantin Reich) Facebook, vKontakte and Instagram public posts about *Eastern Wives*. I also searched for media coverage of the productions on *yandex.ru*.

I began with the Russian television series *East/West*. As a first step, I first viewed it in its entirety and searched for the broadest meaning of "East" and "West," since the director sought to highlight the difference in mentalities between Russia and Turkey, and designated Russia as West and Turkey as East (Hvichiya, 2016). My initial viewing directed me to a wealth of parallels and contrasts in the TV series, and I noticed that all elements are carefully encoded to communicate backwardness for Turkey and modernity for Russia. Mindful of these observations, in the second phase of my data collection, I took very detailed notes to discern pronounced patterns of signification in the first five episodes.

More specifically, I noted the following:

1. Public spaces in both countries, including airports, streets, restaurants, exterior and interior of buildings, baths and coffeehouses, touristic sights; in other words, anywhere the actors are filmed, or the scene is set that could be considered a public space.
2. Private spaces in both countries, including homes and hotel rooms.

3. Physical appearance of the protagonists and extras in both countries, including clothing, hair, and make-up style for women; clothing, hair, and presence/absence of facial hair for men.
4. Social relationships, including how familial, romantic, and other relationships are expressed.
5. Explicit and implicit references to other countries, cultures, languages, and texts, in order to analyze hybridity (Kraidy, 2005), myths (Barthes, 1972) and intertextuality (Fiske, 1987).
6. Explicit and implicit parallels and contrasts between the countries or cultures, to discern how they are framed (Goffman, 1986).
7. Explicit references to television series; specifically, the context in which actors are portrayed as watching or referring to television and TV series, because Turkish series are popular in Russia, to see how metatextuality (Gennette, 1997) is applied.

For the remaining 19 episodes, since the visual, aural, and thematic elements were consistent with the first five episodes, I detailed general plot development, salient themes and other elements that signified *East* and *West*, in tandem testing my interpretations from the first five episodes. In my third, line-by-line reading, I read over my notes and coded for metaphors, symbols, patterns, and common themes.

Following *East/West*, I analyzed the Russian docudrama *Eastern Wives*. In this docudrama that promised to unveil the truth behind the Turkish television series (“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016), there are 16 episodes and four interviewees in each episode, though it was originally planned for five episodes. I observed many overlaps with *East/West*, including in the representation of public and private spaces, performance of relationships, physical appearance of characters, and predominant themes. Instead of taking detailed notes of the overlaps, in my selective reading, I transcribed supplementary novel data such as the narrator voiceover that explained sharia over footage of Ankara, Turkey’s capital. From the interviewees, I detailed common themes of autobiographical accounts and the elements selected in the production of the drama to package and present “truth.” In the concluding step, I carefully read and coded the transcriptions and my notes. Lastly, I analyzed the state-owned television channel “special report,” *Natasha’s Tears, Turkish Love*, which was also about Russian women in intimate and cultural strain in Turkey. Most importantly, the format and soundtrack of this production and *Eastern Wives* was identical, providing an important clue to the proximity between the *Eastern Wives* producer and the Russian government. To answer the research questions, I scrutinized the overlapping content in all of the data, including in the Channel Domashny promotional articles.

During the entire process, I was cognizant of the productions as Russian mediators designed to respond to the popularity of Turkish TV series, hierarchize culture, and shape the geopolitical imagination of millions of viewers, from Ukraine to Moscow

to Tajikistan, at a geopolitically charged time with Turkey. Doing so not only directed my attention to the prevalent orientalist elements, but it also highlighted Turkish culture, sights, and dynamics that are veiled in the Turkish series, in addition to the persisting idealization of French culture in Russia.

For this chapter I researched and analyzed materials in English, Russian, Turkish and Ukrainian. The Ukrainian materials were promotional materials about *East/West* that appeared in Ukrainian media, because *East/West* employed Ukrainian actors and was filmed in Ukraine. For triangulation, I conducted a focus group with three Russian women married to Turkish men and living in Turkey; I also conducted a one-question survey, asking Turkish people from diverse demographic backgrounds to name famous Russian people, as was done in *East/West*. I also interviewed a lead in *East/West* and watched the second season of *East/West* to test my observations of the first season. So how do Russian productions attempt to counter *neo-Ottoman cool*? I turn to the findings next.

Findings

Truthful Russian TV Series, Deceitful Turkish TV Series

The subtitle of an article advertising *East/West* on a Ukrainian television guide website reads “The truth and only truth!” (“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016). A producer explains the motives and goals for the series: “We have long thought about the phenomenon of Turkish TV series. Imagine, *Magnificent Century* was bought by 51 countries!”

(“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016). The producers decided that “everything should be real,” that they need to show the truth about life, and this is why many Turkish actors were hired; unlike *Yasmin*, which was a “cheap story,” because instead of Turkish actors, Azerbaijanis who spoke Russian were hired. “We had to fight for the truth,” asserts the producer, recalling the financial difficulties of hiring highly remunerated Turkish actors. Another difficulty was that most Turkish agencies did not believe that the series was going to be filmed in Ukraine, considering the temporal proximity of the production to the Crimea crisis and the ongoing conflict between Ukraine and Russia (“Evgeniya Loza,” 2016).

Truth and authenticity are consistent preoccupations, as *East/West* was advertised as the true story of a Russian couple who travel to Turkey for fertility treatment⁵⁰. Further, in the trailer, *East/West* was framed as the modern sequel to two Turkish historical TV series: *Magnificent Century* and *Kurt Seyit and Alexandra* (TV Channel Domashny, 2016). The lead, Adnan Koc (Kemal) is well-recognized from his former supporting role in the *Magnificent Century*, and importantly to this sequel framing of the series, Kemal’s voice in *East/West* is performed by Radik Muhametzyanov, the voice of Sultan Suleiman in the Russian *Magnificent Century* (Hvichiya, 2016).

Similarly, the Channel Domashny website description of *Eastern Wives* begins describing the series with: “Generous sultans, spicy bazaars, luxury vacations. A solid

⁵⁰ This, according to the lead actor I interviewed, is not true (interview via WhatsApp, August 16, 2017; I was in Istanbul, actor in Ukraine).

Eastern tale. But what is there - behind the spectacular screen of expensive Turkish TV series ?!" ("Eastern Wives," 2015). It continues with promising to answer the "old questions: how to find a prince, but not get into a harem? Why does a fairy tale become a nightmare? Do they yearn for their homeland, and where are they now ?!" ("Eastern Wives," 2015). To answer these questions which promise to show the truth behind Turkish TV series, the producers look to a number of countries in the Middle East and Central Asia. In fact, only two episodes are about Russian women living in Turkey, episodes 1 set in Istanbul and 9 in Ankara; the rest are about other countries in the Middle East and Central Asia (Algeria, Azerbaijan, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Tajikistan, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates), demonstrating how Turkey is positioned as a metonym for the East⁵¹.

In December 2015, Konstantin Reich, director and scriptwriter for *Eastern Wives*, announced the final episode of "our big exotic journey," and thanked the heroines for their hospitality, and "for being frank and not afraid to tell the truth" on his social media accounts⁵². He explained that the interviewees discussed national characteristics, contradictions, misunderstandings, and war in the "Islamic world in general and specifically in every home." He concluded the post by declaring his dedication to producing more "very honest journalism, docudrama, special emotional projects." In an interview for an Azerbaijani newspaper, Reich attributed his inspiration behind *Eastern*

⁵¹ Women from the former USSR are also interviewed and included as "Russian women."

⁵² Facebook, vKontakte, Instagram

Wives to serendipity; that an author friend of his came across “another scary story about how women are being hurt in the East” (Nemolyakina, Grishin & Bykov, 2016). “Our company makes a documentary film, and we shoot real stories and real women. We have no purpose to intimidate the viewers,” he stated. He also expressed confidence that “we do everything right” because while filming in Egypt many women volunteered to be interviewed. He explained that the first episode was about Turkey, because in his opinion it is the most “understandable” for Russian viewers, that even if they have not traveled there, most viewers hear about Turkey. He describes the first episode set in Istanbul as “calm,” and the episode about Turkish capital Ankara as “tougher” (Nemolyakina, Grishin & Bykov, 2016).

The alarming accounts of the *Eastern Wives* are foreshadowed powerfully in the thirty-second trailer for *Eastern Wives* which starts with the sound of the azan, the Islamic call to prayer. A series of colorful scarves flash on the screen, then an airplane, and the dramatic voiceover of the male narrator and footage of interviews with four women, stating the following:

Narrator: They agree to leave the country,

Woman 1: Doesn’t know the language, doesn’t have a chance to ask for help.

Narrator: change their religion,

Woman 2: You'll accept Islam, sit at home, and wear a burka. No? I'll slaughter you.

Narrator: to be a second wife.

Woman 3: Don't think that you're one and only.

Narrator: **What can Russian women expect from an Eastern marriage?**

Woman 4: They took my grandchildren. We need to get them back somehow.

Narrator: **Four real stories.**

Woman 2: [crying] I don't want you to record this.

Narrator: *Eastern Wives*. Premieres Saturday on Domashny at 22:20.

In these purported truths about Turkey, cultural differences were the most emphasized and hierarchized as I illustrate in the following section.

Russian and Turkish Cultures are Essentially Different

For Director Denis Eleonskiy *East/West*⁵³ was the most appropriate name for the series because “it constantly raises the question of the difference in mentality” (Hvichiya, 2016). This “difference in mentality” is the core of *East/West*, with omnipresent parallels and contrasts. An illustrative example is the trailer screenshot in the Star Media

⁵³ *East/West* is distributed as *Eastern Sweets* in Ukrainian and English (“Eastern Sweets,” n.d.; “Skhidni solodoshchi,” n.d.). The series was also briefly referred to as *Eastern Passions* prior to the renaming to *East/West*.

East/West webpage (“East-West,” n.d.). Leads Kemal and Tatiana walk towards each other. Behind Kemal are mosques on a hill and a chaotic scatter of buildings throughout; behind Tatiana is a church on a hill, with trees and an arc sculpture below it. They appear to be walking on two bridges that merge in the middle. The bridge on Kemal’s side is a traditional suspension bridge; the bridge on Tatiana’s side is minimalist and modern. The text reads *Восток-Запад* [East-West]. *East* is in red and the font is rounded, a mimicry of Arabic script, with dots above the letters including one that resembles Arabic letter *noon* (ن). *West* is in white, capitalized, in straight minimalist font (ЗАПАД) .

There are also explicit parallels and contrasts in various episodes and in the drama overall. For example, the first episode which aired in October 2016, begins with birthday parties in both countries. The Russian birthday dinner is fun, intimate and filled with laughter and good conversation. The Turkish dinner party is tense, with an engaged couple’s families sitting awkwardly around the dinner table, waiting for the late fiancé. Another example is of two interlocutors at airports in Russia and in Turkey, their faces parallel on the screen, surrounded by headscarf-clad passengers of the chaotic Turkish airport, and no-headscarf, Western fashion-donning passengers in the orderly Russian airport.

The transitions between the two countries are signaled through music and scenery. Almost every transition signaling Turkey is accompanied by the sound of a ney and a view of a mosque. Meanwhile, transitions to Russia are urban vistas and minimalist homes, to the sound of classical music. The following table is of contrasts. Many of the

representations are explicit, including the music, buildings, interior, culture, external environment, etc. I extracted implicit elements from a number of episodes and from the culminating narrative.

	East	West
music	instrumental ney ⁵⁴	classical; pop
architecture	mosques	high-rises
interior design	extravagant; destitute	postmodern; minimalist; nostalgic
health services orientation	money	ethics
morality	low	high
culture	low	high
ethnicity	Turkic	Slavic
race	brown	white
clothing	black; red; colorful	beige; blue; gray
external environment	disarray	orderliness
mentality	backward	progressive
modernity	artificial	natural
general atmosphere	tense	relaxed
directionality	past	future
epistemology	religion	rationalism

Religion		
name	Islam	Orthodox Christianity
deity	Allah	Bog; Gospod
symbol	crescent	cross

⁵⁴ An end-blown flute, a staple of Middle Eastern music for thousands of years.

leadership	Imam	Priest
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People		
relationships	inauthentic	authentic
interpersonal relationships driven by	opportunism	integrity
women ----) men ⁵⁵	dependent	independent
men ----) women	possessive love	unconditional love
mothers' priorities	watching Turkish dramas	managing art museum

The actions and lives of people in the Russian West are not bound by religion, tradition, and family like they are in the East; they are bound by progress, love and independence. Turkish families are meddling, scheming, and disingenuous, unlike the caring, loving Turkish families in the Turkish series and the Russian families in *East/West*. Turkish women are not as independent, intelligent, or educated as they appear in the Turkish series, nor the Russian women in *East/West*; they are victims of patriarchy that perform an exaggerated, superficial, and unnatural modernity. Streets in Turkey are narrow, dirty, and dangerous, while Russian streets are wide, orderly, and safe. One can travel to enjoy the East, as Tatiana does, but one should watch their purse at the Grand Bazaar. Tatiana's wallet is stolen there, which is a fact of life according to the hotel receptionist's indifference when Tatiana informs him that she was robbed. Also, one may sit in traffic for hours in Istanbul, or worse, be hit by a car on narrow streets. These are

⁵⁵ No other genders are represented in the series, as in the other productions, which are also all heteronormative.

elements not typically present in Turkish dramas, where traffic flows freely in the wide roads by the Bosphorus, and the Grand Bazaar is safe and exciting.

The cultural differences highlighted in *East/West* overlap with the topics of scrutiny and accent in *Eastern Wives*. In an interview about the Azerbaijani episode, Director Reich stated that cultural contradictions led to the divorce of one of the couples discussed in the episode. "...the difference between the European and Eastern consciousness is visible. In general, during the filming, I felt quite free, because now Baku is an absolutely European city and [even] any woman would feel peaceful" (Nemolyakina, Grishin & Bykov, 2016).

The promotional articles on the Channel Domashny website also emphasize differences, as evident from the titles below. Along with their *Arabian Nights* framing, the titles highlight differences, love, passion and tradition and warn readers that they will most likely have to convert to Islam, that there are strict rules and traditions, and meddling families. The following is a sample of article titles:

Eastern Tale: The Most Beautiful Stories of Russian-Turkish love

East-West: 15 Passionate Quotes

Turkish Marriage: Love and Tradition

East – West: Two Poles of Love

Domashny Connects East and West

The Best Series about the East

Eastern Love: Truth and Lies

Significantly, cultural differences are presented hierarchically, with Russian culture represented as Western and superior to Eastern cultures, as I discuss in the following section.

Mothers and Modernity

In tandem with spotlighting of cultural differences between East and West, the data indicates a Russian performance of a superior West. A potent example is when a tourist attempts to touch a painting in *East/West* and the museum director complains to a colleague, “they don’t have a culture of enjoying art, especially there, in the West” in a scriptwriter slip that disregarded Russia’s performance of *West* in this series (Tikhonova, Shulgina & Eleonskiy, 2016a).

The roles of the mothers in *East/West* play a key part in portraying Russian modernity, and a monolithic Russian culture and Turkish traditionalism. The Turkish mothers’ only preoccupation is with their families and they have no business outside the home. They are frequently helpless and proclaim unfavorable situations by exclaiming

“Oh, Allah!”⁵⁶. Turkish mothers depend on the men in their lives for their livelihood and encourage their daughters to be obsequious. Overall, they have miserable, meaningless lives squandered watching television and infantilizing their children, reflected also in the tension and gloominess of their characters. Aylin’s mother usually watches TV series and her husband’s anniversary gift is a large screen television for her room. In one scene when the mother is again engrossed in a TV series, one of her daughters confronts her with: “You’re watching this stupid TV show again?!...While watching this, you don’t even know what’s going on around you.” (Tikhonova, Shulgina & Eleonskiy, 2016c). The regular implicit and explicit disparagement of Turkish TV series do not appear to be coincidental, considering that the audience of *East/West* also avidly consumes Turkish TV series, on the same television channel.

In contrast, mothers in Russia are independent and ambitious. Tatiana’s mother Olga, a charming intellectual, watches television briefly when bedridden and quickly decides to turn toward a painting and asks her friend to read to her. Olga’s main preoccupation in life is the art museum she manages. She relentlessly guards the paintings and conducts museum tours with grace, knowledge and pride. In a lengthy scene, Olga guides a group of students and elucidates Rembrandt’s *St. Mary and Jesus*, concluding with an exhaustive description of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, blatantly instructing viewers to consume Russian high culture. Olga also encourages her

⁵⁶ Instead of the Russian translations, *Gospod* or *Bog*, *Allah* is retained for emphasis and a reminder of Islam as the predominant religion in Turkey.

pregnant daughter to attend philharmonic concerts and go to museums instead of working and is proud to have raised her daughter by refusing support from her former husband. Olga is not afraid to travel to Turkey to stand up for her daughter and becomes involved in an association that supports Russian women in Turkey. Such an association is necessary because as exciting Turkey is, it is also dangerous, another salient theme in the productions to which I turn next.

Exotic, Dangerous Turkey

Director Reich first announced *Eastern Wives* on his social media accounts on May 20, 2015, describing it as a “very exotic project,” inviting viewers to an “Eastern fairy tale.” He promised “even more exotics” when he announced the filming of the second season and described Ankara as “Honestly, a box with Eastern jewels!” All episodes begin with beautiful scenes and fairytale or tourism-style narration followed by the voices of miserable Russian women. In the first episode, the male narrator begins with “Fluttering again⁵⁷ on the Turkish riviera, Russian...wives...following their Eastern husbands despite their own national traditions,” and continues by describing Turkish men as “Spicy like dolma, hot like doner kebab, and sometimes like baklava that’s too sweet...some tasted and loved, some got burned.” There is also a didactic segment of traditions, history, and other challenges to Russian women’s integration in the respective countries. In the first

⁵⁷ “Again” here means after the Russia-imposed travel ban of travel to Turkey following the jet crisis in 2015 was lifted.

episode which is about Turkey, the didactic segment⁵⁸ explains Sharia Law, dwelling on the covering of women with a burka, chador, hijab, etc. In Episode 9, also about Turkey, patriarchy and the tradition of secluding women is explained, over footage of women strolling in Kizilay, the main square of Ankara.

The descriptions of *Eastern Wives* in Channel Domashny are framed like stories of *Arabian Nights* that read more like scary Arabian nights, reflective of the irony with which every episode starts. There is “great love” (Episode 1), and women are “blinded by passion” of “beautiful words of sultry handsome men” (Episode 2), and the “main character always finds her love” (Episode 3), dreaming of “becoming an Eastern wife” (Episode 4) of an “Eastern tale” (Episode 9), “showered with gold jewelry” (Episode 7) and “swimming in the compliments of Arab men” (Episode 10) in a “faraway” (Episode 11) “exotic country” (Episode 5). However, they “convert to Islam” (Episode 1), and find themselves with a “tyrant, a jealous man who often beat the girl” (Episode 7), in a “golden cage...with surveillance and jealousy” (Episode 4) in a “harsh reality of an Eastern wife: without the right to vote, her own opinion and freedom of movement” (Episode 2), “pushed to suicide” and thus “the flip side of a beautiful Eastern picture...is not a sight for the faint of heart” (Episode 2) and “completely different from a fairy tale and full of inconveniences” (Episode 3).

⁵⁸ In between footage of an interview with a Russian woman who converted to Islam and wears a hijab.

Intertextuality that invokes other orientalist texts is also prevalent. In *Eastern Wives*, the narration is frequently reminiscent of the *Arabian Nights*. In a comparable manner, within *East/West*, Kemal's fiancée Aylin appears to simultaneously play the role of Jasmine from *Aladdin*. She not only physically resembles the Disney animation character, but also frequently lounges by the round water fountain in her home. Her father, who bears likeness to the rotund Sultan in the Disney animation, promises to find her the best husband (Episode 7). Eventually she leaves her husband to be with the "diamond in the rough," impecunious but ambitious Kartal. Kartal is the man her father hired, to save Eileen from her indolence and incompetence, by having Kartal manage her pastry shop, "Princess Eileen," specializing in "Eastern sweets." Another flagrant intertextual moment is when the Russian mother Olga exclaims: "Ibrahim. Suleyman. Ali Baba. Call call. Cause you didn't listen to your mother." Russian viewers would recognize the first two names from *Magnificent Century*, and Ali Baba from the *Arabian Nights*. Additionally, the male Russian lead acts as an investment company executive who partners with Turks to open a hotel resort named *Aladdin Palace*. The *Aladdin* story is well-known through the wide dissemination of the *Arabian Nights* stories in the region, and the Disney film is controversial for perpetuating stereotypes of the Middle East and Asia (Kraidy, 1998; Galer, 2017). But what does Russian media, closely aligned to the Russian government, gain in perpetuating these stereotypes? In the next section I analyze the findings with relation to Russian women's position in Russian society.

Analysis

Russian Women's Reality: Intimate Partner Violence and Rising Conservatism

As Islam is manipulated in the Middle East for political gain, Islamophobia is similarly deployed by Putin. In fact, he seized power through Islamophobia, and Russian state-sponsored Islamophobic media trolls and fake social media accounts meddled in Brexit and the 2016 US presidential election (Werleman, 2018). However, open anti-Muslim discourse in Russia would cause instability, because Muslims have lived in Russia since the 7th century and 15% of the population is Muslim (Weir, 2017). Additionally, while ethnic Russians are about 80% of the population, and there are more than 185 ethnicities in Russia ("Russia 'Not Ready,'" 2017).

In reflecting on his cinematic propaganda masterpiece *Three Songs About Lenin*, Dziga Vertov explained that "...it is not enough just to film bits of truth. These bits must be organized in order to produce a truth of the whole" (Vertov, 1984, p. 120). In his film, to demonstrate the greatness of Lenin, orally transmitted folk songs about Lenin from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan over corresponding plots⁵⁹ focus on Muslim Central Asian women, whom Vertov viewed as "triply emancipated" (Vertov, 1984, p. 137) following sexual, class, and cultural oppression. Oppositely, the Russian productions of this chapter boasted as "the truth," weaponize culture to maintain the

⁵⁹ The October Revolution, a woman who has unveiled, Lenin's role in bringing electricity and technological progress to the desert, and the illiterate masses who are educated.

contemporary Islamophobic status quo in Russia, and attempt to neutralize the influence of the tempting Turkish series which “popularize Muslim men” (“MP Batysheva,” 2015) and *neo-Ottoman cool*. In tandem, especially considering the wide distribution of the productions spanning Central Asia, the productions appear to be part of a new civilizing mission, through the performance of Russian women who are educated, financially and socially independent, well-dressed, and appreciative of high culture in Russia, and suffering when they are abroad.

For millions of viewers of Turkish series and the millions of Russian tourists who traveled to Turkey (Toksabay, 2018; “The number of tourists from Russia,” 2020), Turkey is no longer the mysterious *Other*. However, Russian discourse of Turkey sustains orientalist *Arabian Nights* framing. Russian production companies are reacting to the popularity of the Turkish series by marketing their productions as more authentic representations of Turkey and Turkish culture, while defining Russian identity in monolithic terms, as Slavic, Orthodox, and European. Russian media grapples with the Turkey-bound tourism and Turkish series with a mission to reveal an ostensible truth about Turkey that tourists and viewers cannot grasp. The productions and materials promoting the series work in tandem to construct Turkey and the Middle East in orientalist, backward, Islamophobic terms. Concurrently, Russia is presented as a pristine contrast: a modern, European, Western, Slavic Orthodox country with a rich high culture, independent women and unconditionally loving men.

Eastern Wives, *East/West* and the broadcast on state-owned news channel Russia 24 of *Natasha's Love*, *Turkish Tears* special report, reflect an urgency to cast Turkey as backward, dangerous, and beholden to oppressive Islamic traditions, especially at a time of geopolitical crisis and the formidable popularity of Turkish series in Russia. Intimate partner violence is the single most dominant theme in the productions, which warn Russian women against traveling to and becoming romantically involved with individuals from the MENA region. The intimate partner violence according to the productions and the majority of the disclosures of the interviewees in *Eastern Wives* is in line with the World Health Organization's definition, as "any behavior within an intimate relationship that causes physical, psychological or sexual harm" (World Health Organization, 2012). Tamara Pletnyova, the head of Duma's Committee for Families, Women and Children echoed this concern, stating that when Russian women marry foreigners, relationships often end badly; women are often stranded abroad or in Russia, unable to get their children back, and that children of mixed races suffer discrimination in Russia (Balmforth, 2018). This was the rationale behind her call to Russian women to abstain from sexual relations with non-white Russian men during the World Cup.

However, unlike the productions which perform an idealized Russia where women thrive, Russian reality is bleak. Forty percent of violent crimes in Russia are committed within the family (Masyuk, 2015; Bruntzeva, 2012). Russia's interior ministry reported that about 40 women are murdered daily as a result of intimate partner violence, adding up to more than 14,000 per year (Broomfield, 2017). The number of

women killed as a result of intimate partner violence is on the rise in Turkey as well, and it was 409 in 2017, for a total of 2337 women in the last ten years (“In the last 10 years,” 2018). Taking population into account, the prevalence of homicide by an intimate partner in Russia is about 1 in 20,000 and in Turkey it is 1 in 196,000.

Women’s situation in Russia exacerbated in 2017 when the parliament decriminalized domestic violence. Battery is now acceptable as long as it does not end in hospitalization (Stallard, 2018). Since the decriminalization, violence is on the increase (“Moscow domestic violence appeals, 2018). The following is one of many similar testimonials from a Russian woman married to a Russian man living in Russia: “My husband tried to strangle me...He told me that he has the right to do whatever he wants because he’s the master.” (Stallard, 2018). *The Moscow Times* launched “Mothers and Daughters,” a special project to recognize the plight of women in Russia as a reaction to the decriminalization of domestic abuse (“The Moscow Times launches, 2018). The lack of a platform for women’s voices warranted the project, according to the project website, which states “In today’s Russia...a different idiom is being used to describe the position of women in society: ‘If he hits you, it means he loves you.’” (Mothers & Daughters, n.d.). Pussy Riot founder Nadezhda Tolokonnikova recollected that the majority of the women with whom she was imprisoned were convicted for defending themselves from domestic violence (Tolokonnikova, 2020).

Political empowerment of women is also not a point of pride for Russia, according to the World Economic Forum. Russia ranks 121st, below a number of

countries featured in *Eastern Wives*, including Egypt (119), Turkey (118), Tajikistan (117), the UAE (67), and Tunisia (55) (World Economic Forum, 2017). The United Nations Gender Inequality Index also does not support the representation in the productions of Russia as a superior West, because a number of Eastern countries are ahead of its rank of 49, including Israel (22), UAE (34), Qatar (37), Saudi Arabia (39) and Bahrain (43) (United Nations, 2017).

Inequality in Russia is not bound to improve, based on a recent Russian embrace of conservatism. Russians were reunited with religious freedom following the end of socialism and the aggressive atheistic ideology of the Soviet Union. In tandem, Russian authorities leveraged the revived traditional values, which include national pride and respect for authority, for manipulative political gain (Trudolyubov, 2014). Russian conservatism began with Putin's first presidential win in 2000, supported by the Orthodox Church, when Putin and the Orthodox Church harnessed political power, providing Putin with ideological, imperialist legitimacy (Rogan, 2018) by championing traditional conservative values, opposing LGBTQIA rights and fighting feminism. The decriminalization of domestic violence arose from this vein of Russian conservatism that disapproves of the state's meddling in family affairs and undoing what socialism did: leveraging the power of men and emancipating women to serve the state (Ashwin, 2000; Kamp, 2011). No wonder then that one in three Russian women seeks to marry a foreigner ("Eastern love," n.d.) and the charming Turks in the series and vacation resorts pose a threat to an already troubled Russian demography (Laruelle & Radvanyi, 2018) as

Russian women migrate *en masse* to Turkey (Bloch, 2017) and elsewhere. Women, in Russia and outside of Russia, on and off screen, thus continue to impact politics at home and abroad. I now turn to Russian Eurasianism and potent *neo-Ottoman cool*, which galvanized the Russian productions for geopolitical clout.

Russian Geopolitics and Taming Neo-Ottoman Cool

On September 1, 2017, Russia's "Knowledge Day," Vladimir Putin held an open class entitled "Russia, Looking to the Future." He began by underscoring powerful global competition; that while it is true when "We say: 'Our country is big, powerful, great,'" other countries are also excelling. Yet, that there is something that propels the Russian civilization forward, the "the kind of *passionarity*⁶⁰ about which Gumilev spoke" (Kremlin, 2017). While encouraging Russians to excel in artificial intelligence to share with the world, "the same way we share our nuclear technologies," he declared that "Whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world." ("Whoever leads," 2017). This vignette succinctly demonstrates Russian geopolitical ideology since the end of the Cold War: a commitment to Lev Gumilev's neo-Eurasianism in which Russia leads a united Eurasia; an empire in opposition to the transatlantic West, with a mission to rule the world.

In 2004, Putin asserted that Gumilev's ideas were "beginning to move the masses" ("Prominent Russians," n.d.). Gumilev's Eurasianism inspired Putin's

⁶⁰ *Passionarity* is the term that Lev Gumilev claimed is a unique characteristic of Russian civilization, the cause of Russian progress (Laruelle, 2012).

establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union, in which Russia joined its former subjects in a union that most likely aims to bring the region under Kremlin power (Clover, 2016). Thus, conceptual borders of Eurasian ideology are the linchpin of post-USSR Russian geopolitics, as they emphasize maps of meaning and overlook maps of states and are consequential for material borders. According to prominent Russian geographer Vladimir Kagansky, “The Russian Federation has not yet become a country named Russia - so far it is only a space for reassembling fragments of the USSR.” (“Russian Empire,” 2004).

Indeed, the productions not only perform a homogenous Russia; they also perform the USSR. Interviewees of *Eastern Wives* are from Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine among others, though presented as testimonials of Russian women in promotional materials. On the other hand, the *East/West* production team included Ukrainians, Turks and Russians, Azerbaijanis, Armenians, and Kurds; “a large conciliatory ark” according to Director Denis Eleonskiy (Hvichiya, 2016).

Star Media productions such as *East/West* are regularly broadcast on Channel 1 in Russia, which is telling of its proximity to the government, but even more revealing was the distribution of the drama in Ukraine. It aired on Inter, the second most popular national television channel in Ukraine (“Oriental Sweets,” 2016; Television Industry Committee, n.d.). The channel is owned by oligarchs Dmitry Firtash and Sergey Levochkin, aligned with ousted President Viktor Yanukovich, who allegedly have strong connections with Russian business (Grigas, 2016). Inter was besieged by activists in

September 2016 for spreading pro-Russian propaganda (“Ukrainians besiege,” 2016; Koshiw, 2016; “Offices of Ukrainian TV channel,” 2016). Activists attached a poster that read “Inter belongs to Putin” in front of the Inter TV channel building (Petrov, 2016), graffitied “Kremlin mouthpiece” on a wall, and shouted slogans such as “No to Russian propaganda” (Koshiw, 2016). If Inter were Russian, it would easily have made the list of banned Russian channels in Ukraine (Zinets & Prentice, 2014), however Ukrainian legislation approaches domestic channels differently⁶¹ (“Ukraine may involve,” 2015).

This adversity to Russia is because neo-Eurasianist ideology was deployed to “reassemble” Crimea in 2014. Guiding neo-Eurasianist principles were that Ukraine is an “unnatural state” that threatens the geopolitical security of Russia and the pursued Eurasian empire; that Ukrainian state sovereignty should be dismantled through non-military and/or hybrid warfare to “reassemble” most Ukrainian territories under Russian control (Shekhovtsov, 2017, p. 185). An effective way to dismantle Ukrainian sovereignty through non-military warfare is through popular geopolitics, like *East/West*, which tames perceptions of Russia through the media. Star Media bypassed all pro-Russia filters by virtue of its legitimacy of filming in Ukraine and hiring Ukrainian

⁶¹ That *East/West* aired on Inter may appear coincidental. However, there is an organic link between Inter and Star Media, the production company of the drama, which also illuminates Star Media’s stance as a Russian production company with offices in Ukraine. The link between Inter and Star Media is Ryashin Vladislav Vitalievich. Vitalievich was Inter’s CEO between 2001 and 2006 and went on to establish and be the CEO of Star Media, “one of the largest producers and rights holders of TV products on the territory of the Russian Federation and the CIS - first in Ukraine and TOP-3 in Russia.” (“Vlad Ryashin,” n.d.).

actors. The drama propagates Russian neo-Eurasianism by hailing the Russian civilization through Ukrainians on Ukrainian soil, with a Slavic/Orthodox identification. Thus, the production company and the drama are not perceived as destabilizing or threatening to Ukrainian sovereignty, because they represent Slavs and Orthodox Christians. In other words, by deploying their Slavic/Orthodox identity, a Russian company employed Ukrainians to act as Russian on Ukrainian territory which was represented as Russia, to tame Ukrainian national identity and anti-Russian views. When practical and formal geopolitical relations collapsed between Russia and Turkey, and Russia and Ukraine, popular geopolitics took center stage. At a time when any hint of a pro-Russian discourse in Ukraine was vilified, Russian TV channels were barred and Russian-produced media banned (“Ukraine imposes,” 2016), Ukrainian actors in Ukraine acted as Russians, contributing to Russia’s Neo-Eurasianist agenda by perpetuating an image of Russia in a most flattering light.

Meanwhile, the producers navigated through rough waters to cast and work with Turkish actors despite language barriers, as they sought to project authenticity about Turkey. Even before *neo-Ottoman cool*, Turkey was a popular destination for Russian sea-bound tourists, pilgrimage-bound Orthodox Christians and joint venture-seeking Russian investors. This is perhaps why, the beautiful views of the sea, a sacred Christian site and robust Turkish-Russian trade are a part of the drama; they are too widely known and accepted in Russia to be denied by the drama. In effect, *East/West* accepts the existence of these appealing aspects of Turkey, while projecting orientalist stereotypes on

the rest, such as the culture, social relationships, and gender issues. It aims to tame *neo-Ottoman cool* by warning viewers about the discomforts and dangers of Turkey, by representing Turkey as a corrupt, chaotic country with an underdeveloped infrastructure, and revealing and emphasizing elements that are underplayed or absent in Turkish TV series. In this way, it asserts Russian neo-Eurasianism by implying that Turkey is too backward to be a leader of Eurasia, in response to Turkish Eurasianism that has wooed Central Asian and Balkan countries since the fall of the USSR (Tufekci, 2017). This backward Turkey with dysfunctional relationships is represented by Turks on Turkish soil and marketed as based on a true story; an authenticity orchestrated by the producers to persuade viewers that it represents Turkey truthfully, and even more so than the Turkish series. The main function of *East/West* and the other productions is to warn Russian viewers that while they can enjoy vacationing, business partnerships and Orthodox Christian pilgrimages in Turkey, the East, they should remain in the normative and imagined West, because the East is backward, Muslim, and oppressive to women. Thus, attempting to tame *neo-Ottoman cool*, by recognizing that there is some value in the East, but it is miniscule compared to the great Russia, and the dangers are not worth the pursuits.

As Putin ceased all relations with Turkey and banned travel to Turkey in 2015, the productions came to tame *Neo-Ottoman Cool* and Ukraine. They discursively reproduced Turkey in essentialist, backward, orientalist undertones while focusing on Russian high culture, economic superiority and high moral values. *East/West* muddled

Russian/Ukrainian socio-cultural conceptual borders at a time when Ukraine was hell-bent on asserting its material borders. Discursively reproducing *East* and *West* cultivates orientalist stereotypes and perpetuates an ahistorical Other. While transnational media, tourism, and international marriages are opportunities for cultural exchange and furthered intercultural communication, the productions and promotional materials are encoded to sustain Islamophobic stereotypes and distributed in major outlets. Why? For one, doing so moves the focus away from Russia's own domestic problems related to Islam and feminism. The frightening scenarios and scenes from Turkey and other MENA countries, nearly warrant gratitude from Russian female viewers for their implied independence and modern lifestyles. Related to this, the consequences of Russia's own shift to traditions and conservatism championed by Putin and the Orthodox Church are minimized, because the message is that unlike the volatile Middle East, there is no war in Russia and women can simply escape to their mothers' houses if they suffer from intimate partner violence, and they will not lose their children to their hot-tempered Middle Eastern partners in case of divorce, as occur in the Russian productions.

Yet, as Turkey and Russia have an extensive economic partnership and millions of Russians have seen Turkey with their own eyes, there is an attempt to tame, not entirely deny, popular Turkish realities including vacation resorts and Bosphorus views. Finally, with these productions, Russia is showcased as the legitimate leader of Eurasia, vital particularly to Turkish Eurasianism-charmed Central Asian countries, also ardent viewers of Turkish TV series and Russian media.

Popular geopolitics decenters statecraft and material borders and zooms in on conceptual boundaries and practices. This chapter demonstrates the salience of conceptual boundary-drawing, as Russia defined itself as “West,” underscoring the concept of “West” as less of a geographical indicator than an assertion of modernity and superiority. Meanwhile, it positions Turkey in the “East” (even though geographically Russia extends much further East), to an “East” defined as backwardness and chaos. This discourse is indiscernible in official political rhetoric and Russian media, where the West strictly means Western Europe and North America and is negatively connoted. As Putin and Russian political rhetoric require the “West” as its Other, popular geopolitics incorporates “East” to define Russia as modern. In both cases, the conceptual opposite is instrumental in constructing “East” and “West.” Thus, transnational dramas, such as the Turkish TV series in Russia and Russian TV series in Ukraine threaten official national identity narratives that are essential to nation-states. They play a critical role of exposing citizens to images and discourses that threaten the othering and boundary-drawing inherent in and existentially essential to nation-states. In turn they can materialize as soft power and economic gains for the country of origin, but also in more solidarity between people.

Discursive reproductions of ambiguous binaries such as “East” and “West” in the global media matrix such as *East/West* and *Eastern Wives* serve the nation-states that continue to depend on these stories of *Otherness*, such as Islamophobic media texts in the United States, to sustain their hegemonic power through dehumanizing and fear-

mongering, by taming instead of prohibiting, because neoliberalism is not compatible with closed borders and digital isolation. These Russian productions instrumentalized the codes and tropes of the Turkish TV series in the global media matrix to counter the popularity of Turkey not only in Russia, but also by distributing them in Ukraine and Central Asia. Thus, nation-states that are threatened by the cultural, economic and/or geopolitical power of other nation-states historically perceived culturally inferior, seek to nurture their material and ideological binaries, boundaries and borders—in which the global media matrix is crucial.

Whereas in chapter one I established the global popularity of Turkish series, and particular reasons for their popularity in Bulgaria and Russia in chapter two, in this chapter, in stark contrast to the fearful and resourceless Bulgaria in chapter three, I demonstrated how the Russian media sphere is a battleground for fighting against *neo-Ottoman cool*. In the following concluding chapter, I summarize findings, theorize the *global media matrix* to account for the global phenomenon of the Turkish series, and highlight the significant contributions of this dissertation.

CONCLUSION

Turkish TV series found a perplexing following across the globe in the last decade. Viewers fixated on Turkish series even in countries where citizens were socialized to denigrate, dread, and detest Turkey and Turkish culture, like in Bulgaria and Russia, as I explored in this dissertation. In chapter one, I outlined the history that gave rise to the global popularity of Turkish TV series and identified how the Turkish state capitalizes on the success of the series. I expounded on the popularity of Turkish TV series in chapter two, with empirical evidence from Bulgaria and Russia substantiating Turkish series' status as the new Turkish delight, though not universally. Voices in Bulgaria clamored against Turkish series as threatening to the Bulgarian culture and sovereignty and lamented the inability of Bulgarian series to compete with them, the focus of chapter three. Meanwhile, as I documented in chapter four, resourceful Russia attempted to counter Turkish TV series with its own television series meant to put Turkey in its Eastern place. In this concluding chapter, I provide chapter summaries to answer the main research question: *What transpires when transnational media from the Other traverses and settles in the Self's media sphere?* Subsequently, I discuss the broader significance of this study, culminating with the *global media matrix*, a concept that emerged from my study of the traveling Turkish series and their Bulgarian and Russian destinations; a concept that encapsulates transnational media's interactions with local

media spheres, and theorizes global media as an interdependent, chaotic system. In the following section I summarize main findings and arguments from each chapter.

Chapter Summaries

In chapter one, I provided a historical account of Turkish series, tracing their path from development to their circulation as global media products, focus of academic study, and topic of political discourse. From the first television broadcast in Turkey in 1968 and until the early 1990s, the state-owned Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT) was the exclusive television broadcaster and commercial TV channels were unconstitutional. TRT began producing mini-series in the mid-1970s, and in the mid-1980s it sold about 50 series and documentaries to nine countries (TRT, 1990). With the early 1990s arrived neoliberal policies and a constitutional amendment that legalized commercial television, spurring the proliferation of commercial television channels, satellite dishes in the Turkish roofscape, and the robust production of Turkish TV series.

By the early 2000s, a thriving Turkish economy, market demand, and serendipity propelled the Turkish series to primetime, initially in the Middle East and the Balkans, and eventually to more than 700 million viewers in 146 countries and on all major streaming platforms, supplying the Turkish economy with \$350 million USD in 2019 (Ustuk, 2019; “Turkey’s TV series exports yield,” 2019). Among the most widely

distributed Turkish series are *Magnificent Century*, *Gumus*, *1001 Nights*, and *Valley of the Wolves*.

Turkish series developed into a burgeoning topic of global study in the last decade, approached from a variety of disciplines. According to the multitude of audience reception studies, the majority of Turkish series viewers are women who appreciate the series for their realism, high production quality, and beautiful scenery. However, there is discord about gender representation: while some scholars censured the representation of women, others found that viewers are attracted to the strong female leads. Among the notable findings was also that viewers' desire to travel to Turkey and consume Turkish products increases in proportion to their consumption of Turkish series.

Further, in a pronounced topic of scholarly inquiry often originating in countries with historically antagonistic relations with Turkey, speculation abounds concerning Turkey's application of soft power through the Turkish TV series. To respond to scholarly speculation about Turkish government aims and to ground my comparative study, in this chapter I asked: *What is the official government discourse of the television series?* Turkish presidential discourse about Turkish series illuminated the intimacy and codependency of global politics and popular culture, revealing national concerns and geopolitical strategies, making the popular culture and world politics continuum (Grayson, Davies & Philpott, 2009) and the practical and popular geopolitics distinction (Ó Tuathail & Dalby, 1998) obsolete.

Erdogan, in his capacity as president of Turkey, proclaimed the significance of Turkish series on multiple occasions, including during diplomatic visits abroad. The expansion of the Turkish economy appeared to be the most sought-after value undergirding government support for the production and global distribution of Turkish series, not only for TV industry revenues, but also for boosting the Turkish tourism and consumer goods industries. Also, typical of neoliberal states, Erdogan assigns individual responsibility to individuals and institutions to further the television series industry, underscoring that government support alone cannot sustain the continued success of the series.

Erdogan also criticized Turkish TV series content that disparages clergy, misdirects women by belittling the importance of motherhood, and misrepresents Islam and Turkish history, in tandem connoting the ideological underpinnings of Turkish series likely to be endowed with government support. Finally, Erdogan also maneuvers Turkish series for geopolitical clout, such as by accompanying the *Resurrection: Ertugrul* cast on a diplomatic trip to Kuwait, touring the production site of the series with Venezuelan President Maduro, and hosting an event that promoted a Turkish series hailing the first Bosnian president. However, long before Erdogan's rhetoric and robust Turkish government support, producers, distributors and diplomats set the stage for the global success of the Turkish series, especially in the Balkans and the Middle East.

In chapter two, I elaborated on the peculiar popularity of Turkish TV series in two countries historically hostile to Turkey, Bulgaria and Russia, answering *What makes*

Turkish TV series appealing to Russian and Bulgarian viewers, considering geopolitical tensions spanning centuries and the othering of Turkey in Bulgaria and Russia?

Embracing the popular culture of a traditionally denigrated culture is engendered by complex dynamics that are dialogic with local social realities. Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi (2013) conceptualized *neo-Ottoman cool*, as the Turkish national brand which positioned Turkey as a pivotal state and a great power, with an alternative, accessible modernity and the promise of de-centering Western power to Arab viewers, transmitted mostly through Turkish series, diplomacy and political rhetoric (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013). In this chapter, I investigated the viability of *neo-Ottoman cool* in Bulgaria and Russia.

Viewers in Bulgaria and Russia appreciated the strong female leads, high production quality, and realism of the Turkish series, as well as the scenarios, many of which pertain to modernity and gender issues. Russian public discourse predominantly dwelled on lauding the high production quality of Turkish series and entertainment news related to the Turkish series. In Bulgarian public discourse the pronounced theme was that Turkish series are therapeutic, alleviating Bulgarian struggles with Western-style modernity, including loneliness and nostalgia for times past, when families and communities were together, prior to capitalism and open borders that catalyzed migrant labor and emigration.

Comparing Russian and Bulgarian public discourse of Turkish series expands Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi's (2013) notion of *neo-Ottoman cool* by moving past accessible modernity and de-centering the West, to illuminating how women disregard the imposed

cultural hierarchies that positioned Turkey and the Turks as the *Other*. Their shared appreciation for high production quality aside, Bulgarian and Russian viewers value the Turkish series for diverging reasons arising from local socio-political contexts. Bulgarian viewers' experience of uprooted families and overbearing liberalism since the end of socialism neutralized historic enmity and provided a ripe environment for Turkish series that offer the possibility of an alternate modernity; one where traditional community and family values are not sacrificed. Meanwhile, Russian viewers turn to Turkish series for escapism and a palpable promise for a better life that leads many women to literally escape to Turkey from destitute economic conditions and prevalent intimate partner violence; a proclivity since the 1990s following the demise of the Soviet Union that collapsed the economy (Bloch, 2017), and recently fueled by Putin's propinquity to the Orthodox church and the decriminalization of domestic abuse ("Moscow domestic violence," 2018). However, as viewers are enthralled by Turkish series, others decry their popularity.

In chapter three, I shifted from fascination to the fear expressed in Bulgarian public discourse to answer the following questions: *How do Bulgarians who inveigh against their compatriots' love for the Turkish series perceive this phenomenon? What fears does neo-Ottoman cool activate? What are the implications of Turkish transnational media flows to the geopolitics of the region?* The core of Bulgarian nation building during socialism was the construction and propagation of narratives of Bulgarian plight and the disruption of natural Bulgarian progress under the Ottoman Empire.

According to critics, in contemporary times Turkish series are culpable for shortcomings in Bulgaria, to which various hurdles in Bulgaria are imputed.

Critics bemoan the deterioration of Bulgarian intellect, culture, and productivity ostensibly caused by the Turkish series, framed at best as a cultural invasion from the East and at worst as an existential threat to Bulgaria. Exigent outcries averse to the series warn of a Turkish series-propagated Islamization and Turkification of Bulgaria. In other words, Turkish series are feared as a cultural invasion strategically deployed for neo-Ottoman aspirations, and a prognosis of an imminent Neo-Ottoman invasion. Further, the Bulgarian public gaze shifted toward the East when it should be focused on the West. Bulgarians should avail themselves of Western cultural guidance, not Turkish, argue critics. Additionally, those opposed to the series also posited that the Bulgarian public should reject the series because women are oppressed in Turkey, disregarding the persisting traditional gender roles in Bulgaria, as well as the relatability of the Turkish series to Bulgarian women because they are struggling with similar issues as Turkish women.

In any case, loyalty to the Bulgarian nation entails a rejection of the Turkish series, which was not warranted for Brazilian and American TV series, a part of the Bulgarian media sphere since the 1980s. Bulgarian nationalist discourse of a perpetually imminent invasion by Turkey underlies the positioning of Bulgaria as a homogenous European nation-state. A neo-Ottoman invasion and an extensive Islamization and Turkification of Bulgaria does not appear likely, however, there is evidence that in line

with *neo-Ottoman cool*, the series exhibit soft power elements and function to strengthen Turkey geopolitically. This is evident through Bulgarian cultural hybridity, as the image of the savage Turks ravaging Bulgarian lands was supplanted with the neighbor in the South who shares similar aspirations and woes from Western European and American-imposed modernity. An intervention to derail the popularity of Turkish series could be the production of Bulgarian series to upstage the Turkish, but Bulgaria lacks the required resources, lamented observers.

On the other hand, Russia expends considerable resources to counter the influence of Turkish TV series, the topic of chapter four. Though compared to Bulgaria, public discourse decrying the popularity of Turkish TV series is nearly inaudible, Russian government and media elites provide glaring responses, especially during times of geopolitical crisis. In this chapter, I asked: *How do Russian productions attempt to counter neo-Ottoman cool? How does Russian media define and perpetuate the geo-cultural signifiers East and West? More generally, what can transnational media illuminate about gender, culture and modernity?*

Following the 2015 shooting down of a Russian jet by Turkish forces, Duma deputies instinctually recommended banning Turkish TV series, as they were elsewhere during times of geopolitical turmoil (Kraidy, 2019; Najibullah, 2019; Mohidyn, 2020). Likely because it would be ineffectual, instead of a ban, Russian productions that pledged to divulge the truth about Turkey and Turkish culture, a truth professed to be absent in the Turkish series, were broadcast on the television channel that airs a profusion of

Turkish series and targets women viewers in the vast geographic stretch from Ukraine to Central Asia. Russian TV series deployed classic orientalist tropes of a backward *East* and positioned Russia as the paragon of the Western high culture, modernity, and progress, claiming the throne of the *West* and appealing to the geopolitical imagination of millions of viewers in Ukraine, Russia, and Central Asia.

I argue that *neo-Ottoman cool* (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013) is fought by Russian media which weaponizes culture against Turkey with classic orientalism (Said, 1978). This, in tandem with antagonistic geopolitical developments and socio-political issues in Russia, including rising conservatism, intimate partner violence, and dire economic conditions that have propelled many Russian women to migrate to Turkey since the early 1990s (Bloch, 2017). Furthermore, Turkey's growing influence in Central Asia since the disintegration of the USSR in 1991 was enhanced by the Turkish series and the Russian productions, which are also distributed in Central Asia, perform a superior Russian culture and position Russia as a natural leader of Eurasia, in line with Putin's espousing of neo-Eurasianist ideology.

The potency of the Turkish series in leveraging the geopolitical imagination of Russian and Bulgarian viewers is construed as threatening to nationalists and political elites. In both countries, whether fearing or fighting the Turkish series, perpetuating an image of Turkey in adversarial terms is a worthwhile endeavor, one related to national memory and nationalist rhetoric, as well as an aspirational idealized modernity of the West. The findings reveal the broader significance of this study in decolonizing global

media studies, illuminating the role of women in global media and geopolitics, the complexity of culture, the mutually constitutive relationship of popular culture to geopolitics, and the interconnectedness of global media. I now turn to each of these topics in the following sections, starting with this study's contribution to global media studies.

Significance of Study

Among the most significant contributions of this dissertation is that all comparative cases are set outside the Anglophone West. The West is not an obligatory space in this dissertation which triangulates Turkey, Bulgaria, and Russia, making it a truly global media study, and independent of comparisons with the United States. In fact, Western European and North American-style modernity is challenged in the public discourses of Russia and Bulgaria. Further, this dissertation is not about English-language productions, but Middle Eastern, Turkish TV series, that are also in defiance of wholesale Western modernity, bringing in the realm of possibility an alternate modernity for millions of viewers worldwide, especially women, whose consumption of Turkish series jostled national narratives about Turkey, as I detail in the following section.

Women, Global Media, and Geopolitics

Bulgaria and Russia have to contend with the Turkish series because women demand them. By demanding and consuming the series, women challenged the foundational level of politics in their countries (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011) by problematizing the national discourse of Turkey as the *Other*. Millions of Bulgarian and Russian women choose to watch Turkish series for their relatability and high production quality, unsettling the nation-building narratives that had circulated and prevailed until then, transforming the dehumanized *Other* of their countries into a relatable human being⁶². By watching Turkish TV series in their unassuming, everyday lives, women activated Bulgarian nationalist fears and inspired a host of orientalist Russian productions. The Turkish series exhibited how publicly amplified women's voices from the mythical private realm can be, by disrupting hegemonic geopolitical discourses, which sought to be sustained in the Russian productions. The public discourse and media reactions to Turkish series in Russia and Bulgaria underscores the relation of human agency to transnational popular culture, and how in turn transnational popular culture influences international relations.

Following the broadcast of Turkish series, Bulgarian and Russian bookstores filled with Turkish literature, buses and airplanes filled with Istanbul-bound tourists, and the constructed image of Turkey as backward and barbaric was shattered. The Turkish

⁶² Please note that the claims I make about women's perceptions of Turkish series are based not only on the public discourse of Bulgaria and Russia, but also on ethnographic materials and fieldwork which were beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I will pursue in future research that will focus more on gender and masculinity.

TV series give prominence to the private as the global and show how women act as political agents in their everyday lives (Enloe, 1989/2014), even when not sufficiently represented in official government, like in Bulgaria and Russia where women are largely absent in official government business and lack sufficient representation (World Economic Forum, 2020). By answering Enloe's (1989/2014) call to ask *where are the women in international relations*, Turkish series are exemplary global media that illuminates women's political presence.

Turkish Series, Cultural Hybridity, Multiple Modernities

Prior to the inflow of Turkish series, American individualism, liberalism, and capitalism were imposed on Bulgarians and Russians as modernity worth emulating. Their gradual disenchantment with Hollywood productions coincided with the hardships that arose following aspirations to an American-style modernity. In the Turkish TV series, viewers witnessed an alternate way of being modern that did not require relinquishing family values, religion and tradition, substantiating further that there are multiple ways of defining and living modernity (Kraidy, 2010; García Canclini, 1995). The Turkish series presented an *accessible modernity* to Arab audiences (Kraidy & Al-Ghazzi, 2013), in which modern lifestyles and strong empowered women are compatible with Islam.

Bulgarian viewers, on the other hand, appreciated the Turkish series for their *comparable* modernity, a modernity rooted in moral values, family, and community, not

subsumed by, but grappling with the demands of capitalism and globalization. In other words, the Turkish series impelled viewers to question their everyday lives—an inherently political act (Williams & Delli Carpini, 2011)—by theorizing, that is, observing and comparing (Euben, 1999) their reality with representations of Turkish reality on the screen which thus mediated their everyday lives (Martín-Barbero, 1993). Russian and Bulgarian cultural hybridity (Kraidy, 2005) facilitated the enthusiastic reception of the hybrid Turkish series. However, as viewers watched and appreciated multiple ways of being modern, Russian productions insisted on a monolithic hegemonic Western modernity, and sustained, reproduced, and propagated the categories *East* and *West*.

The phenomenon of the Russian media positioning of Russia as *West* is no less than fascinating. For over two hundred years, Russian national identity was defined in opposition to the West (Robinson, 2019), its other *Other*, namely, Western Europe and the United States. Further, Russia itself was known as a dangerous, threatening East (Said, 1978). However, in the implicitly and explicitly didactic *East/West* and *Eastern Wives*, overemphasized Russian modernity is paralleled with Western modernity, and defined in opposition to Turkish/Eastern culture. Orientalism (Said, 1978) is harnessed to weaponize culture, and to reposition and reproduce the *East* and *West* binaries to counter *neo-Ottoman cool*, and to neutralize the Turkish cultural power disseminated by the Turkish series. Ironically, proximity to Western European high culture, consumption of French food and wine, and emulation of American individualism and liberalism are

touted as Russian cultural superiority. The productions reveal how Russian structures and discourses attempt to “shape different hybridities, and how, in turn, hybrid cultural forms reflect at once the presence of hegemony and its limitations” (Kraidy, 2005, p. 156).

Mutually Constitutive Popular Culture and Geopolitics

Turkish series constituted politics in Turkey, Russia, and Bulgaria. In Turkey and on diplomatic trips abroad, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan declared his support for, promoted, and negotiated agreements related to the Turkish series. He hosted Venezuelan Prime Minister at the *Resurrection: Ertugrul* set, and the cast of that series on a diplomatic trip to Kuwait. Erdogan also vehemently castigated the producers of *Magnificent Century*, prompting the removal of the series from Turkish Airlines in-flight programming. In Bulgaria, the Turkish series were blamed for swaying elections (Georgieva-Stankova, 2013) and for negating nationalist narratives of the Ottoman Empire (Atanassov, 2009). In Russia, Duma deputies proposed banning Turkish series following the shooting down of a Russian jet by Turkish forces in 2015.

Geopolitics also inspired popular culture. The Russo-Turkish jet crisis galvanized *East/West*, which promised to reveal “the truth and only truth” about Turkey (Hvichiya, 2016; “Evgeniya Loza,” 2016), produced during severed Russo-Turkish relations. Furthermore, in *East/West*, a showcase of Russian greatness, most of the actors representing Russians were Ukrainian. Filmed in Ukraine about one year after the Crimea crisis, *East/West* was distributed on a pro-Russian Ukrainian television channel, and on

channel Domashny, the leading distributor of Turkish series targeting women in Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries.

The Terribly Charming Turk in the Global Media Matrix

In 2013, in taking stock of the development of global communication and looking ahead, Kraidy made the following call for the study of global communication, which I attempted to address in this study.

The task at hand, then, is to rethink how we study global communication, culture and power by setting up a dialogue between empirical work in local and national settings, on the one hand, and theorizing, on the other hand, shifting links between a variety of media platforms, national contestations, and transnational crises. (Kraidy, 2013, p. 5)

Considering global communication, transnational media, context, history, and world politics in relation to the empiric evidence in this study led me to the *global media matrix*⁶³. Following rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986) and chaos theory (Lorenz, 1972; Byrne, 1998; Urry, 2003), I view global media exchanges and circulation within a

⁶³ Scholars have used this term in passing, but have not theorized it (Grindstaff and DeLuca, 2004; Byers, 2012).

nonlinear, dynamic, and unpredictable system that is deterministic in terms of hybridity; that is, nothing global is pure or originated in a vacuum (Said, 1993)— it mixes, mingles, interacts and the articulation of that hybridity should be studied (Kraidy, 2005), as well as the technical infrastructures, institutional forms, and cultures of reception that provide the context (Flew, 2018). That is, as global media is “part of a larger set of processes that operate translocally, interactively, and dynamically in a variety of spheres: economic, institutional, technological, and ideological” (Curtin, 2007, p. 9) it also affects those larger processes.

Furthermore, I view global media as decentered, because global media circulation predates television and other technologies (Peters, 2015) privileged by technological determinists (Williams, 1974) by millennia. I approach media as any mediated exchange, including sartorial, alimentary, viral, etc. communication. As viewers are not a *tabula rasa* and spatial scales are mutually constitutive (Martín-Barbero, 1993; García Canclini, 1995; Hall, 1973; Kraidy, 2010), Turkish series in Bulgaria and Russia are a new interaction in a pre-existing, dialectic context, the global media matrix.

I view historical, geopolitical, and social environments in a dialectical relationship with global media circulation which is also in dialogue with global media. Though there may be patterns in circulation dictated by industry and neoliberalism, it is a chaotic system, because seemingly small changes can have big unpredictable effects. For example, relations between Turkey and Bulgaria and Turkey and Russia were antagonistic for centuries, however, one small change, Turkish series, reincarnated the

Terrible Turks as terribly charming Turks in the global media matrix, which swayed further unpredictable effects such as influencing Russian media production, a surge of Bulgarian and Latin American Turkey-bound tourism, and higher divorce rates in the Middle East. Further, Turkish series are not produced in a monolithic Turkish vacuum; they are inspired and in dialogue with analogous global media. Thus, as production and reception, their distribution is enabled through a pre-existing global media matrix. I imagine it as a comprehensive system in which the global media matrix focuses on the interplay of various discursive and material structures with lived experience to deconstruct global media phenomena that cannot be captured with more limited concepts that only focus on geopolitics, political economy, or culture, etc. Further, while it recognizes mediascapes (Appadurai, 1990), the global media matrix brings into focus the boundaries of those flows, and emphasizes the connections and interactions between media texts, and their complex connectivity (Tomlinson, 1999).

To elaborate on the global media matrix more concretely through the Turkish series, from their very inception in the early 1970s, the Turkish TV series were produced following the profuse import American TV series, including *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, which introduced the genre, as well as exemplifying the codes and emotes to actors who would act in the Turkish series (Cankaya, 1986; Serim, 2007; Bhutto, 2019). Although Turkish series mostly target domestic audiences, they have been sold globally since the mid-1970s (Cankaya, 1986; Atalay, 2019). Further, with the robust production of Turkish series in the 1990s spurred by global and national political and economic developments

also began the robust adaptations and derivative works of Japanese and Korean TV series (Khan & Won, 2020). Additionally, multiple non-Turkey based companies produce Turkish series, such as the Saudi O3, which produced the first few Turkish productions for Netflix (*The Protector* and *The Gift*) and the American Karga Seven Productions (*Rise of Empires*). Turkish series are hybrid texts that downplay certain Turkish realities (mosques, sound of azan, traffic) and overemphasize others (empowered, independent women; loyal families). Meanwhile, a number of Turkish series are self-orientalist and rely on clash of civilizations narratives to propagate a certain image of Turkey domestically and abroad (*Resurrection: Ertugrul*; *Promise*).

The distribution of the Turkish series, as this study substantiates, also arrives—no matter where in the globe—into a specific media context that is also dialectical with and dialogic to global media, and also influenced by multiple global sources, as well as social, economic, and political historic precedents and contemporary developments, that is, the global media matrix. But what broader lessons can we take from this study?

First, this dissertation highlights the porous borders of transnational media. That is, technology recognizes no geographical borders and precludes strict state interception and regulation of other, even the *Other's*, media. Transnational media exerts itself not only through traditional broadcast television, but also through social media and streaming platforms, even appearing on mobile phones at the whim of viewers. States, even those in which despots govern, cannot block the inflow or outflow of transnational media if the populace demands it.

Second, transnational media carries the potential to influence the geopolitical imagination of the populace, a privilege formerly reserved for nationally constructed discourses. When transnational media from the *Other* settles into the *Self's* media sphere, it can threaten national identity narratives and weaken nationalist discourses by unsettling and contradicting longstanding representations and stereotypes of the *Other*. Viewers who thus enjoy more liberty and less national interference in constructing their geopolitical imagination may identify discrepancies in representations of the *Other* by their nation-state. Transnational media, incidentally consumed or strategically deployed, can thus mitigate and ameliorate formerly held antagonistic beliefs against the state of origin.

Third, though television series enjoyed by women are readily denigrated as frivolous entertainment, the political power of women's voices even through the mundane activity of watching television in the course of their everyday lives shines in this dissertation. The potency of entertainment in destabilizing national discourses, reflecting on one's own taken-for-granted culture and cultural habits, and even shaping financial decisions to purchase from or travel to the source nation establishes the salience of women's preferences. On the other hand, transnational media reveals how women's gaze charmed by the *Other*, usually a racialized *Other*, is unsettling and perceived as a threat to the nation itself, as though losing control of women's bodies may result in the loss of the nation-state.

Fourth, through this dissertation we are once again reminded of the contested nature of modernity; that is, what constitutes modernity, “the West,” and what people appreciate and value in representations of modernity are far from settled matters. Consequently, women’s lifestyles, dress choices, work and leisure preferences, personal relationships, and others, are persistent symbols and tropes in transnational media, which index modernity or backwardness based on consumer expectations and political agenda.

On the other hand, discursive reproductions of ambiguous binaries such as *East* and *West*, in transnational and national media, are weaponized for political advantage. Dehumanizing and fear-mongering to grasp and concentrate power is one salient use for sustaining binaries, in which the *Other* can be *East* or *West*, or any other term of othering based on the context of origin. Likewise, orientalism harnessed to position one’s culture as superior is not exclusive to North Americans and Western Europeans. Furthermore, self-orientalism in transnational media is also common and perhaps analogous to some Western productions that tout extreme liberal lifestyles judged as immoral elsewhere.

This dissertation, by taking the globalized Turkish TV series as a pivot, revealed a plethora of ongoing debates, dilemmas, and discourses pertaining to modernity, culture, national identity and sovereignty, catalyzed by Russian and Bulgarian women’s enjoyment of the series. For Turks in Bulgaria persecuted for their Turkish identity until 1989, the popularity of Turkish series is a point of validation and pride. “Even Bulgarians watch them!” exclaimed one of my aunts in Bulgaria once.

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