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“Soft Power” as a Part of Turkish Foreign Policy in Georgia

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Abstract. This study examines the strategic use of soft power as an integral component of Türkiye’s foreign policy in the South Caucasus region. The author explores the strategies and mechanisms by which Türkiye projects its cultural, economic, and diplomatic influence in the region. It also examines Türkiye’s purposeful efforts to improve its image, authority and significance in Georgia. Paying special attention to cultural diplomacy, educational exchanges, humanitarian aid and economic partnership, the paper reveals how Türkiye seeks to shape its perceptions, develop cooperation and strengthen its geopolitical position. Methodologically, the study is based on case studies of Turkish soft power in Georgia. In addition, the author analyzes the general framework of Turkish policy in Georgia using the historical-descriptive method. The content analysis of Turkish media and other Turkish cultural agents such as TV shows, films, serials, etc. was used to understand how Ankara uses soft power to promote its cultural and political interests in Georgia. Through empirical analysis, the study examines specific examples of Türkiye’s soft power initiatives, including the promotion of the Turkish language and culture, educational scholarships and humanitarian aid. In addition, the study examines the perception of Türkiye’s soft power initiatives by the local population and assesses their impact on regional dynamics. The findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of Turkish soft power and the consequences of its use for Georgia. Given Georgia’s Christian majority, Türkiye relies on secular instruments of its soft power, while not giving up religious influence on the Muslim communities of Georgia.

Key words: foreign policy, South Caucasus, soft power, Maarif, Diyanet, soap operas diplomacy


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«Мягкая сила» как часть турецкой внешней политики в Грузии

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Аннотация. Рассматривается стратегическое использование «мягкой силы» как неотъемлемого компонента внешней политики Турции в регионе Южного Кавказа. Исследуются стратегии и механизмы, с помощью которых Турция проецирует свое культурное, экономическое и дипломатическое влияние в регионе, оцениваются целенаправленные усилия Турции по улучшению своего имиджа, авторитета и значимости в

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Грузии. Уделяя особое внимание культурной дипломатии, образовательным обменам, гуманитарной помощи и экономическому партнерству, автор раскрывает, как Турция стремится формировать восприятие собственного имиджа, развивать сотрудничество и укреплять геополитическое положение. Методологически исследование базируется на конкретных примерах применения турецкой «мягкой силы» в Грузии. Помимо этого автор анализирует общие рамки политики Турции в этой южнокавказской стране с помощью историко-описательного метода. Анализ контента турецких СМИ и других проводников турецкой культуры, таких как ТВ-шоу, фильмы, сериалы и др., применялся для понимания того, как Анкара использует «мягкую силу» для продвижения своих культурных и политических интересов в Грузии. Посредством эмпирического анализа рассматриваются инициативы Турции в области «мягкой силы», включая продвижение турецкого языка и культуры, образовательные стипендии и гуманитарную помощь. Кроме того, в исследовании изучено восприятие инициатив Турции в области «мягкой силы» местным населением и оценено влияние этих инициатив на региональную динамику. Полученные результаты подчеркивают многогранный характер турецкой «мягкой силы» и последствия ее применения для Грузии. Учитывая христианское большинство населения южнокавказской республики, Турция опирается на светские инструменты своей «мягкой силы», при этом не отказываясь от религиозного влияния на мусульманские общины в стране.

Ключевые слова: внешняя политика, Южный Кавказ, мягкая сила, Маариф, Диянет, дипломатия мыльных опер

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the rule of the *Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AK Parti)* in 2002, the mechanisms of “soft power” have gradually acquired an increasingly significant character in the implementation of Ankara’s foreign policy plans. It is worth noting that the main policy instruments based on the historical, cultural, and linguistic community, as well as the main institutions of Turkish soft power took shape back in the 1990s. However, during its years in power, the Justice and Development Party developed an effective set of soft power measures that allow Ankara to strengthen its positions in a non-forceful way. The potential of Türkiye’s soft power is huge, so it can be expected that the country will continue to increase its presence in different regions with the help of soft power.

Georgia, along with Azerbaijan, is an object of Turkish soft power in the South Caucasus region. Georgia has an important geographical location, resources and a long history of relations with the Republic of Türkiye. During the Cold War, relations

between the two neighboring countries were frozen due to the confrontation between the communist and capitalist blocs. The South Caucasus was considered a sensitive border area and a potential conflict zone between the Soviet Union and NATO. The Turkish-Georgian border was closed and strictly controlled, which prevented the establishment of any contacts between the two neighboring countries (Rohoziński et al., 2008, pp. 31—40). However, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, the countries have rediscovered each other and moved to close cooperation in various fields. Türkiye implements a policy of soft power towards Georgia through cultural, educational and economic cooperation.

Georgians and Turks are not related peoples; most of them profess different religions. Therefore, Türkiye’s use of the Islamic and Turkic parts of its political identity is significantly limited. Georgia’s territorial position distinguishes it from its South Caucasian neighbors, since the main transport routes connecting Türkiye with Azerbaijan and Russia, making possible its economic cooperation with the countries of Central Asia, passes through Georgia. Georgia serves as an

important transit route for energy resources, especially oil and natural gas, from the Caspian region to international markets. The Baku — Tbilisi — Ceyhan pipeline and the Baku — Tbilisi — Erzurum gas pipeline are important projects that emphasize Georgia's role in Türkiye's energy security and economic interests. In addition, Georgia remains neutral against the background of difficult Armenian-Azerbaijani relations. For Georgia, Türkiye's importance is manifested primarily in the economic sphere, as the country provides transit for Georgian goods destined for markets in Europe and the Middle East. The proximity of Turkish ports and a well-developed transport network allow Georgia to gain access to world trade routes, thereby increasing its export potential. Moreover, Türkiye is Georgia's largest trading partner. Türkiye is a popular tourist destination for Georgians, and vice versa. This tourist exchange strengthens people-to-people ties, promotes cultural understanding and contributes to economic benefits in the tourism sector for both countries.

Speaking of historical ties with Türkiye, it is worth noting that Western Georgia was a direct part of the Ottoman Empire, which included such regions as Adjara, Megrelia, Guria, and Imereti. It is noteworthy that modern humanitarian policy is primarily directed towards Muslim regions: Adjara and Kvemo Kartli. At the same time, a large number of projects are being implemented in Tbilisi.

Literature Review and Methodology

An important role in our research is played by the ideology of “*neo-Ottomanism*,” which aims to increase the political influence of Türkiye in the countries that were previously part of the Ottoman Empire. In order to successfully apply the mechanisms of soft power, Turkish politicians have used different tools depending on the three dominant ideological concepts — pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism, neo-Ottomanism. The connection between the foreign policy doctrine of neo-

Ottomanism and the activation of Ankara's presence in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire was pointed out by the following authors: V.A. Avatkov (2014b), A.B. Burashnikova (2013), I.V. Kudryashova and V.V. Matyukhin (Kudryashova & Matyukhin, 2013), E.T. Mehdiyev (2016), M.A. Shpakovskaya and O.V. Barnashov (Shpakovskaya & Barnashov, 2018), A.I. Zubkova (2015), E.A. Safonkina (2014), V.A. Nadein-Rayevsky.¹ These authors have highlighted the origins, as well as the main features and directions of the strategy for implementing the policy of neo-Ottomanism. In addition, it is important to get acquainted with the works of such foreign authors as M.B. Altunışık (2010), Ş. Kardaş (2011; 2012), F. Larrabee (Larrabee & Lesser, 2003).

It is impossible to pass by the work of one of the ideologists of Turkish politics Ahmet Davutoglu *Strategic Depth*. In this work, he presented a new vision of Turkish foreign policy in the spirit of neo-Ottoman ideology (Davutoğlu, 2001). The book proposes a new framework for Turkish foreign policy based on the “strategic depth” of Türkiye's historical and cultural heritage as a bridge between Europe and Asia. The foreign policy doctrine, ignited in the work, has played the role of the main guideline of Turkish foreign policy for almost a decade. In the context of rethinking the role of Türkiye in the conditions of the transformation of the international system after the end of the Cold War at the regional and global levels, the main emphasis was placed on the unique nature of the combination of the features of the geopolitical situation and the historical and cultural “background” in it. Highlighting these characteristics and classifying Türkiye as one of the “central” powers, Davutoglu justified the claims of the Republic of Türkiye to the role of

¹ Nadein-Raevsky V. A. The Search for a New Identity and the Foreign Policy of Turkey // Russian International Affairs Council. September 3, 2012. (In Russian). URL: <http://russiancouncil.ru/analytics-and-comments/analytics/poisk-novoy-identichnosti-i-vneshnyaya-politika-turtsii/> (accessed: 24.08.2023).

a key player both within various regions (the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, etc.) and on the scale of the world system, relying primarily on the country's internal potential as the successor of the Ottoman Empire with its rich history.

It is worth mentioning the works devoted to the place of soft power in Türkiye's foreign policy. Among the domestic authors, one can single out the work of A.I. Aliyeva (2014). The author analyzes Türkiye's use of soft power in its foreign policy towards the countries of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. In addition, the study examines Türkiye's cultural diplomacy and the role of Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting Turkish soft power abroad. Foreign authors have also devoted a lot of works to this issue: for example, one can single out articles by N. Anaz (2022), S. Çevik (2019), M. Altunışık (2008), and H. Altınay (2008).

The final part of the historiography should include the works directly devoted to the Turkish policy towards Georgia. The works of Russian authors are devoted to the peculiarities of the Turkish policy towards Georgia: V.A. Avatkov (2014a), V. Ivanov (2011), L.M. Aleksanyan (2016). In addition, foreign researchers I. Chkhikvadze (2011), J. Rohoziński (Rohoziński et al., 2008, pp. 31—40), D.N. Göksel (2013), K. Kirişci and A. Moffat (Kirişci & Moffat, 2015), M. Çelikpala (Çelikpala, 2005; Çelikpala & Veliyev, 2015), S. Çolakoğlu (2011).

As a research methodology, the author used the case study method, examining specific cases of Turkish soft power application in Georgia. This helped to understand the specifics of its application and its impact on local communities. A comparative analysis revealed the strengths and weaknesses of the Turkish soft power in Georgia. The general framework of Turkish policy in Georgia was analyzed using the historical and descriptive method. Analyzing the content of Turkish media and other channels of Turkish culture, such as television shows, films, series, and music, to understand how Türkiye

uses soft power to promote its cultural and political interests in Georgia.

The Role of Soft Power in Türkiye's Foreign Policy

An important component of the Turkish soft power is the value aspect. The Republic of Türkiye was founded in 1923 as a democratic and secular republic. It was one of the first countries to grant women the right to vote and stand for election, and it acted in accordance with Atatürk's principle of "Peace at home, peace in the world." Certain democratic values remain important in Turkish society. Türkiye is attractive because it is a secular, democratic state governed by the rule of law for the Muslim countries of the Middle East (Keyman, 2010). Secularism has favorably distinguished Türkiye from Iran among regional players and belonging to the Muslim world against the background of global powers (Balci, 2005).

The importance of the Turkish model was recognized by American analysts and government officials. In Türkiye, they saw a country that would promote the values inherent in the American model: democracy, capitalism, and secularism (Benhaïm & Öktem, 2015). Thus, the support of the Turkish model by the Americans is primarily a way for the United States to promote its interests. This was especially typical of American think tanks during the George W. Bush administration.² The promotion of the image of a democratic country was characteristic of the Turks themselves.³ The

² Fifth Annual Turgut Ozal Memorial Lecture // The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. March 15, 2002. URL: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fifth-annual-turgut-ozal-memorial-lecture> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

³ Speech Delivered by the Minister of Foreign Affairs H.E. Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu to EU Ambassadors on the Occasion of Europe Day, 8 May 2009, Ankara // Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. May 8, 2009. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-delivered-by-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-h_e_-mr_-ahmet-davutoglu-to-eu-ambassadors-on-the-occasion-of-europe-day_-8-may-2009_-ankara.en.mfa (accessed: 14.05.2023).

commitment to promoting democracy and economic development is also evident in Ahmet Davutoglu's interview with the American University in the Cairo Review, conducted before President Mohammed Morsi came to power.⁴

All this has had a positive impact on Türkiye's image. This is reflected in the Soft Power Index, in which Türkiye ranks 20th.⁵ Positive aspects of domestic politics and public administration, namely democratization, preservation of secularism and economic growth, have long played an important role in strengthening Türkiye's international authority.

In recent years, the situation has begun to change, which has negatively affected the attractiveness of the country. After the 2015 parliamentary elections, there was a noticeable surge of authoritarian tendencies in Türkiye, which was reflected in the Freedom House *Freedom in the World* report. The country's freedom rating has declined over a five-year period, moving from 38 points in 2017 to 32 points in 2022, which makes it possible to classify Türkiye as an "unfree country."⁶ The restrictions also extend to the Internet. Türkiye imposes strict censorship measures and restricts access to international sources of information.⁷ Such ratings highlight the alarming regression in the area of freedom of Türkiye and create obstacles to building up its soft power potential.

In addition, unpopular and controversial decisions made by its political leaders also

contributed to Türkiye's declining attractiveness. R.T. Erdogan's intervention in the state's monetary policy during the pandemic, pushing for lower interest rates despite criticism from economists, led to a record fall of the Turkish lira in the fall of 2021. These events have exacerbated the decline in Türkiye's attractiveness on the world stage.⁸

Türkiye promotes its cultural heritage, which consists of Ottoman, Turkic and Islamic components. For instance, the Turkish Foreign Ministry's website explains Türkiye's importance for NATO as follows: Türkiye mobilizes its soft power using its deep historical ties with the people and countries in the vast geography where NATO operates. Examples include NATO missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia and Afghanistan, conflicts in which Türkiye was able to use its religious and cultural identity to establish trusting relations with the local Muslim population.⁹

The Yunus Emre Institute is successfully engaged in the promotion of the Turkish language, culture and art. The Yunus Emre Foundation was established under Law No. 5653 in 2007 with the aim of expanding Türkiye's cultural exchange with other countries, popularizing the Turkish language, history, culture and art, providing services in foreign countries to those who wish to receive education in the Turkish language, culture and art, as well as to develop friendship between Türkiye and other countries of the world.¹⁰ Having started its activity about two years after the establishment of the Yunus Emre Foundation, the Yunus Emre Institute has

⁴ Interview by Mr. Ahmet Davutoğlu published in AUC Cairo Review (Egypt) on 12 March 2012 // Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. March 12, 2012. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/interview-by-mr_-ahmet-davuto%C4%9Flu-published-in-auc-cairo-review-_egypt_-on-12-march-2012.en.mfa (accessed: 14.05.2023).

⁵ Global Soft Power Index // Brand Finance. 2023. URL: <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2023-digital.pdf> (accessed: 11.05.2023).

⁶ Turkey: Freedom in the World 2022 Country Report // Freedom House. 2022. URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2022> (accessed: 11.05.2023).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Record Fall of the Turkish Lira. Why Did This Happen and What Awaits Türkiye Next? // TASS. November 29, 2021. (In Russian). URL: <https://tass.ru/ekonomika/13050995> (accessed: 11.05.2023).

⁹ Türkiye's Relations with NATO // Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. URL: <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/nato.en.mfa> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

¹⁰ 5653 Nolu Kanun // T.C. Resmi Gazete. May 18, 2007. URL: <https://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2007/05/20070518-3.htm> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

56 cultural centers abroad.¹¹ The Institute organizes many events to familiarize and popularize Turkish culture and art.

Turkish soft power is not limited to its Ottoman heritage. Thus, Türkiye actively promotes its modern culture and art through various platforms. For example, the Istanbul Biennale is one of the most important contemporary art events in the world, and the Turkish film industry has gained international recognition in recent years.

A big role in promoting the brand of Türkiye belongs to the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TİKA). TİKA is a government-funded organization that was established in 1992 to strengthen its bilateral relations with the Turkic republics of the former USSR.¹² TİKA mainly served as an organization that could carry out humanitarian activities and coordinate foreign policy priorities. TİKA is responsible for coordinating and implementing Türkiye's official development assistance programs, which include a wide range of projects related to education, healthcare, agriculture, infrastructure and many others (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019). Türkiye is an active provider of humanitarian aid, especially in such crisis zones as Syria, Iraq and Palestine, which contributes to its positive image and reputation as a responsible regional actor.¹³

TİKA operates in more than 170 countries and has offices and representative offices around the world (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019,

¹¹ Yunus Emre Foundation // Yunus Emre Enstitüsü. URL: <https://www.yee.org.tr/tr/kurumsal/yunus-emre-enstitusu> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

¹² Kanun No. 4668. Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığının Teşkilât ve Görevleri Hakkında Kanun // T.C. Resmi Gazete. May 7, 2012. URL: <http://www.resmigazete.gov.tr/eskiler/2001/05/20010512.htm#1> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

¹³ No:119 -;21 Temmuz 2003, Bakanlığımızın Irak Dışişleri Bakanlığı'nın yeniden yapılandırılması çalışmalarına destek olması hk // T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı. 2003. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/no_119--_21-temmuz-2003_-bakanligimizin-irak-disisleri-bakanligi_nin-yeniden-yapilandirilmesi-calismalarina-destek-olmasi-hk.tr.mfa (accessed: 20.04.2023).

p. 142). The volume of invested funds is 8.14 billion USD. In its work, it is guided by the principles of respect for local culture, sustainable development, and inclusiveness. Through its development and cultural programs, TİKA strives to build strong partnerships and promote mutual understanding between Türkiye and other countries, thereby strengthening Türkiye's soft power and global influence.

An important component of the cultural aspect is the religious influence of Türkiye. Being a predominantly Muslim country, Türkiye has established itself as a center of Islamic thought and a supporter of political Islam in the region. In this context, the main agent of soft power is the Department of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Diyanet has been used in a number of important aspects of the new course of Turkish foreign policy, which reflects Islamist identity and interests. On the one hand, Diyanet is engaged in identity and ideology building, for example, by issuing *fatwas* (Islamic legal opinions), supervising the religious institutions of the country and participating in awareness-raising activities among Turkish communities and Muslims around the world. Moreover, Diyanet carries out charitable activities at the international level. Thus, Diyanet has supported Iraq and Syria with food supplies.¹⁴

Türkiye is actively seeking to expand its economic ties with other countries through trade, investment and infrastructure projects. For example, Türkiye is increasing its economic cooperation with the countries of the South Caucasus¹⁵ through the conclusion of free trade agreements, joint investment projects and the provision of financial and technical assistance. According to former Turkish Trade Minister Mehmet Mush, in 2020 Türkiye's exports

¹⁴ Kriz Bölgeleri // Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı. URL: <https://tdv.org/tr-TR/faaliyetlerimiz/kriz-bolgeleri/> (accessed: 20.04.2023).

¹⁵ Türkiye's Relations with Southern Caucasus Countries // Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs. URL: https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye_s-relations-with-southern-caucasus.en.mfa (accessed: 14.05.2023).

amounted to a record 225 billion USD, and the total trade turnover is almost 500 billion USD.¹⁶ Mush noted that today Turkish goods can be bought in any country of the world, which indicates confidence in Türkiye as a manufacturer of high-quality goods.¹⁷

Another component of the humanitarian aspect is the educational policy. Türkiye's foreign policy in the field of education is aimed at establishing closer relations with other countries and promoting cultural exchange and cooperation through educational programs. Türkiye actively attracts foreign students by establishing a number of scholarships, student exchanges and joint degrees. *Türkiye Bursları* is worth mentioning. Türkiye Bursları offers a wide range of scholarship programs for undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate students, as well as research scholarships and language courses.¹⁸ Since its foundation, Türkiye Bursları has become one of the most prestigious scholarship programs in the world, with more than 30,000 international students from 171 countries receiving scholarships to study in Türkiye.¹⁹ The program has made a significant contribution to the promotion of Turkish higher education and culture around the world and has strengthened Türkiye's relations with other countries. The country is also home to a number of international universities that offer courses in English and attract students from all over the world.

For a long time, Turkish education abroad was exclusively associated with the schools of

Fethullah Gülen. They were a network of educational institutions established by the followers of the Turkish writer and preacher Fethullah Gülen. The schools offered secular education with an emphasis on technical sciences. Despite some criticism for promoting Islam and Turkish values of the school by the secular establishment,²⁰ Gülen schools have successfully operated in 160 countries around the world.²¹ The real blow to the schools was F. Gülen's conflict with R.T. Erdogan. As a result, the government has taken steps to close Gülen schools in Türkiye and has asked other countries to do the same.

However, immediately after the "defeat" of Gülen's schools, an alternative was proposed in the form of the Maarif educational complex. The Turkish Foundation "Maarif" is a non-profit organization founded by the Turkish government in 2016 to provide educational services abroad.²² The organization strives to promote and disseminate Turkish culture and language, build bridges between different countries and contribute to the development of human resources around the world. Maarif Schools operate in more than 67 countries, including the Balkans, Central Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and currently there are more than 250 educational institutions of the foundation.²³ The organization also provides

¹⁶ Turkish Exports to Surpass Year-End Target: Trade Minister // Daily Sabah. December 16, 2022. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/business/economy/turkish-exports-to-surpass-year-end-target-trade-minister> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ About Us // Türkiye Scholarships. URL: <https://www.turkiyeburslari.gov.tr/about> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

¹⁹ Türkiye Bursları'na 2022'de 171 Ülkeden Yaklaşık 170 Bin Başvuru Yapıldı // Anadolu Agency. December 30, 2022. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/gundem/turkiyeburslarina-2022de-171-ulkeden-yaklasik-170-bin-basvuru-yapildi/2776032> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

²⁰ Aydıntaşbaş A. The Good, the Bad and the Gülenists // European Council on Foreign Relations. September 23, 2016. URL: https://ecfr.eu/publication/the_good_the_bad_and_the_gulenists7131/ (accessed: 14.05.2023).

²¹ US State Department Human Rights Report Cites Albania's Closure of Gülen-linked Schools // Turkish Minute. March 22, 2023. URL: <https://turkishminute.com/2023/03/22/us-state-department-human-right-report-cite-albanias-closure-of-gulen-linked-schools/> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

²² Yarar E. Maarif Foundation Becomes Global Brand in Education for Turkey // Daily Sabah. June 14, 2020. URL: <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/news-analysis/maarif-foundation-becomes-global-brand-in-education-for-turkey> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

²³ Kasap S. Turkey Makes Maarif Foundation Global Education Brand // Anadolu Agency. October 2, 2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/education/turkey-makes->

scholarships for students from different countries to study in Türkiye and supports academic and scientific research.

Türkiye's Soft Power in Georgia

The soft power tools described above are more or less present in Georgia. TİKA plays an important role in strengthening Turkish-Georgian relations. TİKA has been implementing large-scale projects in Georgia since 1994. The programs completed in recent years have included improving social and economic infrastructure and services, organizing educational programs (vocational, language training), repairing and equipping training centers, healthcare, improving the drinking water quality and sanitary conditions.²⁴

TİKA implements various cultural and educational programs: helps Turkish students to adapt in Georgia, organizes charity events that contribute to the consolidation of a positive image of Türkiye. Since 2000, TİKA has been implementing the Turkology project, through which departments of Turkology have been established in Georgian universities in order to expand research on this topic and to increase the interest of the Georgian population in Türkiye.²⁵ The “Online program in the field of new generation journalism for basic and advanced levels” conducted jointly with the Anadolu news agency deserves attention. More than 800 press representatives from 22 countries, including Georgia, were trained within the

framework of this program.²⁶ In 2012, Georgia received 4.23% of TİKA's total financial, professional and technical support, making it the seventh largest supporter of TİKA beneficiaries (Ter-Matevosyan, 2014). In 2011, Georgia ranked second in the post-Soviet space after Kyrgyzstan in terms of the number of projects implemented under TİKA,²⁷ and in 2019 — 5th among post-Soviet countries.²⁸ Despite some decline, the support still remains significant, which underlines the special importance of Georgia in Türkiye's foreign policy. It should be noted that the beneficiaries of TİKA are mainly Muslim-populated territories of Georgia, and only a few programs have been implemented in Tbilisi and Gori.

The Yunus Emre Turkish Culture Center, opened in May 2012 at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University by Bulent Arinc, former Deputy Prime Minister of Türkiye, is engaged in popularizing Turkish culture in Georgia.²⁹ The Center holds various cultural events, Days of Turkish Culture, implements scientific projects and conducts training courses in Turkology.

Of particular note is the project “I Prefer Turkish,” which, at the initiative of the Yunus Emre Institute, teaches as a second foreign language in primary, secondary and higher educational institutions in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Poland, Japan, Egypt, Montenegro, and Romania. Türkiye has strengthened its language policy by organizing international exams in Turkish. In terms of their format and status, they are

maarif-foundation-global-education-brand/1599532 (accessed: 14.05.2023).

²⁴ Central Asia and Caucasus. Projects and Activities // TİKA Program Coordination Offices. URL: <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2016/INGILIZCE%20SITE%20ESERLER/TANITIM%20BRO%20C5%9E%20C3%9CRLER%20C4%B0/PDF/Central%20Asia%20and%20Caucasus%20-%20Projects%20and%20Activities.pdf> (accessed: 25.10.2022).

²⁵ TİKA'dan Gürcistan Doğubilim Enstitüsüne Destek // TİKA. URL: https://www.tika.gov.tr/tr/haber/tika_dan_gurcistan_dogubilim_enstitusune_destek-48263 (accessed: 11.10.2022).

²⁶ TİKA and AA Provide Basic and Advanced New Generation Journalism Training // TİKA. URL: https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/news/tika_and_aa_provide_basic_and_advanced_new_generation_journalism_training-63660 (accessed: 11.10.2022).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Turkish Development Assistance Report 2019 // TİKA. 2019. URL: <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/publication/2019/TurkiyeKalkinma2019WebENG.pdf> (accessed: 11.10.2022).

²⁹ Şeker M. Yunus Emre Tiflis'te // Yeni Şafak. June 2, 2012. URL: <https://www.yenisafak.com/yazarlar/mehmet-seker/yunus-emre-tifliste-32657> (accessed: 11.10.2022).

analogs of such exams as IELTS, TOEFL, TEF, etc. There are two international exams in Turkish, after passing which you can get a certificate of proficiency in the language required for admission to Turkish universities, teaching Turkish, working as a translator, etc. First of all, this is the Turkish Language Proficiency Exam (*Türkçe Yeterlik Sınavı*, TYS) conducted by the Yunus Emre Institute and its cultural centers around the world three times a year. It is also worth noting the examination of the Turkish Language Learning Center at Ankara University (TÖMER), held only in Türkiye. Its advantage is the low cost compared to its counterparts in English, French or German. Many universities cooperate with the Yunus Emre Institute to conduct the Turkish Language Proficiency Exam.

Turkish religious organizations have several dozen boarding schools in Adjara, where children from poor rural families receive free education, after which many go to Türkiye to get religious education. It is noteworthy that since 1993, several thousand Georgian citizens, mainly from Adjara and Kvemo Kartli (a region of southeastern Georgia whose population is largely Muslim), have left for Türkiye to receive religious education (both higher and professional) and to study Qur'anic courses (Liles, 2012). Most of them returned and were enrolled to serve in mosques in different localities.

According to 2009 data, there are 184 mosques in Adjara, 140 of which were built in recent years (Liles, 2012, p. 15). As of May 2014, there were 311 mosques in Georgia,³⁰ and despite the fact that most of them are houses of worship; they are officially registered as mosques.

Thus, Türkiye is represented at all levels of education in Georgia. The country has various

³⁰ New Adjara Head Faces Conservative Backlash after Approving Batumi Mosque // OC Media. July 24, 2018. URL: <https://oc-media.org/new-adjara-head-faces-conservative-backlash-after-approving-batumi-mosque/> (accessed: 11.10.2022).

tools that increase the importance of the Turkish language as a language of science and economic activity. Türkiye uses local structures to train personnel familiar with local specifics.

When talking about Türkiye's soft power, it is impossible to pass by such a phenomenon as Turkish TV series, which have gained great popularity in different parts of the world: the Arab world, the Balkans, Central Asia. Turkish TV series are also quite popular in Georgia. Thanks to the interest of the audience, the interest in the Turkish language and culture is also increasing.³¹ Turkish TV series have replaced Latin American ones, which had great ratings in the 90s of the last century. The first Turkish TV series aired on the Georgian Maestro TV channel was "Aşk ve Ceza" (*Love and Punishment*). The series was a huge success, and the main characters Savash and Yasmin were discussed by the whole of Georgia. The topic for discussion was also the personal life of the actors involved in the series — Murat Yıldırım, who plays the role of Savash, is married to a Georgian woman, he is often seen in Batumi. Such success gave impetus to the launch of two more series. Other Georgian TV channels followed the example of Maestro. Now Turkish TV series are broadcast on three Georgian channels for 2 hours a day — Maestro, Rustavi 2 and İmedi.³² One of the factors of the consolidation of Turkish TV series, which stand out against the background of such a product in many countries, is the broadcast of values understandable to Georgians, declaring the importance of family, religion and traditional morality.

If Azerbaijan is an important source of energy resources for Türkiye, then Georgia's

³¹ Türk Dizileri Gürcistan'da Türk Dilinin Elçileri Oldu // Anadolu Agency. November 28, 2019. URL: <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/kultur-sanat/turk-dizileri-gurcistanda-turk-dilinin-elcileri-oldu/1657785> (accessed: 07.11.2022).

³² Batiashvili Z. Peculiarities of "Soft Power" in the Example of Turkish Soap Operas // Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies. 2020. URL: <https://gfsis.org.ge/files/library/opinion-papers/137-expert-opinion-eng.pdf> (accessed: 07.11.2022).

importance lies in the fact that it serves as an important transport hub connecting Türkiye with Asia. Therefore, Türkiye has invested in modern infrastructure, including ports, railways and highways, contributing to the development of regional and international trade. The country's strategic location and transport networks provide opportunities for transit trade, energy corridors and regional connections, increasing its importance in the region.

In economic terms, Türkiye has become a major trading partner of Georgia, and the volume of bilateral trade has reached a record high in recent years.³³ Türkiye has invested heavily in Georgia's infrastructure, including the construction of a major pipeline to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan through Georgia to Türkiye. Both countries play a very important role in connecting Central Asia and the Caucasus to Europe. Türkiye has also participated in various energy projects in Georgia.

Economic cooperation was consolidated with the signing of the Free Trade Agreement on November 21, 2007.³⁴ Thus, closer economic and trade relations have been established between the countries. The signing of the agreement was a very important event, as it eliminated tariff and non-tariff barriers in trade between the two neighboring countries. The Free Trade Agreement helped Türkiye to become the largest trading partner of Georgia (Aydin, 2011, p. 146). The volume of trade between the two countries began to grow gradually after the signing of this agreement. In 2007, the volume of trade between Türkiye and Georgia amounted to 900 million USD, of which 728 million USD were Turkish exports. In 2012, the volume of trade turnover between

the two neighboring countries reached 1.4 billion USD. In 2012, imports from Georgia amounted to 180 million USD, while Türkiye's exports to Georgia amounted to 1.25 billion USD. Although Georgia occupies an insignificant place in Türkiye's foreign trade, Türkiye has become Georgia's main trading partner with a total turnover of 1.8 billion USD in 2020.³⁵ Türkiye owns 18% of Georgian imports, which makes it the largest importer of Georgia and the share in exports is 7.8%.³⁶

Türkiye is one of the ten largest foreign investors in Georgia. Turkish firms were very actively involved in the Georgian privatization program, which began after the "Rose Revolution" in 2003. The Georgian government has called on Turkish companies to invest more in Georgia in order to reduce economic dependence on the Russian Federation and stop the expansion of Russian companies in the country. So far, the Turkish side has invested mainly in construction, transport, telecommunications, banking, energy projects, food industry, tourism, and agriculture.³⁷

Georgia has implemented comprehensive economic reforms to improve its business environment and attract foreign investment. It occupies a relatively higher place in terms of ease of doing business compared to other countries in the South Caucasus. The government has focused on creating a favorable investment climate, encouraging entrepreneurship and simplifying bureaucratic procedures, which has led to an increase in foreign direct investment.

³⁵ Trade Data Georgia // UN Comtrade Database. URL: <https://comtradeplus.un.org/TradeFlow?Frequency=A&Flows=M&CommodityCodes=TOTAL&Partners=100&Reporters=792&period=2022&AggregateBy=none&BreakdownMode=plus> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

³⁶ Georgia Imports by Country // Trading Economics. URL: <https://tradingeconomics.com/georgia/imports-by-country> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

³⁷ Glogowska J. Turkey and Georgia: Strategic Connections // Bilgesam. March 23, 2012. URL: http://www.bilgesam.org/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=497:turkey-and-georgia-strategic-connections&catid=86:analizlerkafkaslar&Itemid=145 (accessed: 14.05.2023).

³³ External Merchandise Trade of Georgia in 2022 (Preliminary) // National Statistics Office of Georgia. 20.01.2023. URL: <https://www.geostat.ge/media/50862/External-Merchandise-Trade-of-Georgia-in-2022-%28Preliminary%29.pdf> (accessed: 07.11.2022).

³⁴ Georgia // Ministry of Trade of Republic of Türkiye. URL: <https://www.trade.gov.tr/free-trade-agreements/georgia> (accessed: 07.11.2022).

This explains the activity of Turkish business in the country, especially in Adjara.

Turkish companies have become important investors in Georgia, and only American companies have a larger market share than them. Turkish companies actively participated in construction works (including the construction of airport terminals and hydroelectric power plants), invested in a glass factory, telecommunications companies and airport operating companies. They have created many small and medium-sized companies in Georgia.³⁸

Speaking about Georgia, in the field of NGOs, it is worth mentioning the Association of Georgian and Turkish Businessmen GÜRTIAD, which was established in 1999 in Tbilisi by five founding members: Tamaz Chinkarauli, Hassan Bayraktar, Osman Turan, Joshkun Bashmanav, Ilyas Durmush. The Association is managed by 11 board members. Currently, the association has 95 Georgian and Turkish members (corporate companies, representative offices, individuals) who carry out business activities in Georgia and are represented in 25 different fields, such as construction, healthcare, social services, banking, manufacturing, trade, food and beverages, logistics, tourism and hotel management, textiles, retail. The aim of the organization is to improve relations between Georgia and Türkiye by creating a platform for business people of both countries.

Diyanet's activities also covered several areas in Georgia, mainly related to religious and spiritual issues. Diyanet has been operating in Türkiye since 1924, and since the 1980s it has expanded its activities abroad, having accumulated a wealth of experience in working with foreign Muslim communities. Diyanet helps Georgian citizens to organize hajj pilgrimage, train imams and theologians, provide scholarships for postgraduate studies,

and distribute Islamic literature in the Georgian language. It also coordinates financial support and consultations in the field of restoration of mosques and construction of new ones (Ter-Matevosyan, 2014). The leadership of the Diyanet visited Georgia in 2009, and the head of the Georgian Orthodox Church visited Türkiye and met with the leadership of the Diyanet in May 2014 (Ter-Matevosyan, 2014, p. 22).

In 1995, the Presidium for Religious Affairs established the Eurasian Islamic Council (EIS) (*Avrasya İslam Şurası*), which became an important factor in promoting the interests of Türkiye among the Muslim communities of the CIS (Ter-Matevosyan, 2014). Currently, the EIS has organized eight conferences in which the leaders of the Muslim community of Georgia, including the muftis of Adjara, have participated.

The situation in the Kvemo Kartli region is interesting, in which the majority of the population are Azerbaijanis, who, unlike the Sunni Ajarians, traditionally professed Shi'a Islam. In this region, as well as in Azerbaijan itself, the number of Sunnis is growing. This process is linked to the activities of Sunni charitable organizations, particularly TİKA and Diyanet. Most of the Sunni imams in Georgia receive financial subsidies from Ankara and follow the ideology of the Turkish religious preachers Osman Nuri Topbash and Ahmet Mahmut Unlu. It is also planned to open Sunni educational centers with the inclusion of Turkish theologians in the teaching staff in places of compact residence of Shi'ites in Kvemo Kartli. In particular, at the request of Diyanet, in 2021, the Turkish leadership allocated about 3 million USD for the opening of new religious educational institutions in the regions and individual settlements of Georgia, as well as for the salaries of Sunni preachers.³⁹

³⁸ Arunova M. P. Türkiye — Georgia: Cooperation and Problems // Middle East Institute. October 15, 2008. (In Russian). URL: <http://www.iimes.ru/?p=7629#more-7629> (accessed: 14.05.2023).

³⁹ Mamedov K. Turkey Radicalizes the Azerbaijani Community of Georgia // Atalayar. February 22, 2022. URL: <https://www.atalayar.com/en/opinion/kemran->

Of course, the main opponent of *Diyanet* and its activity in Georgia is the Georgian Orthodox Church. There is a certain religious tension between the two countries. A part of the Georgian society with traditional views and the clergy, whose political role has increased in recent years, do not approve of the religious activities of some Turkish organizations on their territory, especially in Adjara. Türkiye has to reckon with this part of Georgian society. For example, during the restoration of the Aziziye Mosque in Batumi, one of the symbols of the Ottoman past and dominance in the region, the Turkish side proposed to restore the old Georgian churches in Türkiye in order to balance and eliminate this tension.⁴⁰ These cooperative efforts are ongoing, but their final outcome remains uncertain. Their success depends on the strengthening of bilateral relations.

Conclusion

The general principles and approaches of Türkiye's soft power are reflected in the case of Georgia: the use of humanitarian aid, the application of educational policy, and a special emphasis on cultural proximity and a common historical heritage. These factors were supposed to help Türkiye to establish relations with new states after the end of the Cold War and to develop comprehensive economic, political, and cultural cooperation with them.

Undoubtedly, the content of soft power was shaped by the internal context of Turkish politics. Therefore, it is not surprising that at an early stage, when the country continued to

remain secular and democratic in the eyes of the world community, Turkish politicians used the "Turkish model." The desire of most of the countries of the Balkans and the South Caucasus to integrate into the EU played into Türkiye's hands, since the image of a democratic and secular state, which is also a member of NATO, favourably distinguished Türkiye from other regional centers of power.

Türkiye's unique historical heritage allows it to promote its soft power through three aspects of its political identity: Turkic, Islamic, and Ottoman, which it has successfully done, especially in regions where these aspects overlap. Against this background, Georgia's case stands out. The country is Christian, most of the population does not belong to the Turkic world, and the only unifying factor, the Ottoman one, causes negative associations, because it reminds of the Ottoman rule of Türkiye over part of the country. Therefore, such characteristics of Türkiye as democracy and secularism come to the fore in shaping an attractive image. NATO membership and economic growth make cooperation with Türkiye even more relevant for Georgia.

It should be noted that Türkiye has effectively used its soft power to strengthen its relations with Georgia. Through cultural, economic, and diplomatic initiatives, Türkiye has managed to expand its influence and strengthen its image in the country, especially at an early stage of the resumption of relations. However, the reorientation of Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Middle East, coinciding with the revision of the traditional foreign policy, has strengthened the Islamic aspect in the socio-political space of Türkiye. This fact negatively affects the Turkish soft power in Georgia, as it challenges the image of Türkiye as a secular and democratic country.

mamedov/turkey-radicalizes-azerbaijani-community-georgia/20220216143705136179.html (accessed: 11.10.2022).

⁴⁰ Menabde G. Restoration of Aziz Mosque in Adjara Reignites Debate Over Ottoman Legacy in Georgia // RefWorld. February 8, 2016. URL: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/56baed524.html> (accessed: 11.10.2022).

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