

The Diplomatic Potential of Turkish Soap Operas

Yara Alas, Kayla Harris, and Claudia Perez

Turkish soap operas, also known as dizi, have become an unexpected source of soft power for Türkiye in recent years. These popular television dramas, known for their engaging storylines, intricate plot twists, and attractive casts, have gained a global following, particularly in Latin America, the Middle East, and Central Asia. As a result, Turkish soap operas have emerged as an effective tool for public diplomacy, helping to shape perceptions of Türkiye and its culture among international audiences. Their example further highlights the importance of engagement on digital platforms and need for creative storytelling in 21st century public diplomacy practice.

Turkish soap operas have been hailed as a major success story for Turkish soft power, as they have helped to promote Türkiye's cultural heritage and showcase its modern society. By highlighting Turkish values and traditions, as well as featuring its vibrant culture and lifestyle, Turkish soap operas have helped to present a more positive image of Turkey to international audiences. This has been particularly true in Latin America, where Turkish soap operas like "Muhteşem Yüzyıl" (The Magnificent Century) and "Sıla" have become wildly popular., attracting millions of viewers and winning several awards.

The success of Turkish soap operas in Latin America can be attributed to several factors, including their universal themes, compelling narratives, and high production values. Additionally, the storylines and characters in Turkish soap operas often resonate with Latin American audiences due to their shared cultural values, such as the importance of family, community, and faith. Furthermore, the use of subtitles and dubbing in local languages has helped to make these shows accessible to non-Turkish speaking audiences, thereby increasing their appeal and reach. Just as notable is the immense effect Turkish soap operas have had on the Latin American diaspora within the United States, with popular American Spanish-language

television network Telemundo showing successful and even controversial soap operas like Fatmagül and Cennet'in Gözyaşları.

Türkiye's government has recognized the importance soap operas have in influencing international perceptions and have made efforts to further distribute them across the world. During our visit with Global Agency, an independent Istanbul-based content distributor of TV series, formats, and films for global markets, its Chief Operating Officer, noted that they are working closely with the government to receive additional funding for their operations. While the government has only funded some of their operational expenses, it seems more than willing and able to fund much more via government grants to help further promote Türkiye's soap opera brand abroad.

While Turkish soaps have enjoyed overwhelming support in Latin America in particular, other regions have seen recent challenges. According to Global Agency, one area that recently saw a decline in its consumption of Turkish soap operas is the Middle East. The Director noted that the region was previously the top consumer of Turkish TV dramas, with content dubbed in Arabic. However, after the Gulf Crisis in 2017, the largest Saudi Arabian TV conglomerate removed Turkish soap operas from the air. Since then, Turkish drama consumption in the Arab world has slowly been rising, but it is still behind Latin America and Central/Eastern Europe.

In conclusion, Turkish soap operas have proven to be a powerful tool for public diplomacy, showcasing Türkiye's cultural heritage and promoting a more positive image of the country abroad. Their success in Latin America and other regions underscored the potential for cultural exchange and cooperation through the medium of television. By continuing to produce high quality content and promoting cultural exchange initiatives, Türkiye can leverage the popularity of its soap operas to further enhance its soft power and foster greater understanding and appreciation of its rich cultural heritage among international audiences.

References:

Akca, I. A. (2015). Muhteşem Yüzyıl (The Magnificent Century): A triumph of Turkish soft power? *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy*, 11(4), 306-318.

Bilgili, T. (2018). Soft power of Turkish soap operas: A strategic approach to Turkish cultural diplomacy. *Turkish Studies*, 19(4), 483-500.

Çevik S.B. (2019). 'Turkey in Global Entertainment: From Harem to the Battlefield'. In Paolo Sigismondi (Ed.), *World Entertainment Media: Global, Regional and Local Perspectives*, New York: Routledge, pp. 116-123.

Çevik, S.B (2019). The Empire Strikes Back: The Ottoman Empire on Turkish Television and Propagating AKP's Narrative. *Middle East Critique*, 29 (1): 1-21.

Navani, P. (2022). *What's behind the meteoric rise of Turkish dramas in the Middle East*. TRT World. Retrieved April 5, 2023, from <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/what-s-behind-the-meteoric-rise-of-turkish-dramas-in-the-middle-east-54726>

Karaosmanoglu, A. (2019). Soft power on the small screen: The rise of Turkish television dramas in the Middle East. *Middle East Critique*, 28(2), 131-149.

Marwan Kraidy, "Watching Turkish television dramas in Argentina: entangled proximities and resigned agency in global media flows," *Journal of Communication*, 2023/02/06.