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# INVESTIGATING THE GLOBAL REACH AND LIMITS OF BALKAN FILM, TV AND AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA'S "SOFT POWER"

(Nevena Daković, Aleksandra Milovanović (eds.), *Soft Power of the Balkan Screens*, Belgrade: Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Institute for theatre, film, radio and television, 2022)

> *Soft power rests on the ability*
> *to shape the preferences of others.*
> Joseph Nye (2009)

Setting the stage for studying cultural and political agendas and value setting through a variety of moving images within different national contexts in the region, the editors of *Soft Power of the Balkan Screens* note that the book deals with "the Balkans and soft power of its diverse screens" and "departs from the understanding of soft power found in various art and cultural texts, multimedia artefacts, cultural policies and strategies" (Daković, Milovanović, Leković 2022: 8). As the editors point out in the introduction (ibid.: 7) the notion of soft power has traditionally been associated with the USA and Western Europe, and their cultural products and creative industries, in particular Hollywood cinema and the national cinemas of France, Germany and the UK. By shifting the investigation to the soft power of Balkan TV series, digital moving images and films, the present volume offers a novel and timely contribution to the study of hitherto unexplored global cultural economies and creative industries, but which have nonetheless, grown exponentially over the last decade, thus providing fertile ground for building alternative critical models and theories of contemporary film, TV and media in small or peripheral creative industry nations, such as Serbia or Bulgaria. Supporting the importance of such a study, the authors of the first chapter, "Coding Soft Power: Media Reception of Serbian TV Series", note how since 2015, Serbian TV series production has grown in number and quality, while the peak of this trend is reflected in the

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premiere of twenty TV series (2022: 27), attesting to the incredible growth and output of this small Balkan country. The authors argue further how "Serbian TV series have become a competitive asset in the global soft power setting", as evidenced by two key examples, the purchase of international rights for a spy-thriller *Civil Servant* by a Brazilian digital platform, and the adaptation of the crime series Besa by a United Arab Emirates production company (ibid.).

Across the region, critically acclaimed and awarded film directors have started engaging in the production of television serials, such as Dalibor Matanić who directed the first Croatian political thriller series *Novine/The Paper* (2016–2020) which was acquired for distribution by Netflix. Meanwhile, the historical drama *Senke nad Balkanom/ Balkan Shadows* (2017–) was the first Serbian series acquired by Amazon Prime. Similarly, a Turkish director Emin Alper directed a crime drama mini-series *Alef* (2020), while a Serbian director Bojan Vuletić made a five-part drama series *Porodica/The Family* (2021). Several critics and commentators across the region have noted the enormous popularity of Turkish television series, notably *Muhteşem Yüzyıl/The Magnificent Century* (2011–2014) and *Binbir Gece/One Thousand and One Nights* (2006–2009), enjoyed across the region, citing the phenomena as an example of Turkish soft power. Other scholars have attributed the success of Turkish drama series to their cross-cultural characteristics, as audiences identify with characters and cultural stereotypes, allowing the series "to act as a transnational conveyor of different cultural proximities" (Pothou 2020: 5) but also to revisit and mediate "the memory of common values of the people living in the Balkans with the Turkish people from the Ottoman Empire heritage" (Gündüz 2020). As I have argued elsewhere, given these developments in the film, TV and media landscape across the region, Balkan film and media studies offers a fertile ground for developing new methodologies to study transnational, cross-cultural, and hybrid aspects of Balkan TV series in this era of "platformisation" and streaming (Grgić 2021: 23).

This vibrant context in the region, the proliferation of local TV series production and their increasing high quality, seems to have inspired the bilateral project "Television Series: A Comparative Study From Geopolitics to Geocriticism – Serbia and Turkey" between the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade and Kadir Has University in Istanbul, in which the editors of the present volume participated in order to produce a comparative study of TV series in both countries, and to reflect on the role of this extremely popular media content within cultural diplomacy and nation branding. Nevena Daković, currently Director of the Institute for Theatre, Film, Radio and Television and professor at the Faculty of Dramatic

Arts in Belgrade, has been researching media representations of national and cultural identity in Serbia, the role of media in Serbia's accession to the EU, and memory and transcultural texts of dramatic arts and media, for over two decades now, and her projects have been awarded national and international funding, acknowledging the academic rigour and relevance of this research. Daković is also the editor of *Screen Media Studies: Serbia 3.0* (2019), making her ideally placed to undertake this study and coordinate the editing of the present volume together with Aleksandra Milovanović, associate professor at FDU, awarded film editor and author of the monograph, *Towards New Media: Transmedia Narattives Between Film and Television* (2019) and Iva Leković, currently PhD candidate in the Department for Theory at the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade.

Findings of the bilateral research project are published here, notably the chapters titled "Coding Soft Power: Media Reception of Serbian TV Series" and "Coding Soft Power: A Matrix for Turkish TV Series" in which the authors investigate social media reception of Serbian TV series using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods such as codebook analysis and keywords research, and the soft power codes embedded in the narratives of Turkish TV series through an analysis of print and social media. In the first case, Daković, Milovanović and Leković find that the coding of recent TV series from Serbia, reveals changes in production and reception contexts, and the move from classical to complex TV models which reflect changes in cultural policy, notably that the traditional framework of soft power, akin to propaganda has been replaced with a new form reflecting high quality production and more effective screenplay (2022: 36). In the Turkish case study, Bayrakdar, Memici and Sisal show how Turkish soft power is embedded within the narratives and themes of the popular TV series, while their international reach allows them to play a greater role in cultural diplomacy and serves for the promotion of Turkish products, tourism and language (2022: 43, 51). The authors note how presently Turkey is the second-largest exporter of TV series after the USA, while Turkish TV series have an audience of 650 million people in over 140 countries from South American to Asia, the Arab world and across the Balkans (2022: 43).

The success of recent Turkish TV series throughout the Balkan region and the Arab world, seems to confirm Joseph Nye's claim that "popular culture is more likely to attract people and produce soft power in the sense of preferred outcomes in situations where cultures are somewhat similar rather than widely dissimilar" (2009: 15–16). Perhaps then, Dina Iordanova's claim that one can see similarities in Balkan cinema due to a "shared Balkan cultural space" some twenty years ago (2001), still continues to resonate for contemporary

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TV series made in the region, which share common characteristics but also strategies for sustainability and visibility in the saturated global market of audiovisual content. For example, in a recent study, Eleni Pothou found that the popularity of Turkish drama TV series in Greece is due to cultural proximity, in particular, noting that the themes and treatment of family values and interpersonal romantic relationship in Turkish TV drama positively influence the preferences of Greek audiences (2020: 2). Gergana Doncheva's contribution to the collection confirms the effect of a decade-long domination of Turkish TV series in Bulgaria, which gave rise to the blossoming of national TV series whose plots and visual style reflected the influence of the highly popular Turkish TV series, in particular those dealing with the family and its values (2022: 76). Furthermore, Doncheva notes how the ever-increasing success of TV series in Bulgaria is the result of the local film, TV and media industry combining and borrowing models from the US and Western European productions as well as ideas, plots and characters from Balkan TV series which in turn reflects shared culture and mentality of the Balkan region (ibid.). The findings in the chapter "The Bulgarian Television Series: Context, Development and Characteristics (2000–2022)" seem to indeed confirm the reach and possibilities of the soft power of Balkan cultural industries through the production and distribution of local TV series within the region. Similarly, Milena Kvapil notes how the connections among the Balkan countries, in particular among the post-Yugoslav nations, are most evident in the crime series genre, in particular, the representations of criminality, criminals and state institutions, such as the police and secret service which seem to be drawn from everyday socio-political reality (2022: 67). According to Kvapil, the process of "glocalisation", the fusion of authentic Serbian (and Balkan) narratives with adaptations of global genre conventions and formats can be seen in many TV series, and can therefore be considered a common characteristic among the Balkan countries (ibid.). In terms of themes and narratives of contemporary TV series, one could say that these continue the trends of contemporary Balkan cinemas, which affront themes such as re-visitations of the past and historical narratives, war consequences and traumas, crime, political corruption, dysfunctional judiciary system, migration, family, patriarchy, women and LGBTQ topics (Papadimitriou and Grgić: 2020). Indeed, Kvapil argues further, the TV series under examination deal with and reflect on historical narratives and the issues of post-transition Balkan societies, but are increasingly broaching new topics such as equality, migration and other global phenomena (2022: 68).

However, as the editors of the collection note, despite the desire to engage in comparative studies of soft power of Balkan screen media as the initial impetus

of the project, the texts in the book tend to focus on national case studies and argue "that the Balkanisation of the region persists in all domains" (2022: 10). Yet, the contributions raise and tease out some important questions, whether the strategies of soft power of Balkan screen media are aligned with national political agendas and whether the films, TV series and digital media under study are rather tools for nation branding. The book is divided in three parts, the first part focuses on Balkan television series productions "as the most prominent soft power media tools and the most popular agent of cultural diplomacy and nation branding", the second part investigates other formats of small screens, such as TV and video formats which tackle the subjects across foreign politics and sports diplomacy among others, while the third part on cinema screens is dedicated to Balkan and East European cinemas as another form of soft power phenomena, and are deeply connected to memory and history, identity building and nation branding discourses (2022: 10–12). Furthermore, Daković and Milovanović highlight how "the Balkans soft power aims to promote affirmative and attractive image of the nation, the state and their values both for international and national audiences" (2022: 8). In these cases, soft power is intrinsically linked with nation branding, and the creation and reinforcement of national identities. Highlighting how in the case of the Balkans, the use of soft power is at times ambivalent, the editors cite the example of the choice of Oscar candidates during Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945–1992), which was based on the film's universal appeal and attraction to international audiences, whereas in the Republic of Serbia, recent national Oscar candidates demonstrates how "the predominant criteria seems to be affirmative and desired portrayal of the society, the state and the nation" (2022: 9).

The present collection is an important and timely contribution to the studies of global and regional new media formats and their affordances at the intersection of film, TV and media studies, reception studies, geopolitics and affect theory, which inform contemporary forms of spectatorship and media consumption patterns across different formats and platforms. By bringing together a variety of expert scholars working on these issues in the Balkans and Eastern Europe and beyond, and publishing their research in multiple languages, *Soft Power of the Balkan Screens*, constitutes an important attempt to fill the gap in international (and for the most part Anglophone) scholarship which still tends to focus on the US and Western European creative industrial output vis-a-vis the concept of soft power.

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