



Banal nationalism and queers online: Enforcing and resisting cultural meanings of .tr

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Abstract

Focusing on daily (re)productions of national identities online, in this article, I investigate a particular country-code Top-Level Domain, .tr for Turkey. I follow Billig's concept of 'banal nationalism' to argue that .tr (re)produces online Turkish national imaginations. Furthermore, I inspect the hegemonic Turkish norms of sexuality to examine what kind of Turkishness .tr (re)produces. The analyses of the policies governing the allocation process of .tr and the email interviews with the authors of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* websites in Turkey show that .tr works to (re)produce, in a banal way, queer-free notion of Turkishness online. My analysis also demonstrates that some authors of the analysed websites do not dismiss .tr as banal but refuse to use it in resistance against the Turkish national requirements embedded in the domain. More broadly, I argue for the acknowledgement of cultural structures in internet governance studies.

Keywords

Banal nationalism, country-code Top-Level Domain, Domain Name System, gay and lesbian, internet censorship, internet governance, LGBT, national identity, queer, Turkey

Introduction¹

Historically, print and electronic mass media have played a central role in the production and development of national identities. Diamandaki (2003) points out that 'the Internet

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poses anew the issue of national or ethnic identity. It is another archive, mirror and laboratory for the negotiation of national and ethnic identity'. While some authors point to the new online possibilities of paranational (Poster, 1999) or post-national (Diamandaki, 2003) communities, many argue that 'the Internet is used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities' (Eriksen, 2007: 1). To support the latter argument, scholars usually point to the online initiative by national groups which struggle to create their states (e.g. Enteen, 2006) or to the extreme right-wing politics on the internet (e.g. Gidisoglu and Rızvanoğlu, 2010).

Conversely, in this article, I would like to investigate more mundane (re)productions of national identities online. I follow Billig's (1995 [2010]) concept of 'banal nationalism', which shifts the focus in the study of nationalism from 'those who struggle to create new states' or 'extreme right-wing politics' to 'the collection of ideological habits (including habits of practice and belief) which reproduce established nations as nations' (pp. 5–6). To illustrate the idea of banal nationalism, Billig (1995 [2010]) recalls a 'national flag hanging outside a public building', which, although attracts no special attention, plays an important role in daily (re)productions of a nation (p. 5). I propose that, on the internet, some country-code Top-Level Domains (ccTLDs), which are two-letter codes for countries used at the end of some website domain names, may play a similar role. Like hanging flags, ccTLDs may seem obscure, insignificant and innocent, and they frequently go unnoticed. However, as Flanagin et al. (2010) remind us, 'technical design and social values are interrelated'; or, to put it differently, there is no technology devoid of ideology built into its design (p. 180). Therefore, I argue that ccTLDs are not insignificant or innocent: as Billig (1995 [2010]) emphasizes, 'banal does not imply benign' (p. 6). In fact, this is precisely where the ideological power of ccTLDs may lie: in their banality, invisibility, taken-for-grantedness.

Flanagin et al. (2010) write also about 'rare times of controversy or redesign' during which the ideological assumptions embedded in the form of technologies receive careful attention (p. 180). For TLDs, such rare times of redesign are happening at the moment of writing this article. In 2008, a central institution coordinating the governance of all TLDs, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN), has decided to extend the list of generic TLDs (gTLDs). Instead of arbitrarily choosing a new set of gTLDs, ICANN asked legally established entities to apply for the domains of their favour. The application process started in January 2012 and lasted about a year. In total, ICANN received 1930 applications, some for the same gTLDs. Examples include .baby, .love, .music, .sex, .translations and many others. Regarding queers, I managed to locate applications for two new gTLDs: .gay (four applicants) and .lgbt (one applicant) (<http://newgtlds.icann.org>, accessed 25 November 2013). The .gay domain has already caused great controversy and received 164 comments during the evaluation process. The comments regard both community concerns, about who should own .gay, and ideological concerns, about what it means to introduce .gay. For example, Saudi Arabia has opposed the introduction of .gay, arguing that ICANN cannot 'enforce western culture and values into other societies'.² The example of .gay shows that different parties involved in this discussion do not treat TLDs as banal or innocent. Instead, they recognize the ideological power of TLDs and strive to insert into them, or into the entire Domain Name System (DNS), their own standpoints. Therefore, we shall not view ccTLDs as essentially banal.

While they do usually go unnoticed, they could also be recognized as of critical importance at particular times and by particular groups.

Whether it is recognized or not, ccTLDs are embedded in the structures of internet governance. Hrynyshyn (2008) points to the three most popular approaches for studying the involvement of nation-states in internet governance: technological determinism, which suggests 'the irrelevance of the nation-state in a globalized world'; technological instrumentalism, which sees technology 'as an instrument which can be used by the powerful to exercise their power over others'; and the social shaping of technology, according to which 'values are embedded in a technology through a social process of the interaction of different groups of relevant actors who are involved in the process of design' (p. 752). Hrynyshyn (2008) inclines to the latter perspective but encourages us to recognize that actors who shape the technological design are situated in different locations in structures of social power.

In this article, I follow Hrynyshyn's approach but instead of examining global economic structures, I focus on the importance of national cultural norms in the governance of ccTLDs. I investigate a particular ccTLD, .tr for Turkey, to examine not only how it (re)produces Turkishness online but also what kind of Turkishness it (re)produces, in particular with regards to hegemonic Turkish norms of sexuality. I chose the Turkish case because, together with the Polish one, it is part of my PhD project on the intersections of queer and (trans)national identifications online. For the PhD project, I analyse lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans* (LGBT³) websites in Poland and Turkey. At one point, I was struck that while in Poland, the majority of LGBT websites use domains containing .pl, in Turkey, only one website uses a sub-domain with .tr (.gen.tr, where 'gen' stands for general).

In this article, I present the results of my inquiry into why LGBT websites in Turkey tend not to use the Turkish ccTLD. First, I discuss the positioning of queers outside the hegemonic notion of Turkishness and present how Turkish authorities achieve such a positioning of queers both offline and online. Second, I introduce basic information about the DNS and discuss different meanings that are attributed to ccTLDs. Finally, after a brief discussion of my methods, I present the results of my analysis, which was conducted in two stages: in the first one, I analysed the policies for the allocation of .tr and in the second one, the interviews with authors of LGBT websites in Turkey.

Nation building and national identity in Turkey

Being relatively recent constructs (Anderson, 1983), modern nations have been created as structurally masculine and masculinist (Nagel, 1998) as well as heterosexual and heterosexist (Peterson, 1999).⁴ As Pryke (1998) points out, 'Historically, certain sexual practices – in particular masturbation, pre-marital sexual relations and homosexuality – have been identified as both actively harmful to the individual, and to the wider health of the nation' (p. 541). Unlike masturbation and pre-marital sex, homosexuality has still been often connected to the 'health' of contemporary nations. To position queers as alien to the nations, a nation's traitors or enemies, seems to be an especially potent strategy. For instance, İlkkaracan (2008) recalls the speech of the Iranian president Ahmadinejad at Columbia University in 2007, in which he stated that 'In Iran, we don't have homosexuals like in your country', to argue that

Over the last couple of decades in various Middle Eastern countries, as is the case in a number of African and Asian countries, homosexuality has increasingly been constructed as a 'Western' practice that is 'imported' from the West, which threatens the social and moral order [...]. Ironically, centuries ago, claims were made in the West that homosexuality was an Oriental or Muslim vice. (p. 1)

Most recently, scholars have shown how queers, especially gay men and lesbians, have been normalized and incorporated into some notions of the nation, a phenomenon often referred to as homonationalism. Puar (2007) defines homonationalism as 'homonormative nationalism', which 'operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects' (p. 2). The phenomenon of homonationalism refers primarily to Western countries, such as Israel (Puar, 2011), the Netherlands (Mepschen and Duyvendak, 2012) and the United States (Puar, 2007), which now more often embrace LGBT rights to criticize non-Western, usually Muslim, societies. At the same time, such Western narratives may strengthen the association of homosexuality with negatively perceived 'Westernness' in the Middle East. İlkkaracan (2008) argues that

the post-9/11 context has enhanced already existing antagonism towards the West in the region, and further facilitated the construction of the West as a threat, and its perceived culture as an 'enemy.' This perceived threat has been exploited by religious right movements, enabling them to reconstruct a Muslim identity based on extremely polarized notions of so-called 'Western' and 'Muslim' values, particularly targeting the regulation of sexuality and gender relations ... [including] the portrayal of sexual autonomy and homosexuality as products of the West that will undermine and degenerate Muslim societies. (p. 10)

Although more than 95% of Turkey's citizens are Sunni Muslims, to treat Turkey simply as a 'Muslim society' would not help us much to understand the position of queers within the hegemonic notion of Turkishness. Compared to Western nations, the Turkish one is a much younger construct. Kadioglu (2007) writes that 'Turkism as a political project aiming at the construction of a Turkish national identity was spelled out in 1904' (p. 283). Yet, it was not until the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) and the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923) that the Turkish nation has started taking on a more distinct shape. After the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the Kemalist project of modernization, initiated by the Turkish iconic national figure Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, was the one to determine the shape of the new Turkish nation in a top-down process of nation building: 'state in search of its nation', as Kadioglu (1995) puts it.

To create a new homogenous nation – the 'new Turks' – the state defined its new 'Others'. Kadioglu (2007) identifies two main sets of 'Others' of the Turkish national identity: non-Muslims within Turkey (e.g. Armenians, Greeks and the Jews) and non-Turkish Muslims (e.g. Arabs, Georgians, Kurds and Slavic Muslims) (pp. 286–289). Building on the Kadioglu's argument, Dönmez and Enneli (2011) expand the list of the 'Others' of the Turkish national identity and argue that the implicit ideal of the Turkish citizenship envisioned by the state is 'solely Turkish, Sunni-Hanafî, heterosexual, male-dominated, and free market believers' (p. ix). In the same volume, Ataman (2011) contributes a separate article on LGBT people and concludes that they are perceived and

treated in Turkey as less than citizens. Similar arguments have been made by Gorkemli (2012: 69) and Szulc (2011: 9).

Yet, it seems that most recently the notion of Turkishness has been opened up for, at least some, redefinitions. Kadioglu (2007) names this development a 'denationalization of citizenship', by which she means the

processes that enable those legal Turkish citizens who are non-Muslims and who are not of Turkish descent to make legitimate claims about their different religious, linguistic, and cultural existence in the public realm within the territorial boundaries of the Turkish state. (p. 284)

Kadioglu (2007) attributes these changes to the boom of civil societal organizations in Turkey in 1990s and Turkey's official candidacy for the European Union in 1999. Dönmez (2011) recognizes similar positive changes but attributes some of them also to the state itself, in particular to the ex-Islamist and now neoconservative Justice and Development Party (AKP), which was founded in 2001 and won all three general elections in Turkey since that time. Dönmez (2011) points primarily to the AKP's efforts to solve Kurdish and Alevis issues. However, he emphasizes that while attempting to re-define Turkishness to include Kurds and Alevis, AKP continues to exclude other groups, in particular those 'not internalizing traditional lifestyles (e.g., gays, transsexuals, people not obeying traditions such as people drinking alcohol). In other words, being Turkish began to be defined in terms of morality and to what extent individuals practiced their religion' (Dönmez, 2011: 13).

Recently, Prime Minister Erdoğan, the leader of AKP, has made a number of controversial statements regarding such issues as abortion, alcohol consumption, caesarean section, public display of affections and the desirable number of children. His moralistic discourse has been pointed out as one of the most important, even if not direct, motivations behind the Gezi park protests that started in Istanbul at the end of May 2013 (Szulc, 2014). LGBT activists in Turkey were one of the first groups that joined and contributed to the organization of the protests (Tufekci, 2013). Already at the beginning of June 2013, they organized an association of different LGBT groups and individuals, named LGBT Blok, which set up LGBT stalls and rallies during the protests and created an extensive online network, particularly on Twitter (see @LGBTblok, #direnayol and #direnLGBT; Szulc, 2014).

Queers and Turkish national identity online

Turkey's LGBT activists have managed to increase their visibility in public discourse since 1990s and were allowed to officially register their associations or to organize gay prides. Yet, the Turkish state continues to oppress queers, even if, in some cases, employing more subtle and sophisticated strategies. For instance, the military service still considers male homosexuality as a psychological disorder, in the case of military candidates (which means gay men are not allowed to do the service), and as a disciplinary offence, in the case of men who already are in service (Biricik, 2009; Hürriyet, 2012); the police regularly harass transsexual and transvestite sex workers (Amnesty International, 2011); and some local governors keep filing lawsuits against LGBT

organizations (Kaos, 2009). And indeed, as Dönmez (2011) points out, the most powerful strategy used against Turkey's queers appears to be the discourse of morality. Ataman (2011) shows how the 'Turkish Law on Public Disgrace' as well as 'Misdemeanours Law' 'has given police additional powers to arrest people [especially transvestite and transsexual individuals] based on perception or prejudice' (p. 135). Elsewhere, I demonstrate that in the case of lawsuits filed against LGBT organizations in Turkey between 2005 and 2011, three recurrent arguments were 'that Turkish LGBT organizations oppose "general morality", are against the "Turkish family structure" or engage in illegal activities' (Szulc, 2011: 24).

As an extension of such policies and attitudes, Turkish authorities also harass and attempt to deny the existence of Turkey's queers on the internet. In general, Turkey has one of Europe's most restrictive laws regarding internet content and Turkish authorities make extensive use of it (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008). Consequently, Turkey has been included in the list of 26 countries in the 'Internet Enemies Report 2012', prepared by Reporters Without Borders (2012), even if it was listed not as an 'enemy' country but as a 'country under surveillance'. After the implementation of 'Law 5651', also called the 'Internet Law', in the second half of 2007, the number of websites which have been blocked in Turkey has increased dramatically (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008). Article 8 of the 'Internet Law' is the most controversial one since it allows judges and prosecutors to take down websites hosted in Turkey or to block and filter websites hosted outside Turkey in case a website is accused of committing one of the listed crimes, such as sexual exploitation and abuse of children, gambling, obscenity, prostitution or insulting Atatürk (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008: 16–17). Additionally, according to the 'Internet Law', an administrative institution such as the Telecommunications Communication Presidency (TİB) has the right to block websites hosted outside Turkey or take down websites hosted in Turkey but only when their content involves sexual exploitation or abuse of children or obscenity (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008: 18).

This 'Internet Law' has also been used repeatedly to block or take down LGBT websites. Interestingly, one of the reasons for implementing the law was an infamous case of Turkey blocking YouTube multiple times between 2007 and 2010. Although the blockings were based on many different court verdicts referring to different crimes (Akdeniz and Altıparmak, 2008), 'Wong [the deputy general counsel of Google, the owner of YouTube] and several colleagues concluded that the video that sparked the controversy was a parody news broadcast that declared "Today's news: Kamal Atatürk was gay!"' (OpenNet Initiative, 2008). This case aptly illustrates how the provisions against insulting Atatürk are being used in Turkey. In October 2008, TİB blocked, even if only for 6 days, two of the biggest social network sites for LGBTs in Turkey, Gabile.com and Hadigayri.com. At first, TİB neither justified its decision nor informed the authors of those websites about the blockage. Later, TİB explained that the websites were blocked because of their 'encouragement to prostitution' (Akdeniz, 2010b: 19). Hadigayri.com explains on their Facebook fanpage that the only specific reason they were given by TİB was their 'publication of a picture of a fat man revealing his naked belly' (Hadigayri.com, 2012). The authors of Hadigayri.com closed down their portal in the spring of 2012. They explain that their decision was influenced by different factors, including 'the constant pressure from the government'. In September 2013, TİB has also blocked access

to Grindr, a popular gay dating application (Kaos, 2013b), and in October 2013, to Transsick-o, an information blog for trans men (Kaos, 2013a).

Similar to LGBT organizations, LGBT websites in Turkey are also subjected to moralistic lawsuits. One of my informants, an owner of one of the biggest LGBT portals in Turkey, describes the case of their website as follows:

There are two lawsuits filed against me by the Telecommunications Communication Presidency. One is over obscenity and the other over the mediation of prostitution ... The reason for this is that, on our portal, in their profile pages, transvestites and homosexuals share addresses of their personal websites and mobile phone numbers. But why do people on Facebook or Twitter share the addresses of their personal websites in their profiles? When they do so, are the owners of Facebook or Twitter prosecuted for the mediation of prostitution and the promotion of obscene content in the same way as I am? In Turkey, such lawsuits are filed only against gay websites. (2012, personal communication)

Another example of a moralistic discourse employed in Turkey against LGBT websites is a controversial case which arose in April 2011 when TİB 'sent a letter to [internet] hosting companies based in Turkey and provided a list of 138 words that may not be used on domain names and websites' (Akdeniz, 2010a: 169). The list was meant for an internal communication, so it is difficult to decipher the general logic behind it. However, the list includes many Turkish and English words which clearly adhere to the moralistic discourse, for example, 'ateşli' (passionate), 'büyütücü' (enlarger), 'çılplak' (nude), 'etek' (skirt), 'girl', 'göğüs' (breast), 'hot', 'yetişkin' (adult) but also 'biseksüel', 'eşcinsel' (homosexual), 'gay', 'gey', 'homoseksüel', 'lesbian', 'lezbiyen' and 'travesti'. Different words referring to homosexuality have been also banned through family and child filters introduced in Turkey in November 2011. Although it is voluntary to install the filters, they have been applied by a number of public and private institutions such as the Turkish Parliament (Hürriyet, 2011) and some internet cafés (Kaos, 2007).

DNS and ccTLDs

The DNS was developed in 1983 and consists of two main types of TLDs: gTLDs (such as .com, .net and .org) and ccTLDs (such as .uk for the United Kingdom or .tr for Turkey). Currently considered as one of the 'critical internet resources' (Mueller, 2010), ccTLDs are technically redundant since any website could be accessed by its numeric address: '[ccTLDs] are useful not because computers need them, but because they have meanings which make them easier for humans to remember' (Hrynyshyn, 2008: 757). Because countries are represented in the DNS by two letters and no digits (unlike e.g. in the telephone system), some authors (Hrynyshyn, 2008; Mueller, 1998; Rood, 2000) consider ccTLDs as semantic signs per se. While this assumption is probably correct in the case of many ccTLDs, it is also possible that a specific set of digits possesses a very clear cultural meaning (e.g. 90210 as a signifier of 'the rich Beverly Hills lifestyle'; Wass, 2003: xv). And it is likewise possible that a set of letters carries no meaning; Mueller (1998) argues that some ccTLDs are counter-intuitive: 'Is .au Austria or Australia? Is .il Iceland, Ireland, or Israel? Why is .ch Switzerland and not China?' (p. 102).⁵

Although they might sometimes be difficult to decipher, especially by cultural outsiders, ccTLDs stand for, and thus primarily signify, countries. Still, some ccTLD registrars may prefer to dissociate a particular ccTLD from the country it is supposed to signify and, instead, attribute a new meaning to it. Given that in such cases the new meaning is usually commercially attractive, Hrynshyn (2008) names this practice the commodification of ccTLDs and illustrates it with the example of two ccTLDs: .tv, which originally stood for Tuvalu, has come to be promoted as the marker of television-related websites; and .md, which originally stood for Moldova, is now promoted to be used by medicine-related websites. Normally, the only requirement applicants must fulfil to obtain one of these ccTLDs is to pay an appropriate amount of money. However, in some cases, there might be a few additional requirements, for example applicants for .tm, which originally stood for Turkmenistan but might also suggest that the proceeding term is trademarked, may not register a domain name which is 'obscene according to Turkmen standards' (Wilson, 2001: 68). In contrast, some other, usually wealthier (Hrynshyn, 2008), countries control the process of allocating their ccTLDs much more closely. They create a set of rules which applicants must comply with to obtain a particular ccTLD, including, for example, the necessity to possess the nationality of or an official address in a particular country. Christou and Simpson (2009) suggest that the greater (governmental) control over a ccTLD becomes, the more important role the ccTLD plays as a 'means of demonstrating national identity' (p. 612).

Furthermore, commenting on the importance of .kz in Kazakhstan, Shklovski and Struthers (2010) argue that the importance of ccTLDs 'increases in locations where notions of nationalism and statehood are in flux' (p. 126). Indeed, a number of initiatives undertaken to create new national or regional TLDs attest that ccTLDs play especially important role for nations and regions which are involved in an active struggle for the recognition of their existence or distinctiveness. Examples include the dotKurd.org campaign, which advocates for the 'identity of Kurds on the world wide web' (www.dotKurd.org), the Fundació puntCAT campaign, which managed to convince ICANN to introduce a new sponsored TLD (sTLD) .cat in 2005 to promote the Catalan language and culture (Atkinson, 2006), the less successful dotCYM campaign, which advocated for the creation of the .cym sTLD for the Welsh online community (Honeycutt, 2008) as well as the campaigns of specific European regions such as Brittany, Galicia or Flanders (Honeycutt, 2008: 253). Additionally, some supranational entities managed to obtain their unique TLDs to endorse, for example, Asian solidarity (.asia) or European identity (.eu). The consequence of this symbolic logic is that ccTLDs and free access to them may play an especially important role not only for groups that strive for the recognition of their distinct regional, national or supranational identities, but also for those groups which are denied a place within the imaginations of a particular nation and, maybe even more important role, for those who do the denying. In what follows, I will explore this possibility through the examination of the role of .tr in relation to hegemonic Turkish sexual norms.

Methods

As mentioned in the introduction, this article is a part of my PhD project, which investigates the intersections of queer and (trans)national identifications online. For the purpose

of the PhD project, I selected a sample of about 50 LGBT websites, 30 from Poland and 20 from Turkey. First, I typed 15 key words, such as 'bisexual', 'homosexual', 'LGBT', 'queer' and others (both in Polish and English as well as Turkish and English) in national versions of Google. I limited my examination to the ten first results for each query. Because my aim was to focus on portal-like community-oriented websites, I excluded all personal websites such as blogs. Additionally, I excluded purely academic and purely pornographic websites as well as those who were no longer updated. Next, to avoid different biases of Google and the algorithms or filters working on my personal computer, I examined the websites listed on Polish and Turkish online directories for LGBT websites such as hiacynt.pl and escinselsitel.com. Finally, recognizing the networked character of the web, I explored the official links on the websites which had been already added to my sample.

For this article, I investigated why LGBT websites in Turkey tend not to use their national ccTLD. I adopt a two-stage research design. In the first stage, I tracked who allocates .tr and who shapes the policies governing the allocation. I also analysed the policies themselves by employing the approach of discourse scholars who recommend to ask questions about 'What identities (roles, positions), with their concomitant personal, social, and cultural knowledge and beliefs (cognition), feelings (affect), and values, seem to be relevant to, taken for granted in, or under construction in the situation?' (Gee, 2005: 111).

In the second stage, I conducted email interviews with the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey. Between October and November 2012, I sent emails to 23 authors of LGBT websites in Turkey. While one email was written in English, all others were translated into Turkish, with the great help of a Turkish native speaker, Deniz Türkçü. In the emails, I first introduced myself and informed the recipients that I contacted them to ask their opinion about the use of TLDs by the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey. Next, I explained that usually Turkey's LGBT websites do not use .tr and asked them the following questions: Why do you think Turkey's LGBT websites do not use the .tr extension? How did you decide about your own domain name and its TLD(s)? Which criteria were important for you while deciding about it? Did you consider applying for .tr, and why or why not? Only six informants replied: from Ayilar.net, Eshsiz.com, Gabile.com, Kaosgl.org, Lambdaistanbul.org and Turkgayclub.com. In selected cases, I exchanged additional emails with those who responded to my request. All informants agreed to reveal the original names of their websites. Still, for safety reasons, I decided not to connect any specific quote with any particular website. Instead, to distinguish among quotes made by the authors of different websites, I identify them all with letters from A to F, which were randomly assigned to each of the six websites. I conducted qualitative content analysis of the interviews.

Enforcing cultural meanings of .tr

Nic.tr, the official registrar of .tr, started registering the Turkish ccTLD in 1991. At that time, Nic.tr was controlled by the Computer Centre of the Middle East Technical University (METU) in Ankara, which was responsible not only for the technical allocation of .tr, but also for the development of policies governing the allocation process. A

substantial and critical change in the governance of .tr took place in 2000, when the Turkish Ministry of Transport and Communication established a DNS Working Group, which has since worked under the authority of the Internet Council (<http://kurul.ubak.gov.tr>, accessed on 8 April 2013). In the ‘Corporate Identity’ section on the Nic.tr website, we read that the DNS Working Group

consists of eleven corporate members of sector representatives, as a means to apply the division of legislative, executive and judicial powers to Nic.tr (‘.tr’ Domain Names) Administration. In this context, DNS Working Group operates as the legislative power by determining policies, rules and procedures while Middle East Technical University performs registry (execution). (Nic.tr, n.d.-b)

The creation of the DNS Working group has indeed divided the legislative and executive power within Nic.tr, but it did this crucially by delegating the job of developing policies for .tr from an educational institution, METU, to the government-dependent DNS Working Group.

The policies regulating the allocation of .tr are listed in a document entitled “‘.tr’ Domain Names: Policies, Rules and Procedures”, which is freely available in Turkish and English on the Nic.tr website (Nic.tr, 2008). One of the main rules that the document establishes is that the .tr extension cannot be registered on its own but must always be preceded by one of the second-level domains introduced by Nic.tr. Consequently, applicants for .tr must always specify for which sub-domain they apply, for example .com.tr, .gen.tr, .gov.tr and others. The document first lists general rules applicable to all sub-domains and then details the regulations for specific sub-domains. Sub-domains are classified into two categories: ‘Document(s) Required’ and ‘No Document Required’. The application for the sub-domains in the former category (usually the most popular sub-domains such as .com.tr, .net.tr or .org.tr) is always assessed by Nic.tr before being finalized. Applications for ‘No Document Required’ sub-domains (such as .gen.tr, .name.tr, .tel.tr or web.tr) are finalized immediately but could be objected to and taken back at any time.

The “‘.tr’ Domain Names’ document is rather long (37 pages) and quite detailed in its instructions and provisos. Especially extensive are the rules for the allocation of specific ‘Document(s) Required’ sub-domains, in particular for the most popular one, .com.tr. Usually, the rules for specific sub-domains list the requirements which applicants must fulfil to be granted the .tr extension. For example, to register their name and surname under .com.tr, applicants must provide a photocopy of their certificate of birth and their Turkish identity number; to register a television program or a film title, a certificate by the Ministry of Culture; and to register a radio or television station, a certificate by the Radio and Television Higher Council. As a result, the Turkish authorities do not only play a significant role in creating the rules governing the allocation of .tr but also, within these rules, require certificates which only they are authorized to issue. Even if proceeding indirectly, the great control of the Turkish authorities over the allocation of .tr suggests that .tr is intended as a marker of Turkishness online: usually, the greater government control over a ccTLD turns out to be, the more important is the role played by the ccTLD as a ‘means of demonstrating national identity’ (Christou and Simpson, 2009: 612).

If the overall ideological function of .tr is to mark Turkishness online, the further question should be what kind of Turkishness it marks: what deserves to be counted as Turkish online? General rules, applicable to all sub-domains, of the “.tr” Domain Names’ document provide some information in this regard, especially Article 8, which reads,

The domain names applied for should be in accordance with national traditions and customs, cultural values and general moral values. The domain name itself or any part of it cannot include expressions of insults, swearwords, shameful definitions etc. This rule covers the equivalents of such words and/or expressions in English and other foreign languages as well. Domain names that do not comply with this rule will not be allotted; and those that have been allotted will be taken back.

The moralistic language of Article 8 (‘general moral values’, ‘shameful definitions’) makes it clear that .tr is intended as an ideological marker of ‘moral’ or ‘respectable’ Turkishness. We learn that this morality involves not using ‘expressions of insults, swearwords, shameful definitions, etc.’, which is intrinsically already vague and problematic. The grandiose signifiers, such as ‘national traditions and customs’, ‘cultural values’ and ‘general moral values’, are equally vague and make Article 8 wide open to interpretation: What counts as moral and what as immoral? What is in accordance with ‘national traditions and customs’ and what is against them? As we could already learn from this article, such moralistic language has been often used in Turkey against queers, particularly by the AKP government. Therefore, given the control exerted by the Turkish authorities over the policies governing the allocation of .tr, the content of the policies and the fact that the Turkish authorities, using moralistic discourse, continue to deny a place to queers within the hegemonic notion of Turkishness, it may be argued that .tr works to (re)produce online a particular notion of Turkishness that fails to recognize Turkey’s queers as Turkish.

Resisting cultural meanings of .tr

While the Turkish state seems to exploit .tr to (re)produce online heterosexist notion of Turkishness, what does .tr mean to the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey? How do they perceive it and why do they tend not to use it? Out of the six informants who replied to my email, only one states explicitly that the policies governing the allocation of .tr do discourage the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey from applying for the ccTLD:

Different gay websites don’t use the .com.tr domain name because, during the procedure, ... the applicants have to pass along such information as their name, surname and address into the state’s hands. And they prefer not to do that. I mean, most owners of gay websites try to hide their personal information because of death threats and other similar menaces. For example, when you want to obtain a domain name like gaydating.com.tr. (Informant C)

Moreover, the informant also reports that applicants for the ‘No Document Required’ sub-domains (e.g. .gen.tr) are also obliged to provide their identity card number. Nic.tr

assures applicants that all personal data are confidential: 'Unless judicial cause is the case, no information shall be released to a third party or any other organisation without your prior consent' (Nic.tr, n.d.-a). However, given that the Turkish authorities may easily file moralistic lawsuits against LGBT organizations and websites, it is not difficult to obtain such a judicial decision.

Still, the bureaucratic procedure that needs to be followed to obtain .tr seems to be a far more important problem for all six informants. For instance, one of them states that 'It's too much bureaucracy to obtain the .tr address. It's a long process during which you need to provide plenty of documents. And because we don't want to struggle with this bureaucracy, we don't use the extension' (Informant F). Another informant shares similar opinion and insists that the bureaucratic aspect is a general, rather than queer-specific problem:

When you apply for '.com.tr', '.net.tr' and other similar domains, you may encounter plenty of bureaucratic problems. I don't use the .tr extension because here [in Turkey] it is perceived as not user-friendly. When I started my portal, I thought about no other extension but '.com'. And this is not only the case of LGBT websites, you'll get the same answer from almost anyone in Turkey. (Informant D)

Indeed, external research confirms that, generally, the more complicated the procedure for obtaining a ccTLD is, the less popular the ccTLD becomes (Christou and Simpson, 2009; Rood, 2000). However, given that the Turkish authorities continue to hinder the official registration of many Turkey's LGBT organizations and companies, it is the authors of LGBT websites who end up with especially limited access to at least some .tr sub-domains, in particular those within the 'Document(s) Required' category such as .com.tr or .org.tr. Three of the informants (B, C and E) explain that when they created their websites they could not apply for .com.tr because they were not officially registered as companies, or as any other officially recognizable entities, which is the formal requirement for obtaining the .com.tr sub-domain. The two requirements during the .tr registration process, to reveal personal data and to provide official documents, even if not primarily imposed to hinder the registration process specifically for LGBT website authors, do discourage some of the authors from applying for the .tr extension. Additionally, this could be even more important for the authors of smaller services who, unlike big LGBT organizations or companies, do not have an access to or cannot afford professional legal services.

Nevertheless, it is not officially forbidden for LGBT websites to apply for and obtain the .tr ccTLD. In fact, one of my informants explains that 'if we really wanted to have a [name of the website].com.tr domain, we could get it' (Informant C). Another informant (A) reveals that they have already either registered or reserved a range of sub-domains with the .tr extension for their website. Even then, however, they prefer not to use them. They explain that '.tr can contain different meanings in terms of social opposition in Turkey. For example, non-governmental organisations which are not associated with any political structure like us, don't use the .tr extension' (Informant A). When asked to further comment on this statement, they respond that 'Although .tr is a country extension related to political engagement, there's a common perception that it emphasizes Turkish

identity. Non-governmental organizations do not refrain from using .tr, they prefer not to use it politically' (Informant A). This somewhat vague statement suggests that it is primarily the practice of the Turkish state to attribute a particular notion of Turkishness to the .tr extension that makes the extension undesirable for the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey. And given that the extension is undesirable for them, .tr becomes an even stronger, although still banal, marker of a queer-free notion of Turkishness online.

At the same time, the quotes just mentioned show that at least some authors of LGBT websites in Turkey are aware of the ideological charge of the .tr extension. Even if they can, they prefer not to use .tr because they recognize that the extension possesses the connotations of a particular politicized notion of Turkishness. By preferring not to use the extension, they resist to adhere to the Turkish national requirements embedded in the .tr ccTLD. This is a strategy similar to the one used by Sri Lankan Tamils, who are not internationally recognized as a group distinct enough to have the right to their own ccTLD. As Enteen (2010) reports, instead of campaigning for their own domain name, Tamils 'refuse to recognize the primacy of country-code suffixes to denote nation and location' and focus on creating their nation online by sustaining the duration and reliability of their national websites (p. 68). In that sense, the authors of both Turkey's LGBT websites and Tamil national websites do not dismiss ccTLDs as banal or innocent but refuse to use them in resistance against the ideological assumptions embedded in ccTLDs or DNS.

Conclusion

In this article, I focused on mundane, daily (re)productions of nationalism on the internet. I suggested that some ccTLDs may be considered as digital equivalents of publicly displayed flags, that is, as banal but not necessarily benign (re)producers of nations (Billig, 1995 [2010]). My examination of a particular ccTLD, .tr for Turkey, showed that, given the great (even if indirect) control of the Turkish authorities over the policies for allocating .tr, the extension (re)produces online Turkish national imaginations. Furthermore, I followed Hrynshyn's (2008) call to recognize structural constraints in the DNS and investigated the hegemonic Turkish norms of sexuality, which still underlie the positioning of queers outside the hegemonic notion of Turkishness (Ataman, 2011; Dönmez and Enneli, 2011; Szulc, 2011). Based on the analysis of a moralistic discourse of policies governing the allocation of .tr, my first conclusion is that .tr works, at some political level, to (re)produce online a particular notion of Turkishness that fails to recognize Turkey's queers as Turkish.

Several of my informants, authors of the LGBT websites in Turkey, explain that some procedures governing the allocation of .tr, in particular the necessity to reveal personal information or to provide official documents to obtain the .tr extension, may discourage the authors of LGBT websites to apply for the national ccTLD. Still, officially, LGBT websites in Turkey are not denied the access to the .tr extension. Furthermore, some other informants admit that, if they wanted, they could obtain a domain name with .tr extension or that they have already registered or reserved it. Even then, however, they prefer not to use it because of the negative connotations the extension possesses: of a particular politicized notion of Turkishness. Therefore, my second

conclusion is that the extension loses its banality for at least some authors of LGBT websites in Turkey who recognize the particularities of Turkish national requirements embedded in .tr and refuse to adhere to them. Of course, it does not mean that the authors retreat from challenging the hegemonic notion of Turkishness online. After all, ccTLDs are not isolated virtual phenomena. The authors of LGBT websites may still clearly refer to the national identity, for example, in their domain names (see Turkgayclub.com) or in the content of their websites.

When commenting on the phenomenon that it is poorer countries that tend to commodify their ccTLDs, Hrynyshyn (2008) argues that 'This cannot be explained by reference to the values embedded in the internet's technical or administrative structure through the social shaping process without taking into account the power relations between the actors who influence that shaping process', in particular 'the international inequality of wealth that characterizes the global capitalist economy' (p. 765). Similarly, I argue that the fact that the authors of LGBT websites in Turkey tend not or refuse to use the Turkish ccTLD cannot be explained without taking into account the national cultural structures, in particular the hegemonic norms of sexuality. Perceived as banal or not, ccTLDs are always culturally charged.

The ongoing process of the redesign of DNS poses new questions regarding internet governance and national and queer identifications online. What will happen to ccTLDs after hundreds of new domain names will be introduced to DNS? Will ccTLDs grow or decline in importance? What will be the preference for domain names of the authors of LGBT websites situated in different national contexts? Which LGBT websites will favour national domains and which the queer ones such as .gay and .lgbt? Will the queer domains also be available in their national versions such as .gay.tr? Future research should address those and similar questions to help us acknowledge and understand the underestimated cultural structures in internet governance.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this article was awarded an Honourable Mention by the 2013 Turkish Studies Association's Fisher Prize Committee for the best graduate paper.
2. Saudi Telecom Company's comment to the application for the new gTLD .gay, 12 August 2012. Available at: <https://gtldcomment.icann.org/comments-feedback/applicationcomment/commentdetails/1760> (accessed 13 March 2013).

3. I use the term 'LGBT' to describe the websites to which I refer in this article because this term is most commonly used for self-description on the websites. Still, some websites extend this acronym to 'LGBTT', where the two Ts stand for Transvestite and Transsexual, respectively, or 'LGBTI', where I stands for Intersexual. The same holds true for LGBT activists in Turkey. Still, in the more general discussion, I prefer the term 'queer' as an umbrella term for gender and sexual minorities because it rightly accounts for the non-heteronormative and gender-non-conforming character of their sexual and gender identifications, even if such identifications 'might mean striving toward the normative identity category' (Gray, 2009).
4. Even though nations have been created as structurally masculine and masculinist, symbolically they are usually imagined as feminine (e.g. Yuval-Davis, 1997).
5. Mueller's argument, however, is based on US-centric assumptions: while .il may be indeed difficult to decipher for US citizens, most Israelis have probably less difficulty to recognize .il as a country code for Israel.

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