



# Gaining Soft Power through Hard Heritage: Turkey's Restoration Projects in Serbia

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**Abstract:** Ever since Joseph Nye introduced the concept of “soft power”, countries around the world started paying a lot more attention to this way of thinking about power and, in recent years, many started to find innovative ways to cultivate their own soft power. One of them was through heritage diplomacy, that is, the use of heritage in foreign policy to accomplish a certain goal. And while several countries actively engage in this practice, the Republic of Turkey is one of the most active ones. Turkey started cultivating its soft power way back in the 90's when, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, it established the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, or simply TİKA, in order to increase its influence on the Balkans, Caucasia and Central Asia, by providing aid to countries in these regions. Today TİKA has offices around the world and it organizes different kinds of projects, including heritage restoration projects, something it started doing back in 2008. Granted, the Agency predominantly funds the restoration of Ottoman monuments, which is why several authors point to this as proof that Turkey's foreign policy is being led by the alleged imperial “neo-Ottoman” agenda, as opposed to “strategic depth”, as formulated by the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu. However, regardless of the way you look at this practice, what is certain is that Turkey is defiantly one of the most important actors when it comes to heritage diplomacy since the country spends millions of dollars on restoration projects. In order to analyze why Turkey does this and speculate on the possible long-term effects of such endeavors, this paper looks the restoration projects that were carried out in Serbia over the years; six projects carried out between 2013 and 2019 that ended up costing more than 4 million US dollars.

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

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## Introduction

As is well known, ever since Joseph Nye introduced and popularized the concept of “Soft Power” (see Nye, 2004), decision makers have been paying a lot of attention to this aspect of power. Of course, there are numerous ways for a country to cultivate its Soft Power, and many of them have been around prior to Nye’s work on the changing nature of power in the modern world. However, Nye revolutionized the way scholars and decision makers think about power and, as a result, a lot more attention was paid to these activities that were already established practices, such as public and cultural diplomacy. As a result of this attention, in recent years whole new aspects of diplomatic relations emerged, such as “culinary diplomacy” (see Chapple-Sokol, 2013). Another one of these newer aspects is “heritage diplomacy”; an already established practice since cultural heritage played an important role in international relations for decades, yet not a widely acknowledged and studied aspect of contemporary diplomatic relations.

Tim Winter defined heritage diplomacy as a “set of processes whereby cultural and natural pasts shared between and across nations become ‘subject to exchanges, collaborations and forms of cooperative governance’” (Winter, 2015: 1007). Its most important aspect, he states, is providing aid to other countries in any form – conservation and heritage-management aid, technology transfer, capacity building, or institutional support – as this brings the people of the two countries closer together (Winter, 2016: 27). Yet despite the fact that heritage plays an important role in international relations, very little has been written on this topic.

It doesn’t fall into the field of heritage studies as it deals more with foreign policy and the interests of the state involved rather than the study of the heritage being used for heritage diplomacy. In addition, heritage diplomacy, much like cultural diplomacy, is pushed to the very margins of diplomatic relations between countries. As a result it doesn’t grab the attention of heritage studies scholars because it deals more with international relations nor of political science scholars since it is perceived as a minor subset of a marginalized part of diplomacy. Nevertheless, heritage diplomacy is taken very seriously by some countries. For instance, the United States funded the Iraq Cultural Heritage Project which aided the Iraq Museum in Baghdad, and maintains the Ambassadors Fund for Cultural Preservation which helps countries from around the world preserve their cultural heritage in order to demonstrate that the U.S. has respect for other cultures (Luke and Kersel, 2013: 5).



Evidently there is interest and several countries invest in heritage diplomacy regularly, which means that more attention should be paid to this aspect of diplomatic relations since it is clearly important to countries. Indeed, while very little has been written on this subject, many countries invested millions of Dollars into this aspect of diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century alone. One of these countries is the Republic of Turkey – a key player when it comes to heritage diplomacy and the topic of this paper which uses Serbia as a case study, analyzing Turkey's restoration projects in this country through media coverage of them, in order to provide much needed insight into how Turkey uses heritage to gain Soft Power because, as this study shows, this practice does indeed help it cultivate Soft Power over other countries quite a bit.

## **Turkey's Soft Power**

As previously stated, the concept of “Soft Power” was introduced and popularized by Joseph Nye during the 90's. Nye argues that the purpose of “power” in international relations is to get other countries to do what you want, but that there are two types of power which accomplish this goal in the modern world: “Hard Power”, which relies on economic and military force, and “Soft Power”, which relies on the way others perceive the country; Hard Power gets others to your side through intimidations and awards, while Soft Power does it by shaping their preferences so that they align with yours (Nye, 2004: 5). How effective is Soft Power, if it is at all, is a matter of debate. Some authors state that Soft Power isn't nearly as effective as Hard Power, others that it is all but useless, or that it is impossible for a country to “vied” Soft Power since it is immaterial, and others still that it is impossible to control and predict the influence of Soft Power which makes it hard to maintain (Fan, 2008: 152–154). However, despite the questionable extent of Soft Power, with the changes happening because of modern technology, public and cultural diplomacy, the way Soft Power is cultivated, they are becoming an ever increasing priority of numerous countries. One of these countries is Turkey which in January 2010 officially launched the Office of Public Diplomacy within the Turkish Prime Ministry, with the goal of coordinating activities intent on promoting Turkish culture in the broadest sense – Turkish arts, heritage, science, media, and tourism. This goal of promoting Turkish culture is accomplished through various programs, like journalism group programs, meetings with foreign journalists, promotional activities, panels and workshops etc. (Ekşi and Erol, 2018: 19).



Turkey also works on cultivating its Soft Power by engaging in cultural diplomacy through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its Turkish Cultural Centers abroad. These centers are established in order “to promote Turkish culture, language and art and to contribute to bilateral relations between Turkey and other countries, as well as to help Turkish citizens in their adaptation to the country in which they live”. Aside from them, Turkey also has the Yunus Emre Institute established in 2007 (although it started working two years later) which promotes Turkish culture and language across the World (Öner, 2013: 12) just like the United Kingdom’s British Council, Germany’s Goethe Institute and France’s Institut Français. However, even before such initiatives focusing on public diplomacy, Turkey was already cultivating its Soft Power through the work of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Turkish: *Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı* or simply TİKA).

## **The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency and heritage restoration**

TİKA was created in 1992 soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The goal of this government agency was to increase Turkey’s influence on the Balkans, Caucasia and Central Asia by providing aid to countries with historical ties to Turkey thus strengthening economic, cultural and educational ties. It accomplishes this goal by providing loans and grants for the development of those countries in addition to realizing cooperation projects in numerous fields including education, trade, and socio-cultural areas (Ekşi and Erol, 2018: 37). In time it grew so much that it became one of the most prominent institutions of humanitarian diplomacy in the World – TİKA spent over USD 3.6 billion on global projects by 2014 and greatly expanded its reach as it opened new offices in Asia, Europe and Africa; in 2002 the agency had 12 foreign offices but in 2016 it had 50 (Ekşi and Erol, 2018: 37–38). And while TİKA funds projects in the education sector, infrastructure, healthcare, agriculture and other branches of industry, a major aspect of its work today is the restoration of cultural heritage, something it started doing in 2008 (Kočan and Arbeiter, 2019: 179).

While it wasn’t planned initially for Turkey to restore cultural heritage in other countries, these projects became one of the most important aspects of TİKA’s work because, as the Minister of Culture and Tourism Mehmet Ersoy states, “the restoration and reconstruction of historical monuments in all territories we were historically present in provides a continuity of our



spiritual ties” (TİKAA, 2019: 5). Simply put, Turkey is especially incentivized to invest in heritage diplomacy as it is helping conserve and restore its own heritage abroad thus getting the people of the other country to engage with Turkish culture and reminding them of the shared past between their country and Turkey, while simultaneously providing aid to the other country – a great way to gain Soft Power. It can even be argued that the “continuing of spiritual ties” through restoration became the most important aspect of TİKA’s work in many countries where it possible to do so since, for instance, the Agency allocates between 50% and 70% of its assets for the restoration of monuments in Balkan countries (Kočan and Arbeiter, 2019: 182). However, perhaps the best way to illustrate to which extent Turkey is committed to preserving heritage is to look at the number of such projects it funds during any given year. For instance, 2014 was one of the most successful years when it comes to heritage diplomacy and in it alone TİKA funded over a dozen restoration projects on three continents:

- \* In Bosnia and Herzegovina: renovation of the State Archives, the Birth House of Alija İzetbegović and the opening of a Museum in the backyard of Živinice Cebari Mosque.

- \* In Albania: renovation of the Rrogozhinë Mosque, the Vlorë Neshad Pasha Mosque, and the restoration of Gjirokastër Inner Old City and several mosques from the Ottoman Era.

- \* In Montenegro: renovation of the Mekkei Mükerrreme Mosque.

- \* In Kosovo: renovation of Kosovo Mehmet Akif Ersoy Mosque, restoration of Lokac Mosque Fountain and equipment of the Ottoman Sinan Pasha Mosque.

- \* In Macedonia: landscaping of Ali Rıza Effendi Memorial House, restoration of Radanje Mahmut Aga Mosque as well as restoration and landscaping of Mustafa Kebir Chelebi Mosque.

- \* In Hungary: restoration of Ottoman Fountains and conservation work on the Szigetvár Turkish House which was turned into a museum.

- \* In Algiers: restoration of Ketchaoua Mosque.

- \* In Tunisia: restoration of the graves of Turkish sailors.

- \* In Palestine: preservation of Masjid-al-Aksa Archives and restoration and landscaping of Sultan Abdulhamid II Public Fountain, Jerusalem’s Old City Houses, and the Prophet Moses Place.

- \* In Lebanon: restoration of Hamidiye Public Fountain (see Yüksek, Yıldız and Ersoy, 2014).



However, it is evident the Agency predominantly funds the restoration of Ottoman heritage which brought it a lot of criticism over the years. Critics even adopted the term “neo-Ottomanism” since Turkey is trying to gain power over the territories of the former Ottoman Empire and funds the restoration of Ottoman monuments thus revitalizing Ottoman culture. As is to be expected, Turkish officials deny that the government has any such imperialistic agenda of mimicking or reviving the Ottoman Empire.

Ahmet Davutoğlu, the former Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, is one of them. He maintains that Turkey is not trying to gain imperialistic dominance over its former territories. As he puts it, Turkey simply chooses to have good relations with these countries because of geographic factors and historical ties (Kara, 2011: 38). İbrahim Kalın, an Islamic studies scholar and Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister of Turkey, notes that even the restoration of Ottoman heritage abroad shouldn't be interpreted as “neo-Ottomanism”. He states that Ottoman heritage is a result of joint effort of the many nationalities which made up the Ottoman Empire. Because of that, Ottoman heritage should be interpreted as a unifying force which brings these groups together through their shared experience with Turkey representing a “pivotal point of this heritage”; something which the country uses to its advantage (Kalın, 2011: 10). Others tend to disagree with this interpretation of Turkey's foreign policy.

A prominent critic is Darko Tanasković, former ambassador of Yugoslavia in Turkey and oriental scholar at the University of Belgrade. Tanasković states that Turkey has an evident neo-Ottoman agenda and that TİKA serves as an instrument to enforce that agenda (Tanasković, 2010: 31). Regarding heritage restoration, Tanasković agrees that Turkey is leveraging Ottoman heritage to its advantage but that the country's neo-Ottoman agenda is underlining this endeavor. (Tanasković, 2010: 104).

Whether Turkey is leveraging the fact that it is the “pivotal point” of Ottoman heritage and maintaining good relations with countries it has historical ties with or pursuing an imperialistic neo-Ottoman agenda is a matter of ongoing debate. However, the fact that the country is restoring Ottoman heritage in order to gain Soft Power is undisputable, after all no country provides aid “out of the kindness of its heart”, and the results of such attempts are especially noticeable when looking in Serbia.



## Turkey and heritage restoration in Serbia

Trying out a Soft Power approach based on cultural heritage in Serbia initially faced a lot of problems because the Serbian national identity is based on a strong antagonistic relationship with the Ottomans (see Šuica, 2010). The entire Ottoman Period is remembered in collective memory as the “500 years of Turkish yoke”; a myth which appeared in school textbooks during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and indoctrinated generations of children with the view of “them” [the Ottomans] enslaving “us” [Serbs] and setting “us” back hundreds of years (Milošević, 2011: 69–72).

As a result, people don't look back fondly on the Ottoman past and Ottoman heritage represents unwanted heritage; there are no large-scale research or promotional projects focused on Ottoman heritage and museums tend not to value it as much as heritage of other historical periods (see Sollie, 2012). It is worth looking at Serbia's capital, Belgrade, to illustrate how big of a problem this is: Belgrade was a large city and a cultural center for many centuries during the Ottoman rule. Tens of thousands of people lived in it; some researchers estimate as many as 98,000 inhabitants in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Fotić, 2005: 52). A significant portion of them were Muslims and there were dozens of mosques around the city but only one of them survived to the present as all others were purposely destroyed along with cemeteries soon after the Ottomans were expelled from Belgrade in 1862 (Šaljić, 2019: 76–77). The same process of demolishing mosques and monuments which reminded people of the “Turkish yoke” happened in all towns and cities which is precisely why even today the question of Ottoman heritage in Serbia is a sensitive one.

However, while there are a few problems in Serbian-Turkish relations today, such as the fact that Turkey acknowledges Kosovo as an independent state, there are strong diplomatic and economic ties which bring these two countries together (see Sarier, 2016). Because of these rather good relations, it was possible for Turkey to start investing in heritage restoration, something it cannot do in other countries where there is a similar “us” vs. “them” relationship like Greece; there are thousands of Ottoman monuments in Greece but the country doesn't allow Turkey to restore any of them (Mehmet, 2019).

To gain Soft Power over Serbia, TİKA opened its office in Belgrade on the October 26, 2009, but it started working out of the Embassy of Turkey in Belgrade in November 2010. In its first decade, the Agency provided aid

for various projects which were divided into distinct sectors: 24% of the project were in the field of education, 20% were in administrative and civil infrastructure, 19% social and cultural cooperation, 14% in the agricultural and animal husbandry sectors, 12% in the healthcare sector, and 9% in the preservation of cultural heritage (TİKAA, 2019: 11). Sure enough, heritage restoration is an important aspect of TİKA's work in Serbia but because of the specific relationship with Ottoman heritage in the country Turkey cannot restore just any monument. The ones it chooses to invest in need to be important for Serbian culture without invoking negative feelings associated with the Ottoman legacy. In addition, the monuments also need to be important to the local community and/or provide income for them through tourism. But while Turkey needs to be more careful when it comes to what it restores, over the years it did fund the restoration of several monuments.

### ***Monuments in Belgrade***

The first restoration project was carried out in Belgrade in 2013. The monument which was chosen was the Sheikh Mustafa's Türbe built in 1783 to house the body of dervish Mustafa Bagdađanin. It was chosen as it was one of just two such structures left in the capital and also because nobody took care of it despite the fact it was in the city center (M. Lj. P., 2013). As it proved to be successful in the sense that it didn't evoke the negative memory of the Ottoman period and was greeted well, more projects followed in the coming years.

Some of the monuments which were perfect for such an endeavor were those in the Belgrade Fortress due to its long and rich history. The Romans were the first to build on this site, after them the Byzantines built defenses here to guard their empire from barbarian attacks, and later on the Slavs settled the area before the Byzantine Empire seized it once more. The Fortress was also occupied by the Hungarians as well before Belgrade was finally handed over to Serbia by the Hungarian king in 1284. The Fortress's history was no less turbulent from this point on; it was modified several times by Serbian medieval rulers but ultimately the Ottomans conquered it in 1521 and used it as the center for gathering and supplying the army. After 1521, it played a major role in the conflicts between the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire up until the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when Serbia gained its independence (see Popović, 1991a).

As a result, today there are monuments from many historical periods in



the Belgrade Fortress, including the Ottoman period: the Damat Ali-Paša's Türbe and the Mehmed Paša Sokolović's Fountain. The Türbe was built in 1784 to house the body of the Grand Vizier, Silahdar Damat Ali Pasha, but after the Ottomans left the Fortress in 1867 it was used as a storage building and later on it housed a small museum of old weapons and trophies. Unfortunately, the Türbe was heavily damaged in 1915 during the bombing of Belgrade, so much so that it needed to be reconstructed; these works were carried out by the Municipality of Belgrade in the 1930's (Popović, 1991b: 63–68). Sokolović's Fountain predates the Türbe. It was built in 1576/77 but fell into disrepair. The first conservation attempts were carried out in 1938 when it was cleared of dirt while additional attempts were carried out in 1960 and 1979 (Popović, 1980: 71–74) yet even it wasn't preserved as well as it should have been.

Since the Belgrade Fortress is classified as a Monument of Culture of Exceptional Importance and one of the most visited touristic attractions of the city, naturally there was a lot of interest among tourists for the monuments within it. However, time took its toll on the Türbe and the Fountain, and as both represent Ottoman heritage, the authorities weren't interested in restoring them. Yet, as they are prominent Ottoman features of a well known Serbian landmark, their restoration was a perfect project for Turkey.

In 2017 Damat Ali-Paša's Türbe and Mehmed Paša Sokolović's Fountain were restored in a joint project carried out by the Municipality of Belgrade, the Cultural Monument Protection Institute of Belgrade and the Turkish civil engineering company Ekol Mimarlık. The endeavor was funded by TİKA which donated over half a million USD in addition to providing another USD 175,000 for the restoration of a nearby staircase designed by the first Serbian female architect, Jelisaveta Načić. A spokesperson from TİKA stated that the Agency funded the restoration of the staircase because "our goal isn't to invest and renovate only Ottoman monuments, but to help in the renovation of Serbian cultural heritage as well" (Vasiljević, 2017); however, it is questionable to which extent this is true since this was the only such project with the aim of restoring "Serbian heritage" and it cost just USD 175,000 as opposed to the millions provided for the restoration of Ottoman monuments.

### ***Ram Fortress***

Aside from the ones in Belgrade, TİKA also funded the much larger project of restoring the Ram Fortress. Ram was built towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century by the Ottomans on the banks of the Danube, some 100

kilometers east of Belgrade, in order to defend the empire from Hungarian attacks (Kiel, 2017: 165–166). This means that the Fortress can be considered entirely “Ottoman heritage” as its whole history is tied to the Ottomans. Since the Ram Fortress was in a bad condition and is classified as a Monument of Culture of Great Importance, its restoration proved to be a great opportunity to bring the two countries together.

Restoring Ram was a project unlike any other in the country. Archaeological excavations were carried out over the course of several years even before the restoration and conservation works were started. As a result, work on the Fortress lasted for several year before it was finally opened to visitors in 2019. However, in addition to this, TİKA also funded works around the Fortress to make it accessible to tourists and the restoration of a nearby Ottoman hammam and a caravanserai; the only such building preserved in Serbia. Because of the scope of the work, the project exceeded its initial budget and ended up costing over USD 1.5 million (D. N., 2019).

### ***Sultan Valida Mosque***

However, the restoration of the Ram Fortress wasn't the most expensive project in Serbia. During the same time, TİKA also funded the restoration of the Sultan Valida Mosque in Sjenica; the only imperial mosque in Serbia. It was built in 1870 under the patronage of the mother of Sultan Abdulaziz and its restoration was particularly useful as it is a cultural monument, but also a working mosque which is important to the local Muslim community – it proved to be a project not just of aid diplomacy and heritage diplomacy, but also of religious diplomacy since Islam was introduced to the region by the Ottomans, and by restoring this mosque Turkish authorities reminded the local Muslim community of their close relationship with Turkey. Because of that, no expense was spared on this project; works were carried out from 2017 to 2019 and ended up costing over 2 million USD (Destanović, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

In its first decade of work, TİKA spent well over 4 million USD on restoring monuments in Serbia. And while such restorations could have caused a lot of problems due to the negative memory associated with Ottoman heritage in this country, they were quite successful in bringing the two nations closer together.

The President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced that the



relations between Turkey and Serbia are “at best level in history” prior to his visit to the country in the fall of 2019 (Ozturk, 2019). The fact that the restoration projects were important in the strengthening of these relations is quite noticeable because, during that visit, Erdoğan inaugurated TİKA's projects in Sremska Raca village and in his speech stated that:

“Our historical and cultural heritage is our common wealth. Every work in this land is a monument to our solidarity and cooperation. We will build our future together with inspiration, power, and courage from the past. The last example of this is the Ram Fortress, one of the pearls of the Danube River, whose restoration was completed by TİKA. I believe that this wonderful example of our cultural heritage will contribute to the tourism potential of the region and I hope it will be beneficial” (TİKAb, 2019).

It is evident that Turkey is using the presence of Ottoman heritage in other countries to its advantage. As President Erdoğan stated himself, Turkey is restoring it not to preserve its own culture (admittedly that must play an important part) but to help other countries – Turkey is restoring monuments thus providing aid to countries who cannot fund the costly restoration themselves, but those countries will also benefit from these monuments long-term because they will increase their tourism potential. However, such projects are much more important for Turkey's relations with the people of other countries than for its relations with the governments of those countries.

By funding the restoration of monuments in another country Turkey is reminding the people of that county that they share a common culture thus bringing them closer. This was proven to be successful in Serbia even before any large-scale restoration projects were carried out. Back in 2010 the people of Serbia were already excited about the possibility that Turkey might fund the restoration of Serbia's heritage. As the country couldn't fund such restoration projects, the people agreed that cultural heritage should be restored no matter who is funding the endeavor (Andrić, 2010).

It is evident that these restoration projects, combined with other aspects of Turkish Soft Power, such as the wide popularity of Turkish TV shows in the Balkans, which have been linked to the revision of the negative collective memory about the Ottoman Empire in the region (Ağırseven and Orki, 2017: 847), are bearing fruit. Looking at Serbia, it is clear that such actions go hand in hand as popular historical TV shows like *Muhteşem Yüzyıl* get the people



to re-examine their views about the Ottoman past since they “see history” from the view of what they interpret to be the “Other”. And so, precisely because of such joint actions, despite the fact that several generations of Serbs were taught in school that Turkey is the enemy of Serbia and Serbian national identity, today people are questioning this notion.

By restoring Ottoman monuments, Turkish authorities are reminding the people of Serbia that they share a common past, problematic as it may be. Because of such systematic efforts on Turkey’s side, Serbs are coming to see Turkey not as an enemy, not necessarily as a friend, but as a country that shares a common culture with Serbia due to a long intertwined history – a complete turnaround in perception as, for centuries, Serbian national identity was based on resisting Ottoman influence and Ottoman culture; such is the power of well planned heritage diplomacy efforts which can help a country gain significant Soft Power over another.

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