

TİKA's Heritage Restoration Projects: Examples of Foreign Aid or Proof of Neo-Ottomanism?

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ABSTRACT *Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey has been using the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) to gain soft power and increase its influence in the Balkans, Caucasia, and Central Asia. As Turkey's focus is on countries that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, many have characterized this attempt as Neo-Ottomanism. Especially problematic is the fact that, over the years, TİKA has funded the restoration of numerous Ottoman monuments in these regions. Using Serbia as an example, this article explores whether such projects are proof of Turkey having a 'Neo-Ottoman agenda' of reviving Ottoman culture and exerting influence over former Ottoman territories, or just a way of Turkey gaining soft power through foreign aid.*

Keywords: Soft Power, Heritage Diplomacy, TİKA, Neo-Ottomanism

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Introduction

Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power in the 1990s as a means to distinguish between two types of power in the modern world: hard power, which relies on the economic and military might of a country, and soft power, which relies on the way others perceive the country. Admittedly, hard power is what people usually associate with ‘power,’ but nevertheless, both soft and hard power accomplish the same goal – getting other countries to do what you want; hard power does this through intimidations and rewards, while soft power does it by shaping the preferences of others so that they start aligning with yours.¹ And while some authors bring the very notion of soft power into question,² policymakers have been paying a lot of attention to this way of thinking about power.

One of the pioneers in the systematic cultivation of soft power is Turkey. It started doing this way back in 1992 with the creation of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, or simply TİKA. TİKA’s goal was to increase Turkey’s influence on the Balkans, Caucasia, and Central Asia by strengthening economic, cultural, and educational ties with countries in these regions. The Agency accomplishes this goal by providing loans and grants for the development of those countries in addition to realizing cooperation projects in numerous fields including education and trade, as well as socio-cultural areas.³ While TİKA funds various cultural projects, one of the more costly ones is the restoration of cultural heritage.

It started doing this in 2008 when the government added heritage restoration to its responsibilities in order to ‘protect the common historical, cultural, and social heritage and values.’⁴ While such projects weren’t initially in the scope of TİKA’s work, they soon became one of its main priorities since, as the Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Ersoy puts it, “the restoration and reconstruction of historical monuments in all territories we were historically present in provides a continuity of our spiritual ties.”⁵

However, Turkey has been getting a lot of criticism lately, precisely because of this desire to establish ‘a continuity of spiritual ties’ with countries to which it has historical ties. Critics point to these actions and state that Turkey has an imperialistic agenda to assert dominance over territories of the former Ottoman Empire and thus label it as ‘Neo-Ottomanism.’ Because of that, this article looks at Turkey’s soft power approach to the Balkans, examining whether or not it is a proof of a Neo-Ottoman agenda. Using Serbia as a case study, it argues that the restoration projects should be interpreted as foreign aid and a way of ‘continuing spiritual ties,’ and not as proof of the infamous imperialistic Neo-Ottoman foreign policy as it is impossible for Turkey to maintain such a policy.

Turkey and Heritage Restoration in the Balkans

The Balkan region is especially important for Turkey's public and cultural diplomacy. The very first Yunus Emre Institute was opened in Sarajevo on October 17, 2009. Commenting on this fact, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu stated in his speech, at the opening ceremony, that this was not a coincidence but rather, a purposeful decision.⁶ Such a decision does not come as a surprise since Turkey has a long history of involvement in this region. It was involved in mediations between countries and it continues to be involved in humanitarian work, especially the building of schools. It has great military cooperation with the region (Davutoğlu even stated that Bosnia and Herzegovina's security matters to him as much as that of his own country), but Turkey also has extensive economic ties with the Balkans—aside from trade, Turkey invested in telecommunications, transport, banking, construction, mining, and the retail sectors.⁷

However, Turkey's soft power approach to the Balkans stems from the fact that this region was a part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries. This means that Balkan countries share a somewhat common culture with Turkey; some more than others, but nonetheless, all of them do. This means that cultural diplomacy is especially important in this region—in the countries which share the common culture to a great extent these actions help strengthen the already great historical ties, and in the countries where hostilities exist they help in overcoming this 'cultural gap' and forming strong ties.

In order to cultivate its soft power in the Balkans through culture and heritage, Turkey funds several projects and initiatives. For instance, the Yunus Emre Institute carries out six large-scale projects and two of them are entirely based on the preservation of Turkish cultural heritage in the Balkans—the 'Revival of the Traditional Turkish Hand Crafts in the Balkans' and the 'Rebuilding the Cultural Heritage in the Balkans' projects.⁸ Yet, Yunus Emre Institute's work pales in comparison to TİKA's projects due to the significant budget the Agency has at its disposal.

TİKA provides tens of millions of Euros annually for restoration projects—it restores mosques, tombs, historical sites, market places, fortresses, etc. Just in the four years from 2016 to 2019, the Agency carried out 73 such projects: 16 projects in 2019,⁹ 18 projects in 2018,¹⁰ 20 projects in 2017,¹¹ and 19 projects in 2016.¹² However, even by 2015, TİKA already funded the restoration of 69

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different sites (28 in the Balkans and 41 in Africa).¹³ Of course, everything changed in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the whole world; organizations that provide aid, such as TİKA, shifted their focus to the healthcare sector and so it remains to be seen how many restoration projects the Agency will carry out in the upcoming years. Yet, there is no doubt that TİKA is one of the most important organizations which provide aid for heritage restoration in the world, and by far the most important one in the Balkans. For instance, one of its more fruitful years was 2014 and in it alone, the Agency funded:

- In Bosnia and Herzegovina: renovation of the State Archives, renovation of the Birth House of Alija İzetbegović, and the founding of a museum within the complex of Živinice Cebari Mosque.
- In Albania: renovation of Rrogozhinë Mosque, renovation of Vlorë Neshad Pasha Mosque, restoration of Gjirokastër Inner Old City, and several mosques from the Ottoman Era.
- In Montenegro: renovation of the Mekke-i Mükerrerme Mosque as well as the construction of the Selimiye Mosque and the Islamic Culture Centre.
- In Kosovo: renovation of Kosovo Mehmet Akif Ersoy Mosque, restoration of Lokac Mosque Fountain, and the equipping of the Ottoman Sinan Pasha Mosque.
- In Macedonia: landscaping of Ali Rıza Efendi Memorial House, restoration of Radanje Mahmut Aga Mosque as well as restoration and landscaping of Mustafa Kebir Çelebi Mosque.¹⁴

Evidently, TİKA funds major restoration projects in the Balkans but it's clear that it is quite selective –the majority of these projects deal either with the Ottoman heritage and/or Islam, which was itself brought to the region by the Ottomans. This is a strategic move on Turkey's side; by doing so, Turkey is financing the restoration of cultural heritage in other countries thus cultivating its soft power, but it is also restoring its own heritage since the majority of these monuments are Ottoman. Turkey is preserving its own culture while spending millions helping other countries, a 'win-win scenario'. Yet, by doing so the country opens itself to criticism which has been especially problematic in the recent decades–Neo-Ottomanism.

Neo-Ottomanism

The term 'Neo-Ottomanism' was first introduced in the 20th century and, over the years, several authors tried to define it. Some authors analyze it as



Ten students participating in TİKA's Experience Sharing Program participated in the cleaning works of the Ottoman tombs in Novi Pazar, Serbia in August 2018.

TİKA / AA

an ideology that is opposed to Kemalism, especially its secularism; they note that the re-Islamization of Turkey is a major component of Neo-Ottomanism. By doing so, they are able to trace the roots of Neo-Ottomanism as far back as the 1950s and the introduction of a multi-party system, since this system allows pro-Islamic parties to come to power in predominantly Muslim countries. These authors note that this also occurred in Turkey when the Democratic Party led by Adnan Menderes came to power in 1950. During Menderes' term in office, religion started to be studied in elementary schools and high schools again, new mosques were built, Islam was preached over the radio, schools for imams and preachers were opened, etc.¹⁵ However, Neo-Ottomanism these days gets a lot more attention as a foreign policy rather than an ideology.

While many definitions of it as a foreign policy exist, all of them are centered on the notion that Turkey is turning its foreign policy towards exerting power over its traditional Ottoman sphere of influence and so imply that the new foreign policy involves the revival of imperial ambitions.¹⁶ Some authors add onto this the revitalizing of Ottoman culture in Turkey following the rise of the Justice and Development Party (aka AK Party), which came to power in 2002 and, more notably, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's own fondness of the Ottoman Empire,¹⁷ but Neo-Ottomanism remains first and foremost a foreign policy since it, allegedly, predates this rise. Yet, while a lot has been written on

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imperialistic inclination. A foreign policy which came to be known as strategic depth and which was laid out in Davutoğlu's book *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position (Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu)*.¹⁸ Among them, there are even those who go a step further by pointing out that such an imperialistic policy cannot exist. İnan Rüma states that the very accusation of Neo-Ottomanism is groundless as neither the people of former Ottoman territories nor Turkish citizens want such intervention on the side of Turkey. Even if there was interest, he notes, such a policy could not be enforced in the modern world, as it is very different from the world in which the Ottoman Empire existed.¹⁹

On the other hand, there are those who state that it is to be expected that government officials and those who support them would denounce Neo-Ottomanism, but that this does not mean that it doesn't exist. A notable critic is Darko Tanasković, former Ambassador of Yugoslavia to Turkey and prominent oriental scholar. In his book on the subject, he is quite critical of Neo-Ottomanism stating that, "it is an anchor of identity, a pivot of ambitions and a nursery of illusions"²⁰ but concludes that, "Neo-Ottomanism isn't, on its own, good or bad. From the aspect of historical logic and 'utilitarian ethics,' it could even be said that it is legitimate."²¹

Tanasković claims that Davutoğlu and others who deny Neo-Ottomanism are aware that it exists but they just don't call it out as it is. To prove it, he quotes Davutoğlu who stated in Sarajevo during a conference devoted to "The Ottoman Legacy and the Balkan Muslim Communities Today":

During the Ottoman state, the Balkan region became a crucial center in world politics, beginning with the 16th century. This was a golden age for the Balkans. [...] Therefore, the Ottoman history is a history of Balkan region; it is a history on the central character of Balkan region in world politics. [...] These were the Ottoman Balkans, and hopefully, we will reestablish the spirit of these Balkans. Critical writers call our approach 'Neo-Ottomanism', therefore I do not want to refer to the Ottoman state as a foreign policy issue. What I am underlying is the Ottoman legacy; the Ottoman centuries in the Balkans were peace and success stories. Now we have to reinvent the underlying dynamics.²²

the subject, the debate of whether or not Turkey's foreign policy can be described as 'Neo-Ottoman' is an ongoing one.

On the one hand, those who oppose such characterization, like Davutoğlu, point out that Turkey is supporting and working with these countries because of geographic factors and historical ties, not an

Tanasković points to this noting that it is Neo-Ottomanism in all but name, but what critics such as him fail to take into account is the fact that there are evident double standards when talking about Turkey. For example, Turkey is criticized for maintaining good relations with countries with which it shares historical ties, yet no one criticizes the United Kingdom for its central role in the Commonwealth or for choosing to maintain good relations with those countries with which it has historical ties. No one criticizes former colonial powers when they provide aid to their former territories, yet the same action is heavily criticized when it comes to Turkey. Take for instance the UK –no one would state that the country has an imperialistic agenda when it provides aid to its former territories like Pakistan. To make it even more clear, not only is the UK praised for helping other countries, but when it was announced towards the end of 2020 that the country would reduce its foreign aid budget, international media outlets published articles in which they criticized this reduction stating that the country has an obligation to help others which are less fortunate.²³ However, Turkey cannot do the exact same thing in the Near East, North Africa, or the Balkans, i.e. help out less fortunate countries with which it has ties, without being condemned.

The same double standard is also noticeable when looking at the cultivation of soft power. Turkey promotes its culture and language in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire through the work of the Yunus Emre Institute, but so too does France in the territories of the former French colonial empire through the work of the *Institut Français* (the French institute). However, when Turkey promotes its culture in Bosnia or Serbia, this action is characterized as an imperialistic attempt to restore the Ottoman Empire, yet when France does it in Algeria or Morocco there is no talk about an imperialistic attempt to restore the French colonial empire. While the double standards regarding the cultivation of soft power are evident, there is still the problem of heritage restoration. After all, it is one thing for a country to help regions with which it has historical ties to due to ruling over them, but it becomes harder to disprove an imperialistic agenda if the country is 'helping' these regions by restoring its own heritage in them.

Heritage Restoration and International Relations

Although it is a rather new field of study, heritage diplomacy has been around for decades. Tim Winter defines it as a “set of processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become ‘subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance’”²⁴ and notes that its most important aspect is providing aid to other countries, as this brings the two countries closer together.²⁵ Many countries decide to partake in this aspect of diplomacy and so Turkey's restoration projects abroad are not the only



A general view of Ethem Bey Mosque under restoration made possible by TİKA, in Tirana, Albania on February 4, 2021. OLSI SHEHU / AA

examples of such practice. However, these restoration works differ from others as Turkey is restoring its own heritage abroad.

It seems hard to disprove a ‘Neo-Ottoman agenda’ when millions of Euros are being spent annually on the restoration of mosques and Ottoman monuments.

While some critics state that such an approach to soft power is clearly proof of Neo-Ottomanism, Turkish officials tend to disagree. Writing on Turkey's soft power İbrahim Kalın, an Islamic studies scholar and Chief Advisor to the President of Turkey, stated that it isn't built on an imperialistic 'Neo-Ottoman agenda.' Instead, he states, one should look at Ottoman heritage as a joint effort of the many nationalities, which were part of the Ottoman Empire and built it together. Because of that, Ottoman heritage should be seen as a unifying force that brings together these groups through their shared experiences with Turkey representing a 'pivotal point of this heritage.'²⁶ Just like those who oppose the idea of Neo-Ottomanism as the foundation of Turkey's foreign policy, Kalın pointed out that Turkey is simply leveraging the fact that it is the 'pivotal point' of Ottoman heritage.

Ottoman heritage should be seen as a unifying force that brings together these groups through their shared experiences with Turkey representing a 'pivotal point of this heritage.'

In their view, Turkey is only using its Ottoman past to its advantage, but critics are not convinced. Tanasković, for one, agrees that Turkey is leveraging Ottoman heritage in the Balkans, but adds that it does this by systematically conserving and restoring heritage in order to create a common Balkan culture based on Ottoman culture.²⁷ This would make it a clear-cut example of Neo-Ottomanism; Tanasković even states that TİKA is itself an instrument of a Neo-Ottoman agenda and notes that "the opening of a branch office of TİKA in a country, something Turkish diplomacy usually insists on, is a reliable sign of its entrance into the operational orbit of a Neo-Ottoman project."²⁸ But is this the case? Are all these restoration projects merely proof of Neo-Ottomanism?

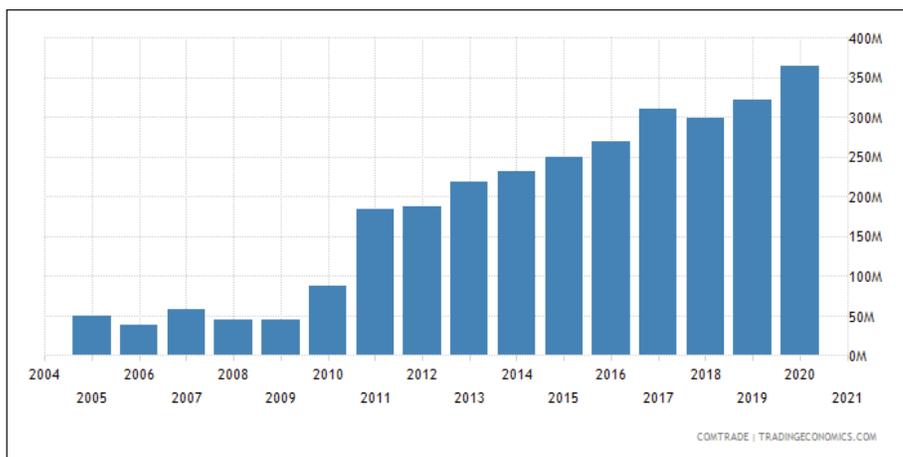
Case in Point: Serbia

Serbia was selected as a case study since it has a rather specific relationship to Ottoman heritage and present-day Turkey. Unlike some other Balkan countries, which are predominantly Muslim and thus are culturally a lot closer to Turkey, like Albania or Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia has always been a predominantly Christian country. Orthodox Christianity and its culture are fundamental aspects of Serbian national identity and so, trying out a soft power approach based on cultural heritage is problematic, to say the least, as Serbian national identity is based on a strong antagonistic relationship with the Ottomans –resisting Ottoman influence both in religion and in culture.²⁹ Another major obstacle for Turkish public diplomacy in Serbia, in general, is the fact that in the public discourse, the Ottoman period is seen as '500 years of Turkish yoke'; a notion which appeared in school textbooks during the 20th

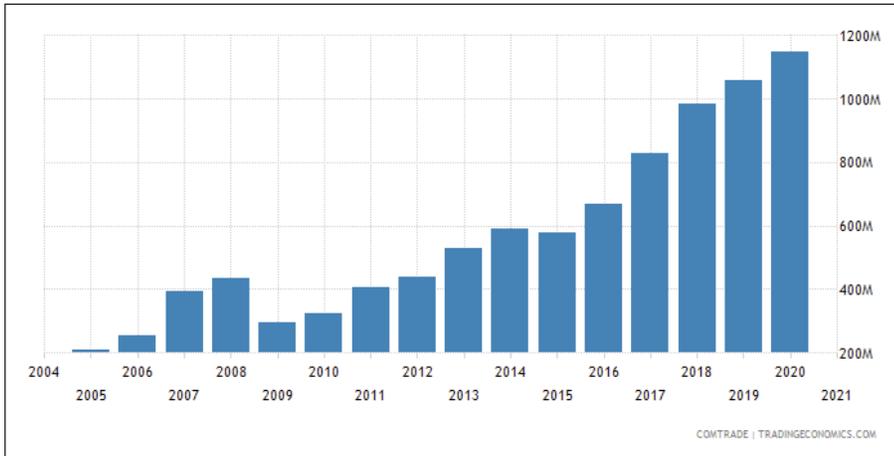
century and indoctrinated generations of children up to the present with the view of ‘them’ [the Turks] enslaving ‘us,’ [Serbs] and setting ‘us’ back hundreds of years.³⁰

However, while there are a few problems in Serbian-Turkish relations, such as the fact that Turkey recognizes Kosovo as an independent state, there are strong diplomatic and economic ties, which have been built in the last two decades. The fall of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 marked a turning point in bilateral relations as it made it possible to move past the problems of the 1990s. The new President, Vojislav Koštunica, met with the Turkish Prime Minister Bülent Ecevit unofficially in Skopje in October 2000, and both of them agreed on wanting to improve bilateral relations. At first, rebuilding good relations was obstructed by the memory of the recent wars in Kosovo and Bosnia, but nevertheless, both Belgrade and Ankara pushed past the troubling past. A series of important official visits took place, such as the two visits to Ankara by the Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović in 2002 and 2003, President Svetozar Marović’s visit in 2004, as well as Foreign Minister Abdullah Gül’s visit to Belgrade in 2005. More importantly, during this time a number of economic agreements were signed –the Agreement on the Prevention of Double Taxation (2003), the Agreement on Mutual Assistance between Customs Administrations (2003), the Agreement on Scientific and Technical Cooperation (2003), the Agreement on Cooperation in Tourism (2004) to name a few. Turkey also started investing in Serbia; an early example is Efes Pilsen buying the Pančevo brewery in 2003 and the Zaječar brewery in 2004 for a total of 18 million Euros.³¹ All these early actions started a great economic cooperation, that culminated with the implementation of a free trade agreement in 2010,³² and which lasts up to the present (Graphs 1 and 2).

Graph 1: Serbian Exports to Turkey (\$, 2005-2020)



Source: Trading Economics³³

Graph 2: Serbian Imports from Turkey (\$, 2005-2020)

Source: *Trading Economics*³⁴

Aside from economic relations, the two countries also share similar foreign policy goals –both countries try to leverage their geographical position and so act as connections between the West and the East; both strive towards regional cooperation and due to their central role in their respective regions even create initiatives to accomplish this cooperation. They are both involved in a lengthy process of becoming members of the European Union, which is obstructed by problems (Turkish-Greek rapprochement, and Serbia's and Kosovo's normalization of their relations), and so both countries also have a love-hate relationship with the EU as not all citizens believe that becoming an EU member state is the right path for their country. Even the political leaders of the two countries often share their frustration with Brussels publicly.³⁵ Naturally, sharing foreign policy goals and having significant cooperation resulted in the establishment of good bilateral relations, and precisely because of these good relations it was possible for Turkey to try and gain soft power through restoration projects.

Even though there were earlier projects, TİKA officially opened its office in Belgrade on October 26, 2009, but it started working out of the Embassy of Turkey in Belgrade in November 2010.³⁶ In its first decade, the Agency provided assistance for various projects in several sectors including education, administrative and civil infrastructure, agricultural and animal husbandry sectors, healthcare, and others.³⁷ Sure enough, just like in other countries, the restoration of cultural monuments became an important aspect of TİKA's work in Serbia.

However, because of the specific relationship with Ottoman heritage, Turkey cannot restore just any monument. The ones it chooses need to be important for Serbian culture without invoking the negative collective memory of the Ottoman period. They also need to be important to the local community and/

There is simply no way for Turkey to impose its will on Serbia in an imperialistic Neo-Ottoman way. Yet Serbia and Turkey both choose to maintain good relations precisely due to geographical factors and historical ties

the Belgrade Fortress; both restored in 2017), the Kalemegdan staircase designed by the first Serbian female architect, Jelisaveta Načić (restored in 2018), the entire Ram Fortress (opened in 2019 after several years of archaeological excavations and restoration work), and the only imperial mosque in Serbia, Sultan Valida Mosque in Sjenica (opened in 2019 after two years of restoration work).³⁸ So how can these projects be interpreted?

One of the ways is that TİKA is trying to foster intercultural interactions by caring for shared Serbian and Turkish heritage. The other way of looking at it is that it is a clear manifestation of Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism – the monuments being restored are Ottoman. In Belgrade, TİKA funded the restoration of the only two türbe left in the city and the fountain built under the patronage of a well-known Serbian-Ottoman statesman. Yes, the Agency also funded the restoration of Načić's staircase, but this is a measly sum of 145,000 Euros as opposed to the millions spent on the restoration of Ottoman monuments. Not to mention that a spokesperson from TİKA stated that the Agency funded this restoration as “our goal isn't to invest and renovate only Ottoman monuments, but to help in the renovation of Serbian cultural heritage as well.”³⁹

This statement is problematic for two reasons: first as it reaffirms the notion that Ottoman monuments aren't a part of Serbian cultural heritage since TİKA's goal was ‘to help in the renovation of Serbian cultural heritage as well.’ More importantly, the statement can be interpreted as a red herring since that project can be used as a distraction, i.e. used for disproving Neo-Ottomanism by pointing to it as an example that not all monuments TİKA restores are Ottoman. Looking at it like this, if anything, the restoration of the staircase can be seen as the exception that confirms the rule.

However, the fact that TİKA is funding the restoration of Ottoman heritage is not inherently bad. It is to be expected since these monuments will bring Turkey and Serbia closer together. And, although heritage restoration is a costly endeavor, it is proving to be a vital point in diplomacy. During his visit to

or provide an income for it. However, while Turkey needs to be more careful, over the years it has funded the restoration of several monuments.

In its first decade of work, TİKA provided over 4 million Euros for the restoration of several monuments: Sheikh Mustafa's Türbe in Belgrade (restored in 2013), Damat Ali-Pasha's Türbe, Sokollu Mehmed Pasha's Fountain (the only two Ottoman monuments left in

Serbia in late 2019, President Erdoğan inaugurated TİKA's projects in Sremska Rača and in his speech stated that:

Our historical and cultural heritage is our commonwealth. Every work in this land is a monument to our solidarity and cooperation. We will build our future together with inspiration, power, and courage from the past. The last example of this is the Ram Fortress, one of the pearls of the Danube River, whose restoration was completed by TİKA. I believe that this wonderful example of our cultural heritage will contribute to the tourism potential of the region and I hope it will be beneficial. [...] Turkey's sole desire is peace and stability in the Balkans. In the last quarter of the century, these lands have experienced grave sufferings and paid serious costs. We should see our differences not as an element of conflict but as our wealth, and build our future together. We should improve our cooperation in all areas. I hope that we will add new ones to these projects, which are our common pride, in the coming period.⁴⁰

So, is Turkey providing aid and using the fact that it is the 'pivotal point' of Ottoman heritage to become closer with Serbia (and other territories of the former Ottoman Empire), or is such heritage restoration proof of Neo-Ottomanism?

Conclusion

The fact is that TİKA's restoration projects are both proofs of Neo-Ottomanism and Turkey using its historical ties to gain soft power through foreign aid. It cannot be denied that by restoring Ottoman heritage in other countries Turkey is revitalizing Ottoman culture; by restoring these monuments to their original state, Turkey is quite literally bringing Ottoman culture back to life, in a sense. So, in a way, they are proof of Neo-Ottomanism not in the usual way critics cite –an imperialistic foreign policy–but in a sense that by revitalizing Ottoman culture in other countries the people of that country come to realize that they share a much closer tie with Turkey. Serbia is quite possibly the best example that proves this.

Serbia is predominantly a Christian country, which turned to a pro-western course in the 21st century by striving towards membership in the European Union. For Serbia, while maintaining good relations with Turkey is an asset to the country, it is by no means a priority; relations with EU member states and other western countries are far more important. Because of that, even if there was some sort of an imperialistic 'Neo-Ottoman agenda,' Turkey would struggle to impose it on Serbia since it is a pro-western country with a national identity based on resisting the influence of Ottomans/Turks (words which are used as synonyms in the Serbian language). Not to mention that Turkey could not assert dominance over Serbia or the Balkans in general even if it wanted to since, as İnan Rüma stated:

In the economic sense, what can be achieved through a Neo-Ottomanist policy can be important for Turkey, but Turkey is still far from being a dominant economic power in the region. Turkey is not a capital-exporting country; on the contrary, it needs to import capital, and thus far it has done so while facing serious nationalist and/or statist opposition within the country. Although it recorded a significant level of economic growth in the recent decade and even became part of the G-20, it can hardly be said that it is a core country in the world economy. Put simply, Turkey is not capable of dominating the Balkans economically in the 'neo-Ottoman' sense. [...] This was evident at the beginning of the 1990s and is even more so now.⁴¹

There is simply no way for Turkey to impose its will on Serbia in an imperialistic Neo-Ottoman way. Yet Serbia and Turkey both choose to maintain good relations precisely due to geographical factors and historical ties. Because of that, the restoration of Ottoman heritage can and should be interpreted as one of the ways Turkey is trying to bring these countries closer together, and not a way it imposes a 'Neo-Ottoman agenda' as such an agenda would be impossible to impose. Moreover, these restoration projects are fulfilling their purpose. Even before they were realized, the people of Serbia already thought that Ottoman heritage should be restored no matter who is funding the process; they did not see this as an attempt on Turkey's side to reassert its dominance or as a threat to their national identity. In fact, they were pleased that Turkey is funding the restoration of this common heritage with only the far-right groups and individuals seeing it as a problem.⁴²

Serbs greeted these projects with excitement, as Serbia could not afford to fund such large-scale restoration projects of well-known Serbian monuments, let alone the mentioned Ottoman monuments. But, thanks to TİKA's projects, they are now in near perfect condition and provide value to the country –at present, the Ram Fortress is a very important tourist attraction and the Sultan Valida Mosque in Sjenica, though not as important to tourism, is still a working mosque important to the local community. Therefore, while these restoration projects do represent, in a sense, the revitalization of Ottoman culture, or rather just the revitalization of Ottoman cultural heritage, they are first and foremost examples of foreign aid –both in Serbia and in other countries where the same principle applies. ■

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