TURGUT ÖZAL AND THE BULGARIAN TURKS: BUILDING A POLITICAL IMAGE (1983-1989)

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ABSTRACT

TURGUT ÖZAL AND THE BULGARIAN TURKS: BUILDING A POLITICAL IMAGE (1983-1989)

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This thesis illustrates how Turgut Özal utilized both internationally and domestically renowned symbolic figures, such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, in the construction of his political image within the context of propaganda during the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria by the Bulgarian government between 1983-1989. Focusing on the high-profile cases of internationally renowned Olympic weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu's defection to Turkey and the detainment of Aysel Özgür in Bulgaria, the study explores how these figures were instrumentalized in Özal's propaganda activities. While doing this, this thesis adopts a framework that examines the challenges faced by the Turkish minority in Bulgaria within the contexts of historical background between 1878 and 1983, then analyses Turgut Özal's strategic approaches through the cases of Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür in the second cold war era from the perspective of international relations and propaganda theory. This thesis argues that the successes, recognition, and victimization of two symbolic figures were utilized by Özal to construct his political image during his prime ministry, marked by political challenges.

Keywords: Turgut Özal, Naim Süleymanoğlu, Aysel Özgür, Cold War, Propaganda.

ÖZ

TURGUT ÖZAL VE BULGARİSTAN TÜRKLERİ: SİYASİ BİR İMAJ İNŞASI (1983-1989)

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Bu tez, Turgut Özal'ın 1983-1989 yılları arasında Bulgaristan hükümetinin Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığa yönelik baskıları sürecinde, Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür gibi hem uluslararası hem de ulusal çapta tanınan sembolik figürleri propaganda çerçevesinde kendi siyasi imajını inşa etmek için nasıl kullandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, uluslararası üne sahip Olimpiyat haltercisi Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Türkiye'ye ilticası ve Aysel Özgür'ün Bulgaristan'da zorla tutulması ve ardından Türkiye'ye gelmesi gibi dikkat çeken olaylara odaklanarak, bu figürlerin Özal'ın propaganda faaliyetlerinde nasıl araçsallaştırıldığını incelemektedir. Bunu yaparken, bu tez, öncelikle 1878-1983 yılları arasındaki tarihsel arka plan çerçevesinde Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın karşılaştığı zorlukları ele alan bir çerçeve benimsemekte ve ardından ikinci Soğuk Savaş dönemi bağlamında, Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür örnekleri üzerinden Turgut Özal'ın kendi siyasal imaj inşasını ve bu bağlamda stratejik yaklaşımlarını uluslararası ilişkiler ve propaganda teorisi perspektifinden analiz etmektedir. Bu tez, iki sembolik figürün başarılarının, tanınırlıklarının ve mağduriyetlerinin, siyasi sorunlarla geçen başbakanlık döneminde Özal tarafından kendi siyasi imajını inşa etmek için kullanıldığını savunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Turgut Özal, Naim Süleymanoğlu, Aysel Özgür, Propaganda, Soğuk Savaş.

To my family…

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the turbulent landscape of the second Cold War era, the oppression of the Turkish-Muslim minority in Bulgaria emerged as a significant human rights issue that echoed across international borders. Between 1983 and 1989, the Bulgarian government's and Todor Zhivkov's assimilation policies, particularly the "Revival Process," in Bulgarian "Vazroditelen Protses" (Възродителен процес) sought to erase the ethnic and religious identity of its Turkish and Muslim population through forced name changes, suppression of cultural practices, and violations of basic human rights. This systematic oppression not only strained bilateral relations between Bulgaria and Türkiye but also drew the attention of the global community, highlighting the intersection of ethnic minority rights and geopolitical tensions during a period marked by ideological polarization. The Bulgarian government's assimilation policies provided Turgut Özal and his government with a potent tool for propaganda on both international and national stages during a time characterized by extensive political strife and turmoil in Türkiye.

In that sense, this thesis primarily investigates how Turgut Özal utilized internationally renowned symbolic figures, such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, in the construction of his political image within the context of propaganda at a time when numerous political problems prevailed. Focusing specifically on the cases of Olympic gold medallist weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu's defection to Türkiye in 1986 and his subsequent career and Aysel Özgür's detainment in Bulgaria from 1986 to 1987 and her arrival in Türkiye, the study explores how these individual narratives were instrumentalized within propaganda activities by Turgut Özal. In a comprehensive manner, it examines how, after their arrival, Özal leveraged extensive media coverage-including television broadcasts and newspaper

reports to highlight their stories, using them as symbols of national resilience and unity within the broader context of the Cold War. By analysing these high-profile cases, the research sheds light on the strategies employed by the Özal government to galvanize public opinion, strengthen its political image, and advance domestic policy objectives amid the complexities of the Second Cold War period.

The Turkish and Muslim minority in Bulgaria has a long and intricate history, rooted in the Ottoman Empire's legacy in the Balkans. Following the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78 and subsequent treaties, significant demographic and political shifts left the Turkish and Muslim minority vulnerable to nationalist policies in the emerging Bulgarian state. Throughout the 20th century, fluctuating relations between the two nations often placed the minority issue at the centre of bilateral tensions. However, the 1980s marked a particularly harsh period, as the Bulgarian government intensified its oppression efforts, culminating in widespread human rights abuses that attracted international condemnation. The escalation of assimilation efforts in the 1980s under Todor Zhivkov's regime marked a significant intensification of these challenges, as the government sought to enforce a homogenous national identity aligned with nationalist ideology. In detail, this period witnessed severe restrictions on language, education, and religious practices, culminating in widespread human rights violations that elicited condemnation from various international organizations, human rights groups and Western countries such as the USA.

Simultaneously, Türkiye was undergoing significant political and economic transformations under Turgut Özal's leadership. Embracing liberal economic policies and aligning more closely with Western powers with a pro-Western orientation, Özal sought to transform Türkiye's economy and enhance its geopolitical influence during the heightened tensions of the Second Cold War. Additionally, Özal's administration was grappling with significant internal challenges, including allegations of corruption, high inflation, cronyism, rising terrorism, arms and drug smuggling, and mismanagement of state funds, which were eroding public trust in the government. However, the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria presented both a challenge and an opportunity for the Turkish government and Turgut Özal. To mitigate the negative impact of these issues and divert public attention, Özal sought

to reconstruct his political image by leveraging high-profile figures like Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, using their stories as symbols of national resilience and unity. Domestically, it allowed Özal to rally national unity around a cause that resonated deeply with the Turkish populace. Özal's government strategically leveraged the situation to draw international attention to Bulgaria's policies, using diplomatic channels, media tools, and symbolic figures to apply pressure and garner support from Western allies and media outlets. Remarkably in domestic politics, it provided a platform to assert Turgut Özal's role as a defender of the Turkish minority during the waning years of the Cold War.

While previous studies have explored the historical context of the Turkish-Muslim minority in Bulgaria and Türkiye's foreign policy during the Özal era, there is a gap in understanding how individual cases were leveraged as propaganda tools to serve broader political objectives.[1] This thesis aims to fill that gap by addressing the following research questions: How did Turgut Özal use the Bulgarian government's oppressive policies against the Turkish minority between 1983 and 1989, and how

[1] The sources consulted on the topics discussed are as follows: Ali Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria: Post-1989 developments," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 27/1, Bilâl N. Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri* (İstanbul: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1986), Mustafa Türkeş, *Turkish Bulgarian Relations: Past and Present* (İstanbul: Tasam Yayınları, 2010), Fahir Armaoğlu, *20. Yüzyıl Siyasî Tarihi 1914-1980* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1997), Ali Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), Erik J. Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), Tomazs Kamusela, *Ethnic Cleansing During the Cold War, The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis, 2018), Ali Eminov, "Are Turkish Speakers in Bulgaria of Ethnic Bulgarian Origin?" *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal*, 7/2 (1986), Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return," *The International Migration Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (1992), Ömer E. Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989* (Ankara: Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Yayınları, 2000), Milena Mahon, "The Turkish Minority under Communist Bulgaria: Politics of Ethnicity and Power," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 1/2, (1999), Ayşe Parla, "Remembering Across the Border: Postsocialist Nostalgia Among Turkish Immigrants from Bulgaria," *American Ethnologist*, 36/4, (2009), Baskın Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), Evgenia Kalinova, "The Revival Process in Bulgaria and the Soviet Participation – Myths and Realities," *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 1/2, (2021), William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774* (New York: Routledge, 2013), Ayşe Parla, "Longing, Belonging and Locations of Homeland Among Turkish Immigrants from Bulgaria," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2006), Neriman Ersoy-Hacısalihoğlu Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu, 89 Göçü Bulgaristan'da 1984-89 Azınlık Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Zorunlu Göç, (İstanbul: Balkar, 2012), Ayşe Kayapinar, Levent Kayapinar, Hakan Öztürk, Ökkeş Narinç, *1989 Yılında Bulgaristan'dan Türk Zorunlu Göçünün 30. Yılı,* (Çorlu: Çorlu Belediyesi Yayınları, 2020), Neriman Ersoy-Hacısalihoğlu and Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu, *Sürgün ve Hafıza*, (Ankara: Ytb Yayınları, 2023), Mehmet Barlas, *Turgut Özal'ın Anıları*, (İtanbul: Birey Yayıncılık, 2001), Süleyman Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal* (İstanbul: Kopernik Kitap, 2019, Barış Yetkin, *Populizm ve Özal-Erdoğan*, (Antalya:Yeniden Anadolu ve Rumeli Müdafaa-I Hukuk Yayınları, 2010), İhsan Sezal and İhsan *Dağı, Özallı yıllar,siyaset iktisat,zihniyet*, (İstanbul: Beta Basım A.Ş, 2016).

did he utilize two symbolic figures, Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, within the context of propaganda to construct his political image? What strategies did Turgut Özal employ to integrate these narratives into Türkiye's foreign policy and domestic politics? How did these propaganda activities influence Türkiye's international image and internal political dynamics during the Second Cold War period?

1.1. Sources and the Thesis Overview

With the aim of providing substantive answers to these inquiries, the research adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing primary sources such as newspapers, biographies, journals, speeches, media reports, government documents and archival materials from the period between 1983 and 1989. Qualitative and historical analysis of Turkish and international media coverage and other sources provides insights into the portrayal and impact of the cases of Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür. The study is grounded in historical research, propaganda theory and international relations frameworks, examining how state actors employ communication strategies to shape public opinion and advance policy goals. By situating the analysis within the broader geopolitical context of the Second Cold War, the research considers the interplay between national and self-interests, ideological alignments, and human rights concerns.

The thesis is organized into five chapters, including the introduction and conclusion chapters. Chapter 2 begins by tracing the historical roots of the Turkish-Muslim minority issue in Bulgaria, exploring the events from 1878 to 1983-84 that set the stage for the 1980s oppression. Moreover, the very same chapter of this thesis investigates the formation of public opinion in Türkiye during this period, analysing how media representations, public discourse, and societal reactions contributed to shaping the national response to the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. It examines the internationalization of the oppression of Turks in Bulgaria and details the Turkish government's initial responses. This chapter also explores the influence of the Second Cold War on Turkish foreign policy and how Özal's government reacted to the escalating crisis.

The focus shifts to the case of Naim Süleymanoğlu in Chapter 3. This chapter focuses on the defection of world-renowned weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu and

analyses how Özal capitalized on the event to enhance Türkiye's international standing and his own political image. It investigates the reception of Süleymanoğlu's defection in the international arena, the special bond between Özal and Süleymanoğlu, and how this relationship was leveraged for political gain. Chapter 4 examines the case of Aysel Özgür's detainment in Bulgaria and the subsequent media portrayal. It discusses the impact of the television series *Yeniden Doğmak* and how it served as a propaganda tool. The chapter explores Bulgaria's reaction to the series, the internationalization of the issue, and Özal's strategic manipulation of Özgür's homecoming and the situation to bolster his political position.

The thesis concludes by summarizing the key findings and discussing the implications for understanding the use of propaganda in foreign policy and domestic politics, and it illustrates how Turgut Özal utilized internationally renowned symbolic figures, such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, in the construction of his political image within the context of propaganda.

1.2. Terminological Considerations: Muslims and Turks in Bulgaria

In discussing the minorities in Bulgaria during the period between 1983 and 1989, it is essential to clarify the terminology used throughout this thesis. While the term "Muslim Turks" is often employed to describe the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, this thesis distinguishes between "Muslims and Turks" to acknowledge the diverse composition of the Muslim population in Bulgaria, which includes not only ethnic Turks but also other Muslim communities such as the Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims) and Roma Muslims. By parting "Muslims and Turks" (in a sense of terminology), this thesis aims to provide a more accurate representation of the minority groups affected by the Bulgarian government's policies during this period.

The Pomaks are ethnic Bulgarians who converted to Islam during the Ottoman rule between the 15th and 19th centuries, and they speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue. As R.J. Crampton noted, during the process of Islamization and Turkification of the Balkans, particularly in Bulgaria, many landowners converted to Islam and adopted Turkish customs. However, some of these individuals, who were known as

Pomaks, chose to maintain their native language, culture, traditions, and customs despite their conversion.[2] According to Yulian Konstantinov, the Pomaks in Bulgaria are a Muslim minority distinct from ethnic Turks.[3] While both Pomaks and Turks share the Islamic faith, Pomaks are ethnically and linguistically different from Turks.[4] Konstantinov highlights that Pomaks have their own unique cultural practices and traditions, which differentiate them from both the predominantly Christian ethnic Bulgarians and the Turkish-speaking ethnic Turks who maintain Turkish cultural traditions. He notes that nation-states have often attempted to categorize Pomaks either as ethnic Bulgarians or as Turks for political purposes. However, the Pomaks have developed strategies to preserve their distinct identity, focusing on demographic behaviours, community cohesion, and less visible markers of identity rather than on overt cultural symbols that are more susceptible to state intervention.[5]

Mary Neuburger emphasizes that Bulgaria's Muslim population is heterogeneous, comprising various ethnic groups, including ethnic Turks, Pomaks (Bulgarian-speaking Muslims), and Roma Muslims, each possessing unique linguistic, cultural, and historical identities.[6] Ethnic Turks, who speak Turkish as their mother tongue and maintain strong ties to Turkish cultural practices, have preserved a distinct ethnic identity within Bulgaria. In addition to this, in her analysis of the demographic composition of post-Ottoman Bulgaria, Milena B. Methodieva distinguishes between "Turks" and "Muslims" by highlighting the ethnic diversity within the Muslim population. According to Methodieva, while ethnic Turks constituted the overwhelming majority, 90 per cent of the Muslim population in Bulgaria during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were also significant numbers of other

[2] R. J. Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 35.

[3] Yulian Konstantinov, "Strategies for Sustaining a Vulnerable Identity: The Case of The Bulgarian Pomaks," in *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, ed. Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Hurst, 1997), p. 33.

[4] Konstantinov, "Strategies for Sustaining a Vulnerable Identity," pp. 34-37.

[5] Konstantinov, "Strategies for Sustaining a Vulnerable Identity," pp. 34-43.

[6] Mary Neuburger, *The Orient within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp.2-3 and p. 6.

Muslim groups, including Pomaks, Muslim Roma, and Tatars.[7] Ethnic Turks were predominantly located in the northeastern regions of Bulgaria, such as the districts around Shumen, Eski Cuma, and Razgrad, where they accounted for 50-80 per cent of the local inhabitants.[8] In some areas like the Deli Orman region and the Akkadınlar district, Muslims-mostly Turks-constituted over 90 per cent of the population.[9] Turks lived throughout most of the country but were concentrated in specific areas, maintaining their Turkish language and cultural practices. In Methodieva's study, it is noted that the Bulgarians distinctly categorized the Turks, particularly concerning their mother tongue, thereby establishing a unique classification within the broader spectrum of Muslim groups.[10] This separation underscores the complexities of identity and linguistic affiliation in the context of ethno-religious differentiation.

According to Antonina Zhelyazkova, Pomaks are ethnic Bulgarians who converted to Islam between the 15th and 19th centuries; they speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue and exhibit cultural practices that blend Islamic and Christian elements.[11] Muslim Roma represents another distinct group, often practising syncretic religions and incorporating rituals from both Islam and Christianity.[12] The Pomaks' Bulgarian origins are evident in their linguistic and cultural connections to the broader Bulgarian population. Unlike Turks, the Pomaks speak Bulgarian as their mother tongue, which reflects their deep-rooted ethnic and linguistic ties to the Bulgarian people.[13] Additionally, their customs and festive rituals demonstrate explicit syncretic elements that are heavily influenced by Christianity, further highlighting their

[7] Milena Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), pp. 39, 41.

[8] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 37.

[9] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 39.

[10] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 37.

[11] Antonina Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 12/3 (2010) pp. 283-300.

[12] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," pp. 283-300.

[13] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," pp. 290-291.

historical association with Bulgarian culture.[14] As she notes, "The Pomaks are linked to the Bulgarians by ethnic and linguistic kinship and to the Turks by their common religion-Islam."[15]

In her analysis of ethnic and religious minorities in Bulgaria, Maria Koinova distinguishes between ethnic Turks and Muslims by highlighting the ethnic and cultural diversity within the Muslim population, too.[16] While ethnic Turks are the largest Muslim group in Bulgaria, constituting around 10% of the population, Koinova emphasizes that the Muslim community is not homogeneous and includes other ethnic groups such as Bulgarian Muslims (Pomaks), Muslim Roma, and Tatars.[17] She notes that the Bulgarian state considers Pomaks to be ethnic Bulgarians who practice Islam, rather than a separate ethnic minority, and that labeling them as such often leads to allegations of "national betrayal."[18] Koinova points out that Muslims in Bulgaria vary not only ethnically but also religiously, encompassing both Sunni and Shiite traditions.[19] By distinguishing between ethnic Turks and other Muslim minorities, she sheds light on the complexities of Bulgaria's ethnic landscape and underscores the importance of recognizing the distinct identities, cultural practices, and historical backgrounds of each group. This differentiation helps to address the specific social, political, and economic challenges faced by these communities and highlights the need for nuanced policies that respect and accommodate their diversity.

Lastly, Ali Eminov shows the same approach when examining Bulgaria's minority populations between 1983 and 1989. When examining Bulgaria's minority populations between 1983 and 1989, it is crucial to distinguish between the terms "Muslims" and "Turks" to accurately reflect the country's ethnic and religious

[14] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," pp. 290-291.

[15] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," p. 290.

[16] Maria Koinova, "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria," *Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe*,2 /2 (1999), pp. 147-157.

[17] Koinova, "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria," pp. 147-157.

[18] Koinova, "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria," p. 151.

[19] Koinova, "Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria," pp. 147-157.

diversity. While all ethnic Turks in Bulgaria are Muslims, not all Muslims are ethnically Turkish. According to the 1992 census data, Muslims constituted approximately 13.1% of Bulgaria's population, totalling 1,110,295 individuals.[20] This Muslim population was composed primarily of three distinct groups: ethnic Turks, who made up about 72.2% (802,127 individuals) and identified Turkish as their mother tongue; Pomaks, who are Bulgarian-speaking Muslims accounting for about 15.9% (176,687 individuals); and Roma Muslims, constituting approximately 11.1% (123,173 individuals) of the Muslim population.[21] Each of these groups possesses unique linguistic, cultural, and historical identities.

Despite this complex picture of the Muslim existence in Bulgaria and the majority of the Muslims were/are Turkish in origin, the Bulgarians nationalists claimed that their ancestors were Pomaks in order to separate the Muslim groups from their Turkish identity, they were actually trying to reconstruct the identity based on religion and reach the conclusion that the minorities were Bulgarians, not Turks. This distinction is specifically articulated to support the Zhivkov government's assertion that "there are actually no Turks in Bulgaria, only Muslim Bulgarians." The purpose of this differentiation of this thesis in discourse is to highlight how cultural practices such as mother tongue, clothing, folk songs, rituals, and genetic transmission distinguish Turkish identity from the traditions and customs of other Muslim minorities in the region.

Being aware of this complex picture of the nature of the Muslim minority in Bulgaria and aware of the fact some of those who had to migrate to Türkiye in the Cold War period were not Turkish in origin, for the purposes of this study, which focuses specifically on the experiences and instrumentalization of the oppression of the ethnic Turkish minority by the Turkish government under Turgut Özal, the term "Turks" will be used in the chapters and sections focusing on the period after 1983. This focus is justified as the cases of Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür pertain directly to individuals of ethnic Turkish origin, and the Turkish government's

[20] Ali Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria: Post-1989 Developments," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 27/1 (1999), pp. 32-51.

[21] Eminov, "The Turks in Bulgaria," pp. 32-51.

propaganda efforts were primarily centred on the ethnic Turkish minority in Bulgaria. By consistently referring to this group and individuals as “Turks,” the thesis maintains clarity and precision in analysing the specific strategies employed by Özal’s administration in relation to this particular minority. This focus is pertinent as it allows for a more precise analysis of how Turgut Özal leveraged the oppression of ethnic Turks-exemplified through the cases of Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür-in his propaganda strategies to construct his political persona.

CHAPTER 2

TURKISH MUSLIM MINORITY IN BULGARIA AND TURGUT ÖZAL'S STRATEGY

Throughout the 1980s, the Turkish-Muslim minority in Bulgaria faced systematic assimilation policies imposed by the Bulgarian government, including forced name changes, restrictions on religious practices, and attempts to erase their cultural identity. The Bulgarian authorities sought to justify this "Revival Process," or "Vazroditelen Protses", as a measure to "return" ethnic Turks and other Muslim minorities to their true Bulgarian identity.

During the 1980s, the systematic repression of the Turkish and Muslim minority in Bulgaria attracted considerable attention from the international media and foreign governments, highlighting the severity of Thodor Zhivkov's assimilation policies long before Türkiye's official response gained momentum. Western nations, particularly the United States and members of the European Community, began to publicly condemn Bulgaria's policies, aligning their responses with broader Second Cold War narratives that cast Eastern Bloc regimes as oppressive and undemocratic. In the 1980s, Turkish public opinion and the national press became increasingly vocal about the Bulgarian government's assimilation policies against the Turkish and Muslim minority, actively shaping a national outcry that placed pressure on Turgut Özal and his government. Although Turgut Özal was initially slow to comment on the issue, the escalating public sentiment eventually led his government to address the situation more assertively. This situation provoked a significant reaction in Türkiye too, where the government, led by Turgut Özal, sought to bring international attention to the plight of the Turkish minority, highlighting Bulgaria's repressive actions within the context of Türkiye's strengthening alignment with the West during the Second Cold War. So that is why this section aims in a broader context: What was

the position and approaches of the international press and the West on the Turkish minority in Bulgaria? How did Türkiye's response to the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria take shape, and how did this response change over time? How was the stage set for Özal, who later used the issue of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in domestic politics to strengthen his own political image?

Considering these aspects, this chapter starts with examining the complex trajectory of the Turkish Muslim minority in Bulgaria, whose struggles, rooted in historical, political, and cultural tensions dating back to the Ottoman era, escalated significantly in the 1980s, gaining international prominence. While the community faced longstanding challenges, particularly following the Russo-Ottoman War (1877-1878) and subsequent treaties of the late 19th century, the conditions of the 1980s brought new intensity to their persecution under Todor Zhivkov's regime. This period witnessed the forced assimilation and cultural suppression of ethnic Turks and Muslims, leading to heightened responses both within Türkiye and across the global stage. While the chapter is structured to provide an in-depth look at the historical background of these minority issues, it then analyses the internationalization of the minority's oppression during the Revival Process, especially after 1984, the Turkish response, and the growing role of public opinion. As the international community began to scrutinize Bulgaria's policies toward its Turkish minority, the chapter focus on Türkiye's response evolved, with the public, media, Turkish state and Turkish government showing increasing engagement. The chapter specifically focusing public opinion and media coverage in Türkiye, amplified awareness of the Bulgarian minority's plight, and exerted pressure on Özal's administration to take a firm stance on the issue. Then the chapter explores the progression of Turkish responses, examining how the state, the public, and the media collectively mobilized to influence policy decisions. It also investigates how Özal leveraged these developments strategically, aligning them with his broader foreign policy and domestic goals, particularly amid the heightened ideological tensions of the Second Cold War. Finally, it explores the influence of Cold War geopolitics on Türkiye's foreign policy, examining how Özal's calculated approach to the issue, including his use of iconic figures such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, allowed him to bolster his political image while addressing the challenges faced by the Turkish

minority in Bulgaria. Through these discussions, this chapter sheds light on the interplay between the historical roots of Turkish minorities in Bulgaria, national and international responses and interests, the Second Cold War atmosphere, humanitarian advocacy, and the political strategy of Özal in Türkiye's approach to this complex issue.

2.1. Historical Outline (1878-1984)

The minority issues between the two countries have been the result of a long historical process rather than emerging solely in the 1980s. The structural changes and minority issues persisted for an extended period, significantly influencing the relationship between both the Ottoman Empire and, subsequently, the Turkish Republic with Bulgaria. The reason for this highly interactive historical process is, as Historian Maria Todorova has argued, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Balkans serve as a significant legacy of the Ottoman Empire.[22]

The challenges facing the Turkish community in Bulgaria have deep historical roots, dating back to the late 1870s, when the Ottoman Empire began to wane in its influence over the Balkans and, consequently, Bulgaria. The support of Russia for the uprisings of countries such as Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro against the Ottomans in the Balkans contributed to the emergence of minority issues. The Bulgarian nationalists' uprising in 1876 posed significant challenges for the Ottomans, who were already preoccupied with suppressing revolts in Serbia and Bosnia. During this uprising, approximately 1,000 Turkish farmers were tragically massacred by Bulgarian forces.[23] In response, the Ottomans armed the remaining local Turks, Circassians, and Tatars, enabling them to quell the uprising by neutralizing around 12000 Bulgarian separatists and Christians.[24] Consequently, these events resulted in ongoing challenges for the Turkish minority in Bulgaria for an extended period.

[22] Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 12.

[23] Justin McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 339.

[24] McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923,* p. 339.

2.1.1. The Bulgarian Independence and the Muslim Minority

The War of 1877–78 between Ottomans and Russia and the subsequent Berlin Treaty marked a significant turning point in the Ottoman Empire's history. This event made both the Ottoman government and the public aware of the potential for total collapse, a realization that arose despite previous territorial losses, which had mostly occurred at the periphery.[25] The core areas, including the Balkans and Anatolia, had remained largely intact, leading to a belief in the Empire's enduring resilience. Furthermore, in this process, the 1877–78 War shattered the myth of the "Ottoman phoenix," demonstrating the empire's vulnerability.[26]

In addition to this, following the 1877–1878 Ottoman-Russian War, which marked the de facto end of Ottoman rule in Bulgaria, significant demographic changes occurred with the Treaty of San Stefano on 19 February- 3 March 1878. However, the Ottoman-Russian War can be interpreted in distinct ways depending on the perspective taken. From Bulgaria's viewpoint, this conflict represents a pivotal moment in its struggle for independence and the establishment of modern Bulgaria.[27] Conversely, for the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman-Russian war resulted in a profoundly disappointing outcome. At the Berlin Congress, the Ottoman Empire's territory was essentially redefined just after the Treaty of San Stefano, leading to a re-establishment of its borders.[28] Then, with the Berlin Treaty of 1878, the Ottoman Empire ceded control over Serbia, the Danubian Principalities, and Montenegro while also recognizing Bulgaria's autonomy.[29] On the other hand, the British (as one of the strongest Great Powers) and Austro-Hungarian statesmen were concerned about Bulgaria, viewing it as a potential Russian stronghold in the Balkans, which

[25] Kemal Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam: Reconstructing Identity, State, Faith, and Community in the Late Ottoman State,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 153.

[26] Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*, p. 153.

[27] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation: Muslim Reform in the Balkans*, p. 21.

[28] Ebru Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. 5.

[29] Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Balkans: Empire Lost, Relations Altered,* p. 75.

led to calls for boundary changes.[30] So, the Treaty of Berlin in July 1878 addressed these concerns by dismantling the Bulgarian state established at San Stefano. The Bulgarian principality was limited to a small area between the Balkan Mountains and the Danube, while the region between the Balkans and the Rhodopes became an autonomous unit of the Ottoman Empire known as "Eastern Rumelia".[31]

Initially, many Muslims migrated to Ottoman-controlled territories, seeking refuge from Bulgarian nationalist violence and the erosion of Ottoman protection. The Russo-Ottoman War caused the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Muslims, resulting in a decrease of at least 370,000 Muslims in what would become Bulgaria, about a third of the prewar population[32], that is why it can be said that the demographic balance that had been present in Bulgaria since the beginning of the sixteenth century started to change only after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78. During and after the conflict, many Turks and other Muslims, particularly from urban areas, were compelled to depart alongside the retreating Ottoman forces.[33] Muslims in the western and eastern Danubian provinces experienced varying impacts from the war. Those in the eastern rural areas, being remote from the conflict, did not face mass exodus, allowing the region to remain predominantly Muslim post-war.[34]

The treaty's reconfiguration of the Bulgarian state placed non-Christian minorities, especially Muslims, at a social and political disadvantage. Those who remained in Bulgaria faced not only social exclusion but also the systematic confiscation of property and restrictions on religious practices. In the post-liberalization era of Bulgaria, Bulgaria embraced liberal ideas, significantly influenced by Western Europe.[35] Notably, the newly elected Bulgarian King Alexander of Battenburg

[30] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 83.

[31] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 83.

[32] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 4.

[33] Ali Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs Journal,* 8/2 (1987), p. 289.

[34] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", p. 289.

[35] Mary Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters and the Re-imaging of the Bulgarian Nation (1878-1995)", *East European Quarterly*, 1 (1997), p. 3.

expressed his commitment to inclusivity towards minorities, declaring, "I will care for all my subjects, irrespective of their beliefs."[36] A key feature of the Berlin Treaty was its focus on ensuring the rights of all communities, especially those who were minorities. The Berlin Treaty recognized the importance of religious freedom and established broad protections for the rights of various faith communities, including the ability to engage with their spiritual leaders.[37] Although the Treaty of San Stefano partly safeguarded the rights of minorities, including Turks, Bulgarians, Serbs, and Montenegrins, it particularly emphasized Muslims' right to own property and established the Ottoman and Bulgarian Foundation Commission, in addition to this, the treaty expanded these rights on a personal level and offered better freedom, particularly regarding religious liberties.

For example, According to Article 3 of the Berlin Treaty, the Prince of Bulgaria would be elected freely by the populace and subsequently approved by the Ottoman government with the consent of the Great Powers. The Article 4 stipulated that prior to the election of the prince, a council convened in the city of Tarnovo would be responsible for drafting the Bulgarian constitution. Furthermore, the second paragraph of this article emphasized that both the election of the prince and the preparation of the Bulgarian constitution would take into account the "rights and interests of the Turks in Bulgaria".[38] The Article 5 of the Berlin Treaty was designed to protect the rights of the Turkish-Muslim minority. It prohibited discrimination based on religion or sect in Bulgaria, ensuring that minorities enjoy the same civil and political rights as the Bulgarian majority. They had the right to serve in public office, choose any profession, and practice their religion freely. The Bulgarian government must uphold these rights and allow minorities to form their own social organizations and maintain connections with their religious leaders.[39] The Article 12 of the Berlin Treaty addressed the real estate holdings of Bulgarians of Turkish descent. Therefore, even if the Turks had departed or migrated from Bulgaria, they

[36] Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters and the Re-imaging of the Bulgarian nation*,"* p. 3.

[37] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 59.

[38] Bilal Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 1986), p. 366.

[39] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 336.

were permitted to retain ownership of the property they abandoned and managed it through other individuals. The Bulgarian authorities were prohibited from confiscating these properties when their owners were not present in Bulgaria.[40]

In short, the Treaties of San Stefano and Berlin established the framework for the modern Bulgarian state with minor differences. Bulgaria was designated a principality under a Christian prince, elected by Bulgarians and confirmed by international powers, while remaining a vassal state of the Ottoman sultan.[41] Bulgaria was permitted a militia but restricted from building fortresses and inherited Ottoman international obligations like debt payments and tariff policies. Eastern Rumelia remained under Ottoman authority, with governance and security managed by a local gendarmerie reflecting the region's population, overseen by a governor-general appointed by the sultan.[42] Despite Bulgarian dissatisfaction with the Treaty of Berlin, it marked the birth of modern Bulgaria, shaped more by external forces than internal developments.

Following the Treaty of Berlin, primary education in Turkish villages in Bulgaria was compulsory and free, with most villages having primary schools (*ilk-okul*) focused on religious education, often attached to mosques where Muslim preachers (*hoca*s) also served as teachers.[43] In towns with larger Turkish/Muslim populations, high schools (*rüştüye*s) provided a broader curriculum, including subjects like music, geography, and Ottoman history. However, higher education opportunities were limited, as many Turkish students pursued their education in Istanbul and remained in the Ottoman Empire, hindering the development of Turkish education in Bulgaria.[44]

In addition to formal education, religious schools (*medrese*s) focused on teaching Arabic and Islamic studies, and an Islamic seminary in Mecidiye prepared religious

[40] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 336.

[41] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 84.

[42] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 84.

[43] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," p. 289.

[44] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," p. 289.

leaders. A Turkish religious college was not established in Bulgaria until the 1920s. During this period, Turkish-language press also developed significantly. Before 1877, there were only a few Turkish newspapers and magazines, but the number of Turkish-language publications increased considerably during the Bulgarian principality (1878–1909), contributing to cultural preservation and identity among the Turkish minority. Despite Bulgaria's independence, its Muslim communities remained under the authority of the Şeyhülislam, an Ottoman official responsible for Islamic law, religious schools, and mosques. Regional muftis, appointed by the Şeyhülislam, administered sharia and oversaw religious institutions in different areas, with all regional muftis reporting to a Chief Mufti.[45]

However, on the other hand, following the Treaty of Berlin (1878), the status of the Turkish Muslim minority in Bulgaria became a complex issue, too, as Bulgaria transitioned from Ottoman rule to autonomous governance. The Berlin Treaty engendered conflicts and extensive suffering by enforcing politically expedient solutions that lacked cultural appropriateness.[46] It recognized ethnicity as the foundation of nationhood for diverse groups that had historically organized their communities primarily around religious affiliations for centuries.[47] The newly established Bulgarian administrative system, shaped with the assistance of the Russians, brought about significant changes to Bulgaria's autonomous governance. As Bulgaria began to partially detach from the Ottoman protectorate, it initiated its first liberal administrative reforms and worked on developing a constitution (The Constitution of Tarnovo) with Russian support.

During this time, Bulgarian nationalism and identity began to emerge more prominently in everyday life. For example, this burgeoning sense of identity was reflected in national anthems, with phrases such as the "occupation of Istanbul" included in revised versions. Meanwhile, minorities in Eastern Rumelia recognized as an Ottoman protectorate, were increasingly accepted as part of the Bulgarian

[45] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria," p. 289.

[46] Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam,* p.149.

[47] Karpat, *The Politicization of Islam*, p.149.

populace, leading to a gradual decline of Ottoman influence in social structures.[48] Many Muslims left Bulgaria because they struggled to adapt to life in a Christian state.[49] Muslims were uncomfortable with public interactions between men and women and resented the loss of mosques, some of which were repurposed for Christian worship or secular uses like storehouses, printing houses, or prisons. Additionally, many Muslims found mandatory conscription into a Christian army deeply objectionable during 1878. Among these objections, there were actually some practices that would directly affect Muslims in social life. For example, although Muslims were not required to wear Christian symbols on their clothing, the obligation to adhere to Christian customs and even to consume food forbidden by the Muslim religion, such as pork, when necessary, were among the measures that directly impacted the lives of the minority, thereby challenging the psychological barriers of the Muslim population.[50]

According to Milena Methodieva, one of the most important examples that affects the Turks in their daily lives and is reflected in the sources is the damage and decrease in the number of places of worship, namely mosques. One of the most accurate examples to be given to this is that the number of mosques in Sofia, which was 40 in the 1870s, decreased to one in the early 1900s and the only functioning mosque is the Banya Bashi Mosque.[51] Again, according to the sources, we see that nationalism, especially Bulgarian nationalism, increased and some Bulgarians destroyed the minarets with the help of ropes.[52] Places of worship were left unhealthy and neglected, and especially the mosque known as the Kara Mosque was converted into a church. These can be shown as evidence that Bulgaria was pursuing nationalist deeds, especially in the late 1800s and early 1900s. If necessary to add, some sources indicate that while the rights of the Turkish and Muslim minority were officially guaranteed under the new Bulgarian constitution, these rights were framed

[48] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, pp. 33-34.

[49] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 112.

[50] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 113.

[51] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, p. 82.

[52] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation*, p. 82.

as those granted to infidels.[53] Furthermore, the Eastern Orthodox Church emphasized Christianity as the predominant religion.

The Berlin Treaty aimed to establish a lasting settlement, but its conditions were not strictly followed. Seven years later, Bulgaria annexed Eastern Rumelia, making it part of Bulgaria. In fact, the occupation of Eastern Rumelia revived Bulgaria's dream of a Greater Bulgaria and offered an opportunity to regain what it had lost in San Stefano. This process brought with it some minority problems and only some of them could be solved with the independence of Bulgaria. The most important of these were problems such as *vakıf* problem (religious charitable foundations), properties of minorities, mufti problem and governance.[54] In fact, the muftis were especially important for the Turkish and Muslim minorities. The muftis were responsible for managing the *vakıf*s, educating the minorities, and supervising the schools that provided this education. So much so that the Bulgarian state appointed muftis to prevent possible Muslim uprisings in the northeast between 1885 and 1897 and asked the muftis to give sermons so that the Muslims would abandon their plans for rebellion.[55] In addition to this, between 1878 and 1908, the Bulgarian governments separately and randomly utilized state properties and Muslim religious foundations, many of which were intentionally destroyed, seized, or sold by the Bulgarian municipalities.[56] However, the Ottoman-Bulgarian Vakıf Commission only met in 1909, after Bulgaria declared independence, and the implementation of the promised freedoms and equality was contentious.[57] In 1908, another significant crisis in the Balkans was triggered by the Young Turk Revolution within the Ottoman Empire, an event that was succeeded by Bulgaria's declaration of independence and the Habsburg Empire's annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The Young Turks Revolution provided Bulgaria with the opportunity it had been seeking. Bulgarian Prince

[53] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim Minorities," p. 287.

[54] Aşkın Koyuncu, "The Ottoman Reaction to the Bulgarian Independence Declaration," in *Turkish Bulgarian Relations: Past and Present*, ed. Mustafa Türkeş (İstanbul: Tasam Yayınları, 2010), pp. 28-29; Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 32.

[55] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 44.

[56] Koyuncu, "The Ottoman Reaction to the Bulgarian Independence Declaration," p. 28.

[57] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 32.

Ferdinand recognized the implications of this revolution, which contributed to a degree of administrative instability in the Ottoman Empire. He subsequently recalled his representative from Istanbul and took control of the Eastern Rumelia Railway.[58] When Bulgaria declared its independence and established itself as a kingdom, after having functioned as an autonomous principality under the Ottomans for 30 years, from 1878 to 1908. To formalize Bulgarian independence, a protocol was signed between the Ottoman Government and Bulgaria in Istanbul on April 19, 1909, called *Istanbul Protokolü* (Istanbul Protocol). The declaration of Bulgarian independence in 1909 had profound implications for the Turkish minority in the country.[59]

A bilateral agreement was added to the protocol on the same day to secure the minority rights of the Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria. This contract was added to solve the problems of *vakıf* and other religious issues. The second article of the protocol established that the Kingdom of Bulgaria would grant the Muslim minority in its territory freedom of religion, equal civil and political rights, and the right to religious representation. Muslim minority would enjoy the same civil and political rights as the Bulgarian majority, and mosques in Bulgaria were authorized to deliver sermons in the name of the sultan-caliph. Additionally, a commission was to be formed by the Bulgarian government to review issues related to Muslim *vakıf*s. The Istanbul Protocol and accompanying agreement also regulated Bulgarian mufti offices. This agreement, mutually accepted by both the Ottoman and Bulgarian governments, established that the mufti offices were not purely internal matters for Bulgaria but rather an institutional support system for the Muslim minority. The eight-article agreement clarified the rights and duties of muftis. The first article of the agreement stated that Chief Müfti would be stationed in Sofia with defined responsibilities, acting as a mediator between the Bulgarian Ministry of Religions and Istanbul's Şeyhülislam.[60] The Article 6 outlined that the Chief Mufti had the authority to supervise Turkish-Muslim schools and required the Bulgarian

[58] Charles Jelavich and Barbara Jelavich, *The Establishment of the Balkan National States 1804-1920* (Seattle and London: The University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 195.

[59] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 368.

[60] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*. p. 369.

government to allocate budgetary funds for Turkish-Muslim schools and mosques.[61] The Article 7 mandated the careful preservation of religious and charitable buildings such as mosques. If any were to be demolished, the Bulgarian government was obligated to pay compensation for repairs or new construction. This framework not only defined the administrative role of muftis but also reinforced the Bulgarian government's commitment to support the educational and religious needs of the Turkish-Muslim minority.[62]

These agreements, however, did not fully guarantee the rights of the Turkish-Muslim minority within Bulgaria, which was pursuing Bulgarian nationalism. In terms of applicability, minority rights were constantly in conflict with the realities of daily life.

In Bulgaria, Muslims were governed in spiritual, administrative, and judicial matters by the Chief Mufti's Office. Property disputes were resolved under Sharia law by special courts. The state-funded mosque maintenance and paid Muslim leaders like civil servants. Although privately established, mosque schools received state support, but this did not aid the integration of Muslims into society.[63] Most Muslims lacked proficiency in Bulgarian, making it difficult for them to compete in the job market and integrate into Bulgarian society. These issues appeared in daily life due to language barriers and the obligations of belonging to a different culture.

The Muslim minority was aware that the loss of Ottoman power over Bulgaria would cause problems between the two countries. The fears of the Turkish-Muslim minority in Bulgaria increased. Interventions were made to the publications of Muslim magazines, and Turkish intellectuals were advised not to write about the mistreatment of Muslims and Turks. The reason for this was to avoid possible tension between the Ottomans and Bulgaria.[64]

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[61] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*. p. 369.

[62] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 369.

[63] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim minorities," pp. 286-287.

[64] Methodieva, *Between Empire and Nation,* p. 235.

2.1.2. From the Balkan Wars to The Turkish National Liberation War: The Turkish-Bulgarian Minority in Turmoil

The beginning of the Constitutional Period in July 1908 ushered in a challenging period for the Ottoman Empire, marked by internal and external conflicts leading up to World War I in July 1914. This era saw Austria proclaiming annexation for Bosnia-Herzegovina, tensions with Bulgaria, and Italy's invasion of Tripoli. The war with Italy prompted the Balkan states including Bulgaria to pursue control over Macedonia, ultimately sparking conflict in the region.[65] At this point, a Balkan League against the Ottomans was established with the support of Russia.[66] This increasing tension eventually ignited the fuse of the First Balkan war, and Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia forgot their differences and united against the Ottomans and declared war on them.[67] Bulgaria took over a significant portion of Western and Eastern Thrace and then gained access to the Aegean Sea. This victory of these Balkan countries, which had been Ottoman subjects for nearly 500 years, over the Ottomans was humiliating, even more disgraceful than being defeated by the European states known as the Great Powers.[68] However, Greece, Romania, Montenegro and Serbia, which did not accept this Bulgaria expansion, formed a new alliance against Bulgaria, but Bulgaria took action before these countries could take action and declared war on the alliance of Greece, Romania, Montenegro and Serbia, which caused the Second Balkan War. Taking advantage of this opportunity, the Ottomans took back Eastern Thrace they had lost in 1913 and Edirne. Bulgaria, on the other hand, was only able to hold Western Thrace until the First World War.[69] In fact, these losses, the failure to return to the desired San Stefano borders, and the interruption of the dream of a Greater Bulgaria were pushing Bulgaria towards

[65] Fahir Armaoğlu, *20. Yüzyıl Siyasî Tarihi 1914-1980* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1997), p. 651.

[66] Jelavich and Jelavich, *The Establishment of the Balkan National States,* p. 216.

[67] Yonca Köksal, "Transnational Networks and Kin States: the Turkish Minority in Bulgaria, 1878–1940", *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 38/2 (2010), p. 194.

[68] Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Balkan*, p. 78.

[69] Köksal, "Transnational networks and kin states," p. 194.

defensive nationalism, as Ali Eminov put it.[70] As Eminov, quoting Todorava pointed out that, this situation "paints a picture of a nation based on a martyrdom mentality, victimized, isolated and far from the world agenda."[71]

Due to their magnitude and influence, the Balkan Wars inevitably impacted minority communities. While the First Balkan War was perceived in the Western world as a fight for independence by the Balkan nations, a contest of the weak against the powerful, the Second Balkan War was viewed as a conflict in which all parties, both victorious and defeated, experienced a moral loss.[72] At the same time, the narrative surrounding around "Turkish yoke" in Bulgaria gained increasing popularity, permeating daily life, academia, literature, and historical discourse. This movement fueled the nationalist sentiments among the Bulgarian people.[73] Notable works, such as *Under the Yoke* by Bulgarian author Ivan Vazov (1894), enhanced the portrayal of Bulgarians living under the oppressive orientalism of the Ottomans, depicting the Turks as foreign invaders intent on eradicating Bulgarian culture. In fact, examples like this show us that anti-Turkish sentiment was on the rise, especially in Bulgaria.

What happened to minorities during the Balkan Wars? It is important to note that, as a result of these conflicts, Muslims and Turks became minor minorities in the Balkans. The Ottoman Muslim population, unable to defend itself against the Balkan League during the First Balkan War, found itself increasingly vulnerable. Particularly due to Bulgaria's successes, which bolstered its nationalist agenda, the status of the Muslim minority diminished significantly. During the Balkan Wars, Turkish-Muslim villages were burned and razed to the ground. Turkish-Muslim coffeehouses and barns were found burned with people inside.[74] Shock troops, particularly those backed by nations united against the Ottomans, operated like guerrillas at the outset

[70] Ali Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria* (London: Hurst & Company, 1997), p. 6.

[71] Eminov, *Turkish and Other Muslim Minorities in Bulgaria*, p. 6.

[72] Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* p. 4.

[73] Mary Neuburger, *The Orient within: Muslim Minorities and the Negotiation of Nationhood in Modern Bulgaria*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 37,37.

[74] McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923*, p. 343.

of the Balkan Wars. They launched attacks and looted Turkish villages, which forced the local population to flee. These guerrilla units acted independently, without orders from higher command, leading to the deaths of numerous Turks and Muslims in the Balkans. This situation created a challenging and traumatic experience for the Muslims who remained in Bulgaria and the surrounding regions, resulting in significant migrations throughout the Balkan Wars.[75]

Interventions particularly had begun into the culture and religious preferences of Muslims living in Bulgaria. Bulgarian troops had converted 200,000 Muslims (mostly Pomaks) living in the lands they had taken from the Ottomans to Christianity with the Orthodox priests they had brought with them and had also pressured them to take Bulgarian names. In addition to these, they had banned the wearing of clothing such as fez and turbans and replaced them with Bulgarian hats and scarves.[76] Most of these practices were applied to the Pomaks (among Muslims), but with the defeat of the Second Balkan War, the temporary Vasil Radoslavov regime of Bulgaria abandoned these practices and returned all religious and cultural rights, especially to the Pomaks. In fact, Boyar showed the gravity of the Balkan Wars and its effect on the Turks in her work with a quote from the book written by the author Falih Rıfkı Atay, who was influenced by the memoirs of the Zagara mufti Raci Efendi. The text was as follows: "The Bulgarians began barbaric atrocities against the Muslim people. Despite the harshness of the winter, group by group the people migrated and the number of migrants in İstanbul was almost the same as the number of its inhabitants. Further, their pitiable condition increased feelings for their plight."[77] It is so clear that the Balkan Wars were very destructive from a humanitarian perspective, especially the migration of Muslims living in the Balkans brought them disease, misery and hardship. Many of the migrants were able to come as far as Istanbul, but they faced housing problems.[78] Similar processes were experienced during the process in which the lands that were captured by Bulgaria before the Second Balkan

[75] McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923,* p. 343.

[76] Neuburger, *The Orient within,* p. 41.

[77] Boyar, *Ottomans, Turks, and the Balkan*, p. 130.

[78] Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I.B Tauris, 1998), p. 161.

War were captured by the Ottomans at the end of the war. So much so that at the end of the Second War, a large part of the Bulgarians living in Edirne, which was captured by the Ottomans, fled back to the Bulgarian core, while those who remained were Turkified.[79]

The peace treaty between Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire, which was signed on 29 September 1913, restored Eastern Thrace to the Empire, excluding Tsarevo, Malko Tarnovo, and Svilengrad, which remained Bulgarian. Populations in the affected regions were exchanged.[80] According to the treaty, the Turkish Bulgarian border would start at the mouth of the Rezvaya River on the Black Sea, extending westward approximately 50 kilometers south of the old border. It would pass about 30 kilometers north of Kırklareli and Edirne, reach the Tunca River, and then shift south, leaving a 25–30-kilometre strip of land to the Ottoman Empire west of the Maritsa River. This border arrangement allowed areas like Dimetoka and parts of the Mustafa Paşa-Dedeağaç railway to remain within Ottoman territory.[81]

The Treaty of Istanbul formalized some aspects of the postwar settlement between the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria, including stipulations regarding the rights of minorities both in Bulgarian and Ottoman territories. One of the most important details was the use of the term "Muslim" instead of "Turkish". The Key provisions of the treaty addressed the status of populations left within each country's borders.

Article 9 guaranteed Bulgarians within the Ottoman Empire the same rights as other Christian subjects. Meanwhile, Muslim residing in Bulgaria retained the right to emigrate to the Ottoman Empire within four years. Those who remained were assured full religious freedom and the right to worship freely. The Muslim community in Bulgaria would elect their own muftis, including a Chief Mufti whose appointment would require the approval of the Şeyhülislam in Istanbul. Salaries for muftis and other religious officials were to be provided by the Bulgarian government,

[79] Reymond Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria*, (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2006), p. 3.

[80] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria*. p. 232.

[81] Armaoğlu, *19. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi*, p. 651.

granting them the same rights as Bulgarian officials. The muftis were vested with authority over personal status matters, including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and guardianship, and their rulings on such issues would be enforced by Bulgarian authorities.[82] The Bulgarian government was to establish and fund primary and secondary schools for the Muslim population, where instruction would be conducted in Turkish, although Bulgarian would also be a required language. Furthermore, the property rights of Muslims were to be respected, and Muslim-owned immovable property could only be expropriated when absolutely necessary, with full compensation provided immediately.[83] The Articles 10 and 11 of the treaty addressed the property rights of Muslim residents in Bulgaria, stipulating that Muslim assets were to be respected without any restrictions imposed. Muslim who emigrated from Bulgaria retained the rights to lease, manage, or oversee their properties through third parties.[84] The Article 12 provided that *vakıf*s would remain intact, and their properties would be protected in accordance with Ottoman laws. Furthermore, the Article 14 specified that Muslim cemeteries should be treated with respect and protected from interference.[85] While rights and freedoms were secured in this agreement, attempts were made to resolve problems that had been ongoing for decades, such as the problems of the mufti and *vakıf*s.

The First World War was partly a consequence of the Balkan Wars, which had significantly increased Serbian territory and influence, raising concerns for Austria-Hungary about Serbian impact on Serbs within its own empire.[86] The assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist on June 28, 1914, provided Austria-Hungary with a pretext to attempt to subdue Serbian irredentism, leading to its declaration of war on July 28, and Russia mobilized in defence of Serbia, prompting Germany to declare war on Russia on August 1, followed by a declaration against France on August 3, and Britain's declaration against Germany on August 4.

[82] Armaoğlu, *19. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi.* p. 651.

[83] Armaoğlu, *19. Yüzyıl Siyasi Tarihi.* p. 651.

[84] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 372.

[85] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 372.

[86] McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923*, p. 354.

These actions sparked a series of further declarations, plunging Europe into conflict.[87]

The Ottoman-Bulgarian alliance during World War I (1914–1918) marked a period of geopolitical realignment, impacting the position of the Turkish-Muslim minority in Bulgaria. As allies in the Central Powers, the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria aimed to strengthen diplomatic ties and part of this effort involved improving the conditions of the Muslim minority in Bulgaria. At the onset of World War I, Bulgaria, led by Prime Minister Vasil Radoslavov, faced economic challenges due to recent conflicts (such as the Balkan Wars) and sought a large loan from Germany in 1914.[88] The loan positioned Bulgaria as a neutral state, though both the Central Powers and Allies pursued Bulgarian support. At the same time, with the onset of World War I, Bulgaria temporarily subdued internal conflicts and reframed Muslims not as adversaries but as strategic allies, aligning this shift with its broader goal of territorial expansion. Aligning with the Austro-German Central Powers, including the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria aimed to reclaim territories lost in the Treaty of San Stefano, and unlike during the First Balkan War, Muslims were not singled out as targets; instead, they supported the Bulgarian war effort.[89] Bulgaria expanded into Thrace, Macedonia, and Dobrudzha, solidifying the Central Powers' control in the Balkans. However, as the war progressed, Bulgaria struggled with shortages, inflation, and low morale, exacerbated by corruption and competition between civilian and military procurement efforts. On the other hand, the government intensified its Bulgarianization of Christian populations, building schools, printing newspapers, and asserting a Greater Bulgarian identity in occupied regions. Ethnographers were deployed to justify these territorial claims, aiming to affirm the "Bulgarian" essence of local populations as part of a broader wartime strategy.[90] This deteriorating situation led to widespread social unrest, protests, and political agitation, ultimately undermining civilian and military morale. In September 1918, Bulgaria's military

[87] McCarthy, *The Ottoman Turks an Introductory History to 1923*, p. 354.

[88] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* p. 137.

[89] Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters and the Re-imaging of the Bulgarian nation," pp. 42-43.

[90] Neuburger, "Bulgaro-Turkish Encounters and the Re-imaging of the Bulgarian nation," pp. 42-43.

collapsed under the Franco-British offensive, leading to an armistice. Following this defeat, political turmoil ensued, resulting in King Ferdinand's abdication and his son, Boris III, ascending the throne.[91] The Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria actually fought as allies in the First World War and lost at the same time.

The Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine, signed on November 27, 1919, marked the end of Bulgaria's participation in World War I on the losing side alongside the Central Powers. The treaty imposed territorial losses, as Bulgaria ceded lands to Greece, Romania, and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes, and also enforced military restrictions and financial reparations. It played a significant role in securing certain rights for minorities in Bulgaria, including the Turkish-Muslim minority, guaranteeing freedom in religious, social, and educational institutions.

In the continuation of this process, Bulgaria would experience its most harmonious period towards minorities, especially the Turkish minority, with Aleksandar Stamboliyski. Aleksandar Stamboliyski was a prominent Bulgarian agrarian leader and politician known for his influence on the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) and his vision of a "third way" ideology that rejected both capitalism and communism. Educated in agronomy in Halle, Germany, he founded BANU's ideological platform, promoting agrarian reforms aimed at creating an egalitarian society through agricultural cooperatives and traditional peasant values.[92] Stamboliyski articulated agrarian principles in the party, emphasizing a vision of justice and balance within society. The agrarian movement sought to curb inequality, particularly regarding land ownership, aiming to redistribute land from those who held excessive amounts to those in need, fostering a more equitable community.[93] Stamboliyski became Bulgaria's prime minister in 1919, representing Bulgaria at the Paris Peace Conference and signing the Treaty of Neuilly. He introduced several reforms, such as redistributing land to peasants and mandating labor service, which, along with his efforts to foster relations with Yugoslavia, made him enemies among

[91] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria*, p. 143.

[92] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria*, p. 417.

[93] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* p. 124.

conservative factions and the IMRO (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization).[94]

After the war, with the rise of Aleksandar Stamboliyski's agrarian government in 1919, Bulgaria experienced a shift in its policies toward the Turkish minority. This administration marked a period of relative respite for Turks and Muslims, who were afforded limited recognition and some civil rights for the first time.[95] Notably, the 1921 Education Law introduced various provisions for Turkish-Muslim schools: separate funding, authority for self-governance, and removal of the obligation to teach in Bulgarian. Although Stamboliyski's government attempted to address these rights seriously, enacting reforms for Turkish educational institutions and even planning the opening of teacher training schools in cities like Shumen.

Stamboliyski believed that true freedom for individuals was rooted in land ownership, and his agrarian reforms aimed to revitalize the nation by re-establishing the connection between the peasantry and the land.[96] Although his message primarily targeted Bulgarian peasants, his policies were inclusive, allowing landless Muslims to benefit from his agrarian reorganization.

Historians generally view Stamboliyski's leadership as one of tolerance toward Muslim minorities, with his political base significantly supported by the Muslim vote.[97] In this sense, as Maria Todorova argued, the Stamboliyski period be seen as the only example of a real experiment in peasant politics in which a peasant cause was defended.[98] Stamboliyski effectively internationalized minority rights and supported the Turkish community in Bulgaria, facilitating their engagement with and support for the Turkish War of Independence. Aleksandar Stamboliyski took a bold stance against imperialist powers by quietly supporting the Turkish national struggle

[94] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria*, p. 417.

[95] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, pp. 54-56.

[96] Neuburger, *The Orient within,* p. 177.

[97] Neuburger, *The Orient within,* p. 177.

[98] Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans,* p. 173.

from 1919 to 1923, despite the pressures and reactions from the Allied powers. His government provided political support and facilitated military, strategic, financial, and moral aid. Additionally, Stamboliyski encouraged the Turkish minority in Bulgaria to support the Turkish War of Independence.[99] His administration permitted the establishment of local organizations, fundraising committees, and relief campaigns to aid the nationalist forces in Anatolia. Bulgarian officials even turned a blind eye to Turkish deputies in Bulgaria who organized the transport of weapons and ammunition to support Turkish nationalists. However, his rule led to opposition from the monarchy, conservative parties, and communists. Stamboliyski's agrarian regime ended in 1923 with a coup, a coup on June 9, 1923, orchestrated by his opponents, and led to his capture and assassination by IMRO members on June 14, 1923.[100]

2.1.3. The Turkish-Muslim Minority between the Two Nation-States

The Treaty of Lausanne, signed on 24 July 1923, officially marked the end of Ottoman involvement in the Balkans, further limiting the ability of the new Turkish Republic to protect Turkish Muslims in Bulgaria. However, the post-World War I Treaty of Neuilly, like other peace treaties, including Lausanne in 1923, introduced protections for minority rights. The Lausanne Treaty, and especially the 1925 Friendship Treaty and Residence Agreement signed between the Turkish Republic and Bulgaria in October 1925, detailed the preservation and management of property, educational, religious, and cultural institutions for the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, explicitly referred to as "Turkish and Muslim inhabitants".[101] Its Protocol (A) specified that Bulgaria would extend the Neuilly Treaty's protections to its Muslim minority, while Türkiye would do the same for Bulgarians under Lausanne. This agreement safeguarded the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, granting rights to language,

[99] İlker Alp, "Kurtuluş Savaşı'nin Bilinmeyen Bir Boyutu: Bulgaristan Türklerinin Yardımları," in *1989 Yılında Bulgaristan'dan Türk Zorunlu Göçünün 30. Yılı,* ed. Ayşe Kayapınar, Levent Kayapinar, Hakan Öztürk and Ökkeş Narinç (Çorlu: Çorlu Belediyesi Yayınları, 2020), pp. 72-73.

[100] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria*, p. 417.

[101] Mustafa Türkeş, "1989 Göçü Nasıl Konumlandırılabılır ve Sistematik midir?" in *89 Göçü, Bulgaristan'da 1984-89 Azınlık Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Zorunlu Göç,* ed. Neriman Ersoy and Hacısalihoğlu Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu (İstanbul: Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi Basım Yayın Merkezi, 2012), p. 594.

religion, and cultural institutions, including schools. This treaty remained binding, requiring Bulgaria to uphold these rights for its Turkish minority.[102]

Despite these and similar agreements, the fate of the Turkish Muslim minority in Bulgaria was very much dependent on the internal developments of both countries. Following the Turkish War of Independence, the establishment of modern Türkiye in 1923 marked a pivotal shift towards a progressive nation-state. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the Turkish Republic embraced sweeping reforms aimed at modernization and secularization, transforming the country from the remnants of the Ottoman Empire into a secular, western-oriented republic. The new state prioritized the adoption of European legal systems, educational reforms, and the Latin alphabet, aligning itself with contemporary standards of governance and society. This transformation included a firm commitment to national sovereignty, economic independence, and the development of a unifying Turkish identity, all essential to Atatürk's vision of a forward-looking and self-sustaining nation.

On the other hand, Bulgaria has been torn between coups d'état and the idea of increasing and maintaining the personal power of the monarchs. In Bulgarian political history, many governments exercised power dictatorially, notably the Stefan Stambolov cabinet (1886-1894), the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union (BANU) government (1919-1923), and the Democratic Alliance (DA) administration (1923-1931). Political coups became a regular method of change of power, as seen in the BANU's fall through the 9 June 1923 coup, the People's Bloc's collapse in 1934, and several other attempts. Bulgarian rulers like Alexander (1879-85), Ferdinand (1887-1918), and Boris III (1918-1944) often sought to establish "personal regimes" with limited interference from the National Assembly, aided by the inefficiency of political parties and conspiratorial groups such as the Military League and Zveno.[103] Over the years, rising Bulgarian nationalism consolidated its position, and finally, on May 19, 1934, the Kimon Georgiev Military Coup took place, establishing the Nationalist Zveno Regime. This coup, driven by political deadlock and rising fascist

[102] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 376, 377.

[103] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria,* p. LIV.

currents, resulted in the suspension of the Tarnovo Constitution, a ban on all political parties, and diminished parliamentary authority. Though initially supporting the coup, the tsar later removed the leaders in 1935, ruling indirectly but retaining control. So much so that this period would later be referred to as "Monarcho-fascism" by communist historiographers.[104]

Consequently, by the 1930s, tensions had surfaced, with growing Bulgarian nationalism and restrictive policies limiting the community's rights, leading to an increase in Turkish and Muslim emigration to Türkiye.[105] While the Bulgarian state was making significant progress internally, the Muslim and Turkish minorities maintained a strong connection to their Islamic traditions, effectively isolating themselves from the secular advancements occurring both in Bulgaria and Türkiye. The Bulgarian government perceived and preferred this minority as calm, conservative, and loyal.[106] The land reformist and egalitarian spirit of the Stambolyski era began to diminish as nationalist sentiments grew stronger. In this changing atmosphere, the loyal minority sought opportunities to migrate, despite being disconnected from the dynamics of the modern world, and their desire to move to Türkiye intensified. In fact, as Stambolyski noted, "the noblest and wisest children of god, farmers, who should be guided in accordance with Bulgaria's interests", were now searching for an escape amidst the rising tide of nationalism.[107]

This period was actually another difficult period for the Turkish and Muslim minority. The Bulgarian government implemented the strict laws required by the coup and suspended civil rights. The Directorate for Social Renewal was established to have a collective effect and direct the cultural and intellectual life of the nation towards unity and renewal.[108] The aim was to develop a mechanism for controlling

[104] Detrez, *Historical Dictionary of Bulgaria,* p. 55.

[105] Wolfgang Höpken, "From Religious Identity to Ethnic Mobilisation: The Turks of Bulgaria before, under and since Communism," in *Muslim Identity and the Balkan State*, ed. Hugh Poulton and Suha Taji-Farouki (London: Hurst, 1997), pp. 54-64.

[106] Neuburger, *The Orient within,* p. 44.

[107] Neuburger, *The Orient within,* p. 44.

[108] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* p. 158.

the country's art, the young generation, and all publications. In fact, between 1934 and 1935, they thought that according to the fascist regime, unity had to be achieved, and one of the methods of doing this was to change the names of the Turks to Bulgarian ones. [109] Even the fascist nationalist regime governing Bulgaria from 1933 to 1944 exploited the church for its political agenda, replacing the church's spiritual mission with a materialistic nationalist ideology. Bulgarian intellectuals often sought to justify their regime's resistance against progress, aligning themselves with governments that sacrificed national dignity and integrity for minor territorial ambitions and oppressed minority groups. They also aided in weakening the Bulgarian church, historically the cornerstone of Bulgarian identity and culture, by supporting political exploitation. The fascist nationalist regime (1933-1944) co-opted the church for nationalist aims, replacing its spiritual mission with materialistic ideals, a trend the later communist regime continued, further eroding the church's influence.[110] The situation for Muslims in Bulgaria significantly deteriorated under the regime that took power in 1934. Between 1934 and 1944, numerous Turkish schools were closed, *vakıf* properties were seized, and Turkish-language press was heavily censored, with many publications banned. Turkish intellectuals faced exile, and Muslims were subjected to intensified Christian missionary efforts. This oppressive environment led to a substantial emigration to Türkiye, resulting in a drop in the Turkish population in Bulgaria to less than ten percent by the start of World War II.[111]

In the 1930s, Turkish intellectuals in Bulgaria had actually opened various secular modern Turkish schools and invitations were sent to teach in these schools with Bulgarian teachers. Also, during the restriction and prohibition of all parties and associations in the mid-1930s, Turks had various cultural, educational and sports associations, but their attempts to establish an ethnic party were both unsuccessful. However, Turks were always present in the Bulgarian parliament, but their number

[109] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* p. 158.

[110] Kemal H. Karpat, "The Turks of Bulgaria: The Struggle for National□religious Survival of a Muslim Minority," *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 23/4 (1995), p. 734.

[111] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", p. 290 and p. 292.

had decreased from 25 in 1891 to 4 by 1934. [112] Among these sports organizations and Turkish newspapers and publications were the Turan Sports Club, founded in Vidin, and newspapers printed in Turkish letters such as *Deliorman*, *İstikbal*, *Yenilik* and *Halk Sesi*.[113] While these Turkish institutions and publications actually became the intellectual representations of the Kemalist revolution outside the borders, on the other hand, they were seen as an obstacle for a minority that pioneered religious education in Bulgaria and its representatives. At the end biggest thrust on minorities was the decline in the schools The number of Turkish schools declined dramatically over the years. In 1921-1922, there were 1,673 primary and 39 secondary schools, by 1928-1929, these numbers had dropped to 922 primary and 27 secondary schools, and by 1936-1937, they further declined to 518 primary and 27 secondary schools.[114]

There was another dimension of the position of the Turkish Muslim minority in Bulgaria. It was not united. Despite their ethnic and religious ties to Türkiye, many members of the Turkish and Muslim minority in Bulgaria were reluctant to embrace the reforms introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in the 1920s. The secularization and modernization efforts implemented in Türkiye, such as the abolition of the caliphate, changes in education, and the promotion of Western legal and cultural frameworks, were viewed with suspicion by the more conservative, traditional elements within the minority community.

From the end of Ottoman rule through the interwar period, the Turkish and Muslim minority in Bulgaria maintained a predominantly religious identity, with minimal adoption of the secular nationalist shift occurring in Türkiye. Until World War II, the minority, largely rural and underdeveloped, retained its own religious-based education system, reflecting little interest in secular or Kemalist reforms.[115] Although some urban-based Turkish intellectuals and teachers in Bulgaria began to engage with the ideas of Kemalism, most of the Muslim and Turkish population remained

[112] Zhelyazkova, "Bulgaria in Transition: The Muslim minorities", p. 287.

[113] Bilal Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 98 and p.152.

[114] Bilal Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 149.

[115] Höpken, "From Religious Identity to Ethnic Mobilisation", pp. 54-64.

aligned with religious leaders who emphasized Islamic values over secular nationalism. The Bulgarian state, wary of fostering a secular Turkish minority with potential nationalistic aspirations, supported anti-Kemalist publications and organizations, indirectly suppressing Kemalist influence.

Between 1928 and 1936, Hüseyin Hüsnü Molla Ahmed, the Başmüftü, or Chief Mufti of Bulgaria's Muslim community, served as a powerful voice of opposition to Türkiye's Kemalist government. Supported by Bulgarian authorities, Hüseyin Hüsnü Molla Ahmed opposed Kemalist reforms, especially those he perceived as anti-Islamic, like the Latin script change and civil code reforms. This stance won him Bulgarian favour but created tension with Türkiye, as Hüseyin Hüsnü mobilized a network of Kemalist critics and religious conservatives in Sofia. The Turkish government responded by diplomatically pressuring Bulgaria and financially supporting pro-Kemalist press and institutions among Bulgarian Turks to counter his influence.[116] This complex relationship highlighted the underlying political tensions between Bulgaria and Türkiye, with Türkiye perceiving Hüseyin Hüsnü and his allies as a direct threat to the new secular Turkish regime. Ultimately, Hüseyin Hüsnü was removed from his position in 1936, a move reflecting both Turkish diplomatic success and Bulgaria's shifting interest in maintaining a more cooperative stance with Türkiye.[117] This cooperation between the Turkish Muslim minority and the Bulgarian authorities reflected mutual interests: the Bulgarian government sought to contain potential Turkish influence and prevent nationalist movements, while the minority sought to preserve its religious identity and resist secularization.

Bulgaria's support for anti-Kemalist movements primarily stemmed from its strategic and political motivations. Kemalism, with its emphasis on secularism and nationalism, posed a challenge to Bulgaria's influence over its Turkish minority, which retained a strong religious and traditional identity. Bulgaria feared that the spread of Kemalist secular and national ideals could inspire its Turkish population toward stronger cultural ties with Türkiye, potentially fuelling demands for

[116] Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, "A Dangerous Axis: 'The Bulgarian Müftü', the Turkish Opposition and the Ankara Government, 1928-1936," *Middle Eastern Studies*, 44/5 (2008), p. 782.

[117] Boyar and Fleet, "A Dangerous Axis," p. 786.

autonomy or creating loyalties that conflicted with Bulgarian state interests. By supporting anti-Kemalist leaders like Hüseyin Hüsnü Molla Ahmed, who was staunchly opposed to the secular reforms in Türkiye, Bulgaria aimed to keep its Turkish minority politically and culturally distant from Kemalist influence. This support also allowed Bulgaria to position itself as an ally for religious conservatives, promoting a sense of solidarity among the Muslim minority, which it hoped would foster loyalty to the Bulgarian state. Additionally, Bulgarian authorities likely saw the anti-Kemalist movement as a way to destabilize Türkiye indirectly by supporting a faction that opposed its modernizing regime, potentially weakening Türkiye's regional influence. Thus, supporting anti-Kemalism was a means for Bulgaria to manage internal minority relations while positioning itself strategically in the region.

2.1.4. The Communist Regime and the Turkish-Muslim Minority in Bulgaria

On September 8, 1944, under the command of General Tolbukhin, Russian forces entered Bulgarian territory through Dobruja, quickly occupying the cities of Ruse, Silistra, and Varna. The entry of Soviet troops into Bulgaria effectively brought down the Bulgarian fascist regime. [118] Following World War II, Bulgaria entered the Soviet sphere of influence and became part of the Eastern Bloc under the control of the Bulgarian Communist Party (BCP). As Bulgaria adopted a Soviet-inspired socialist model, its government implemented Marxist-Leninist policies to transform society, including assimilating the country's Muslim minorities (particularly Turks and Pomaks) into a unified national identity. Initially, the BCP encouraged class-based solidarity, framing Muslims as "brothers" in the fight against the bourgeois and oppression of the Ottoman past.

Initially, the Communist regime sought to promote class solidarity over ethnic or religious identity, which provided opportunities for Turkish intellectuals who aligned with communist ideals. This era saw a rise in Turkish-language publications, and efforts were made to reverse some repressive policies from the previous nationalist period. These reforms were part of the BCP's goal of fostering class unity, emphasizing the common struggle of all workers regardless of ethnic background. In

[118] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 167.

an effort to integrate Turkish communities within a socialist framework, the Bulgarian government expanded Turkish-language education, establishing multiple Turkish high schools and teacher training institutes.[119] Turkish-language publications were encouraged, which fostered the growth of a Turkish-speaking communist intelligentsia. This development helped raise a generation of Turkish intellectuals aligned with socialist-realist values. Turkish newspapers, monthly publications, and libraries offered access to works by leftist Turkish writers and translated non-Turkish authors, fostering a Turkish intelligentsia aligned with "socialist realism". Regional Turkish theatres and village-level folk groups were encouraged, promoting cultural expression under the Leninist principle of being "national in form, socialist in content".[120] Additionally, the communist government emphasized class identity over ethnic or religious distinctions, promoting a unifying "socialist nation" concept.

However, the Communist regime also imposed significant restrictions on religious practices. While the class was prioritized over ethnicity, Islamic institutions came under pressure, with mosques subjected to state control and limited religious education. The tension between Turkish and Bulgarian communities persisted, particularly within the broader context of the Cold War, as Bulgaria's alignment with the Soviet bloc deepened hostility toward Türkiye, a NATO member. Over time, however, the BCP increasingly viewed Muslim cultural practices as impediments to both national and socialist progress.[121] The state-initiated assimilation campaigns that targeted cultural symbols such as dress, language, names, and everyday practices associated with Ottoman heritage. Personal names were forcibly changed to Bulgarian ones, and traditional attire was banned in favor of European styles. Through these measures, the BCP attempted to "modernize" Muslim communities, erasing perceived signs of backwardness. Despite some Muslim support for modernization, particularly among pro-BCP Turks and Pomaks, many rural communities quietly resisted, maintaining cultural traditions within their local circles. This complex process saw the BCP balancing its agenda of Soviet-style

[119] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", p. 294.

[120] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria" p. 294.

[121] Neuburger, *The Orient within*, pp. 55-60.

modernization with its own nationalistic interests, resulting in both conflict and reluctant cooperation from the minority groups.[122]

Although the 1947 and 1971 constitutions, such as the Dimitrov Constitution, enshrined religious freedom, in practice, the state systematically repressed Islamic practices. By 1949, *medrese*s were closed, many mosques shut down or neglected, and religious education was banned. Turkish community schools were nationalized and atheistic education was emphasized. Anti-Islamic propaganda campaigns proliferated, portraying Islam as an "alien" influence and labelling Muslim identity as incompatible with socialism.[123] In the 1950s, when initial measures failed to diminish Islamic beliefs, the BCP adopted a more aggressive stance. The 1956 and 1958 initiatives openly aimed to eradicate Islamic influence, employing mass propaganda campaigns. Islamic practices such as circumcision, fasting, and traditional clothing were vilified; circumcision was deemed "barbaric," fasting "economically harmful," and traditional attire a "symbol of subservience." Thus, Muslims in Bulgaria faced systematic pressure to assimilate, with the state attempting to suppress Islamic and Turkish identities under the guise of socialist modernization.[124]

One of the most significant challenges during this period was the migration crisis of 1950–1952. Over 150,000 Turks sought to leave Bulgaria for Türkiye, citing religious and cultural repression.[125] This was actually reflected in Bulgaria's and Türkiye's international agendas, which represent different poles. Tension between Turkish and Bulgarian communities persisted, particularly within the broader context of the Cold War, as Bulgaria's alignment with the Soviet bloc deepened hostility toward Türkiye, a NATO member. Kemal Karpat claimed that this significant migration from Bulgaria was, in fact, carried out under Stalin's directives as a measure to penalize Türkiye for its involvement on NATO's behalf in the Korean

[122] Neuburger, *The Orient within*, pp. 55-60.

[123] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", pp. 292-295.

[124] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", pp. 292-295.

[125] Karpat, "The Turks of Bulgaria", p. 730.

War. He further argued that the Soviets, anticipating a significant destabilizing effect on the Turkish economy with this move, actively promoted this agenda as a strategic political maneuver.[126]

Following Stalin's death in 1953, Bulgaria, like much of Eastern Europe, saw significant shifts in its political landscape. Strikes and unrest, especially among workers, triggered calls from Soviet leadership for a "new course." Bulgaria responded by relaxing police repression, releasing detainees, boosting consumer investment, and enhancing relations with Greece, the USA, and Yugoslavia. Soviet influence waned as Soviet advisors left, and the joint Soviet-Bulgarian ventures were dissolved.

Between 1953 and 1965, Bulgaria experienced pivotal political shifts culminating in Todor Zhivkov's rise as the unchallenged leader. Following Stalin's death in 1953, Valko Chervenkov, who held both positions of Prime Minister and General Secretary of the BCP, began losing his grip on power due to the Soviet Union's call for a "new course" in Eastern Europe.[127] In 1954, Chervenkov relinquished his role as General Secretary but remained Prime Minister; Todor Zhivkov succeeded him as General Secretary, a role more influential than Prime Minister in the communist system because it controlled the party apparatus, which held ultimate authority over the state. This created a dual leadership where Chervenkov was Prime Minister, and Zhivkov was Party leader, but Zhivkov wielded greater power. Chervenkov's position weakened further after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization policies, leading to his resignation as Prime Minister in 1956, replaced by Anton Yugov. Zhivkov remained as General Secretary and became increasingly dominant.[128] A power struggle ensued between Yugov and Zhivkov, but Zhivkov's unwavering loyalty to Khrushchev and backing from Moscow gave him the upper hand. In 1962, during the BCP's Eighth Congress, Zhivkov orchestrated Yugov's removal with Soviet support; after a crucial trip to Moscow, he announced Yugov's expulsion from the Politburo and dismissal as

[126] Karpat, "The Turks of Bulgaria", p. 730.

[127] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* pp. 191-193.

[128] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* pp. 191-193.

Prime Minister.[129] Zhivkov did not immediately assume the title of Prime Minister but consolidated power by appointing loyalists to key positions, maintaining his title as General Secretary, which continued to be the most powerful position due to the party's supremacy over state functions. Thus, Zhivkov ascended to supreme power through his role as Party leader and retained the title of General Secretary throughout his rule, highlighting how party leadership was paramount in Bulgaria's communist hierarchy.

By the late 1950s, Bulgarian communist policies began to emphasize a nationalistic approach toward assimilating Muslim minorities, especially Turks and Pomaks, within the framework of socialist integration. With Todor Zhivkov's ascent to power in 1956, the government intensified its agenda through a series of campaigns from 1958 to 1960 that promoted the collectivization of Muslim agricultural practices and a "Cultural Revolution" to enforce Bulgarian norms over traditional customs. The BCP's April Plenum in 1956 outlined a systematic approach to counter Islamic and Muslim influence, particularly among the Turkish minority. By 1958, the Central Committee had established "Theses for Work among the Turkish Population," aimed at eradicating Islamic religious expression. These policies included training thousands of politically loyal cadres to spread atheism and anti-Islamic propaganda, framing Islam as an imposed and reactionary force that hindered Bulgaria's development. Additionally, Islam was depicted as a tool of foreign interests, particularly Türkiye, seen as obstructing the integration of Muslims into socialist society.[130] Turkish-language schools, publications, and cultural expressions were systematically reduced beginning in 1960, culminating in the closure of all Turkish schools by 1974-1975. Meanwhile, Pomak communities faced targeted campaigns to change their Arabic names and relinquish visible Islamic customs, particularly from 1970 to 1974, though these initiatives met resistance. Despite such opposition, the regime's ultimate aim was to unify Muslim identities under a singular Bulgarian socialist identity, seen as critical to the nation's broader modernization goals.[131]

[129] Crampton, *A Concise History of Bulgaria,* pp. 191-193.

[130] Eminov, "The Status of Islam and Muslims in Bulgaria", p. 294.

[131] Neuburger, *The Orient within*, pp. 69-76.

One key development during this period was the 1968 Turkish Bulgarian Migration Agreement, which allowed limited voluntary migration of Turks to Türkiye. This was one of the last agreements signed by the Bulgarian government concerning the Turkish minority. It was signed on 22 March 1968 by Bulgarian Foreign Minister Ivan Bashev and Turkish Foreign Minister İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil during Todor Zhivkov's visit to Türkiye on 20-26 March 1968.[132] Turkish Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel expressed that this agreement would allow some Bulgarian Turks to reunite with their families in Türkiye, emphasizing the connection between the two nations. Zhivkov similarly stated that the agreement reflected a mutual desire for enhanced friendship and cooperation between Türkiye and Bulgaria. Following the signing, Çağlayangil described the agreement as a "bridge of friendship" between the two nations, while Bashev praised it as a positive step in bilateral relations.[133]

However, the challenges persisted in various forms. Prior to the widely recognized oppression of the Turkish minority that began in the 1980s, incidents such as the Campaign to Change the Names of the Pomaks from 1970 to 1974 and the total dissolution of Turkish education in 1974 served as precursors to the atrocities that would follow.

During the early 1980s, Zhivkov intensified his efforts to Bulgarize the Turkish minority through increasingly coercive measures. Turkish-language education was restricted, and Muslims were pressured to adopt Slavic names as part of state-sponsored assimilation campaigns. The policies reflected Bulgaria's desire to eliminate ethnic divisions and align more closely with its socialist ideology, which emphasized the creation of a homogeneous socialist citizenry. This period saw the establishment of state-controlled institutions to monitor and regulate the activities of the Turkish Muslim minority. Religious practices were heavily restricted, with mosques closing or operating under severe limitations. The growing anti-religious stance of the state aimed to reduce Islamic identity and enforce secular socialist values. Türkiye, aware of the mounting oppression, engaged in quiet diplomacy with Bulgaria, but these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

[132] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 384.

[133] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri,* p. 384.

The migration agreement of 1968 between Türkiye and Bulgaria, while initially offering a transient enhancement in bilateral relations, was ultimately undermined by underlying ideological and military divergences. These differences frequently resulted in tensions that culminated in severe strain on the diplomatic relationship between the two nations, particularly during the 1980s.[134]

2.2. The Internationalization of the Oppression of Turks in Bulgaria

The "Revival Process" or "Vazroditelen Protses" was fully initiated in 1984 under the leadership of Todor Zhivkov. This campaign aimed to assimilate Bulgaria's Muslim minorities, especially ethnic Turks, by systematically erasing their cultural and religious identities. Zhivkov justified this campaign by asserting that ethnic Turks and other Muslim minorities were originally Bulgarian by descent, claiming they had been forcibly Islamized and "Turkified" during Ottoman rule. He presented the Revival Process as a corrective measure, a "return" to the true Bulgarian identity, rather than a campaign of assimilation. The Zhivkov administration relied on the unsupported assertion of the alleged "orchestrated" nature of the supposed "large-scale Ottoman assimilation effort" of Bulgarians to rationalize the extreme measures and the extensive use of coercion and aggression during the "Revival Process".[135] But how did it all begin, and how did this process find places in both domestic and international contexts?

In the winter of 1984-1985, the Bulgarian government swiftly concluded a campaign to pressure Turks in Bulgaria to switch from their Turkish-Muslim names to traditional Bulgarian names. This effort marked the culmination of a 25-year government campaign to "integrate" the country's major minority groups, including the Pomaks, Romans, and Turks.[136] Efforts to suppress the Muslim traditions and customs of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria intensified as restrictions on using the

[134] Iskra Baeva, "Turkish Bulgarian Relations in the Early Turkish Republic," *in Turkish Bulgarian Relations: Past and Present,* ed. Mustafa Türkeş (İstanbul: Tasam Yayınları, 2010), pp. 75-76.

[135] Tomazs Kamusela, *Ethnic Cleansing During the Cold War, The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 24-25.

[136] Ali Eminov, "Are Turkish Speakers in Bulgaria of Ethnic Bulgarian Origin?", *Institute of Muslim Minority Affairs. Journal*, 7/2 (1986), pp. 503-518.

Turkish language in public spaces were enforced. Following, a vigorous campaign aimed to replace Turkish and Arabic Islamic names with Bulgarian and Slavic names, often employing coercive tactics and police intervention. This assimilation policy ultimately led to Bulgaria's international isolation, as global disapproval of its stance toward the Turkish population became a significant barrier to international recognition of Bulgaria's democratization efforts.[137]

The plan reportedly started in the Turkish villages of the eastern region in the latter part of 1984 but soon expanded to central and northeastern Bulgaria.[138] More specifically, the process of forced name changes initially relied on persuasion in small settlements like Kırcali; however, it eventually became a forced practice.[139] The process was very difficult for Turks. According to some reports, Turks were beaten, killed, forced to commit suicide and sent to labor camps, women were violated and forced to undress in public squares.[140] In Kırcali, where name-changing incidents took place, Bulgarian officials were trying to change the names of Turks with various excuses and were using force if necessary. One of these excuses was that if a person's grandparents were a Pomak, they should take a Bulgarian name because of this kinship relationship.[141] The Muslim-Turkish minority living in the region were even forced to sign papers declaring that they had no relatives in Türkiye, and their emigration was prevented. This process turned into a heavy-pressure process and became extremely troublesome in terms of its methods. That is why this period was also called in many resources, the *Bulgarisation of Turks* or *Gradual Assimilation*.[142] The Bulgarian government's discussions of ethnicity had

[137] Darina Vasileva, "Bulgarian Turkish Emigration and Return," *The International Migration Review*, 26/ 2 (1992), pp. 346-347.

[138] Ali Eminov, "Are Turkish Speakers in Bulgaria of Ethnic Bulgarian Origin?" pp. 503-518.

[139] Ömer E. Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989* (Ankara: Avrasya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Yayınları, 2000), p. 59.

[140] Eminov, "Are Turkish Speakers in Bulgaria of Ethnic Bulgarian Origin?", pp. 503-518.

[141] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, p. 159.

[142] Ömer Engin Lütem, "1984–89 Dönemi Türkiye'nin Bulgaristan Politikasi ve 89 Göçü", in *89 Göçü, Bulgaristan'da 1984-89 Azınlık Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Zorunlu Göç*, ed. Neriman Ersoy-Hacısalihoğlu and Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu (İstanbul: Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi Basım Yayın Merkezi, 2012), p.144.

actually become a part of its policies, and it used it frequently. This rhetoric also made itself an official line for the Bulgarian government that ethnic Turks were descendants of *Slav Bulgarians* who were forcibly converted to Islam under Ottoman rule.[143] So that is why minister of internal affairs Dimitur Stojanov famously stated in 1985, "There are no Turks in Bulgaria."

Some interpret the assimilation campaign as the logical extension of the communist regime's ongoing efforts to eliminate Turkish identity and create a homogeneous nation-state. Others see the 1984-1989 events as a new, ethnically charged shift in Bulgarian nationalism or as an anomaly due to corruption among certain officials rather than a reflection of the broader Bulgarian public or party sentiments.[144] Regardless of the motives behind this campaign, it happened and it was not even a secret. Amnesty International's 1984 and 1985 reports document Bulgaria's harsh measures against Muslim minority groups, particularly Pomaks, who resisted the government's forced assimilation policies.[145] Notably, Jumer Hanski and Mr. Bunzev were sentenced to 15 and 20 years of imprisonment, respectively, for protesting against the mandatory change of Muslim names to Bulgarian ones. In a similar case from the 1985 report, Mr. Buniev (full name unknown) was sentenced to 20 years for participating in similar protests. These cases illustrate the significant penalties imposed on those opposing Bulgaria's enforced cultural assimilation efforts.[146]

As the events gained more attention, the international media started to provide extensive coverage of the issue, often highlighting the details of the situation. Particularly in 1985, the challenges faced by the Turkish minority began to attract global interest and found a moral standing for itself during the era. Particularly,

[143] Milena Mahon, "The Turkish Minority under Communist Bulgaria-Politics of Ethnicity and Power," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 1/2 (1999), pp. 149-162.

[144] Ayşe Parla, "Remembering across the Border: Postsocialist Nostalgia among Turkish Immigrants from Bulgaria," *American Ethnologist*, 36/4 (2009), p. 758.

[145] Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report, Bulgaria* (London: Amnesty International, 1984) p. 274; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report* (London: Amnesty International, 1985) p. 258.

[146] Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report, Bulgaria* (London: Amnesty International, 1984) p. 274; Amnesty International, *Amnesty International Report* (London: Amnesty International, 1985), p. 258.

January 1985 also marked the beginning of media coverage on the local level. During an event organized for immigrants in Bursa, government spokesman and state minister Mesut Yılmaz delivered a speech in which he did not mention any specific state or government policies, aside from urging immigrants to remain calm and composed.[147]

Western press started to engage with what was happening in Bulgaria closely. For instance, on January 18, 1985, *the Guardian* reported on the restrictions imposed on the educational rights and religious practices of Muslim Turks, highlighting the humiliation of cultural norms.[148] But at the same time, there was a consistent message asserting Türkiye's alignment with the Western camp and its support for descendants living beyond its borders.[149] (The reason of that, in the early 1980s, Turkish foreign policies experienced a period of renewed engagement with the Western alliance). A month later, another important British newspaper, *the Times*, resembled the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria to historical practices, which involved controlling cultural aspects and suppressing traditions. As mosques were closed or neglected, and cultural restrictions were the key to bringing attention to the Muslim Turks on the global stage.[150]

The events also revolved around a discussion of opposing historical ideologies, with a particular focus on the situation facing the Turks.[151] Reports of Turks being killed were disturbingly frequent, and there are even claims that Bulgarian state officials acknowledged the number of casualties.[152] The incidents were consistently analyzed from a historical standpoint, with frequent emphasis on the Ottoman heritage of the minorities living in Bulgaria. The persistent discussions around minority issues

[147] "Bulgar Zulmü," *Milli Gazete*, January 8, 1985.

[148] "Bulgarian Attacks on Turks Kill 40," *The Guardian*, January 18, 1985.

[149] "Bulgarian Attacks on Turks Kill 40".

[150] "In the Name of Nationalism-Bulgaria Brings Turks to Hell," *The Times*, February 20, 1985.

[151] Henry Kamm, "Toll in Bulgaria's Turkish Unrest is Put at 100," *The New York Times*, February 8, 1985.

[152] Kamm, "Toll in Bulgaria's Turkish Unrest is Put at 100".

overlook the oppressive nature of forced name-changing.[153] The Turkish population, particularly in the Dobruja region, was subjected to forced relocation and forced name changes. Those who resisted the name changes faced violence and chaos, and there were diplomatic reports suggesting that security forces forcibly entered Turkish homes.[154] The Bulgarian government, on the other hand, consistently denied these allegations, emphasizing its desire to maintain good relations between the two countries, Türkiye and Bulgaria.[155] The ongoing reports from the region continued to underscore the gravity of the situation, shedding light on the name change with increased clarity. The incidents were consistently linked to the Bulgarian government's abuses, involving the rape and humiliation of women, as well as military operations in areas inhabited by Turks.[156] There were sources which claimed that approximately 1,800 people had their names forcibly changed to Bulgarian ones, with government officials carrying out these changes through door-to-door visits and even using coercion.[157] Despite denying any forced name changes, the Bulgarian government maintained that this was a right extended to all citizens of the state. Meanwhile, local accounts revealed unreported casualties in areas inaccessible to the press, estimating the number at 200 to 300. Turkish-owned farms were targeted, and families faced harassment.

The internationalization of the events, especially highlighted by the Turkish and global media, caused concern for the Bulgarian government, which consistently emphasized the lack of evidence supporting the events. The Bulgarian authorities claimed that the minorities involved were not of Turkish ethnicity, as during the 1950s and 1970s, Bulgarians of Turkish descent who did not identify with the Bulgarian state emigrated under specific agreements. Furthermore, they underscored that the Turkish government repeatedly avoided addressing issues concerning

[153] Dessa Trevisan, "Bulgaria's Turks Riot over Name Issue", *The Times*, February 8, 1985.

[154] Trevisan, "Bulgaria's Turks Riot over Name Issue."

[155] Raşit Gürdilek, "Howe Reassures Ankara with Message from Sofia," *The Times*, February 14, 1985.

[156] Roger Boyes, "Bulgarians Accused of Killings to Make Turks Change Names," *The Times*, February 16, 1985.

[157] Boyes, "Bulgarians Accused of Killings to Make Turks Change Names".

emigration. They denounced the claims of any kind of oppression of Muslims as deliberate misinformation. While the attributed responsibility to this misinformation to the United States for the events, Zhivkov frequently emphasized that the events in Bulgaria were not as dire as portrayed.[158]

As the events started to gain significant international attention, the first protests by Turkish expatriates and newspapers began to emerge. The Bulgarian government's actions against the Turkish population sparked a large demonstration in Munich, Federal Germany, on February 16, 1985. Hamit Sarı, speaking on behalf of the organizing committee, expressed that all national and moral values had been undermined, decrying the situation as a manifestation of Bulgarian dictatorship.[159] There was a continuing surge in protests around the world. For example, Turkish citizens organized a protest meeting in The Hague, the capital of the Netherlands. The event was called a *march of condemnation*, and 8,000 Turks laid a black wreath in front of the Bulgarian embassy in The Hague. During the rally, Ahmet Evsen, the chairman of the march committee, stated in his speech that the individuals who were formerly associated with Nazism were now identified as Bulgarians, and he emphasized that these actions resembled fascist practices.[160] Demonstrations were ongoing across Europe, with Paris and Stockholm hosting notable protests. In Paris, about 2,000 individuals rallied to denounce the events and presented a letter of condemnation to the Bulgarian embassy. Meanwhile, Turkish workers organized a demonstration in Stockholm, where a speech was delivered in front of the Bulgarian embassy to highlight the oppressive Bulgarian regime.[161] Following the incident, approximately 5,000 Turks in London gathered at Trafalgar Square to denounce the oppressive regime. At the conclusion of the demonstration, the protesters obtained signatures from a collective total of 80,000 Turkish residents in London, advocating for stringent sanctions to be placed on Bulgaria.[162]

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[158] "Bulgaria Denies it has a Turkish Problem," *The Guardian*, February 16, 1985.

[159] "Bulgar Zulmü Lanetlendi," *Tercüman*, February 17, 1985.

[160] Said Tatlı, "Bulgaristan İnsanlık Seni Lanetliyor," *Tercüman*, March 17, 1985.

[161] "Bulgar Zulmü Stockholm ve Paristeki Yürüyüşlerle Kınandı," *Milliyet*, March 31, 1985.

[162] "Londra'da Binlerce Türk Bulgar Zulmünü Kınadı," *Milliyet*, April 1, 1985.

In this period, specific details were frequently emphasized, and the impact of the news was thus increased, and a certain resonance was achieved. One of the most important examples was the way news was served. Some examples increased the emotional intensity of the events, such as highlighting the changing names from Ismail to Ivan. Additionally, the stories of resistance by Bulgarian farmers, who were integral to the country's foundation, were presented alongside anti-communist counter-propaganda. The rights of the Turkish minority in post-communist Bulgaria were reportedly curtailed, beginning with restrictions on their cultural practices.

As Bulgaria continued to oppress its Turkish minority, international attention had also turned to the assassination attempt on the Pope and incidents of drug and arms smuggling,[163] and this actually increased the international attention and resonance of events in Bulgaria and defected Bulgaria's international image. According to some Turkish sources, the reason why the issue of the Turkish minority had become so severe was that Bulgaria played an important role in arms smuggling and drug trade to Türkiye, and this was revealed.[164] In that sense, Bulgaria's efforts to promote a singular national identity and the assimilation of the Turkish minority garnered widespread criticism. The government's assertion that there were no Turks in Bulgaria and that all individuals of Turkish descent were forcibly Turkified during the Ottoman period was particularly scrutinized. It's noteworthy that within this broader context, according to some sources, the oppression of Turkish minorities was attributed not to communism but to *bourgeois nationalism*. Critics highlighted the divergence of these actions from the principles of "proletarian internationalism."[165] The events had also evolved into a human rights issue, and especially the issue of the Muslim-Turkish minority living in Bulgaria had become debatable from a human rights perspective. In particular, it became a problem that the Eastern Bloc countries were unable to instrumentalize Western values.[166] This was a contested issue in

[163] Flora Lewis, "Foreign Affairs. Bulgaria's Image Problem," *New York Times*, May 31, 1985.

[164] "Demirperde Usülü Jenosid," *Yankı Dergisi*, December 28, 1985.

[165] Lewis, "Foreign Affairs. Bulgaria's Image Problem."

[166] Michael T. Kaufman, "Are Things Looser in The Eastern Bloc? Yes And No," *New York Times*, August 4, 1985.

Türkiye too. Journalist Uğur Mumcu accused the Bulgarian government of "bourgeois nationalism", emphasizing it as "social chauvinism".[167]

2.3. The Turkish State Response

Türkiye had to take an active stance against the problems of the Turkish Muslim minority in the Balkans because of the Turkish population in it. That is why Türkiye had to protect the rights of its compatriots living in countries such as Bulgaria and had to take the necessary interventions in case of violation of these rights.[168] However, the reaction of the Turkish official bodies to the appeared much later than the reports of Amnesty International. In this context, as will be discussed in the following sections, the Balkan and Bulgarian immigrant associations also had a great influence on the problematization of the events by the Turkish state.

The investigation into the events in Türkiye actually commenced at the foreign affairs level well before they unfolded; however, the state's response came only afterwards. Türkiye's ambassador to Bulgaria, Ömer E. Lütem, was addressing three key issues at that time. Firstly, the unresolved matter of retirement and social insurance rights, which were acknowledged in the 1968 migration agreement and secondly, the issue of fractured families resulting from migration over the years.[169] The problems faced by families that had become separated could not be resolved, as the Bulgarian government did not permit families to leave. Lastly, he emphasized that the most significant problem lay in the rights of Muslim Turkish minorities.[170] Prior to assuming his position, he had numerous meetings with state officials and brought this issue to their attention. In November 1983, the ambassador received the news about the forced name change and promptly communicated the situation to the Turkish authorities in Ankara.[171]

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[167] Uğur Mumcu, "Bulgar Şovenliği," *Cumhuriyet*, December 22,1985.

[168] İlhan Uzgel, "Balkanlarla İlişkiler," in *Türk Dış Politikası- Kurtuluş Savaşından Bu Güne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, II, ed. Baskın Oran (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), pp. 11-12.

[169] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 155-157.

[170] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 155-157.

[171] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 155-157.

The first public statements at the state level only came in January 1985 after the issue hit both the international and local press. Minister of state Mesut Yılmaz said the Turkish government was aware of the pressure on Turks and that all kinds of measures would be taken as soon as possible.[172] Then, on January 11, 1985, Kenan Evren sent a message to Zhivkov through diplomatic channels, asking him to put an end to the name-changing campaign. Zhivkov responded to the message by asserting that the Turkish population residing in Bulgaria was an integral part of the Bulgarian nation and that their future was linked to the destiny of the Bulgarian people.[173] In the same message conveyed through the Sofia Embassy, the Bulgarian government was strongly urged to halt its current practices as they could potentially have negative implications for bilateral relations. This message emphasized that Türkiye was demonstrating the required sensitivity but it underlined that these developments would not be overlooked.[174] In the course of these continued communications at the state level, Zhivkov's discussions with Kenan Evren were regularly emphasized. Yalım Eralp, the head of the information department at the ministry of foreign affairs during that time, mentioned that they were actively working to address the issue and highlighted that Bulgaria had not yet received a formal protest.[175] As a response, Bulgarian ambassador to Ankara Argir Konstantinov claimed that none of these events actually occurred. He stated that there was no forced name change campaign and clarified that the mother tongue issue was misunderstood. He also asserted that only the official language of the state was Bulgarian and emphasized that proficiency in Bulgarian was necessary for the conduct of state affairs.[176]

In this period, the Turkish authorities were also informed that tourists from Bulgaria, presumably mostly Bulgarian national Turks, faced obstacles travelling to Türkiye. Upon learning that a state-backed company named Balkan Tourist had reportedly closed the borders and imposed mandatory official procedures, the Turkish embassy

[172] "Bulgar Zulmü," *Milli Gazete*, January 8, 1985.

[173] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 155-157.

[174] "Türkiye Bulgaristanı Protesto Edecek," *Milliyet*, January 15, 1985.

[175] "Evren Jivkov'dan Çözüm İstedi," *Cumhuriyet*, January 16, 1985.

[176] Altan Öymen, "Yok Böyle Şey," *Milliyet*, January 25, 1985.

in Sofia requested an inquiry into the matter if that company had the authority to do this.[177] The Turkish government described this action as a unilateral border closure and consequently summoned the Bulgarian ambassador to Türkiye to provide clarification. The reason cited by the company named Balkan Tourist for the border closures was attributed to alleged propaganda activities by Turkish media targeting Bulgaria.[178] Foreign minister Vahit Halefoğlu underlined that the incidents had to be resolved without damaging the relations and he also underlined that the attitude of the Balkan Tourist company towards the Turkish minority was not appropriate.[179]

The process slowly turned into an inter-state diplomatic note crisis. Türkiye sent its first note to Bulgaria through Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Necdet Tezel, on February 22, 1985. In this note, Türkiye underlined the need to discuss the problems between the two countries comprehensively.[180] This diplomatic note contained two main headings: the first was that Bulgaria should allow a comprehensive migration agreement, and the second was that measures would be taken if the Turkish state's demands regarding the minorities living in Bulgaria were not met.[181] In response to the Turkish concerns over the treatment of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian government issued a diplomatic note on February 27, 1985, through deputy foreign minister Ivan Ganev, claiming that there was no minority issue in Bulgaria and condemning the anti-Bulgarian campaign in Turkish media, which Bulgaria blamed the U.S. influence.[182] On March 4, Türkiye responded by clarifying that expressing concern for the Turkish minority was not interference in Bulgaria's internal affairs, emphasizing that these individuals were Bulgarian citizens but shared cultural ties with Türkiye. Türkiye also recommended more media access to the region. On March 22, Bulgaria replied that the minority issue was resolved in 1968 under migration and family reunification agreements. Further, Bulgaria viewed

[177] "Sofyadan Açıklama Bekleniyor," *Cumhuriyet,* January 24, 1985.

[178] "Sofyadan Açıklama Bekleniyor," *Cumhuriyet,* January 24, 1985.

[179] "Endişeliyiz," *Milliyet*, January 27,1985.

[180] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, p. 302.

[181] "Sofyaya Nota Verdik," *Milliyet*, February 23, 1985.

[182] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 302-305.

the Turkish approach as an intervention in the internal affairs of Bulgaria and also viewed it as a hegemonic attempt. Further discussions took place on April 2, during which Bulgaria once more expressed frustration over Turkish media coverage, warning that if Türkiye internationalized the minority issue, Bulgaria would reciprocate. In subsequent exchanges, including a note on April 10 from Türkiye emphasizing Bulgaria's responsibility for deteriorating relations, both sides demonstrated hardened stances. With Bulgaria failing to respond to Türkiye's last note of August 7, 1985, Turkish-Bulgarian relations reached a diplomatic impasse over the unresolved status of the Turkish minority.[183] These notes exchanged actually deepened the problem between the two countries in a way, and Bulgaria described these interventions made through diplomatic channels as direct interference in its internal affairs.[184]

2.4. Turkish Press and Public Opinion

The Turkish press played a crucial role in shaping public opinion by extensively covering the issues faced by the Muslim Turkish minority. The following newspapers stand out among the sources reviewed, especially in the first years of the events: *Milli Gazete*, *Milliyet*, *Cumhuriyet*, *Tercüman*, *Güneş, Bulvar*, *Hürriyet*, *Yeni Nesil*, *Yeni Batı Trakya*, *Son Havadis*, *Yeni Asır* and *Sabah*. The press coverage of the process progressed parallel to the reactions of the Turkish state.

The Turkish press closely monitored the actions of both the Turkish and Bulgarian governments and even provided relevant news from foreign press sources to its readers. But it should be noted that the first news about what was going on in Bulgaria was received from Turks arrived from Bulgaria in December 1984 and January 1985. Some of these people met directly with Turkish state officials, and some gave interviews to newspapers. The earliest available news in the Turkish press dates to January 8, 1985, as reported by *Milli Gazete*. At that time, Mesut Yılmaz, the minister of state, had the opportunity to hear firsthand from Bulgarian refugees about

[183] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 302-305.

[184] Hüseyin A. Bıçaklı, *Türkiye Bulgaristan İlişkileri 1878-2008* (Ankara: İmge Kitabevi, 2016), p. 229.

the challenges they faced in Bulgaria. They shared accounts of forced name changes, as well as incidents of torture and wrongful dismissals.[185] Later, news of enforced name changes, school closures and banning traditions and customs continued to be heard through the activities of organizations such as the Balkan Turks Solidarity Association (Balkan Türkleri Dayanışma Derneği). Even people who had to leave their families in Bulgaria had the chance to express themselves on such national platforms.[186] Necmettin Karaduman, the president of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, met with Bulgarian migrants to learn more about their experiences and the challenges they faced. This highlights the active involvement of Bulgarian Turkish refugees in shaping public opinion and informing the Turkish community about the events in Bulgaria.[187]

Based on these testimonies, the Turkish media coverage focused on the forced name-changing of Turkish individuals, as well as their mistreatment, violence, and sexual assaults. The impact of such news was amplified by Bulgaria's ideological alignment as a satellite state of the Soviet Union, its role in smuggling and terrorism, and the allegation of involvement in the assassination of the Pope.[188] At the onset of the events, there were reports of Turks being killed in Bulgaria.[189] One of the most striking illustrations of the factors influencing public opinion in Türkiye is the article that appeared in *Cumhuriyet* on January 21, 1985. The article featured brief interviews with immigrant representatives and immigrants, in which 29 people shared vivid details of their experiences during that period. The interviewees recounted instances of forced name changes, desecration of family gravestones, arbitrary imprisonment, village blockades, torture, and isolation from the outside world.[190] These individuals were still receiving updates from Bulgaria, though not as frequently. According to these reports, the Turks there were eagerly awaiting

[185] "Bulgar Zulmü," *Milli Gazete*, January 8, 1985.

[186] Mücahit Büber, "Bulgaristan'da Türklerin İsimleri Değiştiriliyor," *Milliyet*, January 14, 1985.

[187] "Bulgaristan'daki Türklere Baskıyı Yabancı Diplomatlar İzliyor," *Cumhuriyet*, January 18, 1985.

[188] Ergün Göze, "Bulgar Zulmü," *Tercuman*, January 16, 1985.

[189] "Bulgaristan'daki Türklere Baskıyı Yabancı Diplomatlar İzliyor."

[190] "Bulgaristan Endişesi," *Cumhuriyet*, January 21, 1985.

assistance, questioning the ongoing silence of the Turkish government. The reports also stressed the importance of aiding the Muslim Turkish community in this situation.[191]

There was a growing public outcry, and Bulgarian immigrants were expressing their disapproval of the events in Bulgaria. They were particularly upset that TRT (The Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) did not include coverage of these events in their broadcast schedule. In response, a protest rally was organized in İzmir to voice their criticisms to TRT. The Bulgarian immigrant community felt that TRT's coverage of troubling events in Bulgaria was insufficient, prompting them to hold a public protest meeting in Izmir to bring attention to this issue.[192] In the process, sufficient public opinion began to form, especially the Turks who migrated from Bulgaria stated that they had sent the 15.000 signatures they had collected among themselves to the Kenan Evren, members of the Council, the Chief of General Staff and other authorities. They also stated that they would put pressure on all countries in the world to impose an embargo on Bulgaria.[193] But all these criticisms at end was directed at Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party Özal was openly accused of remaining indifferent to the events and reacting late and even faced backlash due to the statements he made at the beginning of the events.

In this environment, the press took an active role in creating a platform to force the government to take action to end the oppression going on in Bulgaria. Criticism of the Özal government and the Turkish state persisted. The opposition parties joined the press about their criticisms of the government as well. And the views of the opposition parties reached the public only through these newspapers.

During the events that transpired in the areas of Bulgaria with a large Turkish population, senior representatives from the political parties in parliament, such as the Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi), the Populist Party (Halkçı Parti), and the Nationalist Democracy Party (Milliyetçi Demokrasi Partisi), convened at the

[191] "Bulgaristan Endişesi."

[192] "Bulgaristan Göçmenleri TRT'yi Protesto Etti," *Güneş*, January 22, 1985.

[193] "Evren Ve Üruğ'a 15 Bin Imzali Dilekçe," *Milliyet*, January 27, 1985.

parliamentary office of the *Tercüman* to articulate their perspectives on the matter.[194] This gathering underscored the heightened political tensions and the strategic use of media platforms in shaping legislative responses to minority issues. Yılmaz Hastürk, the Secretary General of the Populist Party, criticized the Özal and his government for its silence on the matter and their inward-looking approach to the issue.[195] However, in parliament, Özal had made his first statement, even if it was not satisfactory. Özal's first statement regarding the significant event was that an investigation was needed to determine if the events were exaggerated.[196] But these statements were met with a reaction by the opposition. Erdal İnönü, the leader of the Social Democracy Party, criticized Turgut Özal's attitude and the state channel TRT, describing Turgut Özal's response as evasive.[197] Özal was adding a new one to his statements that were met with reactions and was making statements indicating that commercial cooperation between Bulgaria and Türkiye could be disrupted. Özal stated that he couldn't understand how the events had escalated like this and that Türkiye, which buys electricity from Bulgaria, would not want to exacerbate the situation.[198] The opposition parties continued to express their strongest criticism of the government and Turgut Özal statements in interviews with the *Tercüman* newspaper on February 10, 1985. The Populist Party, Nationalist Democracy Party, True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi), Conservative Party (Muhafazakâr Parti), and Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) emphasized that they believed Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party had an unstable foreign policy, made unsatisfactory statements that did not reflect the views of the Turkish people, remained silent in response to genocide, and had an ineffective foreign ministry.[199] In mid-February, Interior

[194] The newspaper *Tercüman* held a right-wing and conservative stance during this period (and as in general), focusing extensively on issues related to Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria, with a significant influence on public opinion. While *Tercüman* frequently reported on topics around identity and religion, it both criticized Turgut Özal and his government and, intentionally or not, served as a propaganda tool for them. By amplifying the concerns of the Turkish minority, it helped to reach the target audience and played an active role in enabling the Özal government to leverage these events as a political instrument.

[195] Mevlüt Işık, "Parti Yöneticleri Bulgar Zulmünü Tel'in Etti," *Tercuman*, January 19, 1985.

[196] "Özal: Bulgaristan Konusunda Dikkatli Olmalıyız," *Milliyet*, January 24, 1985.

[197] Abdullah Özülmüş, "Inönü: Bulgaristanda Durum Vahim," *Milliyet*, January 29, 1985.

[198] Hasan Cemal, "Madalyonun İki Yüzü," *Cumhuriyet*, January 31, 1985.

[199] Ceyhan Altınyelek, "Bulgaristan'a Karşı," *Tercüman*, February 10, 1985.

Minister Vahit Halefoğlu stated that they were still analyzing the accuracy of the news and that Prime Minister Turgut Özal was aware of the situation.[200]

While Özal and his government were evasive, the Turkish press was not. In a column penned by Ergun Göze on January 23, 1985, in *Tercüman*, the Özal administration was reproached for its inaction, with a particular focus on the extensive coverage of global events by the foreign press. Göze emphasized the perspectives of Turkish immigrants from Bulgaria, highlighting the challenges they faced in his article.[201] Eminent political historian Professor Fahir Armaoğlu's article in *Tercüman* on the subject indicated that it was becoming increasingly difficult to remain calm in the face of these events. Armaoğlu even emphasized that the government's methods were not correct and stressed that the government should come before the people and say what necessary precautions were being taken.[202]

Another objection was raised by Teoman Erel, a writer for *Milliyet*. Erel criticized the government for its silence regarding the events in Bulgaria, noting that foreign nations seemed to play a more active role than the Özal administration. He pointed out that the US and British foreign ministries directly involved in the situation and included reports from the AP agency and the BBC in his column. Erel highlighted the significant impact of these publications, asserting that their coverage was more comprehensive and satisfactory.[203] He stressed that the increasingly agitated public was not being adequately informed, suggesting that this lack of communication reflected an intelligence failure on the part of the state, which ran parallel to the actions of Western countries.

There were also cautious voices among the journalists. Journalist Ergun Balcı from *Cumhuriyet* offered a different perspective on the state's intended response to the events, attributing it to the importance of maintaining balanced relations between

[200] "Halefoğulu Açıkladı: Bulgaristan'daki Soydaşlarımıza Sahip Çıkıyoruz," *Milliyet*, February 14, 1985.

[201] Ergun Göze, "Bulgar Zulmü ve Dünya," *Tercüman*, January 23, 1985.

[202] Fahir Armaoğlu, "Dur Demenin Zamanı Geldi," *Tercüman*, February 10, 1985.

[203] Teoman Erel, "Karanlıkta Panik," *Milliyet*, February 11, 1985.

Türkiye and Bulgaria, given the energy supplies from Bulgaria and the trade between the two countries. Balcı observed that this period, marked by improving relations and mutual trade agreements with the Soviets, coincided with Bulgaria's implementation of a nationalist policy toward minorities, which he labeled as chauvinistic. He highlighted the geopolitical complexities Türkiye faced, including tensions with Greece, insurgencies in its eastern regions, and militants trained across the border with intentions against Türkiye. While noting Bulgaria's repression of the Turkish minority as significant, he argued that even if not entirely Western propaganda, Bulgaria's strain in relations with Türkiye would not ultimately serve Bulgaria's interests.[204] Veteran journalist Cüneyt Arcayürek, a writing for newspaper *Güneş* that time, approached the issue from a similar perspective, critiquing the delayed response from the government and viewing the West's increased attention to the minority issues in Bulgaria as a potential strategy for using Türkiye against the Eastern Bloc. Arcayürek argued that Western news sources amplified these events following a Warsaw Pact meeting, although the origins of the incidents were not recent. In his view, this Western focus was intended to align Türkiye, particularly given its ongoing issues with Greece, with Western interests to counter the Eastern Bloc.[205]

2.5. The Effect of the Second Cold War Environment to the Bulgarian Turkish Minority Question

Türkiye's ideological stance and foreign policy strategies significantly influenced its response to the oppression faced by the Turkish and Muslim minorities in Bulgaria. In the 1980s, Türkiye pursued closer alignment with the Western alliance, a shift bolstered by Turgut Özal's liberal economic policies and pro-Western approach. This strategic alignment enhanced Türkiye's ability to draw international attention to Bulgaria's assimilation campaigns against its Turkish minority, using diplomatic channels and public outcry to apply pressure on Bulgaria. Türkiye's positioning within the Western bloc, along with its ideological alignment with anti-communist

[204] Ergun Balcı, "Bulgaristandaki Türkler," *Cumhuriyet*, February 10, 1985.

[205] Cüneyt Arcayürek, "Sessiz Diplomasi," *Güneş*, February 10, 1985.

sentiment, not only legitimized but amplified its advocacy for minority rights, turning the issue into a broader international concern. Thus, Türkiye's ideological and strategic orientation was instrumental in shaping its decisions and in rallying Western support against Bulgaria's policies toward its Turkish minority.

The Cold War, in its foundational state, was believed to be a deadly hostility that emerged following the Second World War between two resolutely opposing blocs, one headed by the Soviet Union and the other by the United States. For almost four decades, this hostility governed and instilled fear into the consciousness of mankind; it's likely that, at times, it even posed a risk of annihilating the planet.[206] The Western world has remained steadfast and formidable, in part fueled by the perceived danger of the Soviet "barbarian!" at their doorstep, and this political adversary, with its non-competitive economy and unsavoury ideology, bolstered the argument for liberal democratic capitalism.[207] It is also important to remember that during the period, the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves in a state of ideological conflict, where historical animosity played a minimal role.[208] However, the USA's Cold War strategies changed over time. It is important to note that the 1970s and 1980s were marked by the U.S.'s promotion of the "Green Belt Project" (Yeşil Kuşak Projesi), particularly under President Jimmy Carter. This initiative, intellectually shaped by Carter's advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski, aimed to surround the USSR with a ring of Islamic countries to contain Soviet influence and control its expansion.[209] In this context, the articles by Ergun Balcı and Cüneyt Arcayürek, discussed in the previous section, gain further significance. They highlighted the complex relationship between Bulgaria and Türkiye in the Second Cold War period. Specifically, they emphasized the timing of the deterioration of Türkiye's relations with Bulgaria and the Soviets, the Özal government's reactions being in harmony and

[206] Arthur Schlesinger, "Origins of the Cold War," *Foreign Affairs*, 46/1 (1967), pp. 22–52.

[207] Michael Cox, "Whatever Happened to the 'Second' Cold War? Soviet-American Relations: 1980-1988," *Review of International Studies*, 16/2 (1990), p. 172.

[208] Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, (London: Lynne Rienner Publication, 1998), p. 60.

[209] Baskın Oran, "Dönemin Bilançosu," in *Türk Dış Politikası- Kurtuluş Savaşından Bu Güne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, II, ed. Baskın Oran (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), p. 11.

synchronized with the West, and finally, the propaganda nature of the West's, especially the USA's, attitude towards the Soviets and therefore Bulgaria. They amplified the impact of these stories domestically and highlighted the Türkiye's position aligning with U.S. strategies at the time. This approach not only influenced Turkish foreign policy but also reflected the West's, particularly the U.S, position. While the timing of all these events and the interest shown by the U.S and the West in minority issues are interesting in terms of timing, Türkiye's subsequent reflections are interesting in terms of both Özal's political career and Türkiye's alignment with the West.

The oppression of the Muslim Turkish minority had been ongoing for many years, but it gained international attention in the 1980s due to the influence of the Second Cold War era. It can be said that it had the influence of the Second Cold War because - while the West pioneered the news of the events in the international arena - it put "anti-communism" at the center of its approach more often and interpreted a serious part of the problems faced by Muslim Turkish minorities as a problem of Bulgarian governance. In a general sense, the aim of the Second Cold War period was to give support to the all-anticommunist administration and strategies around the world by the Ronald Reagan administration.[210] That is why the Bulgarian government viewed this as a response to what they perceived as the USA's influence on Turkish foreign policy, and according to the Bulgarian state, this was driven by Ronald Reagan's desire to meddle in the affairs of Soviet bloc countries.[211] Because of that, the BCP feared that the integration of minorities would be disrupted and could potentially lead to financial difficulties for Bulgaria.[212] In fact, Zhivkov and the Bulgarian government even considered all events against them as a fifth-column activity launched by the West against them and the Warsaw Pact.[213] So it is important to note that from various perspectives, this particular process can be characterized as a competition for spheres of influence amongst the involved parties, as it is commonly

[210] Oran, "Dönemin Bilançosu," p. 11-12.

[211] Baeva, "Turkish Bulgarian Relations in the Early Turkish Republic", p. 82.

[212] Baeva, "Turkish Bulgarian Relations in the Early Turkish Republic", p. 82.

[213] Evgenia Kalinova, "The Revival Process in Bulgaria and the Soviet Participation – Myths and Realities", *Bulgarian Historical Review*, 1/2 (2021), pp. 158-193.

expressed[214], and Türkiye was in a Western camp. On the other hand, it is imperative to remember that Bulgaria's socialist government was established with the backing of the Soviets after WWII, which sheds light on Bulgaria's ideological stance. In a nutshell, (because of the influence power of the West) the ideological structure of the period, by its nature, drew an anti-Soviet image, and it focused on the weakness of Soviet society's structure.[215]

In that sense, due to the poles to which Türkiye and Bulgaria belonged, power differences emerged between them in the internationalization of events. So, the emergence of new media tools, which were used by countries such as the USA and UK, significantly amplified the reach and impact of these events, effectively bringing them to the attention of a wider audience. During the period in question, Turgut Özal and Türkiye's stance played a crucial role, holding significant weight in the matter at hand. We can observe that Özal adopted a policy that aligned with the West in the early 1980s. In 1980, the IMF and World Bank jointly launched a program to provide Türkiye with significant financial support. Özal's leadership and negotiating skills were crucial in securing a favorable agreement due to Türkiye's geo-strategic significance,[216] which can be shown as an example of his good relations with the West. Especially after 1983, Türkiye experienced a comprehensive implementation of neoliberal policies. Turgut Özal, a fervent proponent of this economic ideology, sought to garner public backing for his program by offering illicit profit-making prospects to select emerging business factions. Additionally, he disrupted the established hierarchy of the state bureaucracy, which had been predominantly merit-based, and infused it with reformist cadres who espoused neoliberal principles.[217] He blended economic liberalism with Islamic values, shifting Turkish politics significantly. Adopting an export-driven approach, he replaced the outdated import-substitution policy from the 1930s and achieved significant progress for the Turkish

[214] Martin McCauley, *Origins of the Cold War 1941–1949*, (London: Pearson Longman, 2003). p. 105.

[215] Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War*, (London: Verso 1983), p. 13.

[216] Ziya Öniş "Turgut Özal and His Economic Legacy: Turkish Neo-Liberalism in Critical Perspective." *Middle Eastern Studies*, 40/4 (2004), p. 118.

[217] Pınar Bedirhanoğlu Toker, "Cronyism through Financialization: Turkey's Neoliberal Transformation from Özal to Erdoğan," *Social Research*, 88/2 (2021), pp. 359-379.

economy. In the early 1980s, Turkish foreign policies experienced a period of renewed engagement with the Western alliance, leading to decreased tensions in Turkish-US relations and some reemergence of suspicion and hostility in Turkish-Soviet relations.[218] It highlighted Türkiye's significance in the Western alliance and the Turkish people's affinity for the West. This can be attributed to the implementation of a liberal economic model by Turgut Özal after his election, which forged an ideological bond with this alliance, akin to contemporaries Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.[219] Consequently, Western countries, particularly the United States, supported Türkiye's stance on the issue, while the Council of Europe, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Helsinki Watch, and Amnesty International consistently raised concerns about the challenges faced by the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.[220]

2.6. Özal's Government's Reaction and Response

It became increasingly difficult for Turgut Özal to resist the growing public pressure, and he needed to respond. By February 1985, he began to show more interest in the Bulgarian question and met with Bulgarian immigrants in the parliament. Emphasizing the issues faced by immigrants, Özal pointed out that it was important to carefully monitor these situations in a delicate balance.[221] Özal emphasized that the government was currently unable to provide specific details about the scale and exact nature of the events. He noted that the government had been thoroughly reviewing all available reports. However, he stressed that these events were constantly evolving. Furthermore, he mentioned the possibility of opening border gates and accepting immigrants if deemed necessary.[222] During a cabinet meeting, the ambassador to Sofia, Ömer Lütem, delivered a report on the Bulgarian government's suppression of Turks. Following this meeting, the state minister and

[218] William Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774* (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. 118.

[219] Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy since 1774*, p. 119.

[220] Uzgel, "Balkanlarla İlişkiler," p. 180.

[221] "Özal: Bulgaristan İşinin Üzerindeyiz," *Cumhuriyet*, February 13, 1985.

[222] "Gerekirse Kapıları Açarız", *Tercüman,"* February 15, 1985.

government spokesman, Mesut Yılmaz, issued the government's first official statement, accusing Bulgaria of wrongdoings towards the Turkish minority.[223] Özal then started discussing the issue in a more detailed manner and even he suggested that Türkiye could accept more than 500,000 Bulgarian immigrants if necessary.[224] However, this would become a promise that Özal would be unable to fulfil, especially in 1989, because when the number of immigrants crossing the border exceeded 300,000, Özal closed the border.[225]

Turgut Özal provided more detailed reports to foreign press about the events, and Türkiye's position became clearer in this regard. During this process, Turgut Özal maintained a cautious stance and emphasized that Türkiye was powerful enough to handle a potential wave of migration from Bulgaria related to the minority problem.[226] Özal began to speak more frequently about this increasingly international issue. He expressed his strongest stance yet, stating that if Bulgaria's oppression of Turks did not cease, Turks would protest anywhere in the world if needed. This statement was made during his attendance at the New York Turkish Businessmen's Association event in the USA.[227]

Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party's response, however, was not strong enough considering that there was a burgeoning Western interest for this question. For instance, the reactions of countries such as the United States received extensive coverage in both international and national media. Specifically, Reagan and the U.S. State Department stated that the US was closely monitoring the situation of the Turks living in Bulgaria and confirmed reports of Turkish casualties in Bulgaria.[228] In April

[223] "1 Milyon Türk Bulgar Baskısı Altında," *Milliyet*, February 19, 1985.

[224] "Özal: Değil 500 Bin, Çok Daha Fazla Soydaşımıza Kucak Açarız," *Cumhuriyet*, February 28, 1985.

[225] Ayşe Parla, "Longing, Belonging and Locations of Homeland among Turkish Immigrants from Bulgaria," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 6/4 (2006), p. 546.

[226] "Özal Yabancı Gazetecilere Bulgaristandaki Tüm Türkleri Alırız Dedi," *Milliyet*, March 13, 1985.

[227] "Özaldan Bulgaristan Sorunu: Zulüm Durmazsa Tüm Dünyada Nümayiş Yaparız," *Cumhuriyet*, April 1, 1985.

[228] David K. Shipler, "Reagan Tempers his View on Soviet," *The New York Times*, December 11, 1985; "Biz İşi Bitirdik," *Milliyet*, April 3, 1985.

1985, Armaoğlu once again accused the Özal government of remaining passive and not engaging with the public, as it did at the beginning of the events. He emphasized that Türkiye could benefit from seeking assistance from NATO and the US to yield results regarding these events.[229] Moreover, it is evident that foreign news sources frequently provided material for Turkish media coverage. A notable example of this is *Milliyet* newspaper's report featuring observations from a Reuters correspondent. By including the Reuters journalist's observations from Shumen, Bulgaria, *Milliyet* highlighted the reinforcement of reports on the repression from western sources, thereby amplifying the resonance of these events.[230]

During this period, both within Türkiye and on the international stage, the response to the oppression faced by the Turkish minority intensified, with protests increasingly gaining momentum. One of the earliest major protests in the country was organized on March 21, 1985. The protest rally drew a crowd of over 10,000, and Selahattin Yıldız, the president of the Turkish Immigrant and Refugee Associations Federation (Türk Göçmen ve Mülteci Dernekleri Federasyonu) başkanı, delivered a speech on behalf of the group. He emphasized their intention to raise awareness about the events occurring in the region to both Türkiye and the world. Yıldız highlighted the historical roots of the oppression, which had been ongoing since 1878, and stressed the urgent need to halt the torture and massacres.[231] At the end of this whole process, as the reactions grew like an avalanche, protest rallies began to be organized in Türkiye and the world. The Balkan Immigrants Association decided to organize a rally under the name of the Great March on April 20, 1985. The aim was to announce the problems experienced by the Turks living in Bulgaria and to create the necessary awareness.[232] At the same time, rallies took place in the German city of Hannover. Thousands joined this solidarity march, conveying messages of support to the Turkish community in Bulgaria.[233]

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[229] Fahir Armaoğlu, "Bulgaristan Meselesi", *Tercüman*, April 12, 1985.

[230] "Türkler Baskı Altında," *Milliyet*, April 4, 1985.

[231] "Zulme Lanet," *Hürriyet*, March 22, 1985.

[232] "Büyük Yürüyüş," *Milliyet*, April 20, 1985.

[233] "Kardeşlerimizin Yanındayız," *Hürriyet*, April 21, 1985.

2.7. Conclusion

The condition of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, though marked by varying intensities over time, has generally been challenging since 1878, particularly following the Ottoman Empire's loss of influence in the Balkans. By the 1980s, however, with the increasing power of the media and the Western world's heightened scrutiny, the Turkish minority's plight in Bulgaria gained international resonance and became more widely recognized. Türkiye's ideological alignment with the West within the Cold War context added a strategic dimension to its support for the minority, potentially working to its advantage.

It is important to note, though, that this international attention aligned with the United States' broader Second Cold War strategy under President Ronald Reagan, especially in his efforts to exert pressure around the Soviet periphery, an approach consistent with the "Green Belt Project" project initiated under President Carter. Supporting Muslim minorities and anti-communist movements fell in line with these strategic goals, making the Bulgarian issue a timely example. This alignment of interests was not without its critics; Turkish journalists like Ergun Balcı of *Cumhuriyet* and Cüneyt Arcayürek of *Güneş* expressed scepticism, viewing the West's focus on the Bulgarian minority as a broader anti-Soviet and anti-socialist effort rather than a purely humanitarian one. By early 1985, the momentum around these issues grew significantly, with Turkish public opinion being increasingly shaped by both the media and the Turkish immigrants from Bulgaria. At this point, the Turkish government, led by Turgut Özal, along with the state's official TV channel, TRT, were criticized for their perceived indifference and delayed response, which led to heightened public dissatisfaction. This pressure unfolded against a backdrop of ongoing economic, bureaucratic, security, and social challenges in post-military coup Türkiye, further complicating Özal's political standing. Seeking to bolster his image in the public eye, Özal began to employ strategies for political image-building, a key component of which involved two symbolic figures such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür. As later chapters will explore, these figures became instrumental in redirecting attention from mounting political crises and in reinforcing Özal's political standing in the years to come.

Two individuals prominently positively affected Özal's political image at that time. Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür emerged as influential figures who could bolster Özal's public persona and serve as effective propaganda tools. Özal skillfully leveraged the Turkish minority issue in Bulgaria to his advantage by using symbolic figures, thereby cultivating a heroic image with popular support. So much so that in the future, these two symbolic names would be introduced as Özal's favourites and as the sparkles used to give hope to the people.[234] Naim Süleymanoğlu was a highly accomplished weightlifter of Turkish descent, residing in Bulgaria, and often a subject of widespread international discussion. Aysel Özgür appeared before the Turkish people as someone who was stranded in Bulgaria and forcibly separated from her family.

That is why Özal would be involved in all of these processes for the sake of his own political image construction and would use it for his political propaganda. In fact, as a result, the emotions of the target audience were going to be stimulated through group norms such as beliefs and values, and the victimization of Ayse Özgür and heroism of Naim Süleymanoğlu was going to be a symbol of resistance, heroism and a figure that must be protected. In this context, it can be said that propaganda is highly linked to the use of emotive language and imagery,[235] and will be used by Turgut Özal.

[234] "Özal'ın Son Gözdesi," *Milliyet*, February 8, 1989; Teoman Erel, "Bizi Mucize Paklar," *Milliyet*, February 13, 1988.

[235] Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion* (London: SAGE Publications, 2018), p. 329.

CHAPTER 3

SELF PROMOTION THROUGH INTERNATIONALIZATION: THE CASE OF TURGUT ÖZAL AND NAİM SÜLEYMANOĞLU

During the period when Todor Zhivkov and the Bulgarian government were implementing an assimilation process known as the "Revival Process" in 1984, the use of media tools such as print media and television instrumentalized by the West and Türkiye became an effective way of internationalizing the oppression of Turks in Bulgaria and making them heard across the world. The problems experienced by Turks living in Bulgaria were now beginning to be well heard around the world, and protests, especially in Turkish-inhabited areas against the forced name change process, were gradually increasing and finding a significant place in the world press.[236]

In fact, while it was often reported that these events were a result of Bulgarian chauvinism and nationalism, it had been stated that the problems experienced by the Turkish population were a result of encroachment on the identity, faith, and values of an ethnic minority.[237] Attacks on values, beliefs and identities were actually the main elements that increased the impact of the events in the world and made it easier for them to be heard.

It can be said that some key figures played an important role in internationalizing this process, the most important of whom was the Olympic athlete of the period, Naim Süleymanoğlu. The use of symbolic names, such as Naim Süleymanoğlu as a *propaganda agent*, enhanced the impact of the events in terms of propaganda and

[236] Kamm, "Toll in Bulgaria's Turkish Unrest is Put At 100."

[237] East Europe Correspondent, "In the Name of Nationalism: Bulgaria Brings Turks to Hell", *The Times*, February 20, 1985.

persuasion in both the Turkish domestic and international arena.[238] Naim Süleymanoğlu was particularly effective in bringing attention to the problems faced by the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria by creating, what is called in the literature, *resonance,* which is based on the idea that messages have a stronger impact when they align with existing opinions and beliefs and establishing a form of communication between the masses.[239] In fact, by using new media tools through a heroic and charismatic symbol like Naim Süleymanoğlu, the emotions of the targeted audience were stimulated through identities, beliefs, values, attitudes, behaviours and group norms, taking into account cultural collective memory. Thus, a kind of communication form was actually created for a well-planned purpose to *manufacture consent* over the masses to gain political leverage by political elites such as Turgut Özal. [240] Even years after the events took place, he continued to be used as a symbol of the troubles faced by the Turkish minority in various media tools, and he was regarded as the primary propaganda tool of the process, earning the name of a "walking and talking propaganda machine".[241]

However, more importantly, during this period, Turgut Özal instrumentalized this situation and used it effectively in terms of building his own image. In other words, he was actually turning a potential figure such as Naim Süleymanoğlu into a propaganda instrument. While doing this, Turgut Özal was trying to influence the masses, especially through group norms, by instrumentalizing Naim Süleymanoğlu in terms of propaganda and persuasion for his own image-building. Because every society has established behavioural norms that impact the mindset and actions of its

[238] *Propaganda agent* is not used here with the meaning of an *agent provocateur* and an *agent of* influence. *Propaganda agent*, here, defined here as Garth Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell delivered it is the people who facilitate messages directly and through the media for an institution. Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, p. 393.

[239] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, p. 323.

[240] "Manufacturing consent", a concept articulated by Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman (influenced by Walter Lippmann), emphasizes the media's significant role as a tool for shaping public opinion through advertising power. This perspective highlights the media's influence within a propaganda model rather than viewing it solely as a tool of propaganda. Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

[241] Simon Barnes, "A Young Turk Lifts Oppression," *The Times*, December 6, 1988.

people, shaping the character of its citizens.[242] In this regard, Özal and his team developed a parallel strategy by accurately understanding the emotions and thoughts of the Turkish population. During his time in power, Turgut Özal government faced numerous challenges, such as arms and drug trafficking and terrorism allegations, as well as issues with cronyism and corruption that were prevalently known both nationally and internationally.[243] This made the presence of individuals like Naim Süleymanoğlu even more important for Turgut Özal to build his image for the sake of his political career to obscure the problems he faced. In the struggle for power, propaganda is a tool used by those who want to secure or maintain their power.[244] In fact, in this sense, as David Welch stated in his book with giving reference to Philip M. Taylor; "For the smoke to rise, there must first be a spark which lights the flame. Propaganda is that spark".[245] According to this definition, it can be said that Naim Süleymanoğlu was the spark that Özal was looking for.

The lasting emotional connection that Turgut Özal formed with Naim Süleymanoğlu has been repeatedly highlighted in subsequent years, underscoring the way he garnered public affection through his relationships with influential individuals.[246] The influence of figures like Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür on society has been brought to the forefront on multiple occasions, and these symbols are often referred to as Turgut Özal's favourites.[247] In fact, it has often been stated that these two names, Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, are miraculous instruments used by the Motherland Party and Özal to persuade the public.[248] Naim Süleymanoğlu was a significant figure in bringing international attention to the oppression faced by the

[242] Joost Meerloo, *Rape of the Mind: The Psychology of Thought Control Menticide and Brainwashing* (New York: Pickle Partners Publishing, 1956), p. 65.

[243] Uğur Mumcu, "Bulgar Şovenliği," ; Emin Çölaşan, "Özal Dönemi Hırsızlığı," *Hürriyet,* October 8, 1994; Emin Çölaşan, *Turgut Nereden Koşuyor* (Istanbul: Tekin Yayınevi, 1989).

[244] David Welch, "Opening Pandora's Box': Propaganda, Power and Persuasion," in *Propaganda, Power and Persuasion: From World War I to Wikileaks,* ed. David Welch (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), p. 17.

[245] Welch, "Opening Pandora's Box': Propaganda, Power and Persuasion," p. 17.

[246] "Özal'ın Son Gözdesi," *Milliyet,* February 8, 1989.

[247] "Özal'ın Son Gözdesi," *Milliyet,* February 8, 1989.

[248] Teoman Erel, "Bizi Mucize Paklar," *Milliyet,* February 13, 1988.

Turkish minority in Bulgaria. His impact on society through internationalization, which was based on his ability to create resonance among the masses, was powerful owing to him being a successful Olympic athlete.

3.1. Early Life of Naim Süleymanoğlu

On January 23, 1967, Naim Süleymanoğlu was born in the town of Ptichar (Ahatlı), in Kardzhali (Kırcaali) province, Bulgaria.[249] Süleymanoğlu began his sports career in primary school, where he was involved in swimming, wrestling, and athletics.[250] He grew up in a Turkish minority community as the child of a miner and farmer family. Süleymanoğlu showed extraordinary weightlifting talent from a young age. At 15, he broke his first of several world records, and the very next year, in 1982, he gained international recognition by lifting over three times his body weight.[251]

Naim Süleymanoğlu had achieved many successes throughout his career before his defection. At 14 years old, he achieved first place in local competitions in Bulgaria. In 1983, he broke a world record in the U.S and also placed second in the European and World Championships in Moscow. The following year, he became the European and World Champion, solidifying his recognition on the international stage.[252] In the meantime, Naim Süleymanoğlu was selected for the national team in Bulgaria at the age of 14. In 1982, Naim Süleymanoğlu made his debut in the weightlifting community at the World Junior Weightlifting Championships in São Paulo, competing for Bulgaria, however, due to the Bulgarization Project in the 1980s,

[249] In the historical background provided for Naim Süleymanoğlu, his name was written to reflect the different historical name changes he underwent. The alteration of Naim Süleymanoğlu's name is a critical detail in his personal history, serving as a striking example of a forced name change. Prior to his defection to Türkiye in 1986, his surname was originally recorded as "Suleymanov" in official documents. Later, Bulgarian authorities decided to change it to "Shalamanov," which played a significant role in Süleymanoğlu's decision to defect.

[250] Naim Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu," YouTube, *TRT Spor*, November 16, 2017, Video, 2:21,https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGjLG-XlTKs, access date: January 17, 2023.

[251] "Weightlifting King Süleymanoğlu Conquers Third Olympic Gold in Epic Record-breaker," International Olympic Committee, January 24, 2021. https://olympics.com/en/news/weightlifting-king-suleymanoglu-conquers-third-olympic-gold-in-epic-record-break, access date: January 17, 2023.

[252] Naim Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu", YouTube, *TRT Spor*, November 16, 2017, Video, 2:21, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGjLG-XlTKs, access date: January 17, 2023.

Süleymanoğlu was forced by the Bulgarian police force, like other ethnic Turks, to change his name to a Slavic one, becoming "Naum Shalamanov" in 1985 upon returning home from a training camp in Melbourne, Australia.[253]

The Bulgarian government's actions could also be interpreted as propaganda and image-building process, too. This is due to their awareness of Süleymanoğlu's significant influence over the Turkish minority community as a successful athlete. Bulgaria has seized upon the phenomenal success of young weightlifter Naim Süleymanoğlu as a powerful tool for propaganda and public relations. Süleymanoğlu, weighing in at 123 pounds, has been glorified as Bulgaria's "Vest-Pocket Hercules," propelling the narrative of his country's lifting revolution and projecting an image of national strength and dominance on the world stage.[254] He proudly represented the Eastern Bloc and Bulgaria on the world stage. In a June 1984 article in *Sports Illustrated* by Terry Todd, Ivan Abadjiev, a highly accomplished Bulgarian coach of that era, described Süleymanoğlu as a uniquely exceptional athlete, unlike any seen before.[255] From another perspective, the motivation behind Bulgaria's forced change of the name of a symbolic figure like Süleymanoğlu was probably to set an example for the remaining Turks and to reduce possible reactions. It is a known fact that during Süleymanoğlu's international competitions, he was referred to as Shalamanov, and his remarkable accomplishments were attributed to this surname.[256] It is quite clear that having such a highly successful athlete competing under the name Shalamanov served as a significant propaganda tool for the Bulgarian nation.

However, during this period of oppression, while news about Muslim Turks was increasingly spreading both nationally and internationally, Naim Süleymanoğlu was

[253] Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[254] Terry Todd, "Behold Bulgaria's Vest-Pocket Hercules Pound For 123 Pounds, 16-Year-Old Naim Suleimanov Is Now The World's Greatest Weightlifter And Clearly The Driving Force Of His Country's Lifting Revolution", *Sports Illustrated Vault*, https://vault.si.com/vault/1984/06/11/behold-bulgarias-vest-pocket-hercules , access date: January 17, 2023.

[255] Todd, "Behold Bulgaria's Vest-Pocket Hercules."

[256] "Bulgaria: Naum Shalamanov Sets Three World Records in World Weightlifting Championships", *Reuters*, 11th November 1986, https://reuters.screenocean.com/record/1036530, access date: July 31, 2024.

playing an increasingly important role in spreading the news about the events.[257] One notable example is the *Voice of America* (VOA) radio report, as cited by the *Güneş*, on March 23, 1985. This report emphasized Süleymanoğlus's early Olympic accomplishments while also shedding light on the news surrounding the change of the successful athlete's name by the authoritarian Bulgarian government. [258] During the Cold War era, VOA focused primarily on events happening within specific target countries. VOA services allocated the majority of their on-air hours to Communist Europe and the Balkans, broadcasting in languages such as Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, and English.[259] Additionally, they offered radio broadcasts in languages including Albanian, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Bulgarian, Byelorussian, Czech, Estonian, Georgian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Romanian, Serbo-Croatian, Slovak, Slovene, Tatar, Turkmen, and Uzbek.[260] Renowned European writers, although not well compensated, translated propaganda policy into radio programs while producing stories about American foreign policies. The skill of political influence, as defined by prominent American propaganda theorists as "the control of opinion by significant symbols," has been present since the earliest recorded history.[261] Thus, the resonance of the events is more effectively felt in the target country, enabling the propaganda model to achieve its objectives more easily. At this point, the dissemination of news about Naim Süleymanoğlu through these channels ensured that the situation of Süleymanoğlu and the Turkish population living in Bulgaria reached a broader audience both locally and universally.

In fact, it was a period when Olympic athletes were frequently involved in world politics. In the Cold War era, countries on either side of the Iron Curtain refrained from engaging in military conflict by fighting political battles in the "soft" cultural

[257] "Bulgaristan'da 200 Türk Öldürüldü," *Güneş*, March 23, 1985.

[258] "Bulgaristan'da 200 Türk Öldürüldü."

[259] A. Ross Johnson and R. Eugene Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (New York: Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 26-27.

[260] Johnson and Parta, *Cold War Broadcasting: Impact on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe*, pp. 26-27.

[261] Holly Cowan Shulman, *The Voice of America- Propaganda and Democracy, 1941-1945* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), p. 1.

domains of music, dance, literature, and, significantly, sports.[262] Furthermore, during those years, Olympic athletes from the Eastern Bloc frequently sought asylum, making it one of the most popular topics of the Cold War. The popularity of this situation is actually due to the fact that the Olympic games reached a wide range of people, especially through the media. The worldwide focus on Cold War rivalries and politics increased the brand's visibility and resulted in a product that was well-suited for television and, consequently, commercial utilization.[263] For example, among many of them, tennis player Martina Navratilova was one of the most important examples. While these symbols generally represented people who went to freedom from oppressive regimes, they contained references to the nature of the Cold War and the inter-polar ideological struggle through symbols. The impact of the defection of such powerful figures as Navratilova was so significant that these defections were publicized as the Americanization of the athlete seeking freedom.[264] That is the reason, this process can be characterized from various perspectives as a competition for spheres of influence amongst the involved parties, as it is commonly expressed.[265]

Actually, Süleymanoğlu was not the first athlete of Turkish origin to escape during the period. Boxing coach of Turkish origin Ali Mehmet Yusuf was among those who escaped from Bulgaria via Austria and was only one of the athletes who escaped, especially during this period.[266] But Naim Süleymanoğlu's name has gained international recognition, and his background as a member of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria is often presented in a manner that highlights the period of oppression that the minority faced.[267] Bulgaria's assimilation process of the Turkish minorities is

[262] Johanna Mellis, "From Defectors to Cooperators: The Impact of 1956 on Athletes, Sport Leaders and Sport Policy in Socialist Hungary", *Contemporary European History,* 29/1 (2019), pp. 1-2.

[263] Toby Rider, *Cold War Games: Propaganda, the Olympics, and U.S. Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016.), p. 48.

[264] Dave Anderson, "The Americanization of Martina,*" The New York Times*, September 8, 1975; "Urge to Freedom," *The New York Times*, September 10, 1975.

[265] Martin McCauley, *Origins of the Cold War 1941–1949* (London, Routledge, 2003), p. 105.

[266] "Bulgaristandan Kaçan Türk Boks Antrenörü Zulmü Anlattı,*" Yeni Nesil*, March 22, 1985.

[267] "Offene Arme," Der *Spiegel*, April 17, 1985.

frequently referenced in the discussion of Süleymanoğlu's identity, which had sparked wider global discourse between Warsaw Pact member Bulgaria and NATO member Türkiye regarding minority issues.[268] That is why the news of Süleymanoğlu's name being forcibly changed as a successful athlete would have had a significant impact on the international press.

An example of this can be found in *Der Spiegel'*s April 1985 publication, which discussed the harms of Bulgarianization imposed by the chauvinist Bulgarian administration and the erasure of a community's collective identity, with specific reference to Süleymanoğlu's Muslim Turkish background.[269] The article also emphasized the prevalent discourse of "Bulgaria for Bulgarians" and highlighted the historical continuity of forced Bulgarianization. Just like *Güneş*'s previous coverage further indicates that Süleymanoğlu's symbolic character held great significance, as world events could be interpreted through it. These events were discussed in the context of the bipolarity of the world. Bulgaria, as a member of the Warsaw Pact, was seen as complicit in this persecution. In contrast, NATO member Türkiye was depicted in history as actively seeking a migration agreement and working to repatriate the Turkish minority to Türkiye.[270] In that sense, it can be said that as a symbolic name, Süleymanoğlu represented the beliefs and values of a society and embodied the collective memory of the historical oppression faced by Turks globally.

It is clear that global and local news were interconnected, as seen with prominent personalities like Naim Süleymanoğlu influencing both spheres. It is worth noting that news of Naim Süleymanoğlu's Olympic successes coincided with a wave of media attention in Türkiye. Alongside coverage of his impressive athletic feats, there was also a growing focus on his Turkish heritage and the circumstances surrounding his forced name change to "Naum Shalamanov." This emphasis on his identity underscored the precarious position of Turkish culture under the authoritarian regime in Bulgaria.

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[268] "Offene Arme."

[269] "Offene Arme."

[270] "Offene Arme."

3.2. The Defection

Due to Bulgarian oppression and the forced name-change process, Süleymanoğlu decided to defect to Türkiye. The opportunity arose at the 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, where he won the gold medal. The period before the defection process is very challenging for both Türkiye and Naim Süleymanoğlu. Naim Süleymanoğlu faced immense challenges as he was under the constant surveillance of the Bulgarian secret service even before his escape. His family's phone was tapped, and he was monitored by two agents during his international travels. Years later, as *Sports Illustrated* magazine writer Gary Smith noted in his July 1992 Süleymanoğlu interview article, had to rely on the ones who were close to him within the system, but unfortunately, he said that he encountered a lot of unreliable people during this process: "I learned not to trust anyone and kept my feelings to myself," he confided and, he added, "Communism can leave you feeling isolated and alone".[271] According to this article, the motivation behind these words was that he started to lose his Turkish language skills and cultural heritage at the sports school he attended from the age of ten, but later, in the very same interview, he talked about the general problem of being an athlete in Bulgaria. "The athlete in a Communist country is very aware of why and how he is used," said Süleymanoğlu. "He knows he will be squeezed like a lemon until the juice is gone. In some ways, it is the same in a free society. I guess that is the way of the world".[272] Based on Süleymanoğlu's own words, the intensity of the pressure he was subjected to becomes understandable. In addition to these, Bulgaria's pressure on athletes, especially during this period, comes across very clearly.

On the same token, the final straw for Süleymanoğlu was when the Bulgarian secret police coerced him into testifying that he had voluntarily changed his name to "Naum Shalamanov", despite being forced to do so just after he came back from

[271] Gary Smith, "The Weight of the World; Having Fled Oppression in Bulgaria, Naim Suleymanoglu Now Strains Under the Adoration of the Entire Turkish People", *Sports Illustrated Vault*, https://vault.si.com/vault/1992/07/22/the-weight-of-the-world-having-fled-oppression-in-bulgaria-naim-suleymanoglu-now-strains-under-the-adoration-of-the-entire-turkish-people, access date: January 17, 2023.

[272] Smith, "The Weight of the World."

training camp in Melbourne, as mentioned before. Süleymanoğlu was now determined to escape and was particularly affected by the name change and started making plans.[273] Because, as mentioned earlier, Süleymanoğlu's name was frequently used in a Bulgarianized form during this period, and now he was frequently winning successes in international competitions under the name of "Naum Shalamanov". It can be said that Bulgaria was justifying this forced name change process through this powerful figure who had been subjected to a name change. Here, the Bulgarian government was conveying a specific purpose and message to its citizens, emphasizing that this process was for their benefit.

In this context, we come across an interview that Süleymanoğlu clearly gave under pressure during this period. In his memoirs, retired ambassador Ömer Lütem, who was the Turkish ambassador to Bulgaria at the time, Lütem noted that the newspaper, initially published as *Yeni Işık*, and later renamed *Nova Svetlina*, reportedly featured statements attributed to Süleymanoğlu. [274] In the article dated March 28, 1985, Süleymanoğlu expressed that changing his name was a natural part of embracing his Bulgarian identity and expressed praise for Bulgaria and the BCP by acknowledging their role in his athletic successes. The magazine concluded the piece with Süleymanoğlu's message, "Love and think about our homeland and the People's Republic of Bulgaria".[275] In a period when there was so much pressure, the fact that this magazine distorted Süleymanoğlu's words to this extent can actually be seen as complete Bulgarian propaganda. Süleymanoğlu also stated in the interviews he gave in the following period that all the interviews were actually given under pressure.

During a period of oppression, an important example can be found in an interview conducted by Örsan Öymen, a journalist for *Milliyet* at that time, with Süleymanoğlu. In this interview published on April 8, 1985, Süleymanoğlu responded to Öymen's questions about the name change and the period of oppression by saying, "Don't ask

[273] TRT Spor, "Kapıkule'nin Anahtarı - Naim Süleymanoğlu," YouTube Video, access date: January 17, 2023.

[274] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, p. 425.

[275] Lütem, *Türk Bulgar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, p. 425.

me such questions." Öymen interpreted this as Süleymanoğlu's inability to answer due to the Bulgarian pressure.[276]

Less than a year later, Süleymanoğlu was ready to defect. Naim Süleymanoğlu intentionally chose the 1986 Melbourne World Cup Weightlifting Championship as the event to escape from, with the aim of making a worldwide impact.[277] In the first place, he planned his escape timing accordingly to achieve this goal by himself.[278] However, the defection process during the time period of the Cold War was very difficult. The news of Naim Süleymanoğlu's desire to seek asylum eventually reached the Turkish authorities, and the Turkish National Intelligence Organization (MİT) was involved in the process.[279]

For Süleymanoğlu, the night of December 6, 1986, was one of the most challenging nights for him.[280] Things were starting to develop. Two days before the competition, he had a meeting with some Turks whom he had first met in 1985, named Rasim Arda, who had been able to escape from Bulgaria at that time. In 1985, Rasim Arda first encountered Naim Süleymanoğlu in Melbourne, Australia, during Süleymanoğlu's training camp for the World Cup Weightlifting Championships with the Bulgarian weightlifting team. Despite Arda's initial offer to help, Süleymanoğlu declined due to his concerns. Notably, Arda's frequent meetings with Süleymanoğlu drew suspicion from Bulgarian government officials, who began to take notice of their interactions. Interestingly, Süleymanoğlu's initial rejection of the offer stemmed from his concerns that Arda might be a Bulgarian agent.[281] So that was how the first attempt to bring Süleymanoğlu to Türkiye at that time failed.

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[276] Örsan Öymen, "Bulgaristan'daki Türk Köylerinde," *Milliyet*, April 8, 1985.

[277] Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[278] TRT Spor, "Kapıkule'nin Anahtarı - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[279] Hürriyet, "Ajanlar Savaşıydı... Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Unutulmaz Fotoğrafları", *Hürriyet*, November 19, 2019, https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/galeri-ajanlar-savasiydi-naim-suleymanoglunununutulmaz-fotograflari-40650375/4 access date: January 17, 2024.

[280] Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[281] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?" *Balkanlardan Bir Ses*, February 19, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dh7B51ECbyI, access date: January 17, 2023.

However, in the 1986 World Cup Weightlifting Championships in Melbourne, Rasim Arda now had been putting pressure on him, indicating that they did not want to continue dealing with him if he persisted in being indecisive.[282] This was related to their desire to help Süleymanoğlu, and underlying this desire for help was the motivation that the oppression process in Bulgaria should be heard worldwide. In this regard, Süleymanoğlu was a very effective symbolic name. During that conversation, Süleymanoğlu initially responded that he needed some time to think, but in the end, he said that he decided to seek asylum. When Rasim Arda asked him when he would execute the escape, he stated that he wanted to do so on the night of the competition.

Naim Süleymanoğlu's defection was initiated shortly after he won the medal in Melbourne. On that day, he and the Bulgarian official went to a celebration meal in a restaurant just 30 km away from the hotel.[283] While seated at the same table with Bulgarian officials, Naim Süleymanoğlu noticed Arda engaged in a discreet conversation at the bar. Later, when Süleymanoğlu excused himself from the table to smoke a cigarette, he somehow found himself in conversation with Arda. Arda informed him that everything was prepared, and the escape would commence once he arrived at the hotel. But Naim Süleymanoğlu said that he did not want to wait until arriving at the hotel and that the escape should be made from the restaurant. In response, Rasim Arda swiftly devised a new plan and told that a car was awaiting him across the restaurant. At that moment, Süleymanoğlu quickly got into the car that was waiting for him and started to drive away quickly, along with the people inside. When he arrived at the hotel, Süleymanoğlu was taken to another car and driven to the first house in Melbourne where he would stay. The house was owned by a Turkish resident, whose name was Necati.[284] Then, after another transfer, he headed towards the final house he would stay in again, owned by another Turkish resident named Musa Sayan.[285] Thus, the first contacts with the embassy began to be established through these Turkish citizens.

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[282] Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[283] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi", *Odatv*, December 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzlawT6JcQ , access date: January 17, 2023.

[284] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi."

[285] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi."

As explained, prior to the events, Süleymanoğlu's escape plan was coordinated by locals such as Rasim Arda, who had fled from Bulgaria to Australia. Arda and his associates were involved in informing the world about the oppression of Bulgarian Turks through a propaganda campaign conducted by the Bulgarian Turks Association he had established in Australia.[286] Therefore, it should not be forgotten that until the time the Turkish embassy was officially involved in the process, the sources underlined that this process was carried out by civilian participation. So much so that some Western media outlets underlined that Süleymanoğlu's escape was organised by local Australian Turks.[287]

The issues arose during the negotiations concerning the Turkish embassy in Melbourne. Naim Süleymanoğlu, who had applied for asylum at the Turkish embassy, was initially denied due to a lack of information regarding his Turkish heritage. Meanwhile, Süleymanoğlu's escape started to make headlines on news channels, and the news of the Turkish athlete fleeing under Bulgarian pressure began to spread globally. On the other hand, communication with the Turkish embassy had inexplicably slowed down and appeared to be at a standstill. Simultaneously, pressure began on Naim Süleymanoğlu's family, friends, and coaches. When the progress on the embassy issue stalls, the Turkish embassy officials and Turkish locals living in Australia informed Süleymanoğlu that he should vacate the house he had been staying in. This was particularly concerning because there were many Bulgarians living in Australia, and this situation not only endangered Naim Süleymanoğlu but also put them at risk.[288]

The incident of defection started to gain global attention and was frequently covered by all forms of media, especially in print.[289] *The Los Angeles Times* reported the news promptly after the events, emphasizing Süleymanoğlu's escape from Bulgarian

[286] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?"

[287] Randy Harvey, "Shalamanov Shifts His Own Weight: Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise," *Los Angeles Times*, December 13, 1986.

[288] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi," *Odatv*, December 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qUzlawT6JcQ , access date: January 17, 2023.

[289] Harvey, "Shalamanov Shifts His Own Weight: Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise."

oppression as a Turkish athlete. Additionally, they mentioned that the Australian foreign ministry stated Süleymanoğlu's desire to travel directly to Türkiye.[290] After a few days of waiting, the pace of events began to accelerate as news of the situation reached not only the international community but also the Turkish government and Turgut Özal. Officials from the ministry of foreign affairs briefed Özal, highlighting Naim Süleymanoğlu's success as an Olympic athlete of Turkish descent. In response, Özal took action and dispatched Süleymanoğlu to the Turkish embassy in Melbourne. Süleymanoğlu had set out towards the Turkish embassy with Musa Sayan, who had hidden him in his house in Melbourne. Sayan hid Süleymanoğlu in the car due to the potential presence of Bulgarian agents.[291] When negotiations began with the embassy, they informed him that his request for asylum in Türkiye could be accepted. Nevertheless, it was made clear that he could not remain at the embassy for an extended period. In response, the Australian police worked with Türkiye to facilitate his transfer to UK, ensuring his safe passage on a flight with a state official. The Australian government officials specifically warned the pilots of the plane not to allow anyone else to remove Naim Süleymanoğlu from the plane until they reached London. Australian and Turkish officials took all precautions to ensure his safe flight to London by providing a fake passport.[292]

Turgut Özal sought to coordinate the events with two individuals, specifically his advisors, Can Pulak and Selim Egeli. Their task was to arrange a meeting with Süleymanoğlu in London, attend to his requirements, escort him from the embassy, and discreetly transport him to Türkiye using prime minister Turgut Özal's private plane. Turgut Özal's objective at this juncture was to convene a press conference upon Naim Süleymanoğlu's arrival in Türkiye.[293] When the officials and Naim Süleymanoğlu arrived at the embassy, they were met with a high-risk situation as it was surrounded by Bulgarian officials and secret service members. The main concern

[290] Harvey, "Shalamanov Shifts His Own Weight: Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise."

[291] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi."

[292] "Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun Kaçış Hikayesi."

[293] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?," *32. Gün*, September 26, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJwtmnJFh_s, access date: January 17, 2023.

was safely transporting Naim Süleymanoğlu from the embassy to the airport, as there were potential threats of assassination and kidnapping by the Bulgarians. This information was relayed to the Turkish authorities by the British police, who had received intelligence indicating that there were 16 Bulgarian agents posing as journalists outside. The solution to this was to disguise the embassy's cook as Süleymanoğlu, allowing him to be safely hidden and removed from the embassy with the assistance of Turkish secret service officials.[294]

3.3. The Reception of Süleymanoğlu's Defection in International Arena

Naim Süleymanoğlu's decision to defect gained significant attention from both national and global media outlets. The support of international media organizations brought increased focus to the challenges experienced by the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, shedding light on their oppression. So as mentioned before, the international and Turkish press started to inform the world about the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria through Naim Süleymanoğlu, even just before his defection.[295] Actually, this demonstrates the immense value of Süleymanoğlu even before his defection. In this context, the USA aimed to create a divide in the inter-polar competition by highlighting a heroic figure like Süleymanoğlu, who faced oppression from Bulgaria, a member of the Eastern Bloc, during the Second Cold War, and to bring international attention to his story. In fact, the underlying purpose of propagandizing events, especially through a symbol, is to penetrate the consciousness of the target country's audience.[296] In this case, these countries can be seen as Soviet Bloc countries. While the events were internationalized here, an image was created with a character that would appeal to emotions. This can actually be seen as a motivation that will arouse emotions as a result. At this point, Naim Süleymanoğlu was actually heroized and turned into a myth. The first thing that was actually wanted to be done through Süleymanoğlu was to create a general public opinion. In this sense, as stated in the literature, it can be simply seen as propaganda

[294] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?."

[295] "Offene Arme."; "Bulgaristan'da 200 Türk Öldürüldü."

[296] Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), p. 243.

is the dissemination of ideas intended to convince people to think and act in a particular way and for a particular purpose.[297]

The unique resonance of Süleymanoğlu has a significant impact; in fact, the reason why Naim Süleymanoğlu is important for both Western countries such as The USA and Türkiye is because of his Olympic achievements and the impact he had created worldwide. According to this, it can be said that Naim Süleymanoğlu's significance, particularly for countries like the USA, lies in the fact that he was able to highlight the challenges faced by Turks in Bulgaria who were oppressed by a communist country during the *Revival* process.[298]

It should not be forgotten that in the 1980s, the United States, under the leadership of President Reagan, sought to demonstrate the superiority of the U.S. system to the world and tried to influence countries throughout the Cold War and diversified its methods.[299] To achieve this goal, the US utilized all the necessary instruments and worked to strengthen the foundation of individual freedoms and peace around the world to give the impression that they were guardians of democracy and freedom. In fact, Reagan's strategy was rebuilding America's position in the world after the so-called decade of neglect.[300] Therefore, the importance of Süleymanoğlu, especially for the West, was the resonance he could create symbolically. Süleymanoğlu became a powerful symbol, so much so that Turkish officials saw his appearances with the American press during his early years in Türkiye as effective propaganda for promoting the Turkish side of the story of Bulgarian oppression.[301] He held meetings at the White House as a guest of Mr and Mrs Reagan, gave a speech at the United

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[297] British Library, "*Propaganda: Power and Persuasion - Defining Propaganda,*" YouTube, Jun 3, 2013, 0:10,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_uVGLCgqptI , access date: January 17, 2023.

[298] British Library, "*Propaganda: Power and Persuasion - Defining Propaganda.*"

[299] Nicholas J. Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency: American Propaganda and Public Diplomacy, 1945–1989* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 399.

[300] Cox, "Whatever Happened to the 'Second' Cold War? Soviet-American Relations: 1980–1988," p. 155.

[301] Randy Harvey, "A Big Weight Is Lifted: Bulgaria to Turkey-It's a Heavy Trip," *Los Angeles Times*, May 31, 1987.

Nations, and even became the PR face of a community that faced atrocities that were on the world's agenda.[302] The first figure below is a very effective image in terms of propaganda in this respect. The photograph of First Lady Nancy Reagan trying to lift dumbbells in her hands was very much in line with the heroic image of Süleymanoğlu, who had overcome the oppression process and lifted the weight created by these oppressions. On the one hand, the photograph symbolizes the soft power of the United States with the elegance and grace of Nancy Reagan, and on the other hand, it symbolizes the hard power with the physical strength of Naim Süleymanoğlu. The weights that Nancy Reagan tried to lift, especially as a woman, were very much in line with the image of the USA as sensitive to the difficulties experienced by Muslim Turks and Süleymanoğlu as a symbolic figure. Süleymanoğlu's smile while helping Nancy Reagan can be seen as a symbol to emphasize that this power is people-oriented and that the West is friendly and helpful. This combination can be used as an expression of both the cultural and physical power of the West.



Figure 1: First Lady Nancy Reagan Tries Her Hand at a Little Weightlifting[303]

[302] Christine Brennan, "Pocket Hercules' Visits a Pillar of White House," *The Washington Post*, December 6, 1988.

[303] Ron Edmonds, "First Lady Nancy Reagan Tries Her Hand at a Little Weightlifting as 1988 Olympic Gold Medal Winner for Weightlifting Naim Sulemanoglu of Turkey Looks On at the White House in Washington," photograph, December 6, 1988, AP Photo, accessed via Alamy, https://www.alamy.com/first-lady-nancy-reagan-tries-her-hand-at-a-little-weightlifting-as-1988-olympic-gold-medal-winner-for-weightlifting-naim-sulemanoglu-of-Türkiye-looks-on-at-the-white-house-in-washington-dec-6-1988-in-washington-sulemanoglu-is-visiting-the-united-states-on-a-six-day-goodwill-tour-ap-photo-ron-edmonds-image525801576.html. Access date: February 11, 2023.

In this context, his speech at the United Nations marked a significant milestone in internationalising events. Süleymanoğlu's address focused on human rights violations, particularly highlighting the challenges faced by the Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria.[304] These meetings aimed to continuously share information about the oppression experienced by the Muslim Turkish minority, with the assistance of Naim Süleymanoğlu. Concurrently, efforts were made to enhance the public image of a "heroic" Turkish athlete.

The United States' utilization of Süleymanoğlu and his representation on the international stage aligned with the distinctive public diplomacy strategies of the Reagan administration during the Second Cold War era. Reagan, who succeeded Carter, went beyond the doctrines of his predecessors and increased the intensity of ideological opposition by supporting anti-communist movements more than ever.[305] The administration knew that these White House meetings played a crucial role in shaping America's global image. So that is why multiple organizations within the American government, particularly during the Cold War, prioritized this issue. Entities like the United States Information Agency worked to integrate an understanding of international perspectives into White House press operations, expanding the target audience beyond the domestic political press.[306] In this context, this propaganda process indicates that decision-makers effectively examine the social patterns and mental states of the masses, possess a deep understanding of people's thoughts and historical and social dynamics, and lead the masses using innovative methods based on this knowledge.[307] So that was the way of expanding the target audience, especially when the Cold War was considered to be a process in which relations were frozen, and the war-like.[308] That is why symbols such as

[304] Peter Alfano, Weightlifting, "A Great Weight is Lifted from Turkey's Little Hero", *The New York Times*, December 14, 1988.

[305] Oran, "Dönemin Bilançosu," pp. 11-12.

[306] Cull, *The Cold War and the United States Information Agency,* p. 404.

[307] Priscilla Wald, "Hidden Tyrant: Propaganda, Brainwashing, and Psycho-Politics in the Cold War Period" in *The Oxford Handbook of Propaganda Studies*, ed. Jonathan Auerbach and Russ Castronovo (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 110.

[308] Fred Halliday, *The Making of the Second Cold War,* p. 7.

Süleymanoğlu's himself became much more important. In that sense, Naim Süleymanoğlu, known as "Pocket Hercules", with tiny weightlifter physic, undoubtedly bolstered propaganda and persuasion efforts with his remarkable sporting accomplishments.[309] His iconic status as a symbol of heroic strength, combined with the necessary tools to convey a message effectively to the target audience, made him an exceptionally reliable source for promoting such activities over the years.

At the same time, Süleymanoğlu had also become the face of anti-communist propaganda, which was shaped by Bulgarian leader Todor Zhivkov's policies against the Turkish minority since the USA was actually carrying out this process in the world through a general anti-communist and anti-Soviet image. In another article published on January 16, 1986, *Milliyet* columnist Teoman Erel highlighted the significance of Süleymanoğlu's testimony to the Western world. Erel emphasized that the Western world recognized the value of Süleymanoğlu's testimony due to the challenges faced by the Muslim Turkish minority in their relations with the Soviet Union and Bulgaria.[310] In line with that, Naim Süleymanoğlu was an opportunity for the USA in the international arena. It should not be forgotten that the start of the Cold War cannot be solely attributed to overreactions towards unexpected occurrences and the outcomes of outdated ideological beliefs, the psychological pressures at play caused both sides to gravitate towards polarization.[311] This move by the USA was a strong example of the psychological superiority it wanted to establish and the influence it wanted to build in the world. All in all, this process can be best described as a competition for spheres of influence among the parties involved.[312]

Institutional propaganda tools such as newspapers focused on some complementary details such as the identity of Süleymanoğlu and Turkish minority beliefs, values,

[309] "At 4-11, He's a Tower of Strength," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1988.

[310] Teoman Erel, "Tanıklık Önde Tutulmalı," *Milliyet*, December 17, 1986.

[311] B. Theo Mazumdar and Nicholas J. Cull, "Propaganda and The Cold War," in *The Routledge Handbook Of The Cold War,* ed. Artemy M. Kalinovsky and Craig Daigle (London: Routledge, 2014), p. 324.

[312] McCauley, *Origins of the Cold War 1941–1949*, p. 105.

attitudes and behaviours in Bulgaria to maximize the impact of these events. Mixing the target audience's emotions with Süleymanoğlu's personality made Süleymanoğlu a prominent visual symbol of power. In particular, the image of Süleymanoğlu as a Turkish hero and his discourses on the Turkish Muslim minority were frequently repeated throughout the process. A powerhouse like the USA reshaped the defection of a symbol name, such as Süleymanoğlu himself, to boost the story of a Turkish hero who had gained his freedom and no longer needed to be hidden.[313] In fact, this event, which was constantly underlined and discussed, especially in the Cold War atmosphere, was seen as a struggle between blocs, and Naim Süleymanoğlu, who was involved in this process, was presented as a Cold War hero whose "cloak and dagger" days were over.[314] In fact, this entire oppression process, especially through figures such as Naim Süleymanoğlu, caused great pressure on the Bulgarian government and Zhivkov. So much so that these international pressures were one of the reasons for the *Big Excursion* that started in 1989. Finally, that was how Zhivkov announced in a television broadcast that he allowed the oppressed Muslim Turkish minority who wanted to emigrate to leave Bulgaria.[315]

3.4. Özal's Special Bond with Naim Süleymanoğlu

Bulgaria's *Revival Process* and its associated practices made it easier for decision-makers such as Turgut Özal to use its symbol names as a tool for his propaganda process. Building his own image and executing a propaganda strategy has been crucial for Özal's political career for various reasons, and of course, the most important ones were domestic and international political issues such as economic instability, high inflation rates, cronyism, terrorism, arms and drug smuggling. So that is why Özal had to do this with a particularly correct strategy, and even the voice of the new methods he would find had to drown out the voices of the problems. This should have been actually a process where the narratives should be relocated around the symbolic names, and the effects of the problems experienced in reality should be

[313] Alfano, Weightlifting, "A Great Weight is Lifted from Turkey's Little Hero."

[314] Alfano, Weightlifting, "A Great Weight is Lifted from Turkey's Little Hero."

[315] Todor Zhivkov, "Todor Zhivkov, BT Address on May 29, 1989," YouTube, January 17, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jn49a_g_5RQ , access date: January 17, 2023.

weakened by events or people that have a stronger resonance, such as Süleymanoğlu. Here, Özal actually did this through an internationalized figure, and it is so obvious that symbols are used by propaganda to achieve its goal of influencing the attitudes of groups.[316] In one sense, this can actually be seen as a smart manipulation of the organized habits and ideas of the masses. [317] Those symbols are used as a tool for shaping public opinion and influencing decision-making and manufacturing consent to rebuild his image among the target audience.

As previously mentioned, Özal's Motherland Party was able to secure victory in two consecutive elections, one in 1983 and the other in 1987; however, the party's popularity declined due to growing instability and persistently high inflation rates during the period.[318] High inflation rates, which had risen to nearly 80 per cent - the same level as before 1980 - resulted in a significant erosion of purchasing power.[319]

During Özal's leadership, the economic bureaucracy was reduced, which led to new rent-seeking patterns. The connections between businessmen and high-ranking politicians became crucial for gaining advantageous positions.[320] The government attempted to regulate the private sector through persuasion or mandatory interest groups.[321] So this process has led to situations that will cause cronyism and instability in the economy, such as corruption, which was an issue that seriously damaged his image, especially in domestic politics. The implication of state ministers

[316] Harold D. Lasswell, Ralph D. Casey, and Bruce Lannes Smith, *Propaganda and Promotional Activities: An Annotated Bibliography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 3.

[317] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda* (Brooklyn, NY: Ig Publishing, 2004), p. 9.

[318] Ziya Öniş, "The Triumph of Conservative Globalism: The Political Economy of the AKP Era", *Turkish Studies*, 13/2, (2012), pp. 135-152; The Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi) won these elections with a vote rate of 45 per cent. The Populist Party (Sosyal Demokrat Halkçı Parti) received 30.5 per cent, the Nationalist Democracy Party (Milliyetçi Demokrasi Partisi) 23.3 per cent, and the Independents received 1.1 per cent, source: https://www.tesav.org.tr/milletvekili-genel-secim-sonuclari-1983-2015-2/ access date: January 17, 2023.

[319] Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, p. 417.

[320] Korkut Boratav, "The Turkish Bourgeoisie under Neoliberalism," *Research and Policy on Turkey*, 1/1 (2015), pp. 1-10.

[321] Metin Heper. "The State, Political Party and Society in Post-1983 Turkey," *Government and Opposition* 25/ 3 (1990), p. 331.

from his own party in corruption cases has placed Özal in a risky position.[322] Additionally, allegations of cronyism are damaging to his efforts to regain public trust, and rumours of nepotism are particularly affecting his political image.[323] While the press was covering this process intensively around important issues such as fictitious exports, bribery scandals, problems at foreign trade and bankrupt banks, the names of other state ministers such as Mesut Yılmaz were also mentioned in the aforementioned issues, and Özal's own image, as well as the image of the party, were being seriously shaken.[324] As an example, The name of İsmail Özdağlar, a state minister from Özal's own cabinet, was particularly heavily criticized by the opposition for being associated with corruption. Social Democratic Populist Party Chairman Erdal İnönü stated that it was striking that a party that had only just completed a few years was associated with corruption, while Nationalist Democracy Party Chairman Turgut Sunalp claimed that the government under Özal's leadership had turned a blind eye to corruption and paved the way for it.[325] Emin Çölaşan covered corruption and cronyism issues in detail in an interview he conducted in 1986 with Türkan Arıkan, a former member of the Motherland Party until 1984. While Arıkan emphasized corruption and cronyism, Arıkan emphasized that there was corruption and lack of control in the funds established by Özal in 1986 and in the public banks of the period. Arıkan even stated that Özal knew about this corruption mechanism and that those close to Özal were making a profit.[326] In Mehmet Barlas's book *Turgut Özal'ın Anıları*, Özal acknowledged the existence of numerous issues within a process. He mentioned that he had listened to tape recordings of Özdağlar's involvement in corruption and accepted that Özdağlar was implicated as a participant.[327] Özal also admitted to fictitious export and customs smuggling issues. He attributed these problems to the lack of overall freedom in

[322] "Devlet Bakanı İçin Yolsuzluk İddiası," *Milliyet*, January 6, 1985.

[323] "İnönü: Yolsuzluklar Birbiri Ardına," *Milliyet*, January 7, 1985.

[324] "Bu Gidişat Nereye Doğru," *Cumhuriyet*, February 13, 1985.

[325] "Bu Gidişat Nereye Doğru."

[326] Emin Çölaşan, "Özal Dönemi Hırsızlıkları," *Hürriyet*, October 8, 1994.

[327] Mehmet Barlas, *Turgut Özal'ın Anıları* (Istanbul: Biray Yayıncılık, 2001), pp. 78-79.

import and export activities and clarified that these irregularities represented only one per cent of the total export figures.[328]

So, another problem in domestic politics was terrorism. There has been an increase in news related to terrorist organizations, with frequent claims about bordering countries supporting terrorism.[329] Furthermore, it is crucial to point out the obvious failure of Özal's decision-making and process evaluation methodology during this critical period. It is painfully evident that Özal's threat perception is severely flawed, and he is incapable of evaluating threats correctly in either the short or long term. Özal underestimated the PKK, calling the terrorists as bandits from 1983-1989, and the valuable time loss was caused by underestimating the PKK.[330] Proper equipment, resources, and training were not given to combat guerrilla warfare.[331]

In fact, a significant part of the other interstate problems experienced by Turgut Özal during his time were somehow related to Bulgaria too. Several issues, such as Mehmet Ali Ağca's assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II on 13 May 1981, arms and drug trafficking, and covert operations of intelligence organizations, began to receive increased media coverage in Turkish newspapers.[332] However, all these problems started just before the Özal period, but Türkiye's involvement in discussions about those issues also became more prominent during his period, and this marked a significant shift in the country's visibility on the national stage.[333] It was particularly controversial that these problems, which had been discussed for a long time, were being handled in a multinational manner.[334] Discussions continued to increase in general terms, which became quite problematic for Türkiye and Özal's image.

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328 Barlas, *Turgut Özal'ın Anıları*, pp. 80-81.

329 "Suriye'deki Kamplarda 3 Bin Militan," *Cumhuriyet*, December 2, 1984.

330 Nur Bilge Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism,* 18/1 (1995), p. 20.

331 Criss, "The Nature of PKK Terrorism in Turkey," p. 20.

332 Uğur Mumcu, "CIA ve KGB," *Cumhuriyet*, March 30, 1983.

333 Uğur Mumcu, "CIA ve KGB."

334 Uğur Mumcu, "Çelenk," *Cumhuriyet*, June 11, 1983.

The most important of these was undoubtedly the smuggling activities of a company called *Kintex*, located in Bulgaria. These issues, which were generally discussed in the international arena, included the assassination attempt of the pope, the complex involvement of international intelligence organizations and the same complex relations between state officials.[335]

The *Kintex* incident, covered by Uğur Mumcu in *Cumhuriyet*, shed light on a series of events in Türkiye from various angles. It particularly highlighted the involvement of Bulgaria and Türkiye in arms smuggling, providing detailed insights. The article focused on allegations that a Bulgarian-based company was smuggling arms and ammunition into Türkiye through a smuggler named Bekir Çelenk. It also claimed that the company had links to various issues, including the assassination attempt of the pope. Mumcu raised concerns about these events and criticized the government of that time for not taking decisive actions, viewing it as a significant problem and shortcoming.[336] More importantly, Türkiye started gaining frequent mention in newspapers due to its strategic geographical location, as it serves as a crucial point for smuggling routes that encompass the country.[337]

All of these were actually on the radar of the opposition parties too, and the emphasis was especially on the discourse that new practices in export and import would support arms and drug smuggling.[338] Rahşan Ecevit, who was the chair of the Democratic Left Party (Demokratik Sol Parti) at the time, interpreted Özal's statements as supporting smuggling. Indeed, Ecevit reacted to Özal's statement by interpreting them as evidence of the poor functioning of the foreign trade mechanism, and Özal's exact words were as follows: "We allow smuggled goods to go abroad because this is in our favour," so according to Ecevit this could also potentially lead to uncontrollable arms and drug smuggling. [339]

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[335] "Bulgar Tırlar Kaçakçılık Yapıyor," *Milliyet*, October 3, 1984.

[336] Uğur Mumcu, "Kintex'ten Silah Aldım," *Cumhuriyet*, October 16, 1985.

[337] "Kalaşnikof Yolu Boğazdan Geçiyor," *Milliyet*, February 26, 1985.

[338] "Özal Kaçakçılığı Teşvik Ediyor," *Milliyet*, April 1, 1986.

[339] "Özal Kaçakçılığı Teşvik Ediyor."

On the same token, it was quite a difficult period for Türkiye and especially for Özal since the country has been increasingly detached from Western Europe for over a decade. The Cyprus Peace Operation and the 1980 military coup damaged its relations with the Council of Europe and jeopardised its possible European Economic Community membership aspirations. That is why Türkiye faced significant challenges in its relationship with the European Economic Community (EEC). The Council of Europe sought to raise awareness about human rights issues in Türkiye, particularly in the aftermath of the military coup. This focus was influenced by Türkiye's geopolitical proximity to Europe, the presence of numerous political refugees in Europe, and the impact of these refugees on public opinion regarding Turks living there.[340] These problems were causing Türkiye to distance itself from the West, especially Europe, and to isolate itself from that environment during this period. Europe especially encompassed economic decline, high inflation, unemployment, and possibilities of unregulated migration from Türkiye, as well as shortcomings in the realms of human rights and democracy.[341] Özal strongly believed that the European Economic Community's reports and stance towards Türkiye amounted to interference in its internal affairs. Özal deemed Gwyn Morgan's remarks, who was the representative of the EEC in Türkiye, about a Turkish law granting more power to the police as "a fatal blow to relations" as interference.[342] What was left was the country's geopolitical ties to the US, and liberal economic reforms with international support were its only connections to the outside world. Özal actually saw relations with the USA as the basis of relations with the West, due to the risk of a revival of the Cold War. This can also be attributed to the implementation of a liberal economic model by Turgut Özal after his election, which forged an ideological bond with this alliance, akin to contemporaries Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.[343] So much so that the American Secretary of State at the time, Alexander Haig, frequently underlined their support for Özal and stated at

[340] Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History,* p. 437.

[341] Bülent Tanör, "Siyasal Tarih 1980-1995," in *Türkiye Tarihi*, ed. Sina Akşin (İstanbul: Cem Yayınevi, 2000), p. 107.

[342] "Özal'dan Sert Çıkış," *Cumhuriyet*, June 10, 1985.

[343] Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy Since 1774*, p. 118.

every opportunity that Türkiye was the USA's ally.[344] Although Özal appeared as the ally of capitalism in the eyes of the West and defined himself as a political conservative, economic liberal and left-of-centre on social questions, Özal was going through a period of serious economic problems.[345] In the continuation of this process, when the surveys of the public opinion research companies of the period, such as SİAR and ARAT, started to be announced in 1985, it was seen that the Motherland Party and Özal were experiencing a loss of votes parallel to the problems in the country.[346]

This exact point can be seen as where Özal meets Süleymanoğlu for the illusion he needed. It was evident that these problems would result in significant damage to Özal's reputation. Under pressure from opposition parties and negative public opinion poll results, the situation became a challenging political process for Özal. Throughout this process, Özal actually initiated a long-term propaganda campaign, particularly through symbolic names such as Süleymanoğlu. Propaganda was a key area of interest for Özal. He had a particular knack for utilizing television, which was one of the most important media platforms in Türkiye, to create *vertical propaganda* and was developing a sender-receiver system to engage with his intended audience.[347] The state television, TRT, maintained active communication between Özal and his target audience through television programs such as *İcraatın İçinden*. In fact, Özal aimed to efficiently convey the necessary messages to the target audience by using state organs to achieve quick resonance. It should not be forgotten that the distribution of propaganda usually followed a hierarchical pattern because the creation of content and the methods of dissemination (such as newspapers, radio, television, or the film industry) were frequently regulated by governmental or

[344] "Haig: ABD, Özal'ı Destekliyor," *Cumhuriyet*, September 20, 1985.

[345] Marvine Howe, "Man in The News: Turgut Ozal; Turkish Ally of Capitalism," *The New York Times,* November 9, 1983.

[346] "ANAP'ın Oyu Düştü Seçim Gerekir," *Milliyet*, May 4, 1985; "Zamlar Bindikçe Özal Kaybediyor," *Milliyet*, November 11, 1985.

[347] *Vertical propaganda* is one of the terms developed by Jacques Ellul. According to Ellul, the propagandist, that is, the leader, tries to influence the masses with the power of his high position by using all the technological and technical possibilities at his disposal. Here, the leader uses the centralized mass communication tools in his own monopoly. Ellul, *Propaganda*, 79-80.

corporate entities.[348] Erkal Zenger, whom Özal had appointed as his propagandist, was responsible for crafting Özal's rally speeches and delivering compelling addresses at the rallies. Zenger understood the significance of connecting with the public and stressed the importance of understanding the nature of the masses. By grasping the essence of Anatolian culture, Zenger indirectly acknowledged the values, beliefs, and collective memory of the society. In his interview with Yener Süsoy from *Milliyet*, he highlighted the connection Özal sought to forge with the public and stressed the significance of effective propaganda in communicating the message to the masses. Additionally, he noted that the influence of polling companies that opposed Özal and the Motherland Party could be mitigated through adept communication strategies with the target audience.[349]

Süleymanoğlu's internationally resounding successes and the problems he experienced in Bulgaria were transformed into a political capital by Özal, and thus the problems in domestic politics were partially balanced. From one perspective, this can be seen as Özal's instrumentalization of Süleymanoğlu's victories in order to strengthen public support and to stand against criticism. Süleymanoğlu's significant influence, particularly in the foreign press, made it clear that Özal intended to utilize him as a tool for propaganda, especially in domestic politics. As explained, like some other athletes who escaped from the Eastern Bloc countries, Süleymanoğlu did not escape the radar of the West, especially the USA. While the West was reading these events through an ideological war, it was thought that the escapes were caused by the governments of oppressive countries governed by communism.[350] To give an example, according to many sources, Süleymanoğlu's escape was thought to be more important than the escape of the famous tennis player Martina Navratilova because Süleymanoğlu, as a representation of the Muslim Turkish minority problem in

[348] Alicia Wanless and Michael Berk, "The Audience is the Amplifier: Participatory Propaganda," in *The Sage Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), p. 87.

[349] Yener Süsoy, "Başbakan Özal'ın Teknik Danışmanı Erkal Zenger'le Tatil Sohbeti," *Milliyet*, July 27, 1986.

[350] Harvey, "Shalamanov Shifts His Own Weight: Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise."

Bulgaria, represented an issue of greater significance.[351] For Turgut Özal, it was so clear that using such a figure would be crucial in the internationalization of the Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria and would enhance his prestige as a saviour of such a strong figure in Türkiye and internationally.

Things were not going well for Özal and the Motherland Party in 1986. In September 1986, the Motherland Party experienced a significant decline in poll numbers.[352] The by-election results that same month were unfavourable for the party, despite being in power, leading to internal turmoil within the relatively young party, which was only three years old at the time. Süleymanoğlu actually came to Türkiye after exactly such a process.[353]



Figure 2: Turgut Özal and Naim Süleymanoğlu, on December 13, 1986, holding a joint press conference at the airport upon Naim Süleymanoğlu's return to Turkey. [354]

The process of introducing Süleymanoğlu to the public began when Süleymanoğlu came to Türkiye on December 13, 1986. As soon as Süleymanoğlu stepped off the plane, his initial interaction with the press involved greeting journalists and state officials, kissing the ground, and expressing gratitude from the very first minutes.

[351] Harvey, "Shalamanov Shifts His Own Weight: Defection of World Champion Catches Many by Surprise."

[352] "ANAP 7, SHP 1, Ortada 3," *Milliyet*, September 24, 1986.

[353] Süleyman Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal* (İstanbul: Kopernik Kitap, 2019), p. 158.

[354] *Hürriyet*, November 19, 2017.

However, one of the most significant moments was Naim Süleymanoğlu's first press conference with Özal shortly after his arrival in Türkiye.[355]

Özal warmly greeted Süleymanoğlu with a hug at the start of the press conference. They posed together for the press members, and after a brief chat, Süleymanoğlu kissed Özal's hand before the interview part of the press conference began.[356] Özal's first statement on the issue before the meeting was, "First, direct your questions to Naim. Do not think that I brought Naim just to avoid your questions."[357] This can actually be seen as the first example of Özal using Süleymanoğlu as a diversion. During this press conference, Özal presented Süleymanoğlu to the Turkish citizens, and thus Özal introduced Süleymanoğlu to the target audience as a heroic public figure who came from oppression. The press conference was held with intense participation from members of the press and was conveyed to the public via television. During the conference on December 13, 1986, Süleymanoğlu stressed multiple times that he sought refuge in Türkiye to evade the repressive measures of Bulgaria. Süleymanoğlu particularly focused on the details of closing mosques, forced name changing process, killing and imprisoning people, which was an extremely important element for the necessary message to reach the masses.[358]

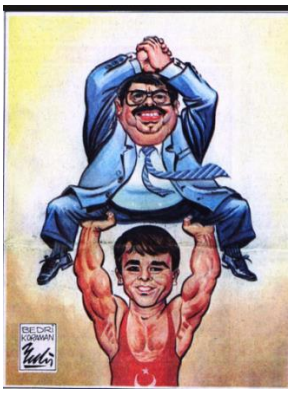


Figure 3: Bedri Koraman's playful caricature depicting Naim Süleymanoğlu lifting Turgut Özal on December 17, 1986. [359]

[355] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?."

[356] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Türkiye'ye Nasıl Kaçırıldı?."

[357] TRT Spor, "Kapıkule'nin Anahtarı - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[358] TRT, "Kapıkule'nin Anahtarı - Naim Süleymanoğlu."

[359] Bedri Koraman, *Milliyet*, December 17, 1986.

The political image that Özal built through Süleymanoğlu was depicted by the cartoonist of the period, Bedri Koraman, only four days after Süleymanoğlu's arrival in Türkiye (Figure 3). This cartoon strongly reflects the political and social dynamics of the relationship between Özal and Süleymanoğlu. First of all, the message that Özal's image and, accordingly, his political position is built on Süleymanoğlu's shoulders is particularly underlined here. Koraman emphasizes both Süleymanoğlu's physical and symbolic power and how Özal used this as leverage. This caricature serves as a striking critique of Turgut Özal's deliberate exploitation of Naim Süleymanoğlu's achievements to construct and bolster his own political image. By positioning himself literally atop Süleymanoğlu's shoulders, Özal is depicted as deriving his political stature from the athlete's hard-earned success, highlighting how Süleymanoğlu's Olympic victories and defection from Bulgaria were appropriated as propaganda tools. Süleymanoğlu, a symbol of Turkish pride and resistance against Bulgarian oppression, is reduced to a platform for Özal to elevate his own status, emphasizing the imbalance between individual achievement and political opportunism. The Turkish flag on Süleymanoğlu's uniform underscores his role as a national hero, yet the caricature critiques how Özal co-opted this narrative to deflect from his government's challenges and reinforce his waning image as a leader. Rather than celebrating Süleymanoğlu's accomplishments on their own merit, the image critiques how Özal instrumentalized the athlete's success to present himself as the orchestrator of national victories, turning personal triumphs into political capital. Finally, the iconic victory sign made by Özal with both hands actually symbolizes a political image study based on Süleymanoğlu's achievements and image. As a result, this propaganda victory belongs to Süleymanoğlu more than Özal.

It can be said that Özal crafted this communication model to enhance the public image of him as the individual who rescued Süleymanoğlu. Özal embraced people who were popular with the public and made them his so-called adopted children, thus gaining the sympathy of society. Özal frequently leveraged these strategies to garner public sympathy, and this tactic was often covered in the media.[360] Teoman Erel eloquently articulated this in his February 1988 article. According to Erel, the purpose of employing these well-known figures, such as Süleymanoğlu, was to instil

[360] "Özal'ın Son Gözdesi," *Milliyet*, February 8, 1989.

hope and confidence in the Turkish people regarding the Özal government.[361] Of course, Özal's display of affection towards popular figures received a positive response from the public. In other words, these individuals were representatives of all the values held by the Turkish people. Among these characteristics, being Turkish and Muslim helped them establish a bond with the target audience, while the lives of these symbolic figures created an image of themselves as victims in the eyes of the target audience. That is why one of the most important aims of this meeting is to arouse emotions through beliefs, values, behaviours, and identities. In addition, one of the main reasons why it is understandable by the public is that the news and the process are prepared in an understandable system that appeals not only to the mind but also to the heart.[362]



Figure 4: Naim Süleymanoğlu being brought by helicopter to Istanbul's Taksim Square and introduced to the public on December 17, 1986. [363]

Süleymanoğlu had started a promotional tour immediately after arriving in Türkiye. First, Süleymanoğlu was brought down to Istanbul's Taksim Square by helicopter, then taken to Bursa and introduced to the public.[364] As can be seen especially in Figure 4, bringing Süleymanoğlu to Taksim was extremely important for the image of Süleymanoğlu and Özal. Bringing Süleymanoğlu by helicopter meant presenting him as a national hero for Türkiye. This kind of welcome aimed to make him a social and national symbol beyond his achievements in the world of sports. Taksim Square

361 Erel, "Bizi Mucize Paklar."

362 Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, p. 250.

363 *Milliyet*, December 17, 1986.

364 "Naim İstanbulda Krallar Gibi Karşılandı," *Milliyet*, December 17, 1986; Taki Doğan, "Naim Bursa'da Yeri Göğü İnletti," *Milliyet*, December 19, 1986.

is one of the important social and political places. The choice of this place symbolized that Süleymanoğlu was an important figure in social and political life. Bringing Süleymanoğlu to Taksim Square in this way can be seen as a move made to emphasize his influence and prestige on society. The fact that photographs and images were included in the media ensured that this moment reached a wider audience, and thus this situation was used to highlight both Süleymanoğlu's individual success and Özal's image.

Süleymanoğlu's popularity had such a significant impact that public surveys in this period indicated his popularity surpassed Özal and was the most talked-about figure in the country.[365] That is why, it was frequently suggested that Özal utilized this for his own and his party's propaganda. In fact, Süleymanoğlu, as a strong figure, was frequently used in the field by the Motherland Party and Özal in the election campaigns and was taken to political meetings many times.[366] It was common for Süleymanoğlu's close connection with Özal to face criticism due to their special bond and Süleymanoğlu's privileged status. Özal's political journeys alongside Süleymanoğlu had sparked controversy. For example, bringing Süleymanoğlu along to the Motherland Party district organization in Marmaris was condemned by the Social Democratic Populist Party's Muğla provincial chairman at the time, Tufan Doğu.[367] In his famous book, *Turgut Nereden Koşuyor*, Emin Çölaşan argued Turgut Özal and his family's use of an influential international figure like Süleymanoğlu to garner sympathy was akin to American-style propaganda.[368] But for Çölaşan, this approach to capturing public attention was problematic. He pointed out that the motive behind this image-building strategy, which targeted all segments of society, was to make up for lost votes. However, he also emphasized that these methods were ultimately ineffective for Özal.[369]

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[365] Füsun Özbilgen, *"*Naim Süleymanoğlu Fıkrası,*" Cumhuriyet Dergi*, January 18, 1987.

[366] "Naim ANAP'ı Bıraksın Haltere Baksın," *Milliyet*, May 5, 1987.

[367] "Naim ANAP'ı Bıraksın Haltere Baksın,"

[368] Çölaşan, *Turgut Nereden Koşuyor*, p. 246.

[369] Çölaşan, *Turgut Nereden Koşuyor*, p. 246.

The political situation has been getting even harder for Özal in 1987. Özal organized a general referendum in September 1987 to vote on the lifting of political bans on opposition party leaders, imposed by the military regime after 1980 followed by a general election on November 19, 1987. Social Democratic Populist Party leader Erdal İnönü proposed voting on the lifting of political bans in parliament, but Özal insisted on taking the issue to the public, saying, "Let the nation lift what the nation has put in place!".[370] Özal seemed to take a calculated risk, hoping for a different outcome by involving the people because he thought there would be more "no" votes.[371] Because he did not want the bans to be lifted and he thought that influential political figures such as Süleyman Demirel would be prevented from returning to politics with the no votes of the people. Thus, he thought that he would have the support of the people. According to the KONDA's poll before the referendum, 49.2 per cent were in favour of lifting political bans, while 44 per cent were against it.[372] The results were exactly in this direction, and Özal did not get the result he expected. On September 6, the citizens voted 51.39 per cent "yes" to lifting the bans, while the 49.57 per cent "no" vote remained.[373] Interestingly, in the interview Özal gave to journalist Mehmet Barlas, he saw this defeat as a gain and interpreted the balance in the votes as an innovative obstacle to returning to the old status quo cadres.[374]

Özal, however, was aware of the negative outcome of the referendum. The election campaign that Özal conducted led to his narrow loss in the elections and ultimately forced early elections to be held two months later in November 1987.[375] The elections, which were originally planned to be held in 1988, were brought forward to November 1987 by Özal's snap election decision. Özal was aware that his votes were decreasing, and it can be assumed at this point that he viewed any election to be held

370 Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 176.

371 Barış Yetkin, *Populizm ve Özal-Erdoğan* (Antalya: Yeniden Anadolu ve Rumeli Müdafaa-i Hukuk Yayınları, 2010), p. 161.

372 "Evet Tırmanıyor," *Milliyet*, August 30, 1987.

373 *Resmi Gazete*, No: 19672, September 12, 1987.

374 Barlas, *Turgut Özal'ın Anıları*, p. 104.

375 Zurcher, *Turkey: A Modern History,* p. 414.

in 1988 as a possible defeat. Özal commenced his election and propaganda efforts with unwavering momentum. As shown in Figure 5, his slogans, "Türkiye is advancing into a new era" and "Türkiye is catching up with the new era", appealed to the conscience of his target audience, while his call to action "Hand in hand for the future of Türkiye, let's create the future of Türkiye together" resonated across all segments of society, propelling him to gain votes.[376]



Figure 5: A referendum campaign poster used by Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party on November 11, 1987.[377]

During that time, Erdal İnönü, the leader of the main opposition party, presented a memorable counter-propaganda: "Do you want to be squeezed like a lemon for another five years?". As seen in Figure 6, the depiction of the people as lemons and the hand symbolically depicting the Özal government in this propaganda poster was actually a reference to Özal's economic policies. The image of the lemon deformed from being squeezed was a depiction of Özal's policies as processes that were now causing serious harm to the people. These remarks effectively put pressure on Özal and the Motherland Party, which was evident in the results of public opinion polls, with Erdal İnönü's party leading the way by a small margin during this period.[378]

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376 Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 210.

377 *Milliyet*, November 11, 1987.

378 "Ekran Savaşı," *Milliyet*, November 23, 1987.

Erdal İnönü, and his party gained an edge over Özal in public opinion polls due to their effective counter-propaganda efforts. This was largely attributed to the public's perception of İnönü as possessing more personal traits such as trustworthiness, eloquence, leadership qualities, and persuasion compared to Özal.[379]



Figure 6: A referendum campaign poster created by the Social Democratic Populist Party (SHP), urging voters to end the current term and say "no" to being squeezed like a lemon for five more years. [380]

The Motherland Party, however, led by Özal, achieved victory in the elections. But, the election results pointed to a continued decline in both the party's and Özal's popularity. Despite gaining 45 percent of the vote in 1983, this fell to 35 percent in the 1987 elections.[381] Özal seemed to have lost his previous psychological edge, and İnönü's "squeezed lemon" propaganda had clearly impacted public opinion. The entry of Süleyman Demirel into the elections was also cited as a factor contributing to Özal's loss of votes. After several developments, Özal decided to convene a general congress, which took place on June 18-19, 1988. The purpose of the congress

379 "Ekran Savaşı."

380 "Let's End This Period Tomorrow." Social Democratic Populist Party's (SHP) propaganda poster, 1987.

381 "Milletvekili Genel Seçim Sonuçları (1983-2018)," *TESAV*, https://www.tesav.org.tr/milletvekili-genel-secim-sonuclari-1983-2015-2/ . access date: August 8, 2024.

was to deliver a message of unity and solidarity to the party. During the congress, Özal addressed a large crowd and was the target of an assassination attempt by Kartal Demirağ. There was even widespread speculation at the time that Özal might use the incident for propaganda, including carrying the handkerchief he had used to stop the bleeding from his finger as a propaganda tool.[382]

3.5. Özal's Political Image Building and Naim Süleymanoğlu

Özal's dwindling popularity was evident by the end of 1987; in a survey published in *Milliyet* on 9 May 1988, this decline was rated.[383] Unlike Özal or even Süleyman Demirel, who reappeared in the political scene after the September 1987 referendum, Süleymanoğlu was very popular. [384] At that point, Özal decided to take the country to another referendum to be held on 25 September 1987. The Motherland Party administration decided at the presidential council meeting in February to reschedule the local elections, originally planned for March 1989, to October 1988.[385] They proposed that local elections be held every five years in October. The bill was presented to the parliament on 31 March 1988 and was accepted with 196 votes in favour and 94 against. As a result, the elections were scheduled for October 1988.[386] The decision to hold early elections was influenced by economic and political factors. Previous political leaders' resurgence and President Özal's strained relations with the media prompted the decision. Although Özal won the 1987 elections, there was a noticeable shift in support from parties like the Social Democratic Populist Party and True Path Party, now under Demirel. This led the main party to call for early elections to prevent further loss of support.

Social Democratic Populist Party strongly opposed the decision to hold early elections and took their case to the Constitutional Court to challenge the election law.

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382 "Evet Söz Milletin," *Cumhuriyet*, August 10, 1988.

383 "Özal ile Demirel Naim'in Yarısı," *Milliyet,* May 09,1988.

384 "Özal ile Demirel Naimin Yarısı."

385 Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 235.

386 Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 235.

The Constitutional Court ruled in favour of the Social Democratic Populist Party, deciding that the elections would take place on March 25, 1989.[387] Following this ruling, President Özal was the first to express his reaction. Demirel, in agreement with Özal, argued in favour of holding early elections. During the discussions in the parliament on 6 August, the temporary article proposing elections on November 13, 1988, was approved with 284 votes in favour, 95 against, and one blank vote.[388] The decision to hold a referendum stemmed from the fact that the ruling party could not secure 300 votes on its own. Subsequently, the referendum process was initiated after President Kenan Evren ratified the changes on 12 August. As a result, the referendum was scheduled for 25 September 1988. The referendum aimed to determine if local elections should be held early, with the date set at 13 November, 1988, in case of a majority "yes" vote and in March 1989, if the majority voted "no."[389] In short, although only a year had passed since the referendum in September 1987 and the subsequent general election on 19 November 1987, the referendum ballot box came before the people again in September 1988.[390]

Özal initiated an extensive propaganda campaign, centring it around Süleymanoğlu and tapping into the national unity and heroism inspired by Süleymanoğlu's athletic successes. Özal also started targeting the minds and the hearts of his target audience; in that sense, Özal even emphasized that he could leave politics according to the results and return to his people.[391] It should not be forgotten that since 1986, Süleymanoğlu had not entered a competition in which his influence would be felt all over both the world and Türkiye, and thus no opportunity arose that Özal could instrumentalize in his own political propaganda process.

The first opportunity was Süleymanoğlu's first international success he achieved at the Championships in Cardiff, UK. Süleymanoğlu competed and won the gold medal

[387] Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 236.

[388] Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 237.

[389] Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 237.

[390] Yetkin, *Populizm ve Özal-Erdoğan*, p. 164.

[391] Oktay Gönensin, "Özal: Ayrılırsam Halka Dönerim," *Cumhuriyet*, September 20, 1988.

for Türkiye at an international level for the first time in history, and Türkiye won its first gold medal in weightlifting at the international level. That's why as soon as he arrived in Türkiye by plane after his successes in Europe Cardiff, he and Özal were tried to be shown in the same frame at every opportunity.[392] The success of Süleymanoğlu in Cardiff garnered attention from local and international media. The French press affectionately called him a mini-Hercules, a moniker that was also embraced later by *Time* magazine.[393] This recognition not only resonated with Turkish readers through local newspapers like *Cumhuriyet* but also had a significant impact on both national and international levels.[394]

As the referendum approached, Süleymanoğlu emerged as a prominent figure by casting his vote before heading to the competitions in Seoul at the airport on September 16, 1988. As shown in Figure 7, his "yes" vote is widely publicized by the media, with reports highlighting his support for the referendum as a symbolic gesture of his close association with Özal as his "adopted child". This can be interpreted as Özal's initial significant propaganda manoeuvre utilizing Süleymanoğlu's influence.[395] In fact, according to the news of *Cumhuriyet* dated September 23, 1988, Özal stated that Süleymanoğlu said that he cast a white vote, that is, a yes vote. What was more interesting were the words of Semra Özal in the same newspaper. According to *Cumhuriyet*, Semra Özal said, "Naim cast a white ballot saying my vote was for my father." [396]

Many journalists stated that Süleymanoğlu's voting before the elections was legally wrong, and even that his vote should be invalid. The first criticism on the subject came from *Cumhuriyet* writer Uğur Mumcu. He wrote that it was legally impossible for him to vote on September 16, 1988, before he went to Seoul, and that according to the law, voters who were not registered on the electoral roll and had resided

[392] "Naim Hoşgeldin," *Milliyet*, September 8, 1988.

[393] "Avrupa Naim İçin Küçük Kaldı," *Milliyet*, April 29, 1988; "Time Naim Süleymanoğlu'ndan Böyle Bahsetti: Mini Herkül," *Cumhuriyet*, July 13, 1988.

[394] "Rekor Dünyanın Gözünde," *Cumhuriyet*, April 28, 1988.

[395] "Naim Evet Dedi," *Milliyet*, September 17, 1988.

[396] "Naim'in Oyu Usulsüz," *Cumhuriyet*, September 23, 1988.

abroad for more than six months could vote when entering and exiting the country.[397] According to *Milliyet* columnist Sinan Toros, this situation was legally wrong and had to have consequences. According to Toros, legal experts agreed that this action was against the law and even thought that the voters and the ballot box officials who made the votes were responsible and should receive the necessary punishment.[398]



Figure 7: Naim Süleymanoğlu casting his referendum vote at the airport on September 16, 1988, before departing for the Seoul Olympics. [399]

Naim's biggest contribution to Özal's campaign was his Olympic achievement in Seoul. Süleymanoğlu broke six world and nine Olympic records in Seoul in September 1988 and earned Türkiye's first gold medal in weightlifting at an Olympic competition.[400] While Süleymanoğlu's success was being published in international newspapers, they were emphasizing that his success was being celebrated everywhere in Türkiye and even that Özal had sent his private plane to show his special interest in Süleymanoğlu.[401] It is so obvious this significant achievement did not escape the attention of Özal, who personally welcomed Süleymanoğlu, underscoring the athlete's importance prior to the referendum. That is why, according

[397] Uğur Mumcu, "Gözlem," *Cumhuriyet*, September 23, 1988.

[398] Sinan Toros, *Milliyet*, September 24, 1988.

[399] *Milliyet*, September 17, 1988.

[400] Gary Smith, "The Weight of the World."

[401] Peter Alfano, "The Seoul Olympics: Weightlifting; Intrigue on Way to Victory," *The New York Times*, September 22, 1988.

to the news in *Milliyet* dated September 23, 1988, Özal wanted Süleymanoğlu to postpone the world tour, which he planned to make after the Olympics, during which he would visit countries such as the USA, Japan and South Korea and explain the oppression in Bulgaria, and to return home immediately.[402] The media discussed Özal's desire to bring his "adopted son", Süleymanoğlu, to Türkiye as soon as possible. There were even reports of the Özal family planning a welcoming ceremony, where Süleymanoğlu's success would be celebrated with a hand-kissing ceremony. Speculation arose that this initiative was aimed at generating support for an upcoming referendum.[403] The possibility that Süleymanoğlu's success would be used as political leverage for Özal's own propaganda was criticized by the opposition parties. The parties heavily criticized the fact that it was brought in such a hurry, exactly one day before the referendum. The opposition leader Süleyman Demirel, stated that this was a political show.[404] While there was speculation that Süleymanoğlu's success would be leveraged to secure a "yes" vote in the referendum, Özal's plan to be personally involvement in the celebration highlighted the significance of Süleymanoğlu's victory in the political journey of Özal.[405] So much so that this planned welcome for Süleymanoğlu was also expected to increase the "yes" votes among the members of the Motherland Party.[406] In fact, the opposition parties opposed the live broadcast of this welcome and argued that it was being used as leverage. On the other side, the Motherland Party deputy chairman stated that this success belonged to Özal and made populist statements such as "Naim can lift Erdal Bey like a barbell and even increase the "yes" votes."[407] The committee established under the name of the Naim Welcome Committee organized the presence of important figures of the state and the government at the airport, and a comprehensive welcome program was being prepared in Ankara. The article by Uğur Mumcu published two days before the referendum, sheds light on Özal's use of

[402] "Özal Dön Deyince Naim'in Programı Altüst Oldu," *Milliyet*, September 23, 1988.

[403] "Naim Neden Özel Uçakla Getiriliyor?" *Milliyet*, September 9, 1988.

[404] "Referandumun Orta Yerine Halter Düştü. Naim Kavgası," *Milliyet*, September 24, 1988.

[405] "Naim'e Referandum Töreni," *Cumhuriyet*, September 23, 1988.

[406] "Naim'e Referandum Töreni."

[407] "Naim'e Referandum Töreni."

Süleymanoğlu as a propaganda tool to bolster his image amidst the referendum process. Mumcu highlights that Özal's utilization of Süleymanoğlu for political gain, including his early return from Seoul, reflects Özal's tendency to manipulate state resources and individuals, like Süleymanoğlu, for self-promotion as a party leader.[408]

By a stroke of unluckiness, the private plane carrying Süleymanoğlu, sent by Özal, experienced a malfunction mid-flight and had to make an emergency landing in Singapore.[409] As a result, Süleymanoğlu could only return to Türkiye on September 26, one day after the referendum. The referendum, which took place on September 25, saw 65 per cent of the vote cast as "no". Despite Turgut Özal's earlier statement that he would step down if the referendum result was not favourable to him, he did not follow through, stating, "I would leave, but I did the right thing. I both gathered our people and silenced the opposition."[410] Nevertheless, this loss seriously dented Özal's political image, and Süleymanoğlu, became increasingly important for Özal in terms of refreshing his future political image. In general, Süleymanoğlu was used to reinforce the sense of national pride and unity at this point. Özal's personal reception of Süleymanoğlu upon his return from the Seoul Olympics transformed the hero's homecoming into a grand celebration, amplifying the propaganda's influence through various forms of media.[411] Two days after Özal's great political loss, Süleymanoğlu returned to Türkiye on September 27, 1988, and was announced at Esenboğa Airport, accompanied by marches, as a person who "had been raised according to Turkish traditions and customs, and had proven his Turkishness."[412] As depicted in Figure 8, Özal displayed a keen interest in Süleymanoğlu. As mentioned in the accompanying caption, Özal affectionately kissed Süleymanoğlu six times and took a few minutes to pose for the newspapers. These images were intended to showcase a proud father and his son, highlighting his son's achievements, and also aimed to cultivate a sense of national unity and solidarity.

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[408] Uğur Mumcu, "Küçük Dev Adam," *Cumhuriyet*, September 23, 1988.

[409] "Havada Gürültü," *Milliyet*, September 25, 1988; "Naim Sevindiremedi," *Milliyet*, September 25, 1988.

[410] Aşık, *Türk Siyasi Tarihinde ANAP ve Turgut Özal*, p. 242.

[411] "Naim'e Başkentte Çoşkulu Karşılama," *Cumhuriyet*, September 27, 1988.

[412] Süleymanoğlu, "Bir Ömür Spor - Naim Süleymanoğlu."



Altı kez öptü Başbakan Turgut Özal, Naim Süleymanoğlu'nu uçağın merdivenlerinde karşıladı. Naim'i altı kez yanaklarından öpen Özal, daha sonra kendisini kucakladı ve birlikte dakikalarca gazetecilere poz verdi.

Figure 8: Turgut Özal welcoming Naim Süleymanoğlu at the airport after the Seoul Olympics, captured in a moment of celebration as Özal kisses Süleymanoğlu. [413]

Fikret Ünlü, a member of the Social Democratic Populist Party, who came to the airport to congratulate Süleymanoğlu, was prevented by Özal from speaking to Süleymanoğlu. This situation was later interpreted by the opposition as Özal using Süleymanoğlu as a trump card.[414]

Süleymanoğlu arrived at Kızılay Square in Ankara in a car with the words "Little Giant Man" written on it, after driving through the city for exactly three hours (see Figure 9, 10, 11). Posing with Özal in an open-top car, Süleymanoğlu delivered a speech, expressing gratitude to the people for their support in his Olympic success. He emphasized that the medal wasn't just his, but belonged to the Turkish nation, and credited the support he received, especially from Prime Minister Özal.[415] Özal, in turn, highlighted how Süleymanoğlu was showcasing the strength of the Turkish people to the world (see Figure 9).

413 *Milliyet*, September 27, 1988.

414 "Başbakan SHP Temsilcisini Tersledi," *Milliyet*, September 27, 1988.

415 "Naim'e Çoşkulu Karşılama," *Cumhuriyet*, September 27, 1988.



Figure 9: Turgut Özal parading Naim Süleymanoğlu through Ankara on top of a bus, introducing him to cheering crowd after his return from the Seoul Olympics. [416]

However, it was stated that some of the flags and banners in the hands of tens of thousands of people who welcomed Süleymanoğlu were prepared for the referendum.[417] At the welcome prepared for Süleymanoğlu, banners that read "Dear Prime Minister, thank you for bringing Naim to us" were prominent and next to these banners were pictures of the Motherland Party and Özal. In fact, the pictures of Turgut Özal and Semra Özal together were displayed with the Motherland Party logos and colours, and these pictures were accompanied by pictures of Süleymanoğlu. [418]



Figure 10: Turgut Özal parading Naim Süleymanoğlu through Ankara on top of a bus, introducing him to cheering crowd after his return from the Seoul Olympics. [419]

[416] "Naim'e Çoşkulu Karşılama."

[417] Faruk Bildirici, "Spor Boyu Siyaset," *Cumhuriyet*, September 27, 1988.

[418] Bildirici, "Spor Boyu Siyaset."

[419] *Hürriyet*, November 19, 2017.

According to *Cumhuriyet* writer Faruk Bildirici, all of these were things prepared for the referendum and were used in the same way to welcome Süleymanoğlu upon his return Even if Süleymanoğlu came after the referendum, this did not change the fact that the Motherland Party and Özal left their mark on the organization of Süleymanoğlu's welcome and that they used to Süleymanoğlu's welcome build an image.[420] This welcoming ceremony, in which the participation of extremely influential people was at its peak, obviously served all the needs of Özal's target audience. It was clear that the mottos "Here is the power of the Turk", "Here is the strongest Turk", and "The greatest Turk" had a response among the people, and it was clear that Özal benefited from this strong resonance very effectively.



Figure 11: Turgut Özal parading Naim Süleymanoğlu through Ankara on top of a bus, introducing him to cheering crowd after his return from the Seoul Olympics. [421]

The contribution of these shows prepared for Süleymanoğlu, especially in Figures 10 and 11, to the construction of Özal's image in terms of propaganda is quite important. The photographs vividly demonstrate how Özal leveraged Süleymanoğlu's Olympic success to bolster his political standing. By showcasing this achievement as a product of his administration, Özal aimed to enhance his public image. The grand celebration, marked by widespread public interest, was orchestrated to highlight Özal's leadership and reinforce his role as the driving force behind national accomplishments. This event not only celebrated Süleymanoğlu's sporting victory but also served as a political tool to solidify Özal's authority and influence.

[420] *Hürriyet*, November 19, 2017.

[421] *Hürriyet*, November 19, 2017.

Süleymanoğlu was heroized in the eyes of the people, and Özal used Süleymanoğlu's personal achievements to rebuild his own image in front of the public as the person who saved this hero from Bulgarian oppression.

"The father-son relationship" between Özal and Süleymanoğlu was always emphasized, but upon his return from Seoul, a mother-son relationship with Semra Özal emerged, portraying a complete family image. This depiction aimed to create an emotional connection between the Turkish citizens (see Figure 12).[422] In a September 1988 survey published in *Milliyet*, Süleymanoğlu was presented as "surpassing his father," in popularity, reflecting deeply held values while also fuelling national pride.[423] This narrative effectively resonated with the audience, leveraging emotions to convey a compelling message. Ultimately, Süleymanoğlu was a complete agent of influence with his successes and difficult life story, so much so that, as The *Times* writer Simon Barnes claimed, Süleymanoğlu was a complete "walking talking propaganda machine."[424]



Figure 12: Turgut and Semra Özal welcoming Naim Süleymanoğlu upon his return from the Seoul Olympics[425]

Moreover, in the same article he gave to *The Times* writer Simon Barnes through an interpreter, Süleymanoğlu was aware of the impact he had on people and even "states" as Özal's "adopted son" and a world-renowned successful athlete. Süleymanoğlu was expressing concern about the fact that his family could not be brought back from

[422] "Kapaktaki Türk," *Milliyet*, September 27, 1988.

[423] "Naim Babasını Geçti," *Milliyet*, October 10, 1988.

[424] Simon Barnes, "A Young Turk Lifts Oppression," *The Times*, December 6, 1988.

[425] *Milliyet*, September 27, 1988.

Bulgaria. He mentioned that he would continue to draw attention to the oppression process in Bulgaria until his own family was able to return. He emphasized his determination to bring attention to this situation in all the international interviews he participated in. But the main point that needs to be underlined here is that although Barnes described Süleymanoğlu's successes and his freedom from oppression in Bulgaria as a real victory, he ended his sentences by saying; "The Turkish government says he's worth far more than a million dollars. Well, so is everybody else under any form of oppression anywhere in the world. But you have to be a sportsman before they will pay the asking price."[426] Here, in fact, there was a reference to Süleymanoğlu's value for Özal. According to Barnes, Süleymanoğlu's value was equivalent to that of other oppressed Muslim Turks in Bulgaria. However, it was clearly emphasized that Süleymanoğlu's value had a distinct significance for Özal and the Turkish government. That is, Özal utilized Süleymanoğlu to enhance his own political image, which is the fundamental assumption of this study. In summary, Naim Süleymanoğlu was cognizant of his own influence.[427] At the end of this process, Süleymanoğlu's family was sent to Türkiye on October 15, 1988, and brought to Ankara with Özal's private plane.[428] In this scene, Özal and his family appear as saviours, further solidifying their own image (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: Naim Süleymanoğlu's family, brought from Bulgaria to Turkey, posing together with the Özal family on October 15, 1988. [429]

[426] Barnes, "A Young Turk Lifts Oppression."

[427] Barnes, "A Young Turk Lifts Oppression."

[428] "Naim'in Ailesi Türkiye'de," *Cumhuriyet*, October 15, 1988.

[429] "Naim'in Ailesi Türkiye'de."

However, as a saviour of a Turkish hero Turgut Özal actually takes his place as the person who channels this resonance to Türkiye and uses it for his own image.[430] It was constantly underlined how important Süleymanoğlu, who was constantly introduced as Özal's favourite and the miracle he needed, was for Özal's own image. We can understand this with the caricature drawn by the cartoonist Ercan Akyol, published in *Milliyet* on 2 October 1988.

As seen in Figure 14, Süleymanoğlu is depicted lifting a barbell in Özal's pocket. The depiction of Süleymanoğlu in Özal's pocket indicates that Özal is trying to show himself as a so-called "stronger leader" in the eyes of the public by owning up to this success. In fact, it is depicted here that Süleymanoğlu's successes and all the political gains caused by the polishing of these successes are in Özal's pocket. This caricature delivers an incisive critique of Özal's opportunistic exploitation of Naim Süleymanoğlu's achievements, framing it as a cynical political strategy devoid of genuine national pride.



Figure 14: Ercan Akyol's October 2, 1988, caricature, titled "Cep Herkülü" (Pocket Hercules), depicting Naim Süleymanoğlu as a weightlifter in Turgut Özal's jacket pocket. [431]

In more detail, this caricature, titled "Cep Herkülü" (Pocket Hercules), offers a sharp critique of how Turgut Özal instrumentalized Naim Süleymanoğlu's athletic

[430] "At 4-11, He's a Tower of Strength," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1988.

[431] Ercan Akyol, "Cep Herkülü," *Milliyet*, October 2, 1988.

achievements to serve his own political agenda. By depicting Süleymanoğlu as a small figure lifting weights within Özal's pocket, the image underscores the subordinate role assigned to Süleymanoğlu in Özal's propaganda machinery. The caricature critiques the disproportionate relationship between the two, with Süleymanoğlu's immense strength and symbolic value as a national hero overshadowed and minimized by Özal's towering figure. The pocket metaphor reinforces the idea that Özal "carried" Süleymanoğlu as a tool, keeping his successes conveniently close to amplifying his own image as a leader capable of securing such national triumphs. This visual commentary suggests that rather than celebrating Süleymanoğlu's individual achievements, Özal used them strategically to consolidate his political authority, distract from domestic issues, and present himself as the protector and promoter of Turkish pride and unity. The caricature thus critiques the reduction of a national icon to a mere prop in Özal's broader project of political image-building. Its underlying message is harsh: Özal's actions are not about uniting the nation or championing its values but about self-aggrandizement. This critique exposes a broader issue, how political figures co-opt personal and national achievements for their own gain, often at the expense of the very individuals they claim to elevate. It suggests a hollowing out of authenticity in Özal's leadership, where symbolism replaces substance.

During the events, Özal's image as the leader who saved the Turkish national hero was being promoted in the international arena, and even the detail of giving the 1.5 million dollars necessary for him to compete in the Olympics was particularly emphasized.[432] This can be considered a mutually beneficial relationship; the events were internationalized, and Naim Süleymanoğlu was utilized as a propaganda tool, representing national pride.

3.6. Conclusion

In general, what should not be overlooked here is Naim Süleymanoğlu's contribution to the internationalization of events and the mutual relationship between him and Özal, who benefited from this contribution.

[432] Akyol, "Cep Herkülü," *Milliyet*, October 2, 1988.

It can be looked at from two perspectives, one from Turgut Özal's perspective and the other from Naim Süleymanoğlu's perspective. To evaluate it through Naim Süleymanoğlu, the purpose of the propaganda is to announce to the international public the oppression experienced by the Turkish Muslim minority in Bulgaria and to show that Türkiye plays a leading role in this regard. However, in the process, the issue progressed differently for Süleymanoğlu. The period of oppression that Süleymanoğlu experienced in Bulgaria was on the radar of countries such as the United States, and from their perspective, this issue was discussed on an ideological level. In this context, Süleymanoğlu became a part of America's anti-communist rhetoric. In the process, Süleymanoğlu was frequently featured in the national press, which increased the effect of hearing about the oppression process he experienced in Bulgaria with his successes. His successful identity and the fact that he was frequently mentioned in the world turned him into a propaganda tool on his own. He attended invitations at the White House, gave speeches at the United Nations, and added to his Olympic achievements. Of course, this was an opportunity not to be missed for Özal, who had political problems in domestic politics.

For Turgut Özal, the aim was to strengthen his political image and increase the sense of national unity despite the problems he faced in both the domestic and international arena. In this sense, the aim was specifically to push the message that Naim Süleymanoğlu is the symbol of power and success as a national pride and turn this message into political leverage. Here, Özal was both building his own political image through Süleymanoğlu and giving the message that he was protecting his compatriots as the government globally. In particular, the maximization of propaganda was achieved through television broadcasts, newspapers, public celebrations and ceremonies. Bringing Süleymanoğlu to Türkiye was the first big step for Özal. He was greeted like a hero, in fact a source of national pride that Türkiye has been looking for years. At a time when Türkiye was caught between West and East, secularism and islam, modernity and traditionalism, Süleymanoğlu was able to bring everyone together. This gathering was a very important milestone in the construction of Özal's own political image and propaganda at that time. This was actually a situation that Türkiye had been longing for for many years. Coups, political bans, embargoes, economic crises, and ideological and racial conflicts have pushed

Türkiye into internal polarization. As a Muslim Turk who had escaped oppression, Süleymanoğlu represented hope for all segments of the population and served as a divine saviour. So, who would save and protect this saviour? At that point, Özal stood by Süleymanoğlu with all his resources throughout the political propaganda process and became one of the number one symbols of his own image construction at that time.

CHAPTER 4

TURGUT ÖZAL'S USE OF AYSEL ÖZGÜR'S DETENTION IN BULGARIA IN TURKISH POLITICS

This chapter examines the case of Aysel Özgür, who remained in Bulgaria while her family escaped to Türkiye, and whose eventual reunion with them became a powerful symbol within the propaganda strategies of Turgut Özal and the Turkish government. Aysel's personal story was elevated beyond individual suffering and transformed into a narrative of national pride and political success, reflecting the broader struggle of the Turkish minority under Bulgarian oppression. Under the leadership of Turgut Özal, the government capitalized on Aysel's story, strategically framing her return as a humanitarian and diplomatic victory to garner public support and consolidate political leverage.

Aysel, a 13-year-old Turkish girl, was held hostage by the Bulgarian government for five years, during which she was prevented from contacting her family, becoming a symbol of shattered families, the revival process and attracting worldwide attention.[433] Aysel Özgür's family was compelled to flee to Türkiye due to the oppression directed at the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. However, Aysel's family was able to obtain permission to travel to Türkiye under the pretext of visiting. The Bulgarian government permitted Özgür family to visit to Türkiye on the condition that Aysel would remain behind. After escaping the oppressive conditions in Bulgaria, Özgür family settled in Bursa, resulting in their separation from their daughter, Aysel. In Bulgaria, Aysel Özgür was forced to live with her grandmother,

[433] TRT Belgesel, "Bulgaristan'da Alıkonulan Aysel, Bu Dizi Sayesinde Ailesine Kavuştu," YouTube, May 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YTIUGN3YK3Y , accessed: January 17, 2023; TRT Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de," YouTube, February 21, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gkWIYK4aeOI accessed: September 5, 2024.

had her name changed to "Asya Satanova,"[434] and thus became subject to both oppression and the process of forced name changes.

In this chapter, the Aysel Özgür incident, which became a symbol of the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, and how this incident was used as a political propaganda tool and personal image building by Turgut Özal will be discussed. To enhance understanding of the topic, the section will begin by examining how the issues Aysel Özgür faced in Bulgaria impacted Turkish media and politics. For the sake of consistency, this chapter will focus on how media tools handled the issue and created the necessary public opinion in terms of the development and functioning of the events. In the sequel, the impact of the TRT television series *Yeniden Doğmak*, which depicted the life of Aysel Özgür and the oppression faced by Turks living in Bulgaria, will be analyzed in terms of propaganda. Finally, after discussing the diplomatic and social impact of the series and how it helped the resulting deportation of Aysel Özgür to Türkiye, it will be discussed how Turgut Özal turned this entire process into a propaganda instrument for his political image-building.

4.1. Perception of Aysel Özgür's Detention in Türkiye and the International Arena

The oppression of Turks in Bulgaria in the 1980s became an international crisis and a matter of great sensitivity for Türkiye. The existence of large masses wanting to migrate from Bulgaria to Türkiye and the desire of broken families to unite in there has been a potential problem between the two neighboring countries for years.[435] Although this problem began in the Ottoman period in terms of its historical roots, the Migration of 1950-1951 and the Migration of Close Relatives in 1969-1978 in the Republican period are among the most fundamental reasons for the problem of broken families.

In the process that prepared the way for the 1989 Forced Migration, also called *Büyük Göç* (the Big Excursion), there were forced assimilation policies implemented

[434] "Ailesi Aysel'i Bekliyor," *Cumhuriyet*, January 2, 1987.

[435] Şimşir, *Bulgaristan Türkleri*, p. 315.

against Turks in Bulgaria.[436] It can be argued that the migrations from Bulgaria during the periods of 1950-51, 1969-1978, and 1989 were essentially forms of large-scale asylum. The resistance of the Turkish minority to the collectivization measures implemented by the communist regime against the Turkish minority in 1950 and 1951 caused some of the Turkish minority to emigrate. In this context, approximately 150,000 people emigrated to Türkiye in 1950-1951.[437]

However, the subsequent migration in 1950-1951 was prevented by the Bulgarian government in order to prevent the decreasing workforce.[438] Since Turks constituted a significant portion of the workforce, especially in agriculture, this migration was increasingly putting Bulgaria in a difficult situation. For this reason, Bulgarian authorities did not allow another migration until 1968. The second major migration wave of the Cold War era occurred between 1969 and 1978 and is commonly referred to as the "Close Relative Migration." This migration was initiated on March 22, 1968, through an agreement between the Bulgarian and Turkish governments with the aim of reuniting families that had been separated by the migration of 1950-1951 and subsequent border closures.[439] What sets this migration apart is its direct connection to previous migration movements and its span over a period of ten years. That is why in 1968, the Turkish minority was permitted to migrate through an agreement between the two states, Türkiye and Bulgaria, due to shifting demographics in Bulgaria. While the reunification of separated families was motivated by humanitarian concerns, it is evident that the Zhivkov administration's primary objective was to maintain the demographic balance in favour of the Bulgarians.[440] This agreement was originally made with the aim of reuniting broken families, but in the process, it turned into limited migration and a total of 130,000

[436] Mehmet Hacısalihoğlu and Neriman Ersoy Hacısalihoğlu, *89 Göçü- Bulgaristan'da 1984-89 Azınlık Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Zorunlu Göç*, (İstanbul: Yıldız Teknik Üniversitesi Basım Yayın Merkezi, 2010), p. 12.

[437] Lütem, *Türk Bugar İlişkileri 1983-1989*, pp. 74-76.

[438] Türkeş, "1989 Göçü Nasil Konumlandirilabilir Ve Sistematik Midir?," p. 598.

[439] Beycan Hocaoğlu, "Bulgaristan Göçmenlerinin Türkiye'de Oluşturdukları Sınır-Aşırı Alanlar," in *1989 Yilinda Bulgaristan'dan Türk Zorunlu Göçünün 30. Yili,* ed. Ayşe Kayapinar, Levent Kayapinar, Hakan Öztürk and Ökkeş Narinç, (Çorlu: Çorlu Belediyesi Yayınları, 2020), p. 368.

[440] Türkeş, "1989 Göçü Nasil Konumlandirilabilir ve Sistematik midir?," p. 598.

people were able to migrate.[441] As a result, it was inevitable that many families would be broken up again. However, the agreement on the migration of close relatives signed between the two countries was later unilaterally annulled by Bulgaria in 1978, and during this period the families were separated from each other, and this situation actually continued until 1989. The 1968 Migration Agreement led to situations where certain families' children or other relatives were unable to accompany them to Türkiye for various reasons and ended up staying in Bulgaria. Subsequently, there were attempts to reunite these individuals with their families in Türkiye, but the Bulgarian authorities refused, citing the expiration of the agreement.

Migration movements between Bulgaria and Türkiye have led to the fragmentation of family structures and deep social traumas over decades. The experiences of Özgür family serve as a poignant and individual case study of the broader national and international issue of broken families, meriting analysis for their impact on societal structures. Aysel, who was forcibly detained in Bulgaria, fell victim to the Bulgarian government's enforced name-change campaign, too, resulting in her name being changed to "Asya Satanova".[442] *Tercüman* newspaper, a widely circulated publication at the time, broke the story about Aysel Özgür on July 6, 1986, with the headline "Bu Yavru Bulgarlar'ın Elinde" (This Youngster is in the hands of the Bulgarians), bringing to light that Aysel was being held against her will in Bulgaria.[443] According to *Tercüman*'s claims, days later, on July 8, 1986, a letter titled "Kurtarın Beni" (Save me) from Aysel Özgür, sent via Soviet Russia, reached Türkiye. *Tercüman* promptly shared this urgent news with the entire nation.[444] Parallel to this, in 1986, from the moment the events started to be published in press, the basis of the news was the problem of broken families that emerged as a result of the oppression process in Bulgaria, and Aysel Özgür became the most important figure of this problem.[445] Aysel Özgür's family in Türkiye and some Turks from Bulgaria who were separated

[441] İbrahim Kamil, *Bulgaristan'daki Türklerin Statüsü* (İstanbul: Türk Dünyası Araştırma Vakfı, 1989), p. 61.

[442] "Ailesi Ayseli Bekliyor," *Cumhuriyet*, January 2, 1987.

[443] "Bu Yavru Bulgarların Elinde," *Tercuman*, Jully 6, 1986.

[444] "Aysel'in Son Feryadı," *Tercuman*, Jully 8, 1986.

[445] "Çocuklarımızı İstiyoruz," *Tercuman*, July 13, 1986.

from their children and family members started a hunger strike and played a very active role in spreading the word about the events.[446]



Figure 15: Aysel Özgür's family holding her photograph on a poster, anxiously awaiting her return from Bulgaria. [447]

On July 6, 1986, *Tercüman* published a photograph of Aysel Özgür's family, holding a banner in English that reads, "I want my daughter Aysel from Bulgaria," alongside a picture of Aysel (Figure 15). The caption below the photograph states, "Five years of unending tears: Aysel Özgür's mother, Fatma Özgür, father, Salih Özgür, and brother, Mehmet Özgür, have been mourning for Aysel for five years. Their plea to the world: We want our daughter Aysel back from Bulgaria". This exemplifies the use of emotional appeal as a propaganda tool to influence public perception. The portrayal of the parents' sorrow and the focus on family separation framed the situation as a personal tragedy, fostering empathy from both domestic and international audiences. By using words like "hostage" and "captive", in general, the narrative not only highlighted the injustice but also cast Bulgaria as a moral violator, strengthening the dichotomy between oppressor and victim. The inclusion of English in the message signalled an appeal beyond national borders, aiming to mobilize international pressure. Through this highly personalized narrative, the complex diplomatic conflict between Türkiye and Bulgaria was simplified into a relatable human story, aligning the family's plight with the broader struggle of the Turkish minority. The image served to rally public support, strengthened national unity, and

[446] "Bulgaristan'a Tepkiler Artıyor, 16 Kişi Daha Açlık Grevinde," *Milliyet*, July 13, 1986; TRT Belgesel, "Bulgaristan'da Alıkonulan Aysel, Bu Dizi Sayesinde Ailesine Kavuştu."

[447] "Bu Yavru Bulgarların Elinde," *Tercuman*, July 6, 1986.

justified Türkiye's diplomatic stance, demonstrating how personal stories could be instrumentalized for political purposes.



Figure 16: In the "Freedom for Aysel" campaign, Aysel Özgür's image is depicted surrounded by chains, symbolizing her captivity. [448]

Following this, the "Aysel'e Hürriyet" (Freedom for Aysel) campaign was launched by *Tercüman*. The campaign was announced all over Türkiye at the same time as Aysel Özgür's family started a hunger strike in Türkiye. As seen in Figure 16 below, the campaign's picture was quite notable. The image of Aysel Özgür, framed by the phrase "Aysel'e Hürriyet" and encircled by chains, served as a powerful tool of propaganda, symbolizing both her personal victimization and the broader plight of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. The visual metaphor of the chain suggested entrapment, reinforcing the narrative that Aysel, like many Turks in Bulgaria, was held hostage by an oppressive regime. The slogan, invoking the concept of "freedom," appealed to nationalist sentiments, framing the issue as a moral imperative for Türkiye to act. By portraying Aysel as an innocent child in need of rescue, the image simplified complex political dynamics into a clear us-versus-them dichotomy, rallying domestic support and invoking international sympathy. This strategy aligned with Türkiye's broader use of soft power, leveraging emotional appeals to galvanize public opinion and exert diplomatic pressure on Bulgaria,

[448] *Tercüman*, July 10, 1986.

particularly during the Second Cold War period, when such human rights narratives held significant weight in global political discourse.

"Aysel'e Hürriyet" campaign created a *snowball effect*, [449] the main message about the issue was designed to create empathy for the families who were on hunger strikes, even though this was not the direct purpose of the protesters. However, these hunger strikes established a connection with the target audience. Thus, the necessary resonance was created. In most cases, well-known victims are showcased prominently and vividly, portrayed as human beings, and their suffering is presented with specific details and background information in storytelling that captures the attention and evokes compassionate feelings in the audience.[450] In that sense, Özgür's detention in Bulgaria was a very effective and important tool in conveying all these problems, such as broken families and the oppression of the Turks in Bulgaria to the public.

Throughout this entire process, the Bulgarian government did not take any action regarding the events and continued to remain indifferent to this event, which was gaining increasing influence in the international arena. However, at the same time, this process was beginning to attract the attention of the Turkish government too. It was expected that Bulgaria would implement the decisions it had taken with European countries regarding the reunification of broken families and allow them to reunite. From that perspective, Barlas Doğu, the president of the Inter-Parliamentary Union of Türkiye at the time, had communicated directly with Bulgarian officials and stated that they needed to take action regarding Aysel Özgür's situation and also emphasized that this situation was not only a reunion of families issue but a human rights issue.[451] According to *Tercüman*, the Aysel Özgür issue started to be talked about globally since it was continuously reported live on BBC radio in July 1986.[452] Also, domestically, discourses were created especially on the basis of her

[449] Ellul, *Propaganda,* p. 182.

[450] Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media,* p. 35.

[451] "Aysel'in Dramına Son Verelim," *Tercüman*, July 13, 1986.

[452] "Aysel'e Hürriyet Kampanyası BBC'de," *Tercüman*. July 13, 1986.

Turkishness, and the effect of the content was strengthened with an emphasis on stories about children in danger in Bulgaria.[453] Aysel Özgür, often referred to as "the Symbol of Turkish resistance against oppression", had emerged as a prominent figure representing the Turkish community in Bulgaria, both domestically and internationally, much like her contemporary Naim Süleymanoğlu.[454]

In that sense, saving Özgür, who embodied the core values of the Turkish nation and had been victimized, was seen as a symbolic act of safeguarding the Turkish population in Bulgaria. However, the catalyst for this action was partially the remarks made by the Balkan Turks Solidarity and Culture Association (Balkan Türkleri Dayanışma ve Kültür Derneği). In an interview with *Tercüman* on July 14, 1986, the association's president, Mehmet Çavuş, expressed his intention to address the overall oppression in Bulgaria with the anticipated visit of Soviet parliamentarians to Istanbul.[455] He emphasized that this issue extended beyond Aysel Özgür and was crucial for all individuals separated from their families. Additionally, Çavuş underscored the fact that the BCP had recognized the cultural and economic rights of the Turkish minority in 1969, 1975, and 1976 through reports. However, after 1984, the party had adopted a racist and chauvinistic stance. In this context, Aysel Özgür became a symbolic figure in the defense of the rights of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, and the objective was to amplify the impact of Aysel Özgür's plight through negotiations with the Soviet Union. In the same interview, Çavuş emphasized that there were an additional 172,000 Turkish family members in similar situations that had been reported to his association. The reports ready to be forwarded to the Turkish authorities.[456] In fact, it can be clearly seen that the aim is to increase the resonance of the events with public opinion that can be created through both the Western and Eastern blocs.

The events were quickly heard of and began to cause serious reactions in the international arena. This incident, which had already turned into a political crisis,

[453] "Özgür Ailesi Panik İçinde, Aysel'i Öldürülebilirler," *Tercüman*, July 13, 1986.

[454] "Aysel Bir Semboldür," *Tercüman*, July 13, 1986.

[455] Kemal Önder, "Bulgarlar 47 Türk Çocuğunu Daha Rehin Tutuyor," *Tercüman*, 14 july,1986.

[456] Önder, "Bulgarlar 47 Türk Çocuğunu Daha Rehin Tutuyor."

also became an issue in the farewell dinner of the Bulgarian ambassador in Ankara, Argır Konstantinov, and Motherland Party officials refused to attend the dinner.[457] The situation was gradually gaining the attention of the Motherland Party, too. Mehmet Keçeciler, the deputy chairman of the Motherland Party at the time, responded to the decision not to attend the reception by stating, "No member of the Motherland Party can participate in an event representing a country that deems this treatment of our fellow citizens as acceptable."[458] Besides all this, The Aysel Özgür incident continued to reach international dimensions without slowing down, and the situation was urgently decided to be taken to the European Democratic Union, the Amnesty International and the United Nations Human Rights Commission by the party officials.[459]

The media tools, such as television and newspapers, were actually maximizing the impact of the situation by frequently reporting about Aysel Özgür. The news was increasing its emotional intensity day by day and becoming more stimulating in terms of content since the news was dominated by stories of children attempting to flee from the harsh conditions in Bulgaria.[460] The government's involvement in the events related to Aysel Özgür soon increased its influence. In fact, Bulgaria had requested a meeting with Türkiye to discuss the events however the general secretary of the Motherland Party, Mustafa Rüştü Taşar, declared that he would accept the invitation that Bulgaria made to him at that time on the condition that he would accept only if he could return with Aysel and the children who were separated from their families.[461] Thus, the government's interest in the events found a place for itself even more in the eyes of the people. At the same time as the "Aysel'e Hürriyet" campaign continued to strengthen its public standing, there was a surge of interest surrounding Aysel Özgür. Numerous people sent letters to media organizations

[457] "Bulgaristan'a Milli Tepki Büyüyor," *Tercuman*, July 14, 1986.

[458] "Bulgaristan'a Milli Tepki Büyüyor."

[459] "Bulgaristan'a Milli Tepki Büyüyor."

[460] "Bulgar Vahşetinden Kaçan Çocuk Yaşta Türkler Ölümü Göze Alarak Sınırı Geçtiler- 5 Türk Zulüm Çemberini Kırdı," *Tercüman*, July 18, 1986.

[461] "İktidar Partisinin Zulme Tepkisi Sertleşiyor," *Tercüman*, July 18, 1986.

requesting updates on her situation. The sentiments expressed in these letters reflected phrases such as "Aysel is Türkiye's daughter," "Aysel is our daughter," and "Aysel represents the cause of the Turkish nation."[462] In fact, emotions were stimulated through this use of language, and Aysel Özgür, who was gradually becoming a symbol, represented all the group norms, such as the beliefs and values of the target audience.

Meanwhile, the events were being discussed internationally. For instance, the Western German newspaper, *Die Welt*, portrayed all of these incidents as the Bulgarian government's ruthlessness and cruelty; it heavily criticized Aysel Özgür's situation of not being sent back to Türkiye.[463] On the other hand, radio was an important agent of influence for the West as well. During the Cold War, Bulgaria was concerned about corporate media outlets being perceived as ideological centers that propagated anti-Bulgarian propaganda. Broadcasters like *Free Europe*, *Deutsche Welle*, *BBC*, and the *Voice of America* were labelled as sabotage centers and accused of attempting to establish psychological and ideological superiority over Bulgaria by Zhivkov and the Bulgarian government.[464] In fact, during the Cold War era, news about Aysel Özgür was broadcast on the radio and turned into a propaganda tool, too. The most significant of these was *BBC Radio's* coverage of Aysel Özgür. According to *Tercüman*, *BBC Radio* frequently highlighted the challenges faced by Aysel Özgür and her family, and it consistently reported on the hunger strike undertaken by Özgür family in Türkiye as part of its broadcast schedule.[465] The report highlights that the BBC's broadcasts significantly increased the impact and influence of the events, amplifying their resonance among the audience.

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[462] "Aysel'e Hürriyet Kampanyasına Mektup ve Telgraf Yağıyor," *Tercüman*, July 18, 1986.

[463] "Alman Gazetesi Die Welt: Bulgaristan Konusunda Ankara'nın Sabrı Taştı," *Cumhuriyet*, July 27, 1986.

[464] "Bulgarian Cooperation with KGB against 'Subversive Centers", 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Bulgarian Interior Ministry Archive, Fond 1, Record 10A, Document 344. Obtained by Jordan Baev, translated by Miroslav Vajarov. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121528. access date: July 13, 2023.

"Bulgarian Interior Ministry Note on Actions against Western Radio", 1979, Wilson Center Digital Archive, Bulgarian Subject Collection, Box 12, Hoover Archives. Obtained by A. Ross Johnson, translated by Sveta Milusheva. https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/121529. access date: July 13, 2023.

[465] "Aysel'e Hürriyet Kampanyası BBC'de," *Tercüman*, July 13, 1986.

The internationalization power of the Aysel Özgür incident continued unabated. The Bulgarian government's attitude, which did not allow Aysel Özgür to meet with her family, was also on the agenda of the Turkish political opposition. The chairman of the Social Democratic Populist Party, Erdal İnönü, brought the issue to the chairman of the German Socialist Party, Willy Brandt. While Brandt was contacting the Bulgarian authorities, the German Socialist Party's International Secretary, Hans-Eber Dingels, sent a letter to Erdal İnönü.[466] The letter said: "Upon the instructions of chairman Willy Brandt, we established high-level contact with the Bulgarian side regarding the Özgür family incident. I contacted my colleague in the Bulgarian State Party, Dimeter Stanishev. If necessary, the issue will be reflected to the head of state. I will inform you immediately as soon as I have more detailed information on this matter."[467]

A prominent illustration of the internationalization of events is the participation of Özgür family in the European Security Cooperation meeting alongside Mümin Gençoğlu, the head of the Balkan Migrants Culture and Solidarity Association (Bulgar Göçmenleri Kültür ve Dayanışma Derneği). At the meeting, Gençoğlu had declared that they would provide documented evidence regarding the sustained pressure imposed on Turks by the Bulgarian government over the past several months.[468] In the news given by *Milliyet* on November 11, 1986, under the title "Türkiye's Campaign Shows its Effect", it was stated that during the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) meeting, US Secretary of State George Shultz specified that the oppression of Turks in Bulgaria was on the USA's radar.[469] Shultz's reaction to the events here was again parallel to America's Second Cold War reflexes and showed the Soviets responsible for the human rights violations and name change processes experienced in the world. As mentioned in the previous section, it was a fact that the USA, especially during the Reagan administration, harshly criticized Bulgaria within the framework of its policy based

[466] "Aysel'i Serbest Bırakın," *Milliyet*, September 2, 1986.

[467] "Aysel'i Serbest Bırakın."

[468] "Bulgar Baskısı AGİT Toplantısında," *Milliyet*, November 11,1986.

[469] "Bulgar Baskısı AGİT Toplantısında."

on opposition to the USSR and socialism.[470] In other words, the USA continued its anti-Soviet propaganda here as well. However, in addition to all these, one of the most important details of this meeting was Özgür family's presence there with Mümin Gençoğlu, the head of the Balkan Migrants Culture and Solidarity Association, and their contribution to the internationalization of the events as living witnesses.[471]

While all this was happening, news about Aysel Özgür and her family had begun to find their place in the international press. One of these was the article titled "How an Ethnic Minority was Bulgarianized" in *The Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper dated December 19, 1986. The content of the news included the experiences of families forced to migrate from Bulgaria, and the newspaper stated that the Council of Europe Parliamentary Assembly had reported that Bulgaria's practices against minorities were human rights violations. It continued by stating that the biggest problem was broken families and saw Özgür family as the most important symbol of this problem. The content of the news stated that Özgür family had to leave their daughter Aysel Özgür in Bulgaria. It was emphasized that the reason for this was that the only way Özgür family could go to Türkiye with a tourist visa and passport was to leave their daughter in Bulgaria in 1983.[472] This was actually a method used by the Bulgarian government to guarantee the return of families who wanted to leave Bulgaria.

The rest of the news includes the hunger strike that Özgür family started in 1985 for their daughter and also includes information about the involvement of the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs in the process and the initiatives it took.[473] So that is how the problem of Aysel Özgür and broken families was being discussed in such an environment, and Özgür's story, which developed parallel to the events, created a strong resonance.

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[470] Uzgel, "Balkanlarla İlişkiler," p. 180.

[471] "Bulgar Baskısı AGİT Toplantısında."

[472] Harvey Broadbent, "How an Ethnic Minority was Bulgarianized," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, December 19, 1986.

[473] Broadbent, "How an Ethnic Minority Was Bulgarianized."

Meanwhile, while the issue of broken families was frequently discussed parallel to Aysel Özgür's situation, the allegations of *Tercüman* that Özgür was forced into marriage to start a family by the Bulgarian authorities made the situation even more problematic. [474] The portrayal of the Bulgarian authorities endorsing the marriage of Aysel Özgür, who was not yet of legal age, to a Bulgarian young man was amplifying the significance of Özgür's situation, which had evolved into a symbolic cause.[475] In response, the Turkish government and state officials issued a press statement emphasizing their attention to the incident and reinforcing the message that they were closely monitoring the developing situation.[476]

The representation of Aysel Özgür as a young girl held significant value in propaganda as it served as a compelling demonstration of the effective use of modern propaganda to gain attention and approval for minority viewpoints.[477] As it told before well-known victims are often portrayed vividly, with specific details to evoke compassion in the audience.[478] In this context, probably the emotional connection with the target audience aimed to evoke the sense that the person being used in the propaganda (in that case, it was Aysel Özgür) was also someone's mother, wife, or sister. Thus, the influence of the victimized person on the target audience was going to increase considerably, and a sense of empathy was going to arise. In this context, it can be said that propaganda is highly linked to the use of emotive language and imagery.[479]

In this context, the narrative of Aysel Özgür serves as a pivotal example of how Turkish media and state policies were strategically shaped on the international scale. The subsequent section will provide a detailed analysis of the role and significance of the television series *Yeniden Doğmak* within this framework.

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[474] "Aysel'e Baskı," *Tercüman*, May 2, 1987.

[475] "Aysel İçin Sofyaya Talimat," *Tercüman*, May 3, 1987.

[476] "Aysel İçin Sofyaya Talimat."

[477] Bernays, *Propaganda*, pp.117-118.

[478] Herman and Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent,* p. 35.

[479] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion,* p. 329.

4.2. *Yeniden Doğmak* and Its Propaganda Impact

The oppression of a Muslim Turkish girl should have been highlighted using various media tools to maximize the effect. One of the most effective ways to do this was to shoot a television series called *Yeniden Doğmak*. According to Edward Bernays, motion pictures, play a crucial role as a platform for disseminating ideas and viewpoints.[480] Movies, in particular, have the power to regulate societal norms and behaviors. Indeed, starting from here, we can apply what Bernays said about motion pictures to this context. In this sense, the series *Yeniden Doğmak* can be seen as a highly effective tool for conveying ideas and thoughts. Since movies are produced to cater to audience preferences, they often mirror, emphasize, and at times exaggerate prevailing societal trends rather than inspiring new ideas and perspectives, and they tend to draw only from popular and current ideas and information.[481] Since of all the mass media, the motion picture has the greatest potential for emotional appeal to its audience, offering a deeper level of identification with the characters (Aysel Özgür) and action (the Bulgarian oppression of Turks) on the screen than found elsewhere in popular culture.[482]

As mentioned before, Özal actually built a vertical propaganda model by using the state television TRT and the monopoly power of this channel and instrumentalized it to give all the necessary political messages through this platform. In that sense, another important issue about this series was that the message to be given was constantly coming from the same source, and that source was TRT, the only television channel of the period. As the only television channel of the period, TRT's public opinion surveys revealed that among the types of programs the target audience wanted to watch on television were news, domestic series, religious programs, game shows, educational programs, local films, cultural and educational content, women's programs, and documentaries.[483] Among these, domestic series ranked second, just

[480] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 156.

[481] Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*, p. 156.

[482] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, p. 19.

[483] TRT Yayın Planlama Koordinasyon Ve Değerlendirme Dairesi Başkanlığı, *Radyo Ve Televizyon Programları Kamuoyu Araştırması* (İstanbul: TRT Basılı Yayınlar Müdürlüğü Yayınları, 1987), p. 41.

after news.[484] The credibility of a source greatly influences change, as people tend to trust authority figures and expert opinions. Once a source is accepted on one issue, its acceptance can extend to other issues as well.[485] In fact, being informed about the events was done through the reality created by the series.

The series, which was broadcast during prime time at 21:00, the time most likely to reach the target audience, was aired at the most appropriate time to effectively convey its message and story.[486] This conclusion can be drawn from the public opinion survey report published by TRT for radio and television programs in December 1987. The broadcast time of the series and its classification as one of the most-watched program types demonstrate how effective it was in reaching its target audience.[487]

The script for *Yeniden Doğmak* was written by novelist and poet Sevim Çokum, who was well known for her works focusing on migration, while Osman Seden served as the director. Osman Seden was a renowned director in Türkiye, known for creating many popular films and television series loved by public. One of his most significant works before directing *Yeniden Doğmak* was the adaptation of famous Turkish novelist Reşat Nuri Güntekin's novel *Çalıkuşu*, which he produced and directed. *Çalıkuşu* broke viewership records during its broadcast in 1986 and featured actors such as ex-beauty queen Aydan Şener, child actor Mine Çayıroğlu, and veteran actor Tomris Oğuzalp, who all appeared in *Yeniden Doğmak*. In that sense, the inclusion of renowned actors such as Mine Çayıroğlu, İsmet Özhan, and Aydan Şener in the Turkish series *Yeniden Doğmak* can be considered a strategic decision that supports the propagandistic goals of the project. By including Şener, who played the protagonist of *Çalıkuşu*, an idealist teacher Feride and Çayıroğlu, who played the deprived orphan Munise who was adopted by Feride, it seems that TRT wanted to

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[484] TRT Yayın Planlama Koordinasyon Ve Değerlendirme Dairesi Başkanlığı, *Radyo ve Televizyon Programları*, p. 41.

[485] Jowett and O'Donnell, *Propaganda & Persuasion*, p. 324.

[486] "Yayın Akışı," *Milliyet*, December 13,1987; "1. Program," *Milliyet*, December 27, 1987.

[487] TRT Yayın Planlama Koordinasyon Ve Değerlendirme Dairesi Başkanlığı, *Radyo ve Televizyon Programları,* pp. 11-20.

capitalize the popularity of *Çalıkuşu* and the fame of both Şener and Çayıroğlu. The participation of these famous actors further enhanced the credibility and prestige of the project, contributing to the expansion of the audience base and ensuring that the series' message was taken more seriously. The emotional connection established with well-known actors made viewers more sensitive and empathetic to the dramatic events portrayed in the series, thereby facilitating a deeper understanding of the social and historical messages. Moreover, the wide fan base of these actors allowed the series to reach diverse demographic segments and appeal to a broad audience spectrum. Ultimately, the presence of famous actors in *Yeniden Doğmak* strengthened the cultural interaction and dialogue between different social perspectives, aiding in the effective dissemination of historical and social messages across various communities. In this context, it can be said that the series employed a conscious propaganda and communication strategy that enhanced its success in terms of content and form.

Before the series was released, it was stated by the TRT that it would tell the story of the Muslim Turkish minority living in Bulgaria.[488] In fact, in the promotion of this series, references were made to the collective memory through Bulgaria's claim as follows: "You are Bulgarians who were forcibly Turkified during the Ottoman period".[489] It would be more accurate to explain this as follows: The series *Yeniden Doğmak* aired in 1987 in Türkiye, tackled the assimilation policies and persecution faced by the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, aiming to make a significant impact on Türkiye's domestic political scene. By dramatizing the Bulgarian government's policies through the phrase "You are Bulgarians who were forcibly Turkified during the Ottoman period," the series aimed to reinforce national consciousness and ethnic solidarity among the Turkish populace. This strategy can be seen as part of the efforts to raise public awareness about ethnic and national identity issues within Türkiye and to unite the Turkish people. In this context, *Yeniden Doğmak* functioned as a propaganda tool that bolstered nationalist sentiments and supported Türkiye's national identity policies within the domestic political arena, thereby emerging as an effective media strategy that fostered social and political dialogue. The series went

[488] "Zor Bir Seçim," *Milliyet*, December 13, 1987

[489] "Zor Bir Seçim," *Milliyet*, December 13, 1987.

beyond being merely an entertainment product, utilizing historical and social issues as a national communication tool, thus showcasing the producer's and scriptwriter's ability to influence domestic public opinion and strengthen the sense of national unity through media.



Figure 17: Poster of the TV series *Yeniden Doğmak*, which portrays the life story of Aysel Özgür.[490]

The TV series *Yeniden Doğmak* met with the audience on TRT, on December 13, 1987. *Tercüman* reported on the *Yeniden Doğmak* series with headlines such as "The drama of the Aysels on screen" and "Bulgarian oppression airs tonight".[491] The series centers on the story of Aysel Özgür, the youngest daughter of a family that fled the forced assimilation policies targeting Turks in Bulgaria, only to be held hostage by Bulgarian authorities after seeking refuge in Türkiye. As shown in Figure 17, the poster of the film *Yeniden Doğmak*, when analyzed from a propaganda perspective, reveals the intense use of nationalist and emotional motifs. The prominent display of the large Turkish flag emphasizes nationalism and national pride, aiming to create an emotional connection with the viewer. The flag's prominent positioning served as a powerful propaganda tool to evoke a sense of unity and solidarity within the

[490] Yeniden Doğmak, IMDB, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0426825/ accessed: October 2, 2024

[491] "Aysellerin Dramı Ekranda," *Tercuman*, December 12, 1987; "Bulgar Zulmü Bu Gece Ekranda," *Tercuman*, December 13, 1987.

audience. The emotional visuals on the poster, particularly the expressions of the woman and the soldier figures, evoke curiosity and attachment in the viewer, highlighting themes of struggle, heroism and repression exerted by Bulgarian soldiers. These elements were designed to trigger patriotic feelings and emotionally connect the target audience to the series. The title *Yeniden Doğmak* underscored themes of resurrection and rebuilding, presenting a narrative of powerful transformation, thereby attracting the audience with a compelling message. The emphasis on the names of the director, screenwriter, and actors reinforces the perception that the film is crafted by credible and significant figures. Altogether, these components illustrate that the *Yeniden Doğmak* poster functions as an effective propaganda tool, guiding the viewer towards an emotional response.

The TV series' first two episodes, only episodes aired, focus on arousing emotions, and it gave all the necessary messages through the most sensitive emotions. By focusing on beliefs, values, and identities, this series increases its impact through the agitation of propaganda as well as conveying the actual facts. Agitation propaganda generally attracts all the attention in the fastest way; in this sense, the aim is actually to overcome the internal psychological barriers of habits, beliefs and judgment.[492] In this context, this type of propaganda actually becomes more evident in a crisis and carries this crisis into the world of people living with their daily habits.[493] This was framed very effectively to mobilize the emotions of the Turkish people and, at the same time, paint a picture of the Turkish people's sense of unity against these external threats.

In these two episodes of the series, the threat perception was created by the interventions and staging of the attacks on the religious practices of Muslim Turks, thus stimulating the emotions of the target audience.[494] The humiliation of the values and beliefs of Muslim Turks in various ways was conveyed to the audience as a message through some scenes, which will be examined below. Among these images

[492] Ellul, *Propaganda,* pp. 71-72.

[493] Ellul, *Propaganda*, pp. 71-72.

[494] TRT Nostalji, *Yeniden Doğmak*, YouTube, access date: September 30, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w84mAO-KIDo.

were the murder of an imam who recited the call to prayer in the mosque, the prevention of burial of the bodies according to Muslim Turkish customs and traditions, the prevention of the circumcision of boys, and the addition of lard to the food of the workers working in the factories.[495]



Figure 18: A scene from *Yeniden Doğmak*, depicting Bulgarian soldiers shooting a Turkish imam as he recites the call to prayer from the minaret. [496]

In examining the 18th Figure, it is crucial to understand how visual representations within the series, such as this scene, contribute to the overarching narrative of propaganda and emotional manipulation. The depicted scene in which Bulgarian soldiers shot and killed an imam during the call to prayer serves as a potent example of visual propaganda within *Yeniden Doğmak*. This portrayal strategically utilized emotional manipulation to evoke feelings of anger, sorrow, and a deep sense of injustice among viewers, particularly by violating a sacred moment of religious significance. The deliberate dramatization of this violence not only demonized the Bulgarian oppressors, presenting them as hostile forces against Islam and the Turkish minority but also elevated the imam to a symbolic martyr, embodying resistance and steadfastness in the face of persecution. This scene amplified nationalist and religious sentiments, positioning the Turkish audience as protectors of their faith and identity while aligning public opinion with the political narratives of the period.

[495] TRT Nostalji, *Yeniden Doğmak*.

[496] TRT Nostalji, *Yeniden Doğmak*.



Figure 19: A harrowing scene from *Yeniden Doğmak*, showing Bulgarian soldiers lining Turkish villagers against a wall for execution by firing squad. [497]

Building on the analysis of Figure 19, this scene further demonstrates the use of visual propaganda elements to manipulate public perception, highlighting similar themes of emotional influence and narrative construction. The scene of Bulgarian soldiers executing Turkish civilians against a wall is a striking use of propaganda, employing key elements such as emotional manipulation, victimization, and enemy demonization. By visually portraying brutal oppression, it evoked fear and anger, mobilizing nationalist sentiments and positioning the Turkish minority as martyrs. This powerful imagery amplified the us-versus-them narrative, aligning the audience with the victims and fostering a unified emotional response. Such scenes utilized classic propaganda tactics, fear appeal, moral dichotomy, and historical dramatization—to reinforce political narratives and manipulate public perception in favor of the series' underlying message.

All these scenes were either reflected with disturbing music and a dark shooting style, or they were accompanied by marches and joyful music, such as *Plevne Marşı*, the March of Pleven, heightening the emotion and conveying the message that way. *Plevne Marşı* was composed to commemorate Gazi Osman Paşa's defense of Pleven during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878). The composer of the march Mehmet Ali Bey. The piece highlights the heroism of the Ottoman army and the bravery of Gazi Osman Paşa, standing out as a symbol of valor. Throughout the Republican era, it has been used to strengthen national identity and connect the Ottoman legacy to the modern Turkish state. The march is often employed during national ceremonies and

[497] TRT Nostalji, "*Yeniden Doğmak.*"

military events to evoke a sense of unity and valor. During the Cold War, it also served as a propaganda tool to rally nationalist sentiments and reinforce Türkiye's stance in both domestic and international contexts. Music played a significant role in propaganda, enhancing the impact of events on the target audience. The emotional nature of patriotic appeals makes music a fitting medium for their expression, as music is well-equipped to convey emotions.[498] Also, music can be a powerful tool for propaganda because it can easily evoke emotions, hint at associations and past experiences, encourage us to join in singing, and incorporate ideology into the lyrics.[499]



Figure 20: A scene from *Yeniden Doğmak*, in which the "Plevne March" is performed before a gathered crowd. [500]

Figure 20 can be quite explanatory in this regard. In this scene, where the Turkish minority gathers to sing *Plevne Marşı* in defiance of Bulgarian oppression, the series utilizes a powerful symbol of resistance and solidarity to convey its propaganda message.

On the same token, the most significant moment used to arouse the emotions of the target audience was when Aysel Özgür received the news that she would be forced to remain separated from her family. This scene was specifically filmed both as a reference to the issue of broken families among the Turkish minority and as a way to

[498] Nicholas J. Cull, David H. Culbert and David Welch "*Propaganda and Mass Persuasion: A Historical Encyclopedia, 1500 to the Present*" (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003), p. 225.

[499] Jowett and O'Donnell, *"Propaganda & Persuasion,"* p. 329.

[500] TRT Nostalji, *Yeniden Doğmak.*

enhance its emotional intensity, further amplified by the real-life situation of Aysel Özgür.



Figure 21: A poignant scene from the TV series "Yeniden Doğmak," showing Aysel Özgür in an emotional embrace with her mother while her father looks on. [501]

In this context, Figure 21 is quite illustrative. This scene, in which Aysel Özgür tearfully embraces her mother while her father stands in the background, helplessly experiencing the pain of leaving his daughter behind, is a powerful example of emotional and visual propaganda. The image of a broken family, particularly a vulnerable child in distress, was designed to evoke deep emotional responses from the audience, such as empathy, sadness, and outrage at the circumstances. Aysel Özgür's innocence and suffering symbolized the broader victimization of the Turkish minority under Bulgarian oppression, reinforcing the narrative of the oppressed as innocent victims of brutal policies. The depiction of the family's fractured ties into nationalist and cultural values, with the family unit serving as a metaphor for the nation, thereby heightening the emotional and ideological stakes. The father's helplessness adds a layer of martyrdom, portraying personal sacrifice for the greater good, a common theme in propaganda that encourages viewers to empathize with the plight of the characters and support the political cause. Ultimately, this scene functioned as a powerful call to action, using emotional manipulation to garner public sympathy and align the audience with the series' broader narrative of resistance against oppression.

[501] TRT Nostalji, "*Yeniden Doğmak 2. Bölüm*", YouTube, Sep 30, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w84mAO-KIDo

The series *Yeniden Doğmak*, which had a significant impact on Turkish audiences, was received with great affection by the public. For viewers closely following the oppression implemented by Bulgaria, the series was seen as a way to stay informed about the events.[502] It was referred to as the "olay dizi" (a phenomenal tv series) in newspapers, while among the public, it was known as the "Aysel dizisi" (tv series of Aysel) Journalists competed to cover it, writing about it for days, and then the realization of a dream was followed step by step. The film, with its emotional and tension-filled scenes, left an unforgettable impression on its viewers. According to Sevinç Çokum, the scriptwriter of the series, by December 1987, the series was watched collectively in various places, from military barracks and coffeehouses to hospitals and boarding schools.[503] Discussions about the series dominated conversations at bus stops, morning ferries, cafés, and outside school gates.[504] The impact of the series was reflected in the newspapers of the time. Ergun Göze, writing for *Tercüman*, described *Yeniden Doğmak* as an effective tool for raising awareness about what he called "the Bulgarian oppression." In his article, Göze emphasized that the Bulgarian government was preventing the practice of cultural and religious activities such as prayer, fasting, and cultural traditions.[505] He particularly highlighted that TRT was acting as a messenger, informing the Turkish public in Türkiye about the oppression faced by Turks. Even in interviews with the cast of the series, such as Serdar Gökhan and İsmet Özhan, the actors emphasized the deep impact the show had in Türkiye, noting that even they were profoundly affected while filming and deeply felt the struggles of Turks living in Bulgaria.[506]

In this context, the series became a highly effective instrument of soft power and was used as a tool of propaganda and diplomatic pressure by the Turkish state against Bulgaria. It aimed to influence the Turkish audience in Türkiye and shape public

[502] "Sevinç Çokum-Biyografi," *Sevinc Çokum Official Website*, accessed October 2, 2024, https://www.sevinccokum.info/?page_id=440.

[503] "Sevinç Çokum-Biyografi."

[504] "Sevinç Çokum-Biyografi."

[505] Ergun Göze, "Sevinç Çokumun Dizisi Yeniden Doğmak," *Tercüman*, December 15, 1987.

[506] Çoşkun Çokyiğit, "Filmin Çekimi Anında Adeta O Cehennemi Yaşadık," *Tercüman*, December 27, 1987

opinion against Bulgaria. Soft power may not be equivalent to influence directly, but it goes beyond persuasion or the capacity to convince people through argument, although that is a crucial aspect of it.[507] In short, in terms of behaviour, soft power is the power of attraction.[508] These visuals are crafted to inspire a feeling of wonder and admiration and to evoke a sense of power in order to boost their persuasive impact and elicit emotional reactions related to the subject or theme.[509] Movies and series are frequently more impactful than text in grabbing the audience's attention and solidifying feelings.[510] According to this, *Yeniden Doğmak* effectively achieved its goal, eliciting significant reactions both in Türkiye and from Bulgarian authorities. In fact, shortly after, TRT Director General Tunca Toskay stated in an interview with *Cumhuriyet* newspaper on January 3, 1988, that TRT bore the responsibility of creating new opportunities, options, and areas to support the state's foreign policy.[511] Moreover, he emphasized that *Yeniden Doğmak* had developed a new method related to the state's foreign policy, highlighting how the Turkish government successfully used this tool to reach a favorable outcome.[512]

Within this framework, the impact of the series as a soft power and propaganda instrument continued to be frequently discussed in subsequent days. Its ability to establish a strong connection with its target audience and its pivotal role in international relations were often highlighted. The mission of the series conveying the events first to Türkiye and then to the entire world was detailed by Mehmet Turan Akköprülü, the head of TRT's television department at the time, in an interview with *Cumhuriyet* on January 4, 1988. According to Akköprülü, the series was so effective that the events were broadcast as news in 17-18 countries through the *Eurovision*

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[507] Joseph Samuel Nye Jr., *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), p. 6.

[508] Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics,* p. 6.

[509] Hyunjin Seo, "Visual Propaganda and Social Media," in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy and Nancy Snow (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2020), p. 128.

[510] Seo, "Visual Propaganda and Social Media," p.128.

[511] "Olaylı Dizi, "Amerikaya" Dış İşlerinden Veto," *Cumhuriyet*, January 3, 1988.

[512] "Olaylı Dizi, "Amerikaya" Dış İşlerinden Veto."

network.[513] In line with these statements, Akköprülü interpreted the content and narrative of the series as a means of exposing Bulgaria's practices, which he likened to those of Nazi Germany, to the world. He emphasized that the series would be sold internationally with different foreign subtitles, ensuring that people around the world would become aware of the atrocities occurring in Bulgaria.[514]

However, *Cumhuriyet* writer Ergün Balcı emphasized that the series contained some things that were far from the truth, such as the shooting of the imam who was reciting the call to prayer.[515] It was emphasized that such symbolisms could cause serious outrage in a country like Türkiye, which is Muslim and where the majority of the population is sincerely attached to religious values. Balcı, who emphasized that such scenes could lead to an international crisis, actually emphasized that the limits of propaganda were exceeded, and that this agitation was carried out without control.[516] It can also be said that when someone is deeply influenced by propaganda, they become more sensitive to the excitement it generates rather than its actual message. Even the slightest thrill or smallest prompt can trigger their automatic responses, revive established beliefs, and lead to the actions prescribed by those beliefs.[517] Meanwhile, while it was frequently underlined that the pressure on Aysel was increasing, the news about Aysel was snowballing in emotional intensity.

4.3. Bulgaria's Reaction to *Yeniden Doğmak* and Internationalization of the Tv Series

Since its debut, *Yeniden Doğmak* gained significant attention from the Bulgarian government. Bulgaria expressed concerns about the series through diplomatic channels, stating that it could have a profound impact on Turkish-Bulgarian relations. And indeed, this exactly what happened. The impact of the series had reached such

[513] "Aysel Dizisi İhraç Malı," *Cumhurriyet*, January 4, 1988.

[514] "Aysel Dizisi İhraç Malı."

[515] Ergün Balcı, "Yeniden Doğmak," *Cumhuriyet*, December 24, 1987.

[516] Balcı, "Yeniden Doğmak."

[517] Ellul, *Propaganda,* p. 184.

dimensions that it caused serious tensions between the two countries. On December 24, 1987, the Bulgarian ministry of foreign affairs came close to a diplomatic crisis with Türkiye, expressing concerns that the return process of Aysel Özgür, along with other children considered for repatriation, would be complicated.[518] Bulgarian ambassador to Türkiye at the time, Minko Sladkarov, expressed concern that the already deteriorating Turkish-Bulgarian relations could worsen further and requested the Turkish ministry of foreign affairs and Turkish foreign ministry Deputy Undersecretary Nurver Nures to have the series taken off the air.[519] In response, the Turkish government emphasized that the series portrayed the lives of Turks in Bulgaria and confirmed that it would continue to be broadcast.[520] This dissatisfaction was not limited to Bulgaria; during the 1987 Balkan Summit, Yugoslavia and Albania also expressed their concerns about the pressure Türkiye was exerting on Bulgaria. They emphasized that they found such broadcasts highly problematic.[521] Such a reaction provided concrete evidence that the series had an impact beyond Bulgaria and achieved the desired resonance.

As soon as the series started airing, the necessary public opinion was created, and the forced name-change practices in Bulgaria were interpreted as chauvinism. However, political criticisms began to be made throughout the series. Özal, by turning the Bulgarian government's dissatisfaction into a public statement, provides insight into how the series was instrumentalized. This can also be observed in the statements he made to the press. During the process, the Bulgarian government's dissatisfaction with *Yeniden Doğmak* and its request to have it taken off the air reached Özal's attention. However, Özal indicated that this request could be discussed only in exchange for the return of Aysel Özgür to Türkiye.[522]

Simultaneously, as the incident gained global attention, its impact grew, and news about *Yeniden Doğmak* began appearing in both newspapers and radio broadcasts.

518 "Tv Dizisini Aysel Pazarlığı Durdurdu," *Hürriyet*, December 29, 1987.

519 "Büyükelçi'den Tepki," *Cumhuriyet*, December 26, 1987.

520 "Büyükelçi'den Tepki."

521 "Tv Dizisini Aysel Pazarlığı Durdurdu," *Hürriyet*, December 29, 1987.

522 "Bulgaristanla Yumuşama mı?," *Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 1988.

The Bulgarian government and Zhivkov were always aware of the propaganda power wielded by the West and countries outside the Warsaw Pact. Parallel to this, it was a time in Bulgaria when, in addition to the series *Yeniden Doğmak*, the Zhivkov government was also deeply disturbed by international radio channels broadcasting and newspapers on the effectiveness of media tools and the negative perceptions they were creating. Indeed, the series began to receive significant coverage in the British newspaper. *The Guardian* described it as a show broadcast through a state-controlled radio and television channel, portraying the story of Turks beaten and oppressed by Bulgarians, as well as the struggles of fragmented families.[523] In this article, Aysel Özgür was frequently portrayed as a symbol of the issue of broken families, with particular emphasis on her being held hostage in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the it detailed that during the filming of the series, Türkiye had requested the repatriation of 100 children but was only able to retrieve 34, emphasizing the series' effectiveness in aiding the repatriation process.[524] Thereby expanding the impact of the series on its intended audience and the victimization of Özgür. In fact, this television series became a tool and was used as a propaganda instrument by the West.

In addition to its diplomatic endeavours, Bulgaria also persistently engaged in counter-propaganda efforts, further solidifying its stance on the matter. Considering all this, in 1988, Bulgaria produced a film called *Time of Violence*. It is important to mention the film *Time of Violence* (Vreme na nasilie) shot as a counter-propaganda tool in order to analyze the Bulgarian government's efforts to respond to Türkiye's propaganda.[525] It is crucial to consider that propaganda can be countered using various methods. This may involve creating retaliatory propaganda to advance national interests or internationally circulating accurately reported news to counteract misinformation.[526]

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[523] "Turkey Ends Tv Show to Pacify Bulgaria," *The Guardian*, January 2, 1988.

[524] "Turkey Ends Tv Show to Pacify Bulgaria."

[525] Nadège Ragaru, "Symbolic Time(s) of Violence in Late Socialist Bulgaria," *Slavic Review*, 1/ 82 (2023), pp. 48–68.

[526] Maria Haigh and Thomas Haigh, "Fighting and Framing Fake News," in *The SAGE Handbook of Propaganda*, ed. Paul Baines, Nicholas O'Shaughnessy, and Nancy Snow (London: SAGE Publications, 2019), pp. 315-316.



Figure 22: Poster for the 1988 Bulgarian film Time of Violence. [527]

The movie dramatized the oppression Bulgarians were subjected to during the Ottoman Empire and presented a historical narrative about the "Turkish" oppressive policies towards Bulgarians.[528] In this film, the conflict between Turks and Bulgarians was portrayed as part of an enduring struggle between Islam and Christianity. The film employed various techniques to contrast the two civilizations, such as the use of dark versus light colours, heavy Oriental music against melodic Slavic tunes, and the stern, adult faces of the Turks in contrast to the serene innocence associated with childhood in the Bulgarian context.[529] *Time of Violence* aimed to establish a balance against Türkiye's propaganda condemning the assimilation policies implemented by the Turks against the Turks in Bulgaria by portraying a story of victimization from the past by the Bulgarian government. The film showed that Bulgaria was trying to balance the propaganda activities carried out by Türkiye through *Yeniden Doğmak* by presenting its own historical narrative to the

[527] "Time of Violence" IMDB, Accessed: October 2, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0096403/.

[528] BG Cinema, "Time of Violence / Време разделно (1988) Part 1," YouTube, 2:08:06, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n5LPdV-V3xM access date: January 5, 2024; BG Cinema, "Time of Violence / Време разделно (1988) Part 2", Feb 23, 2021, YouTube, 2:22:34, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rwqCg3vMO4 access date: January 5, 2024.

[529] Dina Iordanova, "Canaries and Birds of Prey: The New Season of Bulgarian Cinema," in *Bulgaria in Transition: Politics, Economics, Society, and Culture After Communism*, ed. by John D. Bell, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), p. 269.

international public. In this context, *Time of Violence* should be evaluated as a reflection of the ongoing diplomatic tensions between the two countries. While the Özal government used Aysel Özgür as a symbol, Bulgaria aimed to neutralize Türkiye's claims by highlighting its own historical victimization through this film.

4.3.1. The Impact and Withdrawal of *Yeniden Doğmak*: Media Influence and Diplomatic Pressure

Just as the third episode of *Yeniden Doğmak* was scheduled to air, the series was unexpectedly removed from the lineup. At first, the reason for the series being taken off the air was shown as technical problems, but later, diplomatic pressure from Bulgaria was cited as the possible reason.[530] This raised questions as to why this impactful portrayal of the oppression faced by the Muslim Turkish minority in Bulgaria was not broadcast. At that time, *Yeniden Doğmak*, which became a diplomatic tool, led to a process that the authorities of the two countries continued with secret talks for a while. While the press approached the events as a back-channel diplomacy, it emphasized that the removal of the series from the air could cause a possible bargain between Bulgaria and Türkiye on Turkish minorities in Bulgaria.[531] While the Minister of foreign affairs Mesut Yılmaz and the minister of state responsible for TRT Adnan Kahveci avoided making any comments, according to *Milliyet*, some disclosed state officials stated that as a result of the national and international impact created by the series, not only Aysel Özgür but also a large group of people could be extradited from Bulgaria.[532] At this point, *Yeniden Doğmak* not only impacted the life of Aysel Özgür and the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria, but it also helped remove the obstacle posed by the Bulgarian state that prevented Naim Süleymanoğlu from participating in the Olympics, as well. According to a report in *Hürriyet* on December 20, 1987, the series would only be taken off the air under four conditions. The first was the removal of Bulgaria's objection to Süleymanoğlu's participation in the Olympics. The second was the

[530] "Sorumlu Yok," *Milliyet*, December 29, 1987; "Bulgar Zulmü Yayınlanmadı," *Milliyet*, December 28, 1987.

[531] "Gizli Pazarlık," *Milliyet*, December 30, 1987.

[532] "Gizli Pazarlık."

return of Aysel Özgür and other Turkish children to Türkiye. The third condition was for Türkiye to bring the minority issue to the agenda of the Balkan Conference. Finally, the fourth condition was the repatriation of Süleymanoğlu's parents to Türkiye.[533]

Nevertheless, the first person to respond to the removal of the series from the air was Mehmet Çavuş, the director of the Balkan Turks Solidarity and Culture Association. Çavuş, who boycotted TRT, accused the network and the government of catering to Bulgaria's interests. He asserted that the most that could be expected after *Yeniden Doğmak* was taken off the air were Aysel Özgür and a few others, emphasizing that the Bulgarian government would persist in its pressure following the return of these children to Türkiye.[534] In a subsequent statement, Mehmet Çavuş illustrated the disparity between how these events were addressed in foreign policy compared to domestic policy. During a press conference in West Germany, Çavuş stated that he was obstructed by officials from the Turkish foreign ministry from delivering a speech regarding the occurrences in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the Turkish foreign minister Mesut Yılmaz evaded engaging in conversation with Çavuş by asserting that his plane ticket would be forfeited, thereby necessitating his immediate departure.[535] In effect, he was evading Çavuş and sought to minimize the discussion of the events on the international stage. In his statement, Çavuş reiterated that the Turkish foreign ministry did not want to provoke Bulgaria and other countries any further and that Yılmaz was faced with the implication that it would not be right to make any further speeches.[536]

Çavuş often expressed criticism of both the government and TRT in his speeches, highlighting Bulgaria's propaganda efforts. He pointed out that productions like *Return to The Origin, Oin*, *In Captivity*, and *Heroes of Shipka* were being aired in Bulgaria, stoking animosity towards Turks. Çavuş argued that the decision to remove

533 "TV Dizisine Karşı, Naim," *Hürriyet*, December 30, 1987.

534 "Ekrana Mesut Yılmaz El Koydu," *Hürriyet*, December 29, 1987.

535 "Ekrana Mesut Yılmaz El Koydu."

536 "Ekrana Mesut Yılmaz El Koydu."

Yeniden Doğmak series, especially when it was depicting the oppression faced in Bulgaria, from the airwaves was a sign of weakness. This series was significant in conveying these experiences to both Türkiye and the wider world.[537] Finally, according to Çavuş, the reason for this is that Özal thought that the Turkish economy, which was already in trouble, would become even worse. Finally, one of the biggest reactions came from Turks who migrated from Bulgaria to Türkiye. The reaction of nearly 250,000 immigrants living in Bursa to the removal of the series was quite strong. One of the most notable statements during this period came from Naim Süleymanoğlu regarding the series *Yeniden Doğmak*. In an interview with *Hüriyet*, Süleymanoğlu asserted that the cancellation of the series was a politically motivated action orchestrated by the government.[538] He indicated that one of the reasons for this cancellation was the prospect of enabling his participation in the Olympics.

Besides Aysel Özgür's victimization, considering Süleymanoğlu's Olympic successes and his role as a tool for election propaganda by Özal, this statement highlights the influence of the perception that the Özal government aimed to cultivate through symbolic figures. It is evident that Özal adopted a broader propaganda model, manufacturing consent to further his political ambitions. This can be understood as Özal managing the model, leveraging his capital and authority, while utilizing *Yeniden Doğmak* and Aysel Özgür's life, delivered through a single, reliable media outlet like TRT, as a means of persuasion and propaganda. Turgut Özal and the Motherland Party effectively silenced dissenting voices, such as Mehmet Çavuş, by rescuing symbolic figures like Aysel Özgür. Additionally, the critique of anti-communism, particularly in relation to Bulgaria, amplified the message's impact and resonance on the target audience and enhanced Özal's image as a savior.[539]

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[537] "TRT'de Bulgar Makası," *Tercüman*, December 29, 1987.

[538] "Naim Süleymanoğlu Ne Diyor?" *Hürriyet*, December 29, 1987.

[539] In "Manufacturing Consent," Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman present the Propaganda Model of the media, which posits that mass communication serves the interests of powerful elites through mechanisms such as corporate ownership, reliance on advertising, dependence on government and corporate sources for news, the threat of flak, and the reinforcement of dominant ideologies. This model illustrates how media content can be systematically shaped to prioritize the agendas of the elite, undermining independent journalism and limiting public discourse. Edward S Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media.*

4.4. Özal's Capitalization of the Case of Aysel Özgür

In that period, Özal faced a significant decline in public perception and political influence, as explained in previous chapters. It had been continuously noted that his ability to set the agenda was waning by the media outlets.[540] Various surveys by polling organizations like *KONDA*, *PİAR*, and *KAMAR* indicated that Özal's popularity had dropped below the 36.3% he had garnered in previous elections, attributing this decline to economic issues such as inflation and the high cost of living.[541] Notably, surveys by *Hürriyet* and *Sabah* showed his support to be under 30%. It became even more evident that the Aysel Özgür incident held significant importance for Özal during this time.



Figure 23: Headline "Aysel Hope" reveals the reason for cancelling "Yeniden Doğmak," stating that Naim Süleymanoğlu's family might also come to Turkey. [542]

Despite all the surrounding questions, it became nearly certain that Aysel Özgür would be sent to Türkiye. In reference to the poignant image figure, newspapers referred to this event as "Aysel Hope," and discussions emerged about Naim Süleymanoğlu's family potentially accompanying her.[543] *Tercüman* highlighted that Turgut Özal and foreign minister Mesut Yılmaz handled the situation with great secrecy. Actually, it was a subliminal message suggesting that the return of these symbolic figures and their families would be perceived as a triumph for Özal and the media under his direction. Ultimately, this is precisely what transpired.

[540] "ANAP'ın Görüntüsü ve SHP," *Cumhuriyet*, March 27, 1987.

[541] "ANAP'ın Görüntüsü ve SHP," *Cumhuriyet*, March 27, 1987.

[542] Since the series was taken off the air, it was served to the public as one of the news headlines where the reason was most clearly discussed. The content of the title appearing in the photo is as follows: The reason for the cancellation of the *Yeniden Doğmak* series: Aysel's Hope. It has emerged that Naim Süleymanoğlu's family may also come to Türkiye along with Aysel Özgür. *Tercüman*, December 30, 1987.

[543] "Aysel Umudu," *Tercüman*, December 30, 1987.

The day before Aysel Özgür's arrival, it was reported that Özal had breakfast with the then-Bulgarian foreign ministry official, Bladkarov. According to the *Tercüman*, the main topics of their discussion included Aysel Özgür's imminent arrival in Türkiye and the conditions surrounding Naim Süleymanoğlu's participation in the Seoul Olympics.[544] Now Aysel Özgür was recognized as a symbol of freedom for Turkish people, and according to newspapers, her return to Türkiye was going to be announced to public by Turgut Özal.[545] After a short time, it became clear that the series was a matter of dispute between Bulgaria and Türkiye, and the Bulgarian authorities decided to send Aysel to Türkiye immediately after the series was removed.[546] After the series was removed from broadcast, the Bulgarian authorities arrived at Aysel's home to inform her that she would be sent to Türkiye and asked her to get ready immediately. The Bulgarian government initiated the necessary procedures for her return the same day, and Aysel's journey back to Türkiye began when the plane departed from Sofia on the evening of December 30, 1987.[547] The process was quite challenging for Özgür. According to her account, she claimed that the Bulgarian police even attempted to inject her with poison. Fortunately, the Turkish officials from the foreign ministry and the ambassador intervened at the airport and prevented this from happening.[548] The process of arranging Aysel's return to Türkiye had commenced, with all necessary preparations in place for her appearance on television. Aysel Özgür's arrival in Türkiye was, of course, televised.

Aysel first arrived in Istanbul on a flight operated by Bulgarian Airlines. Upon landing, a crowd of press members and Aysel's family eagerly awaited her at Istanbul Airport. The heartwarming reunion between Aysel and her family was broadcast on television, with press and government officials accompanying them throughout the entire event.[549]

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[544] "Ayseli Bekliyoruz," *Tercüman*, December 31, 1987.

[545] "Ayseli Bekliyoruz," *Tercüman*, December 31, 1987.

[546] TRT Belgesel, "Bulgaristan'da Alıkonulan Aysel, Bu Dizi Sayesinde Ailesine Kavuştu."

[547] TRT Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."

[548] Mümin Uslubaş, "*Iğneyle Öldürmek Istediler," Milliyet*, August 25, 1988.

[549] TRT Haber, "*Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."*



Figure 24: Aysel Özgür's emotional reunion with her family at the airport upon her return to Turkey. [550]

Figure 24 shows an image of Aysel Özgür's meeting with her family, broadcast live on TRT. This scene, capturing Aysel Özgür reuniting with her family in Istanbul after her release by Bulgaria, serves as a potent example of emotional propaganda that frames Türkiye's diplomatic efforts as a moral and political triumph. The reunion scene, with Aysel embraced by her parents and brother, symbolized both personal restoration and national victory, reinforcing Türkiye's narrative of fulfilling its responsibility to protect its people beyond borders. The emotional appeal of the image simplified the complex diplomatic tensions into a personal story of loss and redemption, mobilizing public sympathy and fostering national solidarity. Additionally, the photograph underscored Türkiye's diplomatic success, portraying Bulgaria's concession as a direct result of Türkiye's effective pressure and casting Türkiye as a protector of human rights. Framed within a broader political context, the image functions as a tool of soft power, projecting Türkiye's actions as both just and strategically successful. By disseminating this emotionally charged image, the Turkish state not only reinforced national pride but also shaped international perceptions, aligning public opinion with its stance on the treatment of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. This photograph suggests a conclusion regarding the victimization of Aysel Özgür and her peers, who represented a process of oppression that had resonated throughout the years. Their struggle established a significant

[550] TRT Haber, "*Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."*

presence in both the international arena of Bulgaria and Turkish domestic politics, indicating that this issue was addressed.

Aysel Özgür and her family were subsequently taken to Ankara, where she spent the night at the prime minister's residence as the guests of Özal and his wife, Semra Özal. From Istanbul, she was flown to Ankara on a plane belonging to *Türkkuşu*, which was piloted by Prime Minister Özal's son, Ahmet Özal, which as a very personal gesture.[551] A warm welcome was being orchestrated at the prime minister's residence, and preparations were underway for Aysel Özgür and her family members to meet with Özals. The major reason for organizing this meeting was to ensure that the events were publicized to the masses through media. The growing involvement of mass media in political affairs necessitated a heightened focus on public speaking abilities within the country, leading to the current era of media-driven politics.[552] In that sense it is so obvious that propaganda could no longer function independently from social or political circumstances.



Figure 25: Aysel Özgür and her family hosted by Prime Minister Turgut Özal and his family at the Prime Ministry residence. [553]

[551] "Aysel Pazarlığı Mutlu Bitti," *Milliyet*, January 1, 1988.

[552] Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 268.

[553] Trt Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."

Özal family warmly received Aysel at the prime minister's residence and held a press conference there. During the press conference, Turgut Özal announced that Aysel was his "adopted daughter" (*manevi kızı*), and Semra Özal movingly expressed that Aysel was now considered "the nation's daughter" (*milletin kızı*)"[554] This emotional bond with Aysel was further reinforced on national television, but there was an opportunity to improve communication with the target audience. Turgut Özal further emphasized that *Yeniden Doğmak* had effectively reached its objectives and yielded the desired results.[555] During the meeting, he reiterated that he had previously stated that the series would only be removed at the request of Bulgarian authorities if Aysel was extradited to Türkiye.[556]

Actually, Figure 25 visually captures the symbolic significance of Aysel Özgür's return. This frame is taken from the TRT broadcast, taken at the prime minister's residence during the press conference, serves as a strategic display of political leadership and diplomatic success.

The setting elevates Aysel's return from a personal reunion into a state-level achievement, framing the event as a victory for both the family and the Turkish government. Positioned between her family and the prime minister and his wife, Aysel symbolized Türkiye's role as a protective power, reinforcing national unity and portraying the state as a guardian of its diaspora. The inclusion of Semra Özal added a personal touch, humanizing Özal's leadership while emphasizing empathy alongside political authority. This carefully curated moment also communicated Türkiye's diplomatic strength, presenting the resolution of Aysel's case as a testament to the government's effectiveness in managing international crises. As a soft power tool, the image projected an image of Türkiye as both compassionate and capable, mobilizing domestic support and enhancing its diplomatic standing by aligning the state's actions with humanitarian principles.

[554] Trt Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."

[555] Trt Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."

[556] Trt Haber, "Aysel 36 Yıl Sonra Tekrar TRT'de."



Figure 26: Aysel Özgür's meeting with the Özal family at the Prime Ministry residence, capturing emotional moments as Semra Özal is visibly moved. [557]

Özal referred to Aysel Özgür as his adopted daughter at every opportunity in this meeting. Throughout the meeting, Özal was constantly asking Özgür to express how pleased she was with this rescue process.[558] However, one of the most interesting moments of this meeting was when Özal asked Özgür questions about Süleymanoğlu. The fact that the two symbolic names were mentioned in the same frame would strengthen the effect of the current propaganda and the image of Özal as a savior. He talked about Süleymanoğlu's successes and combined this with the success of saving Özgür, Özal was actually becoming a visual symbol of power.[559] Figure 26, titled "Aysel and Özals," was captured during the reception for Aysel Özgür at the Prime minister's residence. In the image, Semra Özal is seen in tears. The accompanying text states that Aysel Özgür, who was introduced to the media by prime minister Turgut Özal, became emotional during the live press conference broadcast on television. At one point, Semra Özal was also visibly moved, unable to contain her tears. Prime Minister Özal said that "Semra had cried throughout the night, stating, those who are not mothers cannot understand".[560]

[557] *Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 1988.

[558] "Aysel Pazarlığı Mutlu Bitti."

[559] "Aysel Pazarlığı Mutlu Bitti."

[560] "Aysel Pazarlığı Mutlu Bitti."

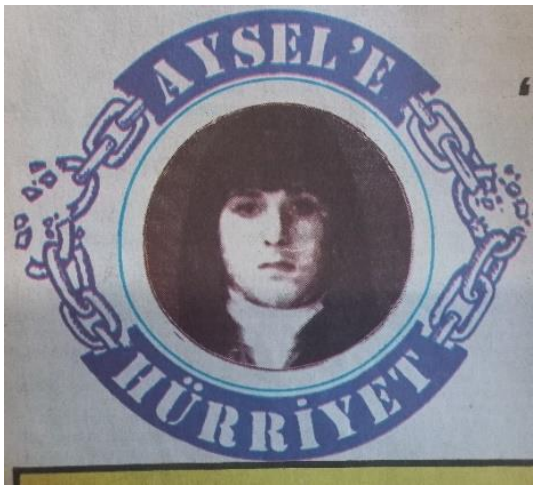


Figure 27: A symbolic representation of Aysel Özgür's release, showing her, earlier chained image now depicted with broken chains, signifying freedom and hope. [561]

The media coverage of Aysel Özgür's return portrayed it as a heroic rescue operation, with Özal being illustrated as the central figure orchestrating a successful outcome, highlighting his leadership and diplomatic skills. The narrative framed Özgür's return as a triumph for Turkish diplomacy and a testament to Türkiye's commitment to safeguarding its citizens abroad.[562] In all the interviews he gave afterwards, Özal frequently underlined that this process was actually a diplomatic success and dictated that the series was taken off the air in return for the Bulgarian government sending Aysel Özgür away.[563] As seen in Figure 27, the image of Aysel Özgür, framed by the slogan "Aysel'e Hürriyet" (Freedom for Aysel), *Tercüman*'s campaign slogan, was presented this time with broken chains. This serves as a powerful propaganda tool by symbolizing her liberation and, more broadly, the victory of Türkiye, Turgut Özal and the media over oppression. The broken chains signify not only Aysel's personal freedom but also a metaphor for the Turkish state's success in rescuing its oppressed minority from Bulgarian control, reinforcing a narrative of triumph. Her solemn expression personalizes the political conflict, transforming it into an emotionally charged narrative that fosters empathy and mobilizes public support. Such use of victimization propaganda simplifies the complex diplomatic dispute into an accessible and emotional story, with Aysel representing the plight of the Turkish

[561] *Tercüman*, January 1, 1988.

[562] "Dizi Diplomasisi", *Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 1988.

[563] "Bulgaristan'la Yumuşama mı?," *Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 1988.

minority in Bulgaria. The slogan "Hürriyet" resonates deeply with nationalist sentiments, framing Türkiye as the protector of its people and a champion of freedom and justice. This image, therefore, acts as both a domestic and international soft power tool, projecting Türkiye's role as a defender of human rights while bolstering its diplomatic position. In this context, Aysel's return is portrayed not merely as a personal rescue but as a political victory, validating Türkiye's strategy of public campaigns and media efforts, such as the *Yeniden Doğmak* series, in raising awareness and applying diplomatic pressure on Bulgaria. Aysel Özgür's deportation to Türkiye garnered attention in international press, as well. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that the Bulgarian government decided to send her back as a condition for removing the controversial TV series from the air.[564]



Figure 28: Aysel Özgür visiting Kocatepe Mosque with her family after arriving in Turkey. The headline reads, "Aysel's prayer of gratitude." [565]

The impact of the resonance created by Aysel Özgür after her arrival in Türkiye was continued. As seen in the above photograph (Figure 28), capturing Aysel Özgür and her family visiting Kocatepe Mosque in Ankara operated as a powerful tool of propaganda by intertwining themes of religious devotion, national unity, and political success. Framed as a "prayer of gratitude," the image transformed Aysel's return from a personal reunion into a public expression of national pride and moral victory, aligning Türkiye's diplomatic efforts with shared religious values. The choice of

[564] "Girl Released," *The Daily Telegraph*, January 2, 1988.

[565] This photo was taken at Kocatepe Mosque, where Aysel Özgür visited with her family after coming to Türkiye. "Aysel's prayer of gratitude" is written on the photo. *Tercüman*, January 2, 1988.

Kocatepe Mosque, a significant religious landmark, reinforced the narrative that the Turkish state's actions were not only politically effective but also morally righteous, projecting the return as divinely sanctioned. The depiction of the family together symbolized both personal and national unity, fostering public sentiment that Türkiye had successfully protected its citizens and preserved its identity. Additionally, this public display of gratitude served as a tool of soft power, presenting Türkiye's diplomatic success as a triumph over external oppression while subtly framing Bulgaria's concession as both a political and spiritual achievement. This photo contained some important elements for propaganda, too, the most important of which were beliefs and values. In addition, it is quite clear that a strong resonance was achieved with all these elements. Through this carefully crafted imagery, the Turkish government consolidated domestic support and projects its influence internationally, showcasing its ability to deliver justice through both political and moral means.

4.4.1. The Success and Controversies of Propaganda: Özal's Strategic Manipulation for Political Gain

It was a very complicated process, especially for Özal, who was trying to use all his influence for the referendum planned to be held on September 25, 1988, on whether the local elections should be brought forward one year. As mentioned earlier, Özal was losing his popularity, and the country's problems, such as corruption, terrorism, smuggling, inflation, incompetence and economic crisis, were now manifesting themselves in different forms at every level. Amidst these problems, Aysel Özgür was a tool that could be used for political leverage.

This process, at least by some, was considered to be discussed as a propaganda process instrumentalized by Özal for the sake of his own image-building rather than an interstate diplomatic operation that was accomplished as a result of Özal's great efforts. In fact, in his article titled "Who Saved Aysel?" dated January 1, 1988, Altan Öymen described this as "propaganda in politics" with the sentence "Of course, Prime Minister Turgut Özal saved her first".[566] In this instance, Öymen was highlighted Özal's embellishment of Özgür's rescue. He noted that while it was

[566] Altan Öymen, "Aysel'i Kim Kurtardı?" *Milliyet*, January 3, 1988.

reasonable for Özal to share this event with his voters, the grand manner in which it was announced at the prime minister's residence suggested an effort to underscore the statement, "I saved her".

In addition to this whole process, Özal's frequent use of this symbolic name caused criticism. The claim that Özgür was being instrumentalized to cover up the bad conditions in the country found increasingly more space in the Turkish press. The most important example of this was the criticism of Özal by Nazlı Ilıcak, in *Tercüman*. *Tercüman* was actually known as the pioneer of the "Aysel'e Hürriyet" campaign. It was being said that developments regarding other Turks living in Bulgaria were being put on hold, and this was being presented as a failure for Özal in particular. The gravity of the situation was underscored by Ilıcak, highlighting that the state's integrity was compromised due to the complexities surrounding the unresolved issue.[567] The fact that Ahmet Özal was the pilot of the plane that transported Aysel Özgür from Istanbul to Ankara faced considerable criticism, with many suggesting that this was merely a publicity stunt orchestrated by Özal family.[568]

Another claim of Ilıcak was that the Aysel Özgür incident was forcibly brought onto Özal's radar by two unnamed journalists. The newspaper claimed and emphasized that Özal learned of these events by chance and that the bargain to send Aysel to Türkiye in exchange for the series being cancelled came to Özal's mind later.[569] As a result, it emphasized the fact that 104 children, no different from Özgür, were left in Bulgaria as a result of the series being suddenly removed from television. In other words, it is concluded that Özal made a quick bargaining decision to bring Aysel Özgür to Türkiye in exchange for the series being removed from the air, solely for his own political image. Finally, the lie that the series was removed from the air due to a technical error was criticized quite harshly. According to the Ilıcak, removing the series from the air with a single order while the Bulgarian oppression was ongoing

[567] Nazlı Ilıcak, "Eşkiya İle Pazarlık," Tercüman, January 2, 1988, p. 11.

[568] Nazlı Ilıcak, "Eşkiya İle Pazarlık", *Tercüman*, January 2, 1988, p. 11.

[569] Ilıcak, "Eşkiya İle Pazarlık."

was a complete “one-man regime” practice. This situation was seen as an attitude that belittled the seriousness and scope of the Bulgarian oppression, and as a result, it was interpreted as “nothing more than a successful show covering up failure.”[570]

Moreover, Ilıcak concluded this very critical article with a question. The content of the question was as follows: “Only 54 of the 158 children who were promised to come last year came to Türkiye. Moreover, is it a success?” Following the parallel inquiries, Ilıcak highlighted that Aysel’s return to Türkiye was exploited as a “show” by the entire Özal family, yet ultimately, few issues were resolved as a result of this process. Furthermore, she stressed the condemnation of the partisan exploitation of national sensitivity, asserting that no state should engage in such a trivial bargain in the face of oppression.[571]

All of this had turned into a process in which criticism was made that this process was used as a propaganda tool and instrumentalized to polish Özal's hero image. The criticism was that the series being taken off air did not benefit any Muslim Turks living in Bulgaria except Aysel Özgür. While the general secretary of the Social Democratic Populist Party, Fikri Sağlar, stated that the series only served Özal's political purposes with a show, the head of the Balkan Turks Association at the time, Salih Bahtiyar, considered the series being taken off air only in exchange for Aysel Özgür's return as a cheap show by the government.[572] On the same token, the grand reception of Aysel Özgür by Özal at the prime ministry’s residence, broadcast live on state television, and the deliberate cultivation of an "I saved her" image were seen as political propaganda.[573] Consequently, the consolidation of all state organs and resources under one person was perceived as a means of political manipulation and propaganda.[574] But at the end of all this, from the moment Aysel Özgür came, it was

[570] Ilıcak, “Eşkiya İle Pazarlık.”

[571] Ilıcak, “Eşkiya İle Pazarlık.”

[572] “Özal Şov,” *Milliyet*, January 1, 1988.

[573] Öymen, “Aysel’i Kim Kurtardı.”

[574] Öymen, “Aysel’i Kim Kurtardı.”

underlined in the polls that she was Özal's favourite, and as a result, she took her place in the results as the most effective figure who caught Özal.[575]

Aysel Özgür was now referred to as "Our National Honor" (*milli onurumuz*) in the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Questions about Aysel Özgür and the situation of the Turks living in Bulgaria were now beginning to find a place in the Turkish Grand National Assembly because it was desired to learn how much progress had been made after such a much-propagated event. The discussion surrounding whether the Aysel Özgür issue should be regarded as a Turkish minority issue in Bulgaria or simply as an isolated case had also made its way into the parliament discussions. During a session on January 27, 1988, Murat Sökmenoğlu, a member of the True Path Party, posed a parliamentary question about Aysel Özgür, directing his inquiries to Mesut Yılmaz, who was a member of the Motherland Party and served as the foreign minister at the time.[576] Sökmenoğlu's questions were as follows:

1. What will happen to millions of our compatriots suffering under Bulgarian oppression after the TV series *Yeniden Doğmak* is taken off the air? What measures have you taken to continue the success in the liberation of Aysel, our national pride?[577]
2. Will something like the movie in question, which allegedly cost 1 billion Turkish liras, be made for millions of our compatriots from now on?[578]
3. What decisions were taken regarding the solution of the migration issue during the meeting between our president and Bulgarian president Zhivkov in 1981? On what grounds were these decisions not put into effect? Will you reconsider the migration issue? What are the new measures of the ministry of foreign affairs in these matters?[579]

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[575] "Özal ve Pahalılık Yine Önde," *Milliyet*, February 8,1988.

[576] Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi Zabıt Ceridesi (TBMMZC), Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p. 659.

[577] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), P.659.

[578] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p.659.

[579] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p.659.

First of all, it should be noted that these questions can be seen as questions in which the True Path Party, as an opposition party, directly criticizes the Motherland Party and Özal. Mesut Yılmaz's answers to these questions were as follows:

1. Our government is making every effort to lift the pressure on our compatriots in Bulgaria and to grant permission to emigrate to our compatriots who wish to do so. As is known, it has been possible for more than 50 compatriot children to reunite with their families in Türkiye. We hope that the sending of Aysel, who has become a symbol, to Türkiye will be a new beginning for further steps to be taken in humanitarian areas. As a government, we consider the problem of our compatriots in Bulgaria as a humanitarian issue, and we spare no effort for the solution of this issue.[580]
2. There is no doubt that the film *Yeniden Doğmak* was effective in saving Aysel. We hope that the Bulgarian authorities will consider the sensitivity of the Turkish public opinion on this issue and agree to resolve humanitarian issues without making them a subject of bargaining. Naturally, we will continue our various preparations and activities to reflect the oppression that is being inflicted on our kinsmen to the outside world.[581]
3. During the official visit of our president to Bulgaria in 1982, the issue of our compatriots there was also discussed; in the meantime, our president expressed that issues such as family reunification should be addressed from a humanitarian perspective and resolved. At that time, it was understood that the Bulgarian authorities were not in favor of a new migration agreement; thereupon, it was expressed that they should reconsider the issue. However, since the pressure and dissolution policy as today was not observed at that time, we did not make an official proposal for a new migration agreement. It is not possible to see this issue as a reasonable way of thinking for the Bulgarian authorities to put forward as support for their own theses now. It is known that the issue that led to Türkiye's justified sensitivity and reaction on this issue is the pressures applied to our compatriots since 1984. In order to

[580] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p.660.

[581] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p.660.

eliminate this, the recognition of the right to migration to our compatriots based on the existing legal obligations between the two countries constitutes the basis of our proposals to Bulgaria.[582]

The questions from the opposition and the government's responses suggest a degree of performative diplomacy centered around Aysel Özgür's return, indicating that the government framed it as a significant humanitarian victory while failing to outline concrete, long-term measures for the broader Turkish minority in Bulgaria. The opposition's rhetorical tone points to scepticism, implying that the government's actions might have been politically motivated and selective, focusing on the symbolic case of Aysel without addressing the deeper, systemic oppression of Turkish communities. The government's responses reflect an emphasis on the symbolic success of Aysel's return and public sentiment, but they lack any substantial policy commitments for future actions. The government's emphasis on symbolic achievements, such as Aysel's return, reflects the use of victim-centred propaganda, where a single high-profile case is instrumentalized to foster public approval and national pride. While acknowledging that diplomatic efforts had occurred, such as discussions with Bulgarian authorities in previous years, the answers also convey that no structured plan for migration or long-term support was effectively pursued. This response highlights the reactive nature of the government's approach, suggesting that Aysel's case was used primarily to project a political victory rather than to launch a sustained policy initiative to protect the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.

4.5. Conclusion

The case of Aysel Özgür exemplifies how individual human experiences could be leveraged for broader political ends. Aysel Özgür, also known as one of the Turgut Özal's so-called adopted children[583], and a member of the Turkish minority residing in Bulgaria also emerged as a particularly effective symbol of Bulgarian oppression.

[582] TBMMZC, Dönem 18, Toplantı 14, c. 1 (January 27, 1988), p.661.

[583] "Özal'ın Son Gözdesi*", Milliyet*, February 8, 1989.

So much so that Aysel Özgür, who earned the title of Turgut Özal's adopted child like Naim Süleymanoğlu, was also the miracle that Özal was looking for to give security and peace to the Turkish people, just like Süleymanoğlu.[584] In the Aysel Özgur case, all necessary instruments were being mobilized to improve the relationship with the target audience. Just like Jacques Ellul said, "Propaganda must be all-encompassing".[585] The propagandist must utilize all available technical means, such as the press, radio, TV, movies, posters, meetings, and door-to-door canvassing. The story of rescuing a member of the Turkish minority from an oppressive regime deeply resonated with nationalistic sentiments, reinforcing a sense of unity and collective pride among the Turkish populace.

The case of Aysel Özgür and the TV series *Yeniden Doğmak* has significantly impacted diplomatic relations between Bulgaria and Türkiye, as well as Türkiye's domestic politics. *Yeniden Doğmak* played a key role in bringing Aysel Özgür back to Türkiye and highlighting the oppression of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria. As a result, the Bulgarian government found itself in a challenging position in the international arena and in the eyes of the Turkish public. So much so that the propaganda and persuasion success of this series was going to find its place as, in the words of journalist Ahmet Tan, "TV series diplomacy" in the context of bilateral state relations of the period.[586] As a result, in this process, which was dubbed as TV series diplomacy, Özal actually followed a vertical propaganda method and instrumentalized all propaganda instruments, such as state televisions, press and political channels from top to bottom. Turgut Özal's calculated use of Özgür's repatriation from Bulgaria highlights the multifaceted role of propaganda in shaping public opinion and furthering political objectives. By drawing international attention to the plight of Turkish minorities in Bulgaria, Özal was able to position Türkiye as a protector of human rights, thereby bolstering Türkiye's international standing and increasing pressure on Bulgaria to address its treatment of minorities. The necessary resonance was achieved by re-discoursing the victimization of Aysel Özgür through

[584] Teoman Erel, "Bizi Mucize Paklar", *Milliyet*, February 13, 1988.

[585] Jacques Ellul, "*Propaganda",* p. 9.

[586] Ahmet Tan, "Dizi Diplomasisi*", Cumhuriyet*, January 1, 1988.

certain group norms such as beliefs and values and conveying the necessary message to the target audience. This was achieved by reconstructing the image of Aysel Özgür as a person who was tortured by the Bulgarians and forcibly separated from her family through a national identity, and thus the feelings of the Turkish people were aroused. This identity also targeted the collective memory due to the historical ties contained in *Yeniden Doğmak* and the problems experienced by the Muslim Turkish minority, who were seen as the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, were justified from a historical perspective. This fuelled the sense of national unity and solidarity and consolidated Özal's place in the story as the saviour. Aysel's arrival to Türkiye was presented as a diplomatic victory and a humanitarian success, a symbol of Özal's leadership abilities and his determination to protect Türkiye's ethnic roots. In this way, Aysel Özgür's rescue was constructed as a success story in which a leader's human sensitivity and determination combined with national power. This process, which received extensive media coverage and reinforced Özal's image, made him a 'saviour.'

The bringing of Aysel Özgür to Türkiye was not only a humanitarian aid initiative but also to strengthen Özal's political position and emphasize Özal's government protective role. However, Özal also transformed this process into an image-building process for himself and transformed Aysel Özgür incident and the resonance it created into his own propaganda process as the saviour of Aysel Özgür with the help of the influential capabilities of media tools and newspapers in creating resonance and maximizing the impact on Aysel Özgür's process. However, Özal's efforts were frequently criticized by opposition parties and the press, who claimed that he was using the process to build his own political image.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined how Turgut Özal strategically utilized Naim Süleymanoğlu's defection and international athletic successes, alongside Aysel Özgür's forced separation from her family, victimization and eventual repatriation to construct and enhance his political image amidst Türkiye's late Cold War period challenges via propaganda. By transforming the individual tragedies and success stories of those two names into powerful symbols of national pride and resilience, Özal effectively harnessed media tools, particularly state-controlled television TRT and televised public ceremonies of Aysel Özgür and Naim Süleymanoğlu, to foster unity, divert attention from domestic issues such as economic instability, corruption, terrorism and cronyism and bolster his political image with the help of the other media instruments such as newspapers. Süleymanoğlu's athletic achievements and Özgür's humanitarian plight were meticulously portrayed to evoke emotional responses, reinforcing Özal's image as a compassionate and heroic leader dedicated to protecting and uplifting oppressed Turkish minorities in Bulgaria. While these propaganda strategies successfully elevated Özal's political standing and garnered domestic sympathy, they also attracted significant criticism for exploiting personal suffering for political gain and neglecting broader systemic issues faced by the Turkish minority in Bulgaria.

This study further highlighted the intricate interplay between media, personal narratives, and political objectives, demonstrating both the effectiveness and ethical complexities of using symbolic figures in propaganda. The cases of Süleymanoğlu and Özgür illustrate how personal stories can be instrumentalized to shape public perception, reinforce national identity, and influence international relations reflections into domestic politics, offering valuable insights into the mechanisms of

political influence and the enduring impact of media-driven image-building during periods of internal and external tension via propaganda models. Ultimately, Özal's adept manipulation of these narratives underscores the potent role of propaganda in political image construction, reflecting broader themes of nationalism, media influence, and the ethical considerations inherent in politicizing individual experiences for personal objectives.

At the international level, the international media outlets drew attention to Bulgaria's human rights violations, challenging its policies of forced assimilation and oppression of the Turkish minority. Though his initial response was delayed, by framing these issues within the context of Second Cold War politics, Özal managed to align Türkiye's stance with the broader human rights discourse prevalent in the global arena, further legitimizing its diplomatic interventions in domestic politics. Moreover, it is significant that Western countries have brought these events to the international stage directly. Naim Süleymanoğlu's visit to the White House and the American government's deliberations on these events within international media, especially with newspapers, further underscore their importance. Consequently, the West leveraged this issue ideologically against Bulgaria and, more broadly, the Soviet Union. Another significant issue was the transformation of Aysel Özgür's situation into an international dispute between Bulgaria and Türkiye. The challenges faced by Turks in Bulgaria and Aysel Özgür were problematized by international organizations such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and through media outlets like *BBC*, *Die Welt, The Daily Telegraph* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Moreover, the global impact of the television series *Yeniden Doğmak*, despite only two episodes being aired, escalated the issue to the level of an international conflict between the two countries. Consequently, Bulgarian authorities demanded the discontinuation of the series through diplomatic channels in exchange for Aysel's repatriation to Türkiye.

On the domestic front, these incidents served as a unifying force, rallying public opinion around shared narratives of victimization, victory and resilience. Özal positioned himself as a saviour and protector of Turkish identity, effectively redirecting attention from the economic challenges and political criticisms facing his

administration. This strategic manoeuvring not only bolstered his political image but also contributed to a broader narrative of Özal as a leader standing firm against external threats and injustice. This context allowed Özal to capitalize on Süleymanoğlu for his own political gain, as Süleymanoğlu's global recognition was largely facilitated by the West's instrumentalization of him. Süleymanoğlu's Olympic achievements, coupled with his portrayal as a victim and the narrative of being rescued by Özal, resonated powerfully with the public. This dynamic provided a strong defence against any damage to Özal's image, particularly in the realm of domestic politics. While doing this, the television broadcasting of Süleymanoğlu's arrival to Türkiye from Bulgaria and his constant portrayal as being on Özal's side as an important image in the elections and referendums held in Türkiye were given as examples of this. Similarly, the victimization of Aysel Özgür was utilized by Özal in domestic politics. The process of bringing Özgür to Türkiye created a strong resonance and effective public opinion through the television series *Yeniden Doğmak*, which was produced during the era of single-channel television. The series increased its impact by featuring well-known actors of the time in its cast, thereby effectively contributing to significant public awareness within the country. Through the "Freedom for Aysel" campaign, the desired effect was elevated to its highest level, and the process of repatriating Aysel Özgür to Türkiye became a matter closely followed by the Turkish public. Özal, by instrumentalizing this situation, played a leading role in the rescue and repatriation of Özgür and televised this process. In short, this situation caused people to instinctively rally around the flag, demonstrating their unwavering support for the nation's leadership.

However, the study has also highlighted the controversies surrounding the instrumentalization of these events for political gain. Critics accused Özal of exploiting the symbolic significance of individuals like Süleymanoğlu and Özgür for personal and political purposes, questioning the extent to which these actions truly addressed the systemic oppression of Turkish minorities in Bulgaria. While these efforts flourished in creating powerful narratives of individual rescue and national pride, they often fell short in addressing the long-term challenges faced by the Turkish diaspora in Bulgaria. Indeed, this constitutes one of the fundamental premises of this thesis, and these objections were particularly criticized by opposition

parties, columnists, and, most importantly, by the representatives and presidents of immigrant associations of those who fled from oppression in Bulgaria. It was asserted that the rescue of two symbolic figures, Aysel Özgür and Naim Süleymanoğlu, was orchestrated by Özal for political gain.

The findings demonstrate that Turgut Özal and his government successfully leveraged the situation of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, to advance Özal's political and diplomatic interests. This strategy not only exerted international pressure but also bolstered the Özal's efforts on legitimacy and public support domestically. The emotional impact of individual stories amplified the effectiveness of propaganda efforts and shaped public perception.

In conclusion, the thesis underscored the dual-edged nature of propaganda as a political tool. On the one hand, Özal's strategies demonstrated the effectiveness of aligning personal stories with national narratives to achieve political and diplomatic objectives. On the other hand, they also reveal the risks of reducing complex issues to symbolic victories, potentially overlooking broader systemic challenges. The cases of Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür offer valuable insights into the interplay between politics, media, and identity during a critical period in Turkish history, serving as a testament to the enduring power of narrative in shaping public perception and political reality. In a nutshell, this study ultimately contributes to a deeper understanding of to illustrate how Turgut Özal successfully utilized internationally and domestically renowned symbolic figures, such as Naim Süleymanoğlu and Aysel Özgür, in the construction of his political image within the context of propaganda and how government can manipulate cultural and emotional symbols to construct political legitimacy, while also emphasizing the need for a balanced approach that prioritizes substantive and sustainable solutions to underlying issues.

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APPENDICES

A. TURKISH SUMMARY / TÜRKÇE ÖZET

Bu tez, Turgut Özal'ın 1983-1989 yılları arasında Bulgaristan hükümetinin Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığa yönelik baskıları bağlamında, Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür gibi hem uluslararası hem de ulusal çapta tanınan sembolik figürleri propaganda çerçevesinde kendi siyasi imajını inşa etmek için nasıl kullandığını ortaya koymaktadır. İkinci Soğuk Savaş döneminin ideolojik açıdan gergin ortamında Bulgaristan'ın Türk ve Müslüman azınlığına karşı yürüttüğü baskı, asimilasyon ve kimlik silme politikalarının Türkiye iç ve dış politikasına nasıl yansıdığını ve bu süreçte Turgut Özal'ın kendi siyasi imajını güçlendirmek için bu konuyu nasıl bir propaganda aracına dönüştürdüğünü incelemektedir.

1983-1989 arasında Bulgaristan'da Todor Jivkov yönetimindeki hükümet, "Yeniden Doğuş Süreci" adı altında zorla isim değiştirme, kültürel pratiklerin yasaklanması, eğitim ve din özgürlüğünün kısıtlanması gibi yöntemlerle Türk-Müslüman azınlığı sindirmeye çalışmıştır. Bu insan hakları ihlalleri, Bulgaristan ile Türkiye arasında gerilimi artırmış, uluslararası kamuoyunda da dikkat çekmiş ve dönemin ideolojik kutuplaşması bağlamında etnik azınlık haklarının, jeopolitik çıkarlar ve insan hakları söylemiyle kesiştiği bir gündem oluşturmuştur. Bu şartlar altında Turgut Özal yönetimi, Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığa yönelik baskıları kendi lehine kullanarak uluslararası ve özellikle ulusal arenada propaganda malzemesi haline getirme imkânı bulmuştur. Özellikle uluslararası ve ulusal üne sahip iki sembol isim üzerinden - dünyaca ünlü olimpiyat sporcusu halterci Naim Süleymanoğlu ile Bulgaristan'da alıkonulan genç Türk kızı Aysel Özgür- Özal, siyasi imajını pekiştirecek bir strateji geliştirmiştir.

Tez bu bağlamda şu soruların cevaplarına odaklanmıştır; Turgut Özal, 1983-1989 yılları arasında Bulgar hükümetinin Türk azınlığa yönelik baskıcı politikalarını nasıl

kullandı ve Naim Süleymanoğlu ile Aysel Özgür gibi iki sembolik figürü propaganda bağlamında siyasi imajını inşa etmek için nasıl değerlendirdi? Turgut Özal, bu anlatıları Türkiye'nin dış politikası ve iç siyasetine entegre etmek için hangi stratejileri kullandı? Bu propaganda faaliyetleri, İkinci Soğuk Savaş dönemi boyunca Türkiye'nin uluslararası imajını ve iç siyasi dinamiklerini nasıl etkiledi? Çalışma, gazeteler, biyografiler, konuşma metinleri ve devlet belgeleri gibi birincil kaynaklara dayalı bir nitel analiz yaklaşımıyla yürütülmüştür. Tarihsel bağlam, propaganda teorileri ve uluslararası ilişkiler çerçevesi kullanılarak Özal hükümetinin kamuoyu oluşturma stratejileri, milli dayanışma ve birlik duygusunu nasıl harekete geçirdiği ortaya konmaktadır. Bu şekilde çalışma, daha önceki araştırmalarda ihmal edilen "bireysel örnekler üzerinden siyasi imaj ve propaganda" boyutunu irdeleyerek Özal dönemi Türkiye'sinde propaganda stratejilerinin anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmayı amaçlar.

Tez beş bölümden oluşmaktadır. Birinci bölüm tezin girişini oluşturmaktadır. İkinci bölüm, Bulgaristan'daki Türk ve Müslüman azınlığın tarihsel süreç içinde yaşadığı sorunlar ile 1980'lerde artan baskı ve asimilasyon politikalarının Türkiye'ye ve uluslararası kamuoyuna yansımasını analiz etmektedir. 1878'den başlayarak Osmanlı sonrası Bulgaristan coğrafyasında Türk azınlığın konumu, demografik değişimler, azınlık haklarına yönelik farklı dönemlerdeki yaklaşımlar ve Bulgar milliyetçiliğinin yükselişi incelenmektedir. Bu tarihsel arka plan, 1980'lere gelindiğinde Todor Jivkov yönetiminin "Yeniden Doğuş Süreci" adı altında yürüttüğü zorla isim değiştirme, dini ve kültürel hakların kısıtlanması, dil yasakları gibi radikal asimilasyon çabalarının altyapısını oluşturmuştur.

Bölüm, 1980'lerde artan bu baskılar karşısında Bulgaristan Türklerinin maruz kaldığı insan hakları ihlallerinin Batı dünyası, ABD ve Avrupa Topluluğu ülkeleri tarafından ele alınışını, uluslararası basının konuyu gündeme taşıma biçimlerini ortaya koymuştur. Batı kamuoyu ve insan hakları örgütleri, Soğuk Savaş koşullarında Doğu Bloku ülkelerindeki baskıcı rejimlere eleştirel yaklaşırken, Bulgaristan'ın Türklere yönelik politikaları bu ideolojik zemin üzerinde Batı medyası ve siyasetinde yankı bulur.

Bu bölümde ayrıca, Türkiye'deki kamuoyunun Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın çilesine dair giderek duyarlı hale geldiği; basın, göçmen dernekleri ve sivil toplum baskısıyla Turgut Özal hükümetinin bu konuda inisiyatif almaya zorlandığı vurgulanır. Türkiye ilk başta mesafeli davranmış olsa da, giderek artan kamuoyu baskısı ve uluslararası ilgi, Özal hükümetinin Bulgaristan Türkleri konusunu hem iç politikada hem de dış politikada kullanabileceği bir fırsat penceresi açar.

Bu noktada Turgut Özal'ın stratejisi devreye girer. Özal, Bulgaristan'daki baskıları Türkiye'nin dış politikasında bir koz, Batı ile ilişkilerde insan hakları savunucusu bir imaj, iç politikada ise milli dayanışmayı artıran bir araç olarak kullanır. Bulgaristan sorunu, enflasyon, yolsuzluk, terör gibi içeride yaşanan problemlerin gölgesinde bir "milli dava" haline getirilerek kamuoyunun dikkatini başka yöne çekme olanağı sunar. Bu bölüm, Özal'ın kendi iktidarını güçlendirmek amacıyla Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlık meselesini nasıl ustaca bir propaganda malzemesine dönüştürdüğünün entelektüel zeminini hazırlar. Böylece tarihsel arka plan, uluslararası boyut ve iç dinamikler iç içe geçerken, Özal'ın sonraki bölümlerde detaylandırılacak sembol isimler -Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür- üzerinden yürüteceği propaganda stratejisinin temelleri bu bölümde atılmaktadır.

Üçüncü bölüm, Turgut Özal'ın uluslararası tanınırlığa sahip bir figür olan oimpiyat sporcusu ve halterci Naim Süleymanoğlu'nu kullanarak kendi siyasi imajını nasıl inşa ettiğini, propaganda stratejilerini hangi araçlarla yürüttüğünü ve bu süreçte elde ettiği siyasi kazanımları inceler. Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın maruz kaldığı insan hakları ihlalleri ve asimilasyon politikaları, Türkiye'de zaten duyarlı bir kamuoyu yaratmışken, Naim Süleymanoğlu gibi uluslararası üne sahip sembol bir ismin devreye girmesi ve onun hem ulusal hemde uluslararası kuvvetli rezonansı Özal'a bulunmaz bir fırsat sunmuştur.

Bölümün çıkış noktası ve ana fikri, Bulgaristan'ın 1980'lerde yoğunlaştırdığı asimilasyon politikalarıdır. Bu politikalar çerçevesinde, Türk azınlığa zorla Bulgar isimleri verilmiş, kültürel ve dini pratikler kısıtlanmış, dil kullanımı engellenmiştir. Bu baskıların dünya kamuoyunda duyulması, Batı medyasının ve insan hakları örgütlerinin tepkisi, Bulgaristan'ın uluslararası alanda zor durumda kalması ile

sonuçlanmıştır. Türkiye açısından bakıldığında ise, kendisi de Batı ittifakının bir parçası olan Özal yönetimi, bu durumu hem dış politikada hem de iç siyasette lehine çevirmek için yollar aramaktadır.

İşte bu süreçte, olağanüstü spor yeteneği ve başarılı olimpik kariyeriyle dünya çapında tanınan halter şampiyonu Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun konumu belirleyici olur. Bulgaristan doğumlu bir Türk olan Süleymanoğlu, "Naum Shalamanov" adıyla zorla Bulgarlaştırılır; ancak o, 1986 Melbourne Dünya Halter Şampiyonası sırasında Türkiye'ye sığınarak adeta bir özgürlük ve kimlik mücadelesi kahramanına dönüşür.

Bu iltica eylemi, Süleymanoğlu'nu sıradan bir başarılı sporcudan çok daha fazlası haline getirir. Artık o, komünist blok'un baskıcı politikalarından kaçan, Türk kimliğini yeniden kazanan ve bir anlamda Batı değerlerine yakınlaşan bir "özgürlük sembolüdür."

Bu bölüm, Turgut Özal'ın bu sembolden nasıl yararlandığını ayrıntılı olarak inceler. Özal, 13 Aralık 1986 tarihinde Süleymanoğlu'nun Türkiye'ye gelişini büyük bir medya şovuna çevirir: Süleymanoğlu havaalanında coşkuyla karşılanır, basın toplantıları yapılır, hatta sonraki günlerde sporcu 17 Aralık 1986 tarihinde İstanbul Taksim meydanına helikopterle indirilerek milli gururun canlı bir örneği gibi sunulur. Öyle ki 25 eylül 1988 yılında yapılan referendumda Süleymanoğlu Özal tarafından bir seçim propagandası aracı olarak kullanılmış hatta Süleymanoğluna aynı yıl yapılan Seul olimpiyatlarına gitmeden önce 17 eylül 1988 tarihinde, referandum tarihinden önce, kameralar önünde havalanında oy kullandırılmıştır. Bunlara ek olarak Süleymanoğlu bazı Anavatan Partisi etkinliklerine dahi götürülmüştür. Bu süreçte Özal, hem Türkiye kamuoyuna hem de uluslararası izleyicilere yönelik mesajlar vermektedir. Türkiye'de ekonomik sıkıntılar, yolsuzluk iddiaları, terör ve uyuşturucu kaçakçılığı gibi sorunlarla yıpranan imajı, 'ezilen Türk'ü kurtaran lider' figürü sayesinde tazelenir. İç politikada dikkatler, Bulgaristan'dan kurtarılan bir kahramanın etrafında birleşerek milli dayanışma hissini güçlendirir; halk, kendi iç meseleleri yerine dışarıdaki 'kardeşlerinin' acılarına odaklanır.

Öte yandan uluslararası sahnede, Süleymanoğlu'nun başarıları ve özgürlüğe kaçışı ABD ve Batı medyasında ilgi uyandırır. Bu, Özal'ın ülkeyi ve kendisini insan hakları

savunucusu bir aktör gibi göstermesine imkân verir. Bulgaristan'ın Türklere yönelik politikaları Batı'da eleştirilirken, Özal yönetimi bu eleştirileri sahiplenir ve destekler. Böylece Türkiye, Sovyet güdümündeki bir ülkenin insan hakları ihlallerini gündeme taşıyan, hürriyet yanlısı bir ülke olarak konumlanır. Bu da Batı dünyasıyla siyasi anlamda aynı çizgide hizalanan Türkiye'ye dış ve özellikle iç politikada meşruiyet kazandırır.

Bu bölümde ayrıca, Süleymanoğlu'nun hikâyesinin propaganda açısından taşıdığı duygusal ve sembolik yük de vurgulanır. Basitçe bir sporcunun ülke değiştirmesinden çok daha fazlası söz konusudur: Süleymanoğlu'nun her dünya rekoru, Türkiye için milli gururun teyidi haline gelir; her madalya, Bulgaristan'ın asimilasyon politikalarına karşı bir zafer olarak yorumlanır. Bu başarı hikâyesinin merkezinde, Özal'ın yarattığı retorik ve sunum biçimi yer alır. Gazeteler, televizyon, devletin resmi açıklamaları, Süleymanoğlu'nu yalnızca bir sporcu değil, 'Türk kimliğinin küllerinden doğan' bir sembole dönüştürür. Böylece Özal, iç kamuoyunda güçlü bir 'biz' duygusu inşa ederken, kendisini bu zaferlerin mimarı ve koruyucu lider olarak konumlandırır. Aynı zamanda Süleymanoğlu'nun yaratmış olduğu bu kuvvetli rezonans ile hedef kitlenin grup normları hedef alınmış olunur ve duygular oluşturulmuş olan bu dikey propaganda modelinin de yardımı ile bu normlar üzerinden uyarılır.

Bölüm ayrıca, bu süreçte kullanılan propaganda yöntemlerini, sembollerini ve araçlarını da ele alır. Milliyetçi söylemler, dini ve geleneksel değerlerin vurgulanması, Batı basınındaki olumlu tepkilerin Türkiye'ye ithaf edilmesi, Süleymanoğlu'nun 1988 yılında Seul Olimpiyatlarında kazandığı kişisel başarılarının devlet politikasıyla özdeşleştirilmesi gibi stratejiler dikkat çekicidir. Bu sayede Özal, kamuoyunu etkilemek için gerekli olan toplumsal hafızayı, inançları, kimlik duygusunu ve değerleri harekete geçirir. İnsan hakları, özgürlük ve kimlik mücadelesi temaları, devletin resmi söylemine eklemlenerek siyasi sermayeye dönüştürülür.

Eleştirel açıdan bakıldığında, bölüm Naim Süleymanoğlu'nun hikâyesinin yapısal sorunları çözemediğini, Bulgaristan Türklerinin genel durumunu iyileştirmediğini

ama bunun Özal için çok da önemli olmadığını ima eder. Çünkü amaç, uzun vadeli bir stratejik dönüşümden ziyade kısa vadeli propaganda başarısı, iç politikada desteğin arttırılması ve dış politikada imaj parlatmadır. Yine de bölüm, Özal'ın bu tekil vakayı zekice kullanarak Türkiye içinde ve uluslararası arenada kendi konumunu pekiştirdiğini gösterir.

Sonuç olarak, bu bölüm, Naim Süleymanoğlu vakasının, Turgut Özal'ın uluslararası tanınırlığı olan sembolik bir figürü iç ve dış politikada nasıl bir propaganda aracına dönüştürdüğünü etraflıca ortaya koyar. Süleymanoğlu sayesinde Özal, Bulgaristan'daki asimilasyon politikalarını Türkiye'nin milli davasına ekleyerek iç sorunları gölgede bırakır, uluslararası desteği artırır, Batı nezdinde insan hakları savunucusu görünümü kazanır. Tüm bunlar, Özal'ın liderlik imajını parlatmaya hizmet eder; Naim'in her başarısı, aslında Özal'ın siyasi anlatısının bir parçasına dönüşür. Bu anlatı, bölüme göre, dönemin siyasal iletişim stratejileri, propaganda teknikleri ve milli duyguları seferber etme kapasitesi açısından incelenmeye değerdir.

Dördüncü bölüm, Turgut Özal'ın siyasi imajını inşa etme sürecinde, Bulgaristan'daki Türk ve Müslüman azınlığın dramını bireysel ve sembolik bir vaka üzerinden nasıl daha da görünür kıldığını gösterir. Bu kez odakta, ailesi Türkiye'ye kaçarken Bulgaristan'da rehin tutulan, zorla Bulgar ismi verilen ve beş yıl boyunca ailesinden ayrı bırakılan 13 yaşındaki bir Türk kızı olan Aysel Özgür vardır. Bölüm, Aysel'in dramının Türkiye'de kamuoyunda nasıl yankı bulduğunu, kamuoyunun tepkisiyle nasıl bir insani ve politik kampanyaya dönüştüğünü ve nihayetinde Turgut Özal'ın bu olayı kendi siyasi avantajı için nasıl ustaca kullandığını ele alır.

Bölüm ilk olarak Aysel Özgür'ün hikâyesinin genel arka planını anlatır: Bulgaristan, 1980'lerde "Yeniden Doğuş Süreci" adı altında Türk azınlığa karşı şiddetli asimilasyon politikaları yürütürken, aileleri böler, çocukları ailelerinden koparır, dil ve dini özgürlükleri kısıtlar. Aysel Özgür, bu baskının en çarpıcı sembollerinden biri haline gelir. Zorla "Asya Satanova" ismini aldıran Bulgar makamları, Aysel'i ailesinden koparak bir nevi rehine gibi kullanır. Bu durum, Türkiye'de gazetelerin geniş yer verdiği bir insani trajedi olarak algılanır. Tercüman gazetesi, "Aysel'e Hürriyet" kampanyasını başlatır, sivil toplum kuruluşları, göçmen dernekleri, insan

hakları aktivistleri ve geniş bir kesim meseleye tepki gösterir. Aysel Özgür ile ilgili haberler duygu yoğunluğunu dramatik bir şekilde arttırmıştır. Hatta Tercüman gazetesinin başlattığı "Aysel'e Hürriyet" kampanyasında Özgür'ün fotoğrafının etrafı zincirlerle resmedilmiş Özgür'ün zorla tutulduğu algısı hedef kitle nezdinde ciddi bir rezonans yaratmıştır. Kamuoyu baskısı giderek artarken, Türkiye'de halk "Aysel bizim kızımız, milli onurumuz" söylemiyle birleşir.

Bu bölüm, tek kanallı dönemde, devlet televizyonu TRT'nin "Yeniden Doğmak" adlı diziyi yayınlamasıyla meseleyi nasıl daha da dramatikleştirdiğini, hedef kitlenin toplumsal hafızasını şekillendirdiğini inceler. Bu dizi, Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın maruz kaldığı baskıları yüksek yoğunluklu bir anlatı üzerinden milyonlara ulaştırır. İmamların öldürülmesi, cenaze ve sünnet törenlerinin engellenmesi, dini pratiklerin yasaklanması, çocukların ailelerinden koparılması gibi sahnelerle dizi, izleyicilerin duygularını uyarır ve harekete geçirir. Dizi, Aysel'in durumuna dair farkındalığı da pekiştirir: Kamuoyu artık sadece gazete haberlerinden değil, televizyon üzerinden de Bulgar zulmünü izlemektedir.

Bu noktada "dizi diplomasisi" kavramı gündeme gelir: Dizi, öylesine büyük bir kamuoyu baskısı yaratır ki, Bulgaristan hükümeti dizinin yayından kaldırılması karşılığında bazı tavizler vermek durumunda kalır. İşte burada Aysel Özgür, diplomasinin bir aracı haline gelir. Bulgarlar, dizinin durdurulması için Türkiye'nin taleplerini göz önüne almak zorunda kalır.

Bölüm, diplomatik arka planda yaşanan pazarlıkları ayrıntılandırır. TRT dizisi Bulgaristan'ı rahatsız etmiş, Bulgar yetkililer dizinin yayından kaldırılmasını istemiştir. Türkiye ise bu talebe karşılık Aysel'in iadesini şart koşar. İnsan hakları ihlallerini açıkça gösteren dizi, Bulgaristan'ı uluslararası arenada daha da zor durumda bıraktığından, Bulgar hükümeti sonunda geri adım atar. Bu bir anlamda insan hakları odaklı bir dış politika hamlesi gibi görünse de, gerçekte Özal'ın iç politikada da işine yarayan bir propaganda başarısıdır.

Aysel'in iadesi süreci, 30 Aralık 1987 ile 1 Ocak 1988 tarihlerinde, medya aracılığıyla büyük bir törene dönüştürülür. Aysel ve ailesinin kavuşması televizyon

kameraları önünde gerçekleşir. Başbakanlık konutunda Aysel, Turgut Özal ve Semra Özal tarafından ağırlanır, duygusal sahneler canlı yayınlanır, Semra Özal gözyaşlarına hâkim olamaz, Aysel "milletin kızı" ilan edilir. Bu sahneler, Türk halkını derinden etkiler; yabancı basın da olayı izler. Böylece Özal, bir yandan insani bir meseleyi çözmüş lider, diğer yandan Bulgaristan'a karşı diplomatik başarı kazanmış bir devlet adamı olarak sunulur. Bu çerçevede Aysel'in kurtarılışı, Özal'ın imaj inşasının bir parçasına dönüşür: İnsani değerleri sahiplenen, mağduru kurtaran, Bulgaristan'ı geri adım attıran güçlü bir lider figürü. Bu bölüm Aysel Özgür'e Süleymanoğlu'na uygulanana benzer bir strateji uygulandığını iddia eder ve devlet kanalı TRT'nin hedef kitlenin duygularını oluşturulan dikey propaganda modeli ile uyarıldığını savunur. Bu uyarılma hedef kitlenin tüm grup normları hedef alınarak yapılmıştır.

Dördüncü bölüm, bu sürecin eleştirel boyutuna da değinir. Bazı muhalif kesimler, dizinin yayından kaldırılmasıyla elde edilen kazanımın sadece Aysel'in kurtarılmasıyla sınırlı kaldığını, diğer Türk azınlık bireylerinin durumunda kalıcı bir iyileşme olmadığını belirtir. Ayrıca, insan hakları ihlallerinin bir televizyon dizisi karşılığında pazarlık konusu edilmesi, etik açıdan sorgulanır. Ancak Özal hükümeti açısından başarı açıktır: Kamuoyunda büyük bir destek, milliyetçi coşku ve birlik hissi yaratılmış, dış politikada da bir sembolik zafer elde edilmiştir. İç siyasette ekonomik veya sosyal problemlerle gündemi meşgul olan iktidar, bu tür dış kaynaklı milli meselelerle kamuoyu algısını etkilemeyi başarmıştır.

Öte yandan, ABD ve Batı dünyasının bu konuda Türkiye'nin yanında yer alması, Bulgaristan'a karşı eleştirel tavırlar takınması da Türkiye'nin uluslararası itibarını olumlu etkiler. Aysel vakası, Türk hükümetine hem içeride hem dışarıda avantaj sağlar. Yine de uzun vadede bakıldığında, bu tekil başarılar yapısal sorunların çözümünü sağlamaz; fakat Özal'ın kısa vadeli siyasal çıkarlarına hizmet eder.

Sonuç olarak bölüm genel hatlarıyla Turgut Özal'ın, Bulgaristan'daki azınlık meselesi üzerinden ikinci bir sembol figürle, Aysel Özgür'le, imajını nasıl güçlendirdiğini göstermektedir. Naim Süleymanoğlu vakasında olduğu gibi Aysel örneğinde de mağduriyetler medya aracılığıyla dramatize edilir, kamuoyu seferber

edilir, dış politika araçsallaştırılır, sonunda hükümet bir diplomatik ve insani zafer elde etmiş gibi sunulur. Böylece Özal, iç politikada "mağdurun koruyucusu", milli gururu ayağa kaldıran lider rolünü pekiştirerek imajını parlatır.

Bu nedenle bu bölüm, Aysel Özgür meselesinin sadece bir insani trajedi olarak değil, Türkiye'de dönemin siyasi atmosferinde ve uluslararası ilişkiler bağlamında kullanılan stratejik bir propaganda örneği olduğunu ortaya koyar. Duygusal anlatılar, televizyon dizileri, basın kampanyaları, diplomatik pazarlıklar ve sonunda canlı yayınlanan kurtarma sahneleri, hepsi Aysel'in hikâyesini siyasi bir sermayeye dönüştürmüştür. Bu sermaye, Özal'ın liderlik imajını güçlendirirken, Türkiye'nin dış politikadaki konumunu da sembolik düzeyde tahkim etmiştir.

Tezin sonuç bölümü, tezde ele alınan tüm unsurların genel bir değerlendirmesini yaparak, Turgut Özal'ın Bulgaristan'daki Türk-Müslüman azınlığa yönelik baskı ve asimilasyon politikalarını, özellikle Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür'ün bireysel hikâyeleri üzerinden nasıl kendi siyasi imajını güçlendirmek amacıyla kullandığını özetler. Bölüm, çalışmanın ilk kısmından itibaren ortaya konan sorulara yanıtlar sunar, ulaşılan genel sonuçları vurgular ve elde edilen bulguların anlamını tartışır.

Öncelikle, Bulgaristan'da 1980'ler boyunca artan asimilasyon politikaları Türkiye'de yoğun bir tepki yaratmıştır. Bu baskılar, uluslararası kamuoyunca da fark edilmiş, özellikle Soğuk Savaş'ın ikinci evresi boyunca Batı dünyasının Sovyet bloğuna yönelttiği insan hakları eleştirilerinin içine yerleşmiştir. Bu durum, Türkiye açısından hem bir dış politika fırsatı hem de iç politikada propaganda için elverişli bir zemin oluşturmuştur.

Tezde incelenen iki sembolik isim, Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür, Özal hükümetinin elinde birer propaganda aracına dönüşmüştür. Naim Süleymanoğlu, dünyaca ünlü bir halterci olarak Bulgaristan'dan iltica ederek Türk kimliğine ve özgürlüğüne koşan, komünist baskılardan kurtulan bir "kahraman" figür haline gelmiştir. Öte yandan, ailesi göç ederken Bulgaristan'da rehin bırakılan Aysel Özgür ise, masum bir çocuk ve mağdur olarak, Bulgar zulmünün en çarpıcı sembollerinden biri sayılmıştır. Her iki vaka da basın, televizyon, devlet organları ve sivil toplum

aracılığıyla Türk kamuoyunda duygusal tepkiler uyandırmış, milliyetçi hassasiyetleri harekete geçirmiştir.

Sonuç bölümü, Turgut Özal'ın bu iki olayı kendi siyasi amaçları doğrultusunda nasıl manipüle ettiğini açıklar. İç siyasette ekonomik sorunlar, yolsuzluk iddiaları, terör, uyuşturucu kaçakçılığı gibi meselelerle yıpranan hükümet, Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlık mağduriyeti üzerinden dikkatleri başka yöne çekmiş, milli bütünlüğü ve dayanışmayı güçlendiren bir söylem geliştirmiştir. Özal, Naim Süleymanoğlu ve Aysel Özgür gibi semboller aracılığıyla kamuoyunda birlik, beraberlik, mazluma kol kanat geren devlet ve lider imajını pekiştirmiştir. Bu duygusal mobilizasyon, Özal'ın zedelenen itibarını tazelemiş, onu "kurtarıcı" ve "insan hakları savunucusu" lider olarak sunmuştur.

Bölüm aynı zamanda bu stratejinin etik ve yapısal boyutlarını da yeniden hatırlatır. Sembolik isimlerin kurtarılması, Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın genel durumunu veya yapısal sorunlarını kökten çözmemiş; sadece geçici, tekil başarılar elde edilmiştir. İnsan hakları ihlalleri bir pazarlık konusu, televizyon dizileri ve medya şovları ise diplomatik araçlar haline gelirken, insani dramların siyasi rant malzemesine dönüşmesi etik açıdan irdelenmiştir. Yani Özal'ın elde ettiği propaganda başarıları, uzun vadeli yapısal çözüm sunmamakta; aksine, bireysel vakaların başarı hikâyeleri genel tabloyu gölgelemektedir.

Bu durum, uluslararası arenada da benzer bir resim çizer: Türkiye, Bulgaristan'ın politikalarını eleştirerek Batı dünyasında insan hakları savunucusu bir profil çizerken, aynı zamanda bu meselenin kendi iç siyasi çıkarlarına hizmet etmesini sağlamıştır. Dolayısıyla ikinci Soğuk Savaş döneminin ideolojik kutuplaşma ortamı, insan hakları söyleminin politik manipülasyonunu kolaylaştırmıştır. Batı'nın Doğu Bloku'na karşı kullandığı insan hakları eleştirileri, Türkiye'nin Bulgaristan'ı hedef alan diplomatik girişimlerini meşrulaştırmış, Özal'a dış politikada da sembolik bir avantaj sunmuştur.

Sonuç bölümü, bu bulguların propaganda, siyasal iletişim, uluslararası ilişkiler ve kimlik politikaları alanlarına yaptığı kuramsal katkıları da işaret eder. Bu çalışma,

liderlerin bireysel mağduriyet öykülerini, sembolik değer taşıyan figürleri ve medyayı kullanarak nasıl siyasi meşruiyet inşa edebileceğini göstermektedir. Ayrıca milliyetçi duyguların, manevi ve dini değerlerin, kültürel kimliğin ve mağduriyet anlatılarının siyasi meşruiyet yaratmadaki rolü bu tezdeki vakalarla somutlaşmaktadır.

Bu şekilde çalışma, Özal döneminde Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın durumunun, çift yönlü bir propaganda sürecinde nasıl araçsallaştırıldığını gözler önüne serer. İktidarın itibar kazanma çabasına, milli hassasiyetlerin seferber edilmesine ve Batı nezdinde konum güçlendirmeye hizmet eden bu strateji, zamanın medya koşullarında büyük ölçüde başarılı olmuştur. Ancak bu başarı, yapısal problemlerin çözümünden çok uzakta, kısa vadeli politik kazançlarla sınırlı kalmıştır.

Özetle, sonuç bölümü, tez boyunca yapılan analizlerin bir sentezini sunar: Bulgaristan'daki insan hakları ihlalleri, Türkiyeli sembol isimlerin (Süleymanoğlu ve Özgür) bireysel hikâyeleri, medya ve propaganda araçlarının ustalıkla kullanılması, Turgut Özal'ın siyasi imajını parlatan, ancak etik ve yapısal boyutlarda soru işaretleri yaratan bir stratejinin parçalarıdır.

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