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## The Turkish Nation as a Bridge: Imagining a Nation in Turkish Parliamentary Discourse

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### Abstract

This article analyses Turkish parliamentary discourse about Turkish communities living outside of Turkey from 1988 to 2016. It focuses particularly on the usage of the bridge metaphor in discursive strategies towards these communities; concentrated mainly in former Ottoman territories and parts of Eurasia. The article argues that Turkish parliamentarians used the bridge metaphor to frame Turkish communities as part of both the Turkish nation and the nation where they lived, thereby constituting their liminal and in-between identity. Parliamentarians continuously (re-)imagine, (re-)construct, and (re-)produce the Turkish nation by using different discursive strategies that included uniqueness, sameness or difference. They used identity markers as ethnicity, language, geography, history, and religion to address these strategies. Metaphorically framing Turkish communities as a bridge provided them a dominant bridge role, namely that of friendship and peace. By transforming Turkish communities into a bridge of friendship and peace, through different dimensions, they believed that they would have a positive and crucial role for the country where they live and for Turkey. This bridge role provided opportunities as well as limits, illustrating the interplay between discourse and foreign policy developments.

### Keywords

Bridge Metaphor,  
Imagined Turkish  
Communities,  
Discursive Practices,  
Turkish Parliament,  
Foreign Policy

### Introduction

This article analyzes the stance towards Turkish communities living outside of Turkey from 1988 to 2016 expressed in Turkish parliamentary discourse. It focuses particularly on the usage of the metaphor of a bridge in discursive strategies towards these communities. A great amount of research has illustrated the popularity of the usage of the bridge metaphor in Turkish identity formation processes and its geopolitical role. In this context, the metaphor of a bridge reflected Turkey's in-between, liminal or hybrid identity and, hence, its geopolitical role (Aykaç, 2021; Rumelili and Suleymanoglu-Kurum, 2017;

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Yanık, 2009). However, there is little research on how the metaphor is used within the construction of the Turkish nation by Turkish parliamentarians. This article aims to fill that gap. It is interested, more specifically, in what it means to metaphorically frame the Turkish communities outside of Turkey as a bridge.

The article argues that Turkish parliamentarians used the bridge metaphor towards its imagined Turkish communities in an attempt to integrate them within the Turkish nation and Turkey's foreign policy ambitions. The metaphor, however, goes both ways. By framing them as a bridge they also positioned these communities partially outside of the Turkish nation. These imagined communities exist in in-between spaces as they become part of both the Turkish nation and the nation where they live. Therefore, they challenge the territorial nation-state (Varadarajan, 2010). The metaphor of a bridge reflects this and constitutes the hybrid, in-between and liminal identity of these imagined communities. Additionally, metaphorically framing Turkish communities as a bridge provides them with a role that serves as a connecting mechanism between Turkey and the country in which they live. In that vein, Turkish parliamentarians used the bridge metaphor to influence and strengthen ties with the countries these Turkish communities live.

The first section covers with the theoretical concepts used and touches upon the concept of imagined political communities in relation to the kin-state. Additionally, it explains the methodology of the research. The second section analyses how parliamentarians used the metaphor of a bridge to approach different Turkish communities: concentrated, mainly, in former Ottoman territories, Greece, the Balkan, the Middle East, the Caucasus, and in different parts of Eurasia. It gives insight into the different ways in which these communities are imagined and constructed; by focusing on elements ranging from language, religion and history to culture, ethnicity, and geography. The third paragraph demonstrates how Turkish parliamentarians transformed these communities into an important foreign policy tool that paved the way to formulate policies towards them and the country where they live. Moreover, it reveals the limits of foreign policy, simultaneous to the opportunities of using the metaphor of a bridge in relation to the imagined Turkish communities.

## Imagined Communities and Methodology

There has been a vast amount of research conducted on Turkish speaking communities in Europe, more specifically in West-Europe, that are primary formed through labor migration. These studies focus mainly on the role and perspective of these communities regarding their homeland and/or kin-state (Baser, 2014; Chapin, 1996; Kaya, 2010; Küçükcan, 2007; Sirseloudi, 2012; Yabancı, 2021) Additionally, these communities are perceived and framed as diasporas. This article refrains from using the term diaspora for several reasons. Firstly, older and new uses of the concept of diaspora focus strongly on migration

and dispersal, and cross-border experiences or a desire to return to the homeland (Faist, 2010, p. 12). This article illustrates that Turkish parliamentarians constructed the Turkish nation abroad by imagining Turkish communities through a shared history, language, ethnicity, and/or religion. These communities do not need to have any cross-border experience, nor do they have to perceive Turkey as their “homeland” or “place of origin.” However, parliamentarians envisioned Turkey as being the state that has the responsibility and privilege to safeguard the security and rights of these communities that are perceived as their kin. This meant that Turkey was hierarchically framed as the “leader” of the Turkish nation, which included Turkish communities worldwide such as the Uyghurs in China and the Turkmens in Iraq. Secondly, the word diaspora is contested in Turkey. Not only did it enter Turkish language more recently, it was also perceived negatively by some political elites as it implied separation, while they tried to approach the nation as a whole. Nowadays the term diaspora is more embraced and used by Turkish officials and academics. However, its meaning and usage remains unclear as it refers to both narrow and broad definitions, which are used interchangeably, thereby making it difficult to grasp what it is exactly meant by the Turkish diaspora (Yaldiz, 2019).

This article, therefore, prefers to use the concept of imagined communities instead of diasporas. Benedict Anderson argued that nations are imagined political communities, in other words, communities come alive and are constructed through imagination. It is imagined because not all of the community members are familiar with each other, yet in their minds they feel a strong connection with one another. Values of comradeship and patriotism are at the core of these imaged communities, thereby having more horizontal relationships instead of hierarchy (Anderson, 2006, p. 6–7). However, instead of focusing on how people imagined themselves as belonging to a community and the comradeship or solidarity that existed within these communities, this article is interested how the nation is imagined, defined, and forged through discursive practices of Turkish parliamentarians. The meaning of the nation is produced, transformed, maintained and dismantled discursively (Wodak, 2017, p. 409).

Turkish parliamentarians used discursive strategies that entail difference and sameness by focusing on the Turkish language, religion, and Ottoman history to detach imagined communities from a fixed territory and mark them as different in the societies where they live, thereby constituting and reaffirming their authority over the nation beyond its borders. In other words, these imagined communities challenged the notion of the nation-state as they existed outside of territorial limits and became defined by liminality and in-betweenness (Hall, 1999). The usage of the metaphor of a bridge played an important role in constructing the liminal and in-between identity of these imagined communities as they integrated these communities into the Turkish nation by making Turkey their kin-state, but at same time reconfirmed their attachment to the state where they live. The research illustrates how the bridge metaphor has the capacity to

unify reasoning and shape discursive structures, thereby bringing identity constructions together.

The focus on citizenship was, for obvious reasons, seen as an important factor in defining the imagined community and the authority of its kin-state. However, citizenship was not an essential factor in determining the nation as many of the third and fourth generation emigrants who are not citizens of their kin-state could still be perceived as part of a larger territorially dispersed nation. Additionally, the imagined community did not need to trace its journey back to a common place of origin. The sense of belonging to a homeland was constituted within the imagined political communities, and also through the interaction between their kin-state and themselves (Varadarajan, 2010).

Turkish parliamentarians focused particularly on Turkish communities in former Ottoman territories. These communities were particularly defined by sudden border changes that are mainly caused by (civil) wars and other (often traumatic) events and conflicts, which were visible during the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The imagined communities ended up in new and different political spaces, sometimes against their will, and Turkish parliamentarians approached these communities based on their shared Ottoman history, Turkish language and kin, or religion. Rogers Brubaker referred to these communities as accidental diasporas. He argued that these imagined communities had a strong territorial focus and mostly held citizenship of the country where they lived instead of that of their kin-state (Brubaker, 2000, p. 2). This was the case for many of the Turkish communities that lived in former Ottoman territories such as the Turkish communities of Western Thrace in Greece and the Turkmens in Iraq. Turkish parliamentarians supported the rights of these communities and sometimes intervened transnationally, especially when the interest of the imagined communities overlapped with Turkey's foreign policy ambitions (Papuçular, 2020).

As mentioned earlier, in Anderson's definition of the imagined community there is a strong focus on the community-level, particularly on how a group of people imagine themselves being part of a community, which constitutes horizontal relations and resembles a nation. This article takes a different approach and contributes to Anderson's line of thinking by focusing on how political elites, parliamentarians more specifically, construct the nation abroad through discourses. These political elites constantly redraw or (re)confirm the boundaries of the nation-state. It is, thus, important to try to understand how these elites (re)articulate the nation and the role and the responsibilities of its state. As Latha Varadarajan states:

Whether it is "Hungarians beyond the boundaries," "Indians abroad," "Chinese living overseas," or "Russians in the near abroad," state

authorities' constitution of various diasporas as part of an extended global nation is quite clearly a rearticulation of nationhood, a redefining of who can and should belong to the imagined community of the nation (Varadarajan, 2010, p. 22–23).

This article focuses on the parliament to understand and illustrate how Turkish parliamentarians (re)define the Turkish nation globally. The parliament is an empirical site of explicit articulations of identity, an arena of contestation, represented a formal authority, and included a wider political debate – as its inclusion incorporated a variety of political texts as debates, speeches, and statements. In these, a broad range of political actors like the cabinet, the opposition and the president defined their political positions (Hansen, 2006, p. 53–57). This increased the likelihood of identifying discursive strategies towards Turkish communities. In order to understand the development of the imagined Turkish communities within a longer historical period, the article scrutinized a total of 3,576 transcripts of Turkish parliamentary debates between 1988 and 2016.<sup>i</sup> This period covered a wide variety of political parties and parliamentarians, thereby providing a broader overview of the bridge metaphor's usage in parliament outside of the current Justice and Development Party (AKP)-period (2002). Moreover, this time span was valuable for exposing any shifts in discursive strategies over a longer period of time. It includes major national and international developments that were important to Turkey's identity and geopolitical role, hence to the Turkish parliament. The 1987 parliamentary elections were the first relatively free elections in Turkey after the military coup of 1980, thereby giving the parliament more legitimacy and authority. The end of the Cold War meant that Turkey needed to redefine its geopolitical role within international politics; making the usage of the bridge metaphor particularly popular (Aykaç, 2021; Bilgin, 2007; Rumelili, 2008; Yanık, 2009). This metaphor was also criticized in this period, especially by AKP-elites.<sup>ii</sup> Research on the bridge metaphor's usage in parliament illustrated its transformation and decline after 2010 (Aykaç, 2021). It is, therefore, interesting to examine to what extent the bridge metaphor was also used towards Turkish communities outside of Turkey within this period.

In this period, there were other important domestic developments and shifts, such as the electoral growth of political parties that were religiously inspired, like the Welfare

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<sup>i</sup> All parliamentary debates from the 18th Parliament up to the current 26th Parliament have been included in the analysis, which means that the first parliamentary debate dates back to 14 December 1987 and the last scrutinized one to 7 April 2016. The software program Nvivo 11 was used to organize, categorize, code, and analyze the transcripts. All texts are translated by the author himself, and as such all errors are his own. Transcripts can be accessed via the website of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey (TBMM): <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/>.

<sup>ii</sup> The perception was that a bridge role was too passive and did not reflect Turkey's foreign policy-ambitions. See for example (Davutoğlu, 2011, p. 350).

Party and later on the AKP, and the tension this triggered regarding civil-military relations (Eligür, 2010, p. 76–84). This could have been reflected on discursive strategies towards the Turkish nation; putting more emphasis on Islam. This was already visible in the period that Turgut Özal was in office, first as Prime-Minister (1983-1989), and later as President (1989-1993). Özal's tenure was known for neo-Ottomanist and Islamist discourse and policies, thereby focusing on Ottoman legacy and territories, and Islam. This tendency was partly in response to international developments that harmed the situation of Turkish and Muslim communities, such as the forced expulsion of Muslims from Bulgaria in 1989; the Aegean dispute and the critical situation of Turks in Western Thrace in the early 1990s; the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s, which led to ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims; the Gulf War in 1990-1991 affecting Iraqi Turkmen communities and the Kurdish issue; the First Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988-1994) leading to the deportation of Azerbaijani Turks; and the impact of the dissolution of the USSR (Yavuz, 2020). Later in this timespan, other important developments and conflicts were the Kosovo War in 1998-1999 and the Iraq War in 2003-2011. Moreover, the situation of the Uyghurs in China kept deteriorating. In other words, this was an important period that contained many international developments and change, which had consequences for the Turkish communities and forced the Turkish parliament to respond. The analysis stops in 2016 due to the constitutional referendum of 2017 that reformed the Turkish political system which significantly decreased parliamentary power (Aykaç, 2021).

The article focuses on the parliament as an actor. It concentrated on the outcome of discourse and counter-discourse within parliament that contributed to Turkey's official discourse and policy. Deductive and inductive coding strategies are combined. The deductive strategy entails systematically searching the word "bridge" within each transcript as the main coding strategy. The analysis focuses on the word bridge in a metaphorical sense and does not include other usages, for example the actual construction of bridges in Turkey. The initial outcome illustrates that Turkish parliamentarians metaphorically framed Turkey as a bridge 631 times within the timeframe. The coding is, furthermore, narrowed by only focusing on the metaphor of a bridge in relation to Turkish communities and kin outside of Turkey, thereby focusing on the Turkish nation abroad. It then identified discursive strategies that focus on uniqueness, sameness or difference towards these communities. The following sub-codes based on (imagined) regions and geographies that are visible in parliamentary debates were created: the West, the East, the North, the South, Europe, the Caucasus, Asia, Central-Asian Republics, the Middle East, the Turkish Republics, the European Community/Union, the Balkans, the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Africa, East-Turkestan, and West-Asia. In addition, sub-codes are created on cultural, religious, historical and political values as democracy, Islam/Muslim population, secularism, liberal/market economy, modern, civilized, brothers, Turkishness

and Ottoman. An inductive strategy led to certain patterns in the data analysis. This entailed the attribution of the metaphor to Turkish speaking communities to make them function as a bridge between Turkey and the country where they live; bringing these, separated but connected, communities (closer) together. These coding and reading strategies give insight into how these Turkish communities were imagined, constructed, and forged by Turkish parliamentarians as part of the Turkish nation and Turkey's foreign policy ambitions.

## The Imagined Turkish Communities

This section discusses how Turkish parliamentarians imagined and constructed Turkish communities and why the bridge metaphor is used towards them. It focuses, first, on Turkish communities that lived in former Ottoman territories, before moving on to a broader focus on the Turkish nation. It explains how parliamentarians used the Turkish language, religion, and history to approach these communities. Additionally, it provides a global and national context in which the metaphor towards these communities was used.

### *Imagined Communities in Former Ottoman Territories*

Under the administration of this friend [the USSR] live our brothers who share our language and our faith. We cannot wait for them [the Turks abroad] to reach to us. We must reach out to them, and we must be prepared for this. We must prepare for this by building spiritual bridges. Language is a bridge, religion is a bridge, history is a bridge [...].<sup>1</sup>

The above quote allegedly belonged to the founder of the Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881-1938). Turkish parliamentarians frequently referred to this quote to illustrate the importance of Turkish language, history, and religion in the constitution of the Turkish nation abroad and Turkey's responsibilities towards these imagined Turkish communities. These parliamentarians particularly focused on Turkish language to define Turkishness and kinship by applying a two-pronged approach. First, by directing attention to Turkish speaking communities that once lived under Ottoman rule and, second, by looking at communities living in regions that were never part of the Ottoman Empire but are seen as ethnically Turkish due to their language. The first category focuses on Turkish communities that were formed due to a radical and sudden reconfiguration of the political space along national lines (Brubaker, 2000, p. 1–2). The dissolution of the Ottoman Empire is a good example of such a reconfiguration, especially when focusing on the Turks of Western Thrace that live in Greece, and Turkish communities living in Bulgaria. The Ottoman Empire ruled for centuries over these regions and, hence, the Ottoman-Turkish influences are strongly visible in these regions. These regions are



perceived as their “homeland.” The Treaty of Lausanne of 1923 confirmed this: the Turks of Western Thrace were left out of the agreed exchange between population of Turkey and Greece. However, Turkey as their kin-state continues to feel responsible for these communities and supports their rights; sometimes even by intervening directly on their behalf. These imagined communities could also ask their kin-state to intervene. However, kin-states usually intervene when their foreign policy interest overlap with that of its nation abroad (Papuçular, 2020, p. 125).

This was most tangible in the case of Turkish speaking communities in Western Thrace. The then Minister of Foreign Affairs Mesut Yılmaz stated in 1988 that Turks of Western Thrace were suffering from social, cultural and religious pressure by the Greek authorities. Yılmaz defined these communities as kin to Turkey.<sup>2</sup> He made a plea for the importance of these communities to Turkey and urged the Greek authorities to shift their political course on this matter. Yılmaz also recognized the potential bridge role that the Turks of Western Thrace could play between Greece and Turkey.<sup>3</sup> In the late 80s and early 90s there was a strong interest in Turkish speaking communities in Greece and Bulgaria. This related to discourse and policies from the “host countries” towards the Turkish communities, but also to foreign policy developments. The early 90s, for example, marked an increase of tension within Turkish-Greek relations over territorial disputes in the Aegean; reflected in discursive strategies towards the Turks in Western Thrace. In 1989, Minister of Defense, İsmail Safa Giray, stated that “tensions within the Turkish-Greek relations have a negative effect on our kin groups living in Greece.”<sup>4</sup> He framed these communities as Muslim Turks, hence, also adding religion as an identity marker to define them. Giray, furthermore, framed these communities as a bridge, thereby differentiating them from the nation-state they live in.<sup>5</sup> Parliamentary Onural Seref Bozkurt from Motherland Party (ANAP) equally framed these communities as a Muslim Turkish minority living in Greece and defined them as Turkey’s kin.<sup>6</sup> Other parliamentarians also emphasized the pressure these Turkish minorities faced in Greece and the necessity to support their rights as their kin-state.<sup>7</sup> The importance of Turkey’s Ottoman legacy in shaping its nation and foreign policy ambitions is well-illustrated by AKP-parliamentarian, İbrahim Köşdere. In 2006, he commemorated the anniversary of the Turkish conquest of Rumelia,<sup>iii</sup> 654 years ago. He extensively elaborated on how the Turks moved from Central Asia to the Balkans, thereby reaching Europe.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, he noted that the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire had far reaching consequences for these regions, particularly for Turks living in Greece and the Balkans. Köşdere illustrated this in the following words:

With the Balkan Wars of 1912, the Ottoman Empire lost all of its Rume-  
lian lands except for our present day borders. However, in Rumelia, Turks

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<sup>iii</sup> A historical region that was referring to Greece and the Balkans.

and their kin communities still carry on their culture and existence. These people are in a position to take on the role of establishing peace in the Balkans and functioning as a cultural bridge between the Balkans and the Republic of Turkey.<sup>9</sup>

Köşdere interpreted the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire as dramatic and sudden. The newly formed nation-states and the radical political reconfiguration had extreme consequences for the Turkish communities and their kin-state, Turkey. According to Köşdere, the Balkans were once even more a Turkish homeland than Anatolia. He saw the Republic of Turkey as a historical, social and cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire, hence, arguing that Turkey had certain responsibilities towards these Turkish communities.<sup>10</sup> The bridge metaphor constituted the in-between and liminal identity of these Turkish communities as they (culturally) connect them with Turkey as their kin-state, while also situating them in the Balkan region. Turkish parliamentarians particularly emphasized the sense of belonging to the Turkish nation that existed within Turkish communities living in Greece. In 1995, Ahmet Nedim illustrated this by recalling a visit with Minister Yildirim Aktuna to these Turkish/Greek communities. He quoted a banner which they saw during the visit: “We are born as a Turk, we will die as a Turk; our educational rights cannot be restricted; we will never give up our soil, life and blood.”<sup>11</sup> Relying on the message of this banner, Nedim stressed that these communities are part of the Turkish nation, foremost, because of their language and religion.<sup>12</sup>

Turkish speaking communities in Bulgaria were similarly approached. The assimilation policies, pressure and violence faced by Turkish speaking communities in Bulgaria, reached its highest point in the late 80s. In May 1989 this resulted into the “Big Excursion” leading to the migration of Bulgarian Muslims to Turkey. In this period more than 300,000 Turkish speaking communities and/or Muslims were forced to move to Turkey. It became reflected in discursive strategies regarding Bulgaria and these communities. In 1989 ANAP-parliamentarian, Onural Seref Bozkurt, framed the events as a “forced deportation of our kinsmen.”<sup>13</sup> SHP-parliamentarian, Günes Gürseler, also expressed her concerns and emphasized that Turkey is not pursuing expansionist or pan-Turkish ambitions. According to her, Turkey’s goal is to protect the rights of Turkish minorities living in other countries.<sup>14</sup> In these contexts, the metaphor of a bridge is used to highlight the value of the Turkish speaking communities, namely their potential to create peace, friendship and dialogue between Turkey and the country where they live. When Bulgaria reversed its discourse and policies towards Bulgarian Turks, Turkish parliamentarians responded positively and supported the process of Bulgarian Turks moving back to Bulgaria. In 2010, Nationalist Movement Party (MHP)-parliamentarian, Hüseyin Yıldız, remarked that Bulgarian Turks enjoyed more freedom of religion and language and that most of the Bulgarian Turks who returned from Turkey to Bulgaria. He believed that the

Bulgarian Turks played an important bridge role between the two countries and are contributing to friendship and trade within Turkey-Bulgaria relations.<sup>15</sup>

The focus on Turkish language and religion remained an important part of discursive strategies to identify the Turkish nation and express primarily sameness and ties between these imagined communities and Turkey. Turkish parliamentarians used these markers to approach these communities that once lived under Ottoman rule. A good example is how Turkish parliamentarians approached the Ahiska Turks that once lived in regions that are now part of present day Georgia. In 1944, during Soviet rule most of them were deported from Georgia to Central Asia. The Ahiska Turks speak the Turkish language and are mostly Muslim. Turkish parliamentarians saw them as part of the Turkish nation and, hence, actively argued for the possibility for them to return to their homelands in Georgia.<sup>16</sup> In 1995, President Süleyman Demirel stated that “Ahiska Turks see Turkey as their motherland.”<sup>17</sup> He believed that if they wanted to return to Turkey, the country should facilitate this.<sup>18</sup> Parliamentarian, Celal Erbay, even argued that the Ahiska Turks functioned as a bridge between Georgia and the countries where they live, stating that if they were allowed to return to Georgia, they would be able to function as a bridge between Turkey and Georgia.<sup>19</sup> Minister Erman Ahin defined all Muslims in Georgia as being part of the Turkish nation instead of only emphasizing the Turkish language. He stated in 1992 that “the local population [particularly in small villages] defines itself as Georgian Muslims and some will speak Turkish as well, especially those that are above the age of 45.”<sup>20</sup> Moreover, he noted that most of them had relatives living in Turkey, especially in the border region. Ahin, thus, argued that religion is very important to identify the imagined Turkish community in Georgia.<sup>21</sup> There was a similar approach towards the Crimean Tatars. Turkish members of parliament saw them as their kin and framed Turkey as their kin-state.<sup>22</sup> Some went further and named them “Crimean Turks” instead of Tatars.<sup>23</sup> According to them, they belonged to the same imagined communities based on shared historical, religious and cultural bonds. Along that line, Kosovar Turks were not regarded differently.<sup>24</sup>

In other instances, religion seemed less important to define the Turkish nation. For example, with the Gagauz people in Moldavia. The Gagauz people are seen as ethnically Turkish and speak also the Turkish language, however, they are Christians. Turkish parliamentarians, therefore, focused on the Turkish language and Ottoman history to integrate the Gagauz people into the Turkish nation and identity. Former President, Süleyman Demirel stated that the “Gagauz people are a solid link in the chain of the Turkish world that is spread across Eurasia.”<sup>25</sup> According to him, the shared language and culture made them part of this Turkish world and framed them as “brothers” of Turkey.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, this allowed them to function as a bridge of friendship between Turkey and Moldavia. In 1996, parliamentarian, Ertugrul Yalçınbayir also emphasized the shared Turkish language between the Gagauz people and Turkey. He framed them as a bridge and urged

Turkey to use this bridge effectively in terms of aid and cooperation. Additionally, he saw Turkey as a regional power that played an important role in Moldavia, especially when it came to defending the rights of the Gagauz people. Yalcinbayir, therewith, characterized Turkey as the kin-state of the Gagauz people by referring to the Turkish language and Ottoman history and argued that Turkey has the responsibility to support and monitor their rights.<sup>27</sup>

As mentioned earlier, global developments were reflected in the discursive strategies towards Turkish communities. This was particularly visible in the context of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. As a result of the invasion there was a growing interest and concern towards the Turkmen communities living in northern parts of Iraq, particularly in oil-rich areas as Kirkuk.<sup>28</sup> Turkish parliamentarians framed these communities as “brothers” and their kin based on language, religion and history. They argued that Turkey had the responsibility to safeguard the rights of these Turkmens. In 2015, AKP-parliamentarian Ramazan Can argued that “Turkey has always defended Iraq’s peace, stability and prosperity, and will continue to be the sole guarantor of the Turkmen presence in Iraq.”<sup>29</sup> Most of the parliamentarians were particularly concerned over the growing influences of the Kurdish population in Iraq and, later on, the threats they faced of Islamic State.<sup>30</sup> In these instances the metaphor of a bridge was used to strengthen the position of the Turkmens within Iraq, noticing their precarious position, while at the same time integrating them within the Turkish nation and formulating a geopolitical position.<sup>31</sup>

### *Imagined Turkish Communities in a Broader Context*

This section illustrates how Turkish parliamentarians imagined the Turkish nation and its communities beyond former Ottoman regions. These parliamentarians focused on different kind of Turkish speaking communities, as the Uyghurs in China or Turkish speaking groups in Central Asia. It illustrates that the metaphor of a bridge is particularly used towards Turkish speaking communities that do not uphold a Turkish citizenship and are not approached in relation to a place of origin nor a hope for return.

In that regard, the dissolution of the Soviet Union (1988-1991) caught the attention of Turkish parliamentarians. Many Turkish parliamentarians traced the Turkish nation ethnically back to Central Asia.<sup>32</sup> They referred to the Turkic migration which entailed the spread of Turkish people and language across Eurasia from the 6<sup>th</sup> to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Based on these common bonds as language and history, Turkish parliamentarians perceived the Soviet Republics that had large Turkic populations as part of the Turkish nation, and, therefore, as their kin. To a certain degree, this was even recognized by the Soviet Union. In 1990, the Turkish Minister of Culture, Namik Kemal Zeybek emphasized this in parliament by quoting the Soviet Minister of Culture Gubenkov: “developing your [Turkey’s] cultural relations with Turkish-speaking republics within the Soviet Union will serve as a bridge that strengthens the relations between the Soviet Union and

Turkey.”<sup>33</sup> Later on, the newly independent Republics – Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kirghizstan – were framed as “Turkish Republics” and “brothers”.<sup>34</sup> In 1995, Turkish President, Demirel addressed the shared heritage as follows:

Distinguished parliamentarians, when we combine Turkey’s advantages related to its historical and geographical resources within the current changing world order, the Eurasian continent is emerging. I focus on the Eurasian phenomenon deliberately. The shared history, language, religion and culture of 200 million people that are living in this belt, which stretches from the Adriatic to China, is becoming more evident day by day. This is a fact and there is nothing unacceptable about it. Our epics, songs, lullabies, customs, traditions, food, drinks, and the language are all the same. More unifying elements than these cannot be seen in any other partnerships.<sup>35</sup>

President Demirel focused on history, language, religion and culture in the broadest sense to construct the Turkish nation. Within this Turkish nation, Turkey is situated at the top of the hierarchy, hence Turkey has certain responsibilities and privileges towards these communities and the countries where they live. Some parliamentarians expanded these responsibilities and privileges, and framed Turkey as a relative or homeland to these communities. As expressed by AKP-parliamentarian, Abdullah Çaliskan:

Our geographical location, historical past, and culture impose important responsibilities to us, which we cannot run away from. Due to its geographical location and historical background, Turkey is a country in which different ethnic and cultural communities live together and share the same dreams and ideals. In this geography, history has made us relatives to each other and made us a family. Turkey has become a home to Circassians, Chechens, Tatars, Azeris, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz’s, Turkistani’s [Uyghurs], Bosnians, Albanians brothers that left for different reasons from the Balkans, Caucasus, and Asia. It has also become one with them.<sup>36</sup>

Çaliskan emphasized Turkey’s geographical location and historical background; transforming Turkey into a homeland for many of the Turkish speaking people; stressing how they had become family due to migration. He went even further and mapped the geographical locations Turkey had family bonds with. He specifically referred to the cities of Pristina, Prizren, Skopje, Gostivar, Tetovo, Sturmiyan, Kircaali, Komotini, Sarajevo, Crimea, Kabarda, Karachay, Grozny, Mohachkala, Batumi, Bukhara, Baku, Samarkand, Taskent, Urumqi, and Shymkent.<sup>37</sup> He perceived the Turkish communities over there as their kin, relatives, and brothers, who Turkey could not neglect. Moreover, Çaliskan

used the bridge metaphor to illustrate the in-betweenness of these communities and argued that they functioned as a bridge to connect the region they lived in geographically to Turkey.<sup>38</sup>

Turkish parliamentarians showed a great interest towards the situation of the Uyghurs in China. The Uyghurs are a Turkic ethnic group living mainly in the region of Xinjiang in China. Therefore, Turkish parliamentarians perceived them as their kin and felt responsible to defend their rights in China. In 1996, ANAP-parliamentarian, Ahat Andican even stated that “East Turkestan is under Chinese occupation,”<sup>39</sup> hence, implying the Chinese rule as illegitimate. Turkish parliamentarians consistently used Xinjiang and East Turkestan together to refer to the region; strengthening the Turkish character of the region and Turkey’s right to be involved. Parliamentarian Mehmet Gül took it a step further and defined the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region as their “ancestral home.”<sup>40</sup> By that logic, Turkish parliamentarians transformed Uyghurs into the Turkish nation based on common ethnicity, history, culture, language and religion. For example, parliamentarian Sinan Ogan of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) stated in 2012: “We share a common ethnic origin, language, and religion with East Turkestan.”<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Turkish parliamentarians emphasized the growing Uyghur communities in Turkey through migration; illustrating the kinship ties between the two while addressing Turkey’s increasing interest in the rights of the Uyghurs.<sup>42</sup>

It is interesting to note that the metaphor of a bridge is barely used towards Turkish speaking communities in Western Europe. The only exception was the CHP-parliamentarian, Ali Rıza Gülçiçek as he used the bridge metaphor towards these communities in 2003. He believed that Turkish communities in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Austria were functioning as a bridge between Turkey and the countries where they lived.<sup>43</sup> The answer to why parliamentarians refrained from using the metaphor of a bridge towards these communities, arguably, lay in Gülçiçek’s speech: framing these communities as “our citizens.”<sup>44</sup> The Turkish communities that migrated from Turkey were seen as Turkish citizens and most also have citizenship, hence, they were for obvious reasons already seen as part of the Turkish nation. As illustrated in the previous sections, the metaphor of a bridge was used to partially disintegrate communities from the nation-state where they lived, while at the same time attaching them to Turkey. This was particularly the case for Turkish speaking communities that did not have any direct ties with Turkey in terms of cross-border experiences and practices, but with which they did share some historical, cultural and religious ties. This was also visible in how parliamentarians approached the Crimean Karaites and Tatars that were living in Lithuania through their emphasis on the common language, Turkish.<sup>45</sup>

## An Imagined Bridge of Friendship and Peace

Metaphorically framing imagined Turkish communities as a bridge transformed these communities into a foreign policy tool. This section discusses in more detail what the bridge role assigned to these communities entailed and implicated on a level of foreign policy: revealing its potential, and also its limits. As demonstrated above, the most dominant bridge role conception Turkish parliamentarians assigned to the Turkish communities is that of a friendship and/or peace bridge. The emphasis on friendship and peace was particularly used when the rights of the imagined Turkish communities were under threat and when Turkey had difficult relations with the country where these communities lived. This meant that Turkey was not in a position to defend the rights of their kin through diplomatic relations while at the same time it did not want to interfere in an aggressive manner in the domestic affairs of other countries, since that could further harm the situation of these imagined communities. Parliamentary discourse towards Turkish communities and the countries where they lived, such as Greece, Bulgaria, China, and Iraq, illustrate different dimensions within the friendship and peace bridge.

The first dimension is reflected in the realization of Turkish parliamentarians that their bridge framing had reciprocal implications for foreign relations. For example, in 1990 regarding the situation of Turkish communities in Greece, Minister Mehmet Yazar stated that “if the situation in Western Thrace continues, it would seriously damage the Turkish-Greek relations.”<sup>46</sup> However, this also worked the other way around. Any difficult relations Turkey upheld with the countries in which Turkish communities lived had a negative reflection on the situation of these communities. In the case of Turkish communities in Greece, Minister of Defense, Ismail Safa Giray emphasized that: “it is a fact that tensions in Turkish-Greek relations have a negative impact on our kin and the lack of contact and dialogue between the two countries limit the possibilities to find solutions for the issues that our kin face, as was visible in the past.”<sup>47</sup> This is an important reason that these communities were framed as a friendship bridge. This bridge role created a context in which the situation of the Turkish communities abroad could be improved while strengthening Turkey’s relationship with the country where they lived.

Turkish parliamentarians, therefore, emphasized the potential or capacity these communities had to function as a bridge of friendship and peace between Turkey and the country where they lived. When relations with these countries was improved along with the situation of the Turkish communities, Turkish parliamentarians used the “friendship bridge” less and/or used other bridge conceptions instead, for example one of trade<sup>48</sup> or culture<sup>49</sup>. This was particularly visible in the case of Greece and Bulgaria. In the latter, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hikmet Çetin remarked the successful bridge role of the Turkish community by stating: “As Turkey, we are very happy that the troubles the Turkish minority has faced is coming to an end and that they have started becoming a

strong bridge of friendship between the two countries.”<sup>50</sup> Çetin argued that Turkish communities succeeded in transforming themselves into a bridge that fostered friendship between Turkey and Bulgaria.

As mentioned earlier, Turkish parliamentarians used discursive strategies of sameness and uniqueness to constitute Turkish communities living abroad as part of the Turkish nation. The metaphor of a bridge was used to illustrate the in-betweenness of these communities, being part of both nations, providing a delicate instrument to be involved just as well as distanced. This could be perceived, nonetheless, as an interference in the domestic affairs of another country, which would have serious consequences for the Turkish communities living in this country. Additionally, it could also (further) harm the country’s relationship with Turkey, particularly when these relations were already strained. Turkish parliamentarians, therefore, struggled to protect the rights of their kin while at the same respect the sovereignty of the country where they lived.

This second dimension becomes most evident in light of political superpowers: the case of the Uyghurs living in China. MHP-parliamentarian, Sinan Ogan exemplified this with the following words: “Of course, we will not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, but we will not remain silent when our East Turkestan brothers are imprisoned innocently and are oppressed.”<sup>51</sup> Ogan recognized the sovereignty of China and Turkey’s wish not the interfere in internal affairs, but at the same time felt the responsibility to defend the rights of the Uyghurs: stretching the Turkish community beyond national boundaries and emphasizing brotherhood. In this case, the metaphor of a friendship bridge was introduced as a solution. The hope was that the Uyghurs could play such an important role in the Turkey-China relations that their rights would be automatically protected within this relationship. However, the continuous deterioration of the situation of the Uyghurs made it difficult to use the metaphor of a bridge. ANAP-parliamentarian, Mehmet Ekici stated in 2010 that “we have reached a point at which we see serious problems at the Chinese foot of the bridge.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, Ekici argued that the Uyghurs could not become a bridge of friendship due to continuing Chinese oppression of the Uyghurs. He and many other argued for a more proactive approach.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, the growing Uyghur communities living in Turkey also impacted the discursive strategies towards China on this matter. As their kin they pressured Turkey to act on their behalf, thereby making the situation more complex and sensitive. Parliamentarian Ramazan Can addressed this issue:

“In addition to our historical and cultural ties with our Uyghur kinsmen, the fact that many citizens of Uyghur origin live in our country further increases the sensitivity of our public opinion, and therefore our government. On the other hand, we also need to take the impact of the Turkish-Chinese relations onto the well-being of our Uyghur kinsmen into



account, since deteriorating relations with China will have direct negative effects on the well-being of our Uyghur kinsmen.”<sup>54</sup>

Although in these instances the metaphor of a bridge was challenged, Turkish parliamentarians kept framing the Uyghurs as a bridge of friendship, thereby reaffirming the authority of the metaphor in parliament. The main reason was that China was transforming or was already transformed into superpower, thus, making it difficult for Turkey to influence or criticize the country. Former Minister of Culture, Ertugrul Günay underlined this by stating:

“China is developing into one of the great states in the world with which we cooperate in various fields. We have no intentions about interfering in China’s internal affairs and we do not want to turn the Uyghur Turks into an issue between us, but we are trying to transform them into a bridge of peace, friendship, integration and brotherhood.”<sup>55</sup>

The difficulty here was that it became impossible to transform the Uyghurs into a bridge of friendship and peace as oppressive Chinese policies towards them were increasing. In that sense, the metaphor of the bridge seems conditional and limited; anticipating some sort of gentle response or at least opening a dialogue. Additionally, it illustrated the failure of Turkey to influence the issue positively through its relationship with the Chinese government.

Similar to the other dimensions, the third dimension addresses stability and peace to Turkish communities. It diverges in its emphasis on security issues that these communities face together with Turkey. This was particularly visible regarding discourses towards Iraqi Turkmens and Iraq.<sup>56</sup> Turkey became more worried about their situation after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the establishment of an autonomous Kurdistan region in Iraq. Turkey feared for an independent Kurdistan that could endanger the (cultural) rights of Iraqi Turkmens, living in that region, as well as have a spill-over effect on the Kurds living in Turkey. Thus, Turkish parliamentarians emphasized the importance to safeguard the unity of Iraq and the loyalty of the Turkmens to Iraq.<sup>57</sup> In this context, Turkey tried to develop relations with three relevant parties, namely the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the Federal Government of Iraq, and the Iraqi Turkmens. Parliamentarians aimed to transform the Turkmen communities into a friendship bridge between Iraq and Turkey; integrating the Kurds while bringing stability and peace in the region, therewith, providing the bridge metaphor with yet another dimension. In 2015, AKP-parliamentarian Sirin Ünal argued:

Turkey respects Iraq’s territorial integrity, political unity and sovereignty and cooperates with all parts of society in accordance with the Iraqi

constitution and International Law. Turkey follows the situation of the Turkmen closely, who are seen as the founding members of Iraq and function as a bridge of friendship between Turkey and Iraq.<sup>58</sup>

Ünal illustrated the difficulty Turkey faced in aligning Turkey's geopolitical and strategic interest in the region with that of the Turkmen.

## Conclusion

This article illustrates how Turkish parliamentarians construct their nation beyond Turkey's borders. Turkish parliamentarians continuously (re-)imagine, (re-)construct, and (re-)produce its nation by using different discursive strategies that included uniqueness, sameness, or difference. Parliamentarians use identity markers as ethnicity, language, Ottoman history, and religion to address these strategies. This allows imagined communities to either associate with or dissociate from the Turkish nation. Simultaneously, these discursive strategies differentiate the imagined communities from the country where they lived. In other words, these imagined communities challenge the notion of a nation-state as they are marked by liminality and in-betweenness. The metaphor of a bridge played a crucial role in this process as it frames these communities as part of both nations: bringing opportunities, as well as difficulties.

The metaphor of a bridge was particularly used towards Turkish communities living in former Ottoman territories. Turkey shares a common history, religion, language, or ethnicity with these communities, while these communities ended up in different nation-states and did not always have Turkish citizenship. Turkish parliamentarians were, therefore, interested in constituting, imagining and forging them as part of the Turkish nation. This became evident in cases where these communities were culturally, politically and economically under threat as with the Turks in Western Thrace or Turkish communities in Bulgaria. However, parliamentarians imagined the Turkish nation even more broadly and included Turkish communities that were not part of the Ottoman Empire, but with whom Turkey shared ethnic and cultural bonds such as the Uyghurs in China. Within the imagined Turkish nation, these parliamentarians frame Turkey as the highest in hierarchy, meaning that Turkey had the privilege and responsibility to defend the rights of these communities, which they saw as their kin and brothers.

Metaphorically framing imagined Turkish communities as a bridge transformed these communities into a foreign policy tool. Parliamentarians assigned a bridge role to these communities and the dominant bridge conception was the one that focused on friendship and peace. In other words, these imagined Turkish communities should function as a bridge between Turkey and the country where they live that fosters friendship and peace. By transforming Turkish communities into a bridge of friendship and peace, through different dimensions, they believed that they would have a positive and crucial

role for the country where they lived and for Turkey. This way, parliamentarians also justified discourse and policies towards these communities.

There are discursive shifts visible in the usage of the bridge metaphor by Turkish parliamentarians when the situation of the imagined Turkish communities improves and/or Turkey upheld good relations with the countries where they lived. In these instances, parliamentarians framed these communities as a cultural bridge that focused on cultural exchange and trade between the two nations to which they belong. This illustrated the interplay between foreign policy developments and discourse. When the country where these communities live ignored the bridge role conceptions and Turkish discourse, this was also reflected in parliamentary discourse. Or, when confronted with a political superpower, such as China, and the friendship bridge appeared to reach certain limits.

It is, therefore, important to conduct more research on how other countries perceived Turkish discourse that transformed their citizens into imagined Turkish communities and the Turkish nation. Even though parliamentarians emphasized that they did not want to intervene into domestic affairs of other countries, the perception of these countries was possibly different. This article gives insight into how Turkish parliamentarians constructed the Turkish nation discursively and how it created a context that allowed to formulate foreign policy. Further research is needed to explore how Turkey used different foreign policy-tools towards its nation abroad and how this is reflected in actual practice and policy. Additionally, more research is needed to discuss how the so-called community members perceived discursive strategies of Turkish parliamentarians towards themselves and how they are framed as part of the Turkish nation and the possible role they should play.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 387.

<sup>4</sup> TBMM, Dönem: 18, Y.Y.: 3, Cilt: 34, Birlesim: 41, 5 December 1989, p. 313-314.

- <sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 313-314.
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- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 111.
- <sup>11</sup> TBMM, Dönem: 19, Y.Y.: 4, Cilt: 86, Birlesim: 110, 16 May 1995, p. 203-204.
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- <sup>20</sup> TBMM, Dönem: 19, Y.Y.: 2, Cilt: 20, Birlesim: 22, 4 November 1992, p. 124.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 124.
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