

TURKISH CULTURAL DIPLOMACY AND YUNUS EMRE INSTITUTES: THE CASES OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND SERBIA*

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Abstract: *This study examines the cultural outreach initiatives of the Yunus Emre Institutes, which serve as a principal component of Turkish public diplomacy and a cornerstone of current Turkish foreign policy. Specifically, the research investigates the institute's cultural projects during its first decade, with a particular emphasis on its efforts in the Balkan region.*

This study aims to demonstrate that Turkey's public diplomacy campaign in the Balkans, bolstered by the diverse cultural initiatives of the Yunus Emre Institutes, has markedly improved Turkey's image within the region. Through the institute's active efforts, Turkey aims not only to preserve its historical and cultural ties with the countries of the region but also to cultivate favorable public opinion through a wide array of cultural programs, exhibitions, and Turkish language courses.

Keywords: *Cultural Diplomacy, Yunus Emre Institute, Balkan Policy, Serbia, North Macedonia.*

Rezumat: *Diplomația culturală turcească și institutele Yunus Emre: cazurile Macedonia de Nord și Serbia. Acest studiu examinează inițiativele de diseminare culturală ale institutelor Yunus Emre, componentă principală a diplomației publice turce și o piatră de temelie a politicii externe actuale a Turciei. Mai exact, cercetarea investighează proiectele culturale ale institutului în primul său deceniu, cu un accent deosebit pe eforturile sale în regiunea balcanică. Această zonă este remarcabilă pentru conexiunile culturale durabile cu*

trecutul său otoman, care rămân vibrante până în prezent. Studiul își propune să demonstreze că toată campania de diplomatie publică a Turciei în Balcani, susținută de diversele inițiative culturale ale institutelor Yunus Emre, a îmbunătățit considerabil imaginea Turciei în regiune. Prin eforturile active ale institutului, Turcia își propune nu numai să-și păstreze legăturile istorice și culturale cu țările din regiune, ci și să cultive o opinie publică favorabilă printr-o gamă largă de programe culturale, expoziții și cursuri de limba turcă.

INTRODUCTION

The Balkans is a region of great importance, not only because it was home to a substantial Turkish population but also due to its significant social and political dynamism throughout many centuries under Ottoman rule. Historically, the Balkans served as the Ottoman gateway to Europe and continues to play a similar role for Turkey today. The region was also pivotal as Republican Turkey embraced Westernization as a means of modernization following the dramatic end of the Ottoman era. To ensure continuity between the Ottoman and Republican periods, modern Turkish foreign policy has particularly focused on the Balkans, which has consistently served as a conduit for the shared political and cultural memories of both Turkish and Balkan communities.

In recent decades, the international system and the world at large have experienced radical changes across numerous fields, including international politics, economics, education, science, and the arts. Technological innovations have profoundly altered the traditional structures of political decision-making. While traditional diplomacy dominated international politics before the Cold War, a new and multi-faceted approach has emerged in response to these dramatic changes. At this point, the concept of public diplomacy has quickly gained popularity among academic circles, becoming a valuable tool for policymakers.¹ Consequently, cultural diplomacy – a key tool of public diplomacy – has gained prominence as more countries invest in it.

Cultural engagement with diverse societal structures around the world is arguably the most widely used method of public diplomacy. Unlike other conventionally engineered processes, culture develops organically over long periods. Consequently, recognizing and respecting the unique cultural qualities of different societies, as well as building affinities with them, is best achieved

¹ For an early work on the concept of public diplomacy, see Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. New York, Basic Books, 1990.

through public diplomacy programs. Countries with a long history of colonialism have gradually integrated aspects of their colonizers' culture, language, education systems, political traditions, and economic structures, often through culturally attractive initiatives designed to create a favourable image and obscure the unequal nature of their relationships. Today, the growing demand for open societies has led to a proliferation of new channels for cultural exchange.

The popularity of public diplomacy tools has notably increased in Turkey, which, until the early 2010s, primarily relied on traditional diplomatic methods. In this context, the Yunus Emre Institute has emerged as the flagship of Turkey's cultural diplomacy, with numerous centres opening across the Balkans following the inauguration of the first one in Sarajevo in 2009.² The Institute operates representative offices across a broad range of locations, from the Balkans and Europe to North America, Africa, and various parts of Asia.

This study aims to achieve three objectives: First, to recognize and briefly highlight the central role and importance of the Balkans in Turkish foreign policy. Second, to describe and evaluate Turkey's cultural diplomacy practices in the Balkans. Finally, to examine and analyse the success level of Yunus Emre Institutes in facilitating cultural exchanges, using data collected from N. Macedonia and Serbia, with a focus on Turkish cultural diplomacy and its potential contribution to Ankara's soft power.

THE BALKANS IN TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY

From the Ottoman Turkish perspective, the Balkans was more than just a territorial extension of the empire's multiethnic fabric. It is important to note that the Ottoman system was not solely based on ethnic Turkish identity. Since its origins as a small *beylik* near Bursa, the Ottomans viewed the West as a primary focus, driven by the concepts of *jihad* (holy war) and *ghaza* (Ottoman/Turkish term for *jihad*). Their motivation extended beyond merely expanding the sultan's territorial sovereignty; it encompassed spreading the word of God and utilizing the Balkans' human resources to support further campaigns westward. With its significant ethnic Turkish population and local Muslim converts, the Balkans played a central role in late Ottoman politics, contrary to the common belief that the region was on the empire's periphery.³ The Balkans continue to hold a crucial

² Yunus Emre Enstitüsü", *Türkiye - Merkez*, 02 Kasım 2017, in <https://www.yee.org.tr/tr/kurumsal/yunus-emre-enstitusu>. (Accessed on 24.06.2024).

³ Kemal H. Karpat, *Turkey's Politics: The Transition to a Multi-Party System*, vol. 1,

place in contemporary Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, understanding the current state of relations between Turkey and the Balkans, and examining the role of cultural diplomacy practices by Yunus Emre Institutes, deserves scientific appraisal.

After a period of relative calm enforced by Cold War dynamics, the Balkans descended into turmoil due to its strategic location and its religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Contrary to common belief, the Ottoman presence in the Balkans lasted nearly 600 years, which is longer than in most of Anatolia, the current heart of Turkey. The policy tools Turkey has employed – or will employ – in the Balkans are significant not only from a historical and cultural perspective but also in terms of economic potential. Ankara's diplomatic efforts are expected to unlock various economic opportunities in the region through increased interaction. Enhanced cultural engagement and improved trust between Turkey and Balkan societies are likely to spur investment and technology transfer throughout the region. Additionally, information and communication networks, supported by advancing technology, will help overcome the limitations imposed by national borders.⁴

Since the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, modern Turkey has based its foreign policy on two fundamental pillars: an unwavering Western orientation and the preservation of the status quo established by the Lausanne Treaty. Consequently, Ankara consistently opposed any form of revisionism within and around its national borders. Ironically, the Balkans represented Turkey's sole land bridge to Europe in pursuit of the first foreign policy goal. Post-WWII, Bulgaria's alignment with the Soviet bloc introduced a new challenge, narrowing Turkey's focus in the Balkans to strained relations with Greece until 1989. Ankara's diplomatic efforts in the region were primarily centred on preventing Greece from gaining advantages over Turkey in Western organizations and maintaining the status quo with countries under communist rule.⁵

Despite various crises with Greece, the Cyprus issue, and fluctuating relations with NATO and the EU, Turkey's overall Western orientation remained largely intact. The real challenge for the Republic emerged following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. While Turkey needed to quickly formulate a response to the political instability that erupted in the Balkans, the shifting strategic environment also

Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1959, p. XIV.

⁴ Nail Olpak, *Yüz Yıl Sonra Balkanlar'a Yeniden Bakmak* [Looking Back at the Balkans After a Hundred Years], in "Çerçeve", Vol. 21, 2013, no. 62, p. 2.

⁵ Baskın Oran, *Türkiye'nin Balkan ve Kafkas Politikası* [Turkey's Balkan and Caucasian Policy], in "Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi", Vol. 50, 1995, no. 1, p. 271.

presented new opportunities for its foreign policy. The emerging global era, characterized by broader economic competition rather than bipolarity, suggested that economic factors would increasingly drive inter-state relations.⁶

The collapse of communist and socialist regimes in the Balkans brought several advantages for Turkey. Ankara welcomed the rapid transition of Balkan countries to capitalist economic models. Additionally, with the fall of these regimes, the primary cultural barrier between Turkey and the region was effectively removed. The emergence of Turkic republics in Central Asia inspired the vision of a Turkish cultural sphere extending from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China. In this context, the Balkans naturally became the Western flank of this imagined Turkish cultural map.⁷

Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans underwent a significant shift in the post-Cold War era. The importance of Greece in Turkey's strategic calculus diminished after the 1990s. New issues emerged between Athens and Ankara as Turkey increasingly focused on defending Albania and, particularly, N. Macedonia, both of which have substantial Turkish and Muslim populations. Relations between the two neighbours have experienced many fluctuations, rooted in deep-seated cultural and religious differences and a history of conflict that spanned from the 1820s to the 1920s.⁸

The collapse of communism in Bulgaria and its transition to democracy benefited the significant Turkish minority there. The new constitutional framework presented economic advantages for Turkey, creating fresh trade and investment opportunities. Conversely, the tragic disintegration of Yugoslavia sent shockwaves through Turkey. Initially, Ankara adhered to its traditional stance of upholding the "territorial integrity" principle, aiming to prevent Yugoslavia's disintegration, which could have opened a Pandora's box. However, as disintegration became inevitable, Turkey's diplomatic approach shifted to emphasize respect for the independence and territorial integrity of the breakaway republics within their former administrative borders under the Yugoslav constitutional structure, and the necessity for cooperation among them. In fact,

⁶ Arzu Şaybak, *Soğuk Savaş Sonrası Türkiye'nin Balkan Ülkeleri ile İlişkilerinde Güvenlik Olgusu ve Karşılıklı Çıkarlar* [Security Concerns and Mutual Interests in Turkey's Relations with Balkan Countries after the Cold War], Bursa, Uludağ Üniversitesi, 2006, p. 194.

⁷ Caner Sancaktar, *Sosyalizmin Yıkılışı Sürecinde Türkiye'nin Balkan Ülkeleri İle İlişkileri* [Turkey's Relations with the Balkan Countries During the Period of the Collapse of Socialism], in "Stratejik Öngörü Dergisi", 2006, no. 9, p. 56-57.

⁸ Baskın Oran, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

Ankara did not support the independence movements of Sandzak, Vojvodina, and Kosovo in 1991 following Slovenia's declaration of independence.⁹

Turkey's policies towards the Balkans are primarily driven by societal factors rather than strategic calculations. Over a century after the Ottoman Empire's final retreat, a significant number of ethnic Turks still reside in various countries to the west of Turkey's border. In addition to ethnic Turks, Bosnians and Albanians are two major Balkan groups with historically close cultural and religious ties to the Turks. Although less numerous, many Pomaks, Torbeshes, and Muslim Gypsies in the region still speak Turkish. Overall, Turkish minorities who share a common language, culture, and historical perspective look towards the Bosphorus to preserve their identity, spanning from Moldova in the north to Greece in the south. A similar emotional connection exists between Turkey and Balkan Muslims, many of whom have relatives in Turkey and feel a strong sense of welcome there. This relationship underscores the enduring importance of the Balkans to Turkey.¹⁰

Understanding the enduring affinity between Balkan societies and Turkey requires examining the Ottoman *millet* system.¹¹ This system was based on treating the peoples of the Balkans and Anatolia as equal components of the Empire, fostering strong bonds of friendship and kinship between the two geographically separated societies for centuries, despite the tensions of the final century before the Empire's eventual dissolution. This integration is further supported by the perception of Turkey as a benevolent mediator in times of instability and ethnic conflict in the region.¹² Since the Republic's founding, Turkey has acted as a staunch ally of the Muslim communities in the

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ E. G. Özkürkcü, *Balkanların Coğrafi Konumu, Bölgenin Jeopolitik, Jeostratejik ve Jeoekonomik Özelliklerinin, Bölgedeki Güç ve Rekabet Mücadelelerine Olan Etkileri* [The Geographical Location of the Balkans and the Effects of the Geopolitical, Geostrategic and Geoeconomic Characteristics of the Region on the Power and Competition Struggles in the Region], in *Balkanlar ve Türkiye'nin Bölgeye Yönelik Politikaları Sempozyumu, 15-16 Aralık 1998*, 1. bs, İstanbul, Hak Yayınları, 1998, p. 2.

¹¹ See Kemal H. Karpat, *Balkanlarda Osmanlı Mirası ve Milliyetçilik* [The Ottoman Heritage and Nationalism in the Balkans], İstanbul, Tımas Yayınları, 2017.

¹² İlhan Uzel, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar* [Turkish Foreign Policy: From the War of Independence to Today: Facts, Documents, Comments], in Baskın Oran (Ed.), *1980-90: Batı Bloku Ekseninde Türkiye-2 Balkanlarla İlişkiler* [1980-90: Turkey in East-West Axis-2: Relations with the Balkans], İstanbul, İletişim, 2010, p. 175.

Balkans, continuing the role established during the Ottoman era, and has remained engaged with the political, economic, and social issues of these countries.

The Balkan identity of modern Turkey is more pronounced than current political borders might suggest. Kemal Karpat, a prominent scholar on late Ottoman and republican Turkish politics, asserts that Turkey has preserved its Balkan characteristics throughout its history.¹³ In fact, Turkey's aspiration to be part of the European community of states is deeply rooted in its Balkan identity, both historically and geographically. The region's demographic characteristics further support this view. Besides the Turkish minorities spread across the area stretching from Greece to Moldova, around 50 million people – approximately 20–22 percent of the total Balkan population – are Muslims with fond memories of the Ottoman past. Similarly, roughly 20–30 percent of Turkey's current population traces its roots to the Balkans. In this respect, Turkey has seized every opportunity to strengthen and nurture this bond of friendship with Balkan countries once the dust of the great war cleared.¹⁴

Turkey's efforts in cultural cooperation with Balkan states did not follow a straightforward path during the republican era. Although the young republic was seen as the successor to the Ottoman Empire, it struggled to forge a new national identity, largely rejecting its past heritage. It was only after WWII and Turkey's engagement with the Western community that the country began to realign its relations with the Balkans. While Turkey's early republican leaders undertook extensive reforms to distance the new state from its Ottoman and caliphate past, elements of Balkan heritage remained visible in daily life. The cultural revival of the past three decades, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, was not immediate but progressed slowly after years of ideological separation. Policymakers must now use the right strategies to rekindle these kinship ties. Turkey's policies must be executed with caution to ensure sustained mutual benefits in political, cultural, and social spheres.¹⁵

In the past decade, Turkey's foreign policy towards the Balkans has been guided by the principles of "compassion" and "inclusiveness." Key elements of Turkey's Balkan diplomacy include high-level political dialogues, national security for all, extensive economic integration, and the preservation of each society's

¹³ Kemal H. Karpat, *Turkey's Politics*, p. XIV.

¹⁴ Idem, *Geçmişten Bugüne Balkanlar* [Balkans from Past to Present], in "Çerçeve" Vol. 21, 2013, no. 62, p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

unique fabric. This approach involves honouring the region's diverse ethnic structures and local traditions, while showing the utmost respect for all religious denominations. These principles have been pivotal in shaping Turkey's foreign policy towards the region and in directing TİKA's¹⁶ priority projects.

In addition to TİKA, the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP), of which Turkey is a founding member, plays a significant role in this context. Established in 1996, the SEECP is the only political organization dedicated to the Balkans, aiming to foster trust and stability among Balkan countries and maintain peace through local cooperation. In May 2013, during a SEECP foreign ministers' meeting in N. Macedonia, it was emphasized that moving beyond the bitter memories of the Ottoman Empire's dissolution would benefit the Balkan countries by helping them address future challenges. The foreign ministers unanimously urged the region to unite around a common vision. The meeting also highlighted that the Balkans should be Turkey's route to European integration processes, stressing the need for greater tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and increased economic activity – factors crucial for all Balkan countries, including Turkey. The parties agreed that Turkey's vision for the Balkans could be realized through EU and NATO cooperation and regional joint efforts.¹⁷ This positive political atmosphere was also endorsed by prominent members of Turkish academia, who noted that the political stability and security of the Balkan Peninsula are essential for Turkey to maintain its pro-Western and pro-European orientation. Many Turkish experts agreed that, while the political instability following the end of the Cold War initially posed threats to Turkey's interests, it has also created various opportunities, allowing Ankara to shift its focus from Greece for the first time in many years.¹⁸

In response to the promising developments across the Balkans, Turkey faces a twofold imperative. Firstly, Ankara must actively engage with regional trends to establish robust political and economic cooperation. At the same time, it is crucial for the Republic to revitalize its connections with Turkish and Muslim communities in the region, who naturally have strong ties to Turkey. Turkish policymakers need to craft strategies that carefully balance these two areas of interest to effectively navigate potential hurdles that the Republic can face in the Balkans.

¹⁶ Turkish acronym for "Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency".

¹⁷ Serdar Çam, *21. Yüzyıl Balkan Barışına TİKA Vurgusu* [TİKA Emphasis on 21st Century Balkan Peace], in "Çerçeve", Vol. 21, 2013, no. 62, p. 42-43.

¹⁸ Baskın Oran, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

THE EMERGENCE OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

As noted earlier, the concept of public diplomacy has emerged as a key term in international relations in the new millennium. To fully appreciate its modern significance, it is useful to revisit the concept from a historical perspective. Niccolò Machiavelli, in his work *The Prince*, poses a rhetorical question: “Should the ruler be someone to be feared or someone to be loved?” He argues that ideally, a ruler should be both, but if forced to choose, it is better to be feared than loved.¹⁹ Building on this metaphor, Joseph Nye developed the concept of soft power. Nye theorizes that for a state to be strong and influential in the international arena, it must leverage both soft and hard power. Soft power, a natural outgrowth of the new public diplomacy, is defined as the ability to achieve one’s objectives through the appeal of culture rather than through military might or economic leverage. Nye categorizes military and economic capabilities as forms of hard power. In contrast, soft power is the capacity to influence others’ behaviour without coercion or pressure and without expecting anything in return.²⁰

Many countries began to embrace public diplomacy to leverage their cultural assets. China, for example, invested heavily in cultural diplomacy through its Confucius Institutes, aiming to transform its rich cultural heritage into a source of soft power. This approach has significantly contributed to the development of China’s academic literature on the subject. Chinese scholar Wang, for instance, outlines the concept of public diplomacy through three main pillars. First, he argues that public diplomacy should be an integral part of foreign policy and driven by policy objectives rather than mere relationship-building. The essence of public diplomacy, according to Wang, is advocating a country’s distinct policies by creating favourable attitudinal environments. Second, Wang emphasizes that national governments play a crucial role in public diplomacy, as they oversee both military and foreign policy. This perspective highlights that while traditional literature often views governments as the primary sponsors and communicators of public diplomacy, recent think-tank reports have questioned this conventional view. Third, Wang argues that there is a common misconception that mass media

¹⁹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *Hükümdar* [The Prince], ed. Çev. Necdet Adabağ, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür yayınları, 2017, p. 64.

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power*, in “Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, Vol. 616, 2008, no. 15, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716207311699> (Accessed on 05.05.2024).

outlets – such as print media, radio, television, and movies – are the sole channels for public diplomacy. Although mass media have historically expanded global awareness, much public diplomatic communication has been limited to one-way message transmission.²¹ The modern definition of public diplomacy, which encompasses the policies used to communicate a nation's ideas, goals, and culture to foreign audience,²² requires a more nuanced approach. This may involve many methods including classical one-way communication methods like broadcasting, more interactive two-way channels for relationship-building, or sophisticated approaches such as collaborative projects to foster mutual goodwill. These strategies can be tailored to achieve either short-term or long-term objectives. Cultural diplomacy, therefore, remains a vital component within the broader framework of public diplomacy.²³

To fully understand cultural diplomacy, it is essential to start with the concept of culture. While culture is a broad and often debated concept, it can be minimally defined as everything created by humans.²⁴ Bauman, for instance, emphasizes that culture is an artificially designed construct rather than a purely natural process.²⁵ In contemporary international relations, cultural diplomacy has become increasingly important in global affairs. This importance stems from the integration of universal cultural values that have evolved over time. Key aspects of effective cultural diplomacy include having a well-functioning government system, strong political leadership, successful bids for major events like the Olympics, high rates of cultural literacy, and readiness to meet technological challenges.²⁶

²¹ Jian Wang, *Managing National Reputation and International Relations in the Global Era: Public Diplomacy Revisited*, in "Public Relations Review", Vol. 32, 2006, no. 2, p. 94, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2005.12.001> (Accessed on 06.05.2024).

²² *Public Diplomacy*, in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/public-diplomacy> (Accessed on 06.05.2024).

²³ Nicholas J Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past. CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy*, Los Angeles, Figueroa Press, 2009, p. 15.

²⁴ Aslı Yağmurlu, *Kamu Diplomasisi Aracı Olarak Kültür Enstitüleri: Yunus Emre Kültür Enstitüsü* [Cultural Institutes as an Instrument of Public Diplomacy: Yunus Emre Cultural Institute], "Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi", 2016, p. 2, https://acikders.ankara.edu.tr/pluginfile.php/179173/mod_resource/content/1/Yunus%20Emre%20Enstit%C3%BCs%C3%BC_format.docx.

²⁵ Zygmunt Bauman, *Towards a Critical Sociology: An Essay on Commonsense and Imagination*, 1. New York, Routledge, 2010, eBook Published, 3, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203855706>.

²⁶ Rachel Briggs et al., *Cultural Diplomacy*, 1. bs, London, DEMOS, 2007, p. 13-14.

Nations possess diverse and rich cultural elements and practices. However, within this broad spectrum, only a few cultural practices are actively employed in cultural diplomacy to represent a nation's culture. These selected cultural elements in public diplomacy are meticulously chosen and dynamic. Nations' "cultural pools" are shaped by various sources, including media outlets, religious institutions, and educational and political frameworks.²⁷ Bozkurt Guvenc suggests that every culture also has a purpose and direction, whether consciously or unconsciously pursued. Just as societies strive to harness nature effectively, educational systems aim to offer superior opportunities, and artists seek to excel in their craft, cultural institutions and organizations also have specific objectives and competitive goals.²⁸ In a similar vein, states engage in cultural diplomacy with clear purposes and ultimate goals. These objectives arise from the cultural achievements of the nation and encompass distinctive practices that have the potential to serve as examples for other countries.²⁹

In recent years, the direct involvement of the state and closely associated institutions has waned. The concept of "national culture" has increasingly been overshadowed by a cultural amalgam enriched with global elements because of globalization, which has effectively blurred national boundaries. One significant consequence of this trend is that global capital and its media instruments have "liberated" culture from the traditional territorial constraints imposed by nation-states. Consequently, local traditions and customs have acquired a global character. Although many cultural elements that have reached global circulation are popularized by major Western capital and media, they do not necessarily represent Western culture alone. For instance, while "yogurt" – a traditional Turkish dairy product – has gained global popularity and entered supermarket chains worldwide, it continues to serve as an emblem of Turkish culture. Therefore, defining and operationalizing cultural diplomacy in an environment where national culture is increasingly "globalized" becomes a complex and elusive task.

Nicholas Cull, for example, offers a more narrowly defined view of cultural diplomacy as a state's effort to govern its cultural image. In other words, it involves enhancing and promoting the state's own cultural resources on the

²⁷ Gökhan Atılğan, *Küreselleşme Süreci ve Ulusal Kültür* [Globalisation Process and National Culture], in "Mülkiye Dergisi", Vol. 34, 2010, no. 266, p. 13.

²⁸ Bozkurt Güvenc, *İnsan ve Kültür* [Human and Culture], İstanbul, Remzi Kitabevi, 1991, p. 98.

²⁹ Aslı Yağmurlu, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

international stage.³⁰ In contrast, Jacquie L'Etang views cultural diplomacy as characterized by long-term campaigns aimed at winning the hearts and minds of diverse audiences. This approach seeks to build emotional connections both domestically and internationally, foster identity and empathy between local and foreign peoples, and achieve various strategic gains within the global system.³¹

Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is typically managed solely by state agencies, cultural diplomacy necessitates broader participation and collaboration with the private sector to produce and deliver the products, services, and connections needed for effective and sustainable outcomes. Consequently, cooperation between public and private sectors, as well as civil society organizations, is crucial for successful cultural outreach.³² Key components of cultural diplomacy include exchange programs, cultural institutes, language training, dance and sports activities, entertainment, exhibitions, artistic performances, and various collaborative projects. In this context, the Yunus Emre Institute, which is the focus of this research, warrants closer examination. As the primary representative of Turkish culture in the Balkans, this institute plays a central role in Turkey's cultural diplomacy in the region.

YUNUS EMRE INSTITUTES AS A CULTURAL AMBASSADOR OF TURKEY

Turkey's public diplomacy efforts in the Balkans are grounded in two interrelated facts. First, the deep cultural and historical ties between Turkey and the region have left enduring cultural imprints on both societies. Geographical proximity and cultural affinity have fostered a sense of closeness between Turkey and the Balkans. Second, the Balkans have historically served as Turkey's gateway to Europe. Thus, Turkey's recent focus on prioritizing the Balkans in its foreign policy reflects its broader Western orientation.³³

In the past decade, Ankara has employed a multi-layered approach to diplomacy in the Balkans, combining traditional methods with innovative tools of

³⁰ Nicholas J. Cull, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

³¹ Jacquie L'Etang, *Public Relations and Diplomacy in A Globalized World: An Issue of Public Communication*, in "American Behavioral Scientist", Vol. 53, 2009, no. 4, p. 610, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764209347633> (Accessed on 08.05.2024).

³² Giles Scott-Smith, *Cultural Diplomacy*, in Alison R. Holmes, J. Simon Rofe (Eds.), *Global Diplomacy: Theories, Types, and Models*, New York, Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, p. 187.

³³ M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908*, Oxford University Press, 2001, *passim*.

public diplomacy. Among these, the Yunus Emre Institutes stand out for their significant role after a decade of operation in the region. As the flagship of Turkish public diplomacy, these institutes have facilitated cultural exchanges between Turkish and Balkan communities. To date, no scientific assessment has been conducted to evaluate Turkey's public diplomacy practices in the Balkans, specifically focusing on cultural diplomacy.

The Yunus Emre Institute stands out as a leading cultural institution under the Yunus Emre Foundation, dedicated to promoting Turkish language, history, culture, and art, and making related information and documents accessible to a global audience. Named after Yunus Emre, a renowned Sufi poet who profoundly influenced Turkish culture in Anatolia during the 13th and 14th centuries, the foundation aims to enhance Turkey's cultural exchanges and foster friendly relations with other countries. Established by statute in 2007, the foundation offers services to those interested in learning Turkish, understanding Turkish culture, and engaging in Turkish arts. The Yunus Emre Institute, a key affiliate of the foundation, organizes cultural exhibits and artistic performances to introduce Turkish culture to the international public. It also supports scientific research and teaches Turkish to foreigners through numerous cultural centres worldwide.³⁴ The Institute's activities fall into two main categories: teaching Turkish and organizing cultural and artistic events. As of 2023, the centennial year of the Turkish Republic, the Institute has launched cultural initiatives across four continents and operates 88 representative offices in 66 countries, spanning Asia, Europe, Africa, and North America. Notably, the Institute has 13 active centres in the Balkans, representing 15% of its total global network.³⁵ These centres employ 628 staff members and, according to 2023 data, have been allocated approximately 1.3 billion Turkish Liras (approximately \$40 million). It is evident from these figures that cultural diplomacy requires both a significant financial commitment and long-term strategic planning that only those countries with substantial budgets can sustain.³⁶

According to the official mission statement of the Yunus Emre Institutes, teaching Turkish is the primary objective of the institute. Each language

³⁴ *Yunus Emre Institute*, in <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/corporate/yunus-emre-institute> (Accessed on 08.05.2024).

³⁵ *Ibid.* Branch offices of Yunus Emre Institutes in the Balkans and their year of inauguration in temporal order: Sarajevo (2009), Tirana (2009), Skopje (2010), Prizren (2011), Pristina (2011), Fojnica (2011), Constanta (2011), Pec (2012), Shkoder (2012), Podgorica (2014), Mostar (2014), Belgrade (2015) and Comrat (2015).

³⁶ Jacquie L'Etang, *op. cit.*, p. 610.

constructs a cultural framework based on the meanings it creates. Zbigniew Brzezinski argues that the role of the United States on the global stage is more dialectical than ever. He contends that America has positioned itself as a model society through various cultural influence mechanisms, with its cultural appeal becoming prominent only after English established itself as the global *lingua franca*. The widespread use of English significantly contributed to the rise of American soft power internationally.³⁷ Similarly, the global promotion of the Turkish language has the potential to shape international perceptions of Turkey, thereby enhancing Turkey's soft power on the global stage.

Turkey's historical background, marked by significant scientific, artistic, and cultural achievements, attracts international interest. As a result, Turkey is actively working to share its extensive heritage through a strategic approach. In this effort, the cultural diplomacy executed by the Yunus Emre Institutes plays a crucial role. The practice suggests that this institution will remain as the key instrument in shaping Turkey's international relations through this novel strategy.³⁸

Since its inception, the Yunus Emre Institute has been actively involved in prominent projects aimed at promoting the Turkish language and showcasing Turkish culture. With cultural centres in 63 countries and 84 representative offices as of January 2023, the institute has played a crucial role in reshaping Turkey's global image. It achieves this through various activities, such as Turkish language courses offered both in physical and digital formats, the Turkish Teaching Portal, the Turkish Preference Project, and related multimedia content. By extending the reach of the language Yunus Emre used to convey messages of peace and love, the Institute introduces millions to Turkish, fostering a broader appreciation and understanding of the language.³⁹

In recent years, the number of Turkish speakers has significantly increased in many Balkan countries, largely due to the Yunus Emre Institute's extensive Turkish language teaching programs. For example, in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of people learning Turkish is steadily rising.

³⁷ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Choice: Global Domination or Global Leadership*, New York, Basic Books, 2004, p. 185.

³⁸ *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü Faaliyet Raporu, 2020* [Yunus Emre Institute Annual Report, 2020], p. 9, <https://www.yee.org.tr/yayin/2020-faaliyet-raporu>

³⁹ *Turkish Influence in the Balkans Increases*, in <https://www.yee.org.tr/en/news/turkish-influence-balkans-increases> (Accessed on 08.05.2024).

The success of the programs has led to the establishment of additional centres, even in smaller surrounding towns like Donje Vakuf.⁴⁰

In addition to providing Turkish language instruction, each branch of the Yunus Emre Institute actively organizes cultural events and artistic performances. These initiatives are crucial for promoting and popularizing Turkish culture across the Balkan region. In recent years, the Yunus Emre Institute has undertaken numerous cultural and artistic projects in the Balkans, some of which are highlighted below:⁴¹

- **Prizren Yunus Emre Institute Library:** Situated in Prizren, Kosovo, this library boasts a substantial collection of books covering a wide range of subjects, including science, art, history, culture, geography, and architecture. The library offers a borrowing service, allowing readers to enjoy books at home, which has notably increased the institute's popularity among Prizren's residents.

- **Turkish World Opera Stars Concert:** Held in Belgrade, Serbia, this concert attracted a large audience and was dedicated to celebrating the 175th anniversary of the birth of Abay Kunanbayev, a renowned intellectual figure from the Turkic world.

- **Turkish as the Common Language of Tolerance in the Balkans:** Held in Shkodra, Albania, this conference brought together dignitaries from both Turkey and the Balkan nations. Speakers highlighted the linguistic similarities and shared vocabulary between Turkish and various Balkan languages, which often surpass common perceptions.

- **Danube in Time:** As part of the Turkey-EU Intercultural Dialogue Program, the Yunus Emre Institute in Bucharest partnered with the Hungarian Cultural Centre, the European Foundation for Europe in Turkey, and the Kalem Agency to organize a photography exhibition. This exhibition showcased evocative images capturing memories along the Danube River.

- **Panel on Suleyman Chelebi and Mawlid-i Sharif:** In collaboration with Bursa Municipality, Uludag University, and the Office of the Bursa Mufti, the Yunus Emre Institute organized a panel dedicated to Suleyman Chelebi. This influential Ottoman figure who was born in Bursa and celebrated in Bosnia, serves as a symbolic bridge between the two societies.

- **"Talismanic Garments" Art Exhibition:** The Yunus Emre Institute in Shkodra, Albania, hosted an exhibition featuring traditionally hand-knitted garments, created to provide divine protection in battles. These garments were

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü Faaliyet Raporu, 2020*, p. 35.

crafted by a local elderly artisan. The event also highlighted classical calligraphy by two distinguished Turkish artists, blending traditional and contemporary artistic expressions.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND FINDINGS

As previously emphasized, this research seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of Turkish public diplomacy and cultural initiatives, which have become a major policy focus for the Republic, particularly over the last decade. The assessment centres on the performance of Yunus Emre Institutes in the Balkans, with a specific focus on two branch offices: Belgrade and Skopje. The research hypothesizes that teaching the Turkish language abroad not only increases interest in Turkey but also helps mitigate negative perceptions. Additionally, the research contends that the Yunus Emre Institute has been notably successful in promoting Turkish culture throughout the Balkan region.

The survey that was conducted in Belgrade and Skopje branches of the Yunus Emre Institute included a range of questions and individuals enrolled in Turkish courses were invited to voluntarily participate. They responded to a questionnaire designed with a five-point Likert scale, allowing them to provide both positive and negative feedback.⁴² The raw data from these responses were subjected to various statistical analyses to assess whether there are any significant correlations. The findings from these analyses are explored and discussed in the conclusion.

Prior to completing the questionnaire, course attendees were informed about the survey's purpose and academic goals. They were instructed to answer the questions independently, without external suggestions. Participants were assured that they could withdraw from the survey at any time if they felt uncomfortable, even after starting. Confidentiality was guaranteed, with the assurance that responses would be used solely for scientific purposes and personal information would remain anonymous. Participants were also informed that the findings might be used for scientific publications. Before participating, everyone was asked to read and sign a consent form freely.

The gathered data underwent processing through the SPSS 26 program. Distribution of basic demographic variables was inserted, and descriptive statistics were generated for the scale scores. Given that all demographic variables

⁴² "Questionnaire on Perception of Turkey, Turkish Language and Turkish Culture for Students Attending Turkish Courses at the Yunus Emre Institutes." *See*, Appendix.

had two categories in the statistical analyses, both the independent groups t-test method and the Mann-Whitney U analysis method, as an alternative, were employed. Skewness and kurtosis values were examined to assess the normality of the scores. According to Tabachnick and Fidell, scores are considered normally distributed when skewness and kurtosis values range between ± 1.5 . Even in cases of normal distribution, it is advisable to opt for a non-parametric method if the group size is insufficient ($N < 25$). The statistical analysis involved assessing the significance level at $p < .05$.⁴³ Considering these fundamental parameters, the SPSS 26 program unveiled the subsequent statistical results:

Table 1. Frequency and percentage distribution by demographic variables

Variables	Group	Frequency	Percentage
Country	N. Macedonia	51	50
	Serbia	51	50
Gender	Male	18	17.6
	Woman	84	82.4
Education	High school and below	48	47.1
	Undergraduate and above	54	52.9
Total		102	100

The survey involved the participation of 102 students enrolled at Yunus Emre Institutes in two Balkan countries with different ethno-religious characteristics. Half of the course attendees were from N. Macedonia, while the other half were from Serbia. The data indicates that females showed a greater willingness to participate in the survey. Specifically, 82.4% of the participants were female, while only 17.6% were male. In terms of educational attainment, 52.9% of the students held a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 47.1% had a high school education or lower.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics table according to scale scores

Scale Scores	Smallest	The biggest	Cover	ss	Distortion	Kurtosis
Türkiye	1.25	5	3.98	0.79	-0.778	0.451

⁴³ William L. Hays, *Review of Linda S. Fidell, Barbara G. Tabachnick, Using Multivariate Statistics*, in “Contemporary Psychology: A Journal of Reviews”, Vol. 28, 1983, no. 8, p. 642, <https://doi.org/10.1037/022267> (Accessed on 09.05.2024).

Turkish Language	1.5	5	4.20	0.61	-1,338	1,191
Turkish Culture	1.13	5	4.15	0.79	-1.222	1,486
General Perception	1.29	5	4.09	0.69	-1.213	1,085

The primary focus of the study is on the perceptions formed after participating in courses at Yunus Emre Institutes in two different countries. The overall perception score and its sub-dimensions were determined by calculating the average of individual items. Generally, a score closer to 5 indicates a higher perception for each sub-dimension and overall. In this context, the overall perception scores range from 1 to 5, with an average of 4.09 and a standard deviation of 0.69. Specifically, perception scores for Turkey, Turkish, and Turkish culture were obtained on a scale of 1 to 5, with respective averages of 3.98, 4.20, and 4.15. These results suggest that individuals who attended Yunus Emre Institutes developed notably positive perceptions of Turkey, Turkish, and Turkish culture. The distribution of scores appears normal, as indicated by skewness values within the range of ± 1.5 for all scores.

To ensure statistical reliability, both parametric and non-parametric methods were employed to assess and compare the perceptions of Turkey, Turkish, and Turkish culture, as well as the overall perception scores among students enrolled at Yunus Emre Institutes, based on factors such as country, gender, and education level. While the distribution seems normal, the dataset size for gender is insufficient ($N < 25$) to utilize the same statistical method. Consequently, the Mann-Whitney U analysis method was applied for gender, whereas the independent groups t-test method was employed for comparing data across different countries and education levels.

Table 3. Comparison of the perception of Turkey, Turkish Language and Turkish Culture, and general perception scores of students studying at Yunus Emre Institutes by country, gender and education level

Group	Variable	N	Türkiye	Turkish Language	Turkish Culture	General Perception
			X \pm ss	X \pm ss	X \pm ss	X \pm ss
Country	N. Macedonia	51	3.81 \pm 0.85	4.12 \pm 0.66	4.01 \pm 0.89	3.95 \pm 0.77
	Serbia	51	4.15 \pm 0.7	4.28 \pm 0.54	4.3 \pm 0.66	4.23 \pm 0.58
	*t ₍₁₀₀₎		-2.205	-1.397	-1,859	-2.05
	p		0.03	0.166	0.066	0.043
Gender	Male	18	3.68 \pm 1.06	3.92 \pm 0.84	3.76 \pm 1.05	3.77 \pm 0.94

	Woman	84	4.04±0.72	4.26±0.53	4.24±0.71	4.16±0.61
	Z**		-1.261	-1.797	-1,784	-1.686
	p		0.207	0.072	0.074	0.092
Education Level	High school and below	48	4.14±0.72	4.3±0.52	4.29±0.68	4.23±0.58
	Undergraduate and above	54	3.84±0.84	4.11±0.67	4.03±0.87	3.97±0.76
	*t ₍₁₀₀₎		1,929	1,603	1,689	1.91
	p		0.057	0.112	0.094	0.059

****Mann -Whitney U statistics; *Independent Groups t test statistics; The reason for giving mean and standard deviation values for gender is more understandable; therefore, mean and standard deviation values are given instead of rank differences or median.**

As a result of processing the data using the statistical method mentioned above, statistically significant differences were observed between the perceptions of students about Turkey ($t_{(100)} = -2.205$, $p < .05$) and their overall perception scores in three different areas ($t_{(100)} = -2.05$, $p < .05$). It was also observed that this difference varied between Serbian and N. Macedonian participants. Based on the statistical analysis, Serbian students have higher average perception scores regarding Turkey and overall perception scores compared to N. Macedonian course attendees. However, the data also indicates that there is no significant difference in perception scores among students enrolled at Yunus Emre Institutes regarding Turkish language ($t_{(100)} = -1.397$, $p > .05$) and Turkish culture ($t_{(100)} = -1.859$, $p > .05$) in both Serbia and N. Macedonia. The survey results indicated that Turkish language and culture enjoy greater popularity in both Balkan countries compared to the popularity of the republic herself.

The survey data indicates a different perspective regarding gender and education level. Both according to gender and education level, the survey data does not indicate a significant difference between the general perception scores of students studying at Yunus Emre Institutes and Turkey. In the same fashion, the same thing holds true in the data for the Turkish and Turkish culture perception scores ($p > .05$). The data reveals that both males and females in Serbia and N. Macedonia share similar views about Türkiye, Turkish language and Turkish culture.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

One broad outcome of the survey data is that the cultural outreach initiatives led by Yunus Emre Institutes serve as a complementary aspect of Turkish diplomacy, filling gaps where traditional diplomatic methods fall short or seem too formal to establish connections with the local societies. In this innovative approach, the Turkish foreign office serves as a catalyst, facilitating a diverse team of cultural ambassadors who foster enduring societal bonds rather than just state-to-state relations. The survey findings underscore that this multifaceted diplomatic strategy, where cultural exchange complements formal diplomacy, proves more genuine and beneficial for both nations.

The data obtained from the survey indicate that Turkey, by embarking on a widespread cultural diplomacy campaign through Yunus Emre Institutes, has already taken a significant leap in the last decade whereby integrating its traditional tools of diplomacy with cultural elements. The survey findings suggest that the public diplomacy campaign proved quite successful as interest in Turkey, Turkish culture (such as music, cuisine and TV programs) and Turkish language has increased considerably in the last decade among Balkan people. The study also suggests that there is no scientifically meaningful difference between the interest toward Turkey, Turkish language and culture among high school graduates and that of the university degree holders. This means the outreach programs conducted by Yunus Emre Institutes are similarly welcomed by all education levels. It is understood from the figures that females show more interest in receiving Turkish education from Yunus Emre Institutes. This may be as a result of popular Turkish seasonal TV series. The survey, however, does not provide a clue about the actual impact of Yunus Emre Institutes in other regions and countries. In order to make a more comprehensive assessment regarding Turkey's cultural diplomacy initiatives, more research should be conducted simultaneously on different continents.

The research findings indicate that significant success in cultural diplomacy can only be achieved through meticulously planned and sustained strategic investment over decades. The current rate of budget increases and the growing number of personnel hired at Yunus Emre Institutes suggest that Turkey is committed to becoming a major player in the field of cultural diplomacy.

APPENDIX:

Questionnaire on Perception of Turkey, Turkish Language and Turkish Culture for Students Attending Turkish Courses at the Yunus Emre Institutes.

“Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement below, where 1 means ‘strongly disagree’ and 5 means ‘strongly agree.’ The questions will focus on your thoughts about Turkey, Turkish culture, and the Turkish language after receiving training from the Yunus Emre Institutes.”

1. Thanks to the Yunus Emre Institutes, I got to know Turkey more closely.
2. After getting in touch with the Yunus Emre Institutes, my negative thoughts about Turkey have diminished.
3. I chose the Yunus Emre Institutes because they taught me Turkish language and Turkish culture.
4. After taking the courses myself, I recommended the Yunus Emre Institutes to those around me.
5. The teachers at the Yunus Emre Institutes helped me develop a love for Turkey and the Turkish language.
6. Although there were other options, I specifically chose the Yunus Emre Institutes.
7. The Yunus Emre Institutes play a crucial role in promoting Turkey. If I hadn't encountered them, I wouldn't have had any knowledge about Turkey.
8. Thanks to the Institutes, I realized that learning Turkish was not as difficult as I had anticipated.
9. After learning Turkish, I would love to travel around Turkey.
10. Thanks to the Yunus Emre Institutes, after learning Turkish, I considered studying in Turkey.
11. I became interested in Turkish TV series and cinema to stay connected with Turkish culture.
12. I believe that learning Turkish is important for my career.
13. After receiving training from the Yunus Emre Institutes, I began to closely follow news about Turkey.
14. After getting in touch with the Yunus Emre Institutes, I developed an interest in Turkish brand products.
15. After attending the courses, I realized that Turkish is a widely spoken language around the world.
16. After learning Turkish, I began researching Turkish universities.
17. I get bored while learning Turkish.

18. I believe that cultural ties have been established between my country and Turkey with the help of the Yunus Emre Institutes.

19. If I had the opportunity, I would be willing to volunteer to teach Turkish.

20. I developed an interest in Turkish food after attending courses offered by the Yunus Emre Institutes.

21. I developed an interest in Turkish music, thanks to the Yunus Emre Institutes.

22. After attending courses at the Yunus Emre Institutes, my interest in traditional Turkish clothing has grown. I would love to dress like Turks.

23. The Yunus Emre Institutes sparked my interest in researching Turkish history.

24. After attending courses at the Yunus Emre Institutes, I began searching for educational scholarships in Turkey.

25. After the courses, I enjoy talking about Turkey with the teachers at the Yunus Emre Institutes.

26. After attending courses at the Yunus Emre Institutes, I believe it would be beneficial to have more Turkish educational institutions in our country.

27. After completing my education at the Yunus Emre Institutes, I took the Turkish proficiency exam.

28. I am not aware that the Yunus Emre Institutes teach Turkish in many different countries around the world.

29. After the education I received, I always think of positive things when Turkey is mentioned.

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