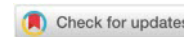


TURKEY'S SOFT POWER POLICY TOWARDS THE BALKANS

Violeta Dema^{1*}

¹UNIBIT, Sofia, Bulgaria
e-mail: violeta.dema2@gmail.com



Abstract: According to the official policy of Turkey, the Balkans are considered “as a sphere of influence since Turkey is also a Balkan country. The country pursues its main objectives in the region of “maintaining and strengthening peace, stability and sustainable development”, and that it “continues to support the accession of all the countries of the region to Europe and Euro-Atlantic institutions. “. In the “Balkan” policy of Turkey, a major role plays its diplomatic institution TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination¹), created in 1992 and active in the region since its creation. The case of the presence of Turkey in the Balkans is particularly interesting because the country maintains a rich and complex historical relationship with its Balkan neighbors. Its ancestor, the Ottoman Empire, deeply marked the region for more than five centuries. If the new Turkish Republic maintains relatively limited relations with its former Ottoman provinces, the liberal opening of Turkish foreign policy by Turgut Özal from the 1980s marked a gradual return of Turkey to the region.

Keywords: public diplomacy, Turkey soft power, Balkans, New Ottomanism,

Field: Social sciences

Introduction

The new institutional architecture, largely driven by Ahmet Davutoğlu who became Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2009, includes instruments serving public and cultural diplomacy, development aid and diplomatic mediation. This new diplomatic tool reflects, according to Fidan, “a more liberal understanding of international relations” of Turkey, in that it translates a functionalist approach to international cooperation, emphasizing institutionalization. (Fidan, H. & (2021, p. 13)

This transformation of foreign policy is justified in particular by the demands of various civil society actors (economic interest groups, NGOs, etc.), who are thus more involved in the decision-making processes. Yohanan Benhaim⁸ speaks of “co-production of foreign policy”, encompassing public and private actors (economic, religious networks, NGOs, etc.), to better understand the paradigm shift in Turkish foreign policy since the arrival of the AKP in power in 2002, resulting from the evolution of the balance of power between civilians and soldiers within state institutions.

It is therefore important to keep in mind the work of Graham Allison, which makes it possible to better deconstruct the often too unified image of the executive. The decision federates various interests and expresses multiple rationalities. Knowledge of this diplomatic toolkit is key to understanding the impact of Turkish soft power abroad, a concept we will discuss below. Studying the activities of one of these agencies therefore makes it possible to better understand the way in which influence strategies are implemented in organizations institutionally linked to the Turkish state (Lachambre, R. 2019, p. 4)

The term was first used in 1990 by Joseph Nye, who defines it as follows: Soft cooperative power is just as important as hard command power. If a State can make its power seem legitimate in the eyes of others, it will encounter less resistance to its wishes. If its culture and ideology are attractive, others will more willingly follow. If it can establish international norms consistent with its society, it is less likely to have to change.

If it can support institutions that make other states wish to channel or limit their activities in ways the dominant state prefers, it may be spared the costly exercise of coercive or hard power. His theory is gradually enriched, notably in his book *Soft Power: the Means to Success in World Politics*, where he identifies three sources of soft power for a State: its culture, its political values and its foreign policy. Finally, it introduces the notion of smart power, which refers to the complementarity between hard and soft power. He thus argues that the most effective way for a country to improve its power capabilities is to combine the strategies of these two types of power. But it is necessary to put the creation of this tool in its context.

The main purpose of the soft power analysis was to show that the United States was not a declining power and that the country had, according to Nye, in a post-Cold War geopolitical context, to maintain its

*Corresponding author: violeta.dema2@gmail.com



power through the use of soft power. Since its creation, soft power, presented as a scientific concept, has also been used to make recommendations to political decision-makers. The boundary between scientific analysis and political discourse thus appears blurred. The field of knowledge seems more intertwined with the field of power, concepts like that of soft power can thus be seen as instruments of American hegemony. (Fidan, H. & Nurdun, R. (2021), *Ibid.* . 22)

Thus, the use of the concept in the academic context encounters the problem of a blurred boundary between a category of practice and a category of analysis. The concept of public diplomacy, which is also often used interchangeably with the concept of soft power, encounters the same problem. Public diplomacy can be understood as a component of soft power, which underlines the argument that a state possesses the capacity to promote its interests through conscious self-promotion. But there too, these notions tend to be mobilized by consultants who propose methods and practices to help countries promote their influence.

The Balkans are a region of southeastern Europe

Even today, its exact geographical definition is disputed. Bordered by the Adriatic Sea to the northeast, the Ionian Sea to the southeast, the Aegean Sea to the south and southeast, as well as the Black Sea to the northeast, the northern border of the Balkans has several definitions according to the criteria geographic or cultural attributes that are given to it. According to various reports, a broad definition is preferred and includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Moldova, Montenegro, Kosovo, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia and even Ukraine.

These Balkan countries share a common past. Ottoman provinces for several centuries, having acquired their independence between the beginning of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, having spent more than forty years under communist regimes, now moving towards the Euro-Atlanticist bloc (candidacy for the membership of the EU and NATO), the Balkan States are experiencing similar historical trajectories and current challenges.

Turkey and the Balkans: from the Ottoman conquest to the rediscovery of the region at the end of the Cold War

One cannot understand the relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries without taking into account the heavy historical heritage they share. Indeed, the Balkan region belonged for five centuries to the Ottoman Empire, whose conquests can be summarized in a few dates: 1371, Battle of Marica (Evros); 1389, Battle of Kosovo Polje; 1453, fall of Byzantium; 1465, conquest of Bosnia and Herzegovina; 1526, Battle of Mohács, which opened the road to Vienna. The withdrawal of the Empire is a long process that stretched over more than a century, starting from the first Serbian uprising in 1804, then the beginning of the Greek insurrection in 1821, until the Balkan wars of 1912-1913. During this period, we did not speak of the Balkans, but of European Turkey or Rumelia. The Ottoman Empire, ancestor of the Republic of Turkey, thus profoundly marked the Balkan region, both culturally, religiously and politically.

These marks are still visible today. But this legacy is generally not well perceived. Indeed, as Nathalie Clayer writes, "beyond the association between nation and Christian religion, it is also the affirmation of otherness – and even enmity – in the face of the Ottoman Empire, the Turks and Islam, which became one of the foundations of the new states. Thus, the Turks and the Muslims, terms that can be interchangeable for the Balkan populations, were often rejected or assimilated to the new States, victims of social indifference and controlled autonomy in religious matters. Moreover, for almost all of the Balkan states, the Ottoman period was synonymous with occupation and colonization.

The collapse of the Eastern bloc and the transition to a post-Cold War international order offers Turkey new spaces for maneuver, which it seizes by launching new initiatives in different regions, especially in the Caucasus, the Middle -East, Central Asia or the Balkans

The war in Bosnia, in the wake of the collapse of Yugoslavia, formalized Turkey's "return" to the Balkans, with a multiplication of its initiatives (Initiatives within the UN, the OSCE and the NATO to convince Western partners to intervene, organization of an extraordinary meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, efforts for an agreement between Bosnians and Croats, etc.). However, in the 1990s, apart from significant military cooperation and diplomatic support for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey played an unobtrusive role economically and culturally. Bilateral agreements have certainly been signed to stimulate trade and exchanges with the countries of the region.

In 1992 was created the TIKA. The two official objectives were: to provide development aid to the new Turkish republics and to the new neighbors of Turkey following the disappearance of the USSR and Yugoslavia, as well as to improve cooperation with them through projects and programs in the economic, commercial, administrative, social, health, cultural and educational fields. (Larochelle, D. L. (2021, p.33)

Renewal of Turkish diplomatic doctrine and architecture

The beginning of the 2000s offered new perspectives for Turkey: the coming to power of the AKP in November 2002 marked the end of a decade of governmental instability, the new government continued the economic stabilization reforms begun following the financial crisis of 2001, and the transition to a new, more fragmented international order post-September 11, 2001 allows Turkey to make changes in its foreign policy priorities.

In this new international "political disorder", Turkey must proceed to a reassessment of its power to become a central state and no longer a peripheral one. To fully benefit from its "strategic depth" (*stratejik derinlik*), i.e. its ability to radiate beyond its borders, the country must invest primarily in three geographical areas: the nearby terrestrial environment, composed of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus; the nearby maritime basin (Black Sea, Adriatic Sea, Eastern Mediterranean, Red Sea, Arabian Gulf and Caspian Sea, but also the Euphrates, Tigris and Nile rivers); and the nearby continental environment (Europe, North Africa and Central and East Asia). – (Angey-Sentuc, G. & Molho, J. (2015, p.88)

But to fully enjoy its material advantages, Turkey must also regain self-confidence and reconnect with the grandeur of its past, particularly the Ottoman one, because "a State which has no conscience or historical memory is incapable of leaving its mark and its imprint on the theater of history". In this new dimension of action, Turkey must therefore promote global diplomacy, a global economy and a global culture, based in particular on a revival of Turkish soft power. Davutoğlu thus created in 2010 a Public Diplomacy Office attached to the Prime Minister's Office, which has developed different multilateral projects to establish dialogue with different groups and contribute to a better understanding of Turkish foreign policy.

In this new configuration of foreign policy, the Balkans take on considerable importance. Ahmet Davutoğlu thus declared in 2009 in Sarajevo "The Ottoman centuries of the Balkans were a success that must be reinvented. Turkey is back! Many other statements by senior Turkish officials underscore the renewed interest in the region, tinged with Ottoman nostalgia. But if the Turkish rhetoric towards the Balkans can be considered "neo-Ottoman", the breakthrough of Turkey in the Balkans under the AKP responds to a more pragmatic strategy. It is organized into three parts:

- economic: free trade agreements signed with all the countries in the region, encouraging Turkish entrepreneurs to invest;
- diplomatic: frequent interventions as a regional mediator, whether between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina or even between Serbia and Kosovo. Also, Turkey supports the NATO membership of Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Macedonia, and has supported the entry of Albania (2009) and Montenegro (2017) into the organization;
- cultural and religious: The set of public bodies (TIKA, Diyanet, YEE, YTB, etc.) and NGOs allow better penetration into the Balkan territories

Turkey's religious presence in the Balkans⁷² relies on a fabric of diverse actors: intellectual and personal networks, the Diyanet, the "neo-Sufi" religious movements (Nurcu, Süleymanci and Fethullahçı/Gülenists until the attempt to failed coup on July 15, 2016) and other Islamic NGOs, but also some municipalities, especially those with large communities of immigrants from the Balkans (Bursa, Bayrampaşa in Istanbul, etc.).

The TIKA, apart from its conventional activities, and in addition to the restoration of mosques, thus supports local Islamic organizations in Albania and Kosovo, or the NGO Merhamet in Macedonia. Another interesting thing, the TIKA, while its executives are close to the tradition of Turkish Sunni Islam Milli Görüş, contributed to the construction of the Bektashi World Center in Tirana, in particular to work for good relations with Albania where the community bektashi is important. Also, TIKA coordinators sympathetic to the work done by Turkish Islamic foundations and charitable organizations sometimes act as informal intermediaries and facilitate contacts with the local Muslim population and Islamic institutions. (Fidan, H. & Nurudun, R. (2021, p.22)

The restoration of many mosques since the mid-2000s, very important such as the "Friday Mosques" or secondary mosques, also contribute to the image of TIKA as the protector of Muslim communities. These initiatives create even more influence as some of these mosques were targeted by Serbian forces as a symbol of the Muslim enemy in the wars of the 1990s. The restoration of Ottoman heritage also allows Turkey to reclaiming this heritage to better justify its regional ambitions in the Balkans, while permanently changing the architectural landscape of the region. This religious inflection of the TIKA, an organization originally inclined to pan-Turkist ideas, is clearly linked to the coming to power of the AKP. The role of Islam is thus becoming increasingly hegemonic in Turkish national identity and political discourse, emphasizing "Turkey's international role as a leading country in Islamic civilization.(Jabbourm, J. (2019, p.44). The new emphasis on Sunni Muslim solidarity and the new woven networks is not without displeasing the

traditional Turkish nationalists. But if the TIKA has a certain role in the Balkans as an Islamic cultural public actor or as an intermediary with other Islamic institutions, its religious role nevertheless remains much less important than that of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, the Diyanet.

Soft power and neo-Ottomanism: television soap operas at the service of Turkish foreign policy

Since the success of the soap opera *Gümüş*, many scholars have debated the contribution of Turkish soap opera exports to Turkey's soft power, and more specifically to Turkish nation branding abroad (Karanfil and Kaptan, 2013; Yörük and Vatikiotis, 2013; Karlıdağ and Bulut, 2014; Kaynak, 2015; Anaz and Ozcan, 2016; Vračić, 2016; Tatal-Cheviron and Çam, 2017; Ağırseven and Örki, 2017; Paris, 2017; Constantinou and Tziarras, 2018; Vitrinel, 2019).

Although the concept of soft power was mainly developed for the case of the United States, the notion has also been applied to other countries that occupy a nodal place in global television culture (Appadurai, 1996). This notion has enjoyed great media success and has been widely used by journalists around the world (Thussu, 2014). Unsurprisingly in this context, the rise of the Turkish television industry and the circulation of Turkish soap operas worldwide have been interpreted by some media researchers and journalists as an attempt to strengthen the soft power of Turkey, especially in countries falling within the contours of the former Ottoman Empire. This reading in terms of soft power takes place in a particular period of Turkish foreign policy. (Zia Weise, Z. (2018, p.3)

Since 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/AKP) took power in Turkey, a new foreign policy strategy has indeed been adopted which aims to make Turkey a regional power. by promoting the image of a strong country ready to play a leading role. This strategy is based on the notion of "strategic depth" developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, a Turkish scholar, diplomat and statesman, which combines "geographical depth" (a unique geopolitical location, between East and West) and "historical depth" (a rich cultural and historical heritage as an heir to the former Ottoman Empire. (Davutoğlu, A. (2001/2021, p.4)

According to Davutoğlu, the emphasis on Turkey's relationship with Western countries since the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 has been accompanied by a neglect of relations with countries that previously belonged to the former Ottoman Empire – including countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Therefore, for Davutoğlu, Turkey should increase its influence on these territories to achieve the status of a regional power. This conception of Turkish foreign policy is called neo-Ottomanism.

In this logic, the last decades have therefore been marked by the promotion of the image of Turkey through the export of its cultural productions to a large part of the Arab and Muslim worlds. The financial and promotional aid granted by the Turkish state to private television channels and production companies to produce and broadcast television soap operas constitutes the strong arm of this policy.

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government thus uses the media both as a propaganda tool inside the country, but also as a tool for cultural and political influence outside the country, at the service of the state, as indicated by the fact that Turkish serial fictions are mentioned in political discourses as crucial elements of Turkey's soft power. Thus, Egemen Bağış, Minister of European Affairs from 2009 to 2013, declared that: "Turkish series are a perfect way to reflect the image of Turkey and the Turkish way of life. Not only for our economic interests, but also for our diplomatic and sociological interests, Turkish series have become one of the most effective means of soft power in our foreign policy" (Bilici, F. (2020, p.11)

Similarly, İbrahim Şahin, Director General of Turkish Radio-Television (TRT), praised the effectiveness of serial dramas in improving Turkey's image abroad: "Perhaps Turkey does not generate there is no high income through the series, but there is no price to transfer our culture and our social structures in the form of soft power abroad through the series" To achieve this objective, an administrative-economic system was put in place. Turkish government officials work in cooperation with TRT leaders. and the Anatolia Agency (Erkuş,S. (2018, p. 23)

Conclusion

The arrival of the AKP in power in 2002, the new government stability, the significant economic growth and the new approach in terms of foreign policy have enabled TIKA to reform itself in depth, as well as to increase its activities and his responsibilities. The Balkans are an interesting case study allowing us to empirically observe the increase in the activities of the TIKA and revealing in particular the more religious orientation of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP compared to the past. However, the variety of projects as well as the evolution of the share of the Balkan countries in the total TIKA budget does not indicate a real preference based on religious criteria. In addition, the significant increase in TIKA's budget for the Balkans – Eastern Europe office in 2017 highlights the recent improvement in relations

between Turkey and the countries of the region. Finally, the work of TIKA in the Balkans allows the Turkish government and administration to ensure the benevolence and tolerance of Turkish power, values that would be historically anchored in the country's Ottoman past, partly fantasized. However, without a field survey, which may be based on the opinion of different political representatives, representatives of different communities (religious or ethnic), or even on a socio-geographical basis, it is not possible to draw up a picture exhaustive of the reception of the work of the TIKA. Thus, it is hardly possible to speak of the real impact of the TIKA on Turkish soft power in the Balkans. This present study nevertheless makes it possible to understand more empirically the strengthening of the influence of Turkey in the region, in different fields (economic, social, cultural, etc.).

References

- Fidan, H & Nurdun, R. (2020) « Turkey's role in the global development assistance community : the case of TIKA », Istanbul: Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans, Vol. 10, n°1,
- Lachambre, R. (2019) "L'évolution de la diplomatie publique turque sous l'AKP : l'exemple des activités de la TIKA dans les Balkans," in Observatoire de la vie politique turque, 6 mars 2019, <https://ovipot.hypotheses.org/15260>.
- Fidan, H & Nurdun, R. (2020) « Turkey's role in the global development assistance community : the case of TIKA », Istanbul: Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans, Vol. 10, n°1,
- Larochelle, D. L. (2021) Le soft power à l'épreuve de la réception -Le cas des fictions sérielles turques en Grèce Réseaux 2021/2-3 (N° 226-227), pages 209 à 234
- Angey-Sentuc & G. Molho, J. (2015) « A critical approach to soft power: Grasping contemporary Turkey's influence in the world », European Journal of Turkish Studies (en ligne), Vol. 21, 2015., consulté le 12 juin 2018. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5287>
- Faruk Bilici, (2020) « Les Balkans ottomans : un monde englouti », Anatoli (en ligne), 1 | 2020, URL :
- Jana Jabbour, (2019) La Turquie : Invention d'une diplomatie émergente, Paris : CNRS, 2019
- Ahmet Davutoğlu, (1998/2020) « The clash of Interests : An explanation of the World (Dis)Order », Journal of International Affairs, vol. II, N°4, décembre 1997-janvier 1998
- « Institution », YTB (<https://www.ytb.gov.tr/en/corporate/institution>), juin 2018
- Ces informations sont tirées du site web officiel de la TIKA (2018): « Organization Law », TIKA (http://www.tika.gov.tr/en/page/organisation_law-8529), ,
- http://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2018/BALKANLAR/ikinci_balkan_bulusmasi_kitap.pdf
- Zia Weise, Z. (2018) « Turkey's Balkan comeback », Politico (<https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>),
- Erkuş, S. (2018) « Turkey's TIKA changes strategy in favor of development projects », Hürriyet Daily News (<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkeys-tika-changes-strategy-in-favor-of-development-projects-113304>), ju