

Public Diplomacy and Democratic Backsliding in Turkey: A Retrospective Look at Government Investment in Soft Power

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Abstract: This paper discusses the development of public diplomacy policies and their implementation by the Turkish government through aggregate investment data and within the broader regional and global context in which the country's policies evolved. Its main aim is to show how regime type is interrelated with foreign policy in general and public diplomacy as a branch of it. Turkey is a fruitful case because the country has experienced significant democratic backsliding since 2011, unlike the first period when the Justice and Development Party (henceforth AKP) came to power in 2002. The discussion over the data on budgets of various institutions responsible for adopting public diplomacy policies shows that cultural and educational public diplomacy received a major increase in investment, especially within the last six years, whereas the budgets for other institutions have fluctuated over the last ten years. Although the paper's purpose was to provide a comprehensive picture of Turkey's public diplomacy throughout the AKP rule since 2002, its main data source remains limited to the last decade. Thus, the availability and transparency of the data and its indication of the relationship between regime qualities and public diplomacy policies are also noted.

Keywords: public diplomacy, authoritarianism, democratic backsliding, Turkey.

Public diplomacy and soft power seeking have proved to be effective competencies in the globalized world of the 21st Century. Studies that have delved into this second, soft face of power have acknowledged its effects on international relations through developing measures for policy effectiveness and discussing its role in the changing world's political arena. With the rise of a new wave of authoritarianism, a critical line of research on public diplomacy policies has shown that public diplomacy is indeed employed by countries who face democratic backsliding or experience consolidated authoritarianism, and the strategies adopted qualitatively differ according to the regime a country has. However, most of these studies consider already established authoritarian regimes (e.g., Qatar) or the competitors of global hegemony against the West, namely Russia and China, to show how differing domestic political values and cultures from the Western world lead to an emergence of a different kind of soft power-seeking.

As a strong actor in its region and its relatively unique position against the autocratic regimes in Middle Eastern countries, Turkey has experienced a dramatic change in its foreign policy and public diplomacy throughout this rise of the new authoritarianism. Being affected by the wave itself, the democratic backsliding Turkey experienced since the 2010s within the now 20-

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year single-party rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) allows us to look at different cases comparatively and trace *how* and *why* public diplomacy policies are sought within one case throughout authoritarianization.

To begin the discussion on the relationship between domestic change and its effects on soft power-seeking, this paper first compares Turkey's last 20 years in terms of its investments and strategies regarding public diplomacy and discusses how these changes relate to regime change. The rest of the article is as follows: In the next section, we discuss how 21st Century public diplomacy came to be and grew in terms of actors implementing it, consider Turkey's position at the beginning of this era, and show how the first decade of AKP rule changed Turkey's foreign policy strategies through emphasizing soft power tools. We then elaborate on the process of backsliding in Turkey's political values, the emergence of a one-man regime, and how domestic politics go hand in hand with Turkey's aims abroad. Last, we highlight the public diplomacy investments of AKP rule, concentrating on the second decade, and show how the institutions established for public diplomacy fit within such an authoritarian environment.

Public Diplomacy in the 21st Century

The World in Whose Image?

Seeking soft power through foreign policy marked 20th-century diplomacy in the context of the Cold War. It remained an essential tool for the two great powers of the period, the USSR and the U.S., to affect other nations regarding public opinion, policy, and positions in the international arena. While hard power showed its hand through the emergence of proxy wars in various regions of the world, the aftermath of World War 2 restrained the two poles from directly engaging with each other with guns and ammunition. Yet traditional diplomatic practices were tense and fragile due to ideological "no compromise" strategies.

In such a context, an enlarging policy area relying on the effective conveyance of political messaging by aiming for a more direct way of communicating with foreign audiences became dominant. This situation led to a deepening competition in gaining soft power—through which one can gain support, loyalty, and material profit by projecting a positive image of one's nation to another (Keohane & Nye, 1998; Nye, 2008). The scholarly work on public diplomacy flourished in such a policy space, leading to the widely acknowledged definition of the term put forward by Tuch (1990) as "a government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture, as well as its national goals and current policies" (p. 3). Soft power, public diplomacy's main aim, as defined by Nye (2002) is the ability "to effect the outcomes you want, and if necessary, to change the behavior of others to make this happen" (p. 4).

Public Diplomacy in the Multipolar World and Turkey's Position

However, understanding soft power and public diplomacy, in terms of only the Cold War, proved to be a great mistake as soon as "the end of history" was declared with the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Cull, 2009; Fukuyama, 1992). Public diplomacy, as a possible competence of any state seeking international prestige and power, became an essential part of the foreign policy toolbox of the new international relations paradigm. When coupled with the development of communication technologies and the world's interconnectedness, soft power strategies and public diplomacy policies began attracting immense amounts of investment (Gilboa, 2008).

Among emerging middle powers of the new multipolar arena, Turkey has increasingly turned to public diplomacy as a tool to address its negative image and project its influence globally and regionally. Although its history with soft power goes as far back as the Ottoman Empire (Demir, 2015), the professionalization of the practice of public diplomacy was only reinforced during the early 2000s with the AKP government. Since AKP came to power in 2002, Turkey has harnessed its soft power to strengthen its relationships with traditional allies and engage with previously neglected regions, such as the Balkans and the Middle East (Bošković et al., 2015; Tür, 2015). In the Middle East, Turkey has faced a particular challenge in attempting to shift perceptions of the country in neighboring nations due to its military-based strategy.

In the last two decades, one backbone of the new foreign policy has been to change these perceptions. Among the important aspects of the efforts has been the development of a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy that places greater emphasis on cultural initiatives. Through these efforts, Turkey has sought to establish its presence on the global stage and bolster its influence in the region. By using public diplomacy and cultural initiatives, Turkey has attempted to improve its standing in the eyes of its neighbors and establish itself as a respected regional power and a true ally of Western countries. The next section explores the rise of the AKP government's use of soft power strategies since 2002 and how these strategies connect to the democratic backsliding the country experienced starting from the 2010s.

Start of Something New: Public Diplomacy of Turkey under the AKP Government

A Paradigm Shift in Turkish Foreign Policy and the Professionalization of Public Diplomacy

The AKP government of the early 2000s created a new image of Turkey as a liberal-conservative democracy, and the identity made Turkey a “model country” for other MENA countries (Bilge, 2016, pp. 1–2). Between 2002 and 2011, the AKP government achieved much more quickly: becoming a loyal and trusted NATO ally, implementing liberal policies with a developing economy after the 2001 crisis, and improving relations with the E.U. while keeping its religious emphasis intact. While the stabilized economy provided an environment for democratic reforms to flourish, it also allowed the AKP government to prove its competence in soft power-seeking, which Turkey struggled with for decades (Çevik & Seib, 2015). Yet the efforts of AKP to confront the country's past, one filled with coup d'états, and its willingness to put the country in line with E.U. *acquis* guaranteed AKP's role in stabilizing and expanding democracy in Turkey. While the AKP government has faced opposition due to its religious character, which is perceived to contradict the founding values of the republic, the international image it gained through its liberalizing reforms in various areas, as well as the country's increasing wealth, made AKP more popular, leading to the expansion of its base, including liberals, democrats, secular reformists and the Kurds (The Economist, 2016).

During this period, Turkey's foreign policy underwent significant changes, in line with what had been happening domestically, with the adoption of public diplomacy and soft power as two important pillars. The democratization reforms and the E.U. accession process provided more domestic freedoms and increased communication channels with the West and Middle East. With the latter, however, AKP sought a “zero problems” policy with its neighboring countries, changing how Turkey approached the Middle Eastern region, which had been security-based and military-minded (Altunışık & Martin, 2011). In sum, the use of force and threat in foreign policy decreased, while soft power tools, such as dialogue, international law, multilateralism, and institutionalization, gained more importance. Thus, Turkish foreign policy tools moved away from the military and

towards establishing state and nonstate institutions dedicated to public diplomacy (Çevik & Seib, 2015; Çevik, 2020). AKP's aim to increase soft power through efficient international communication and cooperation during this period shows that the government's public diplomatic acts sought maximum gains through minimal costs.

Turkey's economic improvements, democratization reforms, and increased freedoms in the 2002-2011 period enabled the country to increase its soft power not only in the West but also in the Islamic world and globally. One of the notable indicators of their rising soft power was Turkey's achievement of provisional membership in the United Nations Security Council, garnering support from 151 states in the U.N. General Assembly in 2008 (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Foreign Affairs [MFA], 2008). Another noteworthy accomplishment occurred previously in June 2004 when Professor Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu was elected as the Secretary-General of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). İhsanoğlu, the first Turkish citizen to hold this office, assumed his duties on 1 January 2005 and served for two terms until the end of 2013 (MFA, n.d.). However, these developments began to change after 2011 when the AKP government moved toward what can be called "Erdoğanism."

Authoritarianization and Public Diplomacy

While Turkey continued to carry out the negotiation process with the EU, implement democratization reforms, and attempt to eliminate military tutelage over civilian politics, Erdogan turned the tables in its favor within a few years, transforming the system into a type of hybrid regime that can best be defined as "competitive authoritarianism," as coined by Levitsky and Way (2002). As stated in the term competitive authoritarianism, Erdoğanism did not remove the formal democratic institutions of the state; instead, it tilted the game of politics so that the AKP government had an asymmetric advantage against opposition forces. These changes included steady funding of pro-government media, spying on, threatening, legally hazing, or imprisoning journalists, opposition politicians, activists, and other government critics through the use of state institutions.

In the 2011 election, achieving unequivocal and substantial success by garnering the support of nearly half of the overall electorate in a steady increase, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan started to neutralize both social and political groups opposing him and his former allies. After the Gezi Park protests and the corruption investigations in 2013, Erdoğan's attack against the government critics became much more visible, as he blamed every opposition movement for conspiring to overthrow him and his government (Caman, 2021; Demir, 2021). As a result of this sharp deterioration in freedom of speech, Turkey's status declined from "Partly Free" to "Not Free" in the annual Freedom House report in 2014, receiving the worst score it had received since AKP came to power in 2002 (Freedom House, 2014).

The failed coup attempt in 2016 gave Erdoğan the opportunity to become more powerful than ever before and finally established his one-man rule (Dalacoura, 2017). Referred to as "a gift from God" by Erdogan himself, the coup attempt gave him an excuse to carry out a widespread purge and crackdown on all opposition while expanding his hold over the state by declaring a long-lasting state of emergency (Lord, 2018, p. 276). Soon after, Turkish citizens approved a new presidential system with a Presidential Reform Referendum in 2017 and re-elected Erdoğan as president in June 2018. According to the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) Country Report (2020), the new presidential system, characterized by an excessively powerful president, has turned Turkey into a "de facto dictatorship" in a short period. This transformation in Turkish democracy had an enormous effect on Turkey's foreign policy and also on public

diplomacy. Under the new structure, the public diplomacy policies of the country were reshaped to promote and advance Erdoğanism, and Turkey re-adopted hard power as the main pillar of its foreign policy (Çevik, 2020).

Despite its new hard power approach, Turkey continued its attempts to reach out to foreign audiences through public diplomacy tools, establishing new institutions with diverse soft power strategies to keep its effort constant and expand its regional focus to other parts of the world. What marked this transition in public diplomacy for Turkey, similar to the transitions seen in Russia and China over the last decades, was an unbalanced increase in foreign aid tied to the discourse around the “greatness” of Turkey as a country competing with Western democracies (d’Hooghe, 2005; Repnikova, 2022), for a more general conceptualization of a “state-centred, hierarchical model of diplomacy” (Hocking, 2005). While it may be seen as understandable in the international arena, this approach helped to build a domestic myth, one that is sustained through propaganda, about how Turkey stands on equal ground with other powers in the world. Thus, public diplomacy became a tool for preserving the regime, a euphemism for propaganda (Friedrich & Brzezinski, 1965; Leonard et al., 2002). There are indeed significant similarities between public diplomacy and propaganda, especially in terms of aims. However, given that public diplomacy is a two-way communication that includes the necessity of listening rather than a hierarchical one-way flow of ideas (Melissen, 2005), culture and values help us understand when and why Turkey changed its form of communicating with foreign audiences and where it gets closer to authoritarian countries mentioned above. There are two ways through which the AKP government decided to switch from one view to another.

The first paths link the government’s choices on public diplomacy policies to its position in the region. The cultural identity of being a “model country” that the AKP government promoted in its foreign policy has also shaped the region’s investments in cultural diplomacy tools. This cultural turn entailed expanded networks with Muslim and Turkic countries (Adar et al., 2021; Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, TİKA, n.d.). This approach, which is also partially in line with the uses of public diplomacy by another new wave of authoritarian countries, required Turkey to prioritize audiences with which it shares historical and cultural bonds. The new audiences of Turkey’s public diplomacy, those countries where Turkish culture and ideals are relatively easier to penetrate, signified a turning away from Turkey’s efforts to cooperate and develop relationships with established liberal democracies and the West (Taş, 2020, 2022). Instead, it sought prestige and soft power from mostly less democratic and underdeveloped countries, accordingly ideologizing the content of its public diplomacy in a way that was not necessarily in line with democratic values.

The second path that led Turkey to switch its public diplomacy strategy in line with its authoritarian turn is the re-emergence of the reliance on hard power. Turkey’s high military spending, military bases on multiple fronts, and a growing military industry (Adar et al., 2021; Taskınoy, 2021) became one of the core fields that shaped the AKP government’s foreign policy in the last decade. While heavy investment was allowed for the military operations, the government did not reduce budgetary funds from its soft power institutions either. The growing burden of standing on hard and soft power rang the alarm for Turkey’s economy in the first half of the 2010s. While heavy investment was allowed for military operations, the government did not reduce budgetary funds from its soft power institutions either. While, in the first half of the 2010s, economic deterioration required budget cuts in both areas, the AKP government instead simultaneously increased the resources it allocated to fund both military operations and foreign aid, as well as various public diplomacy tools. However, these attempts did not have the same positive

impact they once did, as Turkey lost its global reputation as an exemplary democracy in the region and turned into another authoritarian regime in the Middle East.

Turkey's public diplomacy policies would now reflect this transition and resemble other authoritarian countries (e.g., Russia, see Rutland & Kazantsev, 2016). The falling efficiency of the country's public diplomacy policies can be understood in simple terms, according to Murrow (1963, as cited in Cull, 2008a): "Truth is the best propaganda and lies are the worst. To be persuasive, we must be believable; to be believable, we must be credible; to be credible, we must be truthful. It is as simple as that" (p. 189). While Turkey sought to increase its regional power through the military, it also tried to increase dialogue. In a way, Turkey has played two sides since the start of its democratic backsliding. The country has played these dual roles in a time of worsening conditions for Turkish citizens, and the diplomatic approach has brought no significant benefits for the country. As Turkey moved away from the rational actor it was until 2011, the costs have surpassed the benefits. In the next section, we highlight this point through a descriptive look at the second decade of AKP's rule and public diplomacy investment and compare those figures to Turkey's GDP per capita for those years.

AKP's Public Diplomacy Investments

The state institutions described in this section have played a critical role in advancing Turkey's cultural and economic interests abroad with changing emphasis. This section introduces these institutions, their main use for the establishment, and how government investment in them has changed. Although AKP has used several different tools to engage with foreign audiences—including listening, exchanging, and international broadcasting in line with Cull's (2008b) taxonomy—the data provided on these practices are either non-existent or not transparent. Thus, we decided not to include them for reliability. Moreover, while we could not derive retrospective data for the entire period of AKP governance from 2002, we provide a detailed picture of the second decade of AKP's rule and its public diplomacy investments. All data presented below were collected from the respective institutions' yearly performance reports. The institutions are presented in the following order: the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (henceforth TİKA), OECD ODA Funds, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (henceforth AFAD), the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Turkish Maarif Foundation.

TIKA

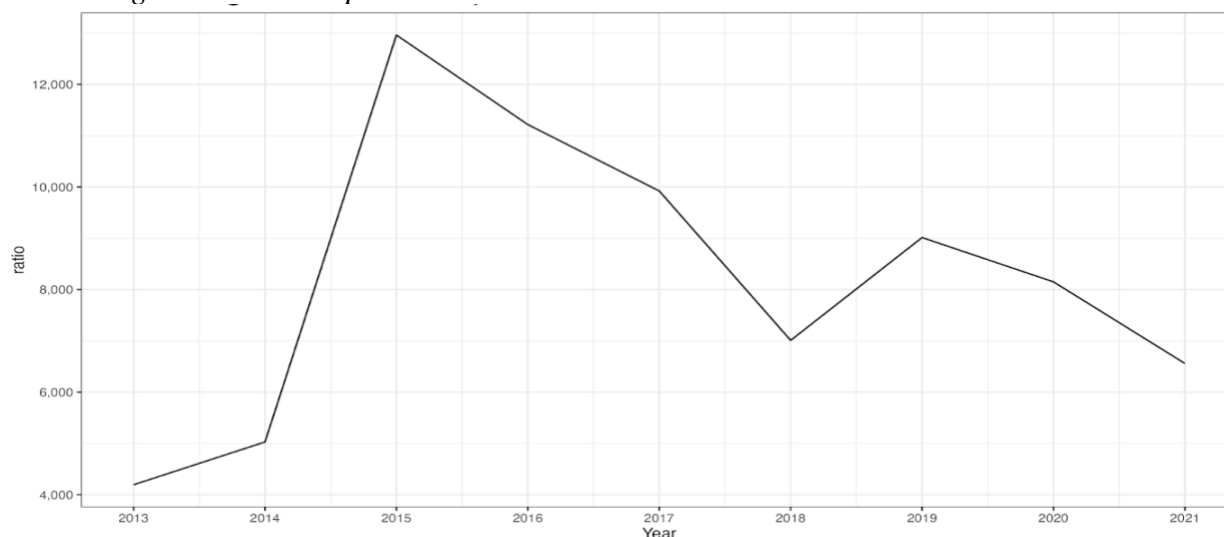
TIKA, which has been operating for many years, is at the forefront of these institutions. It is a Turkish government agency that operates officially under Turkey's Ministry of Culture and Tourism. The agency was established in 1992 to coordinate cooperation and increase communication with the Central Asian and Caucasian states, which had gained their independence with the dissolution of the USSR. The mission and vision of the presidency are formally defined on its website respectively as follows: "Realizing the sustainable project that will carry the borders of Turkey's international development cooperation to the future, with the common and cultural dream of economic, social and human development of countries." and "Becoming an effective pioneer organization that can suggest fast and permanent solutions to local and global problems, using the methods and tools of development cooperation" (TİKA, n.d.).

While TİKA is older than the AKP government in Turkey, its institutional structure has experienced major reforms, initially leading to a reconstruction of its organizational capacity to achieve a more flexible and faster decision-making procedure. With this reconstruction, TİKA has

also made its previous yearly reports unavailable to the public. Thus, we present information about its work since 2013.

Figure 1 shows the relationship between the budget of TIKA and the GDP per capita of Turkey between 2013 and 2021. This relationship, while not having a steady rhythm, was at its highest in 2015. Although the proportion of TIKA's budget to GDP per capita decreased over time, the institution continued to suffer from a lack of transparency. In the Sayıştay (the exchequer and audit department of the Turkish state) reports of 2016 and 2017, TIKA did not report the deposits earned from bidding contracts, and the institution exceeded the limit for the funds it could allocate for advance payments abroad (Karakas, 2019).

Figure 1
TIKA Budget-GDP Per Capita Ratio 2013-2021



OECD ODA Funds

According to the OECD-DAC's data, Turkey's foreign aid budget has consistently increased in recent years, while other OECD-DAC countries have either reduced their budgets or kept them relatively stagnant (OECD, 2023). See Figure 2 below for how Turkey's ODA spendings compare to per capita GDP throughout AKP governments between 2002 and 2021. Furthermore, Turkey's foreign aid has significantly focused on countries in its region, particularly in the Middle East and Africa. This increase parallels the civil war in Syria that started in 2011, where the regional concentration of Turkey's foreign aid rockets significantly until 2020.

However, the reasoning that the increase in Turkey's foreign investments can be explained only through the Syrian war would be lacking. Figure 3 shows the overall increase in funds allocated to Asia, including Turkic countries, as well as the increased dependence of Turkey's public diplomacy on lower-income and least-developed countries. While the news outlets that regularly report on Turkey's foreign policy emphasize the opening to African countries as well (Eyrice Tepeciklioğlu, 2017), investments in Africa are only observable in different institutional funds, as we explore below. These regional choices are quite in line with both the domestic discourse around the culturally and religiously based diplomacy aims and the international interest in these regions, including the competition to attract the underdeveloped regions posed mainly by China.

Figure 2
Net ODA Spendings-GDP Per Capita Ratio 2002-2021

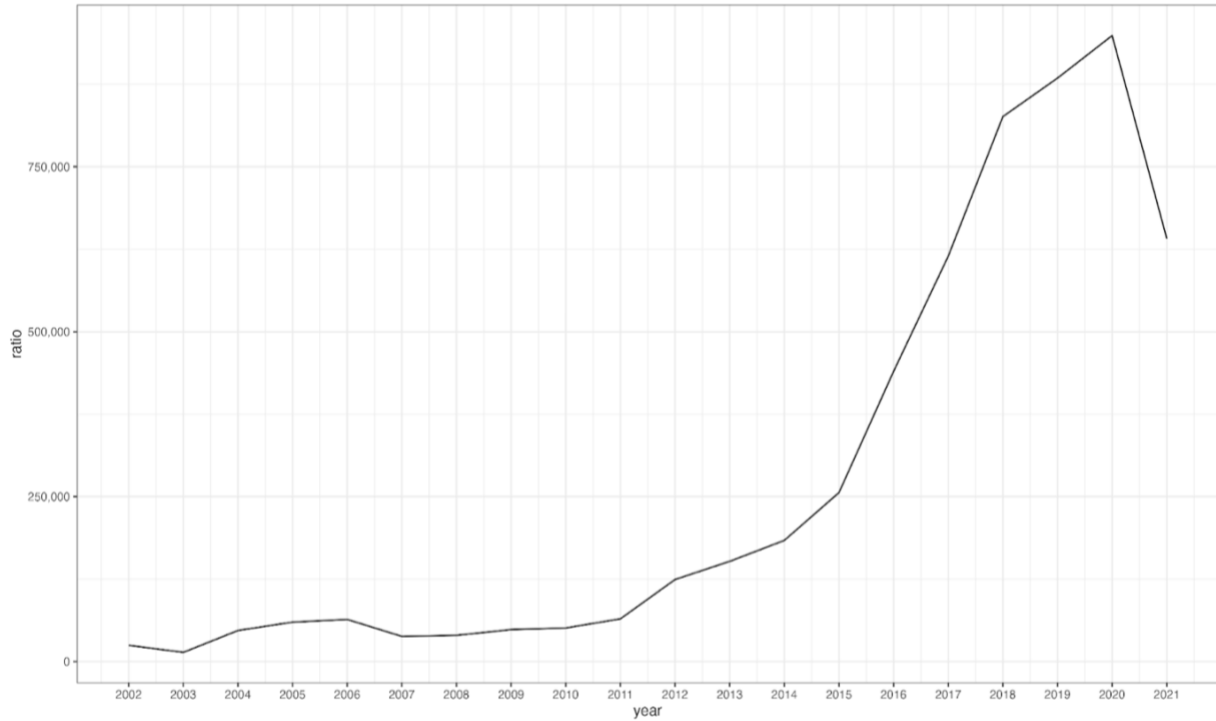
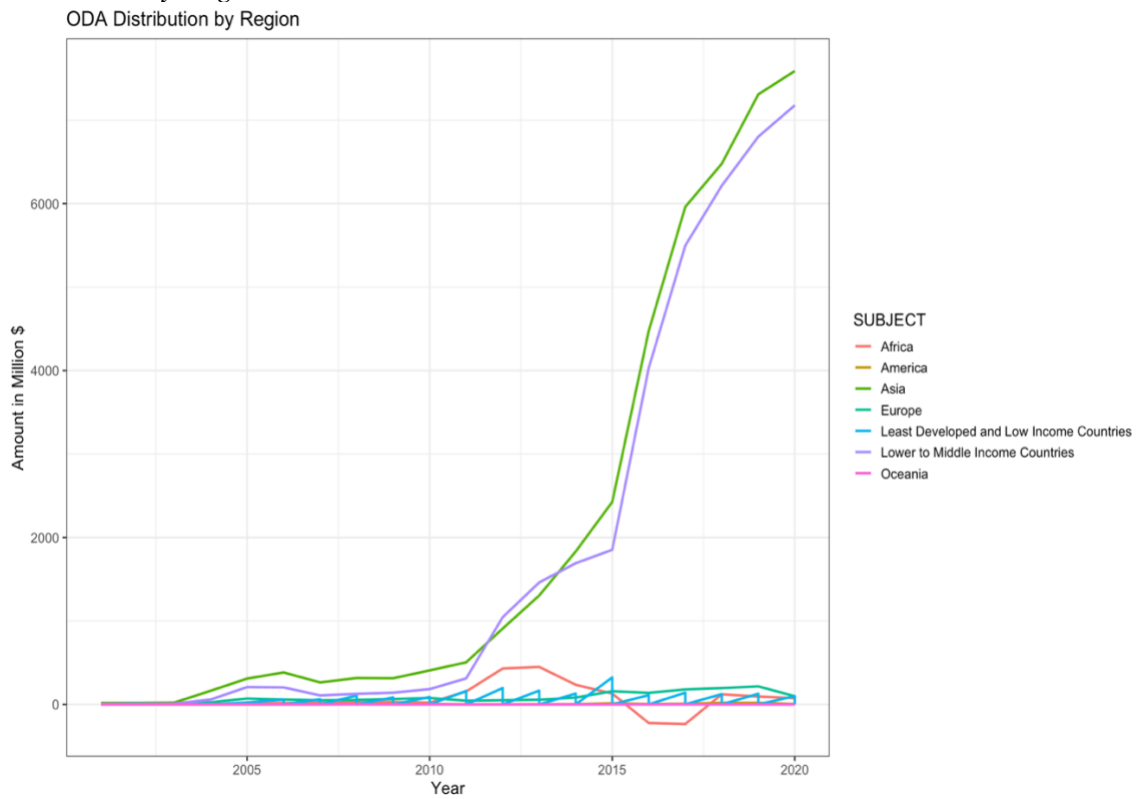


Figure 3
ODA Distribution by Region



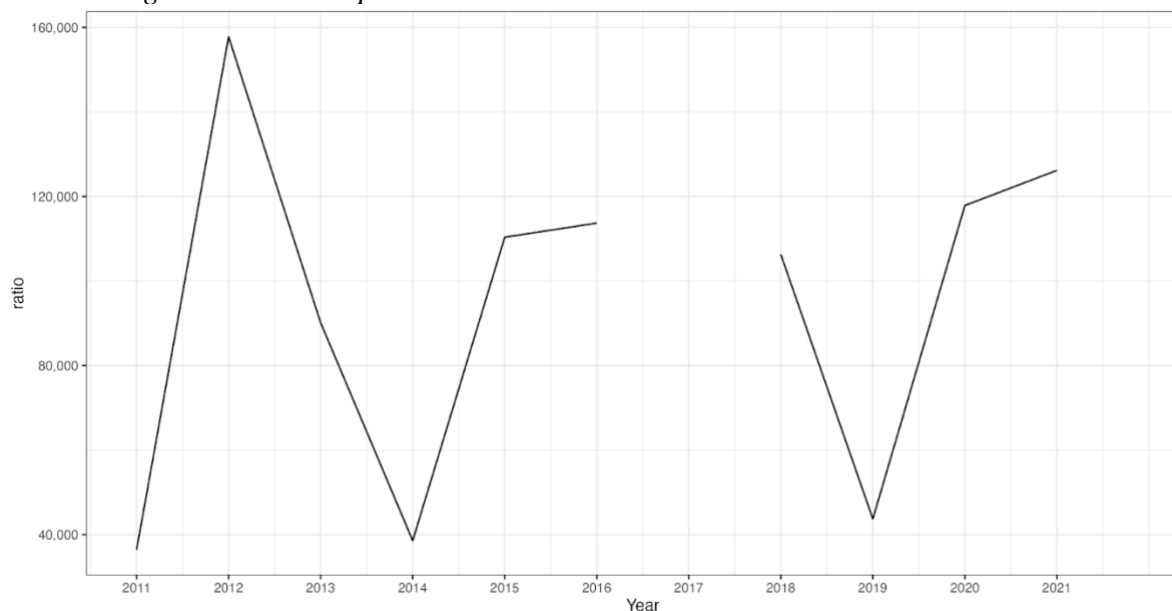
AFAD

Another important institution is The Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), the Turkish government agency responsible for coordinating disaster and emergency response efforts in the country. Established in 2009, AFAD has played a vital role in responding to natural disasters and emergencies in Turkey and has aided other countries facing similar situations. Their official website defines their function and aims as: “to prevent disasters and minimize disaster-related damages, plan and coordinate post-disaster response, and promote cooperation among various government agencies” (AFAD, n. d.)

Figure 4 below shows that its budget, compared to the GDP per capita, was constantly in flux. While foreign aid investments sharply increased after 2011, the amount of money the Turkish government spent on natural disaster relief remained unbalanced. AFAD has also faced criticism from various sources, including media outlets and critics, for its handling of emergencies and its perceived lack of transparency and accountability. The most obvious result of this lack of transparency is already observable in our data: the budget for the year 2017 is not available publicly in the institution's performance report. However, the latest and most significant incident that brought major criticism was the February 6, 2023, earthquake, which killed more than 50,000 people in Turkey. Various news sources from Turkey and abroad criticized the institution and the government for being unprepared for an expected earthquake (Solaker, 2023) and for decreasing AFAD's budget. These developments opened its organizational structure to questioning (El, 2023).

Figure 4

AFAD Budget-GDP Per Capita Ratio 2011-2021



Yunus Emre Institute

Although the political nature of economic and aid-based relations has increased, Turkish institutions that disseminate cultural and national discourse, which can more easily engage with the nationalist discourse after the authoritarian turn, have gained more importance. Yunus Emre Institute, unlike TIKA and AFAD, which focus on aid-based public diplomacy, was established to

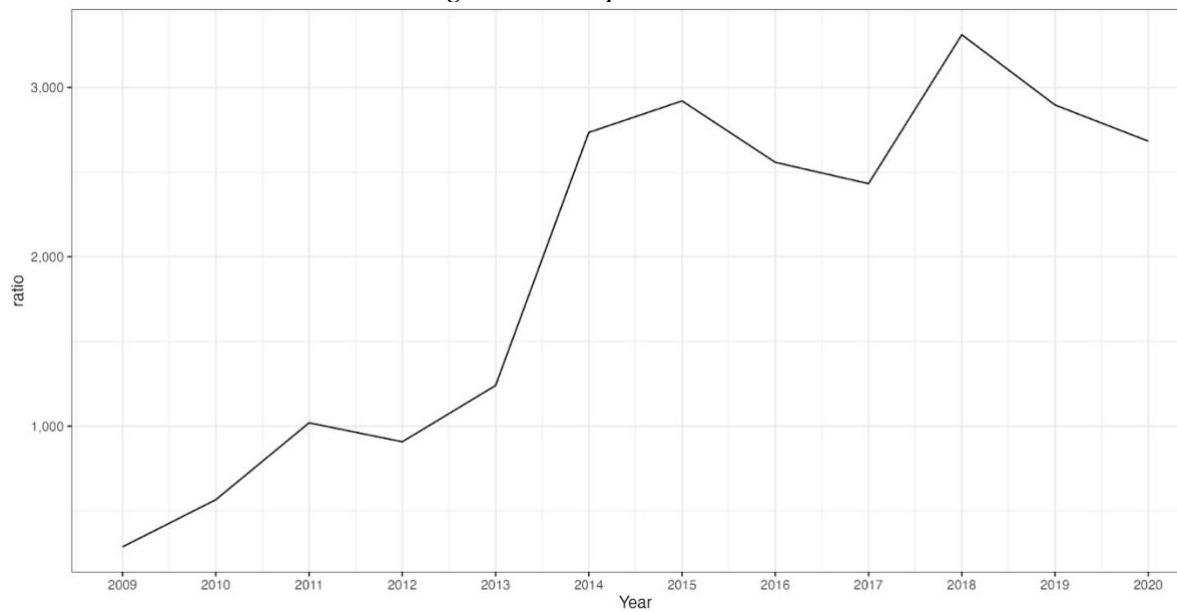
promote Turkish culture through various programs, including supporting Turkish language education and establishing permanent cultural centers in foreign countries in 2007. Its main aim is defined as follows:

to promote Turkey, Turkish language, its history and culture and art, make such related information and documents available for use in the world, provide services abroad to people who want to have education in the fields of Turkish language, culture and art, to improve the friendship between Turkey and other countries and increase the cultural exchange (Yunus Emre Institute, n. d.)

Among the institutions analyzed in this paper, the Yunus Emre Institute is the one with the steadiest increase in its budget proportion regarding the GDP per capita. Unlike TIKA and AFAD, the Yunus Emre Institute increased its budget between 2009 and 2015. This increase suggests that the AKP government has relied quite heavily on the cultural aspects of public diplomacy in its second decade and found the Yunus Emre Institute to align with its foreign policy aims. See Figure 5. Since its establishment as a state-backed institution, the Yunus Emre Institute has expanded to 84 cultural centers in 63 countries by 2022 (Yunus Emre Institute, 2022).

Figure 5

Yunus Emre Cultural Institute Budget-GDP Capita Ratio 2009-2021



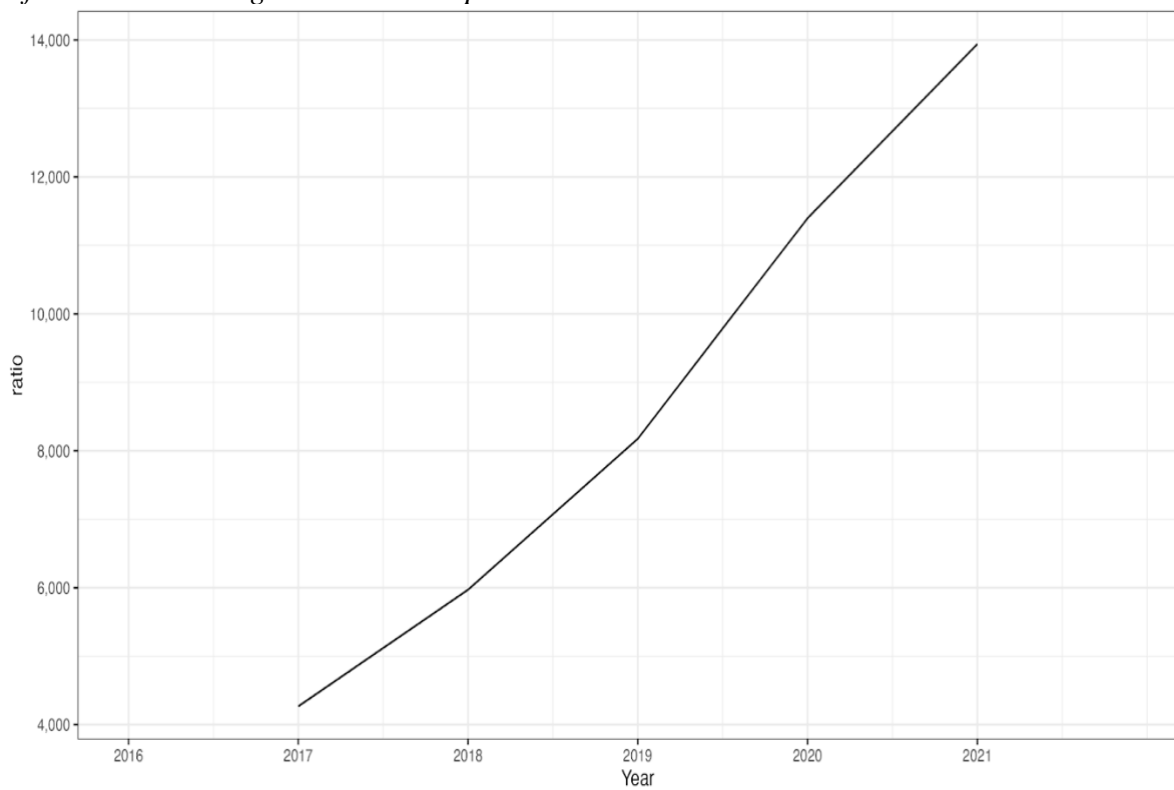
Turkish Maarif Foundation

In educational diplomacy, the Maarif Foundation represents one of Turkey's latest attempts to reach foreign audiences by establishing schools abroad and promoting Turkish culture and values. It was established in 2016, right after the failed coup attempt. It has the following aim: "serving as a gateway to the international educational arena of Turkey that will contribute to enhancing cultural and civilizational interaction and paving the way for achieving the common wellbeing" (Turkish Maarif Foundation, n. d.).

Among the institutions cited here, the Maarif Foundation and the ODA Funds are by far the most unbalanced institutions in terms of their budget compared to the GDP per capita. See Figure 6. Their steady increase in spending against the worsening economic conditions of Turkey shows how important it must be at least for the government to protect their interests abroad in the field of educational diplomacy. However, like other institutions, the Maarif Foundation's role has been criticized for promoting the government's political agenda rather than promoting education and cultural exchange. Despite the official statements in its mission and vision charter, the officials representing the institution declared the foundation's main objective to be to replace schools that linked to the Gülen movement² with education establishments representing Turkey around the world. (Angey, 2018) The head of the foundation stated in 2021 that they had taken over 216 schools affiliated with the Gülen movement in 44 countries (Daily Sabah, 2021). The attempts of the foundation to open new schools in cities in Germany and France also have met with suspicion by the countries' officials because they believed that these schools were only going to push Erdoğan's political agenda. The minister of education in France, when the French state blocked the foundation's attempt to open a school in Paris in 2019, told the journalists of the London Times that "Everyone knows that Turkey is moving towards Islamist fundamentalism and expansionism." Similarly, journalists in Albania have denounced the schools established by the foundation as centers for promoting Erdoğan (Davis, 2020).

Figure 6

Maarif Foundation Budget-GDP Per Capita Ratio 2017-2021



² A Social/religious movement that rested on civil societal foundations and that was influential in fields as education, media, and bureaucracy in Turkey until held responsible for the 2013 corruption investigations and abortive coup attempt in 2016 and declared a terrorist organization by the Erdogan regime.

Concluding Remarks

The escalating diplomatic tensions between the reemerging Western and Eastern blocs and the renewed discussions about a new Cold War approach highlight the ongoing importance of soft power competition in both domestic and international policymaking. While the literature emphasizes the relevance of the relationship between regimes and public diplomacy, the arguments are often drawn from cases predominantly centered on countries such as Russia and China. To contribute to this line of inquiry, the Turkish case offers a pertinent starting point for discussing how shifts in foreign policy strategies and attempts at a renewed representation of countries in the international arena may function in the context of democratic backsliding. Accordingly, this paper puts forward several conclusions:

- Under the AKP government, Turkey actively sought soft power by increasing its public diplomacy policies. In the first two election periods after coming to power in 2002, the AKP adhered to a strategy that prioritized Western values, European Union criteria, and democratization. Turkey's ability to hold both provisional membership in the United Nations Security Council and the Presidency of the Islamic Conference and its “model country” image for its region during these periods of the AKP can be considered an indication that its soft power was effective both in the West and in the Islamic countries.
- The party's shift toward an authoritarian regime since the early 2010s was also reflected in its foreign policy and public diplomacy. After the overwhelming election victory in 2011, with the rise of Erdoganism, the AKP government abandoned its previous policies and began to emphasize anti-Western rhetoric with strong connotations of Islamic and Turkic cultures.
- With the shift away from the liberal democratic world of the West, Turkey's public diplomacy has increasingly relied on its role as a donor country and its recipients as less developed regions of the world, with significant increases in its foreign aid over the last decade. This is first evident in the regional concentration of foreign aid to Middle Eastern and other Asian countries through OECD data.
- Another indication observed in this study is that the AKP government increased the resources allocated to funding military operations, foreign aid, and various public diplomacy tools simultaneously. This can be evaluated that Turkey is attempting to mask or balance its increased hard power, particularly during the democratic regression process, with the deployment of soft power.
- Budgetary information on other institutions that implement public diplomacy policies shows a rather uneven distribution of public diplomacy investments in Turkey to different sectors. While AFAD, the main institution concerning natural disaster management, received unbalanced investment compared to GDP per capita, we see a steady increase in the relative importance of cultural diplomacy tools, namely in the Yunus Emre Foundation and the Maarif Foundation. Furthermore, data analyzed in the paper suggests that cultural diplomacy through general and language education was the chosen strategy, especially for audiences in countries that are culturally (ethnically or religiously) similar to Turkey, such as the Balkans and Africa. This result is in line with Turkey's culturally motivated public diplomacy strategy after 2011 and allows us to ask further questions about how democratic backsliding and ideologization of cultural diplomacy may contribute to controversies regarding Turkey's image abroad.

- While the attainments of the first ten years of AKP governments provided the environment in which Turkey's public diplomacy may flourish, the sharp decrease in domestic democratic standards and the emergence of a one-man regime carried the country's public diplomacy strategies along to hierarchical, propaganda-based policies, which seem to create tensions in the receiving countries. Especially the critique against the language and educational institutions Turkey entrusted its largest comparative investment shows that the new ways AKP governments chose indeed produced negative results and helped to build a more negative rather than positive image of the country abroad.
- As a last note, it should not be forgotten that these analyses are incomplete because obtaining data on how public diplomacy policies are formed, funded, and implemented remains a hard task. Because complete accounts, balance sheets, and employee assignments are kept away from the public, this study on Turkey as a country that experienced democratic backsliding in a short period proves that delving into foreign policy and public diplomacy in authoritarian regimes faces serious challenges, especially in data collection.

In light of these conclusions, we indicate the necessity of further work on how foreign policy tools are also utilized in domestic politics to preserve authority and consolidate support. Thus, looking for other countries who exert soft power strategies that are not considered great powers and observing the changes their democratic standards go through may provide new explanations for how regimes, foreign policy, and international hierarchies are interrelated, as well as indicate possible policy solutions that involve multiple parties to sustain international stability.

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