

Soft Power or Illusion of Hegemony: The Case of the Turkish Soap Opera “Colonialism”

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The article develops two simultaneous arguments; one is theoretical, and the other is analytic. The theoretical argument 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 geographical area consisting of Eastern Europe and the near and Middle East. The analytic argument examines the popularity of Turkish soap operas, both among a cross-cultural audience and within the wider context of cultural, economic, and political influences, and in so doing, it points out challenges and limits for Turkey’s regional power.

Introduction

This article notes the recent boom in the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East, the Balkans, and some (predominantly “Turkic”) former Soviet Republics in Asia, and examines the discourse of Turkish “soft power” that has developed upon this cultural development.

The research focuses here on the analysis of two case studies—of the Middle East and Greece—where the Turkish series are very popular. Both cases are able to contribute different perspectives and explanations of this “cultural penetration” across both sides of a geographical area containing Eastern Europe and the near and Middle East, evaluating Turkey’s “influence” accordingly.¹

¹ In this regard, the limits of the analysis of the present study are set. Although a general framework of the perception of the Turkish series is provided along both case studies (popularity; aspirations and identifications), further research is needed in order to provide a detailed account of the impact of Turkish series on the related societies. Hopefully, the theoretical argument developed here along the discussion on the concepts of “soft power” and “hegemony” will sketch the framework for reflections on popular discourses, as well.

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The article then highlights the discourse of "soft power" in Turkey that accompanies the popularity of the Turkish TV series, focusing along the lines of the political expectations of the Turkish political administration in the said area. The thesis of "strategic depth" by the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, is taken as the main indicator of these aspirations, along with the recent critical arguments against it, namely "neo-Ottomanist irredentism" and the "shift of axis." These contesting views unite to indicate that the Turkish "soft power" is expected to lead to a certain level of diplomatic and strategic "hard power" over these regions, which constitute the former Ottoman hinterland (Davutoglu 2001, 2008).

Probing into the roots of the popular rhetoric of Turkey's regional dominance, the article considers the theory of "soft power," juxtaposing it, in principle, with the Gramscian concept of hegemony.

From this prism, 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. It takes into account a number of aspects of such proximities, including historical ties, religion and traditions, aspirations and identifications, and the various formations of cross-national spaces of identity.

The study also points out that deployment of Turkey's influence in the region is not merely cultural, but also includes economic, as well as political, parameters. Taking into account this interplay, the study assesses the possibilities of the achievement of a certain level of strategic power for Turkey over these regions, addressing a number of shortcomings and potential obstacles, respectively.

Finally, it is emphasized that the rhetoric of Turkish "soft power" does not provide a sound argument for its portrayal of the contemporary "soap opera colonialism" as a major cultural/ideological apparatus of Turkey's prospective regional hegemony. The article concludes by demonstrating the paradox of the nexus of "soft" and "hard" power for Turkey, emphasizing that, like the popularity of Turkish TV series, Turkey's prestige lies in its ambivalent identity, which rests on a fragile equilibrium.

Popularity of Turkish Soap Operas

Following the privatization of TV channels in the 1990s, Turkish TV series proliferated to reflect the popular culture in Turkey, in ways that were quite creative, achieving momentous success with Turkish audiences in a short time (Aksoy & Robins, 1997). With this decade-long success at hand, Turkish TV producers began to look for cross-border markets—a business venture that proved to be very wise: "Between 2005 and 2011 a total of 35,675 hours of Turkish TV programs were sold to 76 countries around the world" (Aydın, 2012). Among the TV program exports, there have been 65 soap operas, which have generated an income of US\$60 million (Deniz, 2010, p. 52). The most popular destinations of the TV exports have been the Middle East, the Balkans, and Turkic language-speaking countries in Asia.

The article reflects on the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East and Greece, addressing thus the cultural expansion of Turkey in both ends of the region. Ideally, the Balkans would be more representative of the western end. However, two important factors limit this perspective. First, the

different spoken languages in the Balkans (in contrast to the Middle East) make the research on the field an impossible task for the present study. Second, while there is consistent research on the reception of Turkey in the Middle East (TESEV reports), no relevant research has been conducted for the Balkans.²

Therefore, the article selects Greece as a case study. First, this is because there is sufficient and consistent interest in Turkey—“[w]ith the exception of Greece and partially Bulgaria, the Balkan countries have never been interested in Turkey before; they have just started to study Turkey” (Türbedar, 2012). Second, Greece provides the most challenging case study in the Balkans, taking into account the geographical, historical, and cultural proximities with Turkey.

In this regard, since no study has been conducted on the popularity of Turkish soap operas in Greece, the article runs original research that involves the program schedules, statistical data (TV ratings), and their analysis,³ all in order to sketch the relevant field.⁴ On the other hand, the popularity of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East has been adequately analyzed by research reports (TESEV) and studies, a body of work on which the article draws.

Middle East

Since their first purchase by the MBC TV channel in 2008, Turkish TV series have constantly expanded throughout the Middle East, from Iraq and Iran in the east to Morocco in the west. Most of the Turkish series are broadcast to the Arab world by Emirates- and Saudi-based satellite channels⁵ at prime time. Imported serial melodramas are usually dubbed into colloquial Syrian Arabic, “the most romantic” Arabic dialect, while the names of the characters are also adapted into Arabic names. Production companies also cut intimate scenes which they find “inappropriate” for the Arabic audience. According to the TESEV reports (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2011; Akgün, Gündoğar, Levack, & Perçinoğlu, 2010), the number of people in this region who watch Turkish soap operas is a substantial 78% in 2010 and 74% in 2011; Syria and Iraq have the highest number of relevant viewers. Most of the viewers (60%) are women (*Turkish Weekly*, 2011).

² Few exceptions, like the public surveys by Gallup Balkan Monitor (<http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/index.php>), do not cover the whole region, and they reflect only on the question regarding the extent to which Turkey is perceived as a “friendly, neutral, or hostile country/entity.”

³ Data kindly provided by the Nielsen Audience Measurement Greece and the departments of “Audience Research” of the TV stations Antenna and Mega Channel, which have broadcast 10 out of the 14 Turkish soap operas in Greece to date.

⁴ It is necessary here to identify the limits of this approach. The discourse of ratings is “technical” and “dry,” according to the needs of television industry (Ang, 1996), and it cannot provide the full picture of who and what people actually do at their homes when they are watching television. Still, taking into account the absence of any research on the popularity of Turkish soap operas in Greece, these statistical data and their qualitative parameters are used here indicatively to sketch the relevant field.

⁵ MBC and Abu Dhabi are the most prominent ones among them.

There are times when the Arabic romance with Turkish soaps reaches its extremes: The final episode of the series *Silver* (*Noor* in Arabic) was viewed by 85 million people throughout the Arabic geography.⁶ Turkish soap stars have become pop idols around the Arab world, leading to a wave of Arab visitors booking special tours to the mansion by the Bosphorus where *Noor* has been shot.

The most popular Turkish melodramas being broadcast in the Middle East are *Silver* (*Noor*), *Ihlamlar Altında*, *Aşk-ı Memnu*, *Yaprak Dökümü*, *Asmalı Konak*, *Binbir Gece* and *Muhteşem Yüzyıl*. Storylines vary from romance to mafioso action, and from modernity-tradition conflict to the problems of couples and extended families.

Greece

The first Turkish series, *Yabancı Damat* (*Synora Agapis*), was broadcast in 2005 by the private TV station Mega Channel during the prime time zone of weekdays in summer. Due to this success, it was rescheduled for the next TV season.⁷ The second one, *Binbir Gece* (*Χίλιες και μία νύχτες*), was broadcast in 2010, also during the summer, by another private TV station, Antenna.⁸ Since then, Turkish soap operas have been regularly scheduled on Greek TV. For the 2010–2011 season, Antenna continued broadcasting *Binbir Gece* while launching another one, *Dudaktan Kalbe* (*Kismet*) in the off-peak zone, which was later replaced by *Gümüş* (*Ασημένια Φεγγάρι*); moreover, Antenna scheduled a new series, *Ezel*, in prime time at the end of that season.⁹ Another private station, Alpha TV, introduced Turkish soap operas in its programming at that time, too—*Acı Hayat* (*Το αγιάζι του έρωτα*) and *Menekşe ile Halil* (*Μενεξέ*). More Turkish series have been broadcast during the last TV season, 2011–2012. Antenna launched *Aşk-ı Memnu* (*Πειρασμός*), after *Ezel* ended, and it currently broadcasts *Asi*.¹⁰ Furthermore, Mega Channel launched its

⁶ In parallel to the growth in audience, the prices also go up. Abeer Khair, general manager and owner of Sama Art Productions, a Syrian TV-production company, was quoted as saying: "Several years back, I bought a one-hour Turkish drama for \$600 or \$700. Today, there are those who are willing to pay \$40,000 for one hour dramas" (*Hurriyet Daily News*, 2012).

⁷ During the summer the programming environment is not competitive, nevertheless, the ratings of the program were extremely high—47.8% share (the percentage of total TV viewers who watched the program on the average minute of a given period over the total viewers of the average minute of the same period). Moreover, when rescheduled on the beginning of the next TV season (every Monday, September to June) at 9:00 p.m.—one of the most important slots of the week) it reached a share of 23.1%, a percentage that is equal to the one reached by several Greek series in that slot.

⁸ Once more, it was scheduled on prime time, weekdays (June–September 2010, Monday to Friday at 9:00 p.m.), reaching a share of 29.6%.

⁹ 17 new episodes of 'Binbir Gece' were broadcast every Tuesday (October 2010–February 2011) at 21:00—a very competitive slot—reaching a share of 20.8%. 'Dudaktan Kalbe' (September–December 2010) was scheduled on weekdays at 17:00 (35.1% share), followed by 'Gumus' (December 2010–May 2011) (32.1% share); and, 'Ezel' on weekdays too (July–September) at 21:00 (32.9% share).

¹⁰ *Aşk-ı Memnu* was initially broadcast on prime weekdays (September–October 2011) at 9:00 p.m. (22.1% share), and then during an off-peak time (October 2011–January 2012) at 6:00 p.m. (28.2% share). *Asi* has run since June on weekdays, at 10:00 p.m. (moved from 9:00 p.m.).

first soap opera since *Yabancı Damat*, starting with *Aşk ve Ceza* (*Έρωτας και τιμωρία*), and then followed by *Unutulmaz* (*Μοιραίος έρωτας*) and *Sıla*.¹¹ In addition, Alpha TV launched two more series this TV season: *Yer Gök Aşk* (*Πρώτα την αγάπη*) and *Lale Devri* (*Λαλέ, έρωτας στην Κωνσταντινούπολη*).

Concluding, out of 10 (nine during the last season) Greek national TV channels, three channels (two of them leading the ratings for the last two decades) have broadcast Turkish soap operas. Even though the first one, broadcast in 2005, was very successful, it was only five years later, in 2010 (when the economic crisis in Greece started) that more Turkish soap operas entered the Greek TV market (out of 14 total, 13 have been launched within the last two years). Although the first should be considered a comedy (with some dramatic elements), the ones that have followed are pure dramas. Finally, when observing their programming across the three TV channels, we notice that, after a short period (usually during the off-peak summer season) of placing them in prime time, the channels moved the Turkish series to off-peak time slots (mainly in the evening).

Still, these parameters tell us very few things about either the perception of Turkey by the Greeks or the extent to which "Turkish series have destroyed many taboos in Greece regarding Turkey and Turks," as reported in *Hürriyet* (Kırbaki, 2011).

"Strategic Depth," the "Turkish Model," and the Soap Operas

The unprecedented popularity of Turkish soap operas in a region consisting primarily of the Ottoman geography has usually been interpreted as a manifestation of Turkey's expanding influence in this region, in line with a project of neo-Ottomanist restoration (Fisher Onar, 2009). Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu baptized this approach as "strategic depth" in his 2001 book, arguing that, since Turkey is located at the center of important "geocultural basins" (the Middle East, Balkans and Central Asia), it should act to take advantage of all opportunities existing in these areas.¹²

Guided by this perspective, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government adopted a foreign policy line of "zero problems with neighbors" and improved relations with both Muslim and non-Muslim governments in the former Ottoman geography.¹³ Since 2005,¹⁴ relations (particularly with the

¹¹ *Aşk ve Ceza* was initially scheduled in prime time on weekdays (September–November 2011) at 10:00 p.m. (25% share), then moved to an off-peak window (November 2011–February 2012) at 6:00 p.m. (33.3% share), followed then by *Unutulmaz* (March–August 2012). *Sıla* has run since June on prime weekdays at 9:00 p.m.

¹² Mumcu (2011) lists three core components of the strategic depth doctrine as follows: zero problems with neighbors, utilization of cultural and geographic "depth" to form alliances, and the restoration of the Ottoman civilization.

¹³ Non-Muslim governments include, in particular, Russia, Armenia, and Greece. Among the Muslim countries, the relations with Iran and Syria have deteriorated again in parallel with the Turkish government's involvement in the civil war in Syria on the opposition's side.

¹⁴ According to Giannotta (2012), AKP foreign policies can be periodized in two phases: between 2002 and 2005, when the government concentrated on democratization and integration with the EU, and the phase

Muslim Middle East) have improved in parallel to Turkey's increasingly active role in regional disputes as a peace broker and defender of Muslim interests.¹⁵ Besides, this new turn toward the region and the Muslim world is claimed to have been achieved without sacrificing Turkey's Western orientation.¹⁶

The aggregate of these factors has been observed to lead to the formation of a Turkish zone of political, economic, and cultural influence—that is, to a zone of “soft power”—in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and the Middle East. This observation and the accompanying events have led to two conclusions. First, a vast number of analysts and reporters assert that Turkey has become a regional power with considerable global weight. Second, it is also asserted that Turkey presents an achievable model of democracy for the Middle East. It is, “an alternative model of governance for Muslim societies” (Çandar, 2009, p. 10), a political system incorporating a “moderate” secularism and a moderate Islamism—that is to say, it upholds both the norms of Western liberal democracy and the traditional values of Islamic conservatism. The talk of a “Turkish model” has intensified since the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” in 2010.¹⁷

The synchronicity of the increase in Turkey's economic and diplomatic/political activities on a territory consisting of former Ottoman domains; increasing talk of Turkish moderate Muslim democracy being a model for the Middle Eastern societies; and the rising consumption of the Turkish cultural products, primarily the soap operas, in the same regions needs an analytic explanation beyond mere coincidence. The most popular explanation is that Turkey's political, economic, and cultural expansion signifies a process of the construction of Turkish “soft power.” The next section of this article is devoted to an examination of this assertion, along with its theoretical tenets.

Soft Power vs. Hegemony

Since the end of the Cold War, the academic discipline of international relations has been searching hard to develop a theory of geopolitics appropriate for the analysis of the structures and dynamics of the “new world order.” Following a short-lived popularity of Francis Fukuyama's (1992) “the end of history” thesis, based on a Hegelian narration of the transition from a bi-polar world dominated by super-power conflicts to a global pax-Americana, Samuel Huntington's “clash of civilizations” thesis (1993,

since 2005, when it has focused on improving relations with the Muslim Middle Eastern governments and societies.

¹⁵ It would not take long for these policies to lead to hostilities with Israel, thereby exposing Turkey to criticism from Europe and the United States that Turkey had undergone of a “shift of axis” in its orientation from West to Middle East (see Çağaptay, 2009).

¹⁶ “Despite mutual misgivings, Turkey's European Western vocation has not been a variable in its outward reach. It has remained a historical constant. One reason is that Turkey is an heir to the legacy of Eastern Rome” (Çandar, 2009, p. 11).

¹⁷ The discussion on the Turkish model has further intensified since the fall of the Egyptian regime, a trend which has continued with Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict. A selection of recent analyses and opinion pieces include Kenyon (2012); *The Economist* (2011); LeVine (2011); Ülgen, Techau, Yannis & Yenel (2012); Christie-Miller (2011); and Gümüşçü (2012).

1996) picked up. Huntington's argument, although based on a mysterious essentialism of the notion of "civilization" that mostly inspired the neoconservative war against "Islamic fundamentalism" in the post-9/11 world, heralded the emergence of a multipolar global recomposition of regional powers.

Joseph Nye's geopolitical theory has the advantage of leaving out Huntington's essentialism while reflecting adequately on the tendency toward the pluralization of global powers (Nye, 1990, 1993). On these grounds, Nye elaborated the concept of "soft power," which has the advantage of taking into account not only the geopolitical power games, but also the economic, political, and cultural dynamics of globalization, along with the consequences of the information revolution (Nye, 2002). Nye argues that the contemporary world is witnessing the transformation of the very nature of power, and the subsequent emergence of a new form of power, that is, "soft power," regarding its sources and distribution. Soft power, as opposed to the conventional perception of (hard) power of military and economic resources, is based on setting the agenda and attracting others, through the deployment of cultural and ideological means of provoking acquiescence.

The major theoretical problem in Nye's thesis is the movement between soft and hard poles of power. Nye points out that "hard and soft power are related and reinforce each other" (Nye, 2002, p. 5), but his theorizing does not probe into this interaction. Put clearly, Nye's geopolitical theory does not relate sufficiently the practices of soft power with concrete aims. Where the notion of soft power falls short, the conceptual framework of the theory of hegemony may be able to carry us one step further in a comprehensive analysis of regional/global, cultural/political hegemony.

In the theory of hegemony, as formulated by Antonio Gramsci, hegemony is above all the totality of what Nye calls soft power and hard power. Gramsci's analytic break-down consists of cohesion (active consent) and coercion (force). As Nye emphasizes the importance of the achievement of "co-optive power, (that is), the ability to shape what others want," in the global information age (Nye, 2002, p. 9), Gramsci stressed the importance of the cohesive component of hegemony, which consisted primarily of a cultural battle to transform popular mentality (Gramsci, 1971, p. 348).

There are, however, important differences between the theory of soft power and theory of hegemony.¹⁸ First, while Nye's geo-strategy privileges "co-optive power" over what he calls "command power,"¹⁹ Gramsci's theory does not underestimate any of the intertwined levels of power—economic,

¹⁸ This may be due to the fact that Nye's concept is based on "the second phase of power," as it is known in the literature of political theory, which emphasizes agenda setting (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962). In pointing out this theoretical connection, Gallarotti (2010, pp. 34–35) dismisses Lukes' (1974) third dimension of power, which has been influenced by Gramsci's theory of hegemony, for holding a notion of "real interests." This may be a legitimate criticism of Lukes' theory, but it does not explain why and in what sense the concept of soft power may be superior to the Gramscian notion of hegemony. Therefore, a theoretical engagement with the theory of hegemony does not exist anywhere in the elaboration of the notion of soft power.

¹⁹ Nye uses the term "command power" as synonymous to the notion of "hard power" or the conventional realist concept of power. A nation's resources of command power could be measured through quantitative

cultural/ideological, and political. Second, Gramscian discourse articulates the cohesive, that is, cultural and ideological, aspects of power struggle into a coherent strategy of achieving hegemony, where Nye's theory lacks clarity. Finally, the Gramscian notion of "war of position" (as opposed to "war of maneuver") rigorously defines the field and the time scale of the hegemonic power struggle: As opposed to a short-term or one-off confrontation, hegemony requires a perpetual struggle to transform "common sense," fought mainly at the level of "civil society."

From the perspective of the theory of hegemony, the strengths and weaknesses of, and potential challenges to, a supposed Turkish "soft power" project can be clarified. If Turkish "soft power" practices aim for the construction of a territory of political influence in a region located geographically beyond the east, south, and west of its borders, then an analytic inquiry is required to measure the relevance of Turkish soap operas as an ideological apparatus of this Turkish neo-imperial vision.

Such an inquiry would confront the popular emotional formula that "Turkish soap operas sell, therefore Turkey is a regional 'soft power,'" which no doubt originates from nationalist bias—that is, from a tangible confusion of objective analysis with subjective opinion, intention, and aspiration.²⁰ The argument in this section implies that this confusion may also be due to the ambiguity of Nye's geo-strategic thesis regarding the dynamics and apparatuses of soft power, and the mechanisms of interaction between force/persuasion and influence/prestige—that is, between coercive and co-optive types of power.

In the next section, we argue that the popularity of Turkish soap operas in Greece and the Middle East rests on a series of cultural proximities, including historical ties, common traditions, and shared cross-cultural aspirations and identifications.

Cultural Proximities

In our assessment of the role of cultural proximities in the popularity of Turkish TV series, mainly in Greek- and Arabic-speaking societies, we need to focus on those levels of proximity other than language, which are "based in cultural elements per se: dress, ethnic types, gestures, body language, definitions of humor, ideas about story pacing, music traditions, religious elements, etc." (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005, p. 4). We can also add this spectrum of cultural proximity: "clothing styles; living patterns; climate influences and other relationships with the environment" (Trepte, 2003, p. 7). Here, we categorize these layers under three headings: historical ties, religion and tradition, and aspirations and identifications. Moreover, as pointed out by La Pastina and Straubhaar (2005, p. 5), the logic of cultural proximity works not only at the national and supranational level, but also at the subnational and regional spheres. As such, we will focus on the formation of cross-national spaces of cultural identity. In addition, Istanbul, not merely as a significant space of cross-national identities, but, more significantly, as an

metrics, such as population size, concrete military assets, or a nation's domestic product. In international relations, this conventional form of power is practiced through military and diplomatic activities. Soft power, or co-optive power, on the other hand, requires further resources and practices, including culture, reputation, ideology, and language (Nye, 1990, pp. 29, 32–33).

²⁰ For an academic example of this confusion, see Deniz (2010, p. 63).

emergent global city with significant potential of cultural influence, particularly in the Balkans and the Middle East, is also considered as a dimension of the cultural proximities argument.

Historical Ties

Middle East

Historically, for four centuries, the Middle East was part of the Ottoman lands, when Arab and Turkish cultures were not thought of as being separate. This historical intertwinement ended dramatically in early 20th century, leading to a century-long reign of discourses of mutual segregation, that is, "Ottoman Imperialism" on the one side, and "Arab Betrayal" on the other (Kalin, 2009, p. 86). Since the 1920s, one of the constitutive denials of the official Turkish republican ideology has been the cultural proximities between Turkey and the Middle East, as part of its Westernization program of Turkish society.

Commentators agree that, since AKP's ascent to power in 2002, a tangible shift has been observed in the Turkish government's approach toward the governments and societies of the Middle East (see Çandar, 2009; Grigoriadis, 2010; Hakura, 2011; Küçükcan, 2010; Lindenstraus, 2012), which has evidently unleashed Turkish society's repressed desire to rediscover their particular cultural proximities with the Arab world. Turkish culture industries swiftly moved to convert these proximities into cash in the regional entertainment market. The success of this business venture, along with the tangible improvement in the image of Turkey in the Middle East (see TESEV reports: Akgün, Perçinoğlu, & Gündoğar, 2009; Akgün et al., 2010; Akgün & Gündoğar, 2011), indicate that the rediscovery of cultural proximities was not merely unilateral.

The hostile perceptions have been gradually changing on both sides since the turn of the 20th century, and the expansion of Turkish TV programs in the Muslim Arab world is suitable to be seen as both a cause and a consequence of this bilateral rapprochement.

Greece

Over the past two centuries, Turkey and Greece, situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, have been involved in strong clashes along mutual movements of expansionism or national consolidation. From the fall of the Ottoman Empire to the emergence of Greek and Turkish nationalist projects during the 18th and 19th centuries and the war in 1919–1922, to the current Aegean conflicts and Cyprus crises, Greece and Turkey are, as the intriguing title of Özkırımlı and Sofos' 2008 book indicates, being "tormented by history": "Both countries have been historically posited as the "Other" in their respective nationalist imaginaries, each being seen, from the outset, as being the antipodes of the survival of the other" (ibid., p. 2).

A few attempts of rapprochement between the two countries have occurred in the last three decades, though none have lasted long. A significant reconciliation process was conducted in 1988 from Prime Ministers Andreas Papandreu and Turgut Özal, known as the Davos process. In 1999, earthquakes hit both countries (Istanbul in August, and Athens in September), generating sympathy among Greeks

and Turks, generous mutual assistance, and the signing of bilateral agreements for the improvement of the relations, the so-called "earthquake diplomacy" (Ntokos, 2010, p. 6). Finally, Greece's position on Turkey's membership application to enter the European Union changed in 2005; Greece started supporting Turkey's candidacy for the European Union, foreseeing improved relations between the two countries.

Despite their turbulent relationship and the reciprocal nationalist rhetoric that celebrates the "differences" of the two countries,²¹ there is a great deal of historical and geographical relevance for their people. For hundreds of years, they lived together in the same lands, and later on (1922–1924), they had to exchange populations. Inevitably, they share the physical environment, places, and memories.

The first Turkish soap opera broadcast in Greece, *Yabancı Damat*,²² deals with the love affair between an Orthodox Greek man and a Muslim Turkish woman, and the difficulties and prejudices they face in their attempt to get married. The setting of the series, Gaziantep, a small city near the Syrian border, "might mean that (Greeks) are seeing an urban Istanbul's image of a remembered Turkey, filtered through the fantasy of an authentic 'Eastern' homeland" (Papailias, 2005, p. 2).

Religion and Traditions

Middle East

Turkey is a Muslim society, and regardless of their genres or storylines, the dramas communicated through Turkish soap operas occur against the background of a Muslim society. Professor Orhan Tekelioğlu of Bahçeşehir University points out the conservative nature of modernity that is presented in the Turkish series with a strong tendency for the "protection of family," which, he argues, has its roots in the Turkish modernization process.²³ Most of the dramas take as their main theme conflict between generations and various clashes between the norms of modernity and tradition, all of which are usually eventually consolidated within a conservative normative framework.

The representation of Turkey as a society with an achievable degree of modernism also appeals to the social imaginary of the Arabic world. As Iwabuchi (2002) points out, the hegemonic role of the United States as the cultural avatar of modernity is in decline as other countries—such as Japan for East Asia—begin to represent a more familiar regional form of modernity. Similarly, Turkey may be gradually replacing, for the Middle East, the status of the United States as the cultural avatar of modernity, thanks to its more proximate and achievable form of modernity.

Greece

Greece and Turkey differ in terms of religion and language. Still, though, their peoples have a long history of cultural interaction: "[B]oth Greeks and Turks must have received cultural influences from both East and West" (Sifianou & Bayraktaroğlu, 2012, p. 293). Actually, they have many things in

²¹ For a comparative analysis, see Millas, 2004.

²² The title in Turkish means "foreign groom," while in Greek, it is "borders of love."

²³ Tekelioğlu, interviewed by Buğdaycı, 2011.

common: customs and traditions such as food culture, music and dances, markets/bazaars, textile goods; and similar ways of living, including expressions and gestures, close family bonds, common words (especially in cuisine and navigation), and even surnames.

Until very recently, Greek consumption of Turkish TV consisted exclusively of Turkish news reports about the conflicts in the Aegean and Cyprus, filtered by the Greek mass media, which reproduce national discourse and stereotypes and promote oppositional schemes (Kostarella, 2007). The broadcasting of Turkish series signified the first time that the Greek audience was exposed massively to the Turkish entertainment industry. In Turkish series, the living of a modern, prosperous, and exciting life is not incompatible with having "traditional" beliefs and relationships. The issues of the hierarchical structure of the family, the honor of the woman, and the strong friendships between men, as well as family vendettas, all prominently covered by the Turkish soap operas, were pertinent in Greek society a few decades ago.

In addition, Turkish series depict several cultural elements that hold a strong interest for the Greek audience. The originality of various products is often at stake.²⁴ The Greek audience cannot help but to also be touched by familiar situations, expressions, and habits:

They enjoyed listening to the Turkish language and picking out Turkish words used in Greek and vice-versa. . . . People commented on certain intimate gestures that "we" also do (or remembered that we also once did). . . . They found perfectly familiar the scenes of the extended family living under the same roof. . . . Was this us "as we used to be"? The part we lost when left? What we expect them to be? What we still "really" are? (Papilias, 2005, p. 2)

Aspirations and Identifications

So far, we have pointed out the cultural proximities at the macro level, i.e., between "nations." However, as David Morley and Kevin Robbins (1995) argue, in the contemporary world dominated by globalized media, collective cultural identities are no longer delimited by national borders. Globalization, in this sense, divides the existing nations and reunites these divided elements with similar communities of other nations to form sometimes even larger communities than the existing national unities. This way, the transnational proximities are capable of forming alternative "imagined communities" which subvert national boundaries.

Here, it should be recalled that Turkish soap operas have been supplied to the Eastern European, Asian, and Middle Eastern audiences after their success in domestic ratings. It is therefore only natural to expect the existence of similar audience groups made up of viewers on both sides of the Turkish borders

²⁴ Baklava sweet, kahv(f)e, kebab, raki, and tavla/i are a few of them. "Baklava is a genuinely Turkish sweet. They pretend they are superior in doner kebab and coffee! In a moment, you will tell us that raki is also yours!" (excerpt from *Yabancı Damat*, in Sifianou & Bayraktaroğlu, 2012, p. 303).

having concerns and patterns of identification that resemble each other's more than those of other social groups of their own nation.

In the context of the Middle East, two such cross-national "imagined communities"—youth and women, housewives in particular—deserve analysis, since in both Turkey and the Middle East these two social categories of predominantly middle-class background constitute the core of the soap opera audiences. In the case of Greece, while sharing the category of women with the Middle East, the second "imagined community" is the opposite of the second group in the Middle Eastern case: Instead of the youth, the elderly form a cross-national audience group between Greece and Turkey.

Middle East

A sector of Turkish society, the secular elite, consisting of liberal urban upper-middle-class families that represent the shop-window of modern Turkey and their youth, may be immune to the messages of soap operas, but the majority of the Turkish youth do not have much in common with this elite, while they do share a proximate cultural habitus with the Middle Eastern youth. Turkish society's conservative/religious restoration, particularly during the recent decade, which has been promoted by the ruling AKP policies,²⁵ bears the potential of bringing the Turkish youth culture closer and closer to the young population of the Middle East, in a similar habitat of arranged marriages and extended families living together.²⁶ The protagonists of the series *Noor*, for example, help both Turkish and Arabic youths to maintain the hope for real love and admiration. In this way, young Arabic masses and the majority of Turkish youth constitute a cross-national space of "imagined community," or, as Manuel Castells coined it, a "cultural commune of the information age," which is subsequently subnational and transnational (Castells, 1997, p. 65). In this space, the youths of each side identify with the difficulties represented by the dramas and share aspirations regarding the protagonists' wealth, glamour, and love.

A similar identification/aspiration couplet applies to the "imagined community" of Turkish and Middle Eastern housewives. Turkish and Middle Eastern housewives do not only find the melodrama of arranged marriages and the suppressed female identity in Muslim societies to identify with, but they also aspire to the active role that the women characters take in social life, not to mention finding what they are missing in the typology of the young, handsome, faithful, and understanding husband on the TV screen.²⁷ The shared patterns of aspiration and identification therefore bring together the women of various Muslim countries to form an "imagined community" consisting mainly of housewives.

²⁵ Prime Minister Erdoğan has been vocal about his vision of the "ideal family with three children" and bringing up "pious generations."

²⁶ A recent research report on ascending conservatism (Yılmaz, 2012) has sparked heated debate in media and academic circles, along with the renowned sociologist Şerif Mardin's observation (Cingöz, 2008) on increasing "neighborhood pressure" and the notion of "concerned moderns" (Toprak, 2010).

²⁷ *Noor's* director, Kemal Uzun, says that the secret of his show is in the depiction of the kind of family that both the average Arab and Turkish housewife longs for (Butler, 2009).

Greece

In the Greek case, two “imagined communities” are identified as elderly people and women in general. Turkish soap operas are very popular among the old generation in Greece.²⁸ This is not surprising if one takes into account that the culture of the Greek elderly has many things in common with the respective Turkish demographic. Aspects of historical and cultural proximity mentioned above apply especially to a generation that grew up listening to stories about the life of their parents and relatives, who were born on the other side of the Aegean Sea. They can identify with the extended families living together under the same roof in houses decorated like theirs, eating similar foods, gathering in the cafés, strolling in the bazaars. At the same time, they satisfy their curiosity about the psyche of their “distant” neighbors by observing their lives and listening in on their conversations, witnessing their strengths, weaknesses, and passions while pointing out what’s “the same” and what’s “different.” Moreover, the very performances of the actors make them more attractive to the older audience. Several journalistic reflections that “comment on the popularity of Turkish series among Greek viewers likened the innocence of the acting to the old Greek cinema (of the 1960s and 70s)” (Papailias, 2005, p. 2).

Turkish soap operas are also popular among women of all age groups.²⁹ Shared patterns of aspirations and identifications related to the middle-class lifestyle (active and independent role of women in social life), the romance, and the intrigues (emotional dilemmas) all apply here. Turkish series and their actors are often admired by groups of Greek women; they meet on Facebook pages created particularly for Turkish series³⁰ and their idols. They exchange information, photos, episodic synopses, news on the series, information on the actors’ personal lives, etc.³¹—and they continue to do so even months after the shows have ended on Greek TV. They even research information on series that have not yet been broadcast in Greece that feature their favorite actors.³² Moreover, there is one more parameter that makes Turkish series popular in Greece. In contrast to most Latin and Greek soap operas, the Turkish ones (especially the ones broadcast in prime time) have high production value, dynamic narration, professional casting, and good music.

²⁸ The analysis of the ratings shows that the penetration of the Turkish series (every single one) in the group of people of over 55 years old is extremely high.

²⁹ Age groups: 15–24, 25–44, 45–54 (for Antenna); and 15–34, 35–54 (for Mega Channel).

³⁰ See the following Facebook pages:

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Turkish-tv-series-and-movies-Greek-fan-page/187772171237494>

(generally for Turkish series);

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/%CE%A7%CE%B9%CE%BB%CE%B9%CE%B5%CF%82-%CE%9A%CE%B1%CE%B9-%CE%9C%CE%B9%CE%B1-%CE%9D%CF%8D%CF%87%CF%84%CE%B5%CF%82-Binbir-Gece/107034399343624>;

<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Kismet-Dudaktan-Kalbe/106450266084577>;

<https://www.facebook.com/AskiMemnuOriginalPage>.

³¹<https://www.facebook.com/pages/K%C4%B1vanc-Tatl%C4%B1tu%C4%9F-Greek-FAN-CLUB/146793782041557> (Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ of *Aşk i Memnu* and *Menekşe ve Halil*);

<https://www.facebook.com/BurakHakkiOfficialGreekFanClub> (Burak Hakki of *Dudaktan Kalbe*).

³² <https://www.facebook.com/SUSKUNLAR.MURAT.YILDIRIM.GREEKFANCLUB>

Istanbul: Regional and Global

In addition to cultural proximities, a significant aspect peculiar to our age of globalization deserves reflection: the relationship between the (re)-emergence of Istanbul as a global city with regional significance and the sales of the products of Turkish culture industries.

In the changing patterns of commercial and cultural exchange, many major cities that function as centers of cultural production tend to gain a degree of autonomy vis-à-vis the modern national context and become "transnationalized" as global cities (Sassen, 2001). According to Keyder (1999), Istanbul is one of these cities which seeks integration with transnational commercial and cultural networks while preserving its local-specific features. Most of the culture industries of Turkey have naturally developed in Istanbul, and therefore, the export of soap operas needs to be viewed also as a cross-national interaction between Istanbul and various societies and cities located outside Turkey.

This contemporary condition could be rooted in historical ties, given that, between the 15th and 20th centuries, Istanbul was the most important cultural capital of the Middle East, more important than the others, such as Damascus, Baghdad, Beirut, or Cairo. The 20th-century Westernization of Turkey led to the severing of the cultural ties between Istanbul and the Middle East, while integrating the city within a national context with Western cultural and commercial networks.

In the early 21st century, a new opportunity to restore the historical ties with the "Orient" seems to have emerged in parallel to the political developments in Turkey. Moreover, the soap operas in question are exclusively produced in Istanbul at a time when the outputs of the conventional centers of cinema and TV production, Damascus and Cairo, have dropped (mainly due to political turmoil). In these circumstances, TV production has developed as the central industry in the cultural economy of Istanbul and made it possible for the city to reclaim her leading position in the region.

Limits of Proximity: Shortcomings and Obstacles

While Turkish political and economic influence coincides with the improving exports of Turkish TV series, the rhetoric of the "Turkish model" and "soft power" do not convincingly demonstrate the link between these phenomena, given that cultural popularity and power of any type (be it soft or hard) do not automatically follow one another.

Telenovelas and Turkish "Soap Power"

Discussing the connection, or the lack of it, between cultural popularity and power, the popularity around the world of Latin American (mostly Brazilian) telenovelas in recent decades can be studied as an example. Brazilian telenovelas have been extremely popular in both Turkey and Greece since the 1990s,³³

³³ In Greece, Latin telenovelas were broadcast between 1999 and 2005 (16 series per year, most of them dramas) by 3 private stations and 2 public ones. In Turkey, two Brazilian and two Mexican telenovelas were broadcast during the 1980s and 1990s.

as in many countries around the world. In the global identification with the telenovelas, the geographical and cultural-linguistic distances were superseded by cross-national spheres of cultural proximity, or the global attraction of melodrama as a genre—shared perceptions of middle-class life as a universal “melodrama” that attracts the general audience.

However, this cultural success did not result in any diplomatic or strategic consequences for Greece or Turkey. Despite their two decade-long cultural “invasion,” Brazilian or Mexican observers never claimed their political power over any of the telenovela-consuming countries. Even the analyses of the popularity of Brazilian telenovelas in the neighboring territories of Spanish-speaking Latin America limit their emphasis with cultural proximities.³⁴

Translation from Cultural to Political

A major obstacle of Turkey’s cultural expansion, particularly in Greece and other Christian countries where Turkish TV programs are popular, is its profile as a Muslim country ruled by a “moderate Islamist” government. In the Balkans, where 88% of the people are Christian, the negative image of Turkey, due to Turkey’s increasing interest in the Arab world and the potential formation of Islamic alliances, attracts more public attention than the positive one.³⁵

In Greece, there is escalating criticism of Turkish soap operas’ “invasion” of the Greek broadcasting “territory.” Long-standing stereotypes and phobias about Turkey fill the pages of populist media and websites in regard to the threat of a “neo-Ottoman imperialism,” and the “contaminating effects” of the Turkish culture to the purity of the “Hellenic” one. In addition, the leader of the far-right party Golden Dawn, which recently entered the Parliament, called on his constituencies to boycott Turkish series in order to resist to Turkey’s “cultural invasion.”

Although the religious barrier does not exist between Turkey and the Middle East, there are still further cultural and political obstacles. Research conducted on public opinion in the Middle East shows that the Arab public, in their overwhelming majority, expect Turkey to play an active role in the solution of the Palestinian question, while a smaller percentage expect it to intervene in intra-Arab affairs (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2011). According to the same report, around 60% of the Middle Eastern public sees Turkey as a model for Arab democracy. Since 2009, when Turkey’s anti-Israeli stance became clear on the Palestinian conflict, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdoğan has been voted repeatedly as the most popular leader of the Muslim world.

However, public opinion on Turkey’s popularity varies dramatically around the region. Polls indicate high popularity (almost 80%) in Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia in the post-revolutionary climate. However, in Iraq and Syria, which Turkey physically borders, the positive perception falls dramatically under 40%. The reasons for negative perception are listed as Turkey’s imperial past, close relations with the West, not being ethnically Arab, and not being Muslim enough.

³⁴ See, for example, La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005.

³⁵ See here the analysis by Erhan Türbedar (2012).

Moreover, Turkish TV series, as much as being a pole attraction, also provoke a great deal of conservative criticism around the Middle East. While presenting an alternative portrayal of women to the conventional Middle Eastern housewife, their storylines usually include divorce, extramarital affairs, and premarital sex (unfaithfulness, unwanted pregnancies, etc.). Strong fatwas against the most popular of Turkish soaps, *Noor*, have been issued by top Muslim clerics charging it with immorality and corruption (Butler, 2009). Turkish programs are held responsible for increasing divorce, weakening of faith among the youth, and even mass murder (Al-Hiajem, 2012). Since 2010, the Arab Spring has also been blamed on the liberal inspirations of Turkish soaps.

These reservations remind us that, in spite of existing cultural proximities, Turkey is not an "authentic" Middle Eastern country as such. The differences begin with the language and continue with many behavioral and normative codes, as well as differences in political/ideological viewpoints.

Politically, the persuasion of the non-Muslim Western domains to a project of neo-Ottoman restoration could, at its best, be a nationalist Turkish dream, given that, for most of these people, most of what are referred to as "historical ties" consist of national traumas and tragedies of their collective memory. It is almost equally questionable whether the former Muslim subjects of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East are prepared to become the subaltern nations of their historical "big brother." Moreover, there exist (and always will) challengers in the Middle East to a potential Turkish venture of regional leadership—culturally (Damascus, Beirut, and Cairo), economically (Iran, Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia), and politically (all).

Finally, while all the talk is about Turkey's influence over the Middle East, there is also a risk of assimilation in reverse. The Turkish soap opera boom coincides with the simultaneous liberalization and de-secularization of domestic political structures under AKP leadership, changes which have significant cultural/ideological consequences. While the country's political system is democratized through the dissolution of the conventional military tutelage, society seems to be falling increasingly under the hegemony of a pious middle-class conservatism. The outcome of this process may equally be the "Middle Easternization" of Turkish society—that is, Turkey's assimilation by a Middle Eastern style conservative Islamist hegemony, as opposed to the structural adjustment of Middle Eastern societies according to a "Turkish model."³⁶

³⁶ The title of Tarık Oğuzlu's article (2008) is indicative of these concerns: "Middle Easternization of Turkey's Foreign Policy" (see also Robins, 2006). Although both the government and Turkish analysts, such as Cengiz Çandar, insist that Turkey, while opening toward Middle Eastern political issues, is safely anchored in Europe, critical observers have increasingly raised the possibility of a "shift of axis"—that is, a reorientation in the Middle East and Islam at the expense of the conventional Western stance of the republic.

The Economy of Cultural "Colonialism"

Turkey's cross-border influence is not merely cultural, but also economic.³⁷ According to *The Economist*, between 2002 and 2009, the value of Turkey's exports to the Middle East and North Africa has swollen sevenfold to US\$31 billion.³⁸ Turkish direct investments in the Balkan countries are also in a positive trend.³⁹ Commercial and economic ties between Turkey and Greece, though relatively limited, have remained steadfast despite the economic crisis in Greece: "Turkey's exports to Greece in the first half of 2011 have increased by 19%, compared to the same period last year. Imports from Greece have also seen an increasing trend" (*SETimes*, 2011).

The causality between the development of Turkish culture industries and the sales of TV programs abroad also needs consideration.⁴⁰ Since 1980s, Turkish society has been through a development of popular culture industries, in parallel to the reign of a "pop culture" and the transformation of the Turkish nation into a consumer society.⁴¹ It was only after the domestic boom of TV business and the overdevelopment of related culture industries that Turkish soap operas began to expand to the cross-border regional markets.

Another economic aspect is economic crisis, which has played an important role in Greece in the introduction of Turkish soap operas to TV schedules. The domestic production of series has decreased significantly, taking also into account that Greece, as a small nation, has a limited market, and as such, it does not have enough resources to produce many national programs.⁴² Accordingly, when audiences, particularly in the middle and popular classes, cannot find the preferred national material in certain genres, they tend to prefer productions that are relatively more culturally proximate (Straubhaar, 1991, pp. 55, 57).

³⁷ In fact, the answer to the questions in TESEV research (Akgün & Gündoğar, 2011) "Have you ever consumed a Turkish product?" and "Have you ever watched a Turkish TV series?" had exactly the same percentage (74% Yes).

³⁸ *The Economist* (October 29, 2009) points out that, in addition to exporting industrial products "from cars to tableware," Turkey has been involved in large-scale energy, infrastructure, and construction contracts "from Algiers to Tehran."

³⁹ According to the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Economy, "Turkish investments which is just 30 million dollars in 2002 increased 189 million dollars in 2011." See <http://www.economy.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=countriesandregions®ion=9>

⁴⁰ The pluralization and privatization of TV channels in 1990s brought about the demand for national programs (Çakmur & Kaya, 2011). TV companies encouraged the emergence of entertainment production business within their own studios to provide programs, including, in addition to serial dramas, comedy programs, contests, advertisements, and music videos, for their channels' airtime.

⁴¹ Nurdan Gürbilek (1992), Can Kozanoğlu (1992), and Meltem Ahıska and Zafer Yenil (2006) reflected on the social transformations in parallel to the development of consumer society, communication technologies, and pop culture through the 1980s, 1990s, and early 21st century.

⁴² "Each part of a Greek series costs around 70,000 to 80,000 euros, whereas each part of a Turkish series cost 7,000 to 8,000 euros" (Kırbaki, 2011).

Similarly, many viewers in the Middle East point out the superiority of the Turkish soaps to their Arabic counterparts, regarding better animation, use of higher technology, better picture quality, and more sophisticated storylines.⁴³ Contemporary Arab culture industries, being inspired by the Turkish products' "more daring storylines" and technological advances, may improve the products in near future to reclaim their "authentic" market (El Shenawi, 2011). On the other hand, the political turmoil that has shaken Cairo and Damascus in recent years, coinciding with the Greek economic crisis, has played a similar role in the Middle Eastern cultural markets.

Economic data that accompany Turkish cultural expansion indicate that the current expansion, and with it, the idea of Turkish "cultural hegemony" or "soft power" may not be sustained, since it has been contingent upon a series of opportunities arising from regional conjuncture.

Conclusion

The article has considered the recent success of Turkish TV series in the Middle East and Greece, along with the discourses that reflected on this cultural expansion, such as "strategic depth" and "soft power." Instead of macro-political arguments, the article has pointed out a series of cultural proximities that this expansion has conjured throughout the region. In the assessment of the possibility of the conversion of this cultural capital into political hegemony, a series of weaknesses, shortcomings, and challenges has been identified.

The main argument that has been pursued through the article is that the rhetoric of Turkish "soft power" does not provide a sound argument for its portrayal of the contemporary "soap opera colonialism" as a major cultural/ideological apparatus of Turkey's prospective regional hegemony. The pinning of exaggerated aspirations onto soft power does not automatically lead to any proper hegemonic ends, though it certainly is capable of generating an illusion of hegemony. The concluding discussion that follows on the paradox of soft/hard power could be illustrative of this observation.

Turkey's image and prestige have undoubtedly improved in Balkans and the Middle East since AKP's accession to power. However, it would be premature to derive from this observation that this improvement is leading to diplomatic/strategic influence over the Middle Eastern and Balkan/European affairs. In other words, the "soft power" has not, so far, been successfully converted into any concrete forms of "hard power," as such.⁴⁴

Such conversion necessitates serious "hard" strategic decisions that concern, above all, Turkish national identity, something that is negotiated among competing pulls between the West and the East, between the Balkans and the Middle East, between modernity and tradition, and between secularism and

⁴³ According to Marwa al Kubanji, a Londoner from Iraq, Turkish programs, which contain "emotional dilemmas and conflicts of the heart," run deeper than the didactic and patronizing Arabic soaps (El Shenawi, 2011).

⁴⁴ The analysis here, although it deploys Nye's terminology, is grounded upon its criticism informed by the theory of hegemony.

Islam. 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. At the same time, Turkey is both of those above-listed opposing entities, and it is neither of them.

This is probably the main reason why 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 externalized Orient, and the demoded religious values in the Greek audience, while representing the dream of an achievable degree of modernity, Westernization, and secularization to the Arabic middle classes.⁴⁵ The first thing that a prospective “hard” decision has to sacrifice is this fragile equilibrium—and with it, the existing cultural attraction toward Turkey in both ends of the region.

⁴⁵ Turkish soap operas are also attractive, according to al Kubanji, because they “show Western norms clashing with the traditional backgrounds of the Muslim characters” (El Shenawi, 2011).

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