

# POPULAR CULTURE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY: A STUDY ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA WHO ARE THE MAGNIFICENT CENTURY VIEWERS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyses the Bosnian university students' reactions to the Turkish TV series, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, in line with their ethnic and religious affiliations. The questions were directed to 43 university students who were the

series' audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including mainly Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, to determine their thoughts about the series. Descriptive analysis method was used in this study. As a result of the study, Croat and Serb audiences point out that they like the scenario and they expect Turkish producers to make similar series, but at the same time they emphasize on "oppressive politics" of the Ottoman Empire. A significant part of the Bosniaks says they knew the similarities between their own culture and Turkish culture in advance and their opinions regarding Turks did not change after the series. The Serbs and Croats although not using explicit praise words about Turks like the Bosniaks, they used concepts such as "family relationships", "lifestyle" and "culture" while they were talking about intercultural similarities.

The Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – formed from parts of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires, and which consisted of six republics and two special districts – disbanded in 1991. Ana Ljubojevic says among the reasons for this were the failure to create common historical narratives as well as the regime's economic and political problems. The autonomy of the six republics triggered the separation of media and education systems, which further contributed to the dissolution of the country (Ljubojevic 2010). With Slovenia and Croatia declaring independence, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina and by Macedonia, a civil war broke out, with Serbia and Montenegro attacking both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ensuing civil war resulted in ethnic cleansing and mass rapes; cities were burned and hundreds of thousands of refugees displaced. The war resulted in such atrocities due to the nationalistic programs introduced by the leaders of various national communities. Those political leaders and nationalistic intellectuals (most of them ex-communists) had discovered that nationalism was more convenient tool to mobilize support and to gain power than Marxism. For this reason, they fueled painful remembrance of ancient and recent wrongs, frustrated national ambitions and reasons to fear for communal survival between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosniaks (Rusinov 1996: 78-80).

Bosnia and Herzegovina gained its independence in the referendum held on 3 March 1992, was reshaped with the Dayton Treaty on 21 November 1995 following the civil war; independence and was officially declared on 14 December 1995 with the Paris Treaty. Bosnia and Herzegovina is a state that has two entities including the Bosniak-Croat Federation and Republika Srpska. It is surrounded by the Bosniak Croat Federation in the north and Republika Srpska in the east (Eker 2006: 71-2).

Several Turkish TV series began airing on Balkan television nearly a decade after the end of the war and they achieved record-high ratings. Among these series, the most popular is the *The Magnificent Century (Muhteşem Yüzyıl)*<sup>1</sup>, narrating the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent. This series that unfolds the Ottoman Empire which ruled the region for centuries also included the parts from Balkan history. *The Magnificent Century* began broadcasting in Bosnia and Herzegovina on OBN TV between 2012-2014, under the title of *Suleyman Velicanstveni*. However, the series could also be

1 For the series' popularity in Balkans see: "Turks Bewitch The Balkans with Their Addictive Soaps", 01 May 13, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turks-bewitch-the-balkans-with-their-addictive-soaps> (accessed April 17 2017).

watched on various websites. Produced by Tims Productions, the series was the most expensive Turkish television drama ever made (Tüzün and Sen 2014: 182), and was presented in Turkey on Kanal D in 2011. İzzet Pinto, who sold the *The Magnificent Century* abroad, says in a 2014 interview that the series was exported to 52 countries, including the USA, China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and various Middle Eastern and Balkan countries, reaching an audience of about 350-400 million viewers ("Türk Dizilerinin Rek" 2014). By 2015, according to data from the Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the series had reached 400 million people in nearly 60 countries (Kamiloğlu 2015).

This study analyzes university students' reactions to *The Magnificent Century*, in line with their ethnic and religious affiliations in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has a heterogeneous ethnic and religious structure. As it directly deals with the era of Sultan Süleyman, the Turkish ruler of the Ottoman Empire who was victorious in the Balkans, the series has provoked some discussion<sup>2</sup> in the Balkans where history shapes identities in a fragile way. Above all, the fact that the series' important characters of Balkan origin complicates the audiences' responses. The historical events depicted by the series are not only history, but have also been turned into contemporary events through their remembrance via television, helping to build national identity through public memory (Ebbrecht 2007: 37).

*The Magnificent Century* has led audiences to rethink their own national identities because it has narrated the Ottoman Empire's five-century rule over the Balkans. For this reason, viewers' conceptions of and reactions to the series are important in terms of settling the place of Ottoman Empire in their perceptions of national identity. Jahja Muhasilović's (2015: 2) thesis examining history textbooks of Serb, Croat and Bosniak indicate that, at different levels, Ottoman rule left a negative mark on these groups because it stripped them of independence. On the other hand, the textbooks view of the Republican period and Atatürk more positively (Muhasilović 2015:108-10). Against this cultural context, the present study considers the thoughts and reactions of

2 For these discussion see: "View: We are all Turks now?", 6 December 2010, <http://serbianna.com/analysis/archives/766> (accessed 3 December 2015),

"Turkish soap opera bringing Suleiman back from the dead", December 15, 2013, <<http://www.thejournal.ie/suleiman-magnificent-ottoman-empire-tv-series-1213006-Dec2013/> (accessed 5 October 2015),

"Turkish Soap Operas Take Balkans by Storm" 30 December 2010, <http://balkan-chronicle.com/index.php/arts-a-culture/entertainment/movies/774-turkish-soap-operas-take-balkans-by-storm>, (accessed 6 November 2015)

Bosnian audiences regarding a series not only about the Ottoman Empire, but produced in a country (Turkey) that was at the center of Ottoman power. How can be understood of their admiration of the series produced by a state that was marked at different levels as “other” in their national identity narratives? Furthermore, how did these thoughts and reactions of the audiences differentiate according to their religious and ethnic affiliations? Has watching the series led to a change in their perception of Turks?

In the literature, formation of national identity has been framed as a top-down process that results from the efforts of the national elite. Even though this may have been true in specific historical moments, the rapid spread of mass media and popular culture has seen national identity transmitted and reshaped through more informal means and commercial networks. Tim Edensor – citing theorists of nationalism such as Gellner, Habsbawn and Ranger, Adam Smith and Benedict Anderson – notes that such studies tend not to analyze popular culture and everyday life. Although he accepts that writers, artists, historians, scientists and folklorists have contributed to the high culture, Edensor points out that their contributions do not cover the entire national culture. According to Edensor, the definition of national culture should include pop stars, advertisers, tabloid writers, marketers, fashion designers, and filmmakers. The traditional cultural forms and practices of the nation have been re-located in the process of formation of national identity, by taking advantage of popular culture through meanings, activities, and images. Tradition-bound ceremonies and other cultural ingredients are sustained by their (re)distribution through popular culture. Furthermore, cultural ingredients of national identity are increasingly mediated, polysemic, contested, and subject to change, to the extent that they are circulated in popular culture (Edensor 2002:7-17). In this study, within the cultural studies perspective, we act according to the argument that popular culture is a field where ideological struggle is being carried out and hegemony is gained or lost. As Stuart Hall (1998: 443) stresses, “Popular culture is neither in a ‘pure’ sense the popular traditions of resistance of these process; nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which the transformations are worked”. We can say that elements of resistance in particular emerge while products of popular culture are consumed. Although they are pervasive due to their easy and understandable contents, they could vary while they are consumed according to class, cultural, ethnic, sexual identifications. As Lawrance Grossberg points out the relation between the audience and

products of popular culture is active and productive in many ways (cited in Storey 2000: 14). Texts do not act out their original meaning and in an instant and none of the texts can guarantee what their effect will be. Because people try to understand texts, they also try to give them meaning according to their own life, needs, and experience. In this article, we put forth the different conceptions of and reactions to *The Magnificent Century* while it is consumed according to the ethnic and religious affiliations of its audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The historical period narrated in *The Magnificent Century* has not been directly experienced by the audience, but has been is transmitted by intergenerational memory or through the education system and mass-communication technologies. The audience’s memory of the historical period narrated in the series can be clarified through Marianne Hirsch’s concept of *post memory* and Alison Landsberg’s concept of *prosthetic memory*. For Hirsch, (2001: 9) *post memory* describes the offspring of trauma survivors relate to their parents’ experiences. Such experiences include very powerful narratives and images that the children of the trauma survivors hear about as they grow up. Therefore, *post memory* defines the familial inheritance and transmission of cultural trauma. The concept of *post memory* thus helps to make sense of the fact that some (especially Serbian) viewers of *The Magnificent Century*’s negative attitudes towards the Ottoman Empire, which constitutes the series’ main subject and historical framework despite their admiration to the series.

Landsberg’s (2004: 3-9) concept of *prosthetic memory* describes a new form of “memory” as a response to modernity’s ruptures, one that emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative of the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theater or a museum. In this moment of contact, one relates to the past event more deeply and personally as though through memory, even though he/she does not comprehend all of its aspects. Landsberg argues that due to its transportable characteristics, *prosthetic memory* is able to challenge more traditional forms of memory. Mass culture technologies transforming *prosthetic memory* have the capacity to create common social frameworks for people who have different social and religious practices. But it does not erase differences or construct common origins. Though people who have these memories are led to feel a connection to the past, they remain aware of their position in the contemporary moment. How viewers of *The Magnificent Century* “remembered” the Ottoman era was transformed by their personal experience of mass communication technologies. Therefore, their negative

reactions to the series Ottoman Empire over the series can be understood as having a basis in their *prosthetic memory*, and their admiration of the series' drama and actors is a sign of their awareness of their own position in the contemporary moment. In addition, *The Magnificent Century* is itself an agent that influences the transformation of memory in this way.

Tüzün and Sen (2014: 184) presenting examples from various Turkish series that depict traumatic historical events that have long been conversational taboos, but which have found ways to provoke public discussion of that history. Like the series mentioned by Tüzün and Sen, *Magnificent Century* touched upon some taboo issues in both Turkey and the Balkans and turned them into public debate. The emphasis on the Sultan Süleyman's love life was regarded as disrespectful to his legacy within nationalist-conservative circles, and caused a serious public debate in Turkey (Aydos 2013). Moreover, due to its high ratings the series was the subject of concern in the Balkans, with some fearing that it would lead to a growth in Ottoman sympathy.

*The Magnificent Century* has been interpreted in different ways by audiences in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to their ethnic and religious identities. On the one hand, the series has reminded people of the close links between Ottoman/Turkish culture and Bosniac, Serb and Croat audiences; on the other hand, it has been perceived as Turkish propaganda by Serb and Croat audiences. The present study aims to put forth the opinions of different ethnic groups towards *The Magnificent Century*, the most popular Turkish series in the region. For this reason, a method of descriptive analysis was used. Descriptive analysis is a type of qualitative data analysis that involves summarizing and interpreting data obtained by various data collection techniques according to specific themes (Özdemir 2014: 336). Its purpose is to present the findings in a summarized and interpreted form. Due to such limitations as geographical distance and language, a massive audience has not been reached, but through open-ended questions directed at audience samples, we were able to obtain more data. Purposive sampling was used in the study as it is in many qualitative studies. We reached 43 university students who were *The Magnificent Century* audience. The link including questions created on the google forms were shared on a social media account used by Bosnian university students, and asked for answers<sup>3</sup>. The students were mainly Bosniak (23), and the rest

were of Serb (10) and Croat (10) origin<sup>4</sup>. Open-ended questions were asked about their socio-demographic characteristics (age, gender, ethnicity) and their opinions of the series. The research was conducted between March 5-18, 2017. Most of the students questioned were studying at regional universities such as Sarajevo, Zagreb, Bihac, Apeiron Bonja Luka and Travnik. There were also students studying at Istanbul Technical, Mimar Sinan and Hacettepe Universities. While the findings of the study were primarily obtained from the answers to these questions, some news sites containing opinions from various circles about Turkish TV series aired in the Balkans were also used to provide supporting data.

## 1. EMOTIONAL TENSIONS: THE MAGNIFICENT CENTURY ADMIRATION AND ANGER TOWARDS THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

One of the most important elements feeding the rage for the past is education system and history textbooks forming and maintaining the collective memory. Even though the former Yugoslavian system tried to create a "Yugoslavian identity", it could not create a society in which a common citizenship prevailed over differing identities. This was a result of the Yugoslav cultural policy and education system. Despite the end of the violent conflicts that marked the 1990s and early 2000s, textbooks today include a lot of brutal conflicts presented as turning points in former Yugoslavian States. For instance, in the textbooks of Republic of Srpska, the Serbian nation is presented as an innocent victim whose people suffered from massacres akin to those of the Jews during the Holocaust, and were threatened by Croatian nationalism and Muslim fundamentalism. Alenka Bartulovic says that due to the textbooks using this type of language, children who live in the region have not been able to form a positive image of their neighbors and see themselves as historical victims. Besides this, these children feel resentment and fury towards their neighbors, and think that their currently peaceful mask will fall one day (Bartulovic 2006: 60-1). Because of the political clash and the distinction reflecting in the education system, when Bosnia and Herzegovina came out of the war, Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats each of the three nations had their

3 Special thanks to Maida Jusic who shared these questions with Bosnian students on her own social media account. She is currently working at Bihac University as a research assistant.

4 According to the results of the population census carried out in October 2013, Bosnia and Herzegovina's population consists of 50.11% Bosniacs, 30.78% Serbs, 15.43% Croats. <http://www.internethaber.com/bosna-nufus-sayim-sonuclari-aciklandi-1607569h.htm> (accessed 30 December 2016).

own separate textbooks in the country. The textbooks of each nation were published in different cities and publishing houses. For this reason, three different histories have been narrated in Bosnia (Muhasilovic 2015: 118-9). Muhasilović (2015: 28) claims the perspectives of these societies towards the Ottomans are different in this respect. While Serbian society has never identified itself with the Ottomans and has seen them as invaders, Bosniaks have largely identified themselves with them.

Anthony D. Smith (1999: 163) points out that one of the causes of ethnic violence is unequal distribution of ethno-history. While some communities have partially documented ethno-history, others just have a recent history of oppression and struggle that can be offered to the collective use for some ethnic categories. It could be argued that this phenomenon has affected the depicted Ottoman period as the “the period of oppression and persecution” in the national identity narratives of the Serbs. Similarly, Smith says that there are some distinctive ethnic groups such as Poles, Hungarians, and Croats that boast their long and rich histories, while at the same time there are Serbs, Romanians and Bulgarians whose medieval histories had to be rediscovered and aligned with their recent memories of Ottoman oppression in Eastern Europe. The most effective way to build national identity is using history and the myth of a “golden age”. Nationalist trainer intellectuals aiming to developing a nationalist ethos enable people politically, need some samples about the glorious past of the community such as common memories, symbols, traditions. Therefore, a golden age myth is created of ancestral origin, freedom, heroism, and saints (Smith 1999: 66-7). It could be maintained that the intellectuals forming Serbian national identity turned the nation’s historical defeats and losses into a “golden age” myth of heroism and sainthood in order to provide a basis for national solidarity. The Serb army was defeated by the Ottoman army in the 1389 war in Kosovo, suffering heavy casualties, and Serbia was included in the Ottoman domination. In Serbian literature, this period is known as the “Kosovo Age” and everything about it has come into the popular imagination of the nation and its cultural definitions. The results of the Kosovo War have not changed in the narrative tradition, but the “defeat” has been transfigured into a “victory”. The fight for Kosovo has been turned into a paradigm for struggle, sacrifice, freedom and dignity in the popular imagination (Ljubojevic 2010). Due to the fact that the narrative of “Ottoman persecution” is of great importance to the Serbs’ narratives

of national history and identity, a fear has arisen in nationalist circles that *The Magnificent Century* would create an Ottoman and Turkish sympathy. Such a sympathy, it is implied, would undermine the most important element of national identity narratives. These arguments have arisen not only from audiences but also journalists and academics. Marko Lopusina, a Serbian journalist who has written books on the Balkan Wars, says in a review on Turkish TV series that “Today, viewers in Belgrade and Zagreb weep not over the fate of their ancestors in the hands of the Turkish Islamic masters but at the fate of Eyshan, Gamus, Scheherazade...” (Lopusina 2010). According to Lopusina, the Balkan people have for decades been opened to the effects of Turkish serials with Islamized folk music, re-emergent Turkish sayings and the idea that Istanbul is a shopping paradise. Furthermore, Lopusina – after noting a large number of Turkish sayings that have become part of contemporary Serbian lexicon, Ottoman meals as part of Serb cuisine, and the large numbers of Serbs who visit Turkey as tourists – adds that these seemingly benign trends are part of the greater geopolitical game of the Balkans. He writes that:

It is just the soap of entertainment whereas the reality is still recalled among some in Serbia when every Turkish nobleman, and there were many, had a right to have his first take on any newlywed Christian woman. Some smart now say that these genes of rape have been awoken in Serbia and are creating new Janissaries. Have we all become the Turks now? (Lopusina 2010)

Underlying this provocative assessment is the same logic driving the concern towards Turkish TV series in the region’s nationalist circles: a fear that the series will undermine the negative “Turkish image” in the narrative of Serbian national identity. This fear is not unfounded. As Edensor (2002: 17) points out, the multiple, changing and contested meanings that surround practices of popular culture contrast with a national identity presented as a “common past” rather than to the “common future”, or the “common present”. This cul-de-sac has bedeviled accounts of national identity which have ignored the things we watch and read, the places we visit, and the things we buy. After the record ratings of the Turkish TV series, an increasing number of tourists have come to Turkey from the Balkan states; demand for Turkish products seen in

the series has increased, and increasing numbers of people have started to be interested in Turkey<sup>5</sup>.

National identity is not a given structure but a category built historically, and continually re-built. Due to the fact that history is the most important motif in that building process, the commemoration of glorious history and common tragedies on many occasions play a key role in strengthening national identity. These commemorations can be encountered in our daily lives and they can be carried out by formal institutions as well. National identity is an abstract and multi-dimensional construct that touches on all areas of life and is manifest in many permutations and combinations (Smith 1999: 144). Since television series are products of popular culture, and a part of our daily life, we may discuss the reproduction of national identity through them. A series experienced massively and simultaneously by the whole nation can function to reinforce and reflect dominant narratives and social values through its contents and stereotypes. But, on the other hand, products of popular culture, as an area of resistance and struggle at the same time, can invite critical discussion of traditions, social values, and official narratives. In this article, this second function of popular culture is discussed. Namely, while Turkish TV series and especially *The Magnificent Century* received great acclaim in the Balkans where they were shown as part of a global marketing and distribution of Turkish television output, they started the discussion about national identity narratives and concepts of the "other". *The Magnificent Century* depicting a common history and watched with admiration by all ethnic groups, has given rise to such a situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has a population composed of 30% Serbs and 10% Croats. The sympathy of the Bosniak population towards the Ottomans has been reinforced with their admiration towards *The Magnificent Century*. Nevertheless, Croat and especially Serb audiences have experienced various emotional tensions due to the negative "Ottoman" image that is part of their national identity narratives. While these audiences of *The Magnificent Century* point out that they like the scenario of the series, they also feel obliged to speak of the Ottoman Empire's "oppressive politics". While some viewers mention

the similarities between their own culture and the Ottoman /Turkish culture and language are many, some say there are no similarities.

An anonymous<sup>6</sup> Serb viewer (v.25) who says the series is popular in all the former Yugoslavia answered the question about the scenario in this way: "interesting, exciting and sad". Although she does not explain why it is sad, it is noteworthy that while the series excites this viewer, she is also distressed. Additionally, in response to what she thought about parts of the series regarding the Balkans, she says: "Serbs don't like the Ottomans because they ruled the Serbs under pressure for years due to their being orthodox"<sup>7</sup>. Although a Serb viewer named Millica T. (v.26) says the series is very popular because it is so good, the story is interesting, and the actors are very talented, she also says Ottomans played a negative historical role in the region where the Slavs and Christians lived. Another anonymous viewer (v.27) commented "(the) series shows ruler Süleyman as a positive historic personality which he is not". This expression indicates that the audience do not trust the series on the grounds that it does not reflect the historical facts. Another Serb viewer (v.29) who says the series is very popular adds that its love story is real, the wars are unreal, but the "killing" in the series are real. In response to the question about the parts of the series related to the Balkans, he says that "expansion of the Ottoman Empire was an aggressive warfare and conquering the weaker regimes." A different anonymous Serb viewer (v.30) says everything is interesting in the series except for the way people are killed, and she adds: "I hope the Turkish people make another soap opera like that". The expression of the viewer that "the way people are killed is not interesting" suggests that she was familiar with this aspect of Ottoman States in advance of watching the television series. Despite this, in what is a good example of the emotional tension some viewers experience, she still hopes that Turkey will make another series. We could see in these examples that Serbian audiences have expressed their anger against the Ottomans in an allusive way.

Another anonymous Serb viewer (v.31) says the series shows that Muslims had a standard of living higher than any other religious group during Ottoman rule. He stated that he began watching the series because he wanted to know how the Turks changed "some things in the Balkans". We

5 Certain travel agencies in Serbia have offered trips to Turkey for the Turkish series named as "Shahrazad's Paths" and the number of Bulgarian tourists traveling to Turkey has increased by 40 percent. Besides this, the Zagreb School of Foreign Languages "Sjajna Zvijezda" has registered a large interest in the Turkish language. "Turkish Soap Operas Take Balkans by Storm" December 30, 2010. <http://balkanchronicle.com/index.php/arts-a-culture/entertainment/movies/774-turkish-soap-operas-take-balkans-by-storm> (accessed November 6, 2015).

6 7' of Serbian audiences, 4' of Croatian audiences and 2' of Bosniak audiences preferred not to say their names. For this reason, a numbering system of 1 to 43 was used to avoid a confusion regarding the series' viewers.

7 Throughout the manuscript, all quotes are cited as is with no correction or modification.

could see in this comment how some Serbian viewers have refrained from giving clear answers. He also says, about the series' script, that "they wrote their own history". As mentioned above, one of the most important elements of national identity narratives is "history writing", and it is one of the first steps taken in the process of building national identity. Stuart Hall (2000: 58) says that we go to the "past" not in the strict sense as a real fact, but we go through history, memory, and desire. With the re-telling, rediscovering, and re-creating of the past, history has a strong formative influence on identity. A similar approach comes from Carl Brown who employs the concept of "usable history". He points out that in some cases a society formulates its past in service of its present values, when a people select – or even invent – a past to justify their present. In his book *Imperial Legacy*, Brown provides an example of "usable history" by pointing to a strong proclivity among those living in lands once under Ottoman rule to deplore or discount the Ottoman era (1996: 9-11). According to Maria Todorova (1996: 70), the perception of Ottoman legacy in the Balkans has been, and continues to be, shaped by generations of historians, poets, writers, journalists and other intellectuals as well as politicians. The evolving perception of the Ottoman past within this specific social group is transmitted and disseminated to broader strata of the population through historiographical works, textbooks, journalistic pieces, belles lettres, and art. As one could clearly see, while Serbian audiences admire *The Magnificent Century*, they express their negative feelings towards the Ottoman Empire. We could say that those negative perceptions towards Ottomans can be explained by "post memory" concept that mentioned before. For example, though a Serbian viewer named Ana Andelkovic (v.33) say that while she knew the scenario might not be historically correct, she feels she has to say that the series is "magnificent and well". She also adds that "Suleiman was the greatest ruler of the Ottoman Empire, which kept the Serbian people prisoners for four centuries". Another anonymous Serbian viewer expresses both admiration and anger against the series and the Turks (v.32). She says the series and the lead actor Halit Ergenç are the best. She, at the same time, notes that the scenario is beautiful and interesting, but it does not reflect reality. According to her, "Turkey conquered the Balkans five centuries ago. Now Turkish power is making inroads through friendlier means". A different anonymous Serbian viewer (v.24) says the scenario has been "changed" and "invented". She also says, "A big portion of Serbians don't see that part of our history as something positive and a lot of them just go crazy if you tell

them that Ottomans weren't the bad guys". It is not surprising that the Serbian viewers have a skeptical attitude towards *The Magnificent Century*. Laura Wise says not only the series in particular, but also Turkey's economic investment in the Balkans, its restoration of monuments and establishment of universities supports claims of Ottoman resurrection in the Balkans. According to Wise, Turkey's westward turn has been accompanied by media attention repeatedly expressing ethnically-framed fears, and that collective memory has to constrain modern foreign policy. Despite being the softest form of cultural influence, popular Turkish series are described as having "conquered" audiences across the Balkans (Wise 2013).

Due to the fact they have not lived under Ottoman domination as long as Bosniaks and Serbs, Croatians have not allocated as much attention to the Ottoman Empire in their textbooks as have the other nations in the Balkans (Muhasilović 2015: 57). We could say that for this reason, even though Croat audiences do not approach the Ottomans with sympathy, they are not as angry towards them as are the Serbs. Thus, an anonymous Croatian viewer's (v.37) answer to the question about the parts of *The Magnificent Century* related to the Balkans is as follows: "The Croats have a normal view on the era, because the Turks didn't rule long like other Balkan states". An anonymous viewer (v.34) who started to watch the series on her friend's recommendation says she had a great desire to go to Istanbul after she started watching the series, and indeed did make the trip. She also says she did not watch for historical events, for "incredible Hürrem and her great love". She adds that "I don't care what it was in the past, for me it is not important the Ottoman Empire, I like modern Turkey and her people, especially men". A Croatian viewer named Nora (v.42) says the series is wonderful and she started watching the series thanks to her friends. She adds "My family protest when I watch them and argue with me but I tell them that it presents real relaxation for me and I don't think about that and history". From these examples, it can be understood that some Serbian and Croatian audience members tried to counter negative reactions to their admiration for *The Magnificent Century* by claiming they are not interested in the series' depiction of history but its drama of love and intrigue.

Nevertheless, some Croat audiences criticized the series, reflecting the way in which the Ottoman Empire has to a certain degree been framed as "other" in narratives of Croatian national identity. A viewer named Ivan (v.40) says the scenario is not true but he enjoys it because it is full of intrigues. He also implies the series does not reflect historical facts by

saying that “I think that Turkish people can’t change the history”. A Croat viewer named Sasa (36), who says he likes the series, describes the Ottomans’ relation with the Balkans as “forcing Islamization and Turkification”. Another anonymous Croat viewer (v.39) says *The Magnificent Century* is the “worst one in terms of Turkish propaganda”. He also adds that the series is “so cynical for non-Muslims and reflects the history of the Turks.”

Balkan nationalism affected by positivism and romanticism destroyed the imagined community of Orthodox Christianity, but preserved an unchangeable and uniform image of Muslim community, and dealt with it in the concept of “millet”<sup>8</sup>. A manifestation of this attitude was the indiscriminate use of “Turk” to refer to Muslims in general. On the other hand, Balkan Muslims displayed the characteristics of “millet” mentality for a long time since they were practically excluded from the process of nation formation in the Balkans, and thus bear the Ottoman legacy (Todorova 1996: 68). The reaction to this attitude among Balkan Muslims is seen in Serbian and Croatian historiography in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Jahja Muhasilović (2015: 29) demonstrates that in some of these narratives, Slavic Christians reacted more strongly against Slavic Muslims than against the ethnic Turks of Anatolia. Some Balkan nationalists were angrier with Balkan Muslims than with Turks because the former had abandoned their Slavic Christian identity and accepted the religion of “the invader.” By the same token, because the Muslim population was subjected to ethnic cleansing during the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, their attitude towards “Turks” are more favorable than those of Orthodox and Catholic Christians. This is reflected in the ratings of Turkish television series in the Balkans. In the regions with more concentrated Muslim populations, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkish TV series have larger viewership.<sup>9</sup>

8 Like other empires, the Ottoman Empire had a very religious, multiethnic and multicultural structure. Until the 19th century, the concept of “Millet” in the Ottoman Empire was used in the sense of “a community of people who believe in a religion or sect”. When it came to the 19th century, the concept gained the meaning of “Nation” (Adiyek, 2014:5).

9 Almir Hodzic notes that a new and unexpected cultural trend spreading across the Middle East and the Balkans is the reemergence of Ottoman culture through soap operas. He adds that Turkish shows are most watched in Bosnia, Macedonia, and Serbia due to the large Muslim populations in these countries. “Magnificent Century” TV Show: Middle East and Balkans Are Soaking Up Turkish Soap Operas”, 10 May 2013, <http://mic.com/articles/40763/magnificent-century-tv-show-middle-east-and-balkans-are-soaking-up-turkish-soap-operas> (accessed November 4, 2015).

It has been observed that Bosniak audiences of *The Magnificent Century* are generally positive about the Ottomans and Turks. For example, a viewer named Halis Campara (v.19) says he has always been very respectful to Turkish people who share the same ancestry and culture with him. Another Bosniak viewer named Lejla Jusic (v.20) says she learned a lot about her country and its history through the series and could see how their culture was elevated with the Ottomans entering the Balkans. Another viewer who thinks the series reflects historical facts is Mirza Pracic (v.22). Of those parts of the series that address Ottoman involvement in the Balkans, Pracic says: “All we should know about Ottoman and their relationship with Balkan, because Ottomans were in this area for about 500 years”, and he defines the Turks as “people with big hearted and great souls”. Adis (v.3), another Bosniak viewer, says as follows:

Christians though encouraged to convert [to] Islam, were allowed religious toleration and mixed marriages and the comparative freedom and contentment enjoyed by its people is one of the most important explanations why the Balkans remained under Ottoman rule for over 400 years.

Ines (v.6), another Bosniac viewer, says Ottomans “introduced their tolerance version of Islam which was followed by Bosniaks mostly”. Likewise, Elma P. (v.4) says the Ottoman Empire is known as one of the most tolerant in history. Ismar Dedic (v.7), another Bosniak viewer, says that “Bosniaks are more brotherly with the Ottoman era, mainly because they adhered to Islam during the Ottoman conquest”, and so “... that’s resulted with a majority of Bosniaks now Muslims mostly.” It is noteworthy that the views of Bosniak audiences on the tolerance of the Ottoman Empire and of Islam largely contradict those held by Serbs on the same subject.

Some of the Bosniak audiences, however, think that, despite their admiration of it, *The Magnificent Century* does not really reflect the historical facts. Mujesira Bakovic (v.17) is one of them. Another Bosniac viewer, Almedina Sirco (v.18), despite her admiring the scenario, thinks it is not realistic. Nejra Saric (v.1), a different Bosniak viewer, is not sure how much the series reflects historical truth even if she finds it perfect. Yet, another Bosniak viewer named Azra (v.5) says “I think it was written excellent, compared with the history, how it all right I don’t know”. It should be noted that we cannot say all Bosniak audiences categorically sympathize with the Turks. For example, Sara Sabljakovic (v.2) says “... no matter that they



ruled for centuries in this region we are not Turks and we will never be". Nedim Serbecic (v.15) is much more critical in this regard. He says the series is used to brainwash audiences to believe the Ottomans' rule over the Balkans was a positive thing.

## 2. REDISCOVERING CULTURAL PROXIMITY THROUGH TELEVISION SERIES

Imagining a national community requires imagining a foreign community. In the era of nation states, the "foreign" (or "the other") is a special category. "The other" is the one who does not have the same nationality as we do and who is not like us (Billig 2002: 95). Due to the importance of otherness in the formation and maintenance of imagined national communities, stereotypical representations of "the other" are frequently encountered in products of popular culture. However, this study considers a work of popular culture that has provoked some members of its audience to realize that the Ottomans, despite their position as "other" in predominant narratives of Balkan national identity, are actually more "like us". This undermines given official narratives of Ottoman history in the Balkans, and is a major reason for the great interest towards Turkish series, and *The Magnificent Century* in particular, in the region. The case of *The Magnificent Century* thus helps to illustrate that globalized media are the medium of stereotypical as well as incompatible, conflicting representations of national identity. As Edensor pointed out, national cultural forms and practices are today sustained by their (re) distribution through popular culture, where they mingle with numerous other iconic cultural elements which signify the nation in multiple and contested ways (2002: 12). We could say that one of these is the way that products of a particular nation's popular culture are consumed by audiences in other nations with the effect of global marketing. It may further be argued that global television productions may open official definitions of national identity to discussion. They can remind viewers of cultural values "otherized" by official history, and allow the rediscovery of common elements in language. This has precisely been the experience made available by the introduction of Turkish series into the Balkan States.

Stuart Hall (1998: 443) highlights that popular culture does not have an absolutely manipulative nature because it includes both fake attractions and distortions as well as elements of acceptance, identification, and familiar experiences for the people. These latter attributes provide the basis of

the great interest towards Turkish series in the Balkans. As film and TV critic Vuk Perovic observes, "Audiences can identify with characters, cultural stereotypes... Hundreds of years under Turkish rule mean that we here share similar values." Communications professor Dona Kolar Panov, approaching the issue from another perspective, says *The Magnificent Century* is a popular forum topic for reflecting on shared cultural traditions in the region, adding that it also helps "to overcome the past marred with nationalism, political violence and wars, to finally put to rest the Balkan ghosts. ("Turkish soap opera...").

To discover what similar experiences audiences have found in the Turkish series, our survey asked respondents two questions, one after the other: "Did you change your opinion about Turkish people after watching the series?" and "Are there any similarities between the Turkish culture and your own culture? What did you think about this after watching the series?". While 17' of the Bosniak audiences say their opinion on the Turks did not change as a result of viewing the series, 6' of them say it changed. Moreover, 21' of Bosniak audiences say that there are many similarities between the two cultures. Despite that 1' of Bosniak viewers say there is no similarity, and the other one say "a bit". The similarities mentioned by respondents generally relate to cuisine, music, traditional forms of clothing, architecture, family values, social behaviors, and even gestures habits. For example, a viewer named Adis (v.3) says he had a "good opinion" about Turks before watching the series and also adds that "Bosnia-Herzegovina shows many signs of its nearly four centuries of Turkish rule: the architecture, the occasional shared word, the complimentary glass of rakija after dinner and etc". Another viewer named Elma P. (v.4) says, while evaluating the scenario of the series, that "There are more interesting than American ones with all those lawyers and businessmen who don't have the same customs", and she identified similarities between the two cultures such as baklava and börek (both types of food), and religion. Sara Sabljakovic (v.2) says her opinion about the Turks did not change after watching the series. She also says "...many times when I look Turkish series I can hear the same words as ours, and the food is similar". Ragip Botoniç (v.16) says: "I had always the same opinion about Turkish people as one friendly nation who support Bosnia and Bosnian peoples in many ways". He also adds that not only Bosniaks but also Serbs and Croats have a similar culture to Turks.

The sense of "cultural proximity" mentioned by many of these audience members is indicates a failure of the effort to

erase traces of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans. For Maria Todorova (1996: 58-59), a movement that has been striving to erase this Ottoman heritage has in fact succeeded in material, visible ways within the public sphere. The most radical changes occurred in the appearance of cities, specifically in regard to architecture and clothing. Despite this, the Ottoman legacy has proved to be more persistent in the realm of popular beliefs, customs, attitudes, and values. Todorova's account is echoed by an anonymous Bosniak viewer (v.8), who identified cultural similarities in regard to food, idiolect, music and dance. Another Bosniak viewer named Amra Osmanovic (v.13) says "Turkish shows are much closer to us than Spanish, also the people, I think the people is like us". She expresses the cultural similarities as "general mentality", "family relationships", "lifestyle", "clothing", "food", "decoration" and "Islam". After the various Balkan states achieved their independence, erasing the traces of Ottoman has meant realizing a set of ideals that are set in opposition to the Ottoman or oriental, understood in terms of modernization/westernization. This process was supposed to bring in a new set of relations both in the family and in society as a whole, based on individuality and rationality, an entirely new position for women, a revised role for children, and a new work ethos (Todorova 1996: 59). When we look at audiences' interpretations of family values and morals in *The Magnificent Century* we can see that the ideal of westernization has not had the desired effect in some parts of Balkan societies. For example, Bosniak viewer Lejla Jusic (v.20) identified the similarities between the two cultures in terms of "Islam", "food", "clothing", "architecture", and then says "...We have similar tradition, family has a special place in our cultures, our honor and moral. But I already knew it before watching the series but after I only confirmed my opinion." Mina Jovicic (v.23), another Bosniak viewer, says her opinion about the Turks did not change after viewing the series. According to her, Turks are people who have always cared about their traditions and moral values.

In spite of the Balkans' historical experiences of tragedy, anger, and hatred, and the formation of national identity narratives around them, the major reason for the great interest in Turkish series in the region is their cultural proximity, a reality that prevails against predominant narratives of national identity. In our daily life, we share events and reflections on them with the people we know, and we read newspapers and watch TV programs to which we feel close. We stay away from narratives bothering us and inquiring radically our understanding (Inal 2010: 31). In this context, we can say that the ratings of *The Magnificent Century* indicate that many

people in the Balkans find Turkish series close to their own world of meaning.

Unlike Bosnian viewers, Serbian and Croatian audiences did not use words of explicit praise while talking about intercultural similarities, but drew upon concepts such as "family relationships", "lifestyle" and "culture" when referring to similarities between their own cultures and Turkish culture. While they tend not to state them explicitly, Serb and Croat audiences have also found reflections of common moral and family values and lifestyles in the Turkish series, which they could not find to the same degree in the American or Latin series. However, on the other side of the coin, "cultural proximity" is a part of historical conflict in the region. In other words, some circles see "cultural proximity" as a product of the "slavery period" under Ottoman rule. In narratives of Serbian and Croatian national identity, Turks are depicted as "other" and "invader"; how, then, do Serbian and Croatian audience members identify with the characters of Turkish TV series? As mentioned in the previous section, Serbian and Croatian audiences tried to negotiate this tension around national identity and otherness by saying "this is [the] Turks' own history" in regard to aspects of the drama that depict periods of Ottoman influence over Serbian and Croatian society and culture. Audience members explained that their reasons for watching the series are usually related to aesthetic qualities of the drama and the acting. These factors are, of course, important reasons for the series' popularity in the region. But, at the same time, Serb and Croat audiences have recognized the great similarities between their own cultures and that of Turkey. For this reason, we could say that cultural proximity is one of the important factors underlying the great interest in Turkish series. For instance, Serbian viewer Millica T (v.26), while saying the Ottomans played a negative role in the region where Slavs and Christians lived, also says that Turkish music and cuisine are part of the national heritage of the former Yugoslavia. An anonymous Serbian viewer (v.30) says that, as the Balkans were part of the "500 years" of Ottoman Empire, there are many similarities between the cultures such as shared words, foods, drinks, and clothes. Ana Anđelković (33), another Serb viewer, says that, due to its mixed Balkan, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern characteristics, Turkish culture is rich and therefore common attributes shared between the two cultures are normal. Another anonymous Serbian viewer (v.32), who accepts the similarity with Turkish culture unwillingly says "Serbia was under Ottoman Rule for about 600 years, so there was a lot of influence to the culture (there is quite a bit more in Bosnian culture, naturally)."

Furthermore, three anonymous Serbian audience members (v.24, v.25, v.31) stated that there was no similarity between the two cultures, while one of them (v.31) emphasized similarities between Bosniak culture and Turkish culture.

From the responses of the survey participants, it can be observed that the attitudes of some Croat audience members towards Turks are more stable than are those of some Serbian audience members. It is clear that some members of the audience changed their opinions about Turks after watching the series. For instance, an anonymous Croat viewer (v.34) says her opinion changed to some degree. The same viewer says the similarities between Croatian and Turkish culture are “Turkish coffee, architecture and food”. Another anonymous viewer (v.37) listed the similarities between the two cultures as “family relations”, “lifestyle”, “clothing” and “meals”. Another Croat viewer named Ivan (v.40) says there are a lot of “cultural and linguistic similarities” between the two cultures, and adds that he had no certain opinion regarding Turks before watching the series.

Although Croat audience members tend not to mention common cultural values with such great enthusiasm as the Bosniaks, this can be seen as an underlying cause of the great interest in the series. Marko B. (v.43), a Croat viewer, says the series is so “intriguing” and “well done”, the actors are wonderful. According to this viewer, through their sovereignty over the Balkans, the Turkish “left their mark on culture, cuisine, language, and even on gestures”. Another Croat viewer, Mate Bozic (v.41), says he loves the Turkish series, adding: “It is not like I identify myself with the stories.. He answered the question about similarities between the cultures as follows: “The Turks have influenced the Bosnian so much that they don’t even have their own identity anymore”. Nora (v.42), also a Croat viewer, expressed her admiration for the series’ actors and listed the similarities between the two cultures as “language, culture and food”. Croat viewer Ivana (v.38) listed the similarities as “language, food, raki, and many things”. She also says she will not change her opinions by watching a series.

### 3. CONCLUSION

*The Magnificent Century*, narrating the Ottoman Empire’s many centuries of rule over the Balkans, has been differently interpreted by audiences according to their ethnic and religious identities. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, where about 50% of the population is Bosniak, 30% are Serbs and 15% are Croats,

the Bosniak population’s sympathy towards the Ottomans and Turks has been strengthened with the great interest in the Turkish series. Despite that, Croat and especially Serb audiences have experienced various emotional tensions due to the negative “Ottoman” image that plays an important part in their respective national identities. For instance, while these audiences expressed their admiration for the scenario, they also had to refer the “oppressive policies” of the Ottoman Empire. While some audiences say similarities between their own cultures and the Ottoman/Turkish culture are many some others say there is no similarity. On the other hand, while they mention the pressures of the Ottoman Empire and say the series has not reflected the historical facts, they say they hope that Turkey will continue to produce similar high-quality series. Even though official narratives of national identity may draw upon negative images of Ottoman history and culture, their admiration of the series is based in cultural similarities and the quality of the series’ aesthetic attributes, including its acting and its compelling dramatic scenarios.

Serbian and Croatian audiences, even though they do not use words of praise towards Turks, have used concepts such as “family relationships”, “lifestyle”, “culture” and “common words” while talking about similarities between the cultures. Like the Bosniaks, Croat and Serb audiences – even if it is only given implicit expression – have found in the Turkish series reflections of common moral and family values and lifestyles they cannot find in American or Latin series. In addition to this, some Serb and Croat audience members argue that the series’ historical significance was not of interest, but that they watched for the love themes and intrigue; these attitudes, furthermore, are expressed in a way that suggests a desire to limit negative judgements of their enjoyment from within their own social circles. Such admiration can also be explained through the concept of “prosthetic memory”. These viewers did not directly experience the depicted historical period, thus while watching the series, they were aware of the “contemporary moment” as much as the narrated period. For this reason, many say it is just “history”.

The Bosniak experience of historical transformations and tragedies may have contributed to their more positive opinions towards Ottomans, when compared with those of Orthodox and Catholic Christians. This can be observed in the comments of Bosniak audiences of *The Magnificent Century*, which is to a great extent positive in regard to the dramatic scenario and the Ottomans and Turks. An important part of the Bosniak audiences say their opinion towards Turks did not change after viewing the series, and they were

already aware of the similarities between the two cultures. All the similarities mentioned concern food culture, music, traditional clothes, architecture, family values, behaviors, and even gestures. However, some members of the Bosniak audience think the series does not really reflect historical fact, despite their admiration for it.

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