Despite Turkey being a candidate-state for membership to the EU since 1963, EU-Turkish relations have been strained by geopolitical and cultural differences. In 2005, after over 40 years of waiting, accession negotiations with Turkey have finally started. However, the majority of EU citizens are against a Turkish membership. This negative perception of Turkey poses a threat to its EU-aspirations, as the accession will depend on the ratification by the member states and, ultimately, the opinion of their respective publics. The dispute over the Eastern Mediterranean, as well as the freeze in accession negotiations have caused a rift between both the EU and Turkish governments and their respective citizens. Cooperative relations, however, in the area of defense, trade and migration between the EU and Turkey, as well as constructive cultural diplomacy, were maintained throughout the years. Now, that cultural diplomacy is threatened by recent events regarding the change of the status of Hagia Sophia from a museum to a mosque. The Decree of the Turkish State Council to reverse the decision made by Ataturk, by which Hagia Sophia - an UNESCO protected world heritage site - was proclaimed a museum in 1934, and turn it back into a mosque, has set back Turkish cultural diplomacy with the EU. This move by Turkey was seen as radical in the EU and opened an old paradigm of the cultural differences between the two parties/societies.

EU’s cultural diplomacy strategies

Culture is a component of politics that, at given times, can be used in conflict-solving efforts. Parallel to the dynamic global processes, the outdated instruments of public diplomacy are also being transformed and adapted to the new forms of cooperation. These are new methods of networking, where the forms of cultural expression can affect the formatting of the new political daily agenda. As a result of these new trends, the international stage has been modified with powerful multinational and transnational models of intercultural dialogue and cooperation. It is evident that cultural diplomacy emanates when a
cultural project affects the betterment of a concrete international political plan and goal. Cultural diplomacy can assist governments to achieve a finer synergy between different elements of a particular international political goal. Thus, in order to build a cultural coexistence in an age of expanding diplomatic development the European Union created the European platform of cultural diplomacy based on the concept of open borders, so allowing cultural exchange and affirmation of cultural diversity and sustainability. It is an evident priority of the European international policy. Already in 2007, the European Commission proposed the European agenda for culture in a globalizing world, which incorporated a concept for promotion of culture in the international relations of the Union. This proposal also integrated the diversity of cultural expression, and high quality artistic and creative industries. When the Treaty of Lisbon came into force coupled with the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS) new possibilities for the EU to improve its international cultural relations were created. The EU has established 139 offices and delegations all over the world that network and implement the activities of the cultural platform, form advisory boards for cultural politics and develop programs for cultural leadership training, thus greatly improving international cultural relations. In November 2015, the European Council called upon the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy to prepare a strategic approach towards culture within European foreign relations under a set of guiding principles. Using these guidelines, together with the promotion of the strategy for international cultural relations from June 2016, the European Union opened a new path for European cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, within the EU, a strategy for the culture of Europe 2020 was promoted as an action document for public and cultural diplomacy. In December 2019, as part of the Creative Europe Program (2014-2020) and entirely funded by the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA II), the European Commission launched grants for Cultural Cooperation Projects in the Western Balkans, so “strengthening cultural cooperation with and competitiveness of cultural and creative industries in the Western Balkans”. Additionally, in January 2020, a separate call for proposals for a grant scheme for common cultural heritage was announced, to promote both cultural preservation and the dialogue between Turkey and the EU. In light of recent tensions between the EU and Turkey, the EU should ensure this grant scheme is implemented to its full potential and should, furthermore, enable the participation of Turkish citizens and civil society organisations in other EU funded schemes, in the areas of art, language, music, etc. It is imperative to try to increase the engagement of Turkish audiences through online media platforms and cultural exchange programmes, so as to promote European culture and values, and to rebuild the bridge between the two societies.

A look at Turkey’s own positive cultural diplomacy efforts

A unique example of the influence of a strategic foreign policy doctrine in which cultural politics are prominently included, is found in the fundamental book by the former Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu – “Strategic Depth”. Unlike any other political scientist or politician, Davutoğlu openly writes about the power of culture and other forms of public diplomacy in gaining sympathy and forming friendships with the rest of the world: “The most important unifying factor between the permanent and variable components of the state power is culture. It’s an element which contains psychological, socio-political and economic mechanisms, based on a certain system of values created by them existing in a certain period of time (historical period), perception by the human factor (population) of affiliation and identity.”1 The cultural phenomenon entitled “Turkish Cultural Expansion” in the era of Davutoğlu created a strong impact, and raised the interest and admiration of many analysts and theoreticians of public and cultural diplomacy.

The spectrum of Turkish cultural activities envelops all the territories of the once mighty Ottoman Empire. It is evident that the Turkish Republic’s mechanisms of cultural diplomacy are the promotion of the Turkish language, visual arts, media and sports. These are promoted by Turkish foundations, the most influential being: the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA), the Foundation of Yunuz Emre, the Maarif foundation, the Anadolu Agency and others. Another example of good policy in cultural diplomacy is the wide and fruitful activities of
The essence of the existence of cultural diplomacy is in the belief of respecting the moral values of different cultures.

The clash of cultures and potential rapprochement through better cultural diplomacy?

The “soft power” of Turkey is, to a large extent, predetermined by its history, culture and geographical position. Namely, its historical heritage and cultural ties to its neighboring countries led to today’s high level of mutual relations. Before the establishment of the Turkish Republic, its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, extended over three continents and lasted almost 500 years. The Turkish sultans were also considered caliphs and Turkey was seen as the center of religious rule in the Islamic world. Due to these factors, the influence of Turkish “soft power” has spread in modern times from the Balkans to the Middle East and Central Asia.

In the sphere of Turkish geopolitical interests, Ankara has expanded its influence and created new instruments of “soft power” over Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. The new Turkish “awakening” caused by the end of the Cold War and the challenges and opportunities created by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, sparked incisive interest in the new Turkish diplomacy not only from its immediate surroundings, but also globally. Turkish cultural exchange, is highlighted for example by the export of films, TV series, documentaries, and music. Without doubt, globalization in a time of economic and cultural exchange increasingly reflects upon changes in contemporary societies. It is also certain that some tendencies of globalization stimulated separatism and renewed new forms of discrimination. The idea of the creation of one integrated world implies the creation of one global culture. This approach of conceptualized collectivism, when it becomes indiscriminate, causes romanticism and in some cases radicalization in different societies. It awakens an instinct to emphasise a group’s uniqueness and particular values. The essence of the existence of cultural diplomacy is in the belief of respecting the moral values of different cultures. Without doubt, Turkey will not back down on its economic and political reasons and excuses for prolonging the process of Turkish integration. Centurieslong cultural ties between the East and the West can be modified during the tectonic changes in the globalized world. In the third decade of this millennium, we are witnessing new global processes and facing a remaining dilemma: Whose concept will endure?
Perceived cultural divides that stem from the above-mentioned historical and geopolitical polarisation are currently aggravating contemporary political disputes between the EU and Turkey. However, throughout such periods of pronounced political division, it is paramount to keep in mind that Turkey remains an important and strategic ally to the EU. Therefore, it is advisable to reduce antagonistic rhetoric in statements by public officials of member-state governments and EU institutions, in order to maintain future prospects of cooperation. Due to the long lasting impasse in opening accession negotiations with Turkey, public support in Turkey for EU membership has declined drastically below the 50% threshold. The perception that the EU “does not want Turkey” has dominated the narrative among the public to the extent that there is a danger of alienating Turkish citizens irreversibly. This would be highly undesirable for the EU, as it would lose its foothold in Turkish society to a level where it would no longer be in a position to exercise its foreign policy goals. While the two sides can disagree on important policy issues, and a certain level of animosity is occasionally expressed between EU and Turkish officials, it is paramount for the EU to be watchful so as to avoid creating the impression among Turkish citizens that this animosity extends to them as well.

References

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