

## Strategic Depth through Soft Power: The Domestic Production and International Projection of Turkish Culture

During the Opening March of the World Social Forum held in Tunis from March 26th to 30th 2013, thousands of participants walked up the Mohamed V avenue, one of Tunisia's foremost boulevards hosting a large number of government buildings and headquarters of large international companies. In doing so, they passed by two symbols of the Turkish presence in Tunisia: the *Bosphore Académie*, a private language school also acting as a Turkish cultural centre and a number of bus stops covered with large-scale advertisements for the Turkish television series *Magnificent Century*. If needed, these are welcome signs that the work undertaken in this issue is both timely and important.

Indeed, Turkey is increasingly seen, if not as a full-fledged counter-model, at least as producing and promoting cultural goods which openly challenge Hollywood codes. And these productions are often exported internationally (sometimes with the active support of the Turkish government) and are particularly heartily welcomed in the Balkans, in the Black Sea region and in the Arab world, thereby positively contributing to the international image of Turkey as well as generating income for the Turkish economy. One such example is the success of the *Valley of the Wolves*. Three movies were adapted from the television series, two of which openly deal with sensitive international issues (the Iraq war and the Gaza flotilla affair). These movies are noteworthy because they offer beautiful cases of mirrored depiction of heroism to a western audience. Indeed, *Valley of the Wolves* does not break with the codes of modern chivalry or with the grotesquely exaggerated portrayal of good and evil. Instead, these codes are merely reversed. Hence, the undercover agent protecting the weak, defending helpless children and saving villages is played by Necati Şaşmaz, who is a kind of

Turkish/Oriental match of the white-skinned, fair-haired and blue-eyed Daniel Craig in James Bond or of Jack Bauer in the television series 24. Equally remarkable to a western audience, the *Valley of the Wolves* franchise heavily draws on anti-Americanism and anti-Semitism for the portrayal of the villains. In *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (2006), American soldiers are the bad guys, using Iraqi children as human shields, blindly killing innocent guests at a wedding ceremony and abusing detainees in sequences which are obvious references to real-life events such as the wedding-party massacre in Mukaradeeb and the Abu-Ghraib torture scandal. The movie also showed a Jewish doctor removing organs from injured civilians so as to sell them to rich American and Jewish patients in the West awaiting transplantation. Although the movie earned much criticism in the US and in Europe, it was a good export product throughout the Arab world.

Such trivial examples are not isolated. Alone, they would be mere anecdotes, but taken together, they point to a growing trend as well as to a characteristic feature of the Turkish foreign policy, in particular under the AKP government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan – namely the deliberate effort to promote Turkish culture abroad, and particularly in the Arab world and in neighbouring countries of the Black Sea region, in order to gain a series of political, diplomatic and commercial advantages. The conceptual cornerstone of this policy is Ahmet Davutoglu's *Strategic Depth*, which contends that Turkish history (Ottoman legacy) and geography (size and strategic location) provide the country with a significant soft power potential, which the country ought to activate and use to its benefit by actively promoting its culture worldwide.

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#### THEMATIC SCOPE OF THE ISSUE

In this context, this issue addresses the question of Turkish soft power with a double emphasis on Turkish structures/institutions as well as on concrete empirical case studies. Stated otherwise, the purpose of this issue is not to offer another theoretical contribution to the ongoing academic debate on soft power – an issue which is better left to specialised scientific reviews. Another important caveat is the focus that the review *Euxeinos* operates on governance and culture. This means that a series of important economic, trade or financial issues which undeniably contribute to strengthen the power of attraction of Turkey will not be dealt with here. The interested reader may refer to scientific journals such as *Turkish Studies*, the *International Review of Turkish Studies*, the *European Journal of Turkish Studies* or *New perspectives on Turkey* which have regularly addressed these issues at great length.

The aim and added-value of this issue is therefore twofold. First, it aims at showing how Turkish scholars understand and apply soft power and how the Turkish state has developed specific foreign policy instruments dedicated to the promotion of Turkey's soft power. Second, these strategies of soft power are illustrated by means of three case studies dedicated to domestic and international success of Turkish soap operas, to the spread of Sufism in segments of the Turkish society and to the bids of Turkey's capital city Istanbul to host a series of international events. These case studies highlight the way in which cultural contents or messages are promoted and received internationally. They also point to subtle and interesting evolutions in the kind of image Turkey wants to convey of itself. Finally, the same case studies identify certain

discrepancies between the international image of Turkey and the domestic societal realities of contemporary Turkey.

#### INDIVIDUAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The first paper "Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy: New Instruments and Challenges" by Selcen Öner serves as a framing paper for the entire issue. It briefly highlights the understanding of soft power within Turkish academia and goes on to introduce *Strategic Depth* as the conceptual basis underpinning Turkish foreign policy. It then reviews the institutions and foreign policy instruments at the disposal of the Turkish state when trying to promote its culture worldwide. It points to the proliferation of various cultural institutions which, as is the case for the Turkish Cultural Centres and the Yunus Emre Institutes, are de facto placed in a situation of competition one with another. Another perhaps unexpected result for the Western reader is the trade-off that some members of Turkish academia seem to see between hard and soft power.

The second paper "Turkish Soap Power: International perspectives and domestic paradoxes" by myself is the first case study of the special issue and focuses on the domestic and international success of Turkish television series. These series often address pressing societal issues such as sexual emancipation, women rights, drug or alcohol consumption and abortion which could be deemed offensive by an Islamic audience. Yet, the manner with which these issues are dealt with seems to resonate across the Black Sea and Arab world, leading for instance to a situation in which the last episode of the Turkish soap *Gümüş / Noor* was viewed by 85 million people worldwide, including half the total number of adult women in the Arab world. Paradoxically enough,

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the freedom of tone of Turkish producers has been harshly criticised within Turkey by senior AKP politicians as well as by regulatory authorities such as the RTÜK.

The third paper “Are New Sufis “Grey Turks”? Urbanite National Identities and Religious reconfigurations” by Marta Dominguez Diaz addresses the recent revival of Sufi thought in traditionally secular urban classes of Turkey. She argues that this movement ought to be understood as an attempt to break with the old anti-religious discourse of “White Turks” while simultaneously keeping away from the traditional and rigorous religious practices of “Black Turks”. Stated otherwise, this movement does not imply a rejection of western modernity, which the so-called “Grey Turks” still embraced for intellectual stimulation. Rather, it corresponds to the desire to incorporate the warmth and wisdom of Sufi traditions into a contemporary Turkish identity otherwise perceived as overly cold and “soulless”. In the Turkish literary landscape, Elif Şafak stands out as the most prominent representative of this spiritual revival. Interestingly, the international success of her books may be taken as a sign that the interest in this westernised version of Sufism goes far beyond the border of Turkey.

The fourth and last paper “Istanbul: How Turkey’s Cultural Capital Has Shaped Its Foreign Policy” by Jennifer Brindisi offers a convincing account of the way Turkey redefined its soft power strategy. Indeed, in the context of the 2010 European Capital of Culture (ECoC) programme, Turkish policy makers went to great length to promote Istanbul as a cosmopolitan, multi-religious and Euro-compatible capital city. Hence, the ECoC application emphasised the decisive historical contribution of Byzantium / Istanbul as cradle of the European civilisation, in a tactical at-

tempt to break the deadlock on EU accession negotiations. A few years ahead and with accession talks virtually frozen, the bid for the 2020 Summer Olympics is based on a different narrative, that of the “global vision”, whereby Istanbul has become the avant-garde of all Muslim nations and a city “looking at 360 degrees”, rather than a microcosm of religious diversity with its eyes riveted on Europe.

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*About the Editor:*

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