Transforming Cultural Geographies: Reflections on Transnational Media Flows
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Soft power or illusion of hegemony: the case of the Turkish soap opera ‘colonialism’

The theoretical argument of the paper is based on an assessment of the utility of the concept of “soft power” in comparison to the Gramscian concept of hegemony in understanding the developments in the recent regional power games in the Middle East and the Balkans. Turkey’s aspirations of becoming a regional “great power” have always been vindicated by the growing Turkish cultural influence over the Middle East, Balkans and Caucuses. One prominent sign of this influence has been the success of Turkish soap operas in the Arabic and Greek TV channels.

We firstly identify the dimensions of the regional popularity of Turkish soap operas referring to research conducted in Turkey, the Middle East and Greece. The analysis assesses the appeal of these cultural products to a cross-cultural audience, relating this fact to the emergence of both supranational and subnational regional spheres with cultural proximities. We then demonstrate that the Turkish influence over the said region is not merely cultural but also economic. The “soft power” argument is consequently based on the rise in economic interactions (increase in volume of exports) along with the tangible increase in the demand for Turkish TV soap operas.

In this context, we look at the political expectations of the Turkish political administration from this expansion in the region. Minister of Foreign Affairs, Davutoğlu’s thesis of “strategic depth” is taken as the main indicator of these aspirations, along with the recent critical arguments against this thesis, including “neo-Ottomanist irredentism” and “shift of axis”. These contesting views unite to indicate that the Turkish “soft power” is expected to lead a certain level of diplomatic and strategic “hard power” over these regions, which constitute the former Ottoman hinterland.

We then assess the possibilities of the achievement of this outcome, by pointing out potential shortcomings. We firstly argue that the experience of the two-decade-long cultural “invasion” of Mexican and Brazilian telenevolas in Turkey and Greece in the 1980s and 1990s was not followed by any diplomatic or strategic consequences. This temporality could well be the fate of the current Turkish cultural “invasion”. Secondly, by addressing the geographical closeness as the major difference in the Turkish case, we assess the power of the potential challengers to Turkey’s aspired regional leadership, including the European Union, Russia, Iran and potentially Egypt. Thirdly, we point out a major limitation of Turkey’s cultural expansion particularly in the West, that she is a Muslim country ruled by a “moderate Islamist” government.

This feature may support the argument for Turkey’s leadership over the Middle East, but there exist further cultural and political obstacles. In late 19th Century, Sultan Abdulhamid’s
II similar (neo) Ottomanist campaign to restore the relations between the State and its Muslim subjects did not prevent Arab nationalism to challenge the Ottoman integrity with claims of self-determination and independence. The point here is twofold: firstly, the Arab majority of the Middle East is very unlikely to want to return to any “soft” or “hard” Turkish rule over their counties. Secondly, in order to supersede the national differences, the Turkish administration may have to emphasise the Islamist leadership argument, as Abdulhamid II did, which could well result in a disastrous “shift of axis” venture in all domestic, regional and global scales.

The above analysis leads to a paradox: Turkey has not so far been able to achieve a tangible diplomatic/strategic influence over the Middle Eastern and Balkan/European affairs, in spite of its growth in economic relations and the rise in the sales of Turkish cultural products in these regions. In other words, the “soft power” has not so far been successfully converted into any concrete forms of “hard power” as such. Such conversion necessitates serious “hard” strategic decisions that concern above all Turkish national identity, between the West and East, between the Balkans and the Middle East, between modernity and tradition, and between secularism and Islamism.

The paradox seems to arise at this precise moment of choice: the increasing regional cultural, economic and, to a certain degree, political influence of Turkey could be interpreted as a consequence of its ambiguous identity; in Derrida’s words her “undecidability”. Turkey is both of those above listed binary oppositions and is neither of them at the same time; and this is probably the main reason how its cultural products, particularly the soap operas, become popular for both Western and Middle Eastern audiences. They appeal to the nostalgia for the lost tradition, the externalised Orient and the demoded religious values in the Western audience, while representing the dream of unachievable modernity, westernisation and secularisation to the Arabic middle classes.