

THE 1001 EPISODES: A DIPLOMATIC PERSPECTIVE TO TURKISH TV SERIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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The throne of the TV soap opera entertainment in the Western Balkans, occupied since the mid-90's by the Latin American production, has recently been overtaken by a trendy new TV feature – the Turkish series, varying in themes, sensibilities and productions and mostly bearing reference to the lifestyle of young and modern members of the Turkish society.

Shortly after a series of devastating conflicts, the region of Western Balkans seeks durable stabilization and sustainable social, democratic and economic development. The ex-Yugoslav states (except for Slovenia), along with Albania, all subscribe to the goal of European integrations as one of the most important frameworks for the overall progress. This region, tormented by long-lasting interethnic antagonisms, represents the next projected area for the European Union enlargement, a perspective which has gained support from the majority of the EU's political actors.

Culturally, the nations of the region continue to represent an amalgam of Western and Eastern traditions. In terms of cultural and political identity, the entire Balkan Peninsula remains a territory of complex and intense contact, of intertwining and overlapping of different ethnic and religious groups – Orthodox Christians, Muslims, Catholics, Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks... If abused and turned into a source of saber-rattling propaganda, this variety could represent a threat, as recent bloody conflicts have unfortunately proven.

The Western Balkans region has been a target of a very intensive diplomatic activity ever since the collapse of Yugoslavia. The general approach of the international community was, however, generally multilateral. Although the role of ambassadors of the Western countries was important for the negotiations, the main efforts for achieving peace were invested by various delegations representing the United Nation, the freshly founded European Union or other bodies of the international community. It is important to stress here that the European attempts to bring an end to the Yugoslav wars were not efficient – moreover, the common position and activity of the newly born EU (embodied in the CFSP/CSDP platform of the Maastricht Treaty) did not pass the test of burning issues in Yugoslavia. In fact, Member States tended throughout the conflict to maintain even mutually opposing positions.

The cultural aspect of diplomatic activities in the Balkans is mostly represented by numerous services attached to permanent diplomatic missions. However, according to Nancy Snow, this formalized and government-based diplomatic pattern is not suitable for the modern public or cultural diplomacy, inasmuch as this activity aims at creating deeper and more durable social connections between nations (Snow, 2009, p. 7). For, a traditional way of conducting public/cultural diplomacy comes down to a communication controlled by governments and directed towards the public abroad. Services for cultural, interuniversity or other educational cooperation belong to the realm of "Government-to-Government" (G2G) or "Government-to-Public" (G2P) communication and diplomacy. A relatively new

logic that could bring a new step towards deeper understanding and cooperation between nations is, according to Snow, built upon the engagement of non-State actors as *diplomats* (or, at least, as *communicators*). Deeper levels of linkage across the national borders can thus be achieved and put into practice, more or less as a way of fulfilling the tasks of foreign policy. In accordance to the previous type of communication, this pattern is called “Public to Public” (P2P) diplomacy (Snow, 2009, p.6). In terms of power in the international relations, public diplomacy can be used as a tool for projection of the *soft power*.

These new ways of diplomatic communication appear to be backed by the information revolution, globalization and the general post-Cold War international reality (one superpower, several growing challengers, along with regional frameworks for cooperation). Disposing of information and controlling its flows has become one of the most utile advantages in the global balance of power, leading to the growing importance of communication. Joseph Nye states in *Understanding International conflicts* that, although the information revolution makes way for numerous non-state actors of international communication, the power over information stays in the hands of governments. More precisely, the governments of developed, postindustrial countries (Naj, 2006, p. 302). Thus, the technological and material discrepancies on this matter influence the power shift worldwide.

Given this categorical distinction, the logic implies that we attribute the role of P2P communication to the TV series broadcasted abroad. The American case on this matter is more than illustrative – in short, it is sustained in an anecdotal proverb, allegedly coming from the Middle Eastern Arab community: “We hate you but send us your Baywatch” (Snow, 2009, p. 4). It can be said that cultural models – even (or especially?) if they belong to the entertainment segment of (sub)culture – can surpass, by means of attractiveness, the prevailing political antagonisms expressed in terms of hard-power, security- and policy-based international relations.

Nevertheless, Nye makes a clear distinction between adopting some of the values and cultural features of a foreign nation and supporting that nation politically. An example is found exactly in the Balkans, during the NATO air campaign against Yugoslavia in 1999: “... Serbs wearing Levi’s and eating at McDonald’s not only supported repression in Kosovo, but also used a Hollywood film, *Wag the Dog*, to mock the United States during the war” (Nye, 2004, p. 92). Extended to the case in question in this paper, this logic could leave scarce chances for a success of Turkish cultural diplomacy.

Turkey as traditional and present actor in the region

Where exactly is Turkey in minds (or even hearts?) of the people in the Balkans? This country’s position towards *the West* is a subject of a host of analyses, researches, theories. Its important role in the NATO and the pending question of the EU membership are the two recognizable international elements which shape Turkish position towards the world. One of the most problematic issues is the projected and yet uncertain adhesion to the EU. We can go as far as saying that the question of Turkey in Europe is in fact the question of Europe itself. Setting boundaries or opening, holding on a distance or integrating, suppressing or embracing new Turkish arrival on the European scene – this is the ongoing dilemma through which the EU (and Europe altogether) meets its identification. In fact, many theoretical views of this issue state that Europe’s self-definition will be at stake in the future

development of the EU-Turkey relations. Anthony Giddens is one of few scholars and intellectuals who openly called for the Turkish accession to the EU. His reasons are the Turkish actual presence in Europe, the existence of strong pro-European forces in the country (which are not to be discouraged by European reluctance), possible turn of the Turks to geostrategic and cultural alternatives... (Giddens, 2009, p. 272). Asu Aksoy of the Goldsmiths College rephrases Ahmet Insel's vision of Turkey's adhesion as a chance for Europe to leave aside its cultural determination and deal more thoroughly with its political dimension (Aksoy, 2008, p. 259).

When it comes to the Western Balkans, any elaboration of current Turkish image and reputation should dig deep into the historical element of these relations. For, as we will soon show, the perception of Turkey in this region is sometimes consisted of history alone. Almost five centuries long, Turkish reign in the Balkans has left significant marks on the region's cultural, religious, socio-political and economic features.

Two decisive battles against Serbian- and Bulgarian-led coalitions in the late 14th century¹ generally mark the arrival of the Turkish Empire in the territories of modern-day Western Balkans. It is until the early 20th century that Turkish State stays present in the Balkans outside its present boundaries – the Balkan wars (1912-13) ended Turkish presence deeper in the Peninsula, restricting the then Empire to the territories of the 21st century Republic of Turkey. Centuries of Turkish rule have left certain cultural patterns and, more importantly, several more or less integrated Muslim communities which have over time built a specific ethnic identity. In cultural terms, in a broader sense of the word, the remains of Turkish presence are apparent in everyday life, as much as in the general outlines of identity. Serbian and Croatian vocabularies contain many words of Turkish origin, some of which are indispensable for basic communication.² Turkish musical and culinary legacy are probably the most rooted of all these aspects – many dishes brought by the Turks (*sarma, pita, baklava, cevap/kebab* etc.) are considered as parts of a *national cuisine* in ex-Yugoslavia.

On the other hand, the Christian nations of the Balkans perceives the Ottoman reign as a long period of slavery. Serbian national history and traditional culture rely in great deal on the issue of liberation from the Turks. The folklore, traditional epics, numerous historical figures – many of these cultural and social elements of the Serbian notion of ethnicity are driven from a freedom-fighting generations under the Ottoman realm. Turkey is therefore recognized somewhat as an archenemy, regardless of some obvious similarities between the cultures.

The historical issues and their usage in intercultural communication attract attention of theorists – the analysis proposed by Christian Giordano seems to be very instructive for this purpose. His theoretical perspective draws on Max Weber's theory of community, based upon a *belief* of the members about the common characteristics (*Gemeinsamkeitsglauben*) – a community, especially an ethnic group, nourishes its *belief* of togetherness by "actualizing of history", among the other means. As Giordano writes in his *Essays on the International* communication, nations are therefore likely not only

¹ The battles of Marica (1371) and Kosovo (1389) are highlighted by historians as the key moments in Turkish conquest of the Slavic territories in the Balkans.

² Ex. the word *sat* meaning 'hour', 'clock' and 'wristwatch' or *kapija* for 'gate'; esp. emotionally charged and socially important words like *amanet* – 'legacy', *barjak* – 'banner'/'flag', *delija* – 'hero'.

to interpret historical events and phenomena, but also to incorporate them in the communication and the relations with international partners (Đordano, 2001, p. 76). Whether the historical issues will permit stronger Turkish cultural (and consequently political) impact in the Balkans, is one of the questions that this paper tends to raise.

Before asking if Turkey can play as an important regional soft-power actor, we will now take a brief look at the overall Turkish role in the Balkans, especially when it comes to the classical means of diplomacy, as described above. Over the past decade, Turkey has made an important entry on the political scene of the Western Balkans. This arrival is described by some scholars as “neo-Ottomanism”, referring to the re-appearance of this country as an important foreign actor in the regions of former Ottoman Empire.³ According to this theory, Turkish bonds with the areas formerly held by the Ottomans are being revived on the basis of cultural heritage, profiting particularly from the religious links between the Turks and the Balkan Muslims. The neo-Ottoman qualification itself is rejected by Turkish Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, for the reason of pejorative usage of the term.⁴ However, regardless of the “branding”, the general idea of utilizing cultural bonds in order to strengthen political cooperation, figures in Turkish diplomatic proceedings. In 2009, during his visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Davutoğlu stated: “The Ottoman centuries of the Balkans were success stories. Now we have to reinvent this”.⁵

Nevertheless, this culture-oriented attitude does not necessarily imply by itself that we have on our hands an up-to-date, 21st century cultural diplomacy, as N. Snow describes it. Whenever there are Turkish government representatives evidently on the source of information, even if the topic of that discourse is entirely diplomatic, we can not say that the P2P condition of modern cultural diplomacy is met. Therefore, Mr. Davutoglu’s statements, the Turkish initiative for cooperation⁶ and a stream of bilateral and multilateral contacts involving Turkey in the Balkans, can altogether be placed within the circle of traditional public diplomatic proceedings.

The Turkish TV series and diplomacy

As it was previously underlined, it is not a goal of this paper to cry out about an ongoing strategy nor is it our task to bring down the Turkish TV entertainment production, not even for the sake of artistic standards. The objective is, in this part of the paper, to draw and contemplate some of the

³ This thesis is strongly supported by Serbian author and professor Darko Tanaskovic, former Yugoslav ambassador to Turkey and Vatican: Tanasković, D. (2006), *Neosmanizam*, Beograd: Službeni glasnik, Službeni glasnik RS. Turkish scholar Ömer Taspinar sees the neo-Ottomanism as the Turkish tool of soft-power projection: Taspinar, Ö. (2008), “Turkey’s Middle East Policies. Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism”, *Carnegie Papers*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec10_taspinar_final.pdf

⁴ “I am not a neo-Ottoman, Davutoğlu says”, *Today’s Zaman*, 25 November 2009, <http://www.todayszaman.com/news-193944-i-am-not-a-neo-ottoman-davutoglu-says.html>

⁵ <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=turkish-economic-activity-in-balkans-signal-a-comeback-2011-03-14>

⁶ This initiative resulted, among others, by a series of trilateral meetings between Turkish, Serbian and Bosnian heads of State, as well as by the signature in 2010 of the Istanbul declaration, tracing the shapes of future cooperation (the Declaration was strongly rejected by the Bosnian Serbs, seeing in it an open door of greater Muslim influence in Bosnia; for further analysis: *Helsinki Bulletin*, No. 64, May 2010, p.3, <http://helsinki.org.rs/doc/HB-No64.pdf>)

possible and plausible implications of this phenomenon. First, we will show some of the former political and international implications of Turkish TV series, without an undue generalization, but for the purpose of illustration. Then, concerning the reception of those programs in the Western Balkans, there will be an outlook of some relevant facts and figures that could help grasp its proportions. Finally, we will proceed to the evaluation of the issue at stake by posing certain question and proposing answers. To be certain about the factual basis of the following elaboration, it is important to stress that no visible, direct links between the Turkish TV series production and the country's foreign policy strategies have been noted. The soap operas will therefore not be considered as a tool of Turkish government. One can, however, set to demonstrate several important correlations between the two.

When it comes to the overall importance that the political and social actors accord to the television dramas, two indicative cases help draw the outlines of possible reactions. One of those cases concerns the inner consequences, and the other reflects possible international effects. The first one is the case of protests held in Istanbul in February 2011 against the broadcasting of the series "The Magnificent Century", depicting the successful sultan Suleiman the Magnificent as a hedonist and a man in love, contrary to the dominant Islamic, almost ascetic vision of the emperor.⁷

The other example involved international actors and even brought certain unrest to the fragile Turkey-Israel relations. As the media reported in January 2010, the Turkish residential ambassador in Israel was given a protest note after the broadcast of an episode of the TV series "The Valley of the Wolves", showing an operational and a moral victory of Turkish secret agents over their Israeli counterparts/enemies.⁸ The involvement of official foreign policy authorities in what originally appears to be fictional media entertainment, speaks vividly of the possible importance attached to this segment of the public sphere.

The overlook of the ratings of Turkish TV production in the Western Balkans shows an important level of reception. In this respect, the cases of Serbia and Croatia are far more interesting than those of countries populated by Muslim majorities, given the religious difference and a negative historical role played by the Ottoman Empire in these two states with dominant Slavic and Christian peoples⁹. How well did the Turkish TV series do in these countries whose formal education systems, as much as the folklore, consecrate the centuries-long anti-Turkish struggle for freedom? The answer: very well. The results of relevant ratings researches testify of a great popularity of the Turkey's TV production.

According to the available data on TV ratings in the Western Balkans, the absolute popularity champion is the Turkish soap opera "1001 nights", a revisited, modern-day version of the classical story of sacrifice and love. Scheherazade, a young woman in a difficult but passionate relationship with a rich man, became a star almost overnight, impressing a wide audience in the ex-Yugoslav countries. A research published in July 2010 has shown that this program was by far the leader in TV ratings in Serbia, with around 40 percent share.¹⁰ In Croatia, the visit of the starring couple of this series to Zagreb

⁷"Turkish TV series sparks secular debate", Southeast European Times, February 28 2011, www.SETimes.com

⁸"Hit TV series behind Israel-Turkey spat", The Telegraph, January 12 2010,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/expat/expatnews/6974606/Hit-TV-series-behind-Israel-Turkey-spat.html>

⁹ The difference between the Orthodox Serbs and Catholic Croats is not directly relevant for this analytical purpose.

¹⁰ <http://www.blic.rs/Zabava/Vesti/196597/TV-serija--1001-noc-rusi-rekorde-gledanosti>

in 2010 was one of the most glamorous events of the year.¹¹ Moreover, as an investigative story of the Serbian Press agency Tanjug discovered, the interest in learning the Turkish language was bursting during the last year in foreign language schools in Belgrade, and there were even the first recorded cases of babies being named after some of the series' stars (in the Roma population).¹² Apart from the "1001 Nights", several modern, urban and romantic series were at the peak of popularity ("Gumush", "When the Leaves Fall", "The Tears of Bosphorus"...). The culmination of the Balkans-Turkey bond in this production was a soap opera "The Field of Lale", with Serbia's pop star singer Emina Jahović, (a Muslim from Serbian region of Sandzak) as the leading actress. The popularity of this series is "over the top" as well.

Where does this attitude come from? The common feature of these top-list series is their *lightness*, their inclination or full belonging to the soap opera genre. So, there are no Turkish special agents, superior in skills and morally to the Serbian or Croatian ones, which would be similar to the case of "The Valley of the Wolves". A cultural model presented in most of the listed series is of course Turkish, but it goes beyond the particularities of Turkish culture, only to offer a romanticized, sweetened side of life, nevertheless incorporated in a genuinely Turkish wider context.¹³ It is, as we may observe, a Turkish variation of the well-known (in the Balkan region, at least) Latin American soap-opera matrix, holding on to the emotions, to relations between the social classes and to the thin red line of struggle for justice as its strongest common spots. If we take into consideration the most popular series, a common context appears: young urban Turkish couples, traditional family as a social background, attempts to reconcile one's career with the personal/emotional life... Despite the linguistic barrier and the prominent Turkish identity of characters, the more general aspects of identity, surpassing nationality and ethnicity issues, seem to prevail in gaining attention and, possibly, identification of the spectators.

Is this not a modern-day cultural diplomacy at work, whatever the intentions may be and even if there is no direct connection between the production of series and the government policies? For, it is not difficult to imagine that being a fan of a TV star can bring one closer to the entire cultural context that has delivered the star. Or, once that TV entertainment overcomes political distance, can politics follow? In other words, this line of reasoning raises the following question: can the Serbs and the Croats accept more easily the presence of the Turkish Republic in the regional politics, even as EU Member State, if the audience in those two countries already started dreaming of Istanbul love stories?

Of course, to be a significant soft power in the Balkans, Turkey does have to fulfill some conditions other than "being present on television". J. Nye sets the criterion of international *credibility* of countries, which can be "enhanced by their domestic and international performance" (Nye, 2004, p. 90). It is Turkish task, if the goal is to become a relevant European soft power, to "win" the credibility brand. The image produced and distributed by the TV series, even the soap operas, can send to the entire Europe a picture of a Europeanized Turkey – even if that means bringing out heartbreaking stories

¹¹ <http://www.jutarnji.hr/seherezada-i-onur---romansa-u-zagrebu-za-novi-medeni-mjesec/900795/>

¹² <http://www.glas-javnosti.rs/clanak/drustvo/glas-javnosti-15-01-2011/srbi-obozavaju-turske-serije-i-uce-njihov-jezik>

¹³ This cultural analysis of the series undoubtedly merits deeper and more elaborated argumentation, as well as a firmer theoretical grounding. However, since it is the primary goal of this paper to initiate a debate and not to offer ready-made conclusions, the author will limit this analysis to his proper observations, staying, of course, open for a debate on this matter.

– as long as the protagonists come from backgrounds that are compliant to the values of secular, democratic Europe.

Finally, in all these processes, one should bear in mind that diplomatic efforts can not be self-sufficient and that the essence which they represent should also be founded on sound basis.

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