

CEST Symposium 2025/2026 | L'Orientale University, Naples | 14–16 January 2026
Who Owns the Nation? Imperial Imaginaries and Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Turkey

PRECIS: The CEST Symposium 2025/2026, titled "*Who Owns the Nation? Imperial Imaginaries and Cultural Resistance in Contemporary Turkey*," will take place at University of Naples L'Orientale, from 14 to 16 January 2026. The event invites critical reflections on the production and contestation of cultural hegemony in Turkey, with a focus on the interplay between imperial imaginaries, Islamist identity politics, and counter-hegemonic interventions by opposition actors, civil society, and cultural producers.

We welcome applications from scholars at all levels in the social sciences and humanities. We encourage comparative and transnational perspectives. Interested applicants are invited to submit a single PDF containing a 500-word abstract, a short narrative CV, and a full CV with publications by 6 October 2025 to cestws25@gmail.com. Participants are expected to present original, unpublished work, which will be considered for publication in a journal special issue. Travel and accommodation expenses will be covered.

Nation-building projects often rely on (mis)informed imaginaries and exclusive identity discourses. In Turkey, the Republic's rewriting of the past—emphasising Anatolian civilisations *and* Central Asian roots while disavowing Ottoman ties—shaped its self-narratives. Since the 1980s, Kemalist hegemony has dissipated, allowing Islamist imperial imaginaries to gradually supplant republican discourses of race, nation, and progress. Today, Turkey's past, present, and future are fiercely contested, a constant tug-of-war between competing actors vying for control over the nation's identity and the meaning of being Turkish and modern in a shifting geopolitical landscape.

Over the last two decades, AKP governments have crafted a compelling narrative centred on Ottoman and Islamic supremacy. This vision serves to establish political and cultural hegemony domestically and pursue a revisionist foreign policy. From neo-Ottomanism to an imperial Islamic imaginary, a reassembled past has been legitimised by an Islamist vision of Turkey. Imperial fantasies dominate both state-sponsored and popular cultural representations.

Discourses glorifying Turkish supremacy have converged with masculinity, hyper-conservative familism, pro-natalism, and religious obedience, forming an evolving ideological constellation. These imperial fantasies extend far beyond Turkey, seen in Turkish-built, neo-Ottoman grand mosques across Africa and Central Asia. In the Balkans and Cyprus, the Ottoman past amplifies the impact and controversy of these neo-imperial interventions. This Islamist-imperial "New Turkey," tightly coupled with authoritarian politics and neoliberal economics, materialises through shopping malls, massive transport infrastructure, and monumental high-rises, complemented by symbolic structures like the Presidential Complex in Ankara and the provincial palaces and *külliyes* linked to the Office of the President. This state-led and financed project, alongside private initiatives, has fostered the rise of a new bourgeoisie dependent on the AKP regime. Yet, it has thus far failed to consolidate cultural hegemony and faces significant contestation.

Opposition municipalities, mostly governed by the Republican People's Party (CHP), have countered imperial discourses by creating alternative spaces of sociability beyond malls and mosques. They have heavily invested in accessible public institutions—new museums, libraries, and nonprofit venues for social interaction—and organised concerts featuring artists whose politics or sexual orientations clash with Islamist identity politics. Since 2019, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, under its now-incarcerated mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu, served as a laboratory for progressive social and cultural policies, expanding public space beyond central state control. Simultaneously, ritualised narratives

and nostalgic celebrations of the republican past lacking transformative political content, function as a counterpoint to the regime's Islamist-imperial project.

Less politically consequential, civil society actors have emerged, emphasising confronting Turkey's traumatic legacies of minoritisation, mass violence, and genocide, often drawing on the German discourse of *coming to terms with the past*. Exhibitions, oral history projects, and platforms like Hafıza Merkezi or the Hrant Dink Foundation offer powerful counter-narratives to both Kemalist and Islamist identity discourses. However, these initiatives largely remained confined to liberal, urban, middle-class audiences in western Turkey. Unlike the Kurdish municipalities of the 2000s, which introduced transformative linguistic, cultural and political frameworks posing a substantive challenge to the Turkish mainstream—these civil society efforts struggle to reach a broader public. Nevertheless, they serve as critical alternatives to Islamist and neo-Kemalist simplifications and appropriations of the past and their inherent claims to “own” Turkey.

About the Symposium

This symposium invites critical reflections on the production and contestation of cultural hegemony in contemporary Turkey. We are particularly interested in how political projects and historical narratives are advanced or resisted through cultural policies, religious infrastructures, media, architecture, music, and other expressive fields. Contributions may focus on government-led initiatives, oppositional municipal projects, or civil society interventions.

We welcome applications from all fields related to the study of society and politics in Turkey and its transnational spheres of influence, especially contributions from social sciences and humanities. This includes memory studies, anthropology, political science, sociology, socio-cultural history, art history, visual and media studies, urban studies, gender studies, and cultural studies. We encourage comparative perspectives across world regions and transnational approaches examining Turkish projects and actors globally.

We invite critical studies of state-led projects aimed at establishing cultural domination, as well as counter-hegemonic responses by oppositional actors. Relevant areas include, but are not limited to:

- **Built Environment:** Urban planning, architecture, and cultural heritage
- **Museums and Counter-publics**
- **Audiovisual Culture:** Television, cinema, digital media
- **Music:** Popular and classical traditions, and their institutional contexts
- **Theatre and Performing Arts**
- **Gender and Familialism:** Reproductive politics, normative models of family, anti-gender ideologies

Authors selected to participate in the symposium are expected to submit a draft paper before the event and present original, unpublished material based on original research. They will also be invited to contribute to a special issue or edited volume to be prepared following the Symposium.

Application Process

Applicants are invited to submit a **single PDF file** to cestws25@gmail.com including:

- An abstract (max. 500 words)
- A narrative CV (max. 300 words)
- A full CV including a list of publications

Deadline: 6 October 2026. Incomplete applications will not be considered.

This symposium is convened as part of the Consortium for European Symposia on Turkey (CEST), funded by Stiftung Mercator and administered by the Stockholm University Institute of Turkish Studies. Members of the Consortium are based at SciencesPo Paris, University of Vienna, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, University of Naples L'Orientale, Stockholm University, University of Copenhagen, and University of Deusto. CEST is also generously supported by the Keyman Modern Turkish Studies Program at Northwestern University.

CEST Symposium 2026 – Fact Sheet

Convenors: Lea Nocera, L'Orientale – Kerem Öktem, Ca' Foscari – İpek Yosmaoğlu, Northwestern

Who can apply? Advanced MA students, PhD students, and postdocs as well as scholars from universities in Europe, including Turkey.

Application deadline: 6 October 2025

Application requirements: 500-word abstract, 300-word CV, full CV with publication list.

Application Mailbox: cestws25@gmail.com

Expenses: Accommodation for two nights and conference meals will be provided. Travel expenses will be reimbursed up to 300 Euros.

Submission of draft papers: 5 January 2026.

Originality of work and publication: Selected participants will submit original, unpublished work and agree to publication in a Special issue by the convenors.

Successful applicants will be informed by 27 October 2025.

Conference location and date: L'Orientale University, Naples, 14-16 January, 2026