

# Diaspora governance in times of COVID-19: the case of the Turkish Diyanet in Italy

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## Abstract

Since the COVID-19 emergency broke out, Turkish state institutions have become crucial in governing diaspora communities facing lockdown measures and forced separation from their homeland. Being the first European country strongly affected by COVID-19, where massive lockdown measures were put in place, Italy is a relevant case to analyze. Retracing the scope and scale of the online activities organized during the COVID-19 pandemic, this paper investigates how the Turkish state supported the Turkey-originated population living in Italy. The analysis draws on interviews with Diyanet religious officers sent from Ankara to serve the Diyanet's branches (DITIB) in different Italian cities and with the religious attaché employed in the Turkish Consulate in Milan who supervises them. The interviews have been corroborated by a vast collection of visual materials including brochures, videos and posters published on the YouTube channel and the official Facebook pages of the DITIB cultural centers in Italy. Our data show that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, online seminars enabled Turkey's connection with the diaspora to be strengthened, using the emergency situation as a starting point for enhancing family programs and fostering Muslim-Turkish belonging in all aspects of life.

## 1. Introduction

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, hereinafter Diyanet) is one of the longest-running Turkish state agencies operating abroad. The institution, founded in 1924, established a Department for International Relations in 1985, one year after the “Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs” (DITIB) opened its branch in Germany. Over the past decades, imams and preachers have been attached to the Diyanet mosques in Sweden, France, Denmark, Austria and the Netherlands to provide religious services and carry out socio-cultural activities for the adults and young generations of Turkey-originated Muslim communities. While the Diyanet rapidly turned into a transnational actor and a key diaspora institution (Sunier and Landman 2014; Çitak 2013; Allievi and Nielsen 2003), it has also contributed to the Turkish state's double strategy of both “maintenance” (Amiriaux 2002) – strengthening the link with “its” diaspora – and control of religious and political opposition activities abroad (Yükleyen 2011).

During two decades of Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) rule, the Turkish government's diaspora policy and Diyanet's international mission have been closely intertwined. This transformation mirrored a larger reincorporation of Sunni Islam into the official state ideology, as well as the renewed presence of religion as a public affair by means of a complete reorganization of the Diyanet, whose budget and



responsibilities have expanded (Yener-Roderburg 2020; Öztürk 2016; Maritato 2018a; Lord 2018). The number of Diyanet cadres (imams, preachers and religious officers) sent abroad has increased and their competences have been redefined, including a uniformization of the tasks and competences. In 2019, according to the Diyanet's official statistics, 1931 of its religious officers were serving abroad for either a long period (up to 5 years) or a short one (up to 2 years). These religious services are under the supervision of Turkish Embassies and Consulates, where the religious attachés (*din ataşesi*) are charged with coordinating the activities carried out in the country's mosques. Since the early 2000s, concomitant with the increase in women employed in the Diyanet workforce, women preachers have also been included among the contingent to serve Turkish Muslim communities abroad with the intention of reaching families and young generations. Scholars have recently investigated the forms and meanings of the activities conducted in Diyanet mosques located in Germany (Carol and Hofheinz 2022; Öcal and Gökarkırsel 2022), Sweden (Maritato 2018b), Austria (Maritato 2021, Çitak 2013), France (Çitak 2010; Bruce 2012; Akgönül 2018) and Denmark (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018) and emphasized the continuities and changes in Turkey's art of governing its diaspora.

Against this backdrop, Italy has hitherto been understudied, for two main reasons. The first lies in the peripheral position of the country in Turkish labor migration trajectories. The second is the relatively small numbers of Turkey-originated communities settled in the country (officially 21,000)<sup>1</sup> if compared to other migrant communities. However, the Turkish-Islamic Union for Religious Affairs opened a branch in Italy (*DITIB Italya*) in 2013 and, like the other DITIB Union in European countries, the Italian one has recently expanded its activities. At present, cultural centers have been established in five Northern Italian cities: Milan, Como, Modena, Imperia, and Venice. The DITIB coordinates and supervises these local branches, whose objectives include the promotion of the socio-cultural activities of Turkish communities in Italy, the management of the places where the communities meet and the organization of activities such as Italian and Turkish language courses, social events on the occasion of religious feasts and national celebrations, and activities for young generations, women and families such as the Offices for Family Counseling. This engagement has also occurred within the framework of a redefinition of consulate services showing proximity and availability vis-à-vis migrants' associations. Such an "empathetic" approach (Öktem 2014) has characterized the AKP's populist narrative of the state serving the people and establishing an "equal" relationship between officers and citizens.

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in February 2020, the attempt of the Turkish state institutions to be close to the people became crucial in governing diaspora communities facing lockdown measures and forced separation from the homeland. As Italy was among the first countries where massive lockdown measures were put in place, the DITIB coordinated all the local branches to provide online activities to support the Turkey-originated population living in Italy. It is thus an interesting case study from which to investigate how state-sponsored diaspora institutions contribute to governing the diaspora.

The paper draws on qualitative research on how COVID-19 has affected the activities of state-related diaspora organizations. It stems from the following questions: How have the lockdowns measures in Italy affected the Diyanet association's activities towards the

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<sup>1</sup> ISTAT, as of 31 December 2021.

Turkish diaspora? And what does this say about the ongoing transformation of Turkey's diaspora governance?

It contends that while most activities provided by the DITIB branches were online, the state institution assumed a new proximity with the diasporic communities, providing both religious and moral support in an unprecedented situation. The paper is organized as follows: The first section illustrates the theoretical framework focusing on the role of religious institutions in diaspora governance. The second provides a focus on the AKP's understanding of diaspora policy and how it has evolved to reach citizens living abroad. Subsequently, attention will be paid to the Italian context and the research methodology. The analysis is then divided into three subsections which examine how, during COVID-19 pandemic, the DITIB associations in Italy (i) referred to Islamic principles to provide moral support to the communities while re-organizing activities aimed at reaching people at home, (ii) conducted online seminars which grew in scope and scale to include as many people as possible during severe lockdown measures and (iii) maintain and reinforce the communities' link and sense of belonging to Turkey. The examination of such an attempt to establish a new proximity with the diaspora communities casts light on a broader transformation of Turkey's diaspora governance.

## **2. The contribution of Transnational Religious Actors and Institutions in Diaspora Governance: Theoretical premises**

Since the 1990s, a vast literature has emphasized the increasing visibility of diasporas in global politics. Scholars' attention has been mainly devoted to investigating the contribution of states in building and governing their "domestic abroad" (Varadarajan 2010). This has mainly occurred via ad hoc institutions, policies, and bureaucratic apparatuses through which nation-states maintain political, economic, and identity ties with their respective communities abroad (Gamlen 2014). The role of the state in shaping, manipulating, and building identities is a continuous process that transcends the borders of the state and creates new political actors, such as the diasporic and kin communities. Diasporas as subjects of an expanded, territorially diffused nation have also been analyzed to stress how these new constituencies affect international relations and are strategically employed to propagate states' images and reputations (Korkut 2016). A stream of literature has examined the policies and instruments through which diasporas are governed and how they shape boundaries of belonging (Ragazzi 2009; Délano and Gamlen 2014; Alonso and Mylonas 2019; Lafleur and Yener-Roderburg 2022). In this vein, the study of governmentality and its transnationalization contributes to diaspora studies, casting light on the ways states resort to a symbolic control of transnational space and a discursive control of imaginative space given the impossibility of directing physical discipline (Collyer and King 2014:194-9). Besides institutions and policies, states resort to "creative forms" and "symbolic instruments" to manage their citizens abroad, preserve their national loyalty, and, if possible, extract resources from them (Fitzgerald 2008:34-5).

Against this backdrop, transnational religious actors and institutions have been examined to reflect on socio-political structures within which individuals "belong" to communities or are excluded therefrom. The role of imams and priests sent to diaspora communities has expanded and diversified the literature on diaspora governance beyond the research on more "classical" diasporic actors such as workers' associations, political,

economic, and financial elites (Fitzgerald 2008; Adamson 2012; Bruce 2019; Maritato 2021). Religion has been investigated for its contribution to foreign policy and international relations as well as the religious actors' local response to international issues such as the refugee crisis and migration (Haynes 2001; Warner and Walker 2011; Jacoby et al. 2019). A perspective which considers the activities conducted by religious officers within diaspora communities is not only able to inform about the multifaceted aspect of diaspora governance, it also drives attention to the meanings, symbols, rituals, and morals constituting pastoral power, a governmentality technique that Foucault describes as the art of governing men (Foucault 2009:165). Some scholars have analyzed religious actors' practices in diaspora communities, referring to pastoral power to emphasize care and control as it pertains to the state's interest in building loyal and enduring relations with emigrants while spreading the government's discourse abroad (i.e., Catholic priests sent to serve Mexican immigrants in the USA, (Fitzgerald 2008) or imams and preachers sent from the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs in Austria (Maritato 2021). Proximity and universality qualify pastoral power as a form of ruling which needs to establish close relations with people to be exerted. Scholarship has recently analyzed how digital diaspora allows issues of spatiality and belonging to be reframed, arguing that, through their digitally networked activities, migrants reinforce their geographical identity rather than becoming more deterritorialized (van den Bosch and Nell 2006; Ponzanesi 2020). Relying on the literature on long-distance nationalism, scholars emphasize how nationalist conservative parties influence their diasporic citizens by enhancing forms of connectivity with the homeland (Anderson 1991).

The paper is situated at the intersection of these literatures and examines how the religious officers' online activities conducted during COVID contributed to offering care and guidance while reinforcing online transnationalism (Trandafoiu 2013; Ponzanesi 2020). The analysis of how state-led diaspora institutions functioned at micro-levels during the pandemic might thus enrich the literature on diaspora studies and transnational religious actors operating in a (digital) diasporic context.

### **3. Turkey's art of governing diaspora under the AKP**

Since the early 2000s, the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) has been engaged in renewed activism towards Turkey-originated diasporas. The literature which has analyzed the AKP diaspora policies emphasizes two peculiarities that mark a discontinuity in relation to Turkey's long-lasting interest in "its" communities abroad. The first aspect focuses on governmentality and considers the instruments through which the Turkish state aims to reach and govern the diaspora. The activities of agencies, government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs) as well as ad hoc institutions and bureaucratic apparatuses have recently expanded in scope and scale.

New and well-established diaspora institutions operationalized their international mission at cultural, economic, social, and political levels. As scholars have underlined, these institutions are situated at the blurred boundary between diaspora and foreign policy (Mencutek and Baser 2018; Maritato et al. 2021; Yabancı 2021). This is the case of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB) founded in 2010 with the aim of building social, cultural and

economic relations with kin and co-ethnic communities, (former) citizens abroad and foreign students and to propagate an ethnic-religious conception of nationhood. The YTB is the only agency committed to the implementation of diaspora policies, education programs, networking and funding schemes for diaspora organizations.

Since the 1990s, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı*, TİKA) is also actively engaged abroad and today runs projects in Balkan countries, the Middle East and Africa. Moreover, in 2007 the Yunus Emre Cultural Institutes were established to promote Turkish language and culture and, since 2016, the *Maarif* Foundation provides educational services abroad while fostering Turkey's cultural diplomacy. The proliferation of state institutions and para-public agencies also reflected a change in Turkey's art of ruling the diaspora. Scholars underline a discontinuity characterizing the AKP diaspora policies vis-à-vis the previous ones as it pertains to the relationship with the migrants' associations and the empathetic approach combining care and control employed while serving the communities abroad (Öktem 2014:7; Maritato 2020).

The second aspect that qualifies the AKP interest in building and governing diaspora is related to the prominence of Islam and Islamic identity in AKP's thematic conceptualization of diaspora. The literature has underlined how in the past two decades a "new diaspora policy" has been shaped in religious-nationalist terms and how institutions and policies have been aimed at strengthening emigrants' ties with the homeland and widening Turkey's conceptions of citizenship, belonging and identity (Aksel 2014; Mencutek and Baser 2019).

The intent to reinforce the link with the diaspora has also included new measures like the 2009 Blue-Card system, which granted more rights to emigrants and their foreign-born children, and the external voting rights since the 2014 Presidential Elections. In this attempt to shape the diaspora's boundaries of belonging, the Diyanet's associations abroad have emerged as crucial institutions in propagating and fostering a religious-nationalist identity within the diaspora. Although the Diyanet has a long-established presence in Europe dating back to the 1980s, in the past two decades, the number of imams and preachers serving abroad has expanded (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Bruce 2020).

Related to this, the budget of the institution has increased to the point where religious services have been transformed into permanent pastoral care aimed at guiding Turkish Muslim communities living abroad (Maritato 2021). The strategies of the Turkish state in creating and representing Turkey's image abroad through state religious apparatuses have been analyzed in different European contexts, in some cases from a comparative perspective (Çitak 2018; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018) while in others with a special focus on the role of women preachers (Maritato 2018). Projects and series of seminars such as "family schools" have been organized by religious officers employed in Diyanet branches in European countries with regard to women's role within the family, children's education, marriage, and divorce. Such attention to future generations in the diasporic context also resonates with the AKP's discourse on the strengthening of the traditional Turkish family and the attempt to forge a pious generation (Lüküslü 2016; Maritato 2015; Kocamaner 2019). Family and Religious Consultation Bureaus are currently operative in many Diyanet branches abroad and the counseling services related to

the family, parenthood, and childcare contribute to redefine the role of religious officers as professional civil servants at the service of the community. The activities organized by the Diyanet abroad also go beyond routine religious services, training and guidance sessions in mosques and include Turkish language courses and social events like trips and picnics for children and teenagers, iftar dinners and culinary kermesses. By virtue of protocols signed with the ministries and state agencies of host countries, Diyanet officers abroad regularly visit elderly people at home, in hospitals and in prisons, and provide counseling services and moral support. In this vein, religion and nationalism intertwine in the construction of a pro-active sense of belonging and of a mobilized and politicized immigrant self.

However, in the aftermath of the post 2016 attempted coup, diaspora policies and institutions have been shaped by authoritarian extraterritorial practices (Glasius 2018) aimed at dichotomizing the conduct of a population abroad by dividing it into the “good” pro-AKP and the “bad” emigrants. Moreover, the fact that religious officers work under the supervision of religious attachés employed at embassies and consulates raises a debate on the spaces for the maneuvering of political opposition. Recently, cases of imams accused of controlling and reporting the activities of the Gülen movement outside Turkey<sup>2</sup> contributed to the recalibration of the relationship between European countries and the Diyanet as the main actor of Turkish Islam which combines both mechanisms of caring and control.

#### **4. Research context and methodology**

Within the framework of Turkey’s current reinvigoration of its diaspora policy, the article analyzes the activities organized for Turkish immigrants attending mosques run by Diyanet in Italy (DITIB Italya) with particular focus on the lockdown period due to the COVID-19 pandemic (February 2020 - April 2022). Italy is an important case for two main reasons: First, it was the first European country to be severely affected by COVID-19 and secondly, it has become a destination country for flows from Turkey only due to changes in European/Italian migration policies. As it concerns the COVID-19 crisis in Italy, a recent and expanding literature examines the impact of COVID-19 on different Italian sectors (Auriemma and Iannaccone, 2020; Minello, 2021; Scavarda, 2020). In this vein, some scholars have focused on the relationship between the COVID-19 crisis and religious resources to assess how religiosity has been experienced during the pandemic (Molteni et al., 2021). In line with what was previously examined, we contend that COVID-related policies implemented by Italian authorities had an important impact on diaspora communities living in Italy as it pertains to their perceived health and psychosocial security. In this respect, the exceptionality of COVID-19 provides a significant perspective from which to observe not only how the Turkish state operates in accompanying its citizens abroad, but also how Turkish communities living in Italy turned to Turkish state authorities and institutions, especially during lockdown measures which forced the closure of community centers and places of worship in Italy.

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<sup>2</sup> Please see: <https://www.dw.com/en/turkish-imam-spy-affair-in-germany-extends-across-europe/a-37590672>.

The Turkey-originated diaspora in Italy has been understudied mostly because migration from Turkey to Italy has a short history and an irregular character compared to other European countries that have regulated flows through bilateral agreements since the 1960s (Purkis and Güngör, 2015; Purkis, 2019; Ince-Beqo, 2019). The first flows started right at the end of the 1980s, in a period in which Italy became a destination country and started to officially address migratory phenomena. On Turkey's side, the end of the 1980s reflected not only the negative consequences of neoliberal policies and the economic crisis, but also the growing socio-political tensions in the entire region (Purkis, 2019). Other research (Ince-Beqo and Ambrosini, 2022; Schuster, 2005; Sirkeci, 2006) also showed that Italy was rarely seen as a country of settlement for migrants and asylum seekers from Turkey; rather, it was considered a transitional place where they could settle temporarily, with the intention of later moving to Northern European countries.

Currently, the resident population from Turkey in Italy is about 21,000, with no clear count of immigrants without Turkish passports. More than half of this population reside in Italy's three most industrialized regions: Piedmont, Emilia-Romagna, and Lombardy. Moreover, it is worth also mentioning that by combining the typical characteristics of unskilled labor migration and asylum seeker flows with those of students and highly skilled labor, Italy and particularly large cities such as Milan and Turin have recently become an important destination for students and highly-skilled migrants from Turkey.<sup>3</sup>

Within the framework of the DITIB association in Italy, between 2017 and 2022 we conducted six interviews with two Attachés employed at the Turkish Consulate in Milan (one in 2017 and one in 2022) and with two women preachers employed in Venice and Imperia local branches and two with Milan and Como associations. Between 2020 and 2022, this was combined with the analysis of brochures, videos and posters published on the YouTube channel and the Facebook official pages<sup>4</sup> of the five DITIB cultural centers in Italy: Milan, Imperia, Como, Modena, and Venice with the aim of retracing the scope and scale of the online activities organized during the COVID-19 pandemic. As online activities increased, we also considered videos posted on the Facebook pages in the period between 2020-2022. To grasp continuities and changes with the COVID-19 period, the article also benefits from previous fieldwork on DITIB in Italy conducted in 2017. This included interviews with the former DITIB Attaché in Milan, one women preacher working in Milan and in the Como Camerlata religious center, and the head of the Diyanet's women section in Como. The article is also based on Diyanet publications and yearly reports of the activities conducted abroad. This is the case of the book "The Islam's View on Epidemic Disease" (*İslamın Salgın Hastalıklara Bakışı*) published in 2020 by the Diyanet press as well as all the online brochures and documents about diaspora projects and publications of the local branches in Italy.

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<sup>3</sup> Samuk-Carignani, Rosina & Ince-Beqo, forthcoming.

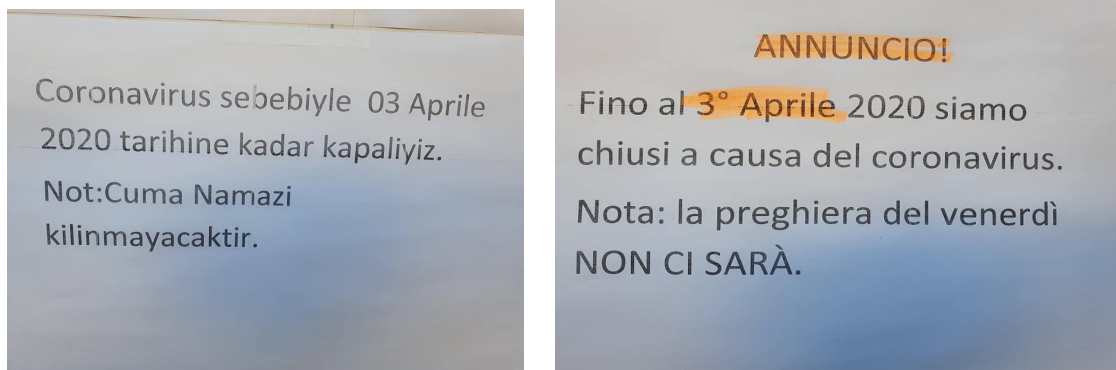
<sup>4</sup> The Facebook pages of the DITIB Italya (<https://www.facebook.com/ditibitalya>) and all the local branches: DITIB Como, DITIB Imperia (<https://www.facebook.com/DiTİB-Italia-Imperia-Camisi-102263606505293>), (<https://www.facebook.com/DiTİB-Italia-Imperia-Camisi-102263606505293>), DITIB Venice (<https://www.facebook.com/DITIB-Venezia-1903624493252894>), DITIB Milano (<https://www.facebook.com/diyanetcamii milano>), DITIB Modena (<https://www.facebook.com/ulu.camii.modena>).

## 5. Data analysis: Turkey's strategies to reach citizens during COVID-19 pandemic

### 5.1. "We don't want to die here". Islamic principles under lockdown measures

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian health system was massively under stress due to the high number of infected cases and the lack of therapies. As the death numbers were exponentially increasing all over the country, severe lockdown measures were implemented. From the beginning of March 2020, Italy was defined as a "red zone" and the movement of the population was restricted except for necessity, work and health issues. In an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic, non-essential shops and businesses were closed and public and educational services were provided online. These repeated containment measures transformed the relationship between domestic and public space, contributing to a complete redefinition of the space of "home". For families this meant combining working from home with child and elderly care and the supervision of children's schooling programs. In this vein, religious places were also forced to close (Figure 1) and online activities increased to cope with the various requests for moral support. The unprecedented situation of a pandemic and the forced atomization of lives had a huge impact on family ties which were forced to be put on standby and carried on from afar.

**Figure 1.** Announcement in Turkish and Italian about the closure of the cultural center in Milan



Translation: *Until April 3, 2020, we are closed due to Coronavirus. Note: Friday prayer will not be held.*

The lockdown measures in Italy and the travel restrictions worldwide also had a strong impact on Turkish diaspora communities which experienced a forced cut-off from families and relatives living abroad. The DITIB branches in Italy were engaged in untangling the Italian government's regulations for Turkish communities and convincing the diaspora to "stay at home". As the religious Attaché affirms, as soon as the mobility restrictions and travel ban were reinforced, a sense of distance from relatives in Turkey spread the fear of isolation and a huge panic within the communities. In this context, despite strict instructions not to move, many Turkish immigrants tried to return to Turkey by their own means because there was so much information circulating, often untrue, about how they would be treated if they were to die in Italy after contracting the virus. In particular, the spread of fake news about the cremation of bodies who had died



from COVID-19 led to a number of requests to return to Turkey despite the travel restrictions:

“Our people were so afraid of the cremation of their bodies, that they were calling us at all times or ask if it was possible for Turkey to organize for the return of the immigrants even with helicopters” (DITIB Venice branch).

“They absolutely did not want to die here because they did not know how their bodies would be treated” (Religious Attaché).

In the management of this panic situation, Diyanet’s branches encouraged diaspora communities to follow Italian authorities’ dispositions while spreading a religious discourse on the pandemic. This occurred through the constant reference to the Sunnah and a specific saying (Hadith)<sup>5</sup> attributed to the prophet Mohammed on how to behave in case of a possible pandemic. It suggests that Muslims should not leave the place where they are located and should isolate themselves in case of infectious diseases to safeguard both individual and community health.<sup>6</sup> Diyanet’s branches abroad emphasized the presence of the Turkish state alongside its citizens by reinforcing the meaning of this Hadith.

“We constantly repeated what our Hadith suggested (...). We supported our citizens in every way, reminded them that our state was with them and would never let their bodies be cremated” (Religious Attaché).

With the aim of providing a religious explanation for the pandemic, the Diyanet published a document entitled “Islam’s view on Epidemic Diseases” (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2020). Alyanak has recently analyzed how this publication emphasizes that the pandemic was not caused by a virus alone, but by humans due to their own moral failures (Alyanak 2021:168). As the imams and preachers operate on the Italian territory under the coordination of the Religious Attaché in the Turkish Consulate in Milan, the DITIB was receiving requests for moral and spiritual support as well as the assurance that the (Turkish) state was not abandoning them. This occurred via a number of activities that were implemented to reach, and provide support to, as many people as possible while controlling that the quarantine restrictions were implemented among Turkey-originating communities. DITIB officers used the diplomatic car of the Turkish Consulate to reach people during lockdown measures. As reported by the Attaché, such support had a strong symbolic value:

“Overall, they (citizens) understood that they are never alone and that we (as a state) were with them (...) In addition to food aid, we (financially) supported our citizens who were unable to work or who lost jobs, during the lockdown”.

People reached by the DITIB officers needed moral and psychological support, but also foodstuffs and basic necessities. As the Attaché affirms: “we delivered more than 500 food aids not only in the city of Milan, but also up to 450 km away. In fact, we did not

<sup>5</sup> Hadiths are believed to be the words of the Prophet, memorized by his followers, and written in the first or second century of the Islamic calendar, see Burton (2022) for more information.

<sup>6</sup> The Hadith mentioned in Turkish is the following: “*Hz. Peygamber, bir yerde veba çıktığını duyanların oraya gitmemelerini, buldukları beldede ortaya çıktığı takdirde oradan ayrılmamalarını söylemiştir*” (Buhârî, “Tıb”, 30; Müslim, “Selâm”, 92-100; Buhârî, “Hıyel”, 13).

leave our citizens alone”. This support epitomizes a change in the direction of the way services are provided by the DITIB, as the head of religious activities conducted in Italy, the Attaché underlines: “During the COVID pandemic we delivered our help to the people” as it was the institution that reached the communities, not the contrary. While reaching people at home during the COVID pandemic, the DITIB officers could also build on the previously established practices of visiting people in hospitals and at home as part of a way to reinforce the link with the diaspora (Maritato 2019). These practices, which combine individual care and proximity, are in line with what has been described as Turkish officers’ “more empathetic” approach towards diaspora communities (Öktem 2014). However, they were greatly amplified during the COVID pandemic. The lockdown experience paved the way for the blossoming of online activities which broadened the scope and scale of Diyanet’s local branches. While the broadening of activities allowed those who did not regularly attend the mosques to be reached, the Diyanet as a religious and diplomatic representative was a reinvigorated presence of the Turkish state in the lives of the citizens living abroad. It was indeed an opportunity to emphasise that “the state is with you in this very difficult moment”.

## **5.2. The introduction of online activities: transforming strategies and changing diasporas**

The lockdown measures were a watershed moment for the organization of online religious activities in all the Italian branches. After the closure of the prayer rooms and cultural centers, and religious seminars for young people, women and families turned online, and this entailed a change in the scope and scale of the events, as well as the audience and the invited speakers who could also join virtually from outside Italy. Moreover, the online meetings allowed the participation of those people who were not usually attending because of working hours and distance from home. The Religious Attaché affirms that before religious seminars and social activities were conducted online, reaching both adults and children in big cities like Milan was not always an easy task.

“Men working in kebab shops are outside home from 7am to 10 pm and could neither come to nor drive children to the DITIB center. It was also hard to make groups of students. [...] However, once the activities were conducted online, the number of students increased a lot. While about 10 people were attending the meetings in presence, we now reached 200 people online”.

The changes concerned not only the audience but also the very nature of the meetings as is reported by religious officers:

“Our activities were not exclusively religious before COVID, (our mosques) were a meeting place for Turks. We would meet around what unites us: religion, culture, Turkish culture... Sometimes we would just meet to eat together. In particular, women who attend the mosque are housewives, they are always at home, and in this place, they could unwind little bit (...) On the other hand, however, not everyone could easily come to the mosque: for those who did not have a car or driver’s license it was difficult. They obviously had opportunities to follow more activities than before. During lockdown we were thus able to talk to other people and it was very meaningful for them”. (Venice branch)

While those programs such as language classes, religious courses and Qur'an reading directed towards women, families and young people were conducted on-line, not only the numbers but also the geographic provenance of the audience enlarged. This entailed an important change in the city-based (often neighborhood-based) dimension, characterizing diaspora associations like the DITIB in which members usually know each other. The online meetings organized by the DITIB officers working in Italian branches were also welcoming people from abroad as in the case of the seminar titled "Daily life expected from a Muslim" in which the religious advisor in Washington intervened, who operates within the framework of Diyanet America (Figure 2). The online seminars were either attended or organized by people from Germany, US, New Zealand, and Turkey, allowing for an expansion of the communities beyond the city borders.

**Figure 2.** Poster of a webinar on Family, 'Daily life expected from a Muslim'



The extension of immigrant communities' physical boundaries<sup>7</sup> created a transnational virtual space in which representatives of Diyanet and of other diasporic communities could participate. Before the COVID pandemic, the limited economic resources and the relatively small-size communities did not allow the Italian branch of the DITIB to invite to Italy religious officers and speakers from abroad. However, the online seminars forged an international and transnational digital diasporic space which in Italy affected the Turkey-originated diaspora's perception of living in a peripheral diasporic context (Ince-Beqo, 2021). On the Facebook pages of the local DITIB branches all the information concerning the online seminars is posted regularly and the recorded videos of the meetings are available. Online seminars that hosted high-level religious officials employed at Diyanet's headquarters in Ankara were highly effective tools in making citizens feel the presence of the Turkish state. This is the case of the seminar titled "Marriage and Family Life" organized by the DITIB Milan branch whose invited speaker was the head preacher of the Diyanet in Ankara (Figure 3). In a similar fashion, the seminar

<sup>7</sup> See Ince-Beqo (2021) for how this digital diasporic space has transformed the migration experience of Turkish Muslim women in Italy.

titled “Family: Love, Compassion and Mercy” hosted the president of the Diyanet and his wife (Figure 4) while the DITIB Venice and Imperia branches organized an online Conference titled “Being Mothers and Fathers, Raising Children” hosting Diyanet’s Head of the Department of Family and Religious Guidance (Figure 5).

**Figure 3.** Poster of a webinar on Family, ‘To be ready for eternal life’



**Figure 4-5.** Posters of webinars on Family Relations (‘Family: Love, Compassion and Mercy’) and Parenthood (‘Being Mother and Father, Raising Children’), with the participation of the DITIB president and his wife



The online seminars allowed the Diyanet to conduct activities despite the closure of mosques and religious centers worldwide and thus to strengthen Turkey’s link to the diaspora also during COVID. From the vast number of online sessions organized between 2020 and 2022, it is clear that the emergency situation was used as a starting point to

enhance programs on family and foster Muslim-Turkish belonging in different spheres of daily life. Not only were family life and routines indeed subverted by lockdown measures, but also the forced cohabitation caused tensions and new challenges. As part of a project implemented by The Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) a Turkish psychologist living in Austria offered phone counseling to immigrants in different Italian cities.

“In some cases, different generations live in the same house. Living with mothers-in-law for some was already burdensome: with the lockdown it was even more difficult. Sessions with the psychologist were of great help, particularly for the women” (DITIB Venice branch).

The online religious sessions not only affected the audience and the distribution of the content provided, but they also expanded the psychological support to women who otherwise were not used to consulting psychologists. However, the combination of spiritual guidance and psychological support also contributed to enhancing that blurred relationship between religious counseling and psychological support which characterizes Diyanet’s mission to diffuse morality within society (Yazıcı 2012; Mutluer 2018; Kocamaner 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic has thus accelerated practices which were already in place.

### 5.3. Religion as a resource to strengthen ethnic-national belonging

All our interlocutors affirm that during COVID there was an increase in the request for religious and moral support among Turkey-originated Muslim communities in Italy. In the interviews, they report that even people who are not very religious approached the DITIB personnel to ask for advice and to find a sense of community within the diaspora. For Turkey-originated communities in Italy, the sense of isolation during the COVID pandemic led to a quest for both a community to belong to and moral support. It is important to consider that all over Europe local DITIB branches receive religious officers from Turkey but are also independent in terms of the funding of new mosques and cultural centers which rely on members’ donations. The sense of community belonging is thus built also via the financial contribution to the local branch activities. However, as many of our interlocutors confirmed, the peculiar context of Italy as a country of transition rather than a final destination negatively affected donation. This is particularly true for the building of new places of worship, which, as was confirmed by the Attaché, do not receive financial aid from the Turkish state and exclusively rely on member donations. As the pandemic provoked an economic crisis, mostly hitting some sectors such as constructions and food service and distribution in which Turkish immigrants work most, the accomplishment of the mosque construction in Italy has been delayed by the decline of donations and the COVID lockdown measures.

However, religious personnel managed to refer to Islamic principles and Turkishness as a national and ethnic culture to reinforce a sense of community also during the pandemic. Scholars have underlined how the activities organized by Diyanet associations abroad are imbued with religious and nationalistic references (Maritato 2021; Öcal and Gökarıksel 2022). By virtue of the institution’s mission to protect national solidarity and integrity (Article 136 of Turkish Constitution), religious officers abroad commemorate national holidays and religious celebrations which span from the First World War

battle of Gallipoli and Turkey's 1919-1922 independence war to the Birth of the Prophet Mohammed and the Ramadan month. During a farewell program for DITIB Como religious officials whose six-year abroad mission had come to end, this aspect was confirmed. The two-hour program, attended by about 500 people, was also streamed online on Facebook. It began with the national anthem with the projection of Atatürk's photo on the big screen and was followed by one student's Qur'an reading (Figure 6). In an attempt to summarize the years she served the community in Como, the head of the DITIB women's section clarifies how her duty was at the intersection of Islam and state.

“(...) We have tried to fulfill this duty conferred on us by our state by working day and night, to convey love for the *ezan* [call to prayer], the flag, the state and the nation, and to keep our national and spiritual values alive. We tried to be close to our brothers and sisters living in Como and Switzerland on good and bad days”.

**Figure 6.** Farewell program to religious officers in DITIB Como



The event, attended by the Attaché, was also an occasion to present all the activities organized by the Como association in the past six years, stressing the COVID-related challenges, and to emphasize how they were in continuity with Turkey's long-lasting engagement vis-à-vis diaspora communities in Europe. In this view, the Turkish state's aim to not forget its citizens abroad and to preserve their belonging to the “Islamic civilization” (*Islam medeniyeti*) was operationalized through the building of mosques and cultural centers and the sending of religious officers from Turkey to Europe. In DITIB officers' speeches this notion of Islamic civilization is intertwined with national culture as an essential component of religion. This aspect is crucial in a migratory context considering that the DITIB is representing the Turkish Sunni interpretation of Islam, as the Attaché affirms:

“Different (ethnic) communities interpret Islam differently; we have our own interpretation. In a religious organization the cultural aspect is crucial, it is much more crucial than we imagine”

The focus on Turkish Islam qualifies DITIB activities as made by and for the Turkey originated diaspora. It also allows us to cast light on how the diaspora is governed in times

of emergency and how the relationship between home states and emigrant communities are continuously shaped. Recently, some scholars have contended that the COVID-19 pandemic marked a return of the states and their notions of sovereignty, protection and control (Gerbaudo 2021). In the case of Turkey, rather than a return of the state, the pandemic accelerated ongoing dynamics at the base of a transformed diaspora governance.

## 6. Conclusions

One of the first European countries strongly affected by COVID-19, Italy immediately ordered the closure of all places of worship. This closure, along with many other anti-COVID measures strictly enforced from March to June 2020, created great economic and psychological hardship for a segment of Turkish immigrants for whom religious places offer not only religious functions but also social solidarity. In this context, Diyanet's officers who were sent from Turkey to serve the communities in Italy had to adopt new strategies to continue to reach out to citizens. However, under the lockdown measures they seized the opportunity of online resources to expand their audience and present themselves as essential actors to cope with this unprecedented situation. This narrative is thus built on the representation of religious services and moral support provided during the COVID-19 pandemic as important as those offered by secular institutions to strengthen the link between Turkey and its communities abroad.

In this article, we analyzed the way the lockdowns measures in Italy affected the Diyanet association's activities towards the Turkish diaspora. We also looked at how this change can give insight into the ongoing transformation of Turkey's diaspora governance. Our findings showed that COVID-19 enhanced forms of digital diaspora governance. The online activities strengthened the link with Turkey and reduced the sense of isolation and marginalization of the Turkey-originated diaspora in Italy, boosting their sense of belonging to a larger online community in which distance from the homeland is shortened. We also argue that the pandemic has expanded the boundaries, though virtual, of Diyanet's presence in the daily lives of immigrants. In fact, the initial food aid and economic support for those who lost jobs due to the total lockdown was later followed by virtual meetings and, in some cases, online psychological sessions.

What we found is that the online seminars proposed by Diyanet were much more than relational or moral support. Sharing a space, though virtual, with Diyanet representatives from Turkey for the participants was very meaningful because they "felt the concrete presence of Turkey next to them." This was the case of a number of seminars organized by the Italian local DITIB associations which hosted high level religious officers employed in the Diyanet Ankara Head Office. At a time of crisis and panic, this involvement reinforced the approach taken particularly by AKP's diaspora management based on care and proximity. Nevertheless, the relationship between the state representatives and citizens has been simultaneously horizontal and vertical. While on the one hand the care and proximity approach was pursued, on the other hand the authoritative and protective presence of the state through religious functions in daily life was continuously introduced. Accordingly, Diyanet's religious officers allowed the "empathetic angle" to reinforce the link with the diaspora communities and to shape an ethno-religious identity in which Islam and Turkishness are defined in essentialist terms. In this attempt, the Diyanet's services during the COVID-19 pandemic reflected a contentious

situation marked by divisions within the Turkish diaspora communities between pro-AKP associations, political opponents, secularists and members of religious communities like the Gülen movement, whose activities abroad are persecuted as terrorism by the Turkish government. While different political and religious associations carried out their own activities during the pandemic, the state nature of the Diyanet also involved political purposes both to present itself as an official interlocutor acting in compliance with Italian regulations, and to support citizens abroad with transnational bureaucratic apparatus.

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