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Yaprak Gürsoy

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# Reconsidering Britain's soft power: lessons from the perceptions of the Turkish political elite

Yaprak Gürsoy   
Aston University

**Abstract** *Enhancing Britain's soft power has been a policy objective of the Conservative-led governments in the past few years. Policy relevant research on the matter mostly measures the positive perceptions of other countries' publics toward the UK. This article proposes to dig deeper into the attitudes of foreign decision-makers in an unobtrusive manner to supplement these previous studies. As an illuminating case study, it investigates the views of the Turkish politicians by using data from the parliamentary proceedings of 2011–2018. This analysis reveals that the strongest soft power asset of the UK in Turkey is its exemplary political values, government and democracy. The biggest challenge is historical experiences of animosity that leads to inherent mistrust. Evidence also demonstrates that the UK is seen more positively in conjunction with other countries and more negatively on its own. This finding stresses the significance of multilateral cooperation to augment UK's soft power.*

## Introduction

How much soft power does Britain have? What are its greatest soft power assets and how can it maintain and improve its resources? Ever since the concept of soft power was first coined by Joseph Nye (1990), it has gained increased traction in the UK, with recent academic papers analysing relative British soft power in a number of areas, ranging from sports to development aid (Pamment 2018; Woodward 2020). Beyond academia, foreign policymakers in the UK have also given heed to Britain's soft power assets and how to enhance them. Defined in simple terms as the ability to 'influence the behaviour of others' through attraction and co-option and by making them 'want what you want' (Nye 2004, 2), soft power projection has become one of the primary foreign policy goals of the UK. It is referenced in official national security documents (HM Government 2015; 2018), parliamentary reports (House of Commons 2011; House of Lords 2014), and the speeches of high-ranking officials (Hague 2012; Howell 2012; Hunt 2019). In recent years, while Brexit has increased concerns over whether the UK would be able to maintain its soft power, Global Britain became the UK's main 'international ambition' (FCO 2019) in connection with trade openness and cooperation with countries outside of the European Union (Glencross and McCourt 2018; Daddow 2019).

In practice, ambitious policies such as Global Britain and official discussions on how to enhance the UK's soft power assets are mostly grounded in

international indices of soft power. Aggregate results from these metrics have placed the UK confidently among the top five globally, at least until recently. This article analyses these studies and argues that they have inherent limitations in measuring negative perceptions and in revealing the structural reasons behind attitudes toward Britain. The article adopts a different methodology in order to move beyond these weaknesses. The main data on political elite attitudes comes from the Turkish National Assembly (TNA) proceedings between 2011 and 2018, analysed by using Qualitative Content Analysis tools (Schreier 2012). Turkey is an informative case because in public polls it has ranked the UK's soft power below the average it receives internationally, with no clear explanation why that is the case. Understanding the strongest British soft power assets in an overall more negative country, as well as the structural reasons behind these adverse perceptions, would provide illuminating lessons to the concept of soft power and British foreign policy-making.

The analysis of data from Turkish political elite perceptions confirms the results of global public opinion polls and soft power indices in three respects. First, it reinforces that 'a successful model of domestic government is an important feature of a nation's overall attractiveness' (McClory 2011, 11) and 'the power of example is far more effective than preaching' to other countries what to do (Hill and Beadle 2014, 47). Among the Turkish political elite, the most important asset of Britain is its political values and well-functioning liberal government, with the longest history of parliamentary democracy. The UK is an attractive role model in these areas, and it shapes the preferences, desires and aspirations of the Turkish political elite, whether they are in government or in opposition. After its political values, the UK is seen as an exemplary country with its economic, justice, education and health systems.

Second, the results confirm the delicate balance between hard power and soft power (Wilson 2008; Nye 2009). As several previous studies have also argued, too much hard power, used in a way that is perceived as aggressive, can erode soft power (Hill and Beadle 2014, 16–20; MacDonald 2018a, 75; 2019, 28–36). Turkish parliamentary proceedings point at this dilemma since, along with positive attributes, Britain is also referenced with negative ones, as an enemy or a threat against Turkish interests and a colonial or imperialist global power with aggressive intentions. The simultaneous existence of positive and negative perceptions emphasizes the limitations of soft power indices that only focus on the former and ignore the latter.

Third, as several other studies have shown (Hill and Beadle 2014, 46; MacDonald 2018b, 3; 2019, 46), this article demonstrates that Britain's soft power resources can be improved with continued devotion to multilateral cooperation, in a way that embraces not only the Commonwealth countries and the USA, but also Europe. Data from the Turkish parliament reveals that Britain is mentioned alone as an enemy more than any other attribute. Conversely, it is cited positively as a role model together with other global cases, Europe and the US more often. The results indicate the value of acting together with other countries rather than pursuing international goals alone.

This article also brings into light two new findings, contributing to the literature on British soft power. First, contrary to prior evidence, Britain's attractiveness as an aid provider or as a global peacekeeper is seldom mentioned and with no significant independent value attached to these international roles.

This is an interesting result given that Turkey received £128.4 million Official Development Assistance (ODA) from the UK in 2017, increasing by nearly a hundredfold in two years, due to the UK's donation to the EU Facility for Refugees (UK Parliament 2019). Similarly, although the UK and Turkey cooperate in a number of peacekeeping missions and define each other as strategic partners (House of Commons 2017), positive perceptions deriving from these collaborations are low.

Second, it is clear from the data that Turkish political elite perceptions of the UK rest on historical experiences, going back centuries. Turkey and the UK have a long record of bilateral relations with ups and downs (Göktepe 2012; Barlas and Gülmez 2018; MacArthur-Seal 2018; Karaca 2020; Hale 2020). Although the 2010s can be considered as a period of close partnership in diplomacy, defence, trade and investment (Altınörs 2020), the shadow of historical animosities are hard to erase. British governments can themselves re-ignite imperial and post-colonial visions when dealing with other countries (Połńska-Kimunguyi and Kimunguyi 2017). Regardless of the use of such discourses toward Turkey by UK officials, memories of Britain's role in the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and subsequent occupation and colonialization of the Middle East has had lasting effects on how Turkish politicians view the UK. Although Turkey itself was not colonized, Britain's imperial history is reflected in today's negative perceptions. These attitudes can be described as deep-seated mistrust that cast doubt on Britain's intentions in a number of issues, ranging from foreign policy to direct investment.

However, history does not only explain negative perceptions. Britain's attraction as a political and economic example also results from the historical view that categorizes the UK as part of the developed nations of the West, with a stable parliamentary democracy and industrialization. As such, Turkish political elite set the UK, along with other countries, as a benchmark with which to compare their own political, economic, educational and other achievements (Çapan and Zarakol 2019). This article shows that perceptions reflecting history are deep-seated and whether positive or negative, they are difficult to change.

This finding has significant policy implications. If memories of the past are resilient and if, in countries like Turkey, no amount of goodwill can eradicate suspicions, soft power cannot be significantly improved through deliberate actions geared toward increasing familiarity with the UK abroad (Rawnsley 2018). In other words, there will be limits to advertisement campaigns such as GREAT (Pamment 2015), policies such as increasing aid spending, investing in institutions like the BBC, providing more scholarships to international students or relaxing visa regulations to attract tourists and businesses (House of Lords 2014; MacDonald 2018b, 39). There is no doubt that all of these are important in securing Britain's top spot among soft power nations. However, they are unlikely to lead to substantial changes in the short run. Therefore, multilateral cooperation remains to be the most important, tangible and cost-effective way of maintaining and improving Britain's soft power.

### **Britain as a soft power: the evidence**

British foreign policy on projecting soft power rests on the cliché that the UK can 'punch above its weight' and has a distinctive 'role in the world,' with a

potential to provide global leadership (McCourt 2011). This belief results in part from the favourable rankings of the UK in soft power indices, which place the country comfortably in the top five and even number one in some years (for example, McClory 2015). Yet, the results from these league tables have also led to concerns that Britain is vulnerable because competing soft powers score close and the UK can lose its dominant status due to ‘complacency, hubris and neglect’ (MacDonald 2018b, 3; also see 2019, 37–43). With Brexit, there is further risk that the UK may slip down in the rankings. In fact, the trend appears to have already started, with the UK being positioned sixth in the recent Monocle Magazine 2019 league table (Monocle Films 2019).

The most reputable studies in the British context, evaluating the soft power rankings of countries, include the yearly Portland’s Soft Power 30 index (for example, McClory 2015), Monocle Magazine annual surveys (initially in cooperation with the Institute for Government, McClory 2010; 2011; 2012) and British Council reports (for example, Singh and MacDonald 2017; Campbell-Cree and Lotten 2018; MacDonald 2018a). Measuring countries’ relative capacity in persuasion, attraction and trust, these studies follow three methods to gather data, either alone or in combination: public opinion polls conducted across the world; ‘subjective’ expert panels assessing each country’s strength in several criteria; ‘objective’ metrics collected from other quantitative sources, such as tourist visit numbers, number of top universities in global rankings, number of embassies abroad, and so forth.

These studies point at Britain’s various soft power assets with different degrees of emphasis. In general, high levels of economic wellbeing and personal income levels, as well as democratic institutions and liberal political values, explain why developed countries are at the top of league tables (Singh and MacDonald 2017; MacDonald 2018a, 68–71). The UK, however, appears to be at the forefront of these developed nations with its openness to diversity, individual liberties, freedom of press, accountable institutions and the rule of law (MacDonald 2019, 12–13). While the monarchy can be a cultural source of appeal, the reputation of the country as the longest running parliamentary democracy increases its political capital (Hill and Beadle 2014, 23, 30–31, 33–34). Finally, although the UK is the weakest in science and technology when compared to other soft powers (MacDonald 2019, 38), it still stands out in the indices because of its diplomacy, education, arts and culture, and sports.

In terms of diplomacy, the UK has been identified as a leading nation due to its ‘impressive diplomatic infrastructure, a highly regarded diplomatic corps, and strong historical ties to a global network of states,’ such as the Commonwealth, and involvement in multilateral organizations, such as the UN. Connected also with its cultural assets, ‘the strength of Britain’s public diplomacy institutions —notably the BBC World Service and British Council’—are also cited as major advantages (McClory 2011, 15–16). Additionally, the UK appears to be a benevolent power and a force for good with its development assistance programmes and participation in international humanitarian missions. Cooperation with other nations, which uphold similar desirable values, and in multilateral settings contributes to this positive diplomatic image (Hill and Beadle 2014, 31–33; MacDonald 2019, 32–33, 43).

The UK’s natural heritage sites, museums, art galleries, musical talents, festivals, historic and contemporary literature, intellectuals and globally popular

brands can be seen as the 'traditional pillars of British cultural appeal' (Hill and Beadle 2014, 24). This attractiveness is obviously buttressed by the English language, which also sustains education as a soft power resource. Britain attracts thousands of foreign students each year, has a high number of universities in top 100, and Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, among others, are world-leading institutions. In sports, the UK is seen as the main site of popular games, such as golf and football, with the Premier League games drawing millions of global viewers (Hill and Beadle 2014, 23–30; MacDonald 2019, 40–42).

The results from these indices help understand Britain's main soft power assets and shape foreign policy. Yet, these studies have well-documented limitations, also acknowledged by practitioners (Hill and Beadle 2014, 12; McClory 2015, 23; Singh and MacDonald 2017, 29–30). One weakness is the focus on positive attributes. Questions and criteria are designed to understand a country's level of soft power, usually in terms of Nye's (2004, 11–15) original conceptualization based on culture, political values and foreign policy. Metrics measure only 'the relative strength of countries' soft power resources' (Portland 2020b) or rank 'the world's major players according to the soft power reserves they command' (McClory 2010, 8). If any negative attributes, such as corruption levels, violence in society or income inequality, are measured (for example McClory 2011), they are always given less attention when compared to positive metrics. Public opinion polls, such as the British Council's youth surveys (for example, see Campbell-Cree and Lotten 2018), have a further weakness in that they are 'artificially' conducted with the specific question of soft power in mind. Thus, results are not collected in a 'natural' setting in an 'unobtrusive' manner (Lee 2000).

Additionally, it is not easy to tell why one country receives a place below or above another on a specific question. Since indices repeat their surveys in different years, changes from one year to another can be interpreted looking at the significant events that happened during the course of the survey period. For instance, while the USA's recent decline in the rankings may be seen as a result of the Trump administration's poor management of diplomatic relations, Japan's rise can be explained in part by the impending Olympic games (Monocle Films 2019). Aside from these trends, it is possible to make assumptions on individual level contingencies. Opinion polls show that those who have visited a country, done business with it or interacted with its culture, perceive the country in more positive terms (Campbell-Cree and Lotten 2018; MacDonald 2019, 14–23). However, these correlations and assumptions miss important underlying reasons for differences of opinion and cannot provide a deeper understanding as to why individuals would choose to interact with one country rather than another in the first place.

Moreover, public opinion polls, expert questionnaires or other data collection methods do not necessarily reflect the views of decision-makers. It has been argued that 'key components' of soft power are 'impossible' to measure 'in terms of the attitudes of foreign decision-makers ... because the data are simply unavailable' (Hill and Beadle 2014, 12). However, if soft power is about making other countries desire what you prefer, then measuring it must also include assessments of how other countries' elites perceive yours. It is these elite preferences that would shape decisions and make a difference in international relations, to the benefit or detriment of a soft power nation.

This article addresses these gaps by looking at Turkish politicians' perceptions toward the UK. The British Council youth surveys, conducted every two years in G20 countries, demonstrate the significance of Turkey as a case study and how a richer analysis of this country can illuminate the UK's strongest soft power assets and its biggest challenges. In the 2018 survey (MacDonald 2018a), globally, the UK was ranked fourth in its attractiveness, third in trust in government and second in trust in its people and institutions. Despite these good results, the same survey in Turkey ranked Britain below the average. Indeed, the UK's worst rankings in attractiveness and in trust in its people was in Turkey, along with results from Russia, Mexico and Saudi Arabia. The Turkish youth ranked the UK between seventh and eighth in these indicators of soft power. The results of trust in the UK government were slightly better. However, even in this case, the UK occupied the sixth place, with results only from Russia and Argentina being worse than the ones from Turkey (MacDonald 2018a, 72; also see Campbell-Cree and Lotten 2018).

Other public opinion polls from Turkey reveal the preponderance of negative perceptions toward the UK. For instance, in a 2019 survey, the mean result in response to the statement 'political, military and economic cooperation with the UK should be further strengthened' was 2.7 on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Only 27.5% of the respondents agreed that stronger relations with Britain would be desirable (KONDA 2019). In another poll, 63% of respondents mentioned the UK in response to the question, 'which country or countries pose threat to Turkey?'. This result placed the UK as the fourth most threatening country after the USA, Israel and France (Aydın et al 2019). This outcome also shows the significance of asking negatively worded questions. Even though the UK received its lowest scores in the British Council surveys from Turkey, they were still in the top 10 among 20 nations, potentially making the results appear relatively good. Yet, other surveys with different questions show that perceptions may in fact be worse.

Given these overall unfavourable public opinion results, Turkey is a crucial case to further investigate. Uncovering areas where Turkish respondents attribute soft power to Britain would demonstrate the UK's most promising soft power assets; and by clarifying the underlying reasons for negative perceptions of the UK, it would also reveal the most significant challenges the UK faces in projecting soft power, and whether these can be remedied. Aside from general lessons that can be learned from the case, Turkey is also a critical country for Britain in its own terms. It is a non-EU, non-Commonwealth emerging power (Oğuzlu and Parlar Dal 2013) that also ranks in the top 30 as a soft power (Portland 2020a). As such, it is both a potential rival and a vital ally of the UK as London reshapes its foreign policy goals post-Brexit. Understanding Turkish political elite's perceptions toward the UK would make cooperation with Ankara in global platforms, and in Europe's neighbourhood, rest on more stable pillars.

### **Turkish political elite's attitudes toward the UK**

The main data for this paper comes from the parliamentary proceedings of the Turkish National Assembly (TNA) from June 2011 to May 2018. This seven-year period corresponds to the 24–26 parliamentary terms and covers nearly

900 sessions of the TNA. This is a period under the dominance of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* –AKP) except for the brief 25<sup>th</sup> parliamentary term. In the UK, the era under study starts one year into the first David Cameron government and closes one year before the end of the second Theresa May cabinet. The year range includes important contemporary events on both sides, such as the 2016 Brexit referendum and, in Turkey, the 2013 Gezi Park protests, the 2016 coup attempt and the 2017 presidential referendum.

In order to discern the attitudes of Turkish parliamentarians toward the UK, Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) methodology was employed, and research was carried out following four main steps (Schreier 2012). First, the minutes of more than 890 parliamentary sessions, which are publicly available online,<sup>1</sup> were searched for keywords, related to the UK in Turkish (such as *İngiltere, Birleşik Krallık*). Meaningful segments containing the keywords from the speeches of MPs concerning the agenda of the day and parliamentary questions were collected into MS Word documents.<sup>2</sup>

Second, a coding frame was built, drawing upon prior research on Britain's soft power assets, as discussed above. Three main categories of coding were made, relating to the perceptions of the lawmakers, the main issue the UK was referenced with, and whether the UK was mentioned alone or with other countries. The frame was tested by coding one third of the segments (units of analysis) two times. The first trial was approximately one year before the main analysis, followed by sharing the coding frame with experts on Turkey in academic conferences. Taking into consideration their suggestions, the frame was revised and tried out again two months prior to the actual start of the analysis. These revisions allowed each category to be finetuned and increased the reliability of the coding frame.

In the final step, the main analysis was carried out by coding each unit of analysis containing a reference to the UK in the speeches of Turkish parliamentarians. Each segment was coded three times—coding for perceptions, issues and multilateralism—using the software MAXQDA Analytics Pro 2018 (Release 2018.2.4). Altogether 1208 units were coded, making it possible to examine the political elite's perceptions of the UK in more depth.<sup>3</sup>

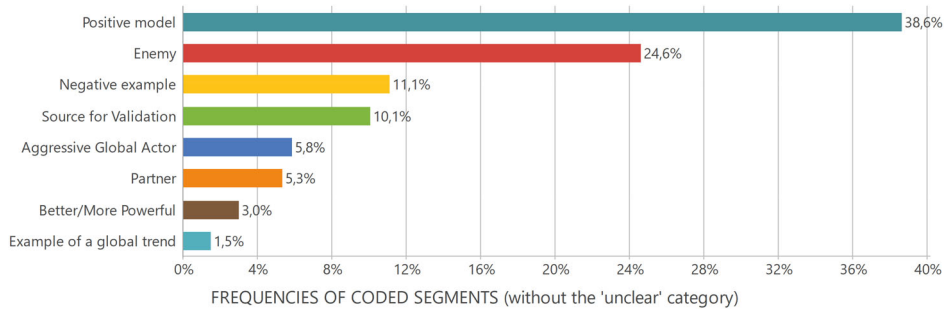
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<sup>1</sup> The pdf versions of the minutes can be found in TBMM 2020a. The records of each session are also available in html format in TBMM 2020b. Mostly pdf versions were used in collecting data, but when the pdf files failed to download on occasion, the html version was also consulted.

<sup>2</sup> In other words, all commission reports, draft laws and their preambles, as well as all other documents that were not speeches, were omitted. Quick comments and interruptions of MPs' speeches were also discarded. Speeches outside of the agenda were omitted because these short declarations at the beginning of each session frequently contained lawmakers' notes of the anniversary of their constituencies' liberation from enemy occupation. Referring to the War of Independence, these announcements were biased toward negative perceptions of the UK. Other rarely significant matters that were brought to the assembly's attention by these kinds of speeches were referred to again in the following proceedings of the same session. These repetitions prevented any important material to be missed by avoiding the speeches outside of the agenda. For more on these types of speeches in the TNA, see Neziroğlu (2009, 80–82).

<sup>3</sup> The data is publicly available in mx18 and pdf formats through two alternative links: <https://doi.org/10.17036/researchdata.aston.ac.uk.00000478> or <http://www.yaprakgursoy.com/projects-and-field-research>. The mx18 data can be used for replication and further analysis by using MAXQDA or similar software while the pdf can be used for seeing the coded segments.





**Figure 1.** Perceptions of the UK in the TNA speeches (2011–18).

### *Overview of perceptions*

Based on the most frequent patterns of referring to the UK in the TNA proceedings, the main category of perceptions was further broken down into nine general codes. A residual category of 'unclear' was created for segments where it was not possible to note the attitudes of the speaker. Only 45 segments (3.7%) were coded under this residual category. The frequencies of each remaining category are shown in [Figure 1](#).

According to these descriptive statistics, the UK has been referred to as a positive model the most, representing 449 segments and nearly 40% of the coded units. This coding was used where the UK was given as a good example or referred to as a role model, suggesting that Turkey should emulate past or current practices, policies or legislation in the UK. While some of these segments were quite detailed in praising the UK, others were in passing, often accompanied by some statistical information and with other countries to make the point that Turkey needs to improve or is falling behind global standards.

The 'negative example' category, which was applied to 129 segments (11%) was similar to the 'positive model' classification in that the UK was taken as a benchmark. However, in these cases, it was implied that Turkey was better, should not aim to be like the UK or that the comparison was invalid. In several instances of this category, the discussion derived from Britain being referred to as a positive example by the government or several MPs, which in turn led to others arguing against this analogy. In some other instances, the UK was used as a benchmark by the AKP government to show how Turkey had progressed in one particular area, surpassing the UK. Both the 'positive model' and 'negative example' sub-categories imply that Britain is used as a yardstick by Turkish parliamentarians. These two groups of segments can be read together as the most common perception, making up nearly half of all references to the UK, suggesting that 'leading by example' is the strongest British soft power asset among the Turkish political elite.

Other positive judgements on the UK in the parliamentary proceedings included 'source for validation' (117 segments), 'partner' (62 segments), Britain being 'better or stronger' in a given situation (35 segments) and 'example of a global trend' (17 segments). Even with generous interpretations, these four categories make up a total of 20% of the coded segments, falling significantly behind the role model perception, which is the predominant positive source of British soft power.

The 'partner' category was used in the broadest sense possible during coding and was applied to all Turkish MP speeches that implied cooperation. Simply agreeing with the UK in a particular instance, such as showing sympathy after the Manchester Arena Bombing in 2017, was also included in this category. The overall low frequency of this code is notable given that the UK was sympathetic to the AKP government after the July 2016 coup attempt and had been a persistent supporter of Turkey's membership in the EU (Altınörs 2020). Although the UK is acknowledged as an important international partner by the AKP governments (TC Dışişleri Bakanlığı 2020), these perceptions did not come forward in the TNA proceedings as the dominant view.

The 'source for validation' code was employed for segments that quoted a citation, an award, anecdote or an idiom from Britain, in order to confirm a certain achievement or point. Citations ranged from newspaper reports to statements from politicians. They covered a wide range of references from centuries ago to recent ones. The accessibility of English as a language cannot be denied in these citations, but they also indicate that Britain is seen as somewhat of 'an authority' or as an outside source of significance.

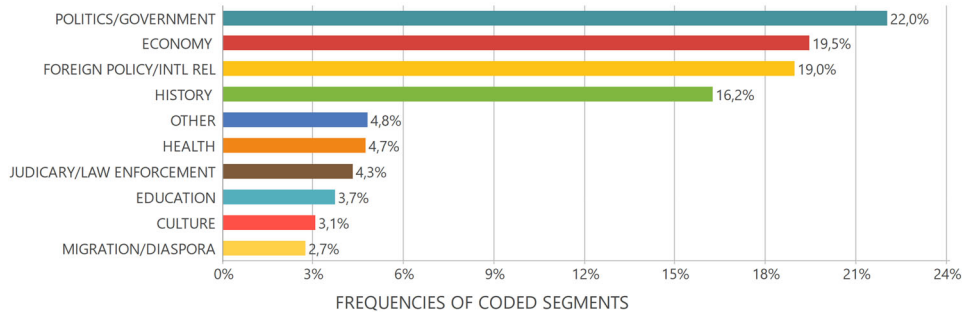
The code 'Britain being better or more powerful' was applied to segments in the broadest possible terms, covering even implications of the UK having higher prestige *vis-a-vis* third countries. In the final category, Britain was given as an example of how global politics was changing with the 2008 financial crisis or Brexit. These references to the UK were only loosely associated with soft power.

Indeed, the most significant perception after 'positive model' are feelings of hostility toward the UK. Turkish lawmakers referred to the UK in antagonistic terms in 286 instances, implying that they saw Britain as an enemy, a threat or as a country that had acted against Turkish interests. This category included past and contemporary events, as well as acts against Ottoman or Turkish economic or strategic interests. Accusations directed at domestic actors, such as the government, for cooperating with the UK to the detriment of Turkish interests were also included in this category.

References to the UK as an imperial power, colonizer or as an actor that had meddled in the affairs of other regions and countries were mentioned in 68 instances, categorized under 'aggressive global power.' Together with 'the enemy' code, negative views represent 30.4% of all references to the UK in the Turkish parliament between 2011 and 2018. Thus, although Britain has soft power over Turkey especially as a model, antagonistic feelings also exist side by side, indicating the fragile balance between positive and negative attitudes toward the UK.

### *Issues and perceptions: strongest areas of soft power and biggest challenges*

The second category of coding was about issues or topics with which the UK was mentioned in the TNA. This second set of codes had 17 categories. The codes 'economy,' 'foreign policy,' and 'migration' were further broken down to 12 sub-headings to capture details. Figure 2 shows the most common issues that were mentioned without the sub-headings. The 'other' category contains the least mentioned seven topics: sports, tourism, science and innovation,



**Figure 2.** References to the UK in the TNA in term of issues (2011–18).

**Table 1.** Co-occurrence of the code 'Positive Model' with different issues.

	Number of segments	%
Politics/Government	168	37
Economy	73	16
Judiciary/Law Enforcement	35	8
Education	35	8
Health	24	5

leaked documents, personal data protection, violence against women, and urbanization and gentrification.

As it can be clearly seen from the figure, the most common issues that Britain was mentioned with are politics, economy, foreign policy and history. Similar to perceptions, these four codes were interpreted as broadly as possible in order to provide a general overview of attitudes. The 'politics' category (266 instances) included matters related to democracy, checks and balances, human rights, individual liberties, corruption and government budget, as well as concerns about regional autonomy, minority rights and local governments. In the latter issues, the UK was mentioned often in reference to Turkey's Kurdish conflict.

The 'economy' category (235 segments) consisted of matters related to trade, finance, industry, foreign direct investment (FDI), business, agriculture, natural resources, unemployment, social security, domestic energy and concerns with global warming related to the economy.

The third most frequently mentioned issue was foreign policy (229 segments), which included discussions associated with international relations, military deployments, international organizations (such as NATO and the EU) and Turkish FDI in other countries when it related more to Turkish influence in its neighbourhood rather than the economy. Segments on Cyprus and the Eastern Mediterranean, foreign-born terrorism, Brexit, visa, and military and intelligence capabilities were also subsumed under this main category.

Finally, the code 'history' (196 instances) was used whenever the UK was mentioned with respect to a historical event up until the 1960s, when Britain's global role and influence in the Middle East declined following the Suez Canal crisis. Most references in this category pertained to relations during the Ottoman

Empire, the First World War, the Turkish War of Independence and the early Turkish Republican Period of the 1930s. This code was used when the main speech was not necessarily on history, but when the UK was brought up in this context, such as an example of how Britain (or others) could be expected to behave given their past actions.

The co-occurrence of the detailed issues with the 'positive model' category reveals the strongest areas of British soft power in Turkey. Table 1 shows the top five topics, with 'politics/government' coding clearly leading this set of co-occurrences. Several examples can be given to better explain the nature of these segments. For instance, how the UK dealt with domestic conflict, secessionism and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) was cited as a possible model for Turkey's conflict with the Kurdish movement and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* –PKK). Aspects of British democracy, such as its historical evolution from Magna Carta onward, parliamentary practices or the admirable relationship between government and opposition parties, were also mentioned in the speeches of lawmakers to highlight the deficiencies of Turkish democracy. At times, the UK was mentioned in passing with statistical comparisons to support legislation or to criticize the government, such as in the matter of squandering away the budget with expensive official cars. The breadth of possible examples provided by the Turkish politicians were quite wide, but overall, it is clear that the strongest area of British soft power in the seven years examined here was its democratic heritage and political values.

Politics is followed by the economy, which was also seen 16% of the time as a positive example that Turkey could mirror. Instances of this co-occurrence of codes include (but are not limited to) matters related to taxation, nuclear power plants, size of agricultural lands, minimum wage and labour rights. After the category 'economy,' the most frequent co-occurrence was with 'justice system/law enforcement' which made up 8% of positive model references. Examples of this co-occurrence include discussions of anti-terror law, mechanisms of mediation to decrease the number of court cases and the ratio of detention-conviction rates. References to the UK's education system were also relatively high, as previous studies on British soft power would predict. Turkish MPs brought up this issue in discussions related to education in the mother tongue, the quality of research publications in the universities and the overall standards of primary school education.

In the issue of health, the UK was mostly given as an example in legislation related to the use of starch-based sugar in food production, violence against health personnel and in the controversial issue of building new hospitals through the public-private partnership model. On this last point, the UK, usually along with Canada, was also mentioned by opposition MPs as a case where the model failed, and therefore should not be adopted in Turkey. These references were coded under the 'negative example' category and provide a good example of how the UK could be seen as a good or bad benchmark depending on the speaker and was mentioned frequently in the context of the same issue. Overall, these results show that the UK was seen as a role model by Turkish politicians in a wide variety of topics, with politics being the strongest area.

Yet, counteracting these positive influences, Britain was also perceived as a threat and an aggressive global power. While previous research on Britain's

**Table 2.** Co-occurrence of the code 'Enemy' with different issues.

	Numbers of Segments	%
History	134	47
Foreign Policy/International Relations	48	17
Foreign Direct Investment	42	15
Politics/Government	16	6
Culture	9	3

soft power suggests that the UK's participation in peacebuilding and global aid are its main assets, these issues were rarely mentioned in the Turkish parliament. Even though Turkey also receives aid from the UK, this role of Britain was commented on only from a comparative point of view and as a positive example that Turkey could emulate. More specifically, in 2014, Turkey's own international humanitarian aid volume came in third in the global rankings, after the US and the UK, leading government MPs to boast about this success (also see the speech of President Erdoğan in the TNA, TBMM 2014b, 84). Similarly, although Turkey has signed defence contracts and cooperated with the UK in a number of international operations—such as on the coast of Somalia and Libya—partnership with Britain in foreign affairs was acknowledged in only 30 instances (2.5% of all coded segments). These results indicate that there are limits to soft power when the target country's politicians are also aiming to build their own capacity in the same area. However, this attitude also tells more than a simple disregard for Britain's benign global role. Coupled with the legacy of colonialism and imperialism, most international influence of the UK was perceived from a negative point of view and its main intentions were approached with suspicion, even when Turkey was cooperating with the UK.

The underlying reason for this type of scepticism in the UK's global activism can be understood by looking at the co-occurrence of the enemy perception with the top five most cited issues. As Table 2 summarizes, nearly half of all references to the UK as an enemy or as a threat against Turkish interests, were mentioned in conjunction with a historical event. The collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the battles of the First World War, the British occupation of Istanbul between 1918 and 1923, loss of Middle Eastern territories and conflict over Mosul loomed large in attitudes toward the UK. These past events were often times recalled as evidence of how Britain had behaved in international affairs and how its previous acts of meddling in the Middle East had led to contemporary conflict. Domestic controversies over the meaning of past experiences also led to recollections of Britain as an old enemy. Similarly, the anniversaries of significant events, such as the Gallipoli Campaign or the Siege of Kut, as well as the heroic liberation of cities during the War of Independence, were grounds for remembering a long period of conflict with the UK.

As other studies have demonstrated, trust between governments lead to significant economic and international benefits (Campbell-Cree and Lotten 2018, 13–15). In the case of Turkey, some of these benefits are naturally lost

since mistrust in Britain due to past events spills over to perceptions of conflicting interests in foreign policy. 17% of references to the UK as a threat were related to current matters in foreign policy. Nearly half of these co-occurrences were related to Cyprus, the manner it was lost to the British in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the continuing military presence of the UK on the island against Turkish interests. Opposition lawmakers were also critical of the UK's alleged support for the AKP and thought that the UK governments viewed the party as a model for moderate Islam in the rest of the Middle East, at least in its initial years in power. There were also frequent references to the UK's influence in Syria, Iraq and the rest of the Middle East, as well as its support for Kurdish groups in the region, as being a threat to Turkish national interests.

British FDI in Turkey was perceived negatively due to a couple of bad experiences, most notably the condonement of a whisky company's customs debt and environmental concerns over nickel mining by a British corporation in western Turkey. These experiences and the overall aversion of foreign capital and privatizations led to adversarial references to British FDI in general.

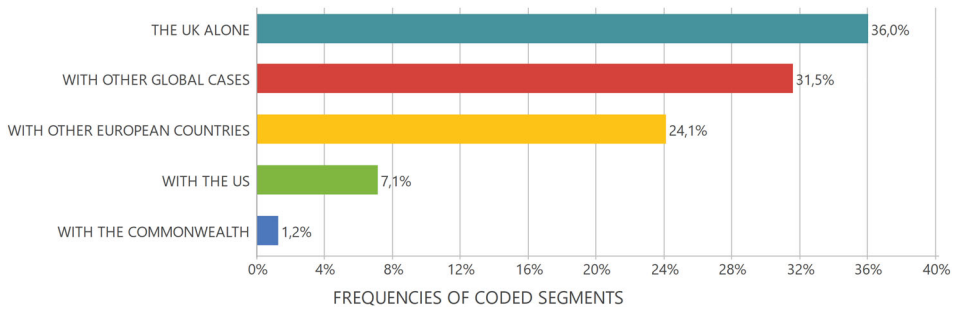
In domestic political issues, again due to an understanding of the UK's historical role in the region, Britain was viewed at times as a threat against Turkish national interests, for instance, in reference to the Kurdish minority. Lawmakers implied that Britain (and other countries) were interfering against stable peace in favour of Turkey in the Kurdish conflict. Britain was also shunned for criticizing Turkey's regime and the referendum to change the constitution to a presidential system. Finally, cultural artefacts and archaeological finds were taken away to Britain in the past, which is a long-standing area of dispute that was brought up in the co-occurrence of the codes 'enemy' and 'culture'.

In sum, the results from the Turkish parliament demonstrate that although the strongest area of British soft power is its exemplary politics and government, its greatest challenge is historical experiences of animosity. This is a dilemma that appeared sometimes even in the same speech of a lawmaker (see, for example, TBMM 2014a, 95–96; 2015, 850–851). Both perceptions reflect deep-seated understandings of Britain and do not appear to be influenced easily from day-to-day events. They also show the limits of public opinion surveys designed specifically to measure a country's soft power assets.

#### *Unilateralism versus multilateralism: strengthening British soft power*

The UK may not be able to change some of the entrenched perceptions resulting from historical experiences. However, research on the Turkish parliamentary proceedings support the argument put forward by previous studies that acting multilaterally may help improve British soft power.

During QCA, each segment from the TNA was coded also in terms of the same type of references the lawmakers made to other countries. As it can be seen from Figure 3, a clear majority of remarks about the UK also contained a similar assertion on at least one more country (64% of coded segments). Although within the UK, some of the discussions on Brexit revolved around the idea of cooperating more with the Commonwealth countries and the US, it is noticeable that from the Turkish MPs' point of view, the UK is not seen in this type of grouping, except for references to Canada in the 'negative



**Figure 3.** References to the UK in the TNA with other countries (2011–18).

example’ category as explained above. Similarly, seeing the UK only together with the US was rare, when compared with joint remarks with other European countries.

If segments included countries from both Europe and the US, they were coded under ‘with other global cases.’ However, this category also included references to all countries anywhere from the globe. Unsurprisingly, most frequent countries cited together with the UK, other than Western ones, were other soft or rising powers, such Russia, Japan, South Korea, China, South Africa or Mexico.

The co-occurrences of different perceptions with degrees of multilateralism clearly show the significance of international cooperation for soft power (see [Table 3](#)). In the category of ‘enemy’ and ‘aggressive global actor,’ the most frequent references were to the UK alone. Conversely, in the strongest area of soft power, namely ‘positive model,’ Britain was mentioned together with other global cases the most. This result would not change if the ‘negative example’ category was added to the ‘positive model.’ In the other optimistic perception categories of ‘partner’ and ‘better/more powerful,’ the UK was seen in combination with other countries from around the world.

As a ‘source for validation,’ the UK was cited on its own more, but this is mostly due to the characteristic of the code itself, which contains citations from the UK. In other words, there is not much room in a speech to cite various quotes from different countries. The UK was referenced alone in the category of ‘example of a global trend’ mostly because of Brexit, which is a unique occurrence. Setting these codes aside, it is clear from the results that if Britain wants to increase its soft power, it should continue its activism together with other countries and not just with the US or the Commonwealth.

In a setting where historical legacies cannot be undone or improved, multilateralism seems to be the only possibly effective policy choice. Although there are calls for the UK to ‘chart its own course’ and avoid being ‘a poodle of Washington or a lapdog of Brussels’ (House of Lords 2014, 62), it is important to reiterate that in seeking independence from other global actors, the UK should not ignore multilateral cooperation.

## Conclusion

The future of Britain’s soft power, and how it can use and improve its resources to increase its international influence, is an ongoing academic and policy debate. The issue will only increase in salience as the UK aims to find itself a

**Table 3.** Co-occurrence of different perceptions with multilateralism (number of segments).

	The UK Alone	With other Global Cases	With Europe	With the US	With the Commonwealth	SUM
Positive model	103	<b>169</b>	147	29	1	449
Enemy	<b>129</b>	70	66	20	1	286
Source for Validation	<b>88</b>	15	5	8	1	117
Negative Example	<b>40</b>	32	38	8	<b>11</b>	129
Aggressive Global Actor	<b>29</b>	20	10	8	1	68
Partner	12	<b>36</b>	13	1	0	62
Better/More Powerful	9	<b>16</b>	5	5	0	35
Example of a Global Trend	<b>9</b>	5	2	1	0	17
Unclear	16	18	5	6	0	45
SUM	435	381	291	86	15	1208

Note: A bold number indicates the highest score in a row. A highlight indicates the highest score in a column.

new role in changing global circumstances in the post-COVID-19 era and with Brexit. This article contributed to the debate on British soft power by investigating political elite perceptions of the UK in Turkey. Methodologically, it addressed the limitations of soft power metrics that look at the views of the public and cannot provide a deeper understanding of negative perceptions. As one of the countries that has perceived the UK in a relatively more negative light, Turkey as a case study was illuminating. The analysis stressed the significance of history and past experiences, highlighted the importance of multilateralism, and established the UK's political and democratic model as its greatest soft power asset.

As with any method to measure soft power, this article also had its limitations. Some of the findings, naturally, reflect Turkey's history with the UK. As already mentioned in the article, Anglo-Turkish relations have historically fluctuated between animosity and partnership. British predominance in the Middle East and Balkans during the colonial era resulted in thorny relations between the Ottoman Empire and the UK, which led them to take opposing sides during the First World War. Adversarial relations continued in the decades that followed the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 although both countries became NATO members after the Second World War. The most significant problems were the withdrawal of Britain from Cyprus in 1960, the subsequent turmoil on the island and Turkey's intervention in 1974.

Despite these historical problems, the UK had become the most fervent supporter of Turkey's EU accession after its membership in 1973. Britain emphasized Turkey's geographical location and military contribution to Western security as the primary reasons why Europe would benefit from enlargement toward the east. The two countries shared similar approaches to international terrorism and domestic separatism, advocating military responses and security cooperation as the best means to combat these threats. Both the UK and Turkey positioned themselves in international relations differently than the rest of the European countries, in part due to their close alliances with the US, at least until recently. Unlike many European countries that



raised concerns over immigration and human rights violations in Turkey, British governments did not seek to form bilateral relations to address these issues primarily, despite the existence of a Turkish immigrant community in the UK.

In the aftermath of the Brexit referendum and the July 2016 coup in Turkey, the two countries have entered a new phase in their domestic politics and relations with Europe. By analysing the perceptions of the Turkish policy-makers toward the UK, and covering the time period which included these two significant developments as well, this article contributed to the way bilateral relations can be rethought and based on a firmer footing.

For the future of soft power studies, it is clear that the history of Anglo-Turkish bilateral relations as briefly outlined here will not be replicated elsewhere. Britain's soft power in other seemingly more negative countries identified by previous studies, such as Argentina, Russia or Saudi Arabia, would have their own historic or contemporary reasons for these perceptions. Similarly, politicians in former colonies of the British Empire would approach the UK quite differently on a number of issues, such as FDI, development aid or international cooperation.

Thus, the significance of this article for soft power studies is not necessarily the generalizability of its specific results, but its overall finding that perceptions reflect deep-seated historical understandings that may be quite resilient and difficult to change through immediate actions. The article also calls for the re-evaluation of methodologies geared toward measuring a country's soft power. Rather than accepting the fact that there are no data availability on individual country elite views, research similar to the one conducted for this article can be employed to analyse the attitudes of politicians in other nations. Through data available from parliamentary or governmental archives, politicians' views of the UK and other soft power nations can be examined in an unobtrusive manner. Given the amount of time and resources such research would require, countries that rank the UK lower or higher than the average can be selected to provide more insights into the strengths and weaknesses of British soft power. In combination with already existing research, these types of new methods would allow for the formulation of well-informed and cost-effective foreign policy choices.

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## Notes on contributor

Yaprak Gürsoy, PhD is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Aston University. Email: [y.gursoy@aston.ac.uk](mailto:y.gursoy@aston.ac.uk)

## ORCID

Yaprak Gürsoy  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8909-6819>

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