

## REFLECTIONS ON TURKISH PRESS OF THE DECISION TO CONVERT HAGIA SOPHIA FROM MUSEUM INTO MOSQUE

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### ABSTRACT

Istanbul is a historical city which served as the capital of three empires. Hagia Sophia is both the hallmark of the city and one of the monuments of the world with its distinguished place. Belonging to the Roman period, Hagia Sophia was one of the buildings of significant importance during the Byzantine and Ottoman Empire periods. With his decision to convert it into museum in 1934, Atatürk gave an example of cultural embrace for Hagia Sophia. However, this decision has been a debated issue for years. On July 10, 2020, it was decided to convert the status of Hagia Sophia back from museum to mosque. In this paper, newspapers with different publication policies in Turkish press have been chosen and the way in which these newspapers evaluate the decision taken regarding the status of Hagia Sophia in their related news and articles have been analyzed.

**Keywords:** Istanbul, Hagia Sophia, Turkish Press.

### Introduction

The historical city of Istanbul, capital of three empires, which connects two continents, is like a key point of Europe and Asia. The main center of the city, called historical peninsula, covers the region where Topkapı Palace and Hagia Sophia are located. Istanbul was designed as the central place of the empires it served as capital city. This is best explained by the monumental Million Stone, standing on the opposite corner of Hagia Sophia. As the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, this place was accepted as the ground zero where the world began. Mese Street, designed as the main alley of the city, started here, and spread to the world after reaching the city walls. In addition to the palaces, which were among the most important buildings of the imperial capital, there was Hagia Sophia, the religious center of the empire, and hippodrome, the earthly center where entertainment activities were organized. Thanks to the special passages built, the emperor could pass to the church or the hippodrome without going public on the street. There were also supporting structures such as cistern which was used to meet the water needs of the centrum. The character of this part of the city remained unchanged in the Ottoman era. This is where the palace of the Ottoman Empire was built, the Blue Mosque, one of the most magnificent mosques alongside Hagia Sophia, was erected, and Hippodrome was turned into a Horse Square where javelin, a Turkish sports game, was played (Yerasimos, 2010).

Today's Hagia Sophia was built in the 6<sup>th</sup> century and has suffered three fires since then. Hagia Sophia, with its appearance and dimensions that travel from the past to the present, has aroused a sense of admiration in those who look at it and has been the subject of various legends.

Hagia Sophia, the oldest and most vivid memento of Rome, attracted the admiration of artisans and has been studied by several scientists due to its reputation (Kömürçüyan, 1988).

With the conquest of Istanbul, Turkish domination began in the city. After taking over the city, Mehmed the Conqueror took Hagia Sophia under protection. After the Sultan turned Hagia Sophia into a mosque, he did not change the shape of the building, and ordered the paintings inside to be covered with whitewash. When Hagia Sophia was converted into mosque, the mosaics remained untouched; this decision is a reflection of Mehmed the Conqueror's universal approach and understanding of historical heritage.

This structure, which served as a church for 915 years, was later used as a mosque for 481 years. After the Armistice Treaty of Moudros signed by the Ottoman Empire, which was defeated in the First World War along with the Allied Powers, the city was occupied on November 13<sup>th</sup>, 1918, and it remained under occupation for 5 years. When the War of Independence was won, Istanbul came under Turkish rule again. Since the day it was built until today, Hagia Sophia, as a huge and meaningful art of work of Istanbul, went through three different periods: first as the Great Church (Megale Ekklesia) and as Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia), which was followed by serving as the Great Mosque (*Cami-i Kebir*) in the Ottoman era, and finally as Hagia Sophia Museum in the Republican era after 1934 (İncicyan, 1976). The reflections of the decisions taken on this structure, which is of great importance, have been equally effective and the debates around it have been long-term.

### ***Hagia Sophia during the Roman and Byzantine Empires***

Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) has an important value for world architecture and art history: the building has been symbolized with its large dome placed on a square plan. The monumental structure, which is one of the most popular places among travelers who visit Istanbul, has always preserved its impressiveness with these features (Gyllius 1997).

Constantine declared Istanbul as the capital, and the first Hagia Sophia building was completed in 360 during the reign of his son, Constantine II (337-361). After the first structure burned down in 404, the second church was built in 415 during the reign of Theodosios II (408-450). The remains of this period are still under the present Hagia Sophia. The remains of the second church discovered during the excavations are exhibited at the front entrance of the church. After this church was completely destroyed during the Nika riots of 532, which took place during the reign of Justinian, the third church was built by Justinian in 537, which has survived to the present day (Bornovalı, 2019). Following its completion, parts of the church collapsed due to an earthquake, and its destroyed dome was restored by Isidore, the nephew of Isidore of Miletus (Akgündüz, 2006). In addition to the damage it suffered in earthquakes, Hagia Sophia was also destroyed due to Iconoclasm that spread in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries.

A magnificent work of Roman architecture and engineering, the Hagia Sophia of Justinian also hosted the coronation ceremonies of the emperors. After the coronation ceremonies were held in the palace, the emperor was blessed in Hagia Sophia and celebrations were held in the Hippodrome. Apart from coronations, weddings and baptism ceremonies were also held in Hagia Sophia (Belge, 2016). The structure displayed its effect not only with its architecture, but also with its mosaics which were widely spread throughout the church (Bornovalı, 2020). Hagia Sophia, which hosted mosaic portraits of made to show their piety, was also an official church where religious, political and social life intersected. During the Byzantine Empire, a treasury building, a baptistery, and a clock tower, Horologion, were added to the church (Aslan, 2011). Hagia Sophia, which is the symbol of the Christian world, was seriously damaged in the Latin invasion.

### ***Hagia Sophia in the Ottoman Empire Period***

Istanbul became one of the important target points for the Ottoman Empire. The conquest of the city by Mehmed II (1432-1481) on May 29<sup>th</sup>, 1453, was symbolized as the victory of the Islamic world over the Christians. The sense of ownership that started with the conquest of the city showed itself with the protection of Hagia Sophia. For example, unlike the Iconoclasts, the paintings in the church were not destroyed. Some of the mosaics were covered with a thin plaster, since the depiction of people is not accepted in the places of worship in Islam. Protecting the mosaics in this way assured their survival until today (Doğan, 2011). After the Hagia Sophia, was converted into a mosque, even its name was not changed and it was called “*Cami-i Ayasofya-ı Kebir*” (The Great Mosque of Hagia Sophia), the revenues of the Büyük Bedesten (Grand Covered Bazaar 1461) were allocated for the maintenance and repair of this structure, and the established foundation enabled the building to become an institution (De Amicis, 1993). Thanks to the construction of Topkapi Palace in the immediate vicinity of Hagia Sophia, it was possible for the Sultan to visit this temple on special religious days, which ensured this place to enjoy a very special protection status. Four minarets were built around Hagia Sophia, which was one of the most popular places of religious service on special occasions, and the facilities needed for Muslim religious service were added.

Giant candlesticks that Suleiman the Magnificent (1494-1566) secured from the Budin Cathedral as a spoil of war during his campaign to Hungary in 1526 were placed next to the altar. During the reign of Murad III (1546-1595), marble jars brought from Bergama (*Pergamon*) were placed inside the building for decoration. During the Murad IV period (1612-1640), the interior decoration was renewed and Qur’anic surahs and the names of the caliphs were scribed. A library was built by Mahmud I (1696-1754) in 1739 in Hagia Sophia (Bornovalı, 69). Due to the importance attached to Hagia Sophia, the tombs of sultans, princes and lady sultans were erected in its yard. The Islamic structures placed in time after Hagia Sophia was converted into mosque are the reflections of Ottoman social complex (*külliy*e) which bear the characteristics of Ottoman urban architecture. Some criticisms were made as regards the conversion of Hagia Sophia into mosque by the visitors of the period. For example, Edmondo De Amicis, during his visit to Hagia Sophia, conveyed his observations that its exterior was not remarkable, everything else inside was Muslim, and the mosque surrounded, crushed, and concealed the church in all aspects (De Amicis, 162).

The care given to the maintenance and repair of the structure played an important role on the survival of Hagia Sophia until today. Extra precautions were taken because the building was affected by humidity and the tremors it suffered during earthquakes, and the structure was tried to be strengthened with cautious approaches. The dome of Hagia Sophia collapsed and was repaired in the 6<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of Justinian, and then again in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since the addition of buttresses by Sinan the Architect in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, it has survived to the present day without any further danger of collapse. Comprehensive reparation was carried out during the reign of Mahmud I, and another major restoration took place between 1847-1849, when the Swiss architects, Fossati brothers, (Doğan, 2011) were commissioned by Sultan Abdülmeceid (1823-1861).

### ***Hagia Sophia in the Early Republican Period***

Istanbul fell under foreign occupation between 1918 and 1923. Hagia Sophia came to the agenda again during this 5-year occupation period. In this process, discussions were held about converting the mosque back to a church, which was not realized due to the anticipated reactions of Muslims (Solak, 2021). Atatürk, who visited Hagia Sophia on September 7<sup>th</sup>, 1929, wanted the mosque to be upgraded from its ruined state. Hagia Sophia was restored in 1931 by the American Byzantologist Thomas Whittemore (1871-1950), and the mosaics covered by the Fossati brothers were largely revealed. In the decision to turn Hagia Sophia into a museum, the idea that excavations and mosaics would be cleaned and exposed, and thus the building would become a cultural center, gained weight.

In this way, it was aimed to save the building from being an element of conflict between Christians and Muslims and to show that humanity, which bears the traces of both faiths, is a common cultural heritage. The mosque was turned into a museum by the decision of the Council of Ministers on November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1934, after which repairs, research and archaeological excavations continued. The excavations began by A. M. Schneider, Director of the Istanbul Archeology Institute, on 29 December 1934 to reveal the traces of the entrance part of Hagia Sophia II, shed light on the Theodosius Period of the building. Columns and lamb-figure stone artifacts belonging to the first building are exhibited in the visitable section of the building today (Diker, 2016). Hagia Sophia was opened to the public as a museum on February 1, 1935. The decision of converting Hagia Sophia into a museum reflects the view of history of Republican Turkey. Atatürk did not limit his view of Turkish history with only Seljuk and Ottoman periods, and saw all Anatolian civilizations as parts of the Turkish history.

Hagia Sophia was included in the “*World Heritage List*” as a museum in 1985. Efforts to turn Hagia Sophia into a mosque began when the “Continuous Foundations, Historical Artifacts and Service to the Environment Association” applied to the Council of State on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2005, for the annulment of the Council of Ministers decision dated 1934 regarding the conversion of Hagia Sophia from mosque to museum. Reminding that Turkey became a party to UNESCO’s “*Convention on the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage*” on March 31, 2008, the 10<sup>th</sup> Chamber of the Council of State decided that using Hagia Sophia as a museum was not illegal since it represented multiple cultures. On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the Council of State decided to approve this application, which was a reversal of its previous verdict. In the annulment decision of the Council of State, it was announced that “*Hagia Sophia was registered as a mosque in the title deed document and this qualification could not be changed*”. With this decision, Hagia Sophia, whose status was changed from museum to mosque, was transferred to the Presidency of Religious Affairs, and it was opened on July 24<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

### ***Evaluation of the Coverage of the Decision of Converting Hagia Sophia from Museum to Mosque in the Turkish Press According to Content Analysis Method***

#### ***Purpose of the Research***

Within the scope of this study, newspapers with different publishing policies in the Turkish press were selected. The study tries to analyze the way in which the aforementioned newspapers evaluated the decision taken regarding the status of Hagia Sophia in their news reports and articles on the decision to turn Hagia Sophia back into mosque. In the study, which is evaluated from the perspective of the press, newspapers with different publishing policies are examined: Hürriyet Newspaper, which is close to the government and reflects the liberal view, Yeni Şafak Newspaper, which is closer to the government, with a conservative line, and Cumhuriyet Newspaper, which represents the opposition left. News reports and articles of the newspapers in a 2-month period including July and August have been reviewed. The reason it covers the 2-month period is to be able to analyze the comments covering the month of July when the decision was taken and the weeks following the decision.

#### ***Method of the Research***

Content analysis research method have been employed in this study. Content analysis is a method which aims to make use of the open content characteristics of a text and study the closed characteristics and reveal the social reality.

#### ***Importance of the Research***

This study is important because the decision on the status of Hagia Sophia, which is of great importance for the world cultural heritage, is one of the prominent practices of both national and international public opinion.

## Findings Regarding the News on the Status of Hagia Sophia in the Newspapers between 1 July-31 August 2020

### *The Evaluation of the Government's Attitude to the Decision in News Reports and Articles*

The decision of Council of State to convert back Hagia Sophia from museum to mosque was an issue supported by the government; thus, Hürriyet and Yeni Şafak newspapers evaluated the topic as a positive achievement. On the contrary, Cumhuriyet newspaper reported the topic with negative news reports and articles, criticizing the government and questioning the decision.

Cumhuriyet Newspaper, in its news report dated July 4<sup>th</sup>, used the headline of “attack on sovereign rights”, quoting President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s statement about the reactions from countries around the world. The 11 July dated news report with the subheading “*The Council of State annulled the 86-year-old decision. The status of the museum, which was abused as a political football, changed with Erdoğan’s signature*” underlined that the decision included political justifications, and went on to give Erdoğan’s “*treason to the history*” accusation for the museum decision. The news report dated 15 July mentioned a criminal complaint filed by the Kemalist Thought Association against the President of Religious Affairs’ discourse on opening schools and madrasahs in Hagia Sophia, on the grounds that the Ottoman multiple legal system was demanded. In the front-page news about the opening of Hagia Sophia on 25 July, it was commented that the President of Religious Affairs was targeting Atatürk with the following words: “*Mehmed the Conqueror dedicated this place to remain as a mosque until the end of the world. Curse is on him who violates the dedication.*” The headline news dated July 29 included the reactions from the opposition to Erbaş’s words and the criminal complaints filed by non-governmental organizations. In the headline news dated July 30, the President of Religious Affairs’ definition of the period when Hagia Sophia was a museum as the “*interregnum era*”, a term used for the depression period of the Ottoman Empire, and the words “*The resurrection of Hagia Sophia is the herald of Masjid al-Aqsa*” were evaluated as a new scandal.

Hürriyet Newspaper quoted President Erdoğan’s words, “*The accusations related to Hagia Sophia are an attack on our sovereignty*” in the news report dated 4 July. In the 12 July dated news report, President Erdoğan’s statement, “*We did not care who says what, we listened to our nation*” were given in the headline and Erdoğan’s evaluation of the subject received a wide coverage. On the same page, the comments made by President of Religious Affairs and the President’s Spokesperson were also presented. On July 13<sup>th</sup>, Erdoğan’s statement “*Hagia Sophia is our domestic concern*” was given in the headline. The headline of July 15<sup>th</sup> dated newspaper read “*We will protect Hagia Sophia like our ancestors did*” which emphasized its cultural heritage dimension. In the headline news dated 25 July, it was commented by quoting Erdoğan’s words that Hagia Sophia had returned to its origins. The news report dated 28 July included the reaction of the Turkish Foreign Minister to the Spanish Foreign Minister’s view that Hagia Sophia should be a common place of religious service. The news report dated August 2 included President Erdoğan’s reaction to the critics of the decision.

Yeni Şafak newspaper’s headline on 4 July gave President Erdoğan’s statement “*nobody has the right to intervene in our places of worship*”, which was a reaction to the objections raised by the USA and Russia. The newspaper, which gave wide coverage to the announcement of the decision on 11 July, included the opinions of government officials in support of the decision, as well as President Erdoğan’s evaluations on the decision. The news report “*The Resurrection of Hagia Sophia*”, with Erdoğan’s words on the headlines, continued with the statement of the Speaker of the Parliament, “*It was the ideal of our generation*”. The vice-president’s comment that Hagia Sophia “*won its freedom*” and the AKP deputy’s words “*righteousness has found its place*” were also included in the news reports. In the newspaper’s headline on July 12, Erdoğan’s statement, “*The people asked, and we opened Hagia Sophia*”, was given, and the news report dated July 29 read “*Western order has come to an end*”.

### ***Comments in News and Articles on the Hagia Sophia Decision***

As a result of the analysis of the news reports regarding the Hagia Sophia decision in the newspapers, it was seen that Cumhuriyet Newspaper included the statements of *“the status of the museum which was made a political football, they shared their joy by attacking Atatürk, a cover for the failures that piled up, even Hagia Sophia could not stop the meltdown of the votes”* and used a negative language towards the change in the status of Hagia Sophia. Hürriyet Newspaper preferred a tone that affirmed the government’s decision by using the phrases *“Hagia Sophia is opening, ready for the historic day, a favorite of the holiday”* while addressing the issue. Yeni Şafak Newspaper gave the news in a positive way with the statements *“The excitement of Hagia Sophia, museum status was against human rights, the victory of law after 15 years, we should be proud, Erdoğan has realized Turkey’s dream, 86 years of longing”*.

Another issue that draws attention in newspaper reports is the method of conveying the comments of foreign countries on the decision. When Cumhuriyet newspaper was giving the discourse of other states, it used a balanced language with the statements *“The Patriarch’s call for Hagia Sophia has resonated in the world, Athens is pushing for sanctions (to the EU), reaction messages from the EU”*. Hürriyet newspaper employed a negative language such as *“the (Greek) Archbishop has gone too far, grief in Greece, Hagia Sophia cannot be a common house of religious service”*. In the headline news of the Hürriyet Newspaper dated July 7<sup>th</sup> titled *“The Archbishop Has Gone Too Far”*, the comments made by the Archbishop of Athens, Yeronimos, that Turkey would not dare, was criticized. In another news report, the criticism by Russian Church as *“This was an attempt to restrict freedom of belief”* was given, and in a news report dated 14 July, Russia’s comment that the Hagia Sophia decision was Turkey’s internal issue was conveyed in the headline. The newspaper, which featured Pope Francis’ statement on Hagia Sophia in its news report on 13 July, criticized the Pope’s comment that *“I feel pain”*. On the first page, the theologians and historians commented on the example of the Cordoba Mosque, which was built in 786 by the Andalusian Umayyads, and turned into a cathedral in 1236. The news dated 14 July reported that the spokesperson of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that they were pleased with the decision. However, the same report included the expression by the German government spokesperson that they accepted the decision with sorrow. Another news report dated 25 July was given with the headline *“Grief in Greece”* and quoted the words of Athens Archbishop as *“a day of mourning for Christianity”*. Yeni Şafak newspaper, on the other hand, made negative emphasis with the comment *“Greece mourns, flags at half-mast”*. On the front-page news on July 12<sup>th</sup>, under the heading *“we should be proud”*, it was reported that congratulations were sent from Islamic world, and the comments by Malaysia, Qatar, the World Muslim League and the Palestinian Hamas Movement were given under the heading *“We delighted the world”*. In the news report dated 25 July, the newspaper devoted a total of 5 full pages to the opening news reports.

When the articles of the newspapers are examined, it can be seen that the decision was commented negatively by Cumhuriyet newspaper columnists with a criticizing tone, whereas Yeni Şafak columnists made approving comments. On the other hand, due to the existence of those who represent different views among the columnists of Hürriyet Newspaper, it has been determined that both positive and negative comments were made in the articles.

In the article written by Mustafa Balbay in Cumhuriyet Newspaper on 7 July, the decision was evaluated from a political point of view and associated with the government’s election plans. Balbay interpreted it as an attempt to prevent the shifting of the conservative electorate to other parties.

Zülal Kalkandelen evaluated the reasons for the decision in her article dated 12 July, and she commented that with this decision, the government aimed to increase the polarization in the society through religion, preparations were made for the elections, an anti-imperialist attitude was tried to be displayed with the discourse of “*interfering with our sovereign rights*” for the reactions of other states, and the republic was directly targeted with the annulment of the decree signed by Atatürk. Deniz Yıldırım, who used the title of “*Endless Victimization*” in his article dated July 25, he discussed that the opening coincided with the anniversary of Lausanne.

When the articles published in Hürriyet newspaper are examined, it can be seen that there are differences of opinion between columnists. In his article titled “*towards happy ending in Hagia Sophia*”, Fuat Bol declared the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a museum in 1934 unlawful, since it was a work of foundation, and argued that foreign countries’ insistence on museum status stemmed from their hatred of Islam. In his article dated 4 July, Ertuğrul Özkök emphasized the common and cultural heritage of humanity dimension with his suggestion: “*Let’s put a clause in our constitution: No temple belonging to one faith can be turned into a temple of another faith within the borders of the Republic of Turkey.*” Mehmet Soysal’s article dated 27 July criticized the words of Pope Francis, the leader of the Catholic Church, that he was in great pain due to the opening of Hagia Sophia, and contrasted his statement with the comment of a Jesuit Priest, Felix Körner of Germany, that “*a mosque decision should not upset a religious person*”. It is seen in the articles of the newspaper that, besides the views supporting the opening of Hagia Sophia, the decision of the Council of State was criticized, and the emphasis on world heritage was highlighted. On the other hand, when the articles published in Yeni Şafak are examined, it is observed that the decision was totally approved and comments were made that supported the government, whereas a harsh language was used against the critics of the decision. In Tamer Korkmaz’s article dated 7 July, the people from Turkey and abroad who wanted Hagia Sophia to stay as a museum were listed, and the critiques from foreign countries were labeled as “*vile attacks*”. Yusuf Kaplan’s article dated 12 July criticized the decision of 1934, and compared it to the recent decision with the phrase “*10 July 2020, a milestone*”. In his article published on the same day with the title “*Good news. Hagia Sophia is conquered*”, Dursun Gürlek commented that with the opening of Hagia Sophia, which had been deprived of religious service since 1934, the 86-year interregnum ended. Rasim Özdenören commented that the reopening of Hagia Sophia for religious service was an event equivalent to the re-conquest of Istanbul and equated it with independence and freedom. İbrahim Karagöl claimed in his article that the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque represented a historical break and argued that the decision was a great awakening that put an end to Western domination and tutelage. In his article, he defined the critiques of the decision as “*tutelary tradition*” and argued that these critics were as uncomfortable as Athens. In his 13 July dated article titled “*The opening of Hagia Sophia will pave the way for Turkey*”, Yusuf Kaplan claimed that in the last two centuries representing the modernization of Turkey, “*our will has been taken from us, our minds have been chained*”, which were part of the efforts to integrate with the West. On 14 July, Mehmet Şeker argued that in response to the reactions from the world, “*now we can be sure of our sovereignty. We showed the world that we are an independent country and that we have the power to claim our own lands*” in his article titled “*The eraser of the history has corrected a mistake*”. In the article of Ergün Yıldırım dated 26 July, temples and museums were compared. In the article, museums were defined as part of the industrial capitalism of modernity, replacing temples. In the article, it was claimed that with the Hagia Sophia decision, Istanbul eliminated of the dominance of the museum and adopted the dominance of the temple.

### ***Designs Regarding the Hagia Sophia Decision in News Reports and Articles***

The analysis of news reports on the decision of giving back Hagia Sophia its mosque status shows that Cumhuriyet newspaper employed a negative language, whereas Hürriyet and Yeni Şafak newspapers used positive expressions that supported the government’s decision.

When the designs of the newspapers as regards Hagia Sophia decision are examined, it can be seen that Cumhuriyet newspaper made negative remarks with the expressions “*Hagia Sophia ambition, Hagia Sophia obsession, attack on the Republic, insulting Atatürk, political symbol*” when emphasizing that the decision was a political one. It is observed that Hürriyet newspaper used a supportive language with the expressions “*Historical day, it returned to its origins, rush to Hagia Sophia*”. News reports of Yeni Şafak newspaper were totally in favor of the decision. Contrary to the “*political symbol, attack on the Republic*” design used by Cumhuriyet Newspaper in its news criticizing the mosque decision, it is seen that Yeni Şafak Newspaper used the expressions “*symbol of conquest, consignment, sovereignty, 86 years of exile, captivity, betrayal*” referring to the past in its criticisms regarding the museum decision.

When the newspaper articles are analyzed, it can be seen that the design of the columns in Cumhuriyet newspaper are similar to its news reports. The common point of the articles is that the decision aims to conceal economic failure and prevent loss of votes; it is also seen as a reckoning with the republic. The designs in the columns are as follows: “*Erdoğan’s trump card, the symbol of coming to terms with Atatürk, the symbol of the counter-revolutionaries, the reckoning with the law of the Republic, concealing the economy, being imprisoned in political Islam, the clash of the sacred, the conquest of the conquered, the endless victimization, the politics of symbols, the caricature of the empire, jumping back to the Middle Ages, political show*”.

Emre Kongar listed the reasons for the decision in his 14 July dated article titled “*Hagia Sophia move through symbols*” as follows: “*To fan the flames of the polarization in the society and the hostility towards secularism, to activate the victimization strategy, to open the gap between the CHP (opposition Republican People’s Party) and its voters since the party did not show a strong opposition, to attract conservative votes, sects and congregations, to come to terms with the republic, to blame the Atatürk period, to turn the nationalist votes in their favor by meeting the criticisms with a so-called anti-imperialist rhetoric, to claim the support of all political Islamic organizations in the world, to ensure that economic failures, unlawfulness and oppression are forgotten, to change the agenda of failures*”.

When the articles in Hürriyet newspaper are analyzed, it can be seen that although the discourse in the news reports tend to affirm the decision taken, articles have both positive and negative designs. The prominent designs in the articles are as follows: “*The chains are breaking, towards the happy ending, the symbol of the conquest, Turkey’s world heritage obligation towards Hagia Sophia*”.

On 2 July, Sedat Ergin underlined the cultural importance of Hagia Sophia in his article titled “*Turkey’s world heritage obligation towards Hagia Sophia*”. Abdülkadir Selvi, in his article dated July 10<sup>th</sup>, stated that a historical mistake would be corrected and the chains of Hagia Sophia would be broken, and criticized the museum decision taken in the past.

Within the scope of the analysis, it was observed that the designs of the articles in Yeni Şafak newspaper were similar to its news reports. The common point of the articles is that the decision of conversion to mosque is associated with political freedom and that the museum decision taken in the past was wrongful. The designs featured in the articles are as follows: “*breaking the chains, the museum decision chains the spirit of conquest, loss of mental independence of society, political independence was severely damaged, 86 years of interregnum, Freedom of Hagia Sophia, a feast day, a wedding day, the symbol that Turkey is a land of Islam, symbol of independence, sword right, the resurrection of Hagia Sophia, its liberation from captivity*”.

In Tamer Korkmaz’s article dated 14 July, it read: “*Despite the obstacles imposed by western states, Turkey has shown that it will not compromise its sovereignty. Making Hagia Sophia a mosque again is a confirmation of the independence of Muslim Turkey.*” In the article, the critiques of the decision were labeled as the “*westerner-laicist flock inside*” and as regards the decision dated 1934, he claimed that “*Atatürk’s signature was fake, and thus the 1934 decree that turned the mosque into museum with an illegal decision was also fake.*”



## Conclusion

The symbol of the historical city, Hagia Sophia, served as a church for 951 years after it was opened as Great Church. From Istanbul's transition to Turkish rule until it was turned into a museum in 1934, Hagia Sophia was used as a mosque for 481 years. The debates on reopening Hagia Sophia for religious service which began after Atatürk's death continued until 2020s. Finally, the Council of State repealed the Council of Minister decision dated November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1934 which converted Hagia Sophia into a museum on the ground that it was void, and Hagia Sophia museum was converted back to mosque after 86 years with the Presidential Decree dated July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

The evaluations in the press on the subject constituted an important source in interpreting the process in order to reflect the perception of the decision in the Turkish society. As a result of the evaluation, the expression "*conquest*" was frequently encountered in the news reports and articles of the Yeni Şafak Newspaper, which reflects the views of the conservative segment of the society. In the newspaper, the reopening of Hagia Sophia was celebrated as the re-conquest of Istanbul and was equated with independence and freedom. In the comments in the newspaper, this correlation is explained by the fact that only the decisions taken by a state are valid within its borders. The decision was also perceived as a success against the West, and with the expression "*Just as the Crusades were stopped in Anatolia, the civilization that they wanted to destroy started to rise and resurrect*", the political achievement aspect of the decision was highlighted. It is seen that the articles and news reports in the newspaper employed a harsh language towards the museum decision of 1934. The newspaper displayed criticisms such as "*the museum status was against human rights, 86 years of exile, captivity, betrayal, breaking of chains, the decision for turning into museum was a shackling of the spirit of conquest represented by Hagia Sophia, it was a serious blow to political independence.*" On the grounds that Hagia Sophia is the property of Mehmed the Conqueror Foundation, the museum decision taken in the past was evaluated as an effort to integrate with the West.

Reflecting the liberal view, Hürriyet newspaper used a confirmatory language in its news reports on the turning of Hagia Sophia into mosque, and it was seen that there were differences of opinion between its columnists. In the articles of the newspaper, opinions that support opening of Hagia Sophia with designs such as "*chains are breaking, happy ending, symbol of the conquest*" were side by side with criticizing views that underline the world heritage status.

The findings obtained as a result of the analysis of news reports and articles of Cumhuriyet newspaper, which represent the opposition left, shows that it is totally against the decision. While Yeni Şafak newspaper evaluated the decision within the framework of conquest and liberation, Cumhuriyet newspaper interpreted it as coming to terms with the foundation philosophy and legal order of the republic. The newspaper also associated the decision with the election agenda of the government and saw it as an attempt to prevent the conservative base from shifting to other parties. It claimed that the government tried to display an anti-imperialist attitude in order to capture nationalist votes with the discourse of "*interfering with our sovereign rights*" against the reactions of other states. The newspaper commented that the turning into mosque of Hagia Sophia in Mehmed the Conqueror's period was a requirement of the time, but it intensified its criticism with the expressions "*Was Hagia Sophia occupied? Conquering the conquered is a great step back into antiquity*", and associated the sword displayed in the opening with the conquest law, which is history now. The newspaper associated Atatürk's decision to turn into museum with his understanding of common value of humanity, and highlighted it as a neoteric judgment.

Hagia Sophia is a registered building on the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage list. The decision of opening Hagia Sophia to religious service after changing its former status as museum constitutes only one aspect of the debates. What is beyond these debates is that the security of this building, which is registered as cultural heritage, has to be ensured as if it is still a museum although its status has changed.

The flood of visitors to the historical building accelerates its wearing, and, compared to its functioning as a museum, longer service hours of the building which is open to the entire public creates security problems. Registered religious places also qualify as museums; thus, protecting these sites as if they are museums is an obligation for their future. For this reason, all measures that will be taken to extend the life of Hagia Sophia can actually be evaluated as the preservation of an important consignment that will be passed on to the future.

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