

Strategic Sectors | **Culture & Society**

Turkish Soap Operas: Soft Power at the Service of a Rising Power's Political Ambitions

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In the past two decades, Turkish television drama has enjoyed global popularity. From the Middle East and North Africa to Latin America, passing by the Balkans and Asia, Turkish *diziler* (soap operas) have conquered hearts and minds, achieving record viewership. In the Middle East, almost every television outlet has broadcast at least one Turkish soap; so much so that Turkish *diziler* have replaced the Latin American *telenovelas*, which have for years dominated TV screens in the region. In the Balkans, Turkish soap operas are the second most consumed TV content behind news; and in Latin America, *diziler* are a great hit: Chile is the largest consumer of *diziler* in terms of number of series sold, while Mexico, then Argentina, pay the most to buy them. Soap operas have served as a key vector of soft power for Ankara. The spectacular popularity of these series has contributed to shaping foreign perceptions of Turkey, while enabling Ankara to rewrite history and revive the country's imperial past and grandeur.

Turkish Soap Operas or the Power to Seduce through Popular Culture

While the new technologies of information and communication introduced by globalization have revolutionized the audio-visual environment and gained increased importance, they have nevertheless not

affected the popularity of television. For millions of people across the world, watching television is still almost a ritualistic act, especially when it comes to watching a programme or a series that is broadcast at a given time in a regular manner, thus creating sustained engagement and repeated interaction.

Given the significance of television for audiences in a globalized world, producing and exporting TV series can be considered a high-stake political activity. For, whoever can export their own series and dominate the soap opera industry can - at least to a certain extent - spread their worldview and shape perceptions. In that sense, soap operas are an important vehicle for soft power. First put forward by the American political scientist Joseph Nye, the concept of "soft power" refers to a country's ability "to get what it wants through attraction rather than coercion" (Nye, 2005). Nye explains that popular culture, like Hollywood and mass entertainment, is a means of soft power as it deeply penetrates societies and helps shape perceptions. This framework perfectly applies to Turkish *diziler*: the TV series spread social knowledge about Turkey's values, history and social norms, thus affecting perceptions of the country.

The phenomenon of Turkish *diziler* appeared in the early 2000s and coincided with Turkey's rise as a regional power and global player. In fact, with the advent of the Justice and Development Party in 2002 (AKP, still in power), Ankara has formulated a new strategy of engagement with the world: embracing a proactive and multidimensional foreign policy, Ankara has sought to expand influence and assert itself as a central power and pivot state in international relations. Moving away from hard power and confrontational foreign policy, Turkey has tried to increase its leverage and influence through "soft power" and public diplomacy: building people-to-

people relations, as opposed to state-to-state relations, was seen in policy circles as the best way to guarantee sustained influence and power.

In parallel, as an emerging economy, Turkey has experienced double-digit growth rates in the 2000s, which in turn created a favourable environment for investment in the development of creative industries. It is against this political and economic backdrop that the Turkish soap opera industry has flourished. Starting from the early 2000s, Turkish entrepreneurs have invested in the production of hit TV series for a domestic audience; the spectacular success of the first *diziler* exported to the Middle East region paved the way for mass exports of Turkish TV series to international markets, gradually enabling Turkey to become the world's second leading exporter of TV series, behind the United States; since 2002, about 150 Turkish *dizi* have been sold to more than 100 countries.

Turkey has exported three different genres of TV series: romantic, historical and political thriller/action soap operas. Each of these genres promotes a specific image of Turkey that contributes to Turkey's "nation-branding."

Gumus: The Foundation of Turkish Series' Global Success

The success story of *diziler* dates back to 2008, when the first romantic soap opera *Gümüş* [Silver] was exported to the Arab world through the pan-Arab, Riyadh-based Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC): achieving a record viewership of 85 million viewers, *Gümüş* was a hit series in the Middle East, before being exported to the Balkans and central Europe.

Gümüş told the story of a wealthy, handsome gentleman - Mehmet (the actor Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ) - who is forced by his grandfather to marry his cousin - Gümüş (the actress Songül Öden) - a young lady with a conservative background, born and raised in a traditional village in Anatolia. Throughout the series, the viewers witness the emancipation and empowerment of the female character - Gümüş: with the strong support of her husband Mehmet, Gümüş becomes a successful

businesswoman and a renowned fashion designer; she therefore personifies the ideal of a Muslim lady who perfectly succeeds in both business duties and household responsibilities. Perhaps most significantly, Gümüş and Mehmet's marriage is depicted (in an idealized way) as a modern partnership between equals, in which Mehmet supports his wife's career ambitions as a fashion designer.

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In the Arab region – in Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Morocco, Qatar and Saudi Arabia –, and also in the Balkans – in Macedonia, Bulgaria, and Albania –, and in Latin America (Argentina), the series was so popular that it led to *Gümüş-mania*, an obsession with the characters and story of the series. Ladies rushed to buy T-shirts and posters with photos of their favourite character; new-born babies were named after the actors; divorce cases were recorded because Arab wives were no longer content with their husbands and demanded that they be as romantic as "Mehmet." While the series was first aired on the Saudi-Arabian satellite channel MBC in the daytime slot (2 pm), its high audience ratings pushed the managers of MBC to broadcast it in evening prime time (9.30 pm). MBC even launched a pay-TV channel in partnership with pay-TV platform Showtime Arabia entirely dedicated to *Gümüş* that allows viewers to watch the series episodes around the clock. The success of *Gümüş* has sparked a boom in Turkish dramas. *Gümüş* paved the way for the export of other Turkish romantic soap operas like *Aşk ve Ceza*, *Öyle Bir Gece Zaman Ki*, *Aşk-i Memnu*, *Asi*, and *Fatmagülün Suçu Ne?*, all of which have achieved record audience ratings.¹

¹ In the Arab region for example, according to a survey by the Turkish think tank TESEV, 78% of Arab populations watch at least one romantic Turkish soap opera. "The perception of Turkey in the Middle East." TESEV, 2010, p. 16.

Turkish Romantic Melodramas: The Promotion of a Seductive Modernity

Different aspects of these romantic soap operas explain their success and attractiveness to foreign audiences. First, Turkish romantic dramas generate a phenomenon of social identification: they explore societal changes and challenges that resonate in various parts of the South, from the Middle East to Asia and Latin America; and they showcase values that resonate with the everyday lives of viewers in the South, thus generating empathy. Turkish TV dramas thus explore the topics of migration from rural villages to cities and the challenges of urbanization, an important topic for developing countries, which is underexplored by Western dramas. They also tackle the phenomenon of the rise of new bourgeoisies in developing countries, showcasing a comfortable middle-class life that is accessible and culturally relevant for people across the South. Hence, almost all the stories revolve around a conservative family who migrates from Anatolia (rural area) to engage in business in Istanbul, and who succeeds in business without compromising religious values and social traditions.

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Moreover, Turkish soaps generally depict a sanitized, idealized version of Turkish life, with traditional family structures, and an absence of violence and rough language. Unlike in Western TV productions where the romantic notion of the good old family is gone, Turkish soap operas give great importance to family, showcasing it as an essential nucleus of the society where everyone cherishes and supports one another. As an Arab fan of Turkish soap operas puts it: *"In Western productions, you have a daughter and you*

*don't know who her father is, you don't know who the mother is. The stories were moral-free. But in other parts of the world, we like things to be a little more conservative. The Turks are amazing at that: they show a modern and globalized society but at the same time, the problems are conservative, the same that are faced in most societies of the South."*² Similarly, a Chilean fan of Turkish romantic soap operas admits that the Turkish series are easier for her to connect to than US television series and that she likes the way Turkish shows focus more on old-fashioned romance instead of what she sees as Hollywood's over-sexualization.³

Second, Turkish melodramas are attractive because they challenge and shake social norms within a familiar setting: for audiences in the Balkans and the Middle East, Turkish *diziler* offer groundbreaking approaches to societal issues, in an environment similar to theirs, Turkey being a Muslim-majority country from the East. A key example of this phenomenon is provided by the plot of the romantic hit series *Fatmagül'ün Suçu Ne? (What Is Fatmagül's Fault?)*. The power of this series lies in its narrative that pitted traditional values and principles against the corruption of the modern world, while addressing a woman's place in society and the challenges and issues she faces, from forced marriage to tense family relations to the suffocating power of the rich. The series centred on the gang rape of a young girl named Fatmagül and her battle for justice. At first weak and vulnerable, Fatmagül educates herself and defeats every hardship as she fights for, and receives, justice on all fronts: civil justice through the nation's courts, divine justice through the punishment of her violators – and, of course, the justice of true love. The series was revolutionary in its approach to women's issues, as it showcased the female character as the main hero and agent of change, while traditionally the heroes of *dizi* stories were always men. Fatmagül didn't accept women's place as being subjugated, almost invisible, thus shaking viewers' perceptions and pushing them to rethink a woman's place and role.

Third, Turkish soap operas offer a seductive modernity: they showcase an alternative modernity, that

² DİDEM Tali, "An unlikely story: Why do South Americans love Turkish TV?" BBC, 8 September 2016, www.bbc.com/news/business-37284938.amp.

³ Ibidem.

neither means Westernization and cultural alienation, nor conservatism and traditionalism. The series portray Turkey as a country where people are attached to values yet open-minded; respect social norms while breaking with tradition in various subtle ways: the characters drink wine with dinner, party, kiss in public, yet they observe Ramadan (Muslim fasting), and respect family values (they listen to the advice of their elders⁴ and live in the same house with their parents). For audiences in Asia, the Balkans, Latin America and the Middle East, the appeal of these stories resides in the mix they show: the European freedom that everyone longs for and, at the same time, the attachment to traditional values and morals.

In sum, there is a political dimension behind the success of the Turkish *diziler*: they give audiences of the South a feeling of empowerment by telling stories that matter to them and relate to their lives and values, while the narratives of Hollywood and other Western productions are disconnected from their reality, and therefore leave these audiences disenfranchised. In that sense, the international success of Turkish *diziler* is the symptom of rising “cultural multipolarity,” as new forms of mass culture from the East – from Bollywood to K-pop – are challenging the dominance of American pop culture in the 21st century.

Historical Series or How to Create Nostalgia for a Romanticized Imperial Past

The second category of Turkish soap operas that were exported to foreign markets are the historical series, mostly exemplified by *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* [Magnificent Century], a hit series in the Middle East, the Balkans and Latin America. Based on the life of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent – the longest reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, and his wife Hürrem, the soap opera romanticizes and glorifies Turkey’s Ottoman imperial past. In addition to achieving record viewership rates domestically, the series was a global success: it was followed by more than 500 million people worldwide, and enabled Turkey to penetrate new markets of the East. In fact, the

series was the first Turkish *dizi* bought by Japan and Korea.

Two phenomena explain the spectacular success of this series. First, the attractiveness of the romance story and the beauty of the main female character in the *dizi*: *Magnificent Century* told the story of the sultan’s love affair with a concubine whom he married, in a major break with tradition. A largely unknown historical figure, Hürrem is believed to have been an Orthodox Christian from modern-day Ukraine. Throughout the series, she embodies impeccable beauty, witty spirit and strong feminine character, so much so that she revived in the viewers’ imaginary the tale of Shahrazad in *1001 Arabian Nights*. The lavish and elegant costumes and accessories she wore, designed specifically for the show, mesmerized large audiences across the globe. When it first aired in Turkey in 2011, *Magnificent Century* claimed a third of the country’s TV audience. The foreign press called it an “Ottoman-era Sex and the City” and compared it to a real-life Game of Thrones.

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Second, when it comes to the Arab and Muslim viewers in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans, the series was successful because of the way it rewrote history. An in-depth, critical examination of the series script reveals that *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* portrays the Ottoman Empire – and by inference Turkey – as heir to a great civilization, and a perfect representative of the interests of Arabs and Muslims across the globe. Throughout the series, the script emphasizes that the past rulers of the country (the Sultan-Caliphs) ruled “with the Quran and the Sha-

⁴ Personified here by Mehmet’s mother and grandfather.

ria" and "protected Islam and Muslims against infidels and heretics."⁵ The series also implicitly reminds viewers in the Middle East/North Africa and the Balkans of their historical ties with the Ottoman Empire. For instance, the character embodying Suleiman the Magnificent declares: "I am the Sultan of Anatolia, Diyarbakir, Kurdistan, Azerbaijan, Damascus, Aleppo, Egypt, Mecca, Jerusalem and Yemen. I am the Sultan of Arab territories which my ancestors had conquered;" "I rule over the Safavids, the Mamluks of Egypt, the Abbasids, Syria, Palestine, Hijaz, and the Silk Road."⁶ By emphasizing the historical ties between Turks and Arabs under the Ottoman Empire, and by portraying Turkey as heir to the Caliphate – an institution that united Muslims across the globe, *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* appealed to Muslim viewers in the Arab region and the Balkans who have long suffered from the absence of credible leadership in their countries and/or from a feeling of cultural disenfranchisement in the Christian and Western-centric world order.

Political Thrillers: Neo-Third Worldism "in Action"

Finally, the third genre of Turkish soap operas are the political action/thriller series. This genre, perfectly exemplified by *Kurtlar Vadisi* [Valley of the Wolves] series, "branded" Turkey as an assertive power, capable of standing up against Western imperialism. In *Kurtlar Vadisi*, the plot revolves around the Turkish intelligence agent Polent Alemdar (actor Necati Şaşmaz), who was sent to the Palestinian territories to defend the Palestinians. The series is built around a Manichean vision of the world in which Israelis are portrayed as "the villains," while the Turkish characters are represented as "the good guys," and the godfathers of the oppressed Palestinian population. One statement in the script is particularly symbolic: in a scene where Polent Alemdar meets an Israeli agent who asks him why he came to Israel, Alemdar answers "I did not come to Israel, I came to Palestine." And when the Israeli character addresses an aggressive warning to him - "You know you won't make it out

of our promised land," Alemdar defies him by replying courageously - "I don't know what part of this land has been promised to you." The message conveyed is clear: Turkey has the political courage to challenge

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Israel and to stand for Arabs and Palestinians. In another scene, Polent Alemdar makes a strong statement: "All those who had ruled this region in the past oppressed local populations, except our ancestors. Our ancestors taught us to fight against injustice, colonization, and imperialism."⁷ In that sense, Turkey is implicitly portrayed as a benign power, which doesn't practise domination. By subtly taking a neo-Third Worldist approach and "branding" Turkey as a power that stands up to Western imperialism, this series appealed to audiences in the South, who feel alienated by the Western-centric hegemonic world order.

Beyond the representations and the images that Turkish soap operas transmit and that appeal to foreign audiences, the success of the *diziler* lies in other elements: in particular, their quality of production on the one hand and the structure and nature of the export markets on the other. At the production level, the Turkish soap opera industry is highly developed: benefitting from their country's good economic situation in the early 2000s, production companies devoted huge budgets to produce high-quality series that can compete with international and American hit series. The image and sound quality, the theme songs, the professional performance and the charisma of the actors, and the beauty of the picturesque shots (at the Bosphorus, in luxurious villas), have all contributed to these series' global popularity. Moreover, the *diziler* are made up of two to four seasons, each composed of 30 90-minute-episodes.

⁵ Season 2, Episode 35.

⁶ Season 1, Episode 48.

⁷ Season 1, Episode 10.

This makes them price-competitive: broadcasters and TV channels buy long episodes that can fill up lengthy air time.

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The *diziler* export strategy also explains their popularity in foreign markets, specifically in the Middle East. While Latin American *telenovelas* that dominated the Middle East market in the 1990s were dubbed in literary/classical Arabic,⁸ Turkish *diziler* are dubbed in dialectal Arabic, the language that people use in their daily life. This allows for easier identification, for the dialect creates a sense of proximity between the Arab viewer and the soap opera on the one hand, and between Turkish and Arab societies on the other. It is worth noting that the production and export of Turkish *diziler* was done by non-governmental/

private companies, who created these series with the sole objective of doing business; however, as the first series were exported to foreign markets and achieved global popularity, they have gradually contributed to Turkey's "soft power." The Turkish government has, therefore, "surfed" on the series' popularity to increase Ankara's global influence.

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⁸ Mainly Mexican and Venezuelan series like *Cassandra* and *Maria Mercedes*.