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Public diplomacy of Türkiye in the Balkans: From the perspective of natural position

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Abstract

In the diplomacy and international relations of the 21st century, the influence and importance of an effective and efficient use of soft power and public diplomacy is crucial for states in realizing certain aims in the international stage. The constructive utilization of soft power tools through the acknowledgment of capabilities, in other words, playing to their strengths, is very important for states in order to gain maximum benefits from their actions in the international stage. The concept of Natural Position assumes a crucial role in detecting and materializing a state's strengths towards a certain region and will be utilized as a framework for the focus of this paper. This paper will focus on the approach of Türkiye within this context in the Balkans, designating specific cases in which we can detect the active use of soft power in that region, the importance of Türkiye's natural position within the Balkans and how this position has and can be utilized as a strong foundation for broadening Türkiye's influence in the Balkans, even further. The paper will go through the theoretical frameworks of soft power, public diplomacy and the concept of natural position, analyzing the crucial role of Türkiye in the Balkans and its approach in soft power towards the region, emphasizing its strengths in the region via elements within the concept of Natural Position.

Keywords: Soft Power; Hard Power; Diplomacy; Natural Position; Regional Actor

1. Introduction

It is no secret that states have always aimed to assert influence and authority over certain regions in order to create a sphere of influence (Jackson, 2020), which will act as a springboard for providing states with a stronger voice and position within the international stage. Besides this, states have also aimed to establish influence over regions which they have certain commonalities and interests towards. States which are known as superpowers have the capacity as well as the inclination to assert influence and dominance throughout multiple regions and even in a global sense scale due to their aspirations for world leadership. Although superpowers aim for overreaching influence, there are also states which aspire for regional leadership, assuming the role of regional powers (Ehtisham, 2023), these states exert influence over a specific region which they deem as a part of their sphere within international relations. States which aspire for regional leadership also adhere to certain tools for legitimizing their involvement as regional actors. These tools can range from "regionalism" which is a concept usually attributed to the establishment and influence of the European Union (Bloor, 2022; Atatorun & Veziroglu, 2022) to neo-colonialism which is a framework for the continued influence of certain European powers on African states previously under their colonization (Haag, 2011).

In the context of the Balkans, Türkiye can undoubtedly assume the role of a regional actor, utilizing many strengths with regards to the region. However, the position of Türkiye in the Balkans is beyond the aforementioned concepts such as regionalism or neo-colonization, rather Türkiye has a natural position to be involved in Balkan Geopolitics, in fact, Türkiye has the obligation to assume such a role, the justification for which can be found through the perspective of the concept of Natural Position (Ibish & Ferhad, 2023).

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2. Concepts of Public Diplomacy & Soft Power

Soft power is a concept coined by Joseph Nye in the late 1980s. According to Nye (5), “Soft power is to get others to want the outcomes that you want – it co-opts people rather than coerces them.” In other words, you get others to want to what you want but not with hard/military power but other instruments. Nye (8-12) argues that “The soft power of a country rests primarily on three resources: its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)”.

Despite Nye’s conceptualization, the concept always existed and was expressed with different terms throughout history. Melissen (3) says that even in ancient times, as far back as the Bible, there were efforts to gain hearts of people. Besides its utilization by developed states, malicious regimes, e.g. Nazis in Germany and Socialists in the Soviet Union, also tried to attract people with soft power instruments. Therefore, the strategy of using non-hard power tools to lure people was not unique to a certain state, group or ideology. For instance, according to Gramscian concept of hegemony, hegemony can be exercised through combining force and consent and balancing each other, thus the ruling class can maintain and justify its dominance (Gramsci 80).

Whether hard power or soft power is more important for a state has always become a matter of discussion. Although there are clashing views about the two concepts, this study argues that one is not less important than hard power and they are interrelated and intertwined with each other. History is full of examples about the debate. For example, the Soviet Bloc, Libya’s Qaddafi, Nazi Germany and many other authoritarian regimes were militarily strong but gained only hate of people, including their own population. On the other hand, Ying Fan (150), a Chinese academician, claims that soft power was superior to hard power in Chinese history.

Back to Nye’s conceptualization, ideology, culture and other factors indeed draw in foreigners and cause the weaker culture to become the dominant culture through replacement or imitation. For instance, American culture, which Nye views as superior to all others, has permeated other civilizations and altered their traditions and rituals to reflect its own. In addition to making enormous sums of money, corporations like Apple, Alphabet, Boeing, McDonald’s, Coca-Cola, Microsoft, Facebook, Apple, and Hollywood-based film producers also contribute to the global spread of the American way of life, with liberal economics and democracy widely acknowledged as the most effective political and economic systems.

However, this study argues that there is not a common agreement on the concept of soft power. For example, Nye started with American culture, international laws and institutions as sources of soft power but later replaced them with culture, political values, and foreign policy. Thus, there is no absolute conceptualization made by Nye. On the other hand, Fan (150) argues that culture is the only source of soft power. But then one can question which culture should be inspired and adhered to since every person grows in a different culture. Besides, this study argues that popular culture is no less attractive than traditional culture. For example, the UAE was established in 1971 but attracts more tourists than countries with ancient cultures such as Iran and Egypt.

Moreover, another problem is who holds soft power. Is it a state, a group of people or an individual? If compared, for example, Gandhi’s soft power might be seen as more superior than that of India. The same comparison can be made for Egyptian government vs. pyramids, Bob Marley vs. Jamaica, etc. In addition, how much soft power is effective without hard power is another matter of discussion. It is acknowledged that a country with hard power but lacking soft power may have problems in gaining hearts of foreigners. However, can a country having soft power but being militarily weak get others to want to what it wants? More questions can be asked. Yet, what is almost obvious is that soft power is a significant tool for states to get approval and adherence of their population and foreigners.

It can be inferred from the definition of soft power that the concept refers to attracting foreign people in various ways. In some occasions, attraction happens naturally, e.g. adherence to touristic places of a country. It might also be a side effect. For example, a good soap opera might be aimed at making profit but it may also enable the audience to be curious about the home country. However, it generally requires hard and deliberate work both by the state and public, which is called public diplomacy (Şehitoğlu, *Kamu Diplomasisi* 37).

According to Melissen (3), public diplomacy means image cultivation, propaganda and other activities. Some scholars argue that it is nothing than propaganda to get a place in the hearts and minds of foreigners. However, this definition is too simplistic as it skips the fact that it listens to its audience and values their requests. In addition, Kalın (11) argues that “*The purpose of public diplomacy is not propaganda but building a strategic language of communication based on objective facts and truth*”. Public diplomacy is conducted within two main frameworks “State-to-public,” and “public-to-

public.” (Ibid, 11). While state uses official apparatus to implement its policies and activities, the public (individuals, companies, universities, think tanks, NGOs, etc.) benefit from civilian methods and activities.

Particularly, the advancements in internet technology transcending transnational borders have enabled people to communicate with each other though malicious groups like terrorist organizations use the very same technology, too. Moreover, media (whether classical or social) is alone an actor boosting public diplomacy. Media is also more influential as it directly addresses people. Therefore, it can be used for both malign and benign purposes. It will not be wrong to say that the media is the best tool for public diplomacy as it is the basic means to spread information. In other words, what is crucial is not whether a state or a public institution maintains public diplomacy but whether the message reaches the audience or not.

The case of Israel may be good example for analysis. Israel used Jewish holocaust to legitimize its crimes in Palestine. In addition, while it tried to influence Western politicians (particularly US congress members) via Jewish groups, pro-Israeli media, which is the most influential constituent in western world, continuously propagated Israel’s being victim while at the same time it demonized Palestinian groups. In fact, they were successful until social media platforms became the main applications in mobile phones. Since then, Israel’s public diplomacy has failed to convince foreign people that Israelis are victims as even a single person is able to disprove with a short video, he/she took from the battlefield that facts are quite different. Thanks to social media, for the first time, American youth has favored Palestine to Israel after the genocide in Gaza, a total disappointment for Israel’s public diplomacy.

3. Characteristics of Türkiye’s Public Diplomacy

Türkiye as a state, like all other states, wants to have a positive image among foreign audiences and exerts various policies and strategies for that purpose. However, one aspect is unique for Türkiye’s public diplomacy; re-branding. When the republic was proclaimed in 1923, the founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, tried to re-brand the country. Re-branding is defined as changing social life, economy, and governmental system of a country as a whole. As soon as Atatürk declared the establishment of the new country, he started to westernize Türkiye through dozens of reforms, also called revolutions. The new government defined the state as secular and tried to transform the state as well as society. For example, Khilafa was abolished; latin alphabet was begun to be used; women and men were forced to wear European style clothes; gregorian calendar replaced Hijri calendar; Arabic and Persian words were removed from Turkish, and so on. The goal was to posit Türkiye in the western world through changing its culture.

Although Türkiye can hardly be regarded as a western state, it can not be denied that it no longer looks like an eastern state. Therefore, re-branding has mostly become successful. In addition, Turkish state also struggles for nation-branding, which Kaneva (118) defines as “A compendium of discourses and practices aimed at reconstituting nationhood through marketing and branding paradigms”. In this context, Türkiye, as state and public, has introduced new institutions and policies to brand itself.

Beginning with non-governmental (f)actors of public diplomacy, Türkiye is deemed one of the best touristic destinations in the world, being the sixth visited country among all in 2023. Statistics show that 57 million visitors left approximately \$55 billion revenue in the same year (Mert ve Oruç, *Türkiye’nin Turizm Geliri*). Since the country hosts ancient places and beautiful beaches, the government does not need to spend much effort to attract tourists. Thus, attraction was natural. On the other hand, Turkish soap operas are watched in more than 100 countries, topping prime time ratings. Turkish film producers earn \$1 billion from export of soap operas (Alain Türk, *Türk Dizi Sektörü*). One should notice that soap opera industry is pure public as it has no governmental involvement nor support. Another “brand business” is Turkish health sector. 1,5 million patients from miscellaneous countries visited Turkish hospitals and helped them generate \$3 billion revenue in 2023 (Ushas, *Sağlık Turizmi Verileri*).

Moreover, a few Turkish companies have become global brands in last 10 years. For example, Turkish Airlines flies to more countries than any other airlines in the world and has contributed \$21 billion, 80% of which is got from transit passengers to Turkish economy in 2023. In addition, Turkish home appliances producer Beko tops its market in Europe. Baykar Tech, a drone manufacturer, has made its armed UCAV, namely Bayraktar, worldwide known for the successes it showed in battlefields. The young defense company earned \$1 billion from exports solely in 2023. More Turkish brands may get pies from their businesses globally soon.

As for state activities for public diplomacy, it looks that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan-led governments weighed more on soft power than previous ones. Besides establishing new institutions, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was restructured in order to proliferate channels of accessing foreign people. Furthermore, new embassies and consulates were opened abroad. Currently, Türkiye ranks third after the US and China in diplomatic network.

Regarding restructure of Foreign Ministry, in order to bolster public diplomacy, at least 10 new units such as Public Diplomacy Unit, Diplomacy Academy Department and Information Technologies Department, Public Communication Department, General Directorate for Information, and Deputy General Directorate for Cultural Diplomacy were established. Moreover, the ministry organizes cultural activities abroad like “Culture Years”, “Turkish Culture Weeks”, “Turkish Culture Days”, “Turkish Cinema Days” and “Turkish Film Weeks” (Ekşi 39). In addition, a public diplomacy unit (The Prime Ministry Public Diplomacy Coordination Office (KDK)) was established in the prime ministry and later transferred to the presidency. Currently, the Directorate of Communication, a sub-unit of Turkish presidency, does a large portion of public diplomacy on behalf of the government. Even directorate’s motto also refers to public diplomacy; “Empower the Türkiye brand”.

Besides state departments, government-established institutions also play a great role in public diplomacy. Among them, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) is the only entity established before Ak Party came to power in 2002. TIKA was established in 1992 to exert country’s soft power in Caucasus, Balkans and Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, it has undertaken distribution of Turkish state aid to tens of countries. Except some western countries, TIKA accessed almost every country through distributing humanitarian aid, building schools, parks, roads, etc (Şehitoğlu, *Health Diplomacy* 171). Türkiye was number 2 in foreign aid after the US until recently and the majority of this aid was delivered via TIKA.

The other unit is Yunus Emre Institute, specifically established to spread Turkish culture and teach Turkish language. Yunus Emre is equivalent to British Council, Goethe Institute and American Culture Centre. The institute has 85 offices across the world. Moreover, The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) carries out Türkiye’s diaspora diplomacy. YTB has accessed many Turkic, Muslim and friendly communities abroad and collaborates with them. What is more, it helps foreign students to study in Türkiye. As of 2024, Turkish universities have 340.000 foreign students, majority of whom stay in dormitories provided by YTB. The institute also gives scholarships to foreign students.

Besides institutes, the media is also an important player for public diplomacy. While state news agency “Anadolu Ajansı” opened new offices in new countries including far countries like Colombia to enlarge its network, state-owned television and radio company “TRT” opened English and Arabic TV channels as well as websites in Spanish, Russian and even Albanian. The mentioned media outlets have millions of audiences and are able to make Türkiye’s message viral.

Finally, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personal soft power should be mentioned. As soon as he came to power, he turned the country’s face to the Middle East, Global South and the East while also trying to further improve relations with the West. His embracing policies toward ignored communities in former Ottoman lands made the latter re-connect with the old friend. From states to individuals, people in surrounding countries began to visit Türkiye, which culminated in a more positive image for the country. To increase friends, Erdoğan had once pursued zero-problem policy with neighbors, which later failed due to the Arab Spring and various other reasons. However, Erdoğan’s soft power in last 20 years is perhaps the biggest booster of Turkish public diplomacy.

Generally speaking, public diplomacy is a state project for Turkish state and performing well despite up-and-downs. Moreover, as will be explained below, Türkiye is lucky in terms of boosting its public diplomacy as its natural position is one of the biggest advantages to make more influential its soft power on former Ottoman lands.

4. Türkiye’s Natural Position in the Balkans

In order to understand the natural position of Türkiye in the Balkans, we must first establish the framework through which we will understand the concept of Natural Position. The Concept of Natural Position has been defined as “a key element in the effectiveness and legitimacy of the diplomatic involvement of a state towards a certain geo-political region. The concept of Natural Position encompasses the shared heritage and/or values between a regional actor and a certain region and acknowledges this commonality as an important source of legitimacy for involvement.” (Ibish & Ferhad, 2023).

The concept of Natural Position observes these commonalities mainly in three aspects, Historical, Social/Cultural and Economic commonalities, or in some cases, interdependencies. It is important to understand that these aspects of the concept of Natural Position function in a collective manner as all three aspects need to be intertwined if we want to make a case for a natural position. In each of these contexts, Türkiye has demonstrated a strong involvement and role when it comes to the Balkans, examples of which have been demonstrated in the previous chapters of this paper.

In truth, the natural position of Türkiye in the Balkans, specifically within the Balkan states which have been termed by the European Union as the “Western Balkans”, provides Türkiye, a strong foundation for exerting influence, assuming the role of a regional actor.

4.1. Historical aspect of Türkiye’s natural position

In terms of historical commonality and the historical foundations of Türkiye and the Balkans within the context of the natural position concept, lies the centuries long Ottoman reality. The Devlet-i Aliyye-i Osmaniyye (Ottoman State) was a Turkish empire which had controlled the Balkans region for more than 500 years, realizing a significant integration policy of the local populations within the bureaucracy and military of the state (Comyn-Platt, 1904). The astounding duration of the Ottoman government of this region and the millet system which encouraged religious plurality and diversity within the empire (Yilmaz & Erdem, 2020), has had long-lasting effects and can easily be utilized as a springboard for a historical justification and legitimacy for Türkiye’s soft power involvement in the Balkans which considers itself as the successor state of the Ottomans (Ortaylı & Küçükkaya, 2017).

Although the centuries-long control of a Turkish empire might be considered as a negative connotation for relations between Türkiye and the Balkans, the long-lasting peace and prosperity in the Balkans during the Ottomans, known as “Pax Ottomanica” (Hayden & Matar, 2012) needs to be emphasized and taken into consideration.

4.2. Social aspect of Türkiye’s natural position

When it comes to the social aspect of Türkiye’s natural position in the Balkans, there are many important influences which need to be examined and understood. One of the those is the human ties which have been established between Türkiye and the Balkans, especially through the reciprocal immigration between the two sides, and thus the ethnic landscape which we can detect. The Balkans are home to a considerable minority of Turks which heavily influence the behavior and approach of the Turkish state towards this region, on the other hand, the considerable number of ethnic groups from the Balkans which have emigrated and reside in Türkiye also opens the door to deeper social connections.

Additionally, one cannot ignore the religious commonality, as a considerable number of people native to the Balkans are of the Islamic faith which Türkiye has utilized as a ground for having an active soft power diplomacy.

Türkiye has engaged in cultural soft power through many of its institutions in the Balkans, from Yunus Emre to TİKA to the Office of Religious Affairs, Türkiye has realized renovations of old mosques and cultural monuments, constructed during the Ottoman times, has constructed new eye-catching cultural structures and has engaged in impactful events, activities and publications geared towards strengthening its cultural impact in the Balkans.

These engagements of cultural soft power of Türkiye have been based on the already existing social commonalities between Türkiye and the Balkans, without which the impact and effectiveness would not be as visible. As the latest statistics show in both North Macedonia (International Republican Institute, 2022) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (International Republican Institute, 2024), Türkiye is perceived as reliable ally with which the majority of citizens would support even closer relations, this not only is the case for these countries but surely resonates throughout the Balkans, especially in the region coined by the EU as the “Western Balkans”.

4.3. Economic aspect of Türkiye’s natural position

When it comes to the economic engagements of Türkiye in the Balkans, the number of investments in numerous sectors of Balkan economies has dramatically increased in the last decades. Türkiye has not been shy in utilizing its successful companies and businessmen such as the TÜSİAD (Turkish Industrialists and Businessmen Association) and MÜSİAD (Independent Industrialists and Businessmen Association) along with chambers of commerce in the Western Balkans and the Turkish Exporters Union (TİM) in order to effectively execute its economic influence in the Balkans. Türkiye has realized free-trade agreements most of the Balkans states and has increased its investments through its businesses dramatically in the past 15+ years (Szpala, 2022).

Türkiye has become one of the leading trade partners in both Albania and Kosovo with a collective worth of over 1 billion dollars in exports, with investments in both countries going over 1 billion dollars as well (Szpala, 2022). Türkiye has systematically increased its visibility and economic impact in the Balkans which provides Türkiye with a strong case for regional leadership based on economic interdependence, among others. The potential for future investments and economic developments looks bright as the potential of Türkiye to become a regional energy hub for the Balkans (Bozkus-Yilmaz, 2019), especially during times in which an energy crisis is always looming, can once again provide an impetus for further cementing Türkiye’s natural position and thus role as a regional actor.

The Balkans needs the involvement of Turkish investors and capital in the Balkans as much as Türkiye needs the Balkans as fertile ground for investment. Balkans states have and can continue to greatly benefit from the economic growth, rise in employment and the infrastructural development caused by Turkish investments, meanwhile Türkiye can use this opportunity to expand its economic capabilities but also to enlarge its scope and influence in the Balkans. In truth, there is an interdependency which is visible in this regard, which further cements the necessity of a more active Turkish involvement in the Balkans.

4.4. The intricate role of Türkiye and its natural position in the Balkans

To state that the Balkans is a complex region in and of itself would be an understatement. Home to various ethnic and religious backgrounds, burdened by historical disputes as well as contemporary challenges and clashes, the Balkans can be seen as a very volatile region. In a region such as this, Türkiye has a very important albeit complex role to play, balancing between various sides and interests of the Balkans states, in order to properly establish itself as a regional actor. From the dragged out dispute between Bulgaria and North Macedonia (Ozkan, 2023), to the ethnic tensions between Albanians and Serbians in Kosovo and Serbia (Ibish, 2023), to the complicated situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina between the entities of Republika Srpska and the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kurtic, 2024), one must tread lightly in order to establish a delicate balance between all these sides. Observing these turbulent developments, establishing a flexible and mediation-based involvement is crucial and Türkiye has the perfect opportunity to play exactly this role. The ability of Türkiye to effectively assume this role is primarily possible through the utilization of all components of its natural position, which other regional actors such as the EU cannot employ. The historical, social and economic interdependencies established between Türkiye and Balkan countries provides the perfect opportunity for being a mediator and peacemaker in the region, effectively taking over the position of a regional leader.

Türkiye can use this to its advantage, primarily by taking a more active role in geopolitical developments in the Balkans as well as the domestic politics of Balkan states. Türkiye should not take its current position for granted, rather, the cordial relations and commonalities should be materialized and capitalized by establishing think tanks, research centers and having clear stances on political matters, providing a compass for Balkans countries. If Türkiye does not move beyond the formality of cordial relations and engage in more concrete outcomes from its relations with the Balkan states, neither side would find any substantial progress in its mutual cooperation and relations. In other words, Türkiye must realize its potential and step up to the plate as a vocal and profound leader in the region.

The need for such leadership is felt significantly in the Balkans, Türkiye can assume the role of a mediator between Serbia and Kosovo, on the other hand, it can become a stabilizing factor against the internal disputes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, at the same time, Türkiye can utilize its common challenges with Albania, especially in disputes with Greece (Ibish & Ferhad, 2024), to strengthen relations and gain mutual benefit while also cementing its position as a regional leader.

5. Conclusion

States have always moved towards having their own sphere of influence or region in which they may engage in regional leadership or as a regional actor, based on certain legitimizing factors. For Türkiye, especially in the Balkans, the legitimacy behind its involvement is profound, especially when perceived through the lens of the concept of Natural Position. Türkiye has led an effective strategy of soft power and diplomacy, utilizing its strong-suits, which we analyze through the concept of natural position, and has cemented itself as a regional actor which can assume a leadership role in the much-divided and tension-ridden region of the Balkans. The Balkans would welcome the active involvement of Türkiye in its geo-politics, as the public perception in most Balkans states welcomes Turkish involvement in the backdrop of increasing disappointment towards the EU.

To effectively assume its role as a regional actor and even further, a regional leader, Türkiye must realize and capitalize on its natural position, and the strengths which it implies, in doing this, Türkiye will greatly increase the capacity as well as the effectiveness of its soft-power and its public diplomacy in general, in the Balkans.

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