

*Neoliberal Governance of Culture and Neo-Ottoman Management of Diversity in
New Turkey*

Chien Yang Erdem, Istinye University, Turkey

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Abstract

Neoliberalism and neoconservatism as two distinct political rationalities have formed a peculiar alliance and generated what Wendy Brown (2006; 2015) describes as “de-democratizing effects” in contemporary societies over the last two to three decades. In Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party’s (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*; AKP) rule, this alliance has a unique configuration combining the norms and values of the free market and Islam(ism) to govern every aspect of social life. While existing literature has generated lively debates on education and social security reforms, urban development, and gender politics, *culture* as a target of administrative reform and a part of the governing processes remains relatively under-discussed. This essay focuses on an array of cultural practices, ranging from history museums to television series featuring Turkey’s Ottoman-Islamic past, and examines the de-democratizing effects of the neoliberal-neoconservative alliance. Culture, when governed in line with neoliberalism has become an integral part of the free market where civil participation, as consumers and entrepreneurs, is considered as an indication of democratization. This emergent culture market also has operated as a regulatory mechanism in favor of the Islamist government’s conservative and nationalist agenda. The essay maintains that Turkey’s blend of neoliberalism and neoconservatism has significantly transformed the state’s approach to culture as a way of governing the social, produced a popularly accepted knowledge of Ottoman-Islamic pluralism, and a citizen-subject who is increasingly subjected to exclusion and discipline for expressing critical views of this knowledge.

Keywords: Culture, Neoconservatism, Neoliberalism, De-democratization, Turkey

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Introduction

What would a neoliberal-neoconservative alliance look like in the Turkish context? And what would be the socio-political implications when culture is governed in line with these two political rationalities? The essay seeks to address these questions by critically examining the recent popularization of Ottoman-themed cultural practices, ranging from history museums to television series featuring the Ottoman-Islamic legacy. The study reveals that the convergence of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in Turkey's cultural field has generated what Wendy Brown describes as "de-democratizing effects" undermining the principles of equality and constitutional democracy (Brown, 2006, 2015). Turkey, which has undergone major administrative reforms under the Justice and Development's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi; AKP hereafter) rule since 2003, is a unique case for understanding a variant of the neoliberal-neoconservative alliance. Although existing literature on the subject has generated prominent debates on education, welfare and social security reforms, urban development, and gender policy, *culture* as a target of administrative reform and a part of the governing processes remains relatively under-discussed.

The essay is organized into three parts to illustrate the ways in which neoliberalism and neoconservatism converge and generate illiberal practices in the AKP-led cultural reform. First, it offers a brief overview of the context in which the two political rationalities are formulated and embroiled into administrative reform. The essay maintains that Turkey's neoliberal-neoconservative alliance, which arose as a critique of the early republic's west-oriented modernization and assertive secularism, seeks to mobilize a cultural renewal based on the ethos of free market and a pragmatic understanding of Ottoman-Islamic tolerance and pluralism. Second, through a discussion of the AKP's neoliberal approach to cultural reform, the essay contends that privatization of the cultural domain has produced new spheres of market where individual actions of entrepreneurship and consumption are considered as an indication of democratization. Finally, by examining the governmental practices that are deployed to regulate Ottoman dramas on Turkish television, the essay seeks to comprehend the processes in which a political truth of tolerance and diversity and a new citizen-subject are constituted.

Contextual background

Before discussing the de-democratizing effects of neoliberalism and neoconservatism in Turkey's cultural reform under the AKP's rule, a brief overview of the context in which these two rationalities were formulated and integrated into governing practices would be beneficial. Since the establishment of the Turkish republic, the state has played a major role in maintaining a homogeneous national identity by suppressing public claims of ethnic and religious differences through military interventions. The state's strict control of society's cultural life, in particular its assertive secularist approach to religion and ethnic conception of Turkish identity, has resulted in unsettling tensions among ethno-religious groups (i.e. the Alevi, Armenian, Greek, and Kurdish minorities) in the 1980s and 1990s. The escalating social tensions at the time indicated the limits of state-led modernization and secularization projects in

accommodating ethnic and pious segments of society (Bozdoğan & Kasaba, 1997, p. 31). This was also a time when Turkey began to witness the declining authority of the founding ideology of Kemalism as an effect of economic and political liberalization. When the AKP came to power in 2003, one of the urgent political questions was thus the “the limits of what the state can—or ought for its own good—reasonably demand of citizens [...] to continue to make everyone internalize an ethnic conception of Turkishness” (Silverstein, 2010, p. 24). At this political juncture, it was clear that a more inclusive socio-political framework was necessary in order to resolve the growing tension resulted in identity claims.

The 1980s was a turning point when Turgut Özal’s pro-Islamic administration initiated neoliberal reform. a neoconservative middle class was on the rise as Turkey underwent economic and political liberalization (İnsel, 2003; Yılmaz, 2009). The burgeoning neoconservative middle class, who strove for both political existence and impact under the rule of the military regime, has influenced the consolidation and consecutive electoral success of the AKP to this day. Since the AKP’s political identity and cultural outlook are set against the “non-pluralist and illiberal form of secularism and state-society relationship,” it sought to restructure the established economic and political frameworks. By adopting neoliberal imperatives and relying on privatization, the AKP sought to dismantle the state’s stronghold over society (Atasoy, 2009).

Apart from domestic affairs, Turkey’s accelerated European Union (EU) membership negotiations between the late 1990s and mid 2000s provided a timely opportunity for the AKP government to legitimize its democratization reforms. Culture, as an administrative unit, was now restructured to comply with the EU integration plan. By complying with the EU’s agenda to enhance “freedom, democracy, solidarity and respect for diversity,”¹ the AKP-led national cultural policy would shift away from the state-centered, protectionist framework of the Kemalist establishment towards one that underscores principles of “mutual tolerance, cultural variety, equality and opposition to discrimination” (*Cultural Policy in Turkey—National Report*, 2013: 7). Nonetheless, this shift does not follow that Turkey’s renewed cultural policy adheres to the EU’s model of multicultural democracy. The EU agenda was rather tactically utilized in the AKP-led cultural policy to rationalize a neoconservative nationalist outlook, which frames Ottoman-Islam as the basis of modern multicultural democracy in Turkey. This outlook proclaims that Ottoman-Islam is the antidote to the decades-long Kurdish and other minority issues because it transcends ethno-religious differences. To promulgate this vision, the renewed cultural policy encourages the creative industry to transform the Ottoman-Islamic history into various forms of cultural products. For example, the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453 has been converted into such spectacles as the Panorama 1453 History Museum, a fun ride called The Conqueror’s Dream (Fatih’in Rüyası) at the Istanbul Vialand Theme Park, the highest profile blockbuster *The Conquest (Fetih 1453)*, and the primetime television series *The Conqueror (Fatih)*. Each of these sites and productions iterates a

¹ Council Resolution of 21 January 2002 on the role of culture in the development of the European Union. [http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32002G0205\(02\)](http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A32002G0205(02))

monotone narrative of the conquest of Istanbul as the founding moment of a civilization of tolerance and diversity.

Given the contextual background, one could argue that the AKP's neoliberal and neoconservative governing rationalities arose as critiques of the secular state's excessive government in society's cultural life. The EU negotiation which required Turkey to comply with a liberal democratic paradigm therefore has given way to the formulation and convergence of these two governmentalities that would significantly challenge the state-centered approach to culture. It is also in this context that Turkey has witnessed emergent forms of cultural practices and sites featuring the Ottoman-Islamic legacy. Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic past, which was considered as a sign of backwardness and obstacle to the early republic's modernization project, is now reconsidered as a means to rationalize the AKP-led democratization reforms and mission to raise a pious generation.² Culture in this respect can be understood as what Tony Bennett (1998) calls "a reformer's science"—referring to an understanding of culture as a transformative force and an integral part of the governing processes seeking to reshape society and individual conduct within the domain of culture and by means of culture.

Creating ever new spheres of free market

It shall be noted that culture as an instrument of government is not an innovation of the AKP administration. Culture has always been a crucial area of administrative concern throughout the history of the Turkish republic. During the early republic, culture was conceptualized as part of the state-led public service aimed to inform and educate citizens (Katoğlu, 2009, p. 32). Arts and culture were essential means for the secularist elites to modernize the nation. Such cultural institutions as state ballet, theater, museum, and national broadcast "[indicated] the type of modern life style that the government was trying to advocate" (Katoğlu, 2009, p. 33). Nonetheless, Turkey's neoliberal reform has changed the role of the state, the role of culture, and the techniques of managing culture. What distinguishes the AKP's neoliberal style of government from that of the early republic is that the market mentality has become the administrative norm (Aksoy, 2009). Culture now is reconceptualized as an asset for advancing Turkey in global competition and a site for exercising individual freedom rather than a mechanism of social engineering. And Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic cultural heritage in particular is utilized as a nation branding technique, a national emblem, to promote Turkey in the global culture industry, rather than a corrupt past to be forgotten. To achieve the aim of efficient, hence *good*, governance, the AKP's cultural governance has heavily relied on privatization as a way to decentralize the state. Thus, privatization has not only transformed culture into an integral part of the free market, but also redefined the state's role as a facilitator of the culture market, rather than the main provider of cultural service to the public.

² Recep Tayyip Erdoğan once commented in response to the oppositional Republican People's Party's (CHP) criticism about the AKP government's interference in politics with religious views, "we [the AKP] will raise a generation that is conservative and democratic and embraces the values and historical principles of its nation" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, February 2, 2012).

The changing relationship between state and culture and the new role that culture has acquired in the process of neoliberal reform is evident in the emergent spheres of free market including city museums, the media sector, and the film industry. For example, the Istanbul Miniaturk Theme Park, Istanbul 1453 Panorama History Museum, and Bursa 1326 Panorama History Museum are exemplary of a new type of museums that have been established during the 2000s and 2010s. What differentiates this new type of history museums from the state-run museums and cultural heritage sites, such as the Anatolian Civilizations Museum, are their theme park-like, commercial-oriented, and civil society-based characteristics. The rationale behind the formation of these museums is that it would enhance the process of democratization by allowing the local authorities and civil society to engage in the production of culture. It is also claimed that by transforming Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic heritage into an urban spectacle, city museums would contribute to boosting tourism and generating capital into the cities.

In addition, the Turkish media sector is another area where the process of privatization is compellingly evident. The rationale of the media reform is that, by privatizing the media sector, it would reduce state expenditures on public services and achieve more efficient governance by transferring the responsibility of (media) production onto the private sector. It is also proclaimed that privatization would be an effective means to meet the preconditions of EU membership which include decentralizing state institutions to allow civic engagement.³ The restructured Turkish media sector has become what Nicholas Rose (1999) calls a "sphere of freedom" where private individuals are assumed responsible for enacting their civic rights to freedom through entrepreneurship and consumption.

Moreover, as is the case for city museums and the media sector, cinema is considered as a resource to be more sufficiently managed to advance Turkey in the global culture industry. As stated in *Cultural Policy in Turkey—National Report*, "[the] productions enabling the Turkish cinema to be a brand recognized worldwide will be popularized and the sector's contribution to exports will be expanded and enhanced" ("Cultural Policy in Turkey--National Report," 2013, p. 9). The General Directorate of Cinema under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism also declares that its mission is to "put the Turkish cinema industry in a position of worldwide acknowledgement and elevating [Turkey] to a degree as one of the major film production locations."⁴ These official statements hence entail that the fundamental aim of developing the Turkish film industry is branding—a process through which Turkey is to be promoted as a competent player in the global market and a desirable location for foreign investment. The recent construction of a large scale film studio, Midwood, by the Municipality of Büyükdere in Istanbul therefore is an indication of the local government's effort to encourage private investment and to elevate the city for global competition.

Although the AKP-led cultural policy proclaims a democratizing outcome through neoliberal reform, recent scholarships have suggested the opposite otherwise. As

³ *Cultural Policy in Turkey—National Report*, 2013.

⁴ See official website of the General Director of Cinema at <http://sinema.kulturuzm.gov.tr/EN,144066/our-mission-and-vision.html>

researchers of the Cultural Policy and Management Research Center at Istanbul Bilgi University suggest, rather than enhancing a participatory culture or allowing social dialogue on cultural rights and freedoms, especially for the ethno-religious minorities, the AKP-led reform has instead strengthened state power and control over cultural practices in society. This paradox is perhaps most evident in the media sector. As Murat Akser and Banu Baybars-Hawks (2012) bluntly remark, the Turkish media environment under the AKP administration “is a historically conservative, redistributive, panoptic, and discriminatory media autocracy”. Bilge Yeşil (2016) shares a similar view as she describes that the AKP-led neoliberal reform, which has enabled the government’s interference over the media sector, is a cause for Turkey’s democracy deficiency and descendent to authoritarianism. Increasing media censorship, closing of critical media outlets, and continuing imprisonment of academics, journalists, and media practitioners who express dissent in both traditional and new media platforms, especially after the attempted coup in July 2016, have been routine practices even though the government continues to promise greater democracy. In this respect, one may argue that neoliberal reform of the cultural field under the AKP rule has extended state power and control rather than limiting it. The emergent spheres of freedom/free market are sites where citizen’s active participation as entrepreneurs and consumers is narrowly understood as participatory democracy.

The truth game and a divided citizen-subject

In the AKP-led cultural reform, the free market is an indispensable condition for promulgating a moral-political truth and governing dissent. This final section focuses on the Ottoman historical costume dramas on Turkish television and discusses the illiberal practices that are deployed to exclude non-conforming views and to maintain the circuit of a moral-political truth. Two cases are worth attention for understanding how the emergent culture market serves as a regulatory mechanism for shaping individual conduct.

Between 2011 and 2014, the Turkish television series *Magnificent Century*, featuring the life of the 16th century Ottoman Sultan, Süleyman the Magnificent, attracted a wide viewership in Turkey and abroad, especially in the Balkans, Central Asia, and the Middle East where the show was exported. Despite its domestic and global popularity, *Magnificent Century* was harshly criticized by many conservative viewers, including the conservative government officials. The television production received more than 70,000 individual complaints and warning from the RTÜK (Radio and Television Supreme Board) during the first days of its broadcast. Based on the filed complaints, the show was accused for its historical inaccuracy and threat to traditional family values and social norms by representing the Sultan’s (fictionalized) private life inside the harem. In 2015 the series’ sequel *Magnificent Century: Kösem*, depicting the life of Kösem Sultan, a slave girl who became a powerful figure in the 17th century Ottoman Empire, also came under the radar of the conservative circles and RTÜK. The series was criticized for having “negative impacts on society’s moral values and the mental and physical developments of children and youths” (“Kösem’e şok ceza!,” 2016; “‘Muhteşem Yüzyıl Kösem’ cezası,” 2016). A petition calling to ban *Kösem* was submitted to RTÜK and other public administration offices, including

the Parliament, Prime Minister, and President.⁵ According to RTÜK's decision, the broadcaster Star TV would be assessed a fine as a symbolic gesture of punishment.

The controversy of *Muhteşem* and its sequel *Köse* stands in stark contrast with the steadily increasing number of Ottoman historical dramas broadcasted on TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) during the same period (see Table 1 and 2 for comparison). Since 2010, Turkey's national public broadcaster TRT and its associated media companies have produced more than a dozen Ottoman television shows, including primetime series and children's programs on the channel TRT Kids. It shall be noted that TRT Kids is Turkey's first national broadcast channel dedicated to children. The timing of its launch in 2009 draws attention to the AKP's agenda to raise a conservative generation.

Table 1: Ottoman historical dramas and children's programs on TRT (2010-2018)

Year	Channel	Production	Episodes	Production company
2010	TRT Kids	<i>Küçük Hezarfen</i>	26	TRT Düsler Evi Çizgi Film Stüdyosu
2010	TRT Kids	<i>Barbaros</i>	26	Animax
2011	TRT 1	<i>Yamak Ahmet</i>	60	Okur Film
2011	TRT 1	<i>Evvel Zaman Hikayesi</i>	4	TRT
2012	TRT 1	<i>Bir Zamanlar Osmanlı Kıyam (Once Upon a Time in the Ottoman Empire: Rebellion)</i>	20	Herşey Film
2012	TRT 1	<i>Esir Sultan</i>	5	Okur Film
2013	TRT Kids	<i>Çınar</i>	26	Gafi2000 Productions
2013-2014	TRT 1	<i>Osmanlı Tokadı</i>	34	Duka Film
2014	TRT 1	<i>Çırağan Baskını</i>	4	Piar DNA
2014-ongoing	TRT 1	<i>Diriliş: Ertuğrul (Resurrection: Ertugrul)</i>	91+	Tekden Film
2014-2016	TRT 1	<i>Filinta (Filinta)</i>	56	ES Film
2015	TRT 1	<i>Zeyrek ile Çeyrek</i>	29	ES Film
2016	TRT 1	<i>Yunus Emre: Aşkın Yolculuğu</i>	44	Tekden Film

⁵ For the petition and campaign for taking *Köse* off air see <https://www.change.org/p/rt%C3%BCK-muhte%C5%9Fem-y%C3%BCzy%C4%B1-k%C3%B6sem-dizisi-yay%C4%B1ndan-kald%C4%B1r%C4%B1lmal%C4%B1d%C4%B1r>

2017-ongoing	TRT 1	<i>Payitaht Abdülhamid (The Last Emperor)</i>	17+	ES Film
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Table 2: Ottoman historical dramas on other Turkish television channels (2010-2018)

Year	Channel	Production	Episodes	Production company
2011-2014	Kanal D, Star TV	<i>Muhteşem Yüzyıl (Magnificent Century)</i>	139	Tims Productions
2012-2013	Fox	<i>Harem</i>	32	Gani Müjde
2013	Kanal D	<i>Fatih (Fatih)</i>	5	MEDYAPIM
2015-2017	Fox, Star TV	<i>Muhteşem Yüzyıl: Kösem (Magnificent Century: Kösem)</i>	60	Tims Productions
March 2018	Kanal D	<i>Mehmed: Bir Cihan Fatih (Mehmed the Conqueror)</i>	6	O3 Medya

Note: Series with English titles are also viewed outside Turkey.

Among the series on national broadcast, *Resurrection*, featuring the establishment of the Ottoman Empire, became the highest rating and award winning series in 2016.⁶ The series reached nearly 200 million viewers in 173 countries (“Diriliş Ertuğrul Kaç Ülkede İzleniyor?,” 2016). It has received considerable amount of financial support from the government. In the aftermath of the attempted coup in July 2016, the series’ producer made a campaign video calling for the nation’s unity against “terrorism”—addressing those who are allegedly involved in the attempted coup. President Erdoğan stated that the *Resurrection*’s selection as the best television series is an indication that it “has won the nation’s heart” (“Diriliş Ertuğrul yorumu,” 2016). His statement is not only a praise for the series’ contribution in reviving Ottoman history, but also its solidarity with the government’s stance on “democracy”. It suggests that viewers’ choice of *Resurrection* signals their choice for “democracy”.

What the controversy of *Magnificent Century* and its sequel *Kösem* illustrates is the AKP government’s endeavor in monopolizing the production of truth. Central to Foucault’s notion of governmentality is “truth games”—referring to the activities of knowledge production through which certain thoughts are rendered truthful and practices of government are made reasonable (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006, pp. 7–8 and 28–31). What Foucault calls the “regime of truth” is not concerned with facticity, but the whole range of activities that connect the different governing practices and make sense of the political rationalities marking the “division between true and false” (Foucault, 2010). In light of this view, the AKP’s political truth is not concerned with historical accuracy or objectivity, but a pragmatic understanding of Ottoman-Islam as the basis of modern multiculturalism in Turkey. It also sees

⁶ Resurrection was awarded the Golden Butterfly Award in November, 2016.

Ottoman-Islam as the remedy for the degenerated moral values in society resulted from west-oriented modernization and assertive secularism. Depictions of the Ottoman-Islamic past that do not conform to the government's version of truth are therefore deemed as a challenge to its authority.

Toby Miller in *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media*, also argues that the popular media constitute routine practices through which truth is made perceptible. As he notes, “[radio], for example, has developed genres and themes for stations to organize their audiences, increased transmission and reproduction, and mobilized new spaces of reception” (Miller, 1998, p. 5). According to him, radio is one of such technologies of truth that by devoting different time slots for particular genres and themes of broadcast, it addresses different segments of the audience whom it sees as the public having a consensus of taste, lifestyle, history, etc. As Miller notes, “[when] these technologies [of truth] congeal to forge loyalty to the sovereign state through custom or art, they do so through the cultural citizen” (1998, p. 4). In this regard, the different subgenres of Ottoman historical costume series, such as action, romance, comedy, and children's programs, can be understood as a technology of truth aiming to amplify not only viewers' choice and taste, but also spaces of perception.

By disciplining those who do not conform to the government's vision of history, culture and morality, such judicial discipline as RTÜK's bans and fines entail what Foucault calls the “dividing practices” differentiating the populace into opposing categories: the good and the bad, the virtuous and the degenerate, and the conforming and the disobedient citizens. Each of these practices presupposes and constitutes a moral subject who is “either divided inside himself or divided from others” (Foucault, 1983, p. 208). In this context, such dividing practices can be located in the AKP government's renewal of national cultural policy, its restructuring of the media in line with market mentality, its campaign for an authentic national culture by reviving Turkey's Ottoman-Islamic past, and its restoration of so called “traditional moral values” which the conservative government claims have been lost. These practices presume a subject of citizenry, who has become morally corrupt and is deprived of the knowledge of their Ottoman-Islamic ancestry as a result of the early republican elites' nation-building and modernization projects. These practices therefore aim for a cultural renewal by guiding subjects to accept their responsibility to become economically liberal, culturally conservative, and morally just (in the view of Islamic justice). Such practices can be understood as what Foucault calls the “techniques of the self” through which individuals come to understand themselves as moral subjects who are capable of “self-reflection”, “self-caring”, and “self-control” (Rose, 1999, pp. 42–44).

Conclusion

On August 5, 2014, just days before the Turkish presidential election, Erdoğan (presidential candidate then) said in an interview, “[people] have said a lot of things about me. One [...] said I was Georgian. Then another [...] I beg your pardon, called me uglier things, saying I was Armenian.”⁷ He made this statement to declare his authentic Sunni Turkish identity by pointing to his opponents as “Alevi”, “Zaza-origin Kurd”, or “not even a native.”⁸ His statement drew public attention mainly because of the divisive and discriminatory language that was being used against ethno-religious groups. Nonetheless, what is more striking about this statement is its stark contrast with the objectives of the AKP-led cultural policy, developmental plans, and projects in promoting a culture of tolerance, diversity, and peaceful coexistence in Turkey. It also raises the question of the logic of evoking the Ottoman-Islamic tolerance and pluralism as the ideal model for a multicultural Turkey.

Since the conservative AKP administration came to power, it has vigorously sought to reform the cultural field based on neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities. By adopting neoliberal imperatives, the administration claims that Turkey’s cultural domain would be liberalized from excessive state and government interventions and would enhance participatory democracy. The AKP administration also sees that Turkey’s west-oriented vision of modernity has had negative effects on traditional values and morality. To restore what it deems a fragmenting Turkish cultural identity and degenerating social values, the AKP administration seeks to create ever new spheres of the market where a moral-religious truth can be mobilized. Nonetheless, the alliance of neoliberalism and neoconservatism as discussed in this essay has constituted yet another authoritarian type of government where individual citizens are increasingly subjected to exclusion and discipline for demanding cultural rights and freedoms and for expressing critical views of the established political truth. I shall note that since Turkey is still currently experiencing the aftermath of the July 15 attempted coup which took place in 2016, the impacts of the AKP-led cultural reform require still new methodologies and theorizations in order to sufficiently comprehend the ever changing relationship between culture, government, and society. This essay therefore is intended to invite further debates on the discursive ways in which neoliberal and neoconservative rationalities may intersect and simultaneously weave culture into the governing processes.

⁷ “PM Erdoğan complains of being called ‘even uglier things, Armenian,’” *Hurriyet Daily News*, August 6, 2014, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/pm-erdogan-complains-of-being-called-even-uglier-things-armenian.aspx?PageID=238&NID=70043&NewsCatID=338>

⁸ Ibid.

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