

Evaluating Turkish TV Series as Soft Power Instruments

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Nehir Ağırseven* - Armağan Örki**

*Okt., Trakya Üniversitesi, Edirne/Türkiye

E-Posta: nehiragirseven@yahoo.com ORCID: [0000-0002-2051-7790](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2051-7790)

**Trakya Üniversitesi, Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü, Uluslararası İlişkiler AD Doktora Programı
Öğrencisi, Edirne/Türkiye

E-Posta: armaganorki@gmail.com ORCID: [0000-0002-6906-0031](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6906-0031)

Abstract

Different societies were ruled under the Ottoman Empire equally, which created an interaction between individuals having different identities and opportunity for living together. The peaceful appeal of the Republic of Turkey in regional and international areas has gained a new meaning with the "soft power" term. Definition of power and competition among the states has been reinterpreted due to the effect of the Cold War at the end of the 20th century. Thanks to the soft power term, the idea of making the desired practice or policies attractive has been preferred so that the importance of forcing practices has decreased. Turkish TV series have become popular in the Middle East, Central Asia, Balkans and South America during the 2000s and have been discussed within different disciplines. On the other hand, the issue that whether these productions are instruments of soft power or not has been examined. In this study, different examples and claims are taken into consideration and evaluated.

Keywords: Soft power, TV series, the Balkans, Middle East, Central Asia

Türk Televizyon Dizilerinin Yumuřak Güç Aracı Olarak Deęerlendirilmesi

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Öz

Farklı toplumların Osmanlı egemenlięi altında eřit şekilde yönetilmesi farklı kimliklere sahip bireyler arasında bir etkileřim yaratmıř ve birlikte yařayabilme olanaęını doęurmuřtur. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin de bölgesel ve uluslararası alandaki barıřçıl söylemi, "yumuřak güç" kavramıyla yeni bir anlam kazanmıřtır. Devletler arasındaki rekabet ve gücün tanımı 20. yüzyılın sonunda, Soęuk Savaş'ın da etkisiyle yeniden yorumlanmıřtır. Yumuřak güç kavramı sayesinde, istenen uygulama veya politikanın cazip şekilde gösterilmesi fikri tercih edilir olmuř ve böylelikle zorlama olarak yorumlanabilecek uygulamaların önemi azalmıřtır. Türk yapımı televizyon dizileri 2000'li yıllarda Ortadoęu, Orta Asya, Balkanlar ve Güney Amerika'da popüler olmuř ve farklı disiplinler çerçevesinde ele alınmıřtır. Dięer yandan bu yapımların Türkiye için bir yumuřak güç aracı olup olmadıęı da incelenmeye deęer görölmüřtür. Çalışmada, farklı örnekler ve iddialar dikkate alınarak bunun deęerlendirmesi yapılmıřtır.

Anahtar Kelimeler : *Yumuřak güç, televizyon dizileri, Balkanlar, Orta Doęu, Orta Asya*

Introduction

Considering its opportunities and risks, globalisation has been a controversial term in international relations literature. It is inevitable that states expand their area of sovereignty or societies increase interaction with each other due to the effects of technology on mass media (Perşembe, 1991: 176). Although this situation seems to be a risk on the nation state, it acts as a means for reinforcing national benefits (Göker, 1997:3). Protection of the national identity is, in sum, related to the active or passive role in interaction process.

This study focuses on whether Turkey is considered to be a soft power or not and the effect of Turkish TV series on this. In spite of the fact that it seems impossible to reach a definite result, it is aimed at making an evaluation from the concepts, scientists' views and limited data.

In the first part, brief information about the place of nearby geography (the Balkans, Middle East and Central Asia) in Turkish Foreign Policy and Turkish TV series is given. The definition of soft power term is made in the main part which also focuses on the elements of soft power. Then, TV series are discussed as soft power elements with different examples and general findings about ratings of Turkish TV series abroad are presented. Evaluation in lieu of conclusion is presented in the last part based on the compiled data.

The reasons for the choice of the Balkans, Middle East and Central Asia instead of the South America in the study are ethnic existence of Turkish people in these regions, presence of different ethnic groups choosing Islam or cultural similarity with the Ottoman Empire. Evaluation of Turkish TV series as soft power in these regions is considered to be more realistic.

1.1. A General View on the Balkans, the Middle East and the Central Asia in Turkish Foreign Policy

In this part the source and necessity of Turkey's policies towards the nearby regions and features of these policies are briefly presented. Thus, one can have an idea whether TV series can be used as soft power instruments by Turkey.

1.1.1. The Balkans

Turkey followed peaceful policies in the Balkans during and after Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's period and the Balkans have played an important role in Turkish foreign policy since the 1990s with the increase in intersocietal cooperation awareness. Different ethnic, religious and denominational identities were ruled with tolerance by the Ottoman Empire in the region even before the Republic and weren't assimilated. The benefit the two successor states existing in different years have gained today is cultural harmony or the possibility of meeting on common ground. Even though this geography witnessed bloody wars such as Bosnian War and ethnic conflicts like in Kosovo in near past, different societies having different identities could live peacefully for centuries.

According to Bayraktar (2012:186), considering the Balkans as a soft power area for Turkey depends on the fact that local people accepted the Ottoman Empire as a superordinate identity thanks to Ottoman tolerance. Although this view isn't true for every society today, it is valid for the ones sharing common values like language, ethnicity or religion with Turkish society.

It isn't possible to deal with the Balkans as a whole in Turkish foreign policy because there is a difference between the European Union member states and non-member states in the region. Turkish minority of Western Thrace, Turkish people living on the islands, air space dispute and territorial waters are some problematic issues and differences between the member country Greece and non-member Turkey. Furthermore, Cyprus issue is one of the factors affecting the relationship between two countries. The whole region especially Greece also plays an essential role in energy policies. Different works are performed on energy transmission lines from the Middle East or Caucasus to Turkey and from the Balkans to Europe such as Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline. Therefore, the region is essential for Turkey in fields like trade, tourism and education.

1.1.2. Middle East

Turkey's relations with the Middle East states are similar to the relations with the Balkans. It shouldn't be forgotten that regional balances change due to the terror, civil wars and wars and international actors have determining roles in this balance in addition to cooperation and conflict among the regional states in this geography. Iran-Iraq War, Gulf War, 2003 Invasion of Iraq, Syrian Civil War, terrorist groups such as PKK and ISIS are some examples related to the issue. Considering 2017, it's clear that US and Russia have important roles in this region like supporting different actors.

The Middle East is an important export market for Turkey and most of Turkey's energy need is provided from that region (Çeştepe, 2012: 27). Some of the energy lines connected to Turkey extend from this region and transfers are performed through sea and land transport. Turkey should increase its attractiveness in the light of political events considering terrorist groups growing up in volatile regions stemming from Syrian Civil War which continues and becomes a sectarian issue.

It is impractical to classify the regional states into two as Muslim or Jewish considering the religion they belong to. Ethnic differences are available. Furthermore, Muslims can be classified at least into three regarding denomination. It is challenging for Turkey and all of its rivals to build simultaneous good relations and leave the same impression on all the states like Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt and Iraq whose identities, allies, rivals and aims are different. It is worth trying to use soft power instruments on the ones except for the states experiencing war or some of whose lands are controlled by terrorist groups.

1.1.3. Central Asia

Turkey's relations with Central Asian states who are mostly Turkish and who emerged after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics with the end of the Cold War are generally positive. Even though Turkey's being a role model for these states came to the fore in the 1990s, there aren't any proposals about this subject today. Most of these states chose

strong partners anyway. At least, we can say that relations between these states are ordinary.

Four states forming Central Asian Turkic Republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan), Tadjikistan and Pakistan are states that Turkey has established good relations with compared to some of its border neighbours. When we compare with air space violations with Greece, mistreatments to minorities in Bulgaria or supporting terrorist groups in Armenia, we can come to this conclusion. Eastern and Western forces are effective in determining relations with Central Asian states. Differences in foreign policy could be seen between the states close to Russian and Chinese bloc and US and EU bloc. Moreover, international treaties to which these states are a party matter to Turkey.

Central Asia is important geostrategically as it is surrounded by Pakistan and India in the South, China in the east, Russia in the North and Iran and the Caspian Sea in the West. The region is also very rich in terms of natural gas which can be transmitted through the pipelines existing, being constructed or planned to be built from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to Turkey and Europe via Azerbaijan.

Demographic features of Central Asia in terms of ethnicity and religion are similar to Turkey much more compared to the Balkans and Middle East. On the other hand, there are some differences like language in the sense of historic process and cultural differences accordingly. The possibility of exporting TV series to the region is relatively low because of authoritarian regimes and broadcaster TV channels. While the Middle East, South Asia, Balkans and Russia are shown as main importers according to the TV series export statistics, Central Asia couldn't rank among top four (Achilli, 2016).

1.2. Turkish TV series

TV broadcasting in Turkey started in the 1950s but broadcasting via TRT (Turkish Radio and Television Corporation) was brought to life at the end of the 1960s. Local TV series such as Kaçaklar, Kaynanalar, Aşk-ı Memnu and Yılkı Atı were broadcasted in the 1970s. During the next decade a lot of different productions like Lüküs Hayat and Bizimkiler were released.

The end of the 1980s and the 1990s in general were the periods when January 24 decisions¹ took effect and the effect showed itself in a wide context from the import of colour television to establishment of private TV channels, from consumption to popular culture (Toruk, 2005:502).

A tough competition among TV channels has taken place since the 2000s. TV series, competitions and other programmes designed in different themes can be seen. Foreign TV series started to be broadcasted on TV channels in the same period.

The research on the recent period of Turkish TV series gives information about overall picture of the productions. According to the research conducted by Deloitte Turkey (2014) more than half of the TV series are 120-180 minutes long including the length of advertisements. More than 20% of nearly 60-70 TV series aired every season discontinue broadcasting in the first six months. However, the income from the export of TV series increased by 15 times in the last five years (2009-2014). Turkish TV series sector managing to export the most TV series following the USA exported nearly 150 Turkish TV series to more than 100 countries by the end of 2016 (total for all years; Aktaş, 2016). Taking TV series broadcasted during and after the 2000s into consideration, different types like adaptations of several types of novels, romantic, historic or detective ones can be seen. This variety is available in the exported TV series as well.

2. Soft Power and Television Series

Firstly, information about what the term soft power is and how it entered the literature is presented in this part of the study. Then, the elements of this power is explained. At the end of this part whether TV series can be regarded as soft power elements or not and in which conditions soft power can be taken into consideration are discussed.

¹ It was a program affecting the economic regime of the country directly. It was approved on January 24, 1980 and put into effect in the 1990s.

2.1.The Term Soft Power

According to Nye (2004a:11) who introduced the term into the literature and whose name has been identified with soft power, culture, political values and foreign policy are source of soft power. Soft power based on these sources enables one not to need hard power to get the target, that is, prevents to use military and/or economic factors as instruments. The existence of multinational corporations that are economically more powerful than a lot of countries makes coalitions formed in governmental policies more complicated (Nye, 1990:157). In these circumstances, functionality of embargo, war and similar convincing ways has decreased. To get something done by using military and economic factors as instruments and threat and pressure that are relatively more difficult ways have caused the term soft power to increase in value. In short, the way of making states follow the other states' wishes or policies has been possible by soft power.

Although soft power term entered the literature in the 1990s, Valbjorn (2009:155-156) explained Egypt's cultural domination over Arab World in the 1950s by this term. Egypt really managed to extend its area of influence without using military or economic force and to get ahead in Arab World by making use of public diplomacy. USA victory in the cold war was thanks to its ability to use the soft power properly (Nye 2004). European Union is considered to be the most effective example of soft power. In this regard, it is considered that epitomes of this power are available but the data shows that this power is a part or stage of the process in today's literature.

2.2. Soft Power Elements: Television

As mentioned above, according to Nye; the elements having role in formation of soft power are based on three sources. According to Karagül (2013:83) these are education, science, art and economy oriented elements and enabled by media, universities, non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations. The influence of media, international organizations and transformation of international system to multipolarity play role in this picture (Şener, 2014). Most probably, the power of media increased in the 2000s due to the reasons like easiness of technology transfer,

easier access to internet, more efficient use of research on audience, difficult conditions of competition and competition among broadcasters. Therefore, programmes like series or movies can be watched on TVs, PCs or even mobile phones, which means not only convenience for the audience but also easier access to more people for the broadcaster. According to Nye (2006), the problem here is that governments cannot control popular culture although they spend on public diplomacy, broadcasting and exchange programmes. It is difficult for a government to use this instrument directly. On the other hand, the government's encouraging products and making their export convenient and making improvements in the sector is a plus.

This study focuses on the influence of television on soft power. To make life style and all the details shaping it attractive is the main aim. Promoting Turkish cuisine abroad successfully and leaving a positive mark can be shown as an example (Milor, 2016). Being a source of cultural inspiration to provide impressiveness and efficiency in public diplomacy can be tried by using different instruments. The influence of televisions and TV series having continuity in TV broadcast can be considered.

Another detail to be underlined is in what ways the ideas in TV productions are presented to audience. For example, the Smurfs is directly identified with communism (Hruby, 2011). In the Smurfs example while no data is available directly for communist propaganda, there is an impression that some details are selected ideologically and presented positively. On the other hand, there are also propaganda oriented productions. The best related examples are films produced in Germany under Nazi rule. Another way is to use productions intended for subconscious and generally used for the advertisements of the products. Although claims related to the subliminal messages have an extensive coverage in social media, there are two questions considering that. The first one is how effective they are, the second is whether they are intentional or not. "Eat popcorn drink coke" experiment conducted by James Vicary was the first study in this regard. As a result of this study conducted Vicary, a market researcher, the increase in coke and popcorn sales was seen (Love, 2011).

If soft power is an aim at making a situation or policy desirable, a comparison among these three methods enables to get more efficient results:

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- Productions like the Smurfs which don't display the desired explicitly, but implicitly,
 - Propagandas made explicitly like in Nazi Germany,
 - Messages given in regular intervals and different ways.

Similar situation to the Smurfs example is also available in some of Hollywood productions. For instance, most of the disasters occur in the United States. American scientists overcome this problem or in case of terror or war in another place of the World the US army or blue-ribbon American citizens resolve the problem fairly. There are several ideas that films like Black Hawk Down (2001), Pearl Harbour (2001), United 93 (2006), The Interview (2014) might be considered as instruments for this aim but this cannot be verified because there are only claims that messages are imposed intentionally. However, there isn't any data that shows producers or scriptwriters accept that.

Broadcasting films or series made directly for a propaganda in another country doesn't seem reasonable in today's conditions and there aren't any related examples. It only seems possible that such a case can be created by a government for its own society. The short cartoon named "Chavez in Heaven" can be considered to be an effective propaganda instrument today. On the other hand, its influence is controversial and it is impossible to get concrete data.

The alternative that can be associated with more product and service sales is more closed to comment. For instance, to cover the brand name of a car seen on the screen may not hide which brand name the unique-designed car belong to or names or logos of some products may not be noticed. Another option is to promote effectively but it is difficult to use this as a government instrument in the short or medium term.

Among the three types of methods mentioned, the most convenient one that can be used as soft power is the Hollywood example and from the Smurfs to the Interview, its influence is more sensible. To think long term for governments and political ideas, to share objectives through the decades and to work for achieving the goal with the other instruments seem more realistic. While propaganda means imposition rather than making desirable, product/service placement is shorter term and more suitable for commercial purpose.

2.3. Interpretation of TV Series as a Soft Power Element

Nye (2004:17) gave the Hollywood example as one of the elements constituting American soft power. On the other hand, Purtaş (2013:10-11) regarded television productions watched by large mass abroad as effective elements in changing perspective and perception towards Turkey in a positive way. When under which conditions productions like films, series and cartoons give messages is reconsidered, the influence of productions presented to the audience in certain periods and making a situation or idea look positive or accepting it as normal stands out.

TV series aren't suitable for the purpose of direct propaganda. Even if, they are produced for this purpose, it is very difficult to make them watch in a foreign country since governments have limited opportunities. To give subliminal message by placing several product and service names, logos or ideological ideas is a commercial method used by producers and is made free under several conditions (there are bans on competition and advertisements). The productions that don't reveal the desired explicitly but that can internalise in a certain period and/or involve accepted norms (like the Smurfs or Hollywood action films) can give more realistic results. If the TV series named *Gümüş* which is known to be constantly watched abroad had always focused on high achievement or facility of Turkey in a certain field, could it have maintained its popularity? If a message like "Go to Turkey as a tourist" or a visual had been often presented explicitly or implicitly in the series, what reaction would the audience have shown when the situation was recognized. As seen, these two methods weren't chosen in the series, the topic of the series continued as it was engrossing (the audience became curious about the next part and addicted to it). Therefore, the audience watched the production only for having fun and didn't expect anything else. It's probable that in a certain period of time, the series made the audience interested in from houses to belvederes, from city life to fashion and the audience took those new things normal.

The last episode of the TV series *Gümüş* was broadcasted in 2007 in Turkey but it was watched in some foreign countries in 2008 (Öztürk & Atik, 2016: 74). After the release of *Gümüş* in the United Arab Emirates, an increase of more than 30% in the number of tourists visiting Turkey

was observed (Alphan, 2011). As for the effects of the TV series in the region where it was watched, it was claimed that the series caused an increase in divorces in Arab World (Deniz, 2010:58). The performance that the same series showed in North Africa and Arabian Peninsula was evaluated as an intentional cultural export (Kimmelman, 2010). When the term soft power is reconsidered via this series, attracting tourists to Turkey should be regarded as an achievement. However, it is obvious that the increase in number of divorces in another country doesn't have a meaning for Turkish public diplomacy or goals of Turkey. On the other hand, to accept the TV series as soft power instruments, extending in a certain period intentionally (the one made desirable) or unintentionally (the one already normal) rather than using direct propaganda or idea or product placement instruments is more realistic.

It was also claimed that Turkish series had effect on removing the negative impression remaining from the Ottomans to Turkey in the Balkans. (Sofia Press Agency, 2011 reporting from Der Standard). Such a situation can be considered to be the biggest and long term achievement that could be obtained via soft power. Furthermore, there is a possibility of making an overall assumption based on this claim.

2.4. General Findings about Evaluating Turkish Television Series as Soft Power Instruments

Several societies' getting used to Turkish television series can be regarded as a plus in terms of their ratings. Varol (2016) attributed the success of exported series in different regions like the Balkans, Middle East, South America to the human focused stories, naturalness of relations and difference between the East and West in TV series. For Albania, Tartari (2015:12) determined that most of these productions were compiled from the literature and traditional stories of the Middle East and the Balkans. This evaluation provides an opportunity to comment not only on the results related to Albania but also on the Balkans generally. As for the success of Turkish television series in the Balkans, preference of patriarchal family structure in the series instead of Western type family model was shown as a reason (Hamzic vd. 2013).

There are also differences in reactions like the variation in supported reasons of success. Even some people claimed that Turkey pursued the goal of creating new state borders or ideologies and reacted to Turkish series indirectly (Lopusina, 2010). Similar reactions were also shown by different people for religious, national or financial reasons in the 2010s, which constitutes a concrete example on the ratings of TV series.

In the previous part, some data on the TV series *Gümüş* were presented and the connection with soft power was established from a certain point of view. This series was released in the Balkan countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Greece except the Middle East and South America (Bora, 2013). The similar results like the increase in the number of tourists coming from the Middle East countries can be observed in the Balkans because it is known that these geographies have common values; but there is no data or search about it.

The TV series named *Yabancı Damat* broadcasted on weekdays in the summer of 2005 in Greece attracted great attention and then different series started to be broadcasted in different Greek TV channels (Yörük & Vatikiotis, 2013:2364). The criticism made by some groups in Greece from religious officials to actors was reflected in the media.

Bulgaria imported 27 different Turkish series such as *Binbir Gece* and *Yaprak Dökümü* in 2010 and became the second country to which Turkey exported TV series most (Sofia Press Agency reporting from the Bulgarian National Radio, 2011a). From the given data, it can be understood that the Balkans are a good market for Turkish TV series. Especially, the 2010s can be described as the golden age. The following data is very important in order to understand popularity of Turkish TV series (Hamzic vd. 2013).

"(...) Turkish shows are most watched in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia followed by Kosovo and Serbia, where the phenomenon is still developing. Research by Mareco Index Bosnia shows that in the first quarter of 2013, for example, 13 Turkish shows were being screened on nine stations by two TV networks. (...) In Macedonia, of nine Turkish shows on air, five were ranked in January 2013 among the top 15 in terms of viewers, according to AGB Nielsen. (...) Three Turkish shows are currently on air in Kosovo. (...) In Serbia, four Turkish soaps are currently on air on three television stations... (...) Research from this year shows that in January 2013 the top two Turkish shows were "Magnificent Century," which ranked fourth, and "As Time Goes By," which came seventh..."

The series named *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*, which was broadcasted as a costume drama TV series and that became a current issue in Turkey, was watched in a large area from the Balkans to the Middle East. The thing that makes this series different from the others is being a production which was exported to the largest number of countries among Turkish series (Yılmaz, 2015). In his speech about the effect of TV series on Turkey, İzzet Pinto working in the related sector stated that an increase of 350% in number of tourists coming from the Middle East was observed in five years. He claimed Turkey managed this thanks to the TV series and even concept parties were organized on *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* (Al Jazeera Turk, 2014).

It is seen that the series weren't watched in high rates but managed to have a considerable place and reach a certain mass. Undoubtedly, the fact that they became the agenda of news and research and were exposed to effective and different reactions can give an idea in this context.

3. In Lieu of Conclusion

Soft power cannot be regarded as an instrument of influence on its own but when especially public diplomacy is considered to be a process, it is an indispensable part of this process in today's conditions. In this regard, smart power, the combination of hard and soft power shouldn't be overlooked. When the existence of a balance in terms of power is accepted, it is understood soft power is certainly a part of this balance.

It seems obvious that TV series are instruments of soft power but what goal the productions pursue or what message they give cannot be understood exactly. Positive side of the situation is that they are effective on attracting tourists to Turkey and enabling audience to think well of Turkey. These series should be encouraged and supported in this context and even if nothing is done related to their ratings in Turkey, works on their export can be carried out.

2010s were the years when Turkish TV series were popular in a wide geographic area from the South America to the Middle East, from the Central Asia to the Balkans. Unfortunately, the success of the TV series watched in these regions has decreased to some extent and the new ones have been added to the productions becoming the topic of research and

news less. Although the export of Turkish TV series continues, either the number of series whose influence is at issue has decreased or they are the subject of studies less and less as this situation becomes usual.

In short, Turkish TV series are effective instruments of soft power in different geographic areas and countries that the Ottomans and Turkey dominated. When they are taken into consideration as instruments, they act for the benefit of Turkey. In addition to direct financial contribution, the series play an important role in contributing to several sectors, attitude towards Turkey and its vision.

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