

***CfP: Navigating Recent Civilizational Turn in the Shifting International Order:  
Insights from Turkey***

*Conveners*

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Since 9/11, discussions about civilization have prominently manifested in debates surrounding globalisation, religion, security, and similar factors. This is lately evidenced by the rise of right-wing populism and the use of civilizational rhetoric in both the East and West. According to Acharya (2020, p. 139), as a phenomenon that has seemingly resurfaced constantly over the past three decades, “civilization is back at the forefront of global policy debates.”

Against the background of the growing uncertainty surrounding the decline of the liberal order, revisionist powers have gradually begun to employ strong civilizational narratives. Leaders like Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan have revived and reformulated civilizational narratives to justify their global ambitions and domestic legitimacy. Among these cases, Turkey presents a unique example. Established on Ottoman heritage in 1923, Turkey has a population that is 99% Muslim. Yet, the founding cadres sought to radically modernize society in secularist and nationalist lines while pursuing a foreign policy agenda designed to anchor the new state in Western civilization, a pattern that remained largely unchallenged until the arrival of Justice and Development Party (JDP) in 2002. Since then, civilizational narratives employed by the JDP elites –especially Erdoğan– have increasingly drawn on neo-Ottomanist themes that underscore Turkey’s ‘greatness’ and ‘uniqueness’ as a distinct ‘order-setter’ actor in the Middle East and the post-Ottoman space.

Erdoğan’s civilizational interpretation of Turkey’s role during the current shifts in international order does not merely view civilizations as passive, immovable blocs, but as forces to be actively mobilized. Thus, Erdoğan’s civilizational turn is both strategic and serves multiple functions. Externally, it acts as Turkey’s diplomatic counter-narrative to Western hegemony, opening pathways for Erdoğan’s government to exploit fault lines in geopolitics. Ankara’s involvement in Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia is often cloaked in civilizational language, positioning Turkey as the rightful heir to a forgotten but ‘fairer’ imperial legacy. Internally, it bolsters regime legitimacy by appealing to populist nationalism and the romanticization of cultural sovereignty, thereby consolidating domestic authority.

At this juncture, Turkey’s ‘civilizational turn’ in the context of the declining liberal order should not merely be seen as the result of simple cost-benefit calculations at work, but rather as a complexly interwoven set of sociopolitical dynamics. In this light, we still know very little about the multiple driving forces behind Turkey’s active employment of civilizational narratives at home and abroad. Amid the dislocatory crises unfolding at many levels of analysis, this workshop brings together a collection of articles-in-progress focusing on Turkey’s civilizational narratives and sheds light on the interplay among this civilizational language and foreign policy, and the imagined future self in an age of systemic relocations.

With this orientation in mind, the workshop will gravitate around three thematical scopes:

- 1) How can significant milestones and changes in Turkey’s foreign policy landscape be analyzed through ‘civilizational revisionism’?
- 2) How does Turkey serve as an exemplary case that links civilizational narratives with debates on the international order in non-Western context?
- 3) In what ways does Turkish foreign policy reflect civilizational narratives, particularly regarding Turkey’s emotional, geopolitical, and strategic preferences?