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*Commémorations infrastructurelles : Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, le Troisième Pont sur le Bosphore et l'incessante « conquête d'Istanbul »*

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# Infrastructural Commemorations: The Ground-Breaking Ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge and the Endless “Conquest of Istanbul”

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## Introduction

- 1 Brian Larkin in *The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructures*, a seminal review of the expanding field of Infrastructure Studies, writes how infrastructures “are not just technical objects... but also operate on the level of fantasy and desire. They encode the dreams of individuals and societies and are the vehicles whereby those fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real” (2013, p. 333). He explains how these public-private works can generate awe and desire, stimulate feelings of promise and a sense of fascination. He adds how it is often the sensory experience and affective atmosphere created by infrastructures that constitute an important part of their political effect. We argue here that infrastructural inaugurations (i.e. ground-breaking ceremonies at the beginning of construction work or opening ceremonies at the end) present an ideal platform to observe what Brian Larkin has identified as the politics and poetics of infrastructures.
- 2 The rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan - Mayor of Istanbul from 1994 to 1998, Turkish Prime Minister from 2003 to 2014 and President since 2014 (Cheviron, Pérouse, 2016) - corresponds to a period of massive investment in Turkey in bridges, airports, highways, metro lines, tunnels, high-speed trains, hydroelectric dams, and nuclear power plants. All of these recently-built mega-infrastructure are celebrated festively during the

ground-breaking stage and/or at the opening ceremonies. In 2020 alone, President Erdoğan delivered more than 30 inaugural speeches during such events in Istanbul and across Turkey. Such infrastructural inaugurations are an opportunity for his Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, henceforth AKP) to display its construction of a modern Turkish nation through mega-projects while harking back to an idealized past of the now-defunct Ottoman empire. This article examines the ground-breaking, button-pushing ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge in Istanbul on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013.

- 3 The inauguration was held on what then Prime Minister Erdoğan considers the most auspicious day in the country's history - the anniversary of the siege of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, by Fatih Sultan Mehmet and his army on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453. This infrastructural inauguration thus turned into a commemoration of a past event. We begin with the Prime Minister's speech given during the ground-breaking ceremony. We then examine the 1453 commemorations held regularly in Istanbul on May 29<sup>th</sup> since 1953. We go on to discuss infrastructures as services (*hizmet*) to the nation, and to civilization more broadly, rendered by Erdoğan and the AKP through these urban mega-projects, and conclude by explaining how such infrastructural commemorations can physically and symbolically recreate the (re)conquest of the city today. In the end, we ask what else is being remembered in Turkey during these techno-political occasions besides the perpetual conquest of Istanbul?

## Prime Minister Erdoğan's Speech

- 4 The ground-breaking ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge (a.k.a. Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge), was both an inauguration of the construction of the infrastructure itself and a historic commemoration. The event took place on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013, close to one of the bridge's future land piers near the Black Sea entrance to the Bosphorus Strait on Istanbul's European side in Garipçe, a once-quiet fisherman's village now converted into a nondescript, suburban neighborhood of high-rise residential buildings. The ceremony was attended by Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, President Abdullah Gül, Minister of Transport, Maritime, and Communication, Binali Yıldırım, Head of the General Directorate of Highways, Mehmet Cahit Turhan, President of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, Mehmet Görmez and many other high state officials and eminent international guests.

Photo 1



A few minutes before the ground-breaking ceremony of the Bosphorus Third Bridge. Ships on the Bosphorus are seen bringing people to the event (top left), a red stage has been set up for Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül's speeches (center) just in front of the location of the bridge's future land piers (bottom right)

Source: Official website of CEO Event, an advertising and political communication firm that organizes such infrastructural commemorations for the AKP

- 5 On the day, thousands of enthusiastic, well-behaved AKP supporters were shipped in from the city's outlying suburbs (see Photo 1), creating an indistinct audience hubbub of cheering and applauding people, waving Turkish flags as President Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan delivered the main speeches. The festivities were televised live on most state-controlled news channels and Erdoğan's speech was later uploaded on YouTube where we were both able to watch it.<sup>1</sup> The video, firstly, shows Prime Minister Erdoğan passing quickly in front of the crowd before making his way up a red carpet to a white podium positioned in the center of a concert-like stage installed specially for the occasion. A team of bodyguards follows his every move in a well-rehearsed choreography, while strategically-hidden security officers and military snipers watch over the event. Behind the Prime Minister, a digital panoramic image of Istanbul's yet-to-be-built Third Bosphorus Bridge is seen from above, with the names of the project's construction companies (IC Holding, Astaldi, and Hyundai) projected from it, and a message written in large white letters just above the bridge:

THE BOSPHORUS NEW PEARL  
 THE BOSPHORUS THIRD BRIDGE AND NORTH MARMARA HIGHWAY  
 GROUND-BREAKING CEREMONY  
 29<sup>th</sup> MAY 2013

Photo 2



Prime Minister Erdoğan speaking at the ground-breaking and button-pushing ceremony of the Bosphorus Third Bridge and Northern Marmara Highway, 29th May 2013

Source: Anadolu Ajansı, Kayhan Özer

- 6 The music plays loudly and is turned off as Prime Minister Erdoğan prepares himself to address the crowd. He begins by thanking and greeting those present.

“Esteemed President, Esteemed President of the Turkish Grand National Assembly, my dear colleagues, dear Istanbulites, ladies and gentlemen, I greet you with my heartfelt feelings in this meaningful meeting.” [The crowd cheers, then Prime Minister Erdoğan recites in Arabic the following *hadith* on the conquest of Istanbul] “Istanbul will definitely be conquered. How beautiful the conquering general and the conquering army will be!”<sup>2</sup> [He switches back to Turkish] “We are together with you on the 560<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the conquering of Istanbul, when the beautiful armies and generals of the Ottoman Sultan have closed the dark ages and opened a new enlightened age... And there is a monument that crowns our gathering. I am asking Allah to bless this historical moment and this joyful togetherness.” [The crowd applauds]

- 7 Former Prime Minister, now President Erdoğan has a very distinctive way of speaking in public. He shouts - his political opponents claim - or sounds very much like a *varoş*, other critics might say.<sup>3</sup> In contrast, his predecessors, regardless of their political leaning, all spoke with a “proper” elitist (i.e. Istanbul) accent, mostly acquired from attending the country’s best universities. Prime Minister Erdoğan graduated from an Imam Hatip vocational school for future government-employed imams. This is not to discredit his oratorical skills, but to point out the difference between his speech and those of other politicians. His public speaking makes him seem more “authentic” to his many followers in Turkey. He uses expressions usually heard from “the man in the street”, makes exclamations not considered as appropriate in a political speech, but which make him eminently relatable to others, uses both simple words to avoid any association with Turkish elitism, and employs less-common phrases that one might hear imams utter at Friday prayers.

- 8 In an article examining Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's "embodied practices of leadership", Charlotte Joppien writes how "greater usage of loanwords (particularly French) of professionalized terminology is more typical for leftist parties, whereas the use of proverbs, Ottoman Turkish or Arabic words, or metaphors from a religious context point to conservative or Islamist parties" (2020, p. 244). For example, the verb "to remember" can be expressed in Turkish either as *hatırlamak* (when an individual remembers) or *anmak* (when a group remembers). Thus, "to commemorate" (i.e. to remember as a group) is often translated as the latter, *anmak*. (The root *an-* on its own means "a moment", while the word *anı*, for instance, means "memory", that is, a moment in time.) During the ground-breaking ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge, however, Prime Minister Erdoğan uses instead the less-common and more Ottoman-sounding *rahmetle yâdetmek*, which we have translated as "to remember gratefully". In his speech, the following sentence was heard: "Once again, I remember gratefully (*rahmetle yâdediyorum*) the glorious sultan, his commanders, and his soldiers, who conquered Istanbul."
- 9 The verb *rahmetle yâdetmek* has indeed a more religious connotation than the more secular *anmak*. In addition, Prime Minister Erdoğan also ends some of his sentences with a "Yallah!" or a "Hadi Bismillah!" (the "In the name of God" phrase spoken before reciting a *surah* from the Quran). Elsewhere in the speech, he addresses the Muslim world directly and asks Allah for specific favors. After the failed coup d'état of July 2016, President Erdoğan's speeches, commemorative or not, systematically ended in prayers for the country's martyrs. The repeated use of Quranic verses during the speech, and the prayers led by the President of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs towards the end of the ceremony, also emphasized the desire to give the inauguration a religious dimension. Charlotte Joppien adds how: "[b]ecause of laicism, the use of religious symbols in political discourse was always a taboo; this has changed only very recently under the AKP government. Since the 2010s, the AKP actively fosters the use of Islamic symbols and stresses the importance of religious holidays" (2020, p. 245).

Photo 3



Mehmet Görmez, President of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs, leading a prayer in front of Prime Minister Erdoğan and President Gül just before the button-pushing moment of the Bosphorus Third Bridge ground-breaking ceremony

Source: Anadolu Ajansı, Kayhan Özer

- 10 What makes Prime Minister Erdoğan seem more “authentic”, however, is not necessarily the references to Islam, nor is it only what he says and how he says it, but it is also the way he makes use of his body (Joppien, 2020, p. 240). His postures remind people of his humble up-bringing in a low-income, popular Istanbul neighborhood (Kasımpaşa). His demeanor says to them that he is still the same man despite his success in politics. If others before him have forgotten their (poor, rural or Kurdish) roots and given up their identity as they rose up the ranks to become part of the country’s elite, Erdoğan is, on the contrary, admired because he is not ashamed of where he comes from and seems not to have changed even though he is now the country’s most powerful man. In sum, the way he uses certain expressions, his accent and his voice, as well as his hand gestures, walking style, clothes, and even his mustache, make him very relatable to a large portion of the population (provincial, conservative, religious). It is the same mannerisms, however, that also make him very detestable for the other portion.

## Commemorating 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453

- 11 Prime Minister Erdoğan is a divisive figure in Turkey. He is venerated by his supporters and detested by his opponents. His will to commemorate more and more festively every year the siege of the Byzantine capital, Constantinople, by Fatih Sultan Mehmet and his army on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453, is also an act that both unifies (his supporters) and alienates (his enemies). He continues his speech during the ground-breaking ceremony by declaring:



Today, as you know, is May the 29<sup>th</sup>. Various celebrations have been taking place since the morning in different parts of our Istanbul. The municipality of Istanbul will organize even more celebrations until late at night.

- 12 According to the speaker, the conquest of Istanbul is to be commemorated because Fatih Sultan Mehmet changed the course of history and “the beautiful armies and generals of the Ottoman Sultan have closed the dark ages and opened a new enlightened age.” May 29<sup>th</sup> is still a “regular” calendar date in Turkey, ten days after the Commemoration of Atatürk, Sports and Youth Day (May 19<sup>th</sup>), which, unlike May 29<sup>th</sup>, is an official holiday, marking the beginning of the Turkish War of Independence. Many people (whether conservative, nationalist, or religious) in Turkey, however, consider 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 a more important historical date, not just in Ottoman, but also in Turkish and Muslim history.
- 13 Kemalism and Neo-Ottomanism, each clearly opposed ideologically, both created a “new sense of national time” through a rupture between an immediate, mostly catastrophic, past and a supposedly bright, mostly idealized, future (Çınar, 2001). Like the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1923 (the date of the proclamation of the Turkish Republic) for Kemalism, the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 corresponds to a founding moment from which time is restructured and a new national collective memory created, inclusive of the Ottoman past (Çınar, 2005, p. 32). Commemorating 1453 during the Third Bosphorus Bridge ground-breaking ceremony encapsulates Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s reinvention of Turkey as Neo-Ottoman. If Neo-Ottomanism has come to be associated more recently with the rule of Erdoğan, however, it is a political, ideological, diplomatic, economic and socio-cultural trend born long before the rise of the AKP (Yavuz, 2020). For instance, earlier 1453 commemorations, which already possessed a strong nationalist connotation and resonated among the Ottoman capital’s Muslim population, occurred at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century under the leadership of the Ottoman Empire’s Party of Union and Progress (*İttihat ve Terakki Fırkası*).<sup>4</sup> A few decades later, the *Fetih Derneği* (Conquest Association) is established by Hasan Âli Yücel, Turkey’s former Minister of Education from 1938 to 1946, under the rule of the Republican People’s Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* or CHP) just before the 1950 general elections. Commemorating 1453, in other words, existed long before Erdoğan was even born. This is key if we are to understand its significance today.
- 14 More “official” 1453 commemorations begin on the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ottoman Conquest of Istanbul on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1953 after the success of the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti* or DP) in the 1950 general elections. From that moment, the ceremonies take place on a yearly basis and are only interrupted by the military coup of 27<sup>th</sup> May 1960. They become a regular event once again after 1964 in spite of the social and political tensions of the 1960s and 1970s. After the 7<sup>th</sup> September 1980 military coup, the 1453 commemorations take the form of a military parade which then slowly die out in the early 1990s (Copeaux, 2013). What matters here is that starting in 1953, the state, military and religious authorities (as well as the Istanbul municipality after its creation in 1958) all participate conjointly in the 1453 commemorations, each favoring different aspects of the ceremony. For instance, the state emphasizes the grandeur of Turkey while the military focuses on the sacrifice of Ottoman infantry, thereby creating a parallel with the heroism of today’s Turkish soldiers. The religious authorities remind everyone of Prophet Mohammed’s *hadith* on the conquest of Constantinople, while the municipality mobilizes the celebrations for its own political ends against the “established order”, especially after Erdoğan is elected mayor in 1994 when the

“conquest” adopts an oppositional character (Bölükbaşı, 2013, p. 67). All four of these institutional actors have found something significant to highlight in the 1453 commemorations, which consists of performing, every 29<sup>th</sup> of May, Istanbul’s Ottoman conquest in different *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) across the city.

- 15 The Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, an event that lasted 53 days, has thus been reenacted in a single day across the city more or less every year since 1953. Of course, specific choices are made about what particular moments of the 53-day siege are to be reenacted. Two key events have emerged over the years. In 1453 Fatih Sultan Mehmet’s Ottoman army was able to bypass the massive boom chain protecting the Golden Horn by towing its galley warships (*kadirga*) across land. This first act of the siege is reenacted by actors dressed as Ottoman sailors (*levant*) hauling large models of the *kadirga* across the city from Dolmabahçe on the Bosphorus to Kasımpaşa on the Golden Horn. This naval breach then allowed the janissaries (*yeniçeri*), the Ottoman elite infantry, to attack the city’s massive land walls. This second stage of the conquest is reenacted near the Walls of Constantinople at Edirnekapı, where the first Ottoman soldier to enter the city, Ulubatlı Hasan, is impersonated by an actor dressed as a janissary, seen climbing the wall to raise a flag before being killed by the enemy. As a simple soldier who courageously sacrificed himself to become a martyr, Ulubatlı Hasan often steals the spotlight from the more distant Fatih Sultan Mehmet who plays a more static role during the commemorations.
- 16 This part of the historical reenactment usually ends with a military twenty-one-gun salute performed in the distance and is often followed by a military parade down *Vatan Caddesi*, a large boulevard opened in 1957 to facilitate car access inside Istanbul’s historic peninsula and to accommodate large military parades such as this. Concerts are performed across the city by *mehterân*, groups of musicians (*mehter*) dressed as an Ottoman military marching band that have become omnipresent over the years during the 1453 commemorations. Consequently, they have come to be associated today not only with the May 29<sup>th</sup> celebrations, but more broadly with Neo-Ottoman nostalgia, the Turkish-Islamist synthesis and the rise of Political Islam.

Photo 4



President Erdoğan and the First Lady on stage with the “Conquest Unit” composed here of *mehterân* during the 2015 “Conquest Festival”. President Erdoğan shows the sign of “four” with his hand, which means “one state, one nation, one homeland, one flag” but which also refers to “Sunni Islam as one religion” (Vannetzel, 2018)

Source: Official website of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey

- 17 Other events include prayers performed by state and military officials in front of Sultan Fatih Mehmet’s tomb (*türbe*) inside the Fatih Mosque complex. Evening ceremonies are attended by other public figures at the *Rumelihisarı*, an Ottoman fortress built along the Bosphorus in 1452 and renovated between 1955 and 1958. Other gatherings related to the 1453 commemorations also take place in the Topkapı Palace and on Taksim Square, as well as near Hagia Sophia, a place of “unofficial” commemoration before its 2020 reconversion to a mosque.
- 18 According to Etienne Copeaux, the year 1977 constitutes a shift in the way that 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 is remembered in Turkey - that is from a military success to a Muslim victory. That year, more than 8,000 protestors walked from Eyüp to Sultanahmet yelling *tekbir* (“Allahuekber”) and demanding to pray inside Hagia Sophia, just as the then vice-Prime Minister, Necmettin Erbakan, announced he would do (Copeaux, 2013).<sup>5</sup> “The theme of ‘waiting for the generation that will reconquer Istanbul’ was constantly on the agenda, and a right-wing student march of the time exhorted the youth, reminding them they were the same age as Fatih when he conquered the city” (Bora, 1999, p. 48). Thus, the commemorations quickly turned into an occasion for conservative, nationalist, religious groups to reclaim Hagia Sophia, which is turned into a site of “unofficial” commemorative protests by right-wing student organizations. Some of their most fervent members even attempt to enter the museum in an effort to mimic the Sultan’s prayer. Authorities have anticipated such actions over the years by stationing police around the museum or simply closing down the building itself.
- 19 In the 1990s, Turkish Political Islam makes significant advances and is no longer afraid to show itself in public. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is elected mayor of Istanbul in 1994 and

Necmettin Erbakan, now leader of the conservative, religious Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, henceforth RP) becomes Prime Minister two years later. The 1453 commemorations become the occasion to showcase their popularity for Erbakan's RP in the 1990s (and, after 2002, for Erdoğan's AKP). At this point in time, the 1453 commemorations are no longer just about Fatih (Sultan Mehmet) and his victorious Ottoman army; they are more about the current *fetih*, that is, the recent takeover of Istanbul and Turkey by Political Islam. The ceremonies now start in the morning after a double call for prayer is performed. Many of the events take place in the neighborhood where Erdoğan grew up, Kasımpaşa, usually inside its large football stadium (later renamed the Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Stadium). This particular spot is soon designated as the place where Fatih Sultan Mehmet performed his last prayer before attacking the city walls (Copeaux, 2014a).

- 20 The 1453 commemorations continue to expand across the city in the late 1990s. A light show is first performed in Sultanahmet in 1997 for the occasion and fireworks above Balat (near the seat of the Greek Patriarchate) become a regular feature of the festivities from that moment on, growing larger year after year. With the rise of the AKP in the 2000s, the 1453 commemorations are turned into the "Conquest Festival" (*Fetih şöleni*), which consists of an entire week of events including not just historical reenactments and military parades, light shows and fireworks, but also public concerts, symposia and other festivities, lasting late into the night, with thousands of guests invited from all over the world. This gradual expansion of the *Fetih şöleni* culminates with the opening of the Panorama 1453 History Museum in 2009, which, in itself, is a re-enactment of the Ottoman army's siege of Constantinople inside a three-dimensional, panoramic museum (Bozoğlu, 2020).

Photo 5



A packed audience on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2011 inside the Panorama 1453 History Museum, which displays in 3D the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottoman army

Source: L'Express, Reuters, Murad Sezer

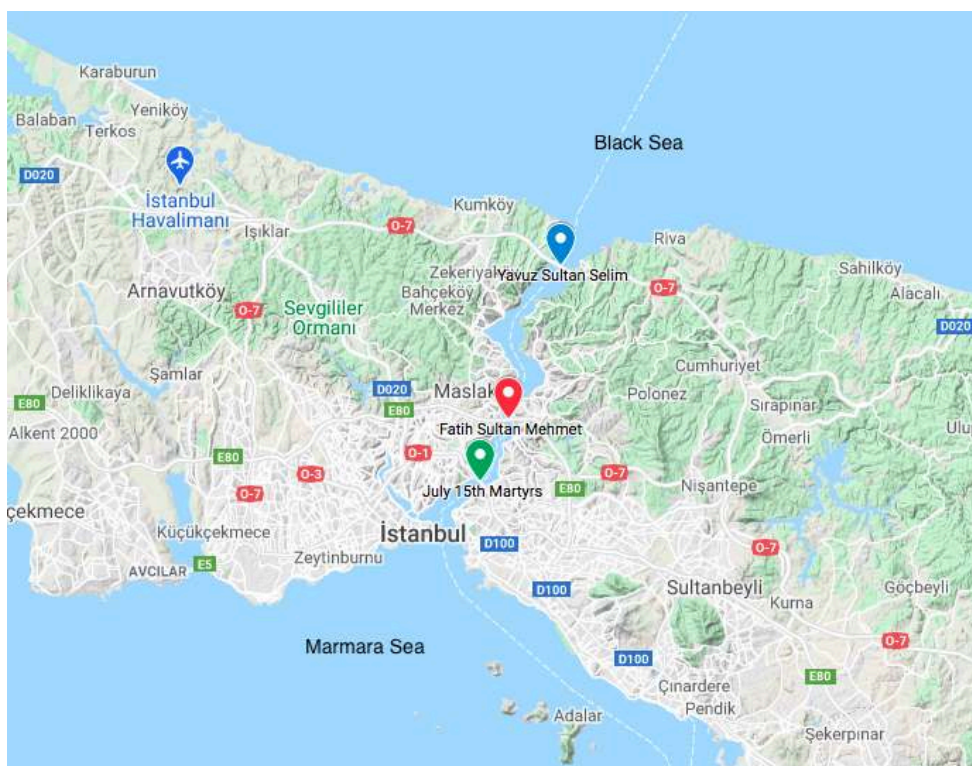
- 21 The commemorations continue to grow in the 2010s. *Fetih 1453*, a popular Turkish film on the conquest, is shown on a large outdoor screen above the Golden Horn on 25<sup>th</sup> May 2013. “On the 563rd anniversary of the Conquest in 2016, attended by (now) President Erdoğan and Prime Minister Binali Yıldırım, the Conquest was ‘revived’ with the ‘world’s largest’ 3D stage onto which spectacular animations of the Conquest were projected in a massive open-air spectacle, transmitted live on the AKP-supported TV channel A Haber, before a firework display and a show by the Turkish Air Force’s ‘Turkish Stars’” (Bozoğlu, 2020, p. 32). The “Conquest Festival” reaches another peak in 2020. On May 29<sup>th</sup> of that year, its main event - a film depicting the siege of Istanbul, with Ulubatlı Hasan and Fatih Sultan Mehmet playing the main roles, shown on a monumental reconstruction of the city walls - takes place inside the city’s historic center in front of Hagia Sophia, about to be reconverted into a mosque a few weeks later. In this case, the reconversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, an act performed by Fatih Sultan Mehmet for the first time in 1453, had not been simply reenacted but fully realized.

## Infrastructural *hizmet*

- 22 There was probably less of a break in time than the expressions “Conquest of Istanbul” or “Fall of Constantinople” infer, since the Ottomans were already present around Istanbul long before its “conquest”. Further, an important Christian, Greek-speaking community continued living in Ottoman-controlled Istanbul after its “fall”. What matters here, however, is not the conquest itself but how it is remembered and reenacted today. Without ever detailing what exactly happened at the time, Prime Minister Erdoğan nonetheless uses the event in his speech at the ground-breaking ceremony of the Bosphorus Third Bridge to revive an idealized, glorious Ottoman past. By doing so, he places himself at the level of Fatih Sultan Mehmet, foregrounding what he perceives as his own contemporary “conquest” of the city - not a military conquest, but a more techno-political, socio-cultural and civilizational conquest.
- 23 In his speech, Erdoğan refers to the bridge both as the Bosphorus new pearl (*Boğaz’ın yeni incisi*, see Photos 2 and 3) and as the third necklace (*gerdanlık*) over the Bosphorus:
- We are once again laying the foundations of a giant project. We will give to the seven-hilled city (Istanbul) seven important monuments, but of course seven monuments for today’s Istanbul is not enough. Everyone in the world will talk about these monuments. One of these is the third necklace for which we are now preparing to lay the foundations, and god willing (*inşallah*) we will see this bridge in a short time.
- 24 Whether the bridge actually embellishes its surroundings (like a pearl or a necklace) is, of course, questionable. Its construction caused massive environmental destruction as forests were destroyed to make way for highways and the rapid urban expansion around them.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, people might appreciate differently the aesthetics of the three “necklaces” over the Bosphorus - the First Bosphorus Bridge completed in 1976, the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge, already named after the conqueror in 1988, and the Third Bosphorus Bridge, or Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge, completed in 2016 - each connecting Istanbul’s European and Anatolian sides. Very much like jewelry that depicts a person’s social status, these three flashy urban mega-infrastructures play the

role of reaffirming the city's identity as a global metropolis striving to show itself off as both attractive economically and advanced technologically.

Map 1



Location of Istanbul's three bridges over the Bosphorus Strait: In green, the "original" Bosphorus Bridge (finished in 1973) renamed the July 15th Martyrs Bridge in 2016. In red, the Fatih Sultan Mehmet Bridge (finished in 1988). In blue, the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge (finished in 2016)

- 25 In the quote above, Erdoğan not only boasts about the Third Bosphorus Bridge during its inauguration, but also about six other urban mega-projects soon to be launched or about to be finished. Of these seven projects, besides the Third Bosphorus Bridge, two others (the Third Airport and Kanal Istanbul) are mega-infrastructures in planning and one (Marmaray) is under construction at the time.<sup>7</sup> Istanbul's Third Airport - a "people-oriented" airport, according to Erdoğan, that the entire world will soon be speaking about - opened at the end of 2018, replacing the smaller Istanbul Atatürk Airport, now closed (Kurşunlugil, 2019). Kanal İstanbul, another urban mega-project still in the planning stage, is an artificial sea-level waterway connecting the Black Sea and Sea of Marmara to allow cargo ships to bypass the narrower Bosphorus Strait. The controversies concerning the environmental impact of these two projects, that have emerged long before their construction, are downplayed by Erdoğan in his speech when he claims that protestors simply don't know what they are talking about. Instead, Erdoğan declares: "We are bringing a civilization project to Istanbul, a city of civilization". He focuses once again on what these monuments (*eser*), which are not built for the nation alone, will bring to a new civilization that looks both towards its past and its future.
- 26 The Prime Minister then evokes Marmaray, an underground tunnel built across the Bosphorus to connect Istanbul's European and Asian sides by rail. Here too, Erdoğan

omits any mention of controversies behind the project, such as the archaeological discoveries in Istanbul's Yenikapı neighborhood that slowed down the digging of the tunnel and brought it almost to a halt.

In 2011, Erdoğan celebrated his fifty-seventh birthday inside the still unfinished tunnel and blamed the construction delays on the archeological discoveries: "Oh, some archeological crockery turned up—oh, some finding turned up," he told the press. "That's how they put obstacles in our path. Are these things really more important than the human?" (In this, as in subsequent remarks on the subject, Erdoğan called the Yenikapı findings *çanak çömlek*: a dismissive term for tableware, generally translated as "pots and pans.") He vowed that there would be no more delays: the train would begin running on October 29, 2013—the ninetieth anniversary of the Republic of Turkey (Batuman, 2015).

- 27 Infrastructures are not new in Turkey, of course. They already played an important "modernizing" role during the Tanzimat (1839-1876) and single-party Republican period (1923-1945). During the Cold War, the World Bank and European Investment Bank funded the building of energy, transportation, communication, and tourism infrastructures to help the country "develop" economically and socially. With Erdoğan, however, such urban and rural mega-projects (Third Bosphorus Bridge, Third Istanbul Airport, Kanal Istanbul, Marmaray, etc.) have become somewhat of an obsession. For instance, Erdoğan often likes to remind his audience that the number of airports in Turkey has more or less doubled from 25 to 49 since he has been in power.
- 28 Infrastructures, built thanks to public-private partnerships, are at the core of the economic program of Erdoğan's AKP, in power since 2002. Although now less talked about, its "2023 political vision", an ambitious set of economic, diplomatic and social goals established in 2010 for the anticipated centenary of the Turkish Republic founded on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1923, aims to transform Turkey into one of the world's top ten economies by reducing its unemployment rate to 5 percent, and making it the fifth most popular tourist destination in the world. These objectives, among others, will be achieved, in part, through the building of three nuclear power plants, wind turbines and geothermal power plants, the expansion of Turkey's high-speed train network and highways, and the establishment of multiple seaports and airports across the country.

Photo 6



A total of 1453 trucks paraded from Istanbul's Third Airport in 2017 to celebrate the 564th anniversary of the Ottoman Conquest of Istanbul, an attempt to break the Guinness World Record for 'longest truck parade'

Source: Anadolu Ajansi

- 29 Erdoğan often calls these mega-infrastructural projects a service (or *hizmet*) that he personally provides, not only to his country but to the entire world.<sup>8</sup> This is a recurring theme in Turkish nationalist historiography, where the expression has been used since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to express the service that the Turkish race has rendered to Muslim and world civilizations (Copeaux, 1996, p.109). Erdoğan explains that he doesn't just provide *hizmet* to the people who have voted for him, however, but to the entire world, including, of course, the 84 million people living in Turkey. In this way, Erdoğan positions himself powerfully. He doesn't need to remind people of his electoral victories, since everyone in the country is in his debt and obligated to thank him. Each infrastructural commemoration then becomes an occasion for Erdoğan to celebrate, not only his success, but his never-ending benevolence.
- 30 Prime Minister Erdoğan declares the following during the ground-breaking ceremony: "Cities ought to be dedicated to those who strive to build countries. Fatih Sultan Mehmet once said, 'The trick is not to build a city; the main skill is to win hearts'." Erdoğan's plan is also to "win hearts" through what we call *infrastructural hizmet*, a way of building public works and rendering services to all, but always expecting something in return. Consequently, anyone who has received such "gifts" from his AKP-led governments must be overtly grateful. This includes what the AKP labels as its enemies, including the Gezi Park protestors who began denouncing the government and calling for civil reforms near Taksim Square on the day before the ground-breaking ceremony of the Third Bosphorus Bridge.
- 31 The official name of the Third Bosphorus Bridge was also announced on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013, during the same ceremony, by President Abdullah Gül:
- As a result, we all together concluded that the name of the Third Bridge ought to be "Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge." In order to show our respect and gratitude in this city to this great Sultan, this great Padishah, who aggrandized the Ottoman Empire, transformed it into a world-class power, took the steps leading to great conquests,



and entrusted us with the sacred relics, we decided all together to give this name. We hope that from now on the Third Bridge will always be called the Yavuz Sultan Selim Bridge.

- 32 Yavuz Sultan Selim (1470-1520) led the Ottoman Empire from 1512 until his death, and, in just a few years, expanded its rule over most of the Middle East. Selim was able to push the Safavid Empire out of Eastern Anatolia, conquer land controlled until then by the Mamluks of Egypt, and bring Ottoman rule to the Arabian Peninsula. For this, he acquired the title of Caliph for himself and all succeeding Ottoman Sultans until the beginning of the 20th century. Selim's conquest of the Middle East made the Ottoman Empire responsible for guarding the pilgrimage routes to Mecca and Medina, and thereby consolidated a major Muslim empire for centuries to come.
- 33 The choice of the name allowed the AKP to revive another Ottoman Sultan for the occasion besides Fatih Sultan Mehmet. While 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 corresponds to the conquest of Istanbul, the name Yavuz Sultan Selim congers up the rapid expansion of the now defunct empire in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and the conquest, among other territories, of Eastern Anatolia. The choice of the name, which was supposedly made "all together" (President Gül repeats *hep beraber* several times in his speech), stirred controversy however. Much of Turkey's Alevi population was offended by the choice, since it claims that Yavuz Sultan Selim killed many of the community's leaders in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In the end, naming the bridge Yavuz Sultan Selim angered Alevis, just as celebrating 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 as the "conquest" of Istanbul (rather than the "fall" of Constantinople) irritates Greece, or commemorating *Anzac Günü* every year on April 25<sup>th</sup> instead of the 1915 Armenian Genocide the day before, angers Armenians, or transforming Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque exasperates the country's secular population, etc, etc. The list goes on. Erdoğan uses these infrastructural commemorations as revenge for the past. They allow him to reaffirm his country's particular place in world politics and consolidate support from the conservative, nationalist, religious side of Turkish society.
- 34 These historical references to the Ottomans are not made innocently by the AKP and serve as a way to stir up old disputes with whom Turkish nationalists consider to be their historic enemies. Erdoğan fights evil at home and abroad against terrorists, foreigners, opposition parties, journalists, activists, lawyers, teachers, scientists, etc, etc. This list also goes on and includes anyone who gets in the way of his plans for his "New Turkey" (*Yeni Türkiye*). The speeches of Prime Minister, now President Erdoğan during such infrastructural commemorations express this constant struggle against evil forces, a black-and-white image of politics, an "us" and "them" mentality. During many of these public occasions, he presents himself within these divisions either as an "elderly statesman/caring father" waving slowly to the crowd, hugging young children and old women, touching his heart with the right hand while gently nodding his head, or as an "impatient, hot-tempered authoritarian leader" using threatening gestures, shooing with cliched fists, accusing by pointing his finger... (Joppien, 2020, p. 239-41), an aggressive stance on the part of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that has become even more blatant after the failed coup d'état of July 2016.

## Conclusion

- 35 Decades of Kemalist education have led many Turks to believe that their ancestors come from Central Asia. Later, the Turkish-Islamist synthesis and Neo-Ottomanism have further disconnected Turkish people from their ethnic and religious “others” vanquished over the centuries. Consequently, many in Turkey perceive their land not as their own but as a trophy of conquest over these more or less imagined historic rivals, the same ones that ultimately keep the country united today. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a divisive political figure in present-day Turkey, perpetuates this myth of conquest in the country’s imaginary to rally his electoral base against his foes both past and present. Here, we have shown how infrastructural commemorations, such as the ground-breaking ceremony of the Bosphorus Third Bridge on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013, serve as a kind of revenge on the past for Erdoğan.
- 36 These festive events allow Erdoğan not only to revive an idealized, glorious Ottoman past, but also to foreground his own contemporary civilizing mission, reaffirm his country’s particular place in world politics, consolidate support from the conservative, nationalist and religious side of Turkey, assert his power against his enemies, place himself at the level of Fatih Sultan Mehmet and perform his own present-day conquest of Istanbul. Older than some Kemalist traditions, the commemorations of 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 - an endless reenactment of the “conquering” of Istanbul - have taken place in Turkey long before the rise of the AKP in the early 2000s. It has indeed been, as we have shown, a nationalist constant since at least the 1950s, involving the active participation of the state, military, religious and municipal authorities. Again, this is key if we are to understand the event’s significance, but what precisely is the nation remembering every year on May 29<sup>th</sup>?
- 37 According to Etienne Copeaux, the real conquest (*fetih*) was put into action, not in 1453 by Fatih Sultan Mehmet, but at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with a series of violent events including the Armenian Genocide of 1915. Copeaux explains how Islam - the dominant, but certainly not the only religion under Ottoman rule - was only able to consolidate its supremacy after the demise of the empire through the ideology of 20<sup>th</sup> century nationalism. He then asks the following question: « Is the commemoration of the *fetih* - with its pomp and circumstance, military parades, the music of the *mehter*, the beautiful costumes and the glorious speeches - the impossible celebration of the almost complete Islamisation and Turkification of the territory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, much more than the commemoration of an event in the 15<sup>th</sup> century? » (2014b)
- 38 Such a post-Ottoman *fetih*, Copeaux adds, cannot be celebrated or remembered as such in Turkey today for at least two reasons. First, events like the Armenian Genocide are denied or explained as anything but genocide. Second, the Turkish state is secular and therefore cannot commemorate what is essentially a religious victory. Nonetheless, commemorating the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul, whether it is during the yearly “Conquest Festival”, or inside the Panorama 1453 History Museum, or at the ground-breaking ceremony of an urban mega-project, does in fact seem to operate as a way to reaffirm the « impossible celebration of the almost complete Islamisation and Turkification of the territory in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. »
- 39 Indeed, every time a mega-infrastructure is inaugurated in Turkey, Erdoğan commensurately downplays the role of other cultures and histories, some annihilated or erased during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in an effort to make room for his “New Turkey”, not

just as a nation but as a world civilization. Such infrastructural commemorations, in the end, manage to displace a series of historic events that (Erdoğan's) Turkey wishes to forget or continues to deny. The obsession to always build more and more urban mega-projects - the Bosphorus Third Bridge, Kanal Istanbul, the Third Airport and Marmaray are just a few examples - strengthens Erdoğan's project for a new civilization while erasing other unwanted histories and cultures that continue to remain inconvenient within the country's dominant historical narratives.

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## NOTES

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z85iOhqWDqY>

2. "Constantinople was so powerful a symbol of resistance to the expansion of Islam that a whole series of *aḥādīth*, some authentic and some not, as well as legendary and folk-epic material, spread about the future Muslim conquest of the city. The Ottomans would recall, and cite on every appropriate occasion, one of these *aḥādīth* which said: 'One day Constantinople will definitely be conquered. What a good amir and what a good army is the one that will accomplish this.'" (Inalcik, 1990, p. 1)

3. The term *varoş* refers to anyone living in Istanbul's poorest neighborhoods, usually recent migrants coming to the city from rural Anatolia. It has a negative connotation in the mouth of Istanbul's better-off, educated elite (Demirtaş, Şen, 2007).

4. "Istanbul was decorated with white and red flags for that day and attendees walked from St. Sophia Mosque to the Fatih district. In Fatih, Hamdullah Suphi Bey, the President of the Turkish Hearts (*Türk Ocağı*) emphasized the Turkic ideals of the empire in his speech." (Tanin Newspaper, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1330, Ankara University Archives).

5. Sultan Fatih Mehmet's prayer inside Hagia Sophia after entering the city in 1453 marked the first conversion of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Byzantine church into an Ottoman mosque, which Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, first president of the Republic of Turkey, later turned into a museum in 1935. In July 2020, however, the museum was converted back into a mosque and prayers were once again allowed inside Hagia Sophia.

6. It is estimated that, by 2030, 41% of the area's forested areas and 28% of its fragile ecosystem will be urbanized (Ayazli et al., 2015).

7. The other three mega-projects mentioned by Erdoğan are: the transformation of Yassıada into the Island of Freedom and Democracy, the cleaning-up of the Golden Horn, and last, but not least, the transformation of Gezi Park into a shopping mall. Similar points could be raised in this article about these urban mega-projects even though they are not infrastructures *per se*.

8. The term 'hizmet' is used less by Erdoğan since 2016 and his fallout with the Gülen movement, whose philosophy is very much based upon this concept of *hizmet*.

## ABSTRACTS

The ground-breaking ceremony of Istanbul's Third Bosphorus Bridge took place on 29<sup>th</sup> May 2013. The date chosen by the then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, to launch the construction of this urban mega-project transformed the inauguration into a commemoration of the 560<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Ottoman Conquest of Istanbul by Fatih Sultan Mehmet. After explaining the significance of the 29<sup>th</sup> May 1453 commemorations in Turkey, in this article, we argue that the building of mega-infrastructure, such as the Third Bosphorus Bridge, has become the occasion for Erdoğan to (re)conquer the city of Istanbul, thus mirroring Fatih Sultan Mehmet more than five centuries ago. In the end, we argue that the "Conquest Festival" in Istanbul today is perhaps more than just a celebration of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman siege of the city, but instead a diverted way for the nation to commemorate - without necessarily ever acknowledging it openly - the ethnic and religious "purification" of Turkey during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

La cérémonie d'inauguration du troisième pont du Bosphore à Istanbul a eu lieu le 29 mai 2013. La date choisie par le Premier ministre de l'époque, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, pour lancer la construction de ce méga-projet urbain a transformé l'inauguration en une commémoration du 560<sup>e</sup> anniversaire de la conquête d'Istanbul par le sultan Ottoman Fatih Mehmet. Après avoir expliqué la signification des commémorations du 29 mai 1453 en Turquie, nous soutenons dans cet article que la construction de méga-infrastructures, comme le troisième pont du Bosphore, est devenue l'occasion pour Erdoğan de (re)conquérir la ville d'Istanbul, faisant ainsi pendant à Fatih Sultan Mehmet il y a plus de cinq siècles. Enfin, le « festival de la conquête » à Istanbul est aujourd'hui peut-être plus qu'une simple célébration du siège de la ville par les Ottomans au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle, mais plutôt une manière détournée pour la nation de commémorer - sans nécessairement le reconnaître ouvertement - la « purification » ethnique et religieuse de la Turquie au XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Turquie, méga-projet urbain, 29 mai 1453, Parti de la Justice et du Développement, néo-Ottomanisme, hizmet infrastructurel

**Keywords:** Turkey, urban mega-project, 29th May 1453, Justice and Development Party, Neo-Ottomanism, infrastructural hizmet

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