

Cultural Heritage Diplomacy as Turkish Soft Power: The Impact of Ottoman-Era Building Restoration on the Tourism Economy in Albania

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ABSTRACT

The paradigm shift of power in International Relations positions cultural heritage diplomacy as a strategic soft power instrument. Through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Türkiye funds the restoration of Ottoman-era buildings in the Balkans to strengthen its geopolitical influence. This study aims to analyze how Türkiye's cultural diplomacy strategy contributes to the tourism economy in Albania. Employing a qualitative approach with a document analysis method, this research evaluates academic literature, institutional reports, statistical data, and public discourse in mass media using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings reveal a pragmatic symbiosis between Türkiye's ambitions and Albania's economy. Although Albania's tourism is predominantly driven by nature and coastal attractions, the restoration of historical buildings by Türkiye is utilized by Albania to diversify its cultural tourism sector. A geopolitical paradox emerges: Eastern-nuanced assets funded by Türkiye paradoxically become tourist commodities whose primary market consists of European citizens (accounting for 95% of the 11.7 million tourists in 2024). Conversely, new construction projects such as the Namazgâh Mosque trigger domestic ambivalence, as the "Turco-centric" image is perceived as a potential hindrance to Albania's "Eurocentric" integration narrative. In conclusion, Türkiye's cultural diplomacy serves as a catalyst for tourism diversification, generating an economic multiplier effect for Albania, while simultaneously compelling the country to navigate the tension between an Eastern heritage identity and a Western political orientation.

Keywords: Cultural Diplomacy, TİKA, Cultural Tourism, Soft Power, Neo-Ottomanism, Geopolitics, Albania.

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, the paradigm of international relations has undergone a fundamental shift, where the achievement of geopolitical objectives no longer relies solely on coercive strength (hard power) but increasingly depends on cultural attractiveness (soft power). Within this transition, cultural heritage diplomacy has emerged as an essential strategic instrument. Through preservation and restoration programs for historical landmarks, a nation can assert its cultural identity, project political influence, and strengthen trans-border partnerships. Relics of the past are now capitalized not only to reinforce shared historical narratives but also to generate new economic value, particularly through cultural tourism. At this juncture, the conservation of historical heritage becomes a crucial meeting point between the diplomatic efforts of donor countries and the economic pragmatism of recipient nations.

This diplomatic dynamic is vividly captured in the Balkan region. The wealth of architectural heritage from the Ottoman conquest era, which shapes the landscape of historic cities in the region, has become a primary target for the soft power projection of the Republic of Türkiye. Recognizing this historical potential, Türkiye has proactively channeled investments into restoring Ottoman-era monuments. The utilization of historical heritage as a diplomatic tool has been extensively implemented by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) since 1992. Across various regions, particularly in the Balkans, TİKA has intensively restored Ottoman-era legacies such as mosques, public baths (*hammams*), and historical bazaars. These projects are strategically designed to project Turkish soft power, strengthen a shared cultural identity, and build international partnerships. While these steps contribute significantly to global historical preservation, they are not immune to criticism, as they are perceived to align closely with Türkiye's geopolitical ambitions in regions with Islamic affinities and Ottoman footprints (Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019; Aktuna, 2025). The most tangible manifestation of this ambition is evident in the synergy between TİKA and Diyanet (the Presidency of Religious Affairs) in physical and architectural projects across the Balkans, aimed at accumulating "cultural capital" (Luke, 2013).

However, diplomatic maneuvers that exploit narratives of shared history do not always proceed without friction. The shift in Türkiye's political direction, perceived as increasingly drifting away from Western values, creates a sharp dissonance with the aspirations of Balkan states that are firmly oriented toward European Union integration (Henne & Öztürk, 2022). This tension triggers suspicions that cultural diplomacy serves as a veil for regional hegemony, the pinnacle of which was captured in the politicization of the groundbreaking ceremony for the Namazgâh Mosque in Tirana, where Turkish interference sparked intense protests from the local parliament (Öztürk & Baser, 2022).

The political reactions in Albania render it the locus that most accurately represents the complexity of this cultural diplomacy. Albanian culture is essentially a synthetic product of autochthonous values and profound external influences resulting from successive waves of conquest (Frashëri, 1964/2023; Xhaferri & Tase, 2024). Centurial Ottoman rule left an indelible mark on architectural structures, traditional attire, linguistic vocabulary, and the demographic transformation toward an Islamic majority since the 15th century (Xhaferri & Tase, 2024).

While Ottoman heritage facilitates the entry of Turkish cultural diplomacy, the collective memory of the Albanian nation toward this past remains markedly ambivalent. Entering the 19th century, alongside the rise of national consciousness in the Balkans, Albanian society and diaspora elites struggled to formulate a distinct cultural identity to detach themselves from imperial assimilation, navigating between their Eastern legacy and a modern orientation toward independence (Çeku & Panchev, 2025). This national revival movement was fundamentally built on the premise of "Albanianism," which prioritized linguistic unity over religious sentiment

(Gemi & Babameto, 2024). In the modern era, the essentialist discourse of Albanian society, carrying the slogan "Return to Europe," often causes the resurgence of Islamic symbols and practices in the public sphere to be viewed with suspicion by intellectuals. Such heritage is perceived as remnants of an Oriental past that is feared could overshadow Albania's reputation in the eyes of Europe (Gemi & Babameto, 2024).

It is within this historical complexity that current Ottoman building restoration projects in Albania are received, interpreted, and reacted to. Interestingly, amidst these geopolitical complexities, restored Ottoman-era buildings are pragmatically incorporated into Albania's national economic agenda. Cultural tourism has begun to occupy a significant position in Albania's development strategy (Lula & Shkurti, 2026). Although the Albanian tourism industry remains heavily dominated by coastal and nature-based attractions during the summer (Kadiu, 2024), the emergence of cultural tourism serves as an essential niche to diversify their tourism products (Rapo & Kruja, 2024). This transformation has contributed to Albania becoming the fastest-growing tourism epicenter in the Mediterranean region, marked by a surge in visitors from 2.19 million in 2010 to 9.67 million in 2023 (Kitevski & Mijalova, 2024).

There is a sharp geopolitical paradox within the relationship between Turkish diplomacy and Albanian tourism. Although Türkiye plays a major role in revitalizing Ottoman cultural assets, Albania's economic landscape is fundamentally reliant on the European market. The flow of tourist arrivals and Albania's trade balance are predominantly dominated by European countries, aligning with their aspirations for European Union integration (Kitevski & Mijalova, 2024). On the other hand, the presence of "Turko-centric" heritage—particularly massive new structures such as the Namazgâh Mosque—potentially creates a visual irony that hinders the "Euro-centric" integration narrative.

Drawing from this complex intersection between foreign diplomatic interests and domestic economic pragmatism, the primary question to be addressed in this research is: How does Türkiye's strategy of restoring historical buildings (as a diplomatic instrument) contribute to the resurgence of the tourism economy in Albania.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach using the document analysis method. The selection of this method is based on the characteristics of the research object, which focuses on cross-border geopolitical dynamics and foreign policy—areas where primary data collection through field research often encounters accessibility constraints. Document analysis allows researchers to access and evaluate cross-cultural and historical phenomena that are not always directly observable (Morgan, 2022). Consequently, this study relies on pre-existing texts as

the primary data source to dissect Türkiye's cultural diplomacy strategies in the Balkan region.

The data sources collected for this study include academic literature related to Türkiye's Neo-Ottomanism policy, official reports regarding the restoration projects of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) in Albania, tourism statistical data from official institutions (treated as secondary documents to strengthen the description of the economic context), and records of political statements in the mass media. To ensure data validity and quality, the document selection process was conducted with reference to four primary parameters of qualitative document analysis: the authenticity of the source (document genuineness), the credibility of the information (freedom from distortion), the representativeness of the data (relevance to the political context), and the clarity of its contextual meaning (Flick, 2009).

The screened data were then analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. This technique allows the researcher to go beyond a literal description of the document content and interpret the latent meanings behind the texts (Morgan, 2022). Through thematic analysis, the data were codified and mapped into several key themes—ranging from Türkiye's soft power strategies and Albania's domestic political reactions to the impact on cultural tourism—which were then synthesized to address the research question regarding the contribution of Ottoman heritage to Albania's tourism economy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cultural Heritage Diplomacy as Soft Power

Power is a fundamental concept in political structures and international relations. Its dimensions are vast, spanning from the control of wealth, civil and military authority, to the strategic ability to influence public opinion (Barnett & Duvall, 2005; Worley, 2021). Historically, the architecture of interstate relations has been dominated by hard power, wherein nations respond to security threats and safeguard their sovereignty through coercive approaches that rely on military strength or economic pressure (Gray, 2011; Oğuzlu, 2007). However, along with the increasing complexity of the current global order, the mechanisms for achieving national objectives have shifted toward a more subtle dimension: soft power. This approach no longer rests on coercion but rather on the ability to create attraction and voluntary compliance through values, institutional practices, and culture (Nye, 1990a, 1990b).

Within this conceptual framework, a state operationalizes soft power to shape and influence the public opinion of other nations through persuasion and the appeal of exemplary values, rather than through commands or pressure (Ketenci, 2023). The utilization of this instrument demands credible communication channels to foster trust in both local and international arenas. Furthermore, soft power is not only driven through official government channels but also possesses crucial social

and economic dimensions that transform a country into a center of attraction (Ketenci, 2023).

It is within this shift in the power paradigm that cultural heritage preservation finds its strategic relevance. The conservation of historical relics is no longer viewed purely as an archaeological endeavor; instead, it has been recognized as an essential instrument in cultural diplomacy. Through collaboration and restoration assistance programs, a nation can assert its cultural identity, strengthen interstate relations, and project soft power to promote its national interests on the global stage (Wang, 2020).

These theoretical dynamics are vividly reflected in the evolution of the Republic of Türkiye's foreign policy, which over the last few decades has undergone an identity transformation from an actor relying on hard power to a state projecting soft power (Oğuzlu, 2007). Since its founding by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1923, Türkiye initially adopted a secular-Western orientation and severed ties with its Ottoman imperial past. However, its geopolitical position at the crossroads of the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Europe necessitated a policy reorientation (Makovac, 2023; Taşpınar, 2008). Particularly during the era of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) administration, there has been a significant shift toward a proactive approach often conceptualized as Neo-Ottomanism—a move that places historical heritage and cultural ties at the forefront of their diplomacy in the territories of the former empire (Aktuna, 2025; Oğuzlu, 2007).

Furthermore, the intensification of this Neo-Ottomanist rhetoric is essentially not merely a form of historical romanticism, but rather a hybridly designed geostrategic instrument. This approach explicitly capitalizes on Ottoman cultural heritage to facilitate the expansion of geopolitical influence and secure access to new economic markets beyond the borders of the Republic of Türkiye (Aydin, 2022). In other words, the preservation of cultural heritage in the Balkans serves as an elegant justification for Türkiye to instill its hegemonic influence without resorting to coercive force.

Turkish Soft Power Instruments in Albania Through TİKA

The evolution of the Republic of Türkiye's soft power-oriented foreign policy cannot be separated from the central role of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). Established in 1992 and undergoing a monumental restructuring in 2011, TİKA transformed into the spearhead of cultural diplomacy and capacity building (Beşgül, 2024). The state's commitment to this instrument is clearly reflected in its budget surge, which increased nearly fivefold during the 2003–2013 period, with foreign aid distribution exceeding \$1.2 billion in 2011 (TİKA, 2011; TİKA, 2016). Currently, TİKA's global operations span 150 countries, with a strategic focus on regions sharing historical ties, including the Balkans (TİKA, 2023).

In the Balkan region, particularly in Albania, the penetration of this soft power is massively manifested through infrastructure projects and the restoration of historical heritage. As of 2024, TİKA has reportedly funded the restoration of 500 historical projects in Albania, valued at 20 million euros (Si, 2024). Among the most prominent is the reconstruction of iconic Ottoman-era monuments, such as the Et'hem Bey Mosque in the central city square, which serves as a symbol of diversity (Ali, 2022), and the Lead Mosque in Shkodra—a significant cultural heritage site and the largest Ottoman-era mosque in Albania—which was re-inaugurated in 2025 featuring a modern flood protection system (Newsroom, 2025). The flexibility of TİKA's diplomacy is also evident in how this Sunni institution contributed to the construction of the Bektashi World Center in Tirana to maintain positive relations (Dema, 2023). Türkiye utilizes these restorations to justify its geopolitical ambitions in the Balkans, a strategy frequently described as a "win-win scenario" (Todorović, 2021; Yağcı, 2025).

The pinnacle of this display of financial prowess is not the restoration of an ancient structure, but rather the new construction project of the Namazgâh Mosque, valued at 30 million euros and designated as the largest mosque in the Balkans (Kerimoğlu, 2026). The presence of this massive Turkish-style architectural edifice creates a complex dynamic. On one hand, the Albanian political elite proactively leverage religious elements to assert their own unique geopolitical strength, such as the government's 2024 plan to establish a sovereign Bektashi Muslim micro-state in Tirana (Elbasani & Myftari, 2025) as a form of nation-branding for religious tolerance. On the other hand, the influx of Turkish physical investment, particularly new developments like Namazgâh, frequently ignites discourses concerning the shadow of foreign intervention among an Albanian society firmly oriented toward European Union integration (Öztürk, 2019; Colborne & Edwards, 2018).

Transforming Cultural Heritage into Tourism Attraction

The success of cultural heritage preservation in Albania has found its optimal momentum thanks to the country's highly strategic geographical position as a bridge in the Mediterranean region (Lula & Shkurti, 2026). Since the 2000s, infrastructure improvements have triggered an exponential surge in tourism growth. This sector has now evolved into a primary pillar, contributing approximately 24% to the total national economy in 2022 (Kadiu, 2024). The positive trend of this diversification is evident in Albania's appeal, which no longer relies solely on the summer season. Although the summer of 2024 recorded 8.5 million visits (Lula & Shkurti, 2026), the presence of cultural heritage sites ensures a steady flow of tourists outside of peak seasons, surpassing the aggregate achievement of 9.67 million tourists in the previous year (Kitevski & Mijalova, 2024).

Although the Albanian tourism industry is predominantly dominated by maritime (beach) attractions and natural beauty, the development of cultural

tourism has become a crucial element in diversifying the sector. Foreign tourists are now increasingly motivated by a desire to immerse themselves in history, heritage architecture, and religious tourism (Kadiu, 2024). This condition creates a complementary ecosystem of destinations for Albania, effectively distinguishing it from other Mediterranean coastal nations (Kalla & Metaxas, 2024).

Dalam kerangka pariwisata inilah, aset-aset sejarah era Ottoman yang dihidupkan kembali oleh pendanaan Turki menemukan nilai komersialnya. Monumen dan kota bersejarah bertransformasi menjadi daya tarik wisata budaya yang bernilai tinggi (Kadiu, 2024). Sebagai contoh, Masjid Et'hem Bey yang terletak di episentrum ibu kota Tirana—dan telah direstorasi oleh TİKA—menjadi daya tarik utama yang memancarkan pesona arsitektur Islam di tengah kota Eropa (Daily Sabah, 2025). Lebih jauh ke selatan, kota bersejarah Berat yang ber juluk “Kota Seribu Jendela” diakui sebagai Situs Warisan Dunia UNESCO menjadi representasi sempurna; tata ruang dan arsitektur khas era Ottoman di kota ini terbukti mampu memikat wisatawan Barat (Hilditch, 2026).

Within this tourism framework, the Ottoman-era historical assets revitalized through Turkish funding find their commercial value. Monuments and historic towns are being transformed into high-value cultural tourism attractions (Kadiu, 2024). For instance, the Et'hem Bey Mosque, located at the epicenter of the capital city, Tirana—and restored by TİKA—has become a primary attraction emanating the charm of Islamic architecture in the heart of a European city (Daily Sabah, 2025). Further south, the historic city of Berat, nicknamed the “City of a Thousand Windows” and recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, serves as a perfect representation; its distinct Ottoman-era spatial layout and architecture have proven capable of captivating Western tourists (Hilditch, 2026).

The Impact of Restoration on Albania's Tourism Economic Growth

For a developing nation with a relatively small economy like Albania, the tourism industry plays a vital role, potentially absorbing up to 50% of the total national employment (Zhao et al., 2023). The integration of Ottoman cultural heritage—facilitated by Turkish soft power diplomacy—into tourism offerings has served as a catalyst for the country's economic resurgence. This aligns with the findings of Kosova et al. (2023), who emphasize that Albania's tourism appeal rests upon its natural landscapes, local culture, and ancient sites. The direct involvement of TİKA has rendered these “ancient sites” better preserved and more vibrant, thereby enhancing the international competitiveness of Albania's cultural tourism.

The economic impact of this destination enrichment is clearly evident in the post-pandemic recovery. The peak of this resurgence was recorded in 2024, when Albania successfully attracted over 11.7 million foreign tourists—a surge of 15.2% compared to the previous year. This exponential growth projects tourism's contribution to reach 26% of the national GDP—a significant increase from its 24% contribution in 2022—with total tourist expenditure reaching a record \$4.8 billion

(Kadiu, 2024; Petanaj et al., 2025). Reports from the World Bank confirm that heritage tourism, particularly in regions such as Berat, has directly revitalized local economies and created new employment opportunities (World Bank, 2025). The presence of these historical sites stimulates a multiplier effect, triggering the growth of the surrounding hospitality and culinary businesses (Zhao et al., 2023).

Data from the *Institusi i Statistikave* (INSTAT, 2025) confirms this trend, showing that 95% of total foreign tourists originate from the European continent, with 72% of them coming from Southern Europe, while tourists from the Americas account for approximately 3% (ATA, 2025; Petanaj et al., 2025). The primary market is dominated by neighboring countries such as Kosovo and North Macedonia, as well as affluent European nations like Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands, which have recorded significant increases in arrivals. While visa-free policies have successfully multiplied visits from the Middle East and Asia, their proportion remains a minority compared to the wave of Western tourists (Petanaj et al., 2025).

However, behind these fantastic growth figures lies a geopolitical paradox. Although Türkiye plays a major role in cultural investment and the restoration of Eastern-oriented buildings, the primary contributors to Albania's tourism foreign exchange remain European. This phenomenon creates a visual and political clash; the presence of "Turko-centric" assets such as the *Namazgâh Mosque*—a mosque built with Turkish funding in a striking Classical Ottoman architectural style in the heart of Tirana—is frequently perceived as a hindrance to the "Euro-centric" image that Albania is constructing to smooth its path toward European Union integration.

These statistical facts lead to the conclusion that Turkish cultural diplomacy in Albania produces a complex reality. Millions of euros in Turkish investment have successfully revitalized Ottoman monuments, which Albania has astutely leveraged to diversify its tourism sector. Consequently, these Eastern-nuanced sites are effectively "marketed" as attractions for a majority of Western tourists. Revenue from this sector provides essential financial resources for the Albanian government to fund national infrastructure, even as they must simultaneously navigate the geopolitical tension between Turkish cultural influence and their own European political orientation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research demonstrates that Türkiye's strategy of restoring Ottoman-era historical buildings through TİKA operates as a cultural diplomacy instrument that indirectly catalyzes the development of Albania's tourism economy. A pragmatic geopolitical and economic relationship exists between the two nations. Türkiye has successfully projected its soft power and preserved its historical legacy in the Balkans. Meanwhile, Albania has responded to these physical investments by leveraging them to diversify its national tourism industry—which has historically relied heavily on coastal and nature-based tourism—into a destination that is also rich in cultural tourism.

However, this strategy gives rise to a sharp geopolitical paradox. Although Türkiye funds these Eastern-nuanced assets, Albania's tourist market and trade balance are absolutely dominated by European nations (accounting for 95% of tourist arrivals). These restored Ottoman historical legacies have paradoxically become exotic attractions sought after by the Western market. On the other hand, Turkish maneuvers—particularly through massive new constructions such as the Namazgâh Mosque—create a "Turko-centric" visual that triggers domestic ambivalence, as it is perceived to conflict with the "Euro-centric" narrative vital for European Union integration. Ultimately, the preservation of this cultural heritage makes a tangible contribution to creating an economic multiplier effect for Albania, while simultaneously compelling the nation to continuously balance the acceptance of historical investment from the East with the pursuit of a political future in the West.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building upon these conclusions, several avenues for future research emerge to further enrich the discourse on Balkan geopolitics and tourism. First, there is a critical need to investigate the specific criteria employed by the European Union in evaluating candidate states, particularly regarding whether a country's political orientation and its architectural landscape—as symbolic manifestations of identity—influence its integration prospects. Future studies should examine to what extent cultural background, religion, ideology, and political leanings are reflected in a nation's architectural forms, and whether these visual identities act as either catalysts or barriers in the diplomatic process of EU accession.

Second, despite Albania's vast cultural assets and significant Muslim population, research on Halal Tourism remains notably absent. This niche presents a unique opportunity to sustain a distinctive Islamic-European cultural identity within the continent. Given that current arrivals are overwhelmingly dominated by the European market, future studies should explore the potential for Albania to pivot toward new markets within the Muslim world. Attracting tourists from the Middle East and Southeast Asia could serve as a strategic and attractive option to further diversify Albania's tourism portfolio and strengthen its global economic resilience.

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