



## An Analysis of Türkiye's Soft Power Policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015-2024): The Case of TİKA

### Türkiye'nin Bosna Hersek'e Yönelik Yumuşak Güç Politikasının Analizi (2015-2024): TİKA Örneği

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#### Abstract

Soft power is the ability of a country to influence other countries through ideological, cultural and diplomatic means without using its hard power. Over the past few decades, development assistance has emerged as an important tool in the implementation of soft power policies. By providing such aid, countries not only contribute to the economic development of the target country but also shape a positive image by introducing their own culture, values and leaving long-term impact. In this context, the soft power activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) have not been adequately studied. A review of the literature reveals that existing studies focusing on TİKA's activities in BiH are limited, indicating a need for more comprehensive research. Therefore, the main objective of this qualitative study is to examine TİKA's activities in BiH (2015-2024) and to evaluate Türkiye's soft power policy. The period was deliberately selected, as 2015 marked a significant conceptual and institutional transformation in TİKA's approach, reflecting a shift towards more human-centered, transparent, and locally responsive projects. Simultaneously, TİKA expanded its global presence beyond the Balkans to regions such as Central Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands. In this context, the year 2015 represents a turning point in Türkiye's development aid policy, while 2024 serves as an appropriate endpoint for evaluating recent practices and outcomes. This study conducts an in-depth analysis of TİKA reports, journal articles, and other electronic sources to determine the content and scope of TİKA's projects in BiH. Based on the obtained data, the impact of Türkiye's soft power activities in BiH through TİKA has been evaluated. The findings conclude that TİKA, as a soft power instrument, has strengthened the positive perception of Türkiye among the people of BiH and has contributed positively to Türkiye-BiH relations.

**Keywords:** Soft power, Hard power, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)

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## Özet

Yumuşak güç, bir ülkenin diğer ülkeleri askeri ya da ekonomik zorlayıcı araçlara başvurmada, ideolojik, kültürel ve diplomatik yollarla etkileme kapasitesini ifade eder. Son birkaç on yılda kalkınma yardımları, yumuşak güç politikalarının uygulanmasında önemli bir araç haline gelmiştir. Bu tür yardımlar aracılığıyla ülkeler, hedef ülkelerin ekonomik kalkınmasına katkıda bulunmanın yanı sıra kendi kültür ve değerlerini tanıtarak olumlu bir imaj oluşturmakta ve uzun vadeli etkiler bırakmaktadır. Bu bağlamda, Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı'nın (TİKA) Bosna-Hersek (BH)'teki yumuşak güç faaliyetleri yeterince araştırılmamıştır. Mevcut literatürün gözden geçirilmesi, TİKA'nın BH'deki faaliyetlerine odaklanan çalışmaların sınırlı olduğunu ve daha kapsamlı araştırmalara ihtiyaç duyulduğunu ortaya koymaktadır. Bu nedenle, bu nitel çalışmanın temel amacı, TİKA'nın 2015-2024 yılları arasında BH'de yürüttüğü faaliyetleri incelemek ve Türkiye'nin yumuşak güç politikasını değerlendirmektir. Bu tarih aralığı bilinçli olarak seçilmiştir; zira 2015 yılı, TİKA'nın yaklaşımında kavramsal ve kurumsal bir dönüşümün yaşandığı, daha insan odaklı, şeffaf ve yerel ihtiyaçlara duyarlı projelere yönelimin başladığı bir dönüm noktasını temsil etmektedir. Aynı zamanda bu dönemde TİKA, Balkanlar dışına çıkarak Orta Asya, Afrika, Latin Amerika ve Pasifik Adaları gibi bölgelere açılımını genişletmiştir. Bu çerçevede, 2015 yılı Türkiye'nin kalkınma yardımı politikasında bir dönüm noktasını temsil ederken, 2024 yılı son yıllardaki uygulamaların ve sonuçların değerlendirilmesi için uygun bir bitiş noktasıdır. Bu çalışma, TİKA raporları, akademik makaleler ve diğer elektronik kaynaklar aracılığıyla TİKA'nın BH'deki projelerinin kapsam ve içeriğini ayrıntılı bir şekilde analiz etmektedir. Elde edilen verilere dayanarak, Türkiye'nin TİKA aracılığıyla BH'de yürüttüğü yumuşak güç faaliyetlerinin etkisi değerlendirilmiştir. Çalışmanın bulguları, TİKA'nın bir yumuşak güç aracı olarak Türkiye'nin BH halkı nezdindeki olumlu algısını güçlendirdiğini ve Türkiye-BH ilişkilerine olumlu katkı sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yumuşak güç, Sert güç, Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı (TİKA), Bosna-Hersek (BH)

## Introduction

In the early 1980s Joseph Nye defined and conceptualized the notion of soft power in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing World Politics*. Since then, international relations have increasingly taken place in an environment where actors seek to enhance their effectiveness through intangible elements such as culture and diplomacy, alongside traditional hard power (Nye, 1991). Rather than relying solely on coercion or material incentives, soft power involves influencing other countries through attraction and consent, which is considered a more effective and sustainable approach. Unlike the realist tradition, which emphasizes coercive methods, soft power refers to the ability of an actor to influence another without resorting to material force. As Nye (2005) later elaborated, soft power plays a central role in creating a favorable image and perception of a country by shaping public opinion in target countries (Nye, 2005).

With the weakening of traditional diplomacy and the emergence of digital technologies and a borderless world, states have undergone rapid transformations in foreign policy orientation (Say & Joldoshev, 2022). Consequently, they have increasingly adopted soft power instruments to shape public perception in target countries through diverse strategies. Digital technologies, in particular, facilitate the implementation of soft power initiatives in sociocultural and economic fields without relying on military means (Lock, 2010). For instance, humanitarian aid is used as one of the effective methods of creating an image. Humanitarian aid projects and aid for development and cooperation are the most common initiatives of leading developed countries. Then, the relationship between development and democratization could be examined through humanitarian and development assistance. According to the 2023 Official Development Assistance (ODA) data, the United States ranked first with \$66.04 billion in development-related spending, followed by Germany and Japan with approximately \$37 billion and \$20 billion, respectively (OECD, 2023). Among the most prominent soft power instruments are democracy promotion, human rights, health, and education. Additionally, support for economic development, cultural activities, and scholarships are widely used to foster democratization and international visibility (Foreign Assistance, 2024).

Türkiye's growing visibility in the international arena, proactive foreign policy, regional and global political influence, dynamic economy, and expanding technical capabilities have contributed to its increasing use of soft power. Since 2005, development aid has become one of the primary components of Türkiye's proactive foreign policy strategy (Dashti & Kamil, 2022). In pursuit of a peaceful and stable international environment, particularly in neighboring regions and historically connected geographies, Türkiye has played an active role in regional and global stability, supported by its membership in leading international organizations.

Soft power tools such as mediation efforts in regional conflicts, exemplified by Türkiye's involvement in the Western Balkans, have gained prominence. Türkiye's development aid has significantly increased as a response to humanitarian crises and natural disasters that undermine democratization and development processes. According to OECD data, Türkiye provided \$8 billion in development aid in 2020, \$7.7 billion in 2021, \$7.1 billion in 2022, and \$6.7 billion in 2023. TİKA reports indicate that this aid spans education, culture, economic and administrative development, and social sectors (OECD, 2023).

Türkiye's foreign policy and diplomacy have prominently prioritized the Balkans. The country's strategic location and deep-rooted historical and cultural ties have shaped a strong relationship with the region. Following the Cold War, Türkiye's engagement with the Balkans increased significantly. The evolving global order and power shifts further strengthened Türkiye's influence. During this period, Türkiye reconnected with nations sharing historical, cultural, and religious bonds, extending from Central Asia to the Balkans. In countries like BiH and Kosovo, Türkiye has contributed to peacebuilding and institutional development, employing soft power through organizations such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Turkish Red Crescent.

Historically, the Balkans have attracted the attention of both regional and global powers due to their geopolitical significance. While the region has long been associated with conflict, it has gradually transformed since the 1990s. Today, its cultural diversity and rich historical legacy remain prominent. Türkiye's deep-rooted ties with the Balkans—based on shared history, religion, culture, and strategic interests—have allowed it to play a constructive role in fostering peace, prosperity, and stability. Projects related to economic development, trade, technical cooperation, education, and humanitarian assistance are carried out at various levels through public institutions, educational organizations, and NGOs. The objective of this study is to examine TİKA's activities in BiH during the period 2015–2024, situating them within the broader framework of Türkiye's soft power strategy.

Established in 1992, TİKA primarily aims to enhance development cooperation with the Turkic world and Türkiye's neighboring countries. It implements a wide range of cooperation projects in the economic, commercial, technical, social, cultural, and educational fields. Initially, TİKA launched its activities by opening offices in Turkic-speaking republics that gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since then, it has evolved into a key instrument of Türkiye's foreign policy, particularly in countries with which Türkiye shares historical and cultural ties (Aydemir & Çoban, 2017).

TİKA's main objectives include strengthening economic, financial, educational, social, and cultural cooperation with developing countries - especially those where Turkish is spoken - while also providing technical assistance. Furthermore, the agency contributes to the preservation of shared historical and cultural heritage, fosters inter-civilizational dialogue, and works to reduce social and cultural prejudices. Within this framework, TİKA has restored numerous historical monuments linked to Turkish history and culture, thereby aligning its cultural priorities with strategic and financial goals (Hatipoğlu, 2018).

Additionally, TİKA is tasked with promoting Türkiye internationally and encouraging the dissemination of the Turkish language by offering technical and developmental support to partner countries. The agency places a strong emphasis on coordination and collaboration throughout the project development and implementation process. It designs its initiatives based on the demands of host countries, which are assessed and validated by relevant institutions. This participatory and responsive model exemplifies TİKA's soft power approach, rooted in mutual cooperation and trust (Polat, 2020).

The principal distinction of this study lies in its in-depth examination of TİKA's activities in BiH during the specific period from 2015 to 2024. While existing literature often addresses a broader time span or encompasses multiple geographical regions, this research focuses exclusively on projects implemented in BiH within the defined timeframe.

The selection of the 2015–2024 period is deliberate and grounded in significant institutional developments. Beginning in 2014, TİKA introduced a renewed vision for its development assistance, coining the term “Turkish-style development approach.” This new paradigm

emphasized human-centered, transparent, and locally driven projects tailored to the specific needs of partner communities. Simultaneously, TİKA expanded its global footprint, extending its operations beyond the Balkans to regions including Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands. In this context, 2014 marks a critical turning point in the institutionalization and global visibility of Türkiye's development aid framework, while 2024 provides a relevant endpoint for assessing the outcomes and trajectory of this evolving policy (Demirkaya & Çelik, 2021).

Moreover, this study focuses exclusively on TİKA's initiatives, analyzing the direct impact of concrete projects on local communities rather than addressing Türkiye's broader public diplomacy strategy. Specifically, it examines TİKA's work in sectors such as education, healthcare, cultural heritage preservation, and economic development. Unlike studies that adopt a multi-country or general public diplomacy perspective, this targeted approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how Türkiye's soft power materializes in practice and what tangible outcomes it produces at the local level.

Given the subject and objectives of this research, the document analysis method was employed as the primary research technique. This method involves systematic collection, review, evaluation, and interpretation of documents that serve as either primary or secondary sources of data. Within the framework of Türkiye's public diplomacy efforts in BiH, this study analyzed reports, academic articles, and electronic materials related to the activities of TİKA. Based on the findings derived from these sources, the study identified and evaluated TİKA's initiatives that contribute to the shaping of Turkish soft power in BiH.

## **1. Analyzing the Concept of Soft Power**

Power is broadly defined as the ability to influence the behavior of others in order to achieve desired outcomes. The methods employed by an actor to exert influence depend on the nature and sources of power it possesses. In the international relations literature, power is commonly categorized into two main types: hard power and soft power (Nye, 2016, pp. 19–20).

Joseph Nye describes power as “being like the weather: everyone talks about it, but few truly understand it” (Nye, 2016, p.20). This analogy underscores the complexity and fluidity of power as a concept. Traditionally, discussions of power in international relations have focused on military strength or coercive capability, with emphasis on the size of armed forces or advanced weaponry (Nye, 2005). In contrast, hard power relies on coercion and punishment, using state resources to harm another actor's interests through military force or economic sanctions (Sancak, 2016).

In the post-Cold War era, the limitations of hard power became increasingly evident due to globalization, the growing influence of public opinion, and the widespread adoption of digital technologies. These shifts have prompted policymakers to seek alternative forms of influence, leading to the growing prominence of soft power as a strategic tool in foreign policy (Yegin,

2015). Introduced by Nye in the early 1990s, the concept of soft power was first articulated in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*, and later expanded in *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*.

Joseph Nye defines soft power as a country's ability to achieve desired outcomes in international politics through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2016). It relies on persuasion, credibility, and legitimacy, and operates through tools such as culture, political values, diplomacy, education, and foreign aid. According to Nye, the main sources of soft power stem from a country's culture, domestic institutions and values, and foreign policy behavior. However, soft power can only be effective if a country acts in line with what it says. If there is a gap between a state's words and actions, it can damage its credibility and reduce its influence (Nye, 2016. p.32).

A country's soft power is shaped by its political values, culture, and foreign policy. According to Nye, cultural values play a crucial role in achieving desired outcomes by generating attraction. Viewing culture as the most significant source of soft power, Nye defines it as a set of values and practices that give meaning to society. Over the past three decades, globalization and advances in communication technologies have facilitated mutual cultural recognition among states (Nye, 2005). Consequently, policymakers and diplomats often seek to acquire general cultural knowledge prior to engaging in bilateral relations.

Political values, which emerge from the policies implemented both domestically and internationally, constitute another fundamental component of soft power. The values a government upholds at the national and international levels significantly influence the preferences of other actors in the international system, thereby becoming a potential source of attraction. A state's commitment to universal principles such as the rule of law and human rights contributes to a favorable international image and enhances its credibility in foreign policy (Nye, 2005). However, the appeal of these elements is contingent upon the consistent application of such values in both domestic and international conduct. Human rights, fundamental freedoms, adherence to legal norms, and international development assistance can all bolster a country's soft power. Nevertheless, a disjunction between rhetoric and practice may undermine the perceived sincerity and reliability of soft power strategies. Therefore, states seeking to effectively utilize soft power in their foreign policy must ensure coherence between their declared values and actual behavior.

While Nye's conceptualization has shaped much of the scholarly debate, several academics have further developed or challenged his framework. Geun Lee (2009) argues that Nye's concept of soft power has opened a new horizon in understanding the less visible dimensions of international relations, particularly the ability to influence others through non-coercive and non-violent means. Although the concept lacks a fully developed theoretical framework, Lee maintains that Nye's notion of soft power primarily serves as a descriptive instrument. It is employed to highlight the shortcomings of American soft power and to demonstrate how a state can utilize its resources to exert influence without resorting to the tools of hard power. Lee has

identified five different soft power categories in line with the political goals:

- (a) to improve the external security environment by protecting peaceful and attractive images of a country,
- (b) to mobilize other countries' support for one's foreign and security policies,
- (c) to manipulate other countries' way of thinking and preferences,
- (d) to mention the unity of a community of countries,
- (e) to increase the approval rating of a leader or domestic support of a government (Lee, 2009, p.4).

According to Lee, all soft power elements do not use military but soft elements such as culture, education, traditions, national symbols, country image, theories and discourses (Lee, 2009).

Alexander Vuving (2009) argues that soft power is primarily understood in two distinct ways within the academic literature. In its narrowest sense, it is often equated with cultural influence, while in a broader sense, it encompasses all non-military forms of power, including both cultural and economic dimensions. Although Vuving accepts Nye's core definition of soft power, he introduces a notable revision by incorporating the term "*accept*"—redefining soft power as "the ability to get outcomes one wants by attracting and gaining acceptance rather than through coercion or payment." While he acknowledges that this definition may not be definitive, he asserts that it is more functional in practice. In the same study, Vuving explores key questions concerning the sources of soft power and the mechanisms through which attraction is generated. To enhance conceptual clarity and memorability, he categorizes the sources of soft power into three symbolic dimensions: beauty, brilliance, and benignity. *Benignity* refers to the perceived helpfulness and goodwill of a country. *Brilliance* manifests in attributes such as a rich and vibrant culture, a capable and disciplined military, a peaceful and effective governance system, or a dynamic and resilient economy. *Beauty*, on the other hand, relates to shared ideals, visions, and values that resonate with other actors. According to Vuving, the effective use of soft power builds trust and fosters intimacy, encouraging others to emulate and align with the behavior of the influential actor. (Vuving, 2009).

Frank Wibert (2007) contends that soft power can be understood through both narrow and broad conceptual frameworks. In its broader sense, rooted in international relations theory, soft power refers to the pursuit of foreign policy objectives through persuasion and cooperation rather than coercive measures such as military force or economic sanctions. In contrast, the narrower interpretation confines soft power to cultural or ideological instruments employed to influence international outcomes. Furthermore, Wibert notes that even in broader definitions, soft power may encompass various non-coercive techniques, including economic incentives such as foreign aid or trade concessions. These instruments, while not overtly forceful, are nonetheless deployed to shape preferences and behaviors in the international arena without resorting to compulsion (Wibert, 2007).

Gallarotti and Al-Filali (2014) argue that the resources employed in foreign policy should align with the type of power being exercised—soft power should rely on soft resources, while hard power should utilize hard resources. However, they also emphasize the interdependence of these

two forms of power. According to their analysis, soft and hard power are not mutually exclusive; rather, they complement one another and can reinforce each other to achieve maximum effectiveness. They contend that the successful implementation of either form of power often requires at least partial support from the other. For instance, a positive international image or a component of soft power can enhance a country's ability to form alliances, thereby strengthening its national defense. Conversely, robust military capabilities or effective security policies may also enhance a country's credibility and prestige, contributing to its soft power appeal. Hence, the interaction between soft and hard power can produce both synergistic and conflicting outcomes, depending on how they are balanced and employed in foreign policy strategies (Gallarotti & Al-Filali, 2014).

After outlining the theoretical dimensions of the concept of soft power, it becomes essential to analyze how this power takes shape in concrete foreign policy practices. In this context, Türkiye stands out as one of the countries that effectively utilizes various elements of soft power in its foreign policy, particularly through its expanding public diplomacy efforts and institutional capacity in recent years. Türkiye has turned components such as cultural heritage, historical ties, humanitarian aid, and educational cooperation into key instruments of its foreign policy, employing soft power as a strategic tool of influence, especially in neighboring regions. Within this framework, Türkiye's soft power strategies have evolved beyond a passive outward engagement based solely on cultural affinity, transforming into an institutionalized and multidimensional model of interaction directed at specific regional goals. The studies presented below examine different aspects of Türkiye's soft power capacity and analyze how this capacity aligns with its foreign policy objectives.

Oğuz Göksu (2023) examines Türkiye's public diplomacy and soft power strategies through the lens of cultural, historical, and religious linkages, with a particular focus on how these elements are mobilized within the framework of strategic communication. His analysis highlights that Türkiye has increasingly integrated public diplomacy as a complementary instrument in support of its broader foreign policy objectives. This institutional shift is evident in official statements, activity reports, and the growing visibility of relevant state actors. According to Göksu, Türkiye aims not only to reshape global perceptions but also to emphasize shared cultural and civilizational affiliations. By leveraging soft power tools, the state seeks to foster a positive image and deepen its influence in regions with which it shares historical and cultural ties (Göksu, 2023).

Kadir Sancak (2025) discusses this general framework more specifically in relation to the Balkans. He examines both the strengths and weaknesses of Türkiye's soft power in the region. He argues that for public diplomacy efforts to be effective, it is not enough to rely only on cultural similarities; it is also important to understand and respond to the regional context. Some local actors view Türkiye's activities with suspicion, which can reduce the success of its soft power strategies. The study's main contribution is its emphasis on the need to pay attention to the "weak sides" of Türkiye's approach—an issue often ignored in the existing literature (Sancak, 2025).



Soner Karagül (2013) evaluates Türkiye's use of soft power in the Balkans through the activities of TİKA and shows that development aid is an important tool for rebuilding diplomatic, cultural, and social ties. TİKA's work in the region goes beyond humanitarian assistance and is carried out in social, economic, and cultural cooperation areas that align with Türkiye's foreign policy goals. This approach serves as a key example of how public diplomacy is reflected in practical actions on the ground (Karagül, 2013).

Yılmaz and Kılıçoğlu (2017) examine in detail the activities of institutions such as TİKA and YTB in the Balkans, arguing that these organizations serve as the institutional carriers of Türkiye's soft power in the region. They note that the legacy of the Ottoman Empire and cultural affinities play a key role in shaping the work of these institutions. However, the authors also point out that some social and political actors in the region view Türkiye's growing influence with caution. A notable contribution of the study is its emphasis on expanding the concept of diaspora and integrating it into public diplomacy. It is also stated that, during the AK Party period, Islamic identity became an important component of this diplomacy (Yılmaz & Kılıçoğlu, 2017).

Tuba Çavuş (2012) discusses Türkiye's use of soft power from a more theoretical perspective, emphasizing that this power is shaped by concepts such as legitimacy, interdependence, and civilizational depth. The study argues that soft power sources are not limited to cultural or economic tools, but also include political systems, democratic experience, and normative values, thus adding conceptual depth to the literature. It is noted that during the AK Party period, with increased emphasis on "civilization" and "culture," these values have become more visible in foreign policy (Çavuş, 2012).

Kader Özlem (2012) examines Türkiye's Balkan policies in comparison with those of the United States, focusing in particular on the cases of BiH, Kosovo, and North Macedonia. Highlighting that Türkiye's interest in the region is based on historical, cultural, and demographic ties, Özlem also argues that Türkiye has started to play a more active role in regional crises and strategically uses its soft power in this context. The study's contribution lies in showing how Türkiye positions its soft power not only through cultural relations but also in crisis management and peacebuilding processes (Özlem, 2012).

Kubilay Arın (2015) analyzes Türkiye's soft power through think tanks and intellectual circles, interpreting the AK Party's policies within Neo-Gramscian and Neo-Ottoman frameworks. He argues that conservative think tanks such as SETA and USAK have played an influential role in shaping foreign policy due to their close relationship with the AK Party. What makes this study unique is its demonstration of how soft power is formed not only through state institutions but also through civil society actors, media, and intellectual spheres. Arın interprets Türkiye's claim to regional leadership as an effort to establish normative hegemony and evaluates this approach in the context of tensions with the West (Arın, 2015).

## 2. Türkiye-BiH Relations

BiH has historically held a significant strategic position in the Balkans, drawing the attention of major empires throughout the centuries. Shaped under the rule of the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman Empires, BiH developed a rich cultural heritage while maintaining its geopolitical importance. The Ottoman period, in particular, introduced Islamic culture to the region and left a lasting imprint on its social and cultural fabric. However, as the Ottoman Empire declined in the late 19th century, BiH came under the control of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, entering a new political era. After World War I, BiH became part of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, marking another shift in governance (Usta, 2021; Babuna, 2009).

Following World War II, BiH was incorporated into the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. During the Cold War, Bosniak Muslims faced significant sociopolitical pressures under the centralized socialist regime. These tensions deepened divisions within the country and marginalized the Muslim population. After the death of Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito in 1980 and the subsequent weakening of state authority, ethnic and political conflicts reemerged. The collapse of the Soviet Union accelerated the disintegration of Yugoslavia, paving the way for rising nationalism and widespread ethnic violence in the early 1990s. BiH was quickly engulfed in the conflicts, leading to a devastating civil war (Wachtel, 2022).

In 1992, following a referendum, BiH declared independence—a development closely followed by the international community. Türkiye officially recognized BiH on February 6, 1992, marking a significant milestone in its diplomatic relations with the newly independent state. The recognition was warmly received by the Bosnian people, and then-President Alija Izetbegović frequently expressed his gratitude toward Türkiye. Beyond symbolic recognition, Türkiye provided both material and moral support to BiH during and after the war, contributing to the country's international integration and post-conflict recovery (Jelavich, 2019).

Although Türkiye's relationship with BiH has deep historical roots, the nature and intensity of this relationship have varied across different historical periods. During the Cold War, direct engagement between Türkiye and BiH was limited. However, BiH's war of independence and subsequent humanitarian crisis brought the country to the forefront of Türkiye's foreign policy agenda. After the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement, Türkiye adopted an active foreign policy aimed at safeguarding BiH's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and multi-ethnic composition. Türkiye's growing influence in the Balkans further intensified its engagement with BiH (Yağcı, 2018).

The cultural legacy inherited from the Ottoman Empire continues to shape Türkiye-BiH relations today. However, this legacy should not be viewed merely as historical nostalgia. The cultural exchange initiated during the Ottoman era laid the foundation for a shared civilizational heritage, visible in architectural monuments such as mosques, bridges, inns, hammams, tombstones, bazaars, madrasas, and fountains. This heritage also extends into the realms of language and religion, where the influence of Turkish culture persists (Usta, 2021).

Numerous Turkish-origin words remain in everyday use in BiH, particularly in religious terminology, culinary traditions, and place names. The region's Islamic identity was further consolidated under Ottoman rule, creating a durable link between cultural identity and architecture. These cultural continuities have fostered emotional bonds between the two nations and provided a solid foundation for bilateral engagement (Turhan, 2010).

Within this broader context, the cultural relationship between Türkiye and BiH has proven dynamic and enduring. Türkiye's efforts to preserve Turkish heritage in BiH, alongside initiatives to promote Bosnian culture in Türkiye, reflect a reciprocal cultural diplomacy. As the two countries strengthen their cultural dialogue, the effectiveness of their public diplomacy also increases. In this regard, cultural relations and public diplomacy function as mutually reinforcing processes, enhancing soft power outcomes for both sides.

Türkiye's transformation in the 2000s—characterized by democratization, economic growth, and institutional reform—had a direct impact on the country's foreign policy orientation (Paçaoğlu, 2020). During this period, soft power emerged as a central component of Türkiye's external strategy (Poyraz & Dinçer, 2016, p. 34). Culture, in particular, became a primary soft power instrument. The historical breadth and geographic reach of the former Ottoman Empire enabled Türkiye to adopt a culture-based approach in its relations with former Ottoman territories (Sancak, 2016). In this context, BiH stands out as a key country in the Balkans where Türkiye actively implements its soft power strategy, rooted in shared history, religious affinity, and a common Ottoman legacy. To institutionalize its soft power tools, Türkiye established several organizations to conduct public diplomacy and development cooperation. Among the most prominent are the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE), both of which play a central role in Türkiye's engagement with BiH.

### **3. Türkiye's Soft Power: A Case Study of TİKA in BiH**

In the formulation of Türkiye's new foreign policy in the Balkans, TİKA has emerged as a key instrument for implementing soft power strategies. According to official data, TİKA conducts its activities through region- and country-specific projects, designed in coordination with local stakeholders. Particular emphasis is placed on ensuring collaboration with both non-governmental organizations and public institutions during the planning and execution phases of each project.

During the preparatory process, requests from stakeholders are submitted to relevant institutions for evaluation, and the resulting feedback is used to align proposed programs with Türkiye's soft power and development diplomacy objectives. This participatory and consultative approach ensures that projects are adapted to local needs and priorities, thereby increasing their effectiveness and sustainability. Observations indicate that TİKA continues to apply this model in its operations and project designs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), making it a central actor in Türkiye's soft power engagement in the region.

Following the end of the Bosnian War, BiH entered a complex period of post-conflict reconstruction, marked by extensive political, economic, and social reform efforts. The country undertook major transformations in areas such as healthcare, agriculture, education, and public administration—many of which relied heavily on international support.

TİKA began its operations in BiH in 1995 through the establishment of its Sarajevo Program Coordination Office. Since then, it has played an instrumental role in supporting the country's development agenda. International development assistance, including TİKA's contributions, proved essential in facilitating these reforms, particularly in sectors where domestic capacity was limited due to war-related devastation. One notable illustration of TİKA's involvement is its support for the preservation of Turkish-Islamic cultural heritage, which simultaneously contributes to cultural diplomacy and the rebuilding of national identity in post-war BiH.

According to TİKA's 2023 Activity Report, the agency has concentrated much of its soft power and public diplomacy efforts in the Balkans, with BiH emerging as one of its top priority countries. In 2023 alone, TİKA allocated 270 million Turkish liras to development projects in BiH, surpassing the 236 million Turkish liras designated for the Middle East and Africa in the same year. The projects implemented in BiH spanned a wide range of sectors, including education, health, agriculture, infrastructure, and cultural cooperation. In total, TİKA successfully completed 220 projects in BiH during 2023. These initiatives were designed to support the socio-economic development of local communities and to strengthen Türkiye's historical and cultural ties with the country. While the long-term impact of these efforts requires further empirical assessment, they are widely perceived by policymakers and local beneficiaries as contributing positively to Türkiye-BiH relations and to BiH's broader development goals (TİKA, 2023).

Aiming to create a more conducive and modern educational environment for future generations, TİKA has supported the renovation of school infrastructure, constructed new educational facilities, and implemented teacher training and capacity-building programs. TİKA has opened chemistry and biology laboratories in the Cazin Cemaluddin Efendi Çauşević Religious School (Madrasah). This Religious School is one of the important in this part of BiH with approximately 300 students. Then, another project was aimed at the health sector which has paved the way for the medical staff training (2016). In addition to its educational initiatives, TİKA has also contributed to enhancing university-level academic environments. For instance, the agency completed the renovation and furnishing of the library at the Faculty of Architecture at the University of Sarajevo in 2016. These projects not only improve access to quality education but also strengthen human capital development—one of the foundational elements of Türkiye's soft power strategy in the region. (TİKA, 2016).

TİKA has also contributed to improving the learning environment at the primary and secondary education levels in BiH. For instance, the agency completed the construction of the Piştaline Primary School—originally initiated in 2007 but left unfinished due to financial constraints. As a result, approximately 120 students who had previously studied in substandard conditions

gained access to a modern and well-equipped educational facility.

At the higher education level, TİKA has supported the establishment of laboratories and research spaces in various universities across the country. One prominent example is the FABLAB initiative, which provides students and researchers with access to tools for designing and prototyping innovative technologies. These facilities facilitate hands-on learning and contribute to the local innovation ecosystem by linking academic projects with industrial R&D needs. Through such efforts, TİKA has played a significant role in strengthening BiH's technological infrastructure and empowering young talent in the field of science and engineering (TİKA, 2019).

TİKA has placed increasing emphasis on supporting youth-oriented technological education in BiH. One notable example is the agency's contribution to the Mostar Education, Robotics, Invention, and Technology Center (CERIT), a specialized institution that offers robotics and coding workshops for children and adolescents. To date, more than 400 young participants have attended training programs on fundamental robotics, coding, and smart technologies. As part of its support to CERIT, TİKA provided essential equipment including computers, 3D printers, smart boards, microcontroller sets, and STEAM educational robots. These resources have enhanced the center's capacity to deliver hands-on, skill-based learning experiences, thereby promoting youth engagement with innovation and emerging technologies (TİKA, 2022).

Beyond youth education, TİKA has also supported technical and vocational training by enhancing infrastructure and research capacities. For instance, the agency supplied CNC machines to Brčko Technical High School to expand its practical training capabilities. Additionally, an atomic force microscope—developed by TÜBİTAK—was delivered to the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) to support advanced scientific research. Further contributions include the renovation and re-equipment of application workshops in the textile department of Mladost Vocational High School, located in Zenica, a major manufacturing hub in BiH. These interventions have improved the quality of vocational training, strengthened institutional capacity, and supported skill development aligned with industry needs (TİKA, 2024).

TİKA's economic assistance strategy in BiH emphasizes sustainable development and the empowerment of vulnerable communities through agriculture and rural entrepreneurship. A key focus has been increasing local production capacity and income levels in sectors such as agriculture, beekeeping, and animal husbandry by providing targeted training and equipment support.

Particular attention has been given to empowering women, especially those affected by the Bosnian War. In collaboration with the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Sarajevo, TİKA implemented a greenhouse farming project for low-income or unemployed women in Eastern and Central Bosnia, including the regions of Srebrenica, Bratunac, Vogošća, and Živinice. As part of this initiative, 80 war-affected families received 100 m<sup>2</sup> greenhouses,

irrigation systems, seedlings, and agricultural training. Each greenhouse is projected to yield vegetables valued at approximately €3,000 annually, thereby reducing household expenses and promoting year-round food security (TİKA, 2017). Beyond food production, these projects contribute to revitalizing rural economies, enhancing the economic autonomy of women, and fostering social inclusion in post-war regions. This integrative approach reflects Türkiye's broader soft power strategy, which links humanitarian assistance with community resilience and capacity-building (TİKA, 2017).

In line with its efforts to promote sustainable rural development, TİKA has implemented targeted agricultural initiatives focusing on women's empowerment through income-generating activities. Since 2017, the agency has operated the *Balkan and Eastern European Countries Food and Livelihood Security Support Program* in collaboration with the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Sarajevo. The program primarily targets post-war returnees and economically disadvantaged groups by supporting food production and household income diversification.

Within this broader initiative, a specific project launched in 2019—*Rural Development and Women's Employment Through Blueberry Cultivation*—has been conducted in cooperation with the Golden Lily Association. Through this project, TİKA has provided technical training, seedling support, and basic infrastructure to women farmers in rural areas. As of 2020, more than 550 families had benefited from the program. By enabling women to participate in high-value agricultural production, the initiative has contributed to enhancing women's economic participation, improving household resilience, and fostering long-term community development (TİKA, 2020).

BiH possesses favorable natural conditions for beekeeping, owing to its rich vegetation, diverse topography, and varying climatic zones. The country hosts over 3,700 plant species—approximately 700 of which are classified as medicinal or aromatic—providing an ideal environment for high-quality honey production.

Recognizing the sector's economic potential, TİKA has supported beekeeping activities in BiH since 2009 by providing technical training and equipment to rural families dependent on agriculture and animal husbandry. A notable outcome of these efforts is the establishment of a modern honey processing and packaging facility in Kaçuni, located in the Busovača district of Central Bosnia. Completed in 2022 in collaboration with local beekeepers' associations, the facility has a daily capacity of 2.5 tons and enables hygienic, standardized, and value-added production. This initiative marks the culmination of over a decade of sustained support and reflects TİKA's broader goal of promoting sustainable livelihoods and rural entrepreneurship. By modernizing production infrastructure and strengthening producer cooperatives, the project enhances both local income generation and regional economic integration (TİKA, 2022).

In 2022, TİKA launched the *"I Produce with TİKA: Bihac Indoor Strawberry Cultivation Project"* in partnership with the Bihac Metropolitan Municipality to support youth and women-

led agricultural production. The initiative aimed to mitigate climate-related yield losses in strawberry farming by installing 20 high-tunnel greenhouses, each covering 1,000 m<sup>2</sup>. In addition to the greenhouses, the municipal partner provided irrigation systems, fertilizer, and seedlings to 20 selected producers. The project set a production target of approximately 60 tons of strawberries per year, with an estimated market value of €150,000. Beyond increasing local agricultural output, the initiative contributed to revitalizing the regional economy by enabling young and female farmers to generate stable incomes, reducing migration pressure, and promoting entrepreneurship at the community level. This approach aligns with TİKA's broader strategy of supporting sustainable livelihoods and inclusive rural development.

Building upon the momentum generated by the indoor strawberry cultivation initiative in Bihać, TİKA expanded its agricultural and socio-economic development projects across other regions of BiH. In an effort to support sustainable vegetable farming, the agency provided 1,000 m<sup>2</sup> greenhouses to 20 additional families. These interventions aimed not only to boost local food production but also to increase household income and reduce rural poverty.

In parallel, TİKA collaborated with the Novi Grad Municipality—Sarajevo Canton's largest administrative unit—to establish a heritage fruit orchard and support vocational training through greenhouse education programs. Covering 1,700 m<sup>2</sup>, these facilities served both agricultural production and skill development purposes.

To further enhance rural entrepreneurship, TİKA established a fruit and vegetable processing and packaging facility in Ahmići village, located in the Vitez municipality of Central Bosnia. This initiative specifically targeted women who had returned to their communities after displacement during the war, equipping them with the tools and infrastructure necessary for small-scale agri-business. Moreover, within the framework of its women's economic empowerment agenda, TİKA supported the Bugojno Đerđef Women's Association by establishing a sewing workshop. The donation of sewing machines and related equipment significantly increased the association's production capacity and allowed for the creation of new employment opportunities for women in the region (TİKA, 2023).

In parallel with its socio-economic and agricultural development initiatives, TİKA has played a leading role in the preservation of cultural heritage in BiH - an integral component of Türkiye's cultural diplomacy. Through various restoration and reconstruction projects, the agency has contributed to protecting both Ottoman-era and medieval monuments that form a vital part of the country's historical landscape. Among the most prominent restoration works are the Fatih Sultan Mehmed Mosque and the Ferhadiye Mosque, as well as the completion of the Sultan Bayezid II Mosque in Foča. In Mostar, TİKA restored the historic Karagöz Bey Madrasa and supported the construction of a new library at the Sarajevo Mevlevihane, further contributing to the preservation of Islamic educational heritage in the region. Notably, the agency also extended its cultural preservation efforts to include non-Muslim heritage sites. For example, it provided support for the landscaping of the Holy Virgin Mary's Nativity Cathedral and the reconstruction of the historic Šarić Han, underscoring a broader commitment to interfaith and multicultural

heritage. These initiatives not only safeguard shared cultural and architectural legacies but also foster symbolic bonds between Türkiye and BiH, reinforcing the role of soft power through historical continuity and mutual respect (TİKA, 2015).

Beyond restoration, TİKA has sought to repurpose historical structures as functional cultural and educational spaces. A key example is the restoration of the historic Karagöz Bey Madrasa in Mostar, situated near the iconic Stari Most bridge and designated as a national monument. Following its renovation, the building began serving as the regional office of the Yunus Emre Institute, symbolizing the connection between historical preservation and contemporary cultural outreach. In a similar vein, the Elçi İbrahim Pasha Madrasa in Travnik was restored in accordance with its original Ottoman-era architectural features. The project, which included extensive surveying, restitution, mechanical and structural reinforcement, was conducted as part of a broader inventory initiative to protect Ottoman cultural assets across the Balkans. By reviving such institutions, TİKA not only contributes to heritage conservation but also to the revitalization of historical educational infrastructure. These projects reflect an evolving approach to soft power that integrates heritage with function, transforming historical buildings into active sites of cultural transmission, identity reinforcement, and international engagement (TİKA, 2018).

TİKA has also contributed to the preservation of public memory in BiH by restoring symbolic sites associated with the country's modern history. A significant example is the comprehensive work carried out at the Kovači Cemetery in Sarajevo—one of the oldest Ottoman-era cemeteries in the region and the final resting place of many martyrs of the 1992–1995 Bosnian War. In coordination with local authorities, TİKA conducted archaeological excavations that identified and restored 699 gravestones. The project also included landscape development to enhance the visibility, accessibility, and dignity of the site. Kovači Cemetery holds deep symbolic significance for Bosnians, serving as a site of remembrance, national identity, and intergenerational connection. By supporting the conservation of such spaces, Türkiye—through TİKA—actively contributes to post-conflict reconciliation and the preservation of collective memory, thereby extending the scope of its soft power from cultural heritage to historical healing (TİKA, 2020).

In addition to large-scale heritage restoration, TİKA has also supported the revitalization of local cultural infrastructure that fosters community cohesion and identity preservation. A case in point is the renovation of the cultural center in the village of Domljanovići, located in the Herzegovina region. Through this project, TİKA provided stage, sound, and lighting systems that transformed the center into a functional space for hosting social and cultural activities. This initiative enabled the local Muslim community—particularly in a rural and historically marginalized context—to preserve and express their cultural identity through music, theater, religious events, and public gatherings. As such, the project reflects an inclusive understanding of soft power that extends beyond physical restoration to the support of living cultural practices and local participation. By promoting active cultural engagement at the grassroots level, TİKA's work in Domljanovići contributes to social resilience, intergenerational continuity, and the normalization of post-war



rural life in BiH (TİKA, 2022).

One of TİKA's most symbolically significant restoration projects in BiH is the Fatih Sultan Mehmed Mosque, located in Sarajevo. Originally built in 1457, the mosque stands as one of the earliest imperial structures in the country and holds deep historical and religious significance. Positioned directly across from the Gazi Husrev-bey Mosque in the city center, it was commissioned by Isa-Beg Ishaković, the Ottoman governor of the region. TİKA initially undertook maintenance, repair, and structural restoration of the mosque in 2015. In 2022, the agency expanded its efforts to include interior conservation, replacement of carpets, and modernization of the lighting system. These restorations were not only technical interventions but also acts of cultural reaffirmation, aimed at preserving a spiritual landmark that continues to function as an active place of worship. The project exemplifies how Türkiye leverages historical restoration as a form of soft power—strengthening emotional and religious ties with local communities while reinforcing shared cultural memory in the post-Ottoman space (TİKA,2022).

TİKA has also played an active role in strengthening the healthcare infrastructure of BiH, particularly in the context of post-war recovery and social resilience. One of the agency's flagship interventions was the renovation of the Sarajevo University Clinical Center, which had suffered extensive damage during the 1992–1995 war. Completed in 2018, the project restored critical facilities, enabling the treatment of over 300 patients and enhancing the overall quality of care. During the COVID-19 pandemic, TİKA extended emergency support by distributing protective face shields to healthcare workers in partnership with the International University of Sarajevo. These interventions highlighted the agency's responsiveness to global health crises and its ability to mobilize resources quickly (TİKA,2022).

Moreover, TİKA has implemented several initiatives aimed at supporting individuals with special needs. Since 2015, it has provided digital logopedic sets for speech and language therapy at the Angelus Day Care Center in Domaljevac. The agency has also delivered orthopedic hearing aids and other assistive technologies to children with hearing and speech impairments, thus promoting equitable access to health and education services. Collectively, these projects reflect Türkiye's holistic soft power approach—combining technical aid with inclusive and human-centered development priorities (TİKA,2022).

Complementing its institutional healthcare projects, TİKA has also focused on improving service accessibility and supporting disadvantaged populations through targeted medical equipment donations. For instance, the agency provided an ultrasound machine to the Kaleja Health Center and offered technical equipment to the Transfusion Medical Institute, which operates at the Federation level. These interventions addressed urgent infrastructure gaps and contributed to the enhancement of diagnostic and transfusion services across the region (TİKA,2022).

To improve patient mobility and emergency response in remote areas, TİKA donated a patient transport vehicle to the Lukavac Health House in the Tuzla Canton. This contribution facilitated

timely access to medical services, especially for elderly and chronically ill patients. In the field of special education, TİKA launched the “*Turkey–Balkans Experience Sharing in Special Education*” initiative, aiming to transfer Türkiye’s best practices to partner institutions. Within this scope, 16 workshops and special education classrooms in eight selected schools were renovated and equipped with modern teaching tools. These improvements significantly enhanced learning environments for students requiring tailored educational support. By integrating healthcare, mobility, and special education into a cohesive development framework, TİKA has advanced a model of inclusive service provision that reflects Türkiye’s soft power priorities in the Western Balkans (TİKA,2023).

In addition to its social and cultural interventions, TİKA has supported institutional capacity-building in BiH through projects aimed at modernizing public services and enhancing administrative efficiency. One such initiative was the provision of technical equipment to Una-Sana Canton Radio and Television (RTV USK), a public broadcasting institution established in 1995. The assistance aimed to improve the station’s production quality and broadcasting capabilities, thereby contributing to local media development and public communication infrastructure (TİKA,2019). Another notable project was the *Digital Archiving System Establishment Project* implemented at the Federation level. This initiative introduced advanced archival technologies designed to facilitate the secure preservation and digital accessibility of official documents. By enabling more efficient document management, the project contributed to the modernization of public administration processes in BiH (TİKA,2024). Prime Minister of the Federation of BiH Nermin Nikšić emphasized the importance of archives for both states and citizens. With the significant support provided by TİKA, historical materials that will serve as open sources for future researchers, scientists, students, and citizens will be stored here (TİKA, 2024).

Extending its influence into the domain of international legal cooperation and security diplomacy, TİKA has also engaged in capacity-building initiatives aimed at standardizing policing practices and fostering regional collaboration. The *International Police Training Cooperation Project* seeks to harmonize law enforcement terminology and develop shared strategies in the fight against transnational crime. By offering in-service and practical training programs aligned with international policing standards, the project facilitates knowledge exchange among participating countries and contributes to the formation of a cohesive security framework. These efforts not only enhance operational capabilities but also promote mutual trust and institutional alignment among law enforcement agencies in the broader region. The initiative has brought together senior prosecutors and law enforcement officials from a diverse range of countries including Iran, Pakistan, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Through TİKA’s facilitation, Türkiye positions itself as both a model and a mediator in fostering legal interoperability and regional security cohesion (TİKA,2024).

#### 4. Findings

This section presents an analysis of TİKA's soft power activities in BIH between 2015 and 2024. In BIH, Turkey's support for this soft power policy has been coordinated by TİKA; however, other institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) have also actively participated in this process. TİKA's mission is defined as "to carry out sustainable projects and activities within the framework of Turkey's international development cooperation efforts, supporting the economic, social, and humanitarian development processes of countries, and preserving and passing on our shared historical and cultural heritage to future generations (TİKA, 2023)." This statement clearly highlights Turkey's commitment to contributing to the development processes of countries and to preserving and transferring the shared historical and cultural heritage within the scope of international development cooperation. Furthermore, this commitment is evident in TİKA's performance assessments in BIH during the 2015-2024 period. These assessments summarize TİKA's soft power mission with two main objectives. The first objective is to support the development processes of Balkan and Eastern European countries through projects in education, health, administrative and civil infrastructure, and the production sectors. The second objective is to preserve, restore, and pass on the shared historical and cultural heritage in these countries to future generations.

It is evident that quality education holds significant importance in TİKA's activities in BIH. TİKA's education policy aims to enhance the quality of education and improve the physical conditions of schools, creating a more conducive learning environment. In this context, key priorities include renovating school infrastructure, providing modern educational equipment, and addressing deficiencies caused by financial limitations to ensure that students receive education under better conditions and that teachers can deliver more effective instruction (TİKA,2024). Additionally, TİKA's educational projects aim to meet the educational needs of local communities and raise the educational level of these communities in the long term. This policy, which also seeks to contribute to sustainable development processes, emphasizes nurturing students as well-equipped individuals, supporting teachers, and strengthening local education systems. Expanding educational opportunities in disadvantaged regions and ensuring equal opportunities in education are among TİKA's core objectives. The 2015 and 2016 annual reports on quality education projects examine TİKA's support under five main headings: strengthening the physical and technological infrastructure of schools, constructing new, modern, and well- equipped educational institutions, implementing training and development programs for teachers, enriching educational curricula, and launching projects aimed at enhancing student achievement. Although TİKA's educational projects in BIH are not divided into specific sub- segments, the goals and objectives remain consistently aligned across all programs.

Another important issue is the economy. One of the fundamental problems hindering the

competitiveness of BIH's economy is the lack of adequate financing for SMEs (Small and Medium-sized Enterprises). Despite being the backbone of the country's economy, these businesses face significant challenges due to complex registration processes. Such bureaucratic obstacles increase the risk of corruption and expose commercial enterprises to unfair practices. As a result, private sector growth and overall economic development are adversely affected. This situation becomes even more concerning given the limited resources allocated by the government of BIH to the private sector. Moreover, private sector growth will remain constrained as long as social cohesion and citizen engagement are not adequately ensured (USAID,2020).

TİKA aims to achieve economic development by fostering broader-based participation within society. To this end, it is planned to mobilize resources effectively. Currently, human resources in BIH are either emigrating or remaining underutilized, while financial resources are largely controlled by elites associated with corruption. Mobilizing resources through alternative means could facilitate the emergence of new centers of influence capable of peacefully challenging the existing power structures. In this context, it is essential to increase the inclusion of the Bosnian- Herzegovinian diaspora, the private sector, civil society, and disadvantaged groups— particularly youth and women—into the social fabric. Such participation would be a crucial step toward addressing the negative impacts faced by citizens.

TİKA's mission aims to support BIH's path toward self-sufficiency by enhancing broad participation from all societal actors and encouraging the role of the private sector. In this process, TİKA's role is shaped by its contribution to initiatives that mobilize private sector resources and expertise, as well as by facilitating development projects led by the private sector. With TİKA's support, access to credit and investment opportunities is expanded, offering new solutions for financing in BIH. At the same time, by focusing on specific sectors and increasing private sector access to diverse funding sources, TİKA aims to strengthen the potential and resilience of the Bosnian economy.

TİKA's economic assistance to BIH stands out particularly through infrastructure investments, support for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and projects aimed at enhancing production capacities. Given that SMEs form the backbone of BIH's economy, strengthening these enterprises directly contributes to the country's overall economic growth. By providing financing, consultancy, and capacity-building support to SMEs, TİKA aims to increase their competitiveness on an international scale. For instance, TİKA's projects that facilitate local producers' access to modern equipment have significantly contributed to increased efficiency in production processes and boosted their competitive strength.

Another significant project undertaken by TİKA in BIH focuses on supporting the inclusion of disadvantaged groups in the labor market. The participation of groups such as women, youth, and rural populations in economic life has made substantial contributions to BIH's

social and economic development. Through vocational training programs aimed at these groups, TİKA has enhanced the quality of the workforce and taken significant steps toward providing the skilled labor required by the local economy.

Moreover, TİKA's projects aimed at preserving BIH's cultural and historical heritage are an integral part of its economic development strategy. The restoration of historical structures and the preservation of cultural values contribute to the revitalization of tourism, thereby supporting the country's economy. TİKA's projects in this area have enhanced BIH's tourism potential and aided its progress toward sustainable development goals. By promoting tourism, BIH is enabled to establish a stronger economic presence on the global stage.

An essential component of TİKA's economic assistance to BIH also includes investments in education and healthcare. These projects have been implemented to cultivate a skilled workforce and improve overall quality of life. The technical support provided in education enables youth to access better educational opportunities, while healthcare projects aim to enhance the general health standards of the community, ultimately increasing workforce productivity.

The economic projects and activities conducted by TİKA in BIH not only contribute to the country's economic growth but also play a vital role in fostering social cohesion and development processes. The technical assistance and economic support projects within this framework have accelerated BIH's post-war reconstruction and facilitated significant steps toward achieving the country's long-term development goals. These projects by TİKA are a strong demonstration of Turkey's soft power in the region and have also deepened the historical and cultural ties between the two countries.

TİKA's restoration and cultural heritage projects in BIH play a strategic role closely connected to Turkey's soft power in the region. These projects aim both to strengthen historical ties and to contribute to BIH's social and economic development. Specifically, the restoration of historical buildings and preservation of cultural heritage enhance BIH's tourism potential, directly benefiting the national economy. These efforts also help to preserve the country's cultural identity and promote it on the international stage.

Among TİKA's most significant restoration projects in BIH are the repairs of Ottoman-era historical structures such as the Gazi Husrev Bey Mosque, the Old Bridge in Mostar, Travnik Fortress, and the Alaca Mosque. These projects aim not only at the physical restoration of these buildings but also at preserving BIH's historical and cultural identity. The restoration of these structures contributes to the preservation of Bosniak identity and strengthens the historical ties between the people of BIH and Turkey. TİKA's restoration projects significantly contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage and the strengthening of social solidarity in BIH. Numerous historical structures that suffered extensive damage during the war have been restored by TİKA and reintegrated into society. These restoration projects, in addition to preserving historical heritage, have also fostered social cohesion and a sense of belonging. Religious structures, such

as mosques and mausoleums, play a critical role in the preservation and reconstruction of Bosniak-Muslim identity. These projects have increased social awareness by encouraging the local population to take ownership of their historical heritage. When cultural heritage is viewed as an element that shapes not only the past but also the future, TİKA's projects hold a significant place in BiH's collective memory. Additionally, these projects have played a unifying role by promoting a culture of coexistence among the different ethnic and religious groups in the region.

Turkey's soft power strategy in Bosnia and Herzegovina has become institutionalized in a multidimensional and stable manner, not only through development assistance and bilateral relations, but also via public perception, leadership representation, and socially oriented local projects. This is empirically supported by public opinion surveys conducted by the Center for Security Studies (CSS) in 2017 and 2023. According to the 2017 data, 26 percent of respondents identified Turkey as Bosnia and Herzegovina's most important ally, while 22 percent regarded it as the top donor. Among Bosniak respondents, these figures rose to 38 percent, indicating Turkey's privileged status within this segment of society (Santrucek, 2019). Particularly notable is that, despite Turkey trailing behind major donors like the European Union in terms of absolute development aid, it was perceived as the most generous and supportive actor. This underscores the effectiveness of symbolic representation, cultural affinity, and public diplomacy in shaping perceptions.

This trend was further reinforced in the 2023 CSS survey. According to the findings, 46 percent of respondents viewed Turkey as BiH's "friendliest country," surpassing both the European Union and the United States, which were each selected by 38 percent of respondents (Fena, 2024). Turkey's top position in the public perception hierarchy indicates that its influence extends beyond technical assistance to include historical ties, religious-cultural affinity, and the systematic use of symbolic diplomacy. This suggests that Turkey's public diplomacy not only creates material benefits but also builds a perceptual influence that portrays the country as a cultural and political reference point.

This multifaceted impact is also reflected in leadership evaluations. In a 2024 regional public opinion survey conducted across the Western Balkans, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan emerged as the most admired leader in BiH, with a support rate of 61 percent. Erdoğan's high approval ratings in other regional countries such as Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo further underscore the personalized and transnational dimensions of Turkey's soft power. Although support in Serbia stood at a relatively lower 41 percent, this should be interpreted in light of historical and political complexities, rather than as a strictly negative outcome. It reveals that Turkey's soft power is context-sensitive and may encounter certain limitations depending on national circumstances (Sancak, 2024).

The institutional depth of Turkey's soft power in BiH is perhaps most concretely observed through the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). Statements by Bosnia and Herzegovina's Prime Minister Denis Zvizdić reveal a political acknowledgment of these efforts. Expressing gratitude for Turkey's €100 million credit line and its contribution

to the employment of approximately 6,000 people, Zvizdić emphasized TİKA's role as a "cultural bridge" between the two countries. This acknowledgment highlights not only the economic impact of Turkish assistance, but also its cultural and humanitarian dimensions([tika.gov.tr](http://tika.gov.tr)).

Taken together, these findings reveal that Turkey's soft power strategy in BiH is built upon a multilayered public diplomacy framework, involving public perception, leadership symbolism, institutional cooperation, and social sensitivity. Turkey is not merely perceived as a development actor, but as a reliable and culturally resonant partner in BiH's quest for social justice, cultural identity, and political security. This positioning fosters long-term strategic ties and reinforces Turkey's image as a trusted and multidimensional actor in the Western Balkans.

## **Conclusion**

This study has examined Türkiye's soft power strategy in BiH between 2015 and 2024, focusing on the activities of TİKA as a central actor. The analysis demonstrates that Türkiye's soft power in BiH has evolved into a multidimensional and institutionalized form of public diplomacy, encompassing development assistance, cultural heritage restoration, education, economic empowerment, and healthcare support. These activities have not only contributed to the socio-economic development of BiH but have also strengthened Türkiye's image as a benevolent and reliable partner in the region.

The findings reveal that TİKA's projects, particularly in education, vocational training, agricultural development, and cultural restoration, have addressed local needs while simultaneously reinforcing historical and cultural bonds between the two countries. TİKA's ability to implement locally responsive, human-centered projects has enhanced its legitimacy and effectiveness in the eyes of the Bosnian public. The public opinion surveys conducted in 2017 and 2023 provide empirical evidence for this impact: Türkiye is widely perceived as one of the most friendly and supportive foreign actors in BiH, surpassing even global donors such as the EU and the US in terms of public perception.

Moreover, TİKA's role has not been limited to development assistance; it has also served as a cultural bridge that reinforces Türkiye's civilizational outreach and symbolic leadership. The high approval ratings of President Erdoğan and the acknowledgment of Turkish aid by local political leaders further support the argument that Türkiye's soft power operates not only through institutions but also through leadership visibility and narrative diplomacy. In this sense, Türkiye's approach combines both material and symbolic dimensions of soft power, contributing to its long-term strategic engagement in the Western Balkans.

While the study highlights the achievements of Türkiye's soft power in BiH, it also acknowledges the limitations of relying predominantly on a single institutional actor. Future research could expand the scope by comparing TİKA's effectiveness with other soft power

tools, such as the Yunus Emre Institute or Turkish educational scholarships, or by examining local perceptions more deeply through fieldwork. Additionally, investigating how Türkiye's soft power competes or interacts with other regional and global actors in BiH would provide a more comprehensive understanding of its strategic positioning.

In conclusion, the period between 2015 and 2024 represents a critical phase in the institutionalization and visibility of Türkiye's soft power in BiH. TİKA's activities during this period demonstrate a successful model of soft power projection, one that is context-sensitive, socially oriented, and grounded in shared history and mutual cooperation. As Türkiye continues to shape its foreign policy through soft power tools, the case of BiH stands as a significant example of how development assistance can transcend material aid and foster deeper socio-cultural and political bonds.



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