



Turkish TV Productions in the Albanian Media; the Rise of a New “Poetic” Medium

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Abstract

Turkish TV serials are a new phenomenon in Albania. This country ironically was the last one in the Balkans to broadcast Turkish serials, even later than Greece, the historical competitor of Turkey in the Balkans. Albania, with a largely Muslim population, (56.70 percent and an additional of 2.09 percent Muslim Bektashi) was more affiliated with Italian TV productions such as films, serials etc. and various local productions (Italian patent models). The change started on April 11, 2011 when the first TV serial *Gümü* was broadcasted by the national TV channel, Klan TV. The Albanian Television history and TV culture is affected by the Italian culture and media. Two generations, that of my father and mine, grew up with the Italian media and culture. But after a decade of strong Albanian private media (TVs, radios, newspapers and internet sites) the Italian culture seems to have passed in the second place. The rise of the “soft power” of Turkey in the Balkans brought the soft power of Turkish television in the region. Nearly 15 Turkish TV serials changed the perception of Albanian viewers for Turkey and its serials dramatically. One by one, the Brazilian-Latin American TV serials disappeared from the Albanian screens. Now there are two strong players: the Turkish TV serials with their poetry, and the Italian TV serials with their action. Why are they popular with the Albanians? The usage of literature and poetry makes them different from all the other productions of Latin America, USA and Europe. That brings another era to the Albanian TVs, a new culture. This element is the main focus point of this article.

Keywords: Serials, Soap operas, Turkey, Albania, TV

1. Introduction

Turkish serials or soap operas are now a reality on televisions across the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. They are now taking the place that almost in the last 20 years was booked by the Latin serials and soap operas. Moreover, they are replacing or going parallel with the Hollywood serials in the same way and style as the American TV productions did many years ago. This article aims to present the difference of these productions and what makes them attractive for viewers in Albania.

Albania is deeply affected by the Italian culture, and the key element affecting this country is the Italian TV channels and their productions. In the last two decades of the 20th Century, Italian TV channels were a window to Europe for the Albanian people. After the fall of the communist system, Italian TV productions were the main foreign programs broadcast on Albania’s national TV, TVSH and also on private channels (Samarxhi, 2014). There is no evidence for the number of these productions (TV shows, films, serials, musicals etc.).

The original impact of TV productions remains evident due to their broadcast in original languages, English, Italian, Spanish or Portuguese with Albanian subtitles. That is the reason why there is a popularity of the Italian language in Albania.

But since April 2011, the Turkish language has been getting more familiar. “The serials have increased people’s interest in the Turkish language and many citizens came to Yunus Emre Cultural Centre in Tirana to take Turkish language classes” (Dibra, 2013), Fatos Dibra, specialist of this cultural centre says. Mr. Dibra describes that “now the Turkish culture is not an unknown field coming from another continent anymore”.

This increases the interest in Turkish literature as well. Titles from well-known writers like Orhan Pamuk, Elif Safak, Orhan Kemal etc. are published by Albanian publishing houses. While the Latin soap operas and TV serials have already left the Albanian TV channels, now there is a “soft war” between the Italian and the Turkish TV productions.

2. The “soap” reality

Albania was the last country in the Balkans in 2011 to be introduced to the Turkish soap operas. Despite being a country with a Muslim population (nearly 58 percent according to the latest census (INSTAT, 2012), including Suni and Bektashi) and strong political and economic ties with Turkey, Albania was dominated by the Italian, American, Brazilian and Mexican soap operas. The Turkish literature and cinema were little known until 2006, when the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. The Albanians of Kosovo, Macedonia, Presheva Valley and Montenegro were more familiar with Turkish serials as the TV channels in these countries had started broadcasting such serials since 2004.

Today we count 15 serials broadcasted or still on air at four Albanian television channels. This number is much higher in Kosova and Macedonia even because there is a presence of Turkish minorities. The trend of broadcasting in the primetime frame is evident with serials like Ezel, Splendid Century, Kuzey Güney etc. the National TV channel, Klan TV was the first to broadcast the serial named Gümü , after the name of the main character of the serial. In the Table 1, we can find the list of these serials and Klan TV, one of the biggest TV channels in the country is the biggest broadcaster of these serials. But Albanian Screen is broadcasting the most expensive Turkish TV serial ever, Magnificent Century. Also the cable TV’s like Tring ate interested on broadcasting these productions.

Table 1. The list of Turkish serials broadcast in Albania. Note: The names of the serials are given in Albanian and English or as they appear on the Albanian TVs

National Klan TV	Satellite National Vizion Plus TV and Tring Platform	Albanian Screen (AS) Satellite National TV
Gymysh-Gümü	Xhanan – Canan	Sulejmani i Madhërishëm – Magnificent Century
Ezel	Lugina e Ujqve - The Valley of the Wolfs	1001 Netë – 1001 Nights
Shamikuqja - The Lady with the Red Head Scarf	Karadayı	Fatmagyl – Fatmagul
Jetë e hidhur – Bitter Life		
Kuzey Guney		
Menekshe dhe Halili – Menekshe and Halil		
Dashuri e Ndaluar – Forbidden Love		
Shtëpiake të Dëshpëruara- Desperate Housewives- <i>Turkish version</i>		
Yll Deti – Sea Star		

3. The power of poetry?

Turkish poetry is very little known in Albania. Nazim Hikmet Ran, a poet with communist views translated from French was published in 1989 in Tirana. Some poems from Fazıl Hüsni Da larca were also published in the literary papers. But the Turkish poetry and literature in

general was not so familiar in Albania. On the other hand, we should say that even Albanian poets were not known in Turkey. A book of Xhevahir Spahiu was first published in Turkey in 2002, introducing the Albanian poetry to the Turkish people. That is the reason why the serials using poetry, from Turkish poets and others, made these serials different, and much more melancholic.

Actually, these serials show a strong country; Turkey, willing to impose its power not only in Albania but also in every other nation where these materials are shown. Briseida Mema calls it “a power of violence”; a kind of propaganda that shows the strong individual and the strong state and in some cases this strong person may be even a poet” (Mema, 2013). Sultan Suleyman (Magnificent Century) and Ramiz Karaeski (Ezel) tell the story through poetry and verses, showing the spirituality and power at the same time. Suleyman reads poetry and thinks as a poet when he gives the order to execute his old friend and Sadrazam (Prime Minister) Ibrahim of Parga. Ibrahim was married to the sister of Sultan, Hatice, and attracted her with his violin and poetry. “My aim is not to be two with you, but to be one”, he writes.

Karaeski, an old mafia man in Istanbul that lived many years in prison, reads poems of Shakespeare, Oscar Wilde or Rumi in Turkish. Poems from Hamlet or the verses of Wilde’s “Yet each man kills the thing he loves...” from the “Ballad of Reading Gaol” bring a new spirit from the Occident that come together in Istanbul, the meeting point with the Orient. Jal I ad-D n Muhammad Balkh , or Mevlana Rumi as we know him, comes from a total different perspective. Even when Karaeski dies, he reads a poem of the Turkish poet Edip Cansever saying that “I buried them all and I’m coming, the man is free when he is living...”

The “Ezel” TV serial was the most watched Turkish soap opera in Albania: an impossible Turkish love story, which included all the elements of great classical novels like the “Romeo and Juliet”, “The Count of Monte Cristo”, “The Godfather” etc. The spirituality and poetry of Oscar Wilde and Rumi, together with the Turkish melancholy brought a great success. This production and the others as well bring to the Albanian public the social and cultural elements and models which are no longer unfamiliar to them. That is why they still have a great success, leaving behind the Spanish and Brazilian productions.

“People are affected by the poetry in the Ezel serial”, Albanian journalist Nimet Isufi says (Isufi, 2014). There are a lot of fan pages in Facebook created and used by Albanians, and some of them are giving place to the poetries of these serials. (Facebook Fan Page, 2014) This phenomenon is nearly the same as in Turkey, country of the origin for the serials. Especially young people create these pages with the verses and poetries of characters of the serials. The soft power of poetry becomes the soft power of these TV productions, and of course, the power of Turkey in the region. This is a Hollywood model in the image creation and consolidation of a state.

“Klan TV managed to get the first place against local TV productions, and in most Albanian homes there were mainly two favourite TV channels (in two different TV devices): Klan TV showing “Ezel” and the other TV channel showing another program” (Dumani, 2013), Albert Dumani says. Dumani also claims that this TV serial competed even with the Champions League matches on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

“The success of these serials is confirmed by the high demands of advertisers for these time frames” (Kekezi, 2013), Ana Kekezi, former Marketing Director of Vizion Plus TV says. At the moment, Vizion Plus is broadcasting the most popular TV serial in Turkey “The Valley of Wolves”.

The so-much discussed TV serial “Magnificent Suleyman” (original name Muhte em Yüzyıl, in Albanian “Sulejmani i Madhërishëm”) also brought discussions in the Albanian media about

the so-called “neo-ottoman” politics of Turkey in the Balkans. Despite being criticized in Turkey by the conservative Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the TV serial still holds a large audience’s attention in its third season. “People are amazed at the artistic quality of the serial and do not consider the historical arguments that are supposed to support this quality” (Lalaj, 2013) says Jerina Lalaj, former Marketing Director of Albanian Screen TV and currently Marketing Director of Vizion Plus.

Most of the Turkish TV serials were premiere broadcasts, aired during these TV channels’ prime time or in the afternoon, targeting the female audience. This shows that the TV channels were sure of the success of these imported programs. “We were skeptical in the beginning but our expectations changed when we aired “Sulejmani i Madhërishëm” (Magnificent Century), a contemporaneous production”, Jerina Lalaj says. Lalaj also emphasizes that these TV serials came to Albania after their successful premieres in other countries of the region. She discusses the ‘soap opera’ term and says that even the producers of these programs insist on calling them TV serials.

For nearly 5 months, Saturday evening was the biggest television airtime competition between Top Channel TV, with its local production “Big Brother Albania” (a patent of Endemol), and Klan TV with “Ezel”. A survey by Abacus Research in Tirana shows (in Figure 1 and Figure 2) the Turkish TV serials’ effect on the audience. The research analyses six days of a week, February 11-16, 2013. The audience figures in persons and percentages show that Klan TV wins the Saturday night’s battle. Also, the ratings of Vizion Plus and Albanian Screen rise on the days when Turkish serials are broadcast, especially on Tuesdays.

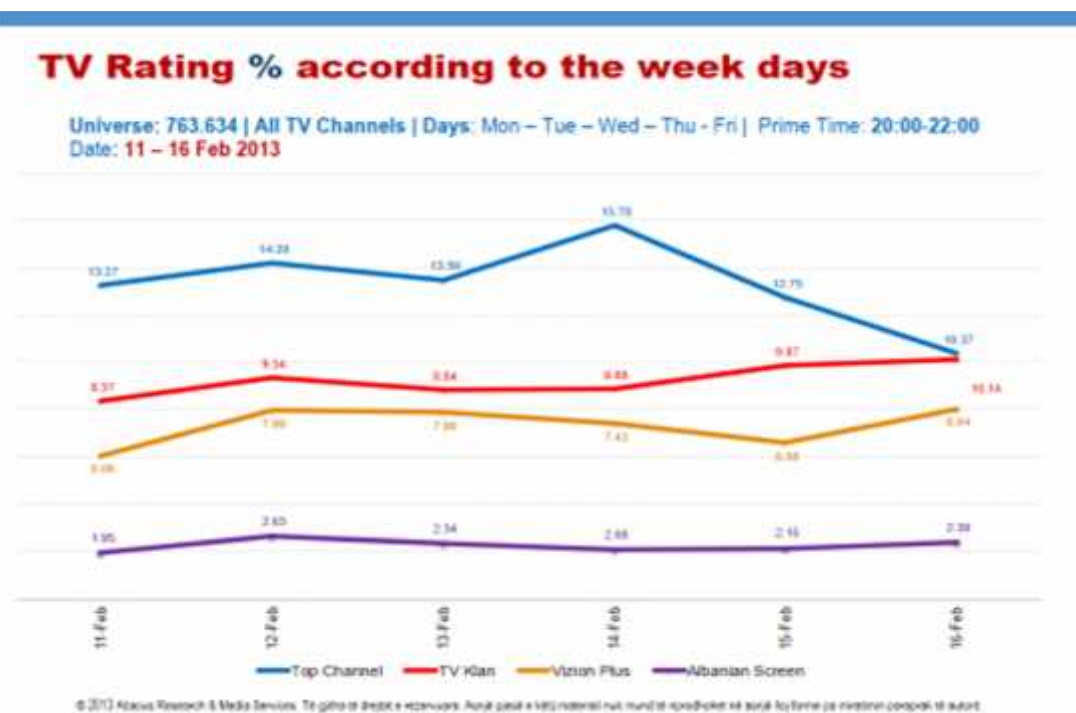


Figure 1¹. TV ratings % according to the week days

¹ Courtesy of Abacus Research - A survey prepared by Jusilda Bocaj, under the auspices of Mr. Thanas Goga, Tiranë, October 2013

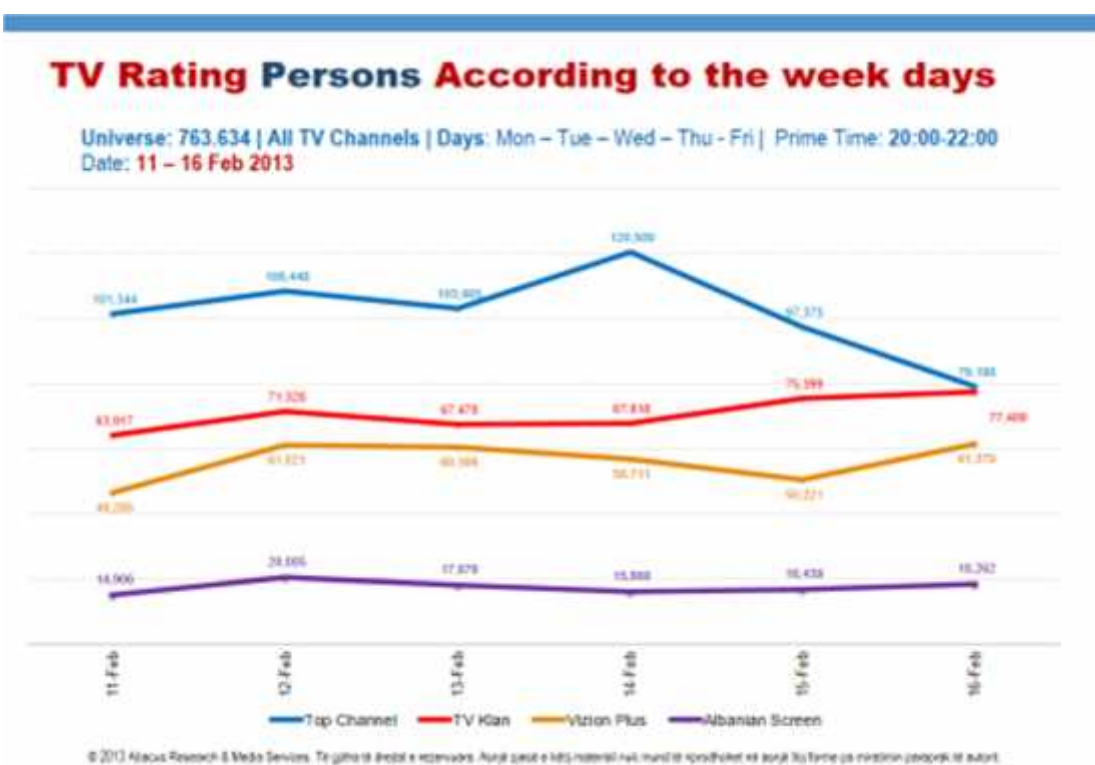


Figure 2². TV rating according to the week days

4. Conclusions

Poetic discourse and the usage of Occidental and Oriental fairy tales differentiate the Turkish soap operas. The majority of these productions come from the literature and old traditional stories of the Middle East and the Balkans. What makes them different is the mixture of Turkish, Persian, Arabic and Western literature.

The usage of poetry is maybe the main element that makes these productions more romantic but at the same time preferable by millions of viewers in many countries. The actors of *Gümü*, *Ezel*, or *Magnificent Century* are as famous in the Balkans and the Arabic world as they are in Turkey. “The Albanian tourists want to visit the places in Istanbul where *Ezel* and *Eysan* met and read poetry” (Gjoni, 2013), Erion Gjoni General Manager of Venus Travel says.

This poetry feeling goes in disproportion with the Latin, Hollywood and Italian TV productions that almost all the time play with action movies. Even the reality shows, which are mostly a patent of Italian, French and British media companies, like *Big Brother*, are losing the battle for audience.

The Turkish TV serials will continue to be the most-watched television productions in Albania. Today two Albanian actors play in these films, showing the interest of producers for selling more in the Albanian speaking areas in the Balkans (Kosovo, Macedonia and Montenegro), and of course, in Albania as well.

The serials will continue to build a new image of Turkey. They will be a new passport and will bring new social models that will affect the lives of the Albanians. This will be evident in a

² Courtesy of Abacus Research - A survey prepared by Jusilda Bocaj, under the auspices of Mr. Thanas Goga, Tiranë, October 2013

country that still suffers the lack of an effective cinema network and a poor production rate in the field of cinematography. The serials will compete not only with the products of the same category from other countries, but what is most important they will also compete with the Albanian TV productions.

Turkey's effect will rise indirectly, because these "cultural ambassadors" have opened the door of influence. Turkey, as the biggest ally of the United States in the region, is taking an "American path" in its public diplomacy. The Hollywood-style productions and the way of selling them abroad are a real example. And with the poetry and poets, the Turkish language will be much more dominant in Albania and in the Balkans.

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