

Türkiye's Soft Power: Re-Imagined on its Centennial

By Çağatay Özdemir

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Reviewed by Firdan Fadlan Sidik, Social Sciences University of Ankara

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The book *Türkiye's Soft Power: Re-Imagined on its Centennial* offers a rigorous attempt to address the theoretical and conceptual gaps in current analyses of Türkiye's soft power. Authored by Çağatay Özdemir, a member of the advisory board of the National Center for the Sea and Maritime Law at Ankara University, this book delves deeply into contemporary scholarship to elucidate the multifaceted and evolving dynamics of soft power within Turkish diplomacy. Central to the book is the argument that historical legacies have served as catalysts for cultural diplomacy, a theme that aligns with both the book's title and Türkiye's Century of Türkiye vision. This thematic orientation also informs the overall structure of the volume.

Structured into 11 chapters across seven parts, the first part begins with a theoretical and conceptual framework of soft power, critically analysing how theoretical insights are translated into practice while situating them within historical commentary. As the book's author notes, quoting Nye, "soft power relies on credibility, and credibility disappears when people feel they're being manipulated" (p. 11). Sustainable attraction requires the long-term projection of values in a manner that is authentic and consistent, in contrast to the short-term gains associated with coercive military or economic power, which can eas-



ily erode if perceived as manipulative. In comparison, soft power enhances the efficiency of a country's public diplomacy, enabling the indirect cultivation of economic and political relationships.

Culture, as a source of soft power, must remain credible, authentic,

and grounded in genuine values rather than functioning merely as an instrument of national branding or ideological dominance. A telling example of the misapplication or unsuccessful use of cultural production discussed in the book is the U.S.' reliance on Hollywood films as a vehicle of soft power in the post-9/11 era. Yet, as the book's author observes, quoting Joffe, these films did not necessarily generate affection for the U.S. but instead produced a particular image, which could backfire if deemed artificial or overly polished. This reflects the broader critique that culture, when instrumentalized as a tool of imperialism within an industrialized system, risks undermining its credibility.

Having established a solid theoretical framework in the previous part, the second part of the book turns to the Ottoman past, illustrating how early Ottoman practices inform the foundations of Turkish soft power. Within the Ottoman context, religion assumed a pivotal role in the conduct of state diplomacy. The discussion commences with the Ottoman

concept of *eman* (mercy), which extended to non-Muslim populations from the West, thereby enabling foreign non-Muslims to enjoy a degree of protection comparable to that afforded to non-Muslim subjects within the Ottoman Empire. More broadly, the Ottomans employed *istimalet*, a policy of conciliation, or what is often termed the Pax Ottomana, grounded in tolerance toward newly incorporated populations. Complementing this was the *timar* system, whereby land grants were allocated to military leaders, integrating them into the Ottoman administrative framework. These policies exemplify the Ottomans' simultaneous reliance on hard and soft power, with *istimalet* operating as a mediating principle between the two. All sections of this chapter provide insight into how the Ottoman Empire addressed foreign challenges through the strategic use of soft power and public diplomacy.

With the foundation of the republic, Türkiye employed public diplomacy and soft power to distance itself from the Ottoman theocratic legacy and to project the image of a secular, democratic state governed by the rule of law. The adoption of secularism by state officials further enhanced Türkiye's soft power appeal, particularly in the Western world. Yet Türkiye, quoted Kalın, "is perceived as a Middle Eastern, backward desert country, while in the East, it is seen as a Western imitator lacking identity and roots." (p. 100). Considering the fact that Türkiye is perceived in diverse and contrasting ways across various global publics, the author argues that its soft power "strategies should convey different messages regionally in its soft power efforts." (p. 100). In other words, Türkiye must be adapted to the specific sociocultural and geopolitical contexts of each region. The mid-20th century marked a new political era with the establishment of the Democratic Party (DP) on January 7, 1946, which, within four years, defeated

the Republican People's Party (CHP) and became the sole ruling party. The DP's foreign policy toward Syria and Iraq reflected continuity with Ottoman traditions.

From the 1990s until 2002, however, structural and infrastructural deficiencies, coupled with political instability and preoccupation with securing a place in the international order, undermined Türkiye's soft power presence. A decisive shift occurred with the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, whose vision of global governance emphasised inclusivity, transparency, and accountability, and was encapsulated in his guiding principles: "the world is bigger than five" and "a fairer world is possible" (p. 230). Erdoğan promoted a more equitable international order, advocating for equal status and peaceful coexistence among all nations through engagement with global institutions, including the United Nations, G20, NATO, and the European Union.

To advance this vision, Türkiye launched several initiatives, including the Asia Anew Initiative and the Türkiye-Africa Partnership Summit, both designed to strengthen development-oriented cooperation with partner countries. Since 2021, the Antalya Diplomacy Forum has continued to provide a high-profile platform for dialogue, convening world leaders and government representatives on a range of diverse global themes. President Erdoğan's approach to public diplomacy is defined by Türkiye's strategic involvement in numerous international crises.

At the domestic level, Erdoğan's public diplomacy strategy has prioritized the institutionalisation and systematic development of diplomatic instruments through the establishment of new bodies and the enhancement of existing ones. The author highlights the strategic communication dimension of

Erdoğan's public diplomacy, noting that: "The Directorate continues to work with its citizen diplomats and strong diaspora – reflections of the unity of the state and nation – in line with the 'Century of Türkiye' vision, to strengthen Türkiye's brand, promote its values more effectively, and win the hearts and minds of the international public by prioritizing information security in the post-truth era." (p. 233). Another notable milestone in this trajectory was the official adoption, in 2022, of the name "Türkiye" in international literature, an initiative framed as better reflecting the nation's cultural identity and values (p. 234).

The evolution of statecraft highlights the increasing importance of soft power and public diplomacy as key instruments in shaping international relations. Influence is no longer restricted to official diplomacy but extends to cultural and societal actors, enabling states to cultivate attraction rather than resorting to coercion. By strategically mobilizing its cultural heritage, humanitarian initiatives, and economic partnerships, Türkiye has projected a favorable international image rooted in its Ottoman past and republican identity.

This book offers a fresh perspective on Türkiye's deployment of soft power as a transformative element in world politics, blending theoretical inquiry with historical and contemporary practice. It highlights the consolidation of public diplomacy under the AK Party and the presidential system, situating these efforts within Erdoğan's "Century of Türkiye" vision. As Türkiye enters its second century, soft power remains central to its diplomatic strategy, positioning it as a dynamic model for fostering global understanding and consolidating its presence on the international stage.

However, the reviewer notes a minor shortcoming in its engagement with Ottoman history – particularly regarding the categorization of "decline and stagnation," a concept that has been revisited by many Ottoman revisionist scholars who reinterpret it as evidence of the empire's enduring resilience and adaptability. Despite this minor historical oversight, the book retains its analytical strength and offers a compelling and innovative perspective on contemporary diplomacy.