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PECULIARITIES OF “SOFT POWER” IN THE EXAMPLE OF TURKISH SOAP OPERAS

ZURAB BATIASHVILI

137

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Lately the phenomenon of “soft power” has become increasingly important in the international arena, since it can be used to achieve domestic and foreign policy goals.

At this stage, “soft power” is already being researched and approached academically. Interestingly, the soft power index for countries has been calculated annually over the last ten years.¹

An interesting phenomenon in this regard is Turkish soap opera TV serials which is a part of Turkish “soft power” and has contributed significantly to the process of improving Turkey’s image in various countries (including Georgia).

TV Serials as a Part of Turkish “Soft Power” and their Place in the World

Turkish “soft power” is diverse and is being actively studied in scientific circles. Similar to other nations, “soft power” in Turkey also incorporates different areas of daily life. However, unlike other countries, it has its peculiarities. For example, one of the most important aspects of Turkish soft power is Turkish soap operas which is not the case when assessing the soft power index of other countries.

Turkish soap operas are popular in Turkey and beyond, especially in the Arab world and the Balkans (i.e., mainly in the former Ottoman Empire territories). Recently, through TV serials the image of Turkey has greatly improved in these countries. However, it is noteworthy that many Turkish soap operas and actors are more popular abroad than in Turkey itself.

Turkish soap operas are used both to “improve” Turkey’s image and increase the number of tourists in Turkey. Viewers are eager to experience firsthand the places depicted in the TV serials. Izet Pinto, founder of Global Agency, a company that operates in this sector, said that the number of Middle Eastern tourists in Turkey increased by 350% between 2009 and 2014 and estimates that the biggest contribution to this achievement was made precisely by Turkish soap operas.²

Moreover, extra money goes into the Turkish economy and especially into its television industry because of Turkish soap operas. If in 2007 revenues from the export of Turkish soap operas was only USD 1 million, by 2018 this number increased to USD 500 million.³

Also 2018, 700 million people watched Turkish soap operas in 146 countries.⁴ Considering the fact that there are 1.67 billion households in the world with a television set,⁵ 700 million is a serious number.

The Turkish think-tank, the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV), conducted a public opinion survey in 16 Middle Eastern countries in 2012. The results showed that three-quarters of the population had seen Turkish TV serials. It is noteworthy that according to the same study, the similar three-quarters of the population (varies among countries between 70-78%) of these countries had a positive attitude towards Turkey.⁶ Hence, we have some connection between watching Turkish soap operas and positive attitudes towards Turkey.

Turkish soap operas are watched extensively both in the Turkish-speaking world (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, etc.) and in the Balkan countries.

An interesting fact is that Turkish TV serials are popular in both the Muslim and Christian countries of the Balkans. Even clergymen in Greece have come out to oppose the broadcast of Turkish soap operas on television.⁷

The most interesting situation in this regard was created in Macedonia where almost the entire television time was occupied by Turkish soap operas. The Macedonian authorities were even forced to adopt a special law, banning daytime and “prime-time” Turkish soap operas to limit the influence of Turkish “soft power” on Macedonian society. As the Macedonian Minister of Information and Public Affairs, Iva Ivanovski, said: “They (TV serials) are appealing but 500 years of slavery is enough.”⁸ Here she meant the long-standing Ottoman rule of Macedonia as slavery.

Lately, in the wake of deteriorating political relations with Turkey, Middle East countries are also trying to limit Turkish TV serials. For example, on February 10, 2020, the official religious council of Egypt issued a fatwa urging local believers not to watch Turkish soap operas because they believe that the circulation of

these products “serves the purpose of rebuilding the Ottoman Empire ... for this purpose they viciously use politics, faith, even art and culture.”⁹

According to Serbian sociologists, the reason for the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Balkan countries is that they are based on traditional, patriarchal values and there are similarities between Turkish and Balkan

cultures. They believe that in the Balkan countries dramatic changes have taken place in family lifestyle while the Turkish soap operas revive lost and forgotten values.

The situation is similar in Greece. When Greeks are asked about the popularity of Turkish soap operas, they reply that Turks and Greeks have similar family structures, culture, relationships among people and emotional attitudes.¹⁰

How Strong is Turkish “Soft Power?”

It has already been ten years since the “soft power” of different countries has been measured throughout the world.

When the “soft power” index of countries was first calculated in 2010, Turkey came in the 25th position (one position ahead of Russia).¹¹

Rank	Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score
1	France	1.64	14	Norway	0.99
2	United Kingdom	1.64	15	Japan	0.97
3	USA	1.57	16	Italy	0.81
4	Germany	1.44	17	China	0.80
5	Switzerland	1.39	18	Israel	0.78
6	Sweden	1.33	19	South Korea	0.73
7	Denmark	1.21	20	South Africa	0.69
8	Australia	1.16	21	Brazil	0.69
9	Finland	1.13	22	Mexico	0.61
10	Netherlands	1.08	23	India	0.60
11	Spain	1.05	24	UAE	0.56
12	Canada	1.04	25	Turkey	0.50
13	Singapore	1.01	26	Russia	0.45

Turkey had the best performance in 2012 when it was 20th in the rankings.¹² Consequently, we can call this a “golden age” period for Turkish “soft power.”

Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	United Kingdom	11	South Korea
2	USA	12	Norway
3	Germany	13	Finland
4	France	14	Italy
5	Sweden	15	Netherlands
6	Japan	16	Spain
7	Denmark	17	Brazil
8	Switzerland	18	Austria
9	Australia	19	Belgium
10	Canada	20	Turkey

The last study on “soft power” throughout the world was conducted in 2019 and Turkey is ranked 29th (again one point ahead of Russia). It should be noted that in the previous year (2018) Turkey could not reach the top 30 (only the top 30 are counted).¹³

Rank	Country	Rank	Country	Rank	Country
1	France	11	Italy	21	Singapore
2	United Kingdom	12	Norway	22	Portugal
3	Germany	13	Spain	23	Poland
4	Sweden	14	Denmark	24	Czech Republic
5	USA	15	Finland	25	Greece
6	Switzerland	16	Austria	26	Brazil
7	Canada	17	New Zealand	27	China
8	Japan	18	Belgium	28	Hungary
9	Australia	19	South Korea	29	Turkey
10	Netherlands	20	Ireland	30	Russia

Turkish TV Serials in Georgia

Although recent data suggest that Turkey is ranked 29th in the world's "soft power" rankings, its impact on many countries with whom it has close geographical proximity, as well as linguistic, cultural, religious and historical ties, is much higher.

In addition, Turkey has a significant influence on specific topics in some countries. For example, it is natural that its influence is greater on the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria and Northern Macedonia, on the Crimean Tatars, on the Turkish part of Cyprus, on the Muslim minority in Serbia's Sanjak province and so on.

Turkish "soft power" in terms of TV serials has emerged in Georgia since 2010.¹⁴ Although there has not been much sociological research on Turkish soap operas in Georgia, the fact is that they are very popular in the country. This is demonstrated by the fact that more or less popular Georgian channels are competing with each other, both in terms of the acquisition and the broadcasting of these soap operas, and interviewing Turkish actors starring in them.

Imedi TV reported on August 25, 2013 that more than 2,000 respondents participated in its public opinion poll. When asked which country's serials are the most appealing to the public, the majority of respondents named Turkish and Georgian TV serials.¹⁵

We see similar results in a report prepared for the Georgian National Communications Commission in June 2013 which reads: "Respondents are interested in Georgian and Turkish soap operas. They say that the the content of the Georgian and Turkish soap operas is more "real" and familiar than that of the South American ones."¹⁶

The Georgian viewers' approach to the issue generally resembles that of the Balkan population. In both cases the emphasis is on shared values and culture. For example, Georgian respondents stated during the survey: "I love Sava (a character in one of the TV shows). He is an ideal man, I want my family members and men in general to be like that." In addition: "Family traditions, several generations living together... women in the room and men outside. I also saw the cradle. In addition, the institution

of virginity; however, this tradition recedes in our society and as it seems - in Turkey as well. There is a hegemony of men as compared to women. Turkish soap operas also avoid excessive sex scenes and the propaganda of homosexuality. Relationships among relatives are important.”¹⁷

Georgians also talk about Turkish soap operas on social media: “We have learned a lot of interesting things about their traditions. For example, family traditions when several generations live together. Even our mourning is similar - with screaming and yelling. The institute of virginity... they have a term there, too - what would people say?”¹⁸

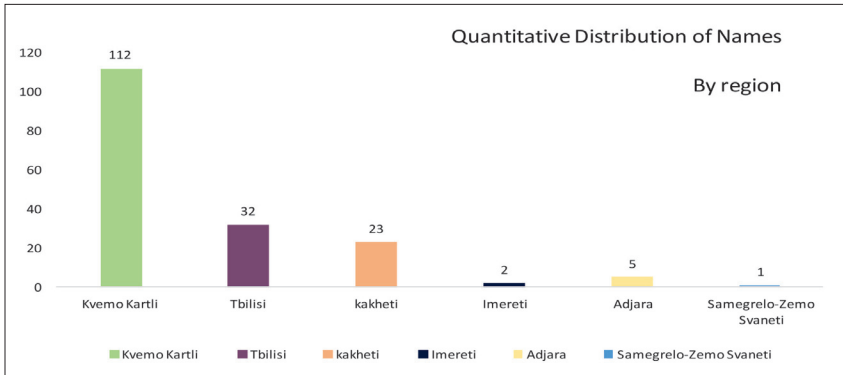
It should be noted that the introduction of Turkish soap operas into Georgia was done through the classic method characteristic of “soft power” - with a voluntary participation in the process.

In 2013, when Turkish soap operas began to air on Georgian television stations, Bacho Kikabidze, one of Maestro’s founders and CEO, said in an interview with *Sarke* magazine that Turkish soap operas were top-rated worldwide and were not aired on Georgian TV channels before because of the ignorance of the owners of the TV companies. In his words: “The Turks really did not come and offer us. We came to them. They were not cheap either. We really paid a lot of money. So, the Turks have nothing to do with it, it’s all about our marketing.”¹⁹

In some cases, Turkish soap operas have a direct and clear impact on Georgian society. In addition, it should be noted that these influences in various regions and communities are represented with different degrees of importance.

For example, 159 children born in Georgia in 2018 were named after the heroes of Turkish soap operas - 32 of them - Onur, 65 of them - Damla, 35 of them - Zahra and 27 of them - Elip.²⁰

Of note is that 112 of these 159 children come from Kvemo Kartli²¹ where Turkish channels are very popular among Georgian citizens of Azerbaijani origin which also attests to the impact of Turkish soap operas in this region.

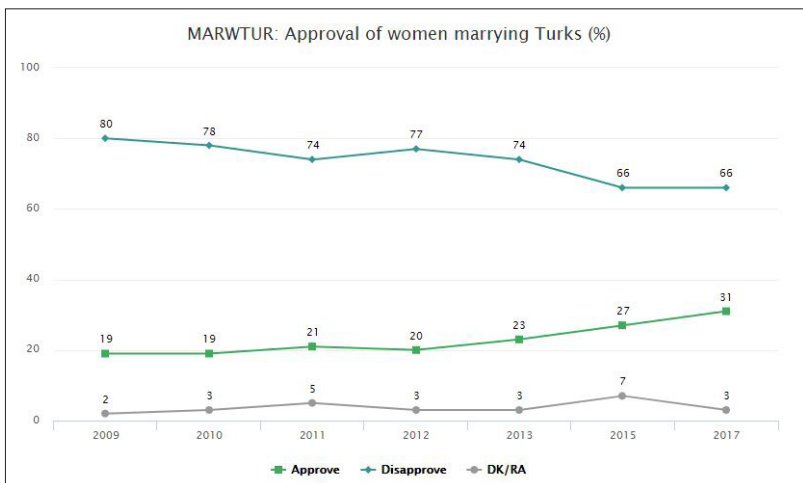


It is also an interesting fact that in the same population, according to our observations, Turkish words and phrases are slowly becoming indigenous and replacing the Azerbaijani equivalents due to the influence of Turkish channels and soap operas.

It is further interesting to note the attitude of Georgian society towards Turkey and the Turks and how it has been changing over the years.

In this instance, we will use data from the so-called Caucasus Barometer study conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Center (CSSR).

If only 19% of the Georgian population approved of the marriage of Georgian women to Turks in 2009-2010, after 2010 (that is, after the appearance of Turkish soap operas on Georgian television), this figure began to grow slowly and reached 31% in 2017.²²



We can observe a similar tendency in terms of other indicators. For example, when asked: “Which country do you consider to be Georgia’s main friend?” only 3% of respondents in 2013 named Turkey. This figure doubled and reached 6% in 2017.²³

During the same period, the number of people speaking in the Turkish language increased in Georgia. For example, 15% of respondents claimed to have some level of Turkish language proficiency in 2017 (before there was no language proficiency survey)²⁴ while this figure increased to 17% in 2019.²⁵

We do not argue that the aforementioned trends were fully precipitated by the introduction of Turkish soap operas to Georgian television nor do we have the appropriate tools that would make it possible to determine the percentage rate of the contribution of soap operas to this issue. But one thing is clear - these trends began in Georgia after 2010 (that is, after the introduction of Turkish soap operas). However, international experience is also important with examples from many countries showing a correlation between the number of people who watch Turkish soap operas and who have a positive attitude about Turkey.

Conclusions:

- Turkish soap operas are an important part of Turkish “soft power.”
- The direct control of the “soft power” of any country is difficult.
- Turkish “soft power” (including TV serials) in many countries around the world, including Georgia, has changed the image of the Turkish state and Turkish culture for the better.
- The influence of Turkish soap operas is significant in Turkish neighborhoods, including Georgia, and this influence will be maintained in the near future.
- Due to the high demand for the aforementioned TV serials, Turkish soap operas will maintain their place in Georgian television in the future.
- The influence of Turkish “soft power” (including soap operas) is particularly high on Georgian citizens of Azerbaijani descent and this will be maintained for the long term.

- It is important that the issue of Turkish “soft power” is not addressed by specific groups within a framework of politically motivated anti-Western (and anti-Turkish) campaigns.

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