

# **TURKISH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN ALBANIA (THE IMPACT OF TURKISH SOAP OPERAS ON ALBANIAN TELEVISIONS)**

Alban Tartari\*

## **Abstract**

The Republic of Turkey is now maybe the most dominant and economically powerful country in the Balkans. In the current global economic crisis, Turkey remains the 17th most developed country in the world, and it expects to be among the 10 most dominant states by the year 2023.

The official diplomatic relations between Turkey and Albania date back to the 1920s and despite all the political changes, these relations still remain lively. Recently, the so-called Turkey's "soft power" in the region has brought many discussions about Turkey's Neo-Ottomanism. The "Muhteşem Yüzyıl" (Splendid Century) TV serial, named in Albanian "Sulejmani i Madhërishëm" (Suleyman, The Magnificent) brought discussions about the Turkish public diplomacy in Albania and in the Balkans generally.

This means that the Turkish TV industry, despite being a private business, has now taken on the role of the Turkish State partner, by creating, bringing and imposing a new image of Turkey abroad, and in this study concern in Albania. The twelve most successful Turkish TV serials that are aired on the Albanian televisions such as the national "Klan" TV, "Vizion Plus" TV, "Albanian Screen" TV etc., bring another reality and image of Turkey to Albania. These serials seem to be part of that public diplomacy.

And as the former diplomat and Dean of the Fletcher School Edmund A. Gullion (March 1966) says, "By public diplomacy we understand the means by which governments, private groups, and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise influence on their foreign policy decisions".

## **This study aims to answer the following questions:**

1. How Turkey is using its public diplomacy in Albania through its TV serials?
2. What is the impact of these serials regarding the image of Turkey and its economy?

**Key words:** Albania, Turkey, Public Diplomacy, TV serials, Neo-Ottomanism.

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\*Alban Tartari is a PhD Candidate in Journalism at Tirana University and also he is the Public and Media Relations Director of ALBtelecom and Eagle Mobile. Since 2010 he is a part-time Lecturer at Epoka University, Beder University and Tirana University. ALBtelecom Sha. Km 7, Autostrada Tiranë – Durrës, Kashar, Albania. Cell:+355672007007

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Turkey's literature and cinema were little known in Albania before 2006, when the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Before that, the writers and poets related to the communist political system such as Nazım Hikmet Ran, Azis Nesin or Yaşar Kemal were generally known for no more than three books.<sup>1</sup> The only Turkish movie aired in Tirana that really affected the Albanians was "Selvi Boylum Al Yazmalım - The Lady with the Red Head Scarf" or "Shamikuqja" in Albanian; a film by Atıf Yılmaz (1978), starring Türkan Şoray and Kadir İnanır. The story written by the Kyrgyz writer Chingiz Aitmatov was ironically considered by the Albanians as the symbol of the "Turkish love". The movie was aired several times on the Albanian Public Television, TVSH. These two neighbouring countries, Albania and Turkey, which are geographically and historically close to each-other, remained apart in this field of culture.

Afterwards, Orhan Pamuk with "My Name is Red" and some other novels, and later on Elif Şafak, Orhan Kemal, Reşat Nuri Güntekin, Perihan Mağden etc. were introduced to the Albanian reader.<sup>2</sup> The author of this paper has translated some well-known Turkish poets into the Albanian language, in a publication of Epoka Univesity. The Albanian public didn't know anything about the Turkish cinema and the Turkish public still knows nothing about the Albanian cinematography. The Albanian writers Ismail Kadare (with his two books "General of the Dead Army" and "The Wedding") and Dritëro Agolli (with "Commissar Memo") became known in Turkey before the year 1990 (the end of the communist system in Albania). Three more novels of Kadare, translated from the French language by the Turkish translator Aykut Derman, were published in Turkey in the years 1998-1999.

Thus was the atmosphere in this field of culture until 2006. The entry of Turkish authors' books' raised the Albanian people's interest in Turkish literature, but were the Albanians likewise interested in Turkish soap operas?

These TV serials had been broadcast since a long time ago in the neighbouring countries such as Macedonia (FYROM), Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and even in Greece, Turkey's biggest rival in the Balkans. Albania was the last country in the region to be introduced to the Turkish soap operas.

## 2. HOLLYWOOD-STYLE EFFECT? AMERICAN-STYLE TURKEY?

Today we count twelve Turkish soap operas which have been broadcast on the Albanian TV channels so far while two titles will be shown in this winter season. They are shown in the

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<sup>1</sup> Personal observation, Katalogu i Botimeve, Biblioteka Kombetare, Tirane - There were three books: "Peizazhe Njerëzore" by Nazim Hikmet, "Tregime" by Azis Nesin and "Mehmet Imcaku" by Yaşar Kemal.

<sup>2</sup> Publications at Adrion LTD, Tirana. Observation made one September, 2013

biggest TV channels of Albania targeting a large audience. The national Klan TV, the national satellite channel Vizion Plus, and the national satellite channel Albanian Screen are the three channels that host the Turkish soap operas at the moment. (See table 1)

**Table 1**

<b>Klan TV</b>	<b>Vizion Plus TV</b>	<b>Albanian Screen (AS)</b>
1. <i>Gymysh-Gümüş</i>	2. <i>Xhanan – Canan</i>	3. <i>Sulejmani i Madhërishëm – Magnificent Century</i>
4. <i>Ezel</i>	5. <i>Lugina e Ujqve - The Valley of the Wolfs</i>	6. <i>1001 Netë – 1001 Nights</i>
7. <i>Shamikuqja (The Lady with the Red Head Scarf)</i>	8. <i>Karadayi</i>	9. <i>Fatmagyl – Fatmagul</i>
10. <i>Jetë e hidhur - Bitter Life</i>		
11. <i>Kuzey Guney</i>		
12. <i>Menekshe dhe Halili – Menekshe and Halil</i>		
13. <i>Dashuri e Ndaluar – Forbidden Love (coming soon)</i>		
14. <i>Shtëpiake të Dëshpëruara- Desperate Housewives- Turkish version (coming soon)</i>		

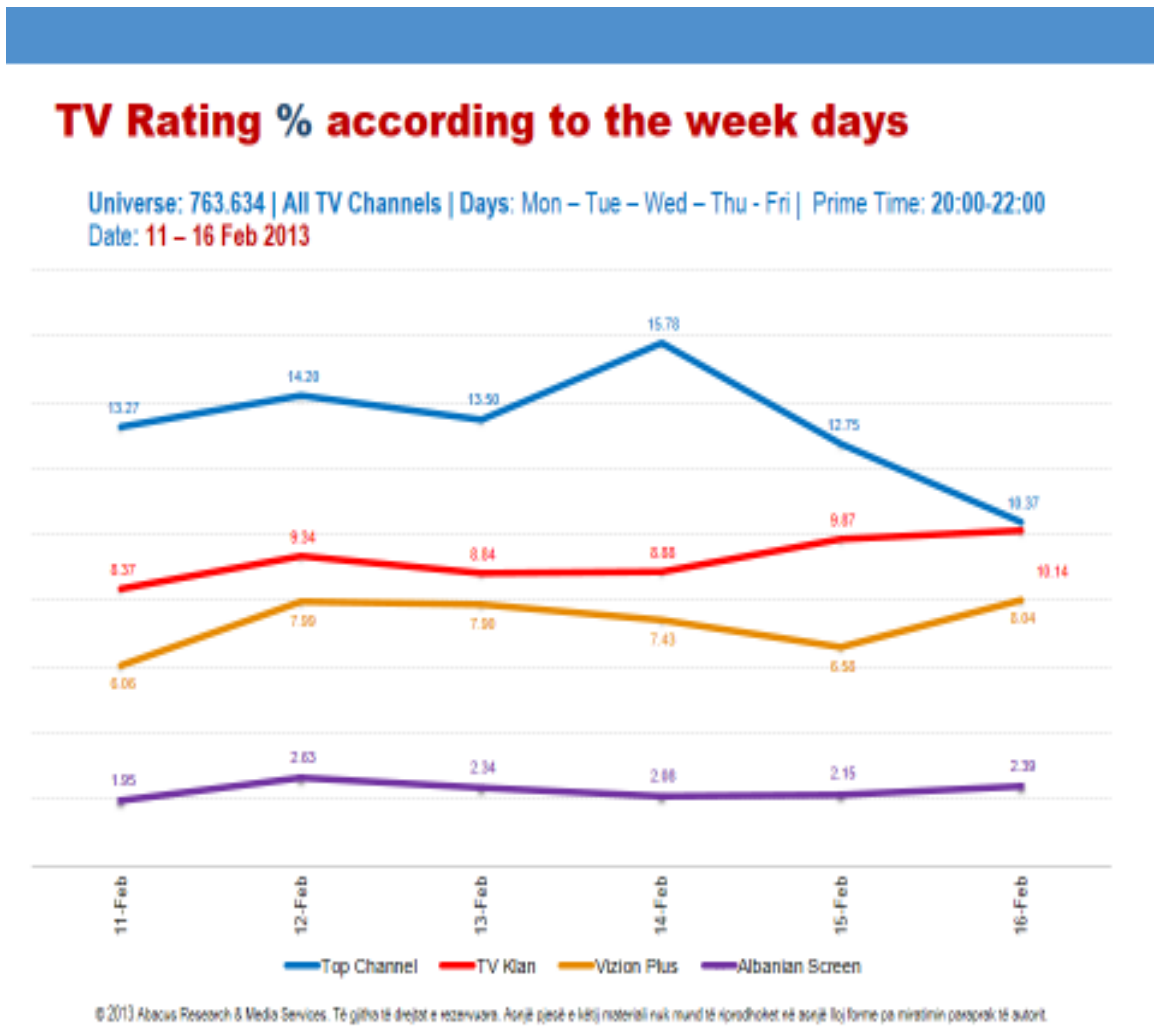
*Note: The names of the serials are given in Albanian and English or as they appear on the Albanian TVs.*

The love melodrama *Gümüş*, is the first TV serial shown in Albania, starting from April 11, 2011. “The Turkish TV serials brought the Spanish and the Brazilian TV serials down off the throne”, the Program Director of Klan TV Albert Dumani says.<sup>3</sup> Dumani also adds that “Ezel” and “Kuzey Guney” competed for audience with local TV productions. Turkish actors became so popular with the Albanian public that in November 2011, Klan TV brought the actress Songül Oden (starring the lady named *Gümüş* in the serial with the same name) to Tirana for the Song Contest “Kënga Magjike”.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Dumani, Interview for Alban Tartari (via e-mail), “Turkish TV Serials on Klan TV”, Tiranë, October, 2012

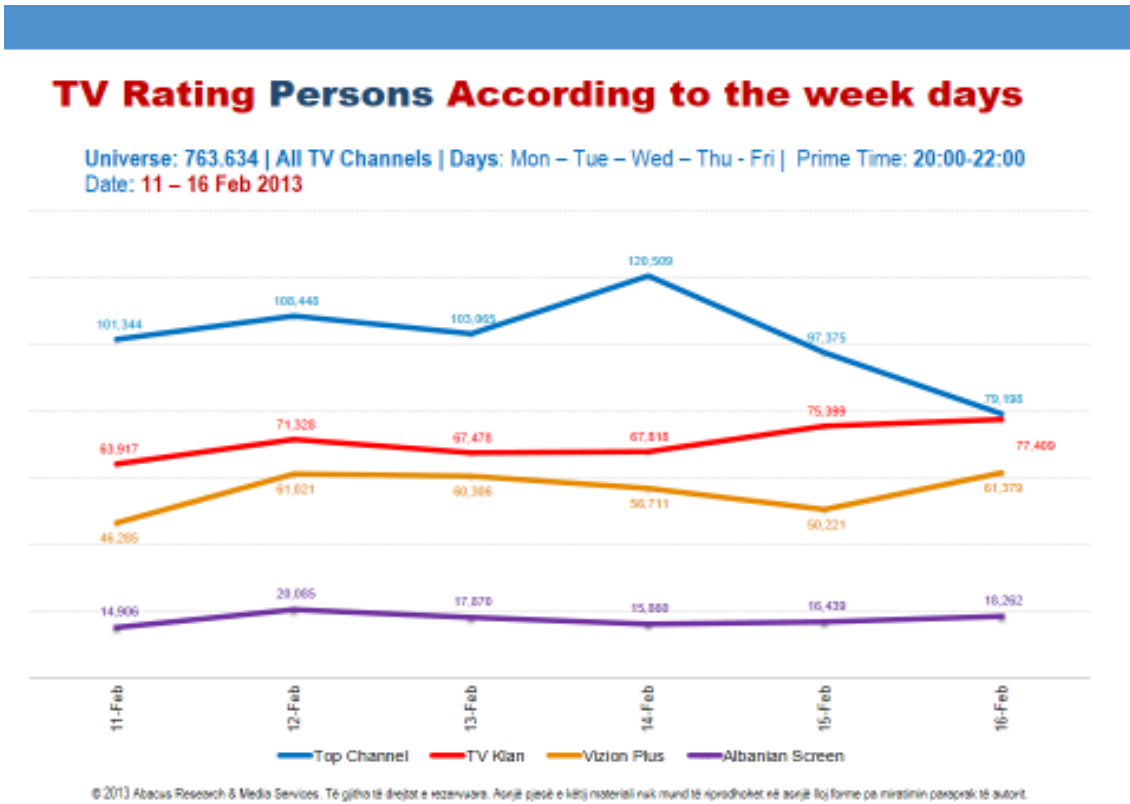
Most of the Turkish TV serials were premiere broadcasts, aired during these TV channels' prime time or in the afternoon, targeting the female audience. This shows that the TV channels were sure of the success of these imported programs. "We were sceptical in the beginning but our expectations changed when we aired "Sulejmani i Madhërishëm" (Magnificent Century), a contemporaneous production" says Jerina Lalaj, former Marketing Director of Albanian Screen TV and currently Marketing Director of Vizion Plus.<sup>4</sup> Lalaj also emphasizes that these TV serials came to Albania after their successful premieres in other countries of the region. She discusses about the 'soap opera' term and says that even the producers of these programs insist on calling them TV serials.

**Table2**



<sup>4</sup> Jerina Lalaj, Interview for Alban Tartari (via e-mail), "Turkish TV Serials on AS TV", Tiranë, May, 2012

Table 3



Source: Abacus Research<sup>5</sup>

For nearly 5 months, Saturday evening was the biggest television airtime competition between Top Channel TV with its local production “Big Brother Albania” (a patent of Endemol) and Klan TV with “Ezel”. A survey by Abacus Research in Tirana shows (in Figure 2 and Figure 3) the Turkish TV serials’ effect on the audience. The research analyses six days of a week, February 11-16, 2013. The audience figures in persons and percentages show that Klan TV wins the Saturday night’s battle. Also, the ratings of Vizion Plus and Albanian Screen rise on the days when Turkish serials are broadcast, especially on Tuesdays.

“Klan TV managed to get the first place against local TV productions and in most Albanians’ homes there were mainly two favourite TV channels (in two different TV devices): Klan TV showing “Ezel” and the other showing the other channel”, Albert Dumani says. Dumani also claims that this TV serial competed even with the Champions League matches on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

<sup>5</sup> Courtesy of Abacus Research - A survey prepared by Jusilda Bocaj, under the auspices of Mr. Thanas Goga, Tiranë, October 2013

“The success of these serials is confirmed by the high demands of advertisers for these time frames”<sup>6</sup>, Ana Kekezi, former Marketing Director of Vizion Plus TV says. At the moment, Vizion Plus is broadcasting the most popular TV serial in Turkey “The Valley of Wolves”.

The so-much discussed TV serial “Magnificent Century” also brought discussions in the Albanian media about the so-called “neo-ottoman” politics of Turkey in the Balkans. Despite being criticized in Turkey by the conservative Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the TV serial still holds a large audience’s attention in its third season. “People are amazed at the artistic quality of the serial and do not consider the historical arguments that are supposed to support this quality” Jerina Lalaj says.

“Serials like “Fatmagul”, “Karadayı” etc. are broadcast in primetime competing now with Italian and Hollywood films and serials.<sup>7</sup> They are not different from the American productions and may even have an advantage over them, in view of the fact that the Albanian culture and traditions are quite close to the Turkish ones”, Albert Dumani says.

In a report of Oxford Business Group for year 2012, Turkish soaps were said to be a success that has taken Balkan audiences by storm. “The Balkan craze for Turkish soap operas arguably started in 2010, when the television series “Binbir Gece” (“A Thousand and One Nights”) became a primetime hit in Bosnia, Montenegro and Macedonia, as well as in Romania, Albania and Greece. Following this success, in 2011, Bulgaria bought 27 Turkish soap operas, according to Bulgarian National Radio. To date, Turkey has sold 70 soap operas to 39 countries in the Balkans, the Caucasus region and the Middle East. At 42, Kazakhstan is the biggest buyer of Turkish soaps, followed by Bulgaria with 27, Azerbaijan with 23 and Macedonia with 17.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Briseida Mema, journalist and professor of communication, there are three elements that affected the high audience of the Turkish serials in Albania besides the actors’ successful artistic play:

- a. “The public’s satiety from the Latin-American films that have a poor artistic level and play.
- b. The discovery of an unknown and prejudiced world, a new reality which is completely transformed in Turkish films. This brought the first attraction and the increase in audience numbers.
- c. The desire to visit the Turkish coasts (the only place where the Albanians could go without a visa some years ago) brought the second attraction: to discover this country through the films. And besides the artistic attraction, there is also the creation of another image which is meticulously curated.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ana Kekezi, Marketing Director, Vizion Plus TV, Interview for Alban Tartari. Tirana, July, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Daily Programs of AS TV and Vizion Plus TV at <http://webtv.albanianscreen.tv/pages/programi/ALB> and <http://vizionplus.al/seriele/karadayi/> Visited on October 16, 2013

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Business Group, Soap Power: The Sweeping Success of Turkish television series, <http://www.oxfordbusinessgroup.com/news/soap-power-sweeping-success-turkish-television-series> Visited on September 20, 2013

<sup>9</sup> Prof. Dr. Briseida Mema, “The Turkish TV serials in Albania”, Interview for Alban Tartari, October 2013

### 3. WHAT ARE THEY BRINGING?

Although these TV productions come from the private sector, they represent the culture and the power of Turkey. They show a strong country, willing to impose its power not only in Albania, but also in every other nation where these materials are shown. Briseida Mema calls it “a power or violence; a kind of propaganda that shows the strong individual and the strong state, and in some cases this strong person maybe also a poet”.<sup>10</sup> Sultan Suleyman (Magnificent Century) and Ramiz Karaeski (Ezel) tell the story through poetry and verses showing the spirituality and power at the same time. This is a Hollywood model in the image creation and consolidation of a state.

A public e-mail of the Turkish Embassy to Tirana, on 30 April 2012, invited all the Turkish citizens and the Turkish language speakers to watch the TV serials on the Albanian channels. Attached in the e-mail were also three photos from the serials “Ezel”, “The Lady with the Red Head Scarf”, and “Magnificent Century”.

#### **There are four elements of effect:**

- a. Economy
- b. Language
- c. A new spirituality
- d. State reputation

- a. “Another success of these serials comes due to the fact that they are two or three times more expensive than the serials coming from the United States or other western countries which are produced by Sony Pictures, Paramount and Televisa film houses”, Kekezi says. This means that these serials shape this part of TV sector in Albania, bringing new financial standards. And this means more financial benefits for Turkey. “The price of one episode of a TV serial varies from EUR 500 to 1500”, Firat Gulgen of Calinos Holding says, as cited by Vizion Plus.<sup>11</sup> It is not just politics. It is all about economy.

The Turkish flag (“The Valley of Wolfs”), the most beautiful silhouette of Istanbul in the sunrise (“Ezel”), the historical sites beside the modern roads (“The Lady with the Red Head Scarf”), and the bridges in Bosporus (Gümüş) are widely shown in every episode of these soap operas or especially in the jingles. “This is a great advertisement for Turkey, a great marketing”<sup>12</sup>, Erion Gjoni, general manager of Venus Travel in Tirana says. Mr Gjoni explains that travel agencies developed new packages for the tourists that wanted to see the shooting process in the film set of the “Magnificent Century” serial. People are more interested now in Top Kapi Palace, the old Palace of the Sultans in Istanbul.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Vizion Plus TV, “Mania e Telenovelave Turke”, <http://vizionplus.al/mania-e-telenovelave-turke/> visited on October 20, 2013

<sup>12</sup> Erion Gjoni, General Manager of Venus Travel. Interview for Alban Tartari. Tirana, September 2013

- b. An important element is the broadcasting of the soap operas in their original language, in Turkish, with Albanian subtitles. The Turkish language is becoming a regional language. “The serials increased people’s interest in the Turkish language and many citizens came to Yunus Emre Cultural Centre in Tirana to take Turkish language courses”<sup>13</sup>, Fatos Dibra, specialist of this cultural centre says. Mr. Dibra describes that “now the Turkish culture is not an unknown field coming from another continent any more”. Alsat Macedonia, an Albanian satellite TV channel in Macedonia, tried to dub one of the TV serials in the Albanian language. But all the other titles come to the public in their original language.
- c. Although Turkey is a country with a majority of Muslim population, the mosques are not shown as a part of spirituality. Another spirituality is born; that of the modernity. This is some kind of self-made Turkish modernity, based on the Turkish cultural tradition. In “Ezel” TV serial, the most-watched Turkish drama according to Klan TV, the mosques and churches of Istanbul are shown as some kind of décor, not as a religious element. The producers just want to show a new Turkey, a modern and European one, quite different from the history and the mentality that other neighbouring nations have for this republic.
- d. And the fourth element is the state reputation. Turkey is not seen as weak state any more. The soft power of pictures shows the soft power of the Turkish republic. They are much more effective than any other initiatives of the Turkish state, and that is why we call that the Turkish Public Diplomacy. This term will be evaluated in the coming lines.

#### **4. THE REALITY OF THE TURKISH PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN ALBANIA**

As above-mentioned, we can say that Turkey is applying now an active public diplomacy in Albania. This is part of the Turkish public diplomacy in the western Balkans countries: Macedonia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. It targets Greece as well, where partner productions were made such as the serial “Yabancı Damat” (2004). Soap operas or TV serials – call them what you want – are now an important part of the Turkish Public Diplomacy in the Balkans, and Albania is the last country of the mosaic.

As (former diplomat) Dean of the Fletcher School Edmund A. Gullion (March 1966) says, “By public diplomacy we understand the means by which governments, private groups and individuals influence the attitudes and opinions of other peoples and governments in such a way as to exercise influence on their foreign policy decisions.”<sup>14</sup>

Turkey is trying other ways besides the official ways of its diplomats and embassies. NGO-s, and in our case the private sector, fill this gap. International audiences are the target and TV serials

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<sup>13</sup> Fatos Dibra, specialist of “Yunus Emre” Cultural Centre. Interview for Alban Tartari, September 2013

<sup>14</sup> The Fletcher School, Definitions of Public Diplomacy, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Murrow/Diplomacy/Definitions> Visited one september 12, 2013.



are the best way to reach them. İbrahim Kalın<sup>15</sup> emphasizes the importance of the media in an article for Perceptions magazine.

“However, by definition, public diplomacy should not be undertaken solely by government institutions. NGOs, aid organizations, human rights organizations, foundations, universities, civilian platforms, the media and other civil society actors have become indispensable to public diplomacy efforts. Parallel to the growing proximity between public institutions and non-governmental organizations, public institutions and NGOs should collaborate more in the field of public diplomacy”<sup>16</sup>.

We do not have any evidence that the Turkish serials are affecting the policy decisions of the Albanian state. But they are affecting the Albanian people’s decisions. “The success of the serials showed to the Albanian TV managers that they are the right program for the viewers”, Ana Kekezi says. They are spending more and more hours watching these serials. Many trips to Istanbul and other Turkish cities are planned and made and this means much more airline tickets and hotel payments. This means much more familiarity with the Turkish language, music and culture in general.

In my opinion, this will bring a second phase; when Turkey becomes even more accepted by the Albanian public opinion. The effect of the serials should be considered in the long term. They build a strong and continuous familiarity with Turkey. They are the best embassy that shows the reality and the life of the country. This may be a constructed reality but nevertheless, it is the reality that the producers want to present about Turkey. This will bring more cultural exchange, economical investments and as a result a stronger relationship between the Albanian State and the Turkish State.

On the other hand, this public diplomacy of Turkey is not just targeting the western Balkans, the Middle East or the Caucasians. It is targeting the European Union (EU). They show how Turkey is developing and how it has changed. They show a Turkey with no different problems than the EU states, and the modernity seems to be in the light of the Turkish State which aspires to be an EU member. Turkey is building a new image. “The task of the new Turkish public diplomacy is to tell the story of the new Turkey to a wide ranging audience across the globe. As Turkey overcomes its old fears and builds a new identity for itself, the process of change transforming the country will have a deep impact on Turkish domestic and foreign policy.”<sup>17</sup>

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The “Ezel” TV serial was the most watched Turkish soap opera in Albania; an impossible Turkish love story, which included all the elements of great classical novels like the “Romeo and Juliet”, “The Count of Monte Cristo” etc. The spirituality and poetry of Oscar Wilde and Rumi, together with the Turkish melancholy brought a great success. This production and the others as well bring to the Albanian public the social and cultural elements and models which are no

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<sup>15</sup> Note: Associate Professor İbrahim Kalın is Chief Advisor to Prime Minister, Turkey. The views in this article are the author’s personal evaluations.

<sup>16</sup> İbrahim Kalın, Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Turkey, PERCEPTIONS, autumn 2011, Volume XVI, Number 3, pp. 21. [http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Autumn\\_2011.pdf](http://sam.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Autumn_2011.pdf)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., page 5

longer unfamiliar to them. That is why they still have a great success, leaving behind the Spanish and Brazilian productions.

The Turkish TV serials will continue to be the most-watched television productions in Albania. Today two Albanian actors play in these films, showing the interest of producers for selling more in the Albanian speaking areas in the Balkans (Kosova, Macedonia and Montenegro) and of course, in Albania as well.

The serials will continue to build a new image of Turkey. They will be a new passport and will bring new social models that will affect the Albanians' life. This will be evident in a country that still suffers the lack of an effective cinema network and a poor production rate in cinematography field. Serials will compete not only with the products of the same category from other countries, but what is most important, even with the Albanian TV productions.

Turkey's effect will rise indirectly, because these "cultural ambassadors" have opened the door of influence. Turkey, as the biggest ally of the United States in the region, is taking an "American path" in its public diplomacy. The Hollywood-style productions and the way of selling them abroad are a real example. After leaving behind the Latin-American productions, the Turkish TV serials will compete directly with the Italian TV productions and models that for the moment are still the most dominant medium in Albania.

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