

# SOUTHEASTEUROPE in Focus

No. 5/2020



## External Actors Series: Turkey

With contributions by

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## Southeast Europe in Focus 5/ 2020

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### About the project

Recently, the Western Balkans region and the whole of Southeast Europe have developed into a showcase of great power interests. In particular, Russia, Turkey, and China are coming to the fore as increasingly committed external actors (in addition to the European Union and the USA). Nevertheless, there are differences in the motivations and goals of the actors concerned. The project of the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / Southeast Europe Association took a closer look at the motives, instruments, and effects of the influence of Russia, Turkey, and China. The project examined the geostrategically, security policy, and systemically relevant dimensions of these actors’ engagement, taking into account also the economic, cultural, social and societal processes (certainly from a historical perspective) in the entire region of Southeast Europe.

The contributions in this volume present the most important results of Turkey’s footprint in Southeast Europe as presented and discussed at an international conference held by the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / Southeast Europe Association in Berlin on 5-6 June 2019: *Reality Check Series: Sources, Tools and Impact of Non-EU-Engagement in Southeast Europe. Part II: Turkey*. The editor is grateful to the authors of the publication for making their contributions to the conference available in a revised version and considering the conference’s discussion as well as later developments.

### Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft / Southeast Europe Association and the editor.

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## Abbreviations

<b>AKP</b> - Justice and Development Party (Turkey)	<b>NGO</b> - Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>ANAP</b> - Motherland Party (Turkey)	<b>NSR</b> - New Silk Road
<b>BBP</b> - Great Union Party (Turkey)	<b>OECD</b> - Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
<b>BESA</b> - Ethnic Albanian political party in Macedonia	<b>OSCE</b> - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
<b>BiH</b> - Bosnia and Herzegovina	<b>PIC</b> - Peace Implementation Council
<b>BKT</b> - Banka Kombetare Traktore (Albanian bank)	<b>PM</b> - Prime Minister
<b>BRI</b> - Belt and Road Initiative	<b>PYD</b> - Kurdish Democratic Union Party (Syria)
<b>CAATSA</b> - Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act	<b>RCC</b> - Regional Cooperation Council
<b>CDA</b> - Critical Discourse Analysis	<b>RP</b> - Welfare Party (Turkey)
<b>CESEE</b> - Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe	<b>SAP</b> - European Union Stabilization and Association Process
<b>CHP</b> - Republican People's Party (Turkey)	<b>SDA</b> - Party of Democratic Action (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
<b>CU</b> - Customs Union	<b>SDP</b> - Social Democratic Party of Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>Diyanet</b> - Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs	<b>SEE</b> - Southeast Europe
<b>DOST</b> - Bulgarian Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance Party	<b>SEECp</b> - Southeast European Cooperation Process
<b>DPS</b> - Movement for Rights and Freedoms (ethnic Turkish party from Bulgaria)	<b>SETA</b> - Turkish Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research
<b>DUI</b> - Democratic Union for Integration Party (ethnic Albanian party from North Macedonian)	<b>SMEs</b> - Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
<b>DYP</b> - True Path Party (Turkey)	<b>TGNA</b> - Turkish Grand National Assembly
<b>ENP</b> - European Neighbourhood Policy	<b>TIKA</b> - Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
<b>EULEX</b> - European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo	<b>TRT</b> - Turkish Radio and Television Corporation
<b>FDI</b> - Foreign Direct Investment	<b>UEBD</b> - Union of European Balkan Democrats
<b>FETÖ</b> - so-called "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization"	<b>UETD</b> - Union of European Turkish Democrats
<b>FM</b> - Foreign Minister	<b>UID</b> - Union of International Democrats
<b>FTA</b> - Free Trade Agreement	<b>WB</b> - Western Balkans
<b>ICBH</b> - Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina	<b>YPG</b> - Kurdish People's Protection Units (Syria)
<b>IMF</b> - International Monetary Fund	<b>YSK</b> - Turkish Supreme Election Council
<b>ISIS</b> - Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	<b>YTB</b> - Directorate for Turks Abroad and Related Communities
<b>MIT</b> - Turkish secret service	
<b>MP</b> - Member of Parliament	



## Introduction / Note by the Editor

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*Turkey is part of Southeast Europe.* In this regard, it is very different from the other external actors considered in this series who are truly external. In contrast, as Dimitar Bechev highlights in his contribution to this volume, even if only the region of Eastern Thrace is considered as Turkey's share of the Balkans, it would be nevertheless on its own the second most populous country in the region, right after Romania. Beyond its geographical location, Turkey also looks back on a centuries-long shared history with the region and many citizens of modern Turkey can trace their ancestral roots to places like Skopje or Sarajevo.

It thus comes as no surprise that Turkey has a special interest in the region, and this has become much more visible during the last decade. Turkey is present in many cities in the form of Yunus Emre Institutes offering language courses, the Turkish development agency TIKA renovating old Ottoman heritage, or also the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs Diyanet supporting local Muslim communities. In parallel, Turkey has boosted its investment in the region and become an important economic player, too. Still, against the backdrop of authoritarian domestic politics in Turkey and the freezing of its European integration process, one question looms large observing these developments from the EU: How to assess Turkey's new and more assertive foreign policy towards Southeast Europe and especially the Western Balkans?

The Southeast Europe Association discussed this question at a conference on 5-6 June 2019 in Berlin. The conference aimed to disentangle the country's actual engagement from the orientalisating myths of a 'neo-ottoman' policy in the Western Balkans surrounding it in many debates. It produced several very nuanced results that put Turkey's engagement in the region into perspective, comparing it to that of other actors and also evaluating its success, often with surprising results. For example, even though places like Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo play an important role in official rhetoric, it is other places like Serbia or also Montenegro that benefit much more when it comes to Turkish investments. In addition, even as the Turkish claim to care for fellow Muslims

abroad is appreciated by many, the important role religion plays in its foreign cultural policy often limits Turkey's appeal among different audiences, and has even split religious groups after the fallout of President Erdoğan with the Gülen Movement. In contrast to the usual perception, political rallies held by the Turkish President in Sarajevo or other places in the Balkans should mostly be understood as directed at a domestic Turkish audience rather than at the Balkan spectators present at these events. Overall, most experts at the conference agreed that Turkey is neither able nor trying to make an alternative offer to that of the EU to the region, but that the EU integration of the Western Balkans is very much also in Turkey's interest, even considering its stalled own accession process. In most areas, Turkey is (or could be) rather a partner for the EU than a competitor or even a spoiler.

This volume compiles contributions from our conference's experts on Turkey's role in Southeast Europe, its foreign policy, and its relations to specific Western Balkan countries. Our authors consider different dimensions of Turkey's relations to the region (economic, political, cultural) and explore their relevance and outcomes based on desk research, interviews, or media and text analysis.

In his contribution, *Dimitar Bechev* opens this volume by giving an overview of how Turkey matters in the Balkans, but also how its influence is limited. He argues that Turkey is neither competing with the EU or the USA, nor is it exporting its model of governance with a mixture of authoritarian and democratic features. Rather, Turkey takes advantage of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region through overlapping economic and security interests, despite its often divisive rhetoric.

The following three contributions then offer an overview of Turkey's role in the six Western Balkan countries and Bulgaria in three different areas: the economy, soft power, and politics.

*Mariya Hake* looks at Turkey's economic involvement in the region, comparing it to both the EU as well as other external actors like China and Russia. She finds

an increasing engagement of Turkey since the early 2000s, which is nevertheless well behind that of the EU or even single member states.

*Ahmet Erdi Öztürk* considers Turkey's much-discussed soft power in the region and gives an overview of soft power actors and their activities. He finds that Turkey has expanded its outreach to the region through several institutions, but that especially the rift with the once cherished Gülen Movement has caused much friction with Muslim communities in the Balkans. Despite its often strongly symbolic gestures in and to the region, Öztürk considers Turkey's soft power in the region as limited, especially due to its strong focus on religion.

*Srecko Latal* and *Hamdi Firat Büyük* offer in their contribution not only a compact overview of Turkey's domestic politics under Erdoğan, but also on its influence on politics in the region. They underline besides others that while official rhetoric tells otherwise and Turkish politicians often focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina in their speeches, Turkish money rather flows to Montenegro or Serbia.

The next two contributions look at Turkey as a foreign policy actor. *Beken Saatçioğlu* focusses on the question whether Turkey can be considered a potential competitor for the European Union in the Western Balkans. She underlines that positing Turkey as an alternative regional actor competing with the EU for hegemony means overstating its goals and capacities. Crucially, she underlines that Turkey has more to gain from the countries' EU integration and the following regional stability than from making alternative offers.

*Birgül Demirtaş* takes a closer look at the development of Turkey's foreign policy, analysing besides others also debates on Kosovo in Turkey's parliament. She argues that there are challenges ahead and limitations to Turkey's appeal to the region, resulting from the tilt towards unilateral policies.

Finally, the last two contributions offer insights into two especially interesting country cases. *Sabina Pačariz* looks at the recently warming relations between Turkey and Serbia. She finds that despite of historical hostilities, both countries nowadays share important traits like a multidimensional foreign policy, attitudes towards their EU candidacy and the status of an 'anchor state' in their region, as well as rising authoritarianism domestically. Interestingly, the improved relationship also has a lot to do with both countries' interest in the EU market of which both can benefit when working together.

*Dino Mujadzevic* explores with Bosnia and Herzegovina the most likely case for good relations to Turkey. He finds that Muslim religious and political actors in the country accept Turkish patronage as it brings both material and symbolic benefits. Nevertheless, the point of reference of the relationship is not only the Ottoman period, but also characteristics of modern Turkey as well as its support for the country and Muslims abroad.

I would like to thank all the authors who have contributed to this publication and share with us their insights on Turkey's role in Southeast Europe. All contributions were finalized shortly before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, which then also put production on hold. The developments resulting from this crisis are thus not covered in this issue.

## Turkey's Policy in the Balkans - Continuity and Change in the Erdoğan Era

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**Abstract:** The article studies the evolution of Turkey's policy in the Balkans from the 2000s until the present. Though Turkey is part of Southeast Europe and has always been involved in the region's politics, its presence and ambitions expanded with the coming to power of the Justice and Development Party AKP. It has harnessed economic and soft power tools to assert its influence, with Islam playing an increasingly central role – both as a driver and an instrument. As a result, many analysts tend to portray Turkey as a “killjoy” competing with the EU and the United States, exporting its model of governance with a mixture of authoritarian and democratic features. In contrast, this article argues that Turkey is not seeking to undermine Western order but rather to take advantage of it. Economic interdependence and overlapping security interests link Turkey and the West, despite Erdoğan's divisive rhetoric and politics. In addition, Turkish foreign policy activism in the Balkans has delivered geopolitical and commercial gains for Ankara, but also led to setbacks for local actors

### Introduction

It was the night of 12 June 2011. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan had a good reason to be in a triumphant mood. The Justice and Development Party (AKP) had just been re-elected for a record third term. Jubilant crowds had gathered in front of its offices in Ankara to greet their leader. The speech Erdoğan delivered would stick in people's memories for years to come: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakır."<sup>1</sup> This moment marked, likely, the high point of Turkey's neighbourhood policy, or “zero-problems with neighbours” (*komşularla sıfır sorun*) as Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu styled it at the time. Having been shunned by the EU, Turkey appeared to be on the ascent regionally – winning hearts and minds across the former Ottoman imperial domains. The Arab Spring or Awakening brought about the downfall of sclerotic regimes across the Middle East and North Africa testifying to the traction of the so-called Turkish model, the notion that the country's experience with democracy and market-driven growth could guide positive changes beyond its borders.

The Balkans featured heavily in Turkey's neighbourhood strategy: From Sarajevo to Tirana and from Skopje to Constanța and Varna on the Black Sea, Turkish investment, consumer goods, and cultural

exports such as growingly popular TV series and educational institutions attracted interest. Ankara's diplomacy was making inroads in the region. In September 2009, for instance, President Abdullah Gül paid a landmark visit to Belgrade, which set in motion a rapprochement with Serbia. Davutoğlu took credit for mediating in local disputes, having orchestrated a series of three-way meetings with the Foreign Ministers of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, Sven Alkaj and Vuk Jeremić.<sup>2</sup>

A decade later, Turkey finds itself in a very different place. Its ambitions for regional leadership faced a reality check with the 2013 military coup in Egypt and Syria's devastating war. Erdoğan's own authoritarian turn culminated with the switch from a parliamentary to a presidential regime in 2017, which has dealt a mortal blow to the aspiration to set an example for neighbours. Turkey's economy has faltered. Turkish foreign policy has become defensive and increasingly reliant on military force, rather than economic instruments and soft power. The latest intervention in Northeast Syria and before the cross-border incursions in 2016 and 2018, all aimed at neutralising Kurdish militants, highlight this trend. In more than one respect, the “new” Turkey built by Erdoğan is reminiscent of the old Turkey, left behind in the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the major shift in posture, Turkey has continued to engage with Southeast Europe. To be

<sup>1</sup> BBC (2011): Turkey election: victorious Erdogan pledges “consensus”, 13.06.2011, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-europe-13744972> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>2</sup> For the 2000s, see the chapters in Kadioğlu, Ayşe / Öktem, Kerem / Karlı Mehmet (2012): Another Empire: A decade of Turkey's foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party. Bilgi Üniversitesi

Yayınları, İstanbul. Also Kirişçi, Kemal (2012): Turkey's engagement with its neighborhood: A ‘synthetic’ and multidimensional look at Turkey's foreign policy transformation’, Turkish Studies 13/3, pp. 1-23.

<sup>3</sup> Waldman, Simon / Çalışkan, Emre (2017): The New Turkey and Its Discontents. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

sure, Ankara's policy was largely confrontational. The Greek-Turkish disputes in the Aegean and over and around divided Cyprus have gotten worse, for instance. Turkey's estrangement from the EU has not improved matters either. Recently, Erdoğan's repeated threats to European leaders that he would open the gates for the 3.6 million refugees from Syria caused tensions.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, Turkey strove to build closer ties with virtually all Balkan countries without exception. Its relations with Serbia, led by the aspiring strongman Aleksandar Vučić, have been moving forward. Turkey holds leverage in Bosnia and is pressing on with trilateral cooperation involving both Sarajevo and Belgrade. It is also increasingly central to the region's energy security, having gradually moved from being a major consumer to a country transiting natural gas. In short, there are both positive and negative aspects of Turkey's presence in the Balkans.

The following text looks at the origins and trajectory of Turkish policies. It dissects its performance and the responses from local actors in the Balkans. It finishes with some reflections on Turkey's relationship with the West in the region.

### Turkey's regional identity

There is a fundamental misconception when it comes to Turkey's position in the Balkans. It is usual practice for foreign policy pundits to relegate Turkey to the category of "external players" in the region, alongside with one-time imperial rival Russia, rising China, and even the Arab Gulf countries that have gained prominence thanks to a handful of investment ventures in former Yugoslavia.<sup>5</sup> In reality, Turkey is not an outsider to the Balkans, at least not in the sense that the other countries on the list are. Its geography, history and society all link it closely to the Southeast corner of Europe. The cliché about Turkey "returning to the Balkans", therefore, makes little sense.

It is true that, technically, only a small fraction of Turkey's territory lies in the Balkans. The region of Eastern Thrace has an area of little over 23,700 sq. km, which is about 3 % of the country's territory. However, thanks to the megalopolis of Istanbul, it accounts for a

much larger share of the population – about 14 % or 11.6 million. So, if European Turkey was a separate state, it would be the second most populous one in Southeast Europe, following Romania and ahead of Greece.

It is also worth keeping in mind that the large urban centres of Western Turkey, starting with Istanbul but also including Izmir and Bursa, are relatively proximate to major Balkan cities. The Bulgarian capital Sofia lies some 551 km away from Istanbul and the second-largest city Plovdiv (or Filibe as it is known in Turkish) 421 km. This distance is, in fact, shorter than the one between Ankara and Istanbul (448 km). The comparison could be extended further. Belgrade, for instance, is closer to Istanbul than Trabzon is; Sarajevo closer than Diyarbakır.

Turkey is connected to the Balkans thanks to its *population*: Up to 30 % of its citizens have roots in the region and in most cases have found themselves within the borders of the Turkish Republic as a result of migrations caused by the gradual shrinking and ultimate collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Migration from the Balkans continued throughout the republican period, the Cold War and the 1990s. These migratory waves give rise to connections, some immediate and some more distant. The imprint of the Balkan Turks and other Muslim groups is visible not just in Thracian cities such as Edirne, Tekirdağ or Kırklareli (or Kirk Kilise, meaning "Forty Churches"), but also in Bursa, Izmir, parts of Istanbul, Ankara and elsewhere in Anatolia. It is safe to assume that a fair share of the 10,000-strong multitude that welcomed Erdoğan in the Serbian town of Novi Pazar in October 2017 had relatives, friends, and/or business partners in Turkey or had been to Turkey on more than one occasion.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there are large populations in Balkan countries who can trace their origins to what is today Turkey – Greece, which harboured more than a million refugees from Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace in the exchange of populations in the 1920s, but also Bulgaria.

Human connectivity blurs the territorial divides that remain, in the final analysis, social constructs. Seen from the vantage point of sociology and history, the

<sup>4</sup> Safi, Michael / MacKernan, Bethan / Borger, Julian (2019): US warns Turkey of red lines as Syria offensive death toll mounts. Guardian, 10.10.2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/10/turkish-president-threatens-send-refugees-europe-recep-tayyip-erdogan-syria> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Bieber, Florian / Tzifakis, Nikolaos (2019): The Western Balkans and the World. Linkages and Relations with Non-Western Countries.

Routledge, London. See the chapter on Turkey by Ahmet Erdi Öztürk / Samim Akgönül, which contains a snapshot of Turkish initiatives and achievements.

<sup>6</sup> RFE/RL (2017): Turkey's Erdogan gets a warm welcome in Serbia's mostly Muslim Sandžak region. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty, 11.10. 2017, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/turkey-serbia-/28785717.html> (accessed 18 October 2019).

boundary between “the Balkans” and “Anatolia” is as diffuse as the one between the Balkans and Central Europe. Apparent certainties often do not stand up to careful scrutiny.<sup>7</sup>

Turkey and the Balkans are connected at a yet deeper level. They share an experience of modernisation, Europeanization, nation- and state-building which is ambiguous and ridden with trauma. Turks and other Muslims from the Balkans played a seminal role in the establishment of modern Turkey. The view of nationalism, state formation, and state-driven transformation as a project foisted upon conservative Anatolian masses by the arrivals from the lands of Rumeli (or Turkey-in-Europe) is no doubt simplistic. Yet key figures starting with the republic’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk did come from the Balkans and in many ways their ideas and general outlook, at least in part, reflected the conditions and circumstances they faced in their places of origin.

Going further back in time, the Balkans were central to the late Ottoman Empire’s interaction with the West and efforts at modernisation. The Ziraat Bank (Agricultural Bank), the second-biggest lender in Turkey, was started in 1963 by Mithad Pasha in the town of Pirot, in Southeast Serbia. Turn-of-the-century Macedonia gave a start to the Young Turk revolution of 1908. Talaat Pasha, one of the three-men committee to lead the Ottoman Empire in its dying days and the architect of the extermination or genocide of Armenians in Anatolia during the First World War, came from Kardžali (Kırcaali) in present-day Bulgaria. The loss of the Balkans during the wars of 1912-1913 bore heavily on the emergence of the Turkish Republic later on in that history.<sup>8</sup>

Even after the end of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey stayed engaged in Balkan politics. It was part and parcel of multilateral initiatives such as the two Balkan Pacts of 1934 and 1953. The latter treaty was actually signed in Ankara, with Greece, Turkey and Tito’s Yugoslavia as parties. Turkish officials attended all Balkan gatherings in the 1970s and 1980s, including the foreign ministerial in Belgrade of 1988. Its disputes with neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria, on account of

the forced assimilation and subsequent expulsion of local Turks, anchored it even more tightly in the region. After the Cold War ended, Turkey, led by Prime Minister and later on President Turgut Özal, was quick to deepen its links with several Balkan neighbours.<sup>9</sup> It steered clear of unilateral intervention into the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, preferring to work through NATO and other international institutions, but followed the conflict closely and opened its doors to refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. Turkey joined the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) overseeing the Dayton Peace Accords. It also contributed to the relaunch of regional cooperation in the mid-1990s, through bodies such as the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) and the Stability Pact.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, Turkey is not *just* a Balkan country. It has a similar relationship to other areas. As Davutoğlu, amongst others, would point out, it is also a Middle Eastern and a Caucasus country as well as a neighbour of North Africa and Central Asia. Connections with Syria and Iraq, borders with whom were drawn only after the First World War, are at least as prominent. They have cut across communities that have recently become blurred as a result of forces ranging from war and forced migration to trade and investment. The politicians and personalities who have come to dominate public life in Turkey today have no Balkan connections. Erdoğan, for instance, has his family roots from the Black Sea town of Rize and most likely, several generations back, Batumi in Georgia.<sup>11</sup> The AKP has deep roots in inner Anatolia.<sup>12</sup> The Black Sea region has been overrepresented in Istanbul politics.<sup>13</sup> Turkey is both internally diverse but also interwoven in its multiple neighbourhoods. It is also a crossroads but, often, because of its size and the lasting impact of nationalism in its multiple permutations, inward-looking.

<sup>7</sup> For an erudite critique of the distinction between the Balkans and Anatolia in historiography, see Vezenkov, Alexander (2017): Entangled geographies of the Balkans: The boundaries of the region and the limits of the discipline. In: Daskalov, Roumen / Mishkova, Diana / Marinov, Tchavdar / Vezenkov Alexander: Entangled histories of the Balkans, Vol 4: concepts, approaches and (self-)representations. Brill, Leiden, pp. 115-257.

<sup>8</sup> Lewis, Bernard (1961): The emergence of modern Turkey. Oxford University Press. Oxford.

<sup>9</sup> Özal is credited with the establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency TİKA (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi

Başkanlığı), which is the main channel of development assistance to Turkey’s neighbours, in the Balkans and elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> Bechev, Dimitar (2011): Constructing South East Europe: The politics of Balkan regional cooperation. Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.

<sup>11</sup> The President’s wife Emine hails from Siirt in the Southeast and is reportedly of Arab heritage.

<sup>12</sup> Abdullah Gül and Davutoğlu come from inner Anatolia (Kayseri and Konya).

<sup>13</sup> Ekrem İmamoğlu, the opposition candidate who won the mayorship of Istanbul in 2019, is from Akçaabat, near Trabzon.



## Why are we preoccupied about Turkey in the Balkans?

Given Turkey's embeddedness in the Balkans, but also its distinctive character and self-centeredness – why is it that analysts are uneasy about its policy? It is not uncommon to look at the region as turning from a periphery of the EU, gradually digested into its institutions and norms, into an area of great power competition. A return to the era of diplomatic rivalries and wars and of the Ottoman and the Tsarist Empire coming back from the dead to contest Western domination and carve out their geopolitical spheres of influence. Looking at Turkey, in particular, it has become standard to describe its presence and initiatives as a manifestation of “neo-Ottomanism” – vaguely describable as nostalgia for imperial *grandeur* and aspiration to recoup at least some of the influence lost with the end of the empire.<sup>14</sup>

The reasons are manifold and have to do with the trajectory taken by both Turkey and its Balkan neighbours over the last decade or so. The underlying issue is that the political order centred on the European Union and based on principles such as democratisation, open borders, and multilateral cooperation is faltering. The periphery of the Union, the Western Balkans but also Southeast Europe more broadly, is exposed to the repercussions. This faltering happens at the time that Turkey and the West are drifting apart as well.

Democracy is coming under strain: In 2018, the international watchdog Freedom House downgraded Serbia, an EU candidate country, to “partly free”.<sup>15</sup> It did the same with neighbouring Hungary, an EU member state. To be sure, democratic regimes in the Balkans had never fully moved to consolidation, even in the 2000s when the pull of EU conditionality was arguably at its strongest. But in the 2010s, we have seen a resurgence of phenomena such as high-level corruption, pervasive clientelism, and the erosion of the rule of law. Nationalism is back, sadly not just in former Yugoslavia but also in the core EU, too. However, unlike the times when Slobodan Milošević and Franjo Tuđman held power, wars are not fought on the battlefield. Rather, they take place on the front

pages of the tabloids, beholden to the government of the day, on TV talk shows, and increasingly on social media.<sup>16</sup>

The region's EU integration is facing headwinds. The opposition to the start of membership negotiations by North Macedonia and Albania proves the point. In the Macedonian case, France defied all other EU countries with the argument that the Union needs internal consolidation first before expansion. Kosovo in the meantime has not been granted visa liberalisation, despite fulfilling the technical conditions. The EU's unwelcoming attitude vindicates the view that Europe is moving towards a differentiated model of integration, where the Western Balkans, along with Romania and Bulgaria and other post-communist member states, find themselves in the outer circles of Europe.

The weakening pull of Brussels has a negative fall-out on domestic politics. The European dignitaries' embrace of authoritarian-minded elites does even greater damage. Pro-EU constituencies in countries like Serbia and Montenegro are disheartened by Brussels and member state officials' reticence when it comes to ills such as state capture. At the same time, the apparent pro-EU consensus at the level of political parties does not translate into unqualified support for reforms to foster accountability and strengthen the rule of law. Put in simpler terms, Balkan politicians talk the EU talk, but fail to walk the walk. Sure enough, the status quo may not be as dire as in the 1990s, but it is hardly a confirmation of Europe's “transformative power”. The real litmus test is not the number of negotiation chapters open or closed, or the benchmarks fulfilled, but the strong desire of large groups in the region to emigrate as evidenced in surveys.

Turkey has taken an even more troublesome trajectory. Its fragile democracy has morphed into what scholars term a competitive authoritarian regime. The transition to a presidential regime in 2017-2018 has marked the endpoint in the dismantling of checks and balances on executive power.<sup>17</sup> Despite gains by the opposition in the latest round of local elections, the country is both *de facto* and *de jure* in

<sup>14</sup> See for instance Tanasković, Darko (2013): Neo-Ottomanism: A doctrine and foreign policy practice. CIVIS, Belgrade. More broadly on Neo-Ottomanism, Yavuz M. Hakan (2016): Social and intellectual origins of neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a post-national vision. *Die Welt des Islams* 56/3-4, pp. 438-465.

<sup>15</sup> Freedom House (2018): Freedom in the world – Democracy in crisis. January 2018, available at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>16</sup> Bieber, Florian (2019): The rise of authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. Routledge, London.

<sup>17</sup> On the evolution of Turkey's political system, see Esen, Berk / Gümüşçü Şebnem (2016): Rising competitive authoritarianism in Turkey. *Third World Quarterly* 37/9, pp. 1581-1606; Special Issue on Exit from Democracy: Illiberal Governance in Turkey and Beyond. *Journal of Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 16/4.

President Erdoğan's hands. The authoritarian turn in domestic politics, following a decade of EU-inspired reforms in the 2000s, has led to the sharp deterioration of relations with the West. Anti-American and anti-EU rhetoric, never absent from the Turkish public sphere, have now become the norm.<sup>18</sup> Political and security ties have deteriorated dramatically. The standoff between Washington and Ankara over Syria and the verbal duels between Erdoğan and Donald Trump have triggered concerns that a divorce is imminent. Though it is unlikely that Turkey would leave NATO or extricate itself from the Customs Union with the EU, it is fair to say that its relationship with Western partners has mainly become transactional rather than rooted in long-term strategic interests, let alone values.<sup>19</sup>

It is Turkey's gradual decoupling from the West that has stoked fears that it is on a mission to reclaim its former empire. It is not difficult to find evidence to that effect. Ottoman nostalgia has long been present in Turkish society and culture. The imperial past has served as inspiration for different political strands, from Islamist conservatives all the way to liberal proponents of minority rights and pluralism.

Turkish foreign policy has tapped into Ottoman memories and legacies, too. In October 2009, for instance, Ahmet Davutoğlu delivered in Sarajevo what many took at the time as a programmatic speech in which he praised the Ottoman past as a source of guidance for the future in the Balkans. It was only in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the peak of the sultans' might, that the region took the centre stage in world history.<sup>20</sup> Having made peace with its past and harnessing its historical capital, the new Turkey was bringing the promise to remake the Balkans, too. No more a stagnating and fragmented periphery of the West in Europe but a pivotal part of a new cluster in a multi-centric global environment. Needless to say, such messages have been ill-received by many of the locals. Politicians and commentators have accused Ankara of working to reclaim the empire, albeit with economic and soft power rather than military means, cultivating the "fifth column" amongst Balkan Muslims. Others

have shown enthusiasm, however. "Welcome Sultan" read one placard during Erdoğan's "walk of fame" in Novi Pazar in October 2017.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to "Neo-Ottomanism", another complaint laid at Turkey's doorstep is that it is exporting authoritarian rule to its neighbours. It is a similar theme as the one about "Putinization", that is Russia promoting a governance alternative to Western liberal democracy. Critics point, for instance, at Erdoğan's cosy relationship with the new crop of Balkan strongmen, such as Serbia's Aleksandar Vučić. Like his Turkish colleague, Vučić has built a presidential regime and amassed a great amount of power in his hands, though without going through the pains of changing the Serbian constitution.<sup>22</sup> Another example would be the refugee deal concluded in March 2016 between Turkey and the EU, which has empowered, by default if not by design, the Western Balkan countries to act as guardians of Europe's gates and, therefore, strengthen the hands of the governments and political leaders relative to the parliaments or courts. Last but not least, the Turkish government's efforts to root out the Gülenists (known now as the "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization" FETÖ) have spread to the Western Balkans. There are examples of arrests and renditions of Turkish citizens without due process and the protections afforded by the law.<sup>23</sup>

### The evidence

Though the concerns about Turkey should not be dismissed lightly, its Balkan policy is neither disruptive nor fully beholden to neo-imperialist fantasies. It rather reflects a mixture of ideology and pragmatic calculations, and is often a product of circumstances rather than grand designs.

*To start with*, the authoritarianism in the Balkans is a home-grown phenomenon and not an import from either Turkey or Russia. It would be far-fetched to fault Erdoğan, Putin, Viktor Orbán or anyone else with the rule of law and accountability deficits in a region that has some historical experience with competitive

<sup>18</sup> On how Turkish identity's construction of "others" relates to foreign policy, see Hintz, Lisel (2018): Identity politics inside out. National identity contestation and foreign policy in Turkey. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

<sup>19</sup> Kirişçi, Kemal (2017): Turkey and the West: Faultlines in a troubled alliance. Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>20</sup> Davutoğlu's address at the conference on 'Ottoman Legacy and Muslim Communities in the Balkans Today', Sarajevo, 16 October 2009. Quoted in Demirtaş Birgül (2015): Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans: A Europeanised foreign policy in a de-europeanised national context? Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies 20/10, pp. 1-17.

<sup>21</sup> Analysts use imperial parallels at length. See Çagaptay, Soner (2017): The new sultan: Erdogan and the crisis of modern Turkey. Bloomsbury, London. Idem (2019): Erdogan's Empire. Turkey and the politics of the Middle East. Bloomsbury, London.

<sup>22</sup> Bieber. The rise of authoritarianism.

<sup>23</sup> Begisholli, Blerta (2019): Kosovo 'broke law' when deporting Turkish Gülenists. Balkan Insight, 5.10.2019, available at <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/kosovo-broke-law-when-deporting-turkish-gulenists-02-05-2019/> (accessed 18 October 2019).

politics, but is still a novice when it comes to democratic governance. External powers may take advantage of state capture and corruption, as they often do, but these conditions are by and large local ones liable to be exploited. Foreign meddling could well exacerbate matters – e.g. Turkey’s partnership with or outright patronage over certain politicians and factions in Bosnia and Herzegovina consolidate their grip on power and public resources – but is not the root cause of democratic dysfunctionality.

*Secondly*, Turkey is not always the lone wolf it appears to be. A “neo-Ottoman” policy would imply that Turkey acts in mostly a unilateralist fashion, as opposed to through the medium of institutions or alliances, such as NATO. To be sure, Turkish foreign policy has a strong unilateralist impulse as many scholars and experts have pointed out. Self-reliance and distrust of foreigners are entrenched in perceptions and attitudes of the Turkish public, too.<sup>24</sup> Ankara has made moves and asserted its interests in the Balkans too: E.g. providing economic assistance through TİKA, supporting domestic political players aligned with the AKP, funding schools, trying to mediate in regional disputes, etc. The same point was very much true of the Middle East before the Arab Spring when Davutoğlu was touting the notion of Turkey as an order-setter (*düzen kurucu ülke*).<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, even with President Erdoğan in full control and nationalism rampant, foreign policy has played along and adapted to multilateral institutions. To give the obvious example: Despite its strained relationship with both NATO and the EU, Ankara continues to support their enlargement to the Balkans, as in the AKP’s early years of power. Rather than pursue an obstructionist strategy, as Russia does, and try to wean countries’ into its diplomatic orbit, it ratified Montenegro and North Macedonia’s NATO accession treaty without delay. There is no opposition, rhetorical or substantive, coming from Ankara vis-à-vis the EU’s expansion either. That makes sense from a purely rational perspective. Bringing in new members also means expanded market access for Turkey, thanks to the Customs Union with the EU. Notably, Turkey is amongst the Top 5 export markets for Romania, Bulgaria and Greece, all of them being members of the

Union.<sup>26</sup> In short, there still remains a multilateral dimension to Turkey’s engagement with the Balkans, even if it gets overshadowed by Erdoğan’s leader-to-leader diplomacy.

*Thirdly*, go-it-alone has not delivered that much for Turkey. Davutoğlu’s shuttle diplomacy between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) in 2010-2011 looked excellent on paper, but, beyond some initial concessions, such as the Serbian parliament’s condemnation of the genocide in Srebrenica, it has failed to settle conflicts. BiH is arguably more fragmented and dysfunctional now than it was a decade ago when Turkey embarked on its mission as a trouble-shooter capable of replacing the EU or the US. The main achievement of that era turned out to be the opening with Serbia, which, though initiated by Abdullah Gül and Davutoğlu, blossomed when Erdoğan and Vučić took charge. Though present in Bosnia, Turkey is not involved in the most significant security issue in the Balkans – the Kosovo issue. It is the EU presiding over the “normalisation talks” between Belgrade and Prishtina, with the US and occasionally Russia coming into the picture. All in all, Turkish ambitions have been scaled down. The Serbia-Bosnia-Turkey trilateral summits are now focused on more immediate issues such as the highway connecting Belgrade and Sarajevo.

*Fourth point*: Turkish politics appear to be driven increasingly by domestic political considerations and not geopolitics. Thus, in May 2018, Erdoğan held a mass rally in Sarajevo ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections in Turkey. The reason he chose the Bosnian capital was that he had been prevented from campaigning amongst Turkish communities in Western Europe. His partisans from Germany, the Netherlands, Austria and elsewhere had an opportunity to display their support by gathering in Sarajevo, half the distance to Turkey. In other words, Erdoğan’s move targeted his voters first, and only then Balkan audiences.

*Fifth*, Islam has become much more central to Turkish foreign policy with the AKP at the helm, but that does not mean it was absent from the picture when secularists called the shots. The Directorate of

<sup>24</sup> For a succinct overview of Turkish foreign policy, see Aydın, Mustafa (2019): Foreign policy 1923-2018. In: Özerdem, Alpaslan / Whiting, Matthew (2019): The Routledge handbook of Turkish politics. Routledge, London, pp. 367-378.

<sup>25</sup> Davutoğlu, Ahmet (2001): Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu. Küre Yayınları, İstanbul.

<sup>26</sup> Turkey’s major export markets in Southeast Europe in 2018 were as follows – Romania: \$2.5 billion, Bulgaria: \$1.7 bn, Greece: \$1.4 bn, Slovenia: \$1.06 bn, Serbia: \$586 million, Albania: \$308 million,

Bosnia and Herzegovina: \$294 million, Croatia: \$272 million, North Macedonia: \$253 million, Kosovo: \$215 million, Montenegro: \$80 million. Turkey’s imports from the region – Romania: \$1.557 bn, Bulgaria: \$1.527 bn, Greece: \$918 million, Serbia: \$233 million, Slovenia: \$211 million, Croatia: \$150 million, Bosnia and Herzegovina: \$120 million, North Macedonia: \$69 million, Albania: \$13 million, Montenegro: \$10 million, Kosovo: \$3 million. Data from the Turkish Statistical Institute ([www.turkstat.gov.tr](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr)).

Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı* / Diyanet) has a network across the Balkans, funding imams, mosques, and other pious institutions. Yet its involvement dates back to the 1990s. Back then, one of its main concerns was counteracting Salafism coming from the Gulf. Nowadays, it is imperative to stamp out Gülenists who managed to expand their influence in the 2000s, when they were allied with the AKP. – On the one hand, Turkey plays a hegemonic role in Balkan Islam. On the other, religious communities are in the arena of struggles emanating from Turkish politics, which takes from the country's soft power. Once Gülen's *cemaat* was the vanguard of Turkey's influence in the Balkans. Now it stands as the state's enemy number one.

It is also worth noting that there is more to religious diplomacy than just Islam. Turkey has used faith to engage predominantly Christian countries. For instance, the Istanbul Municipality financed the renovation of St. Stephen, the Bulgarian church in Fener. The opening ceremony in November 2017 saw Erdoğan and Prime Minister Boyko Borisov side by side. The meeting was a prequel to the EU-Turkey summit in March 2018 convened in Varna during Bulgaria's Presidency of the Council of the European Union.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, Alexis Tsipras became the first Greek Prime Minister to visit the seminary on the island of Halki in February 2019.<sup>28</sup> Turkey touted the prospect of reopening the religious school closed forcibly in 1971.

*Lastly*, Turkish activism in the Balkans has generated dividends, but also costs. Perceptions of Turkey, as well as Erdoğan, differ depending on one's ethnic affiliation and politics. He does have his admirers, as the rally in Sarajevo or the impromptu gatherings in support in the aftermath of the coup attempt on 15 July 2016 show. Yet there is no shortage of sceptics and detractors, including amongst the Muslim populations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, Erdoğan tends to be popular amongst voters for the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), but not so much other strands, which are critical of Turkey's undemocratic turn even if they retain a positive view of Turkey and Turks.<sup>29</sup> In Bulgaria, the main political force representing the Turkish community and other

Muslims, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), is at odds with official Ankara. Turkey has meanwhile thrown its weight behind a splinter faction. Similarly, in North Macedonia, the AKP is aligned with Besa, which challenges the Democratic Union for Integration (DUI) that is the dominant Albanian party. In general, the combined effects of the AKP's fusion with the Turkish state and alignment with local parties and politicians in the Balkans have had negative fallout in the region.

### Conclusion: Is Turkey a rival of the West in the Balkans?

What is Turkey's role in the Balkans? Is it a competitor to the West or simply a difficult partner? – There is no conclusive answer to this question. At the level of discourse, Turkey poses as a rival. At the 2018 Sarajevo rally held in the Zetra Olympic Centre, Erdoğan accused "certain European countries" of working against Turkey by driving a wedge amongst its citizens and exposing ethnic and sectarian divides.<sup>30</sup> So even without making a claim about the Balkans, he posited Europe as an adversary. At the level of practice, however, Turkey acts in parallel but not necessarily *against* the EU and the United States. In the grand scheme of things, Turkey is tightly connected to the European economy, a fact highlighted by the ongoing recession, which puts at risk EU investors too. Turkish trade with EU members like Romania, Greece, and Bulgaria is by far more significant than with the Western Balkans, though Serbia is picking up, too.

On the security side, Ankara acts independently of NATO and has deepened ties to Russia. Yet it remains part of the Alliance and contributes to its policies including deterrence initiatives aimed at Moscow. When it comes to the Balkans, Turkey has no alternative to offer to local countries to woo them away from Euro-Atlantic institutions. Its resources are limited, too - in comparison to the collective West. What is also important is that Balkan elites do not necessarily see a trade-off between ties to Western organisations and Turkey. That point is clearly visible in the policy of non-aligned Serbia, which has also been courting Russia, China and the Gulf States while

<sup>27</sup> Bechev, Dimitar (2018): Avoiding a clash in Varna. Ahval, 27.03.2018, available at <https://ahvalnews.com/eu-turkey/turkey-and-eu-avoiding-crash-varna> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>28</sup> Yackley, Ayla Jean / Hope Kerin (2019): Tsipras seeks to mend Greece's fractious relations with Turkey. Financial Times, 6.02.2019, available at <https://www.ft.com/content/92713fe2-2a24-11e9-88a4-c32129756dd8> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>29</sup> Büyük, Hamdi Firat (2018): Erdogan's Sarajevo rally starts online war-of-words. BalkanInsight, 8.05.2018, available at

<https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/08/erdogan-s-sarajevo-rally-starts-a-social-media-war-in-bosnia-05-08-2018/> (accessed 18 October 2019).

<sup>30</sup> BBC (2018): Erdoğan Bosna Hersek'te: Avrupa'nın bize karşı tavrının sebebi oradaki Türklerin dağınıklığıdır. BBC Türkçe, 20.05.2018, available at <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-44189205> (accessed 18 October 2019).

negotiating its membership in the EU. But it is also the case with Bulgaria, which has emerged as a leading advocate of engagement with Turkey within the Union. The only country in Southeast Europe that has deep-seated concerns and fears about Turkish expansionism is Greece, which has long-standing territorial disputes with its neighbour, only made worse by the looming conflict over offshore gas deposits in the proximity of Cyprus. But Greek policy-makers have demonstrated the capacity to be flexible and cooperate with Turkey when interests converge.

Turkey is embedded in the politics, economies, and societies of the Balkans. It is an autonomous player, and the cult of Erdoğan has become central to its presence in the region, often with divisive effects. However, calling Turkey a spoiler to challenge to EU or NATO policy is hardly warranted.

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## Economic Relations between Southeast Europe and Turkey - A Gordian Knot or Loose Ties?

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**Abstract:** Although European Union countries constitute the largest trading partner of and investor in the Southeast European (SEE) countries, economic ties with non-EU players, including Turkey, have been on the rise in the past two decades. Against this background, the article gives an overview of the economic exposure of Turkey to SEE countries in the past two decades, i.e. since the AKP came to power in 2001. There are several key conclusions from the analysis: First, the economic importance of Turkey for SEE countries has significantly increased since 2001. Turkish economic involvement has been intimately related to the principles of Turkish foreign policy and has been reinforced by strong personal relations with the political leaders in some SEE countries. Second, not all SEE countries have established equally strong economic ties with Turkey. While Turkey has become a key trading partner and investor for Albania, Kosovo and Bulgaria, its economic influence has remained limited in the rest of the SEE countries. Third, drawing a comparison among the economic ties of the SEE region with other non-EU players (i.e. China and Russia) highlights Turkey's special position as a competitor, most prominently with Russia for market share.

### Introduction

Although the European Union (EU) member states constitute the largest trade partner and investor in the Southeast European (SEE)<sup>1</sup> economies, economic exposure in terms of trade and investments to non-EU global players – in particular Turkey – have been on the rise in the past two decades. Turkey's historical and cultural ties with the region date back to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire which left its traces not merely in the cultural and religious-ethnic mix of the population, but also fed into Turkey's active role in building stability in the region. It has been pointed out that Turkish foreign policy and the respective economic ties with other countries have been shaped by both structural (i.e. static and with long-term impact) and conjunctural factors.<sup>2</sup> As for the former, Turkey had and has the advantage of geographical proximity with the SEE countries, which leads to reduced transportation costs as well as similar consumption habits. The conjunctural factors have a more transitional impact and reflect, among other things, the personality of the policy-makers. Based on this classification, the Turkish governments since the early 1990s<sup>3</sup> have adopted three, broadly successive approaches towards the Balkans: A continuation of

traditional Atlanticism (i.e. a defensive non-involvement policy with good neighborhood relations); a "neo-Ottoman" turn (i.e. an approach to the economy, through culture, emphasizing the common past); and a most recent strategy under the presidential system since 2014 towards the strengthening of economic ties based on personalized diplomacy.<sup>4</sup>

Against this background, the following paper pulls back the many layers of Turkish economic influence on the SEE countries, in particular on the countries of the Western Balkan region. It focuses on the economic ties of Turkey with the region from both a host (i.e. the SEE economies) and home country (i.e. Turkey) perspective in the past nearly two decades, i.e. since the Turkish Justice and Development Party AKP was established in 2001. The question of stronger interrelations with Turkey has increasingly gained attention from an EU perspective as fears emerge that these interrelations might be on a par with the EU's economic and political influence in the region or a threat to it. Therefore, this analysis aims to objectify and quantify the perceptions among politicians, experts, and the population itself about the scope of Turkey's economic impact on the SEE countries.

<sup>1</sup> The non-EU Southeast European countries include Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo\* ("this designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence"), Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In this paper, the two country aggregates 'Western Balkans' and 'non-EU SEE countries' will be used interchangeably. The country aggregate SEE consists of the non-EU SEE countries plus Bulgaria.

<sup>2</sup> Aydın, M. (1999), Determinants of Turkish Foreign Policy: Historical framework and traditional inputs, *Middle Eastern Studies*, 35(4), p. 152-186.

<sup>3</sup> In fact, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 marked the beginning of a turn of the ideological framework of the Turkish foreign policy, including the rapprochement of the Balkan countries in a peaceful manner.

<sup>4</sup> Aydıntaşbaş, A. (2019), From myth to reality: How to understand Turkey's role in the Western Balkans, *ECFR Policy Brief* 280.

The paper also investigates both the public and private sector involvement of Turkey in each of the SEE countries. The current strategy for the economic exposure of Turkey in the region, including development aid, will be presented, while putting it into a time perspective, focusing on the period after the landslide victory of the AKP in the general elections in 2002. As the increasingly stronger political and economic interest has also been feeding into mounting investment volumes of Turkish businesses, Section 2 will touch upon the sectoral distribution of these investments and the motives for the expansion of Turkish businesses in the region. In addition, the article will turn its attention to the trade exposure of different sectors in the SEE countries to Turkey and briefly discuss the bilateral migration flows between the two regions. Going further, Section 3 will take a disaggregated approach and focus on the differences among the SEE countries. In addition, this section will compare the economic exposure of the Western Balkan countries to Turkey with other non-EU global external players, in particular Russia and China.

#### **Turkish economic policy towards non-EU Southeast European countries – goals and actors**

The change in the guiding principles of Turkish foreign policy over the past 30 years, especially since the AKP came to power, influenced the goals of the Balkans in the area of economics. The “soft power”-policy of Ahmet Davutoğlu – in his roles as a Chief Advisor for Foreign Policy to the Prime Minister, then as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and later on as Turkish Prime Minister (all between 2001 and 2016) – were key for the development of stronger relations with neighboring regions such as the SEE countries and Central Asia. Turkish foreign policy laid the ground for stronger economic integration, almost two decades ago, by signing bilateral Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with each of the SEE countries.<sup>5</sup> However, since Foreign Minister Davutoğlu stepped down in 2016, Turkey has refocused somewhat the pace and intensity of its regional activism and diplomatic initiatives. It was replaced by a focus on greater economic ties and the prominent role of the Turkish

President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In addition, the new period was marked by President Erdoğan’s direct engagement, through personal ties especially with non-EU SEE leaders.

#### **Turkish development aid financing and participation in supra-national organisations with a focus on the SEE countries**

One aspect of Turkish economic involvement in the SEE region is expressed by the flows of development aid. Indeed, the development financing from Turkey has rapidly increased in the past two decades. It climbed from 0.2 % in 2001 to 1 % of gross national income in 2017, and it is among the highest of the OECD countries.<sup>6</sup> Despite a prevalent share of humanitarian aid flowing, the Turkish state has also continuously expanded its non-humanitarian development aid for the SEE region, in particular for the Western Balkan countries.

The *Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency* *TIKA* (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı) has a pivotal intermediary role in Turkish foreign and development aid policy. Established in 1992, TIKA has served ever since as a public investor, in particular in countries with which the Turkish state has “shared values”. It has been argued that the expansion of the volume and geographical scope of development aid came as a result of the convergence between the influence of ideas and economic interests – a trend that has intensified especially since 2001.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, to put this investment into perspective, although Turkey’s support for local projects in the SEE region has increased, it remains limited in comparison to the EU pre-accession funds.<sup>8</sup> TIKA has defined its strategy for the Balkan countries, founded on three major principles: (1) high-level political dialogue; (2) safety for all, maximum economic integration; and (3) preservation of the region’s multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and multi-religious social structure. According to these principles, TIKA has started to provide development assistance aid in various areas to the non-EU SEE countries.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Turkey has Free Trade Agreements with Albania since 2006, with Bosnia and Herzegovina since 2002 (updated in May 2019), with Kosovo\* since 2013, with Montenegro since 2008, with North Macedonia since 1999, and with Serbia since 2009. The FTA between Bulgaria and Turkey, which was signed in 1998, has been replaced by the Customs Union between the EU and Turkey after Bulgaria joined the EU in 2017.

<sup>6</sup> According to most recent OECD data, nearly 88 % of the Turkish total development aid has targeted the humanitarian aid area in 2017 as related to the Syrian refugee crisis.

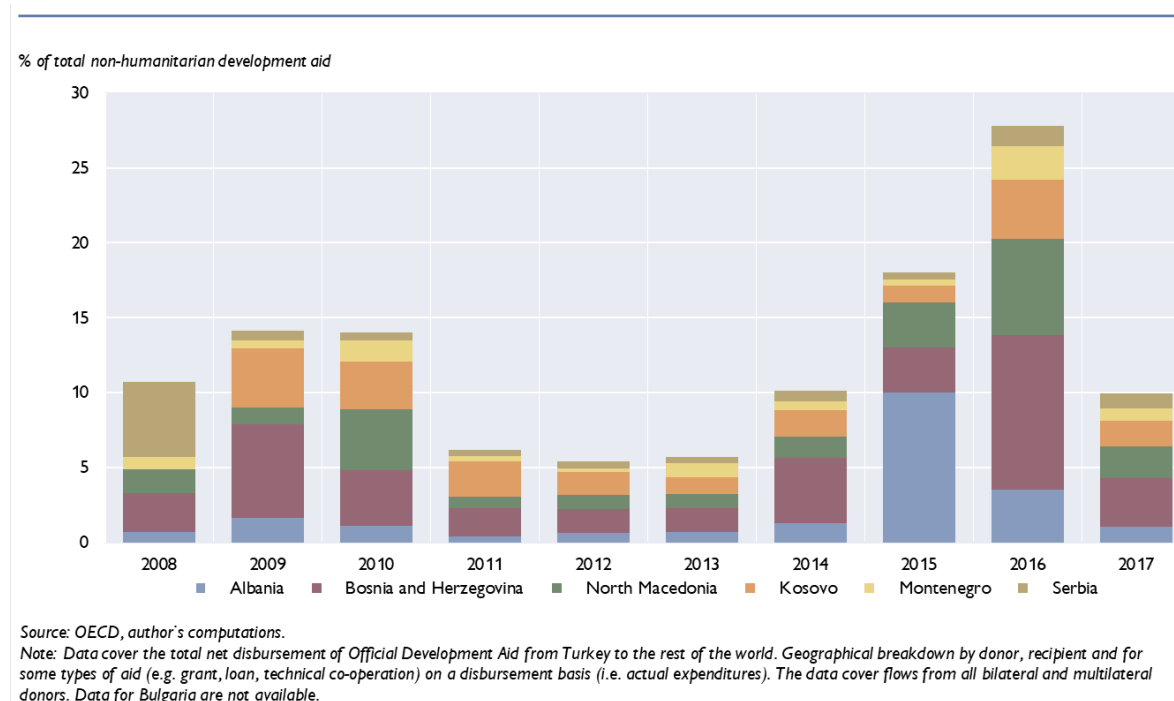
<sup>7</sup> Ipek, P. (2013), *Ideas and change in foreign policy instruments: Soft power and the case of the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency*, Foreign Policy Analysis, p. 1-21.

<sup>8</sup> EU IPA assistance for the period 2007-2013 amounted to EUR 11,5 billion. (See [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/instruments/overview_en)).

Available data from the OECD<sup>9</sup> for the period 2008-2017, which excludes humanitarian financial aid related to the crisis in Syria, but includes financing to Turkish NGOs, points towards an average share of the SEE countries in total financing aid of 11.3 % in this period (see Figure 1). In aggregate terms, the financial aid for non-EU SEE peaked in 2014 and stood at USD 138 million. One important issue is that the financing of this aid, which consists almost entirely of grants, has targeted not all countries to a similar extent. For instance, Bosnia and Herzegovina has taken, from the very beginning, a key recipient position in Turkey's broad-based enhanced engagement in the SEE countries. According to the 2007 TIKa annual report, the country was among the top ten recipient countries

of Turkish development aid in 2005 (USD 25.2 million, 3.9 % of total aid financing in 2005). Its leading position has remained broadly unchanged ever since. The spotlight shifted slightly to Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, which have increasingly attracted funds since 2014. On the other side of the spectrum are Montenegro and Serbia. Serbia was a key case in point of the Turkish-led attempt for mediation and reconciliation in two Muslim communities<sup>10</sup>, and funds related to this reconciliation explain the uptick of development aid financing in 2008.<sup>11</sup> Overall however, development aid to the Western Balkans has remained well below the funds for the countries of Central Asia.<sup>12</sup>

*Figure 1 Development financial assistance aid of Turkey to the non-EU SEE countries since 2008*



A particular feature of Turkish development aid is the lack of any economic and/or political conditionality attached to the funds. Therefore, these funds have been disbursed largely without delays, making them an appealing financing source. Following the guiding principle of the preservation of Ottoman cultural heritage, the investments went into the restoration

and construction of mosques and cultural centres in SEE. In parallel, TIKa engaged actively in education by establishing Turkish schools and universities to educate the future elite of the region. It also invested in the social area (e.g. kindergartens, hospitals, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

*Diyanet* (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), the Directorate for Religious Affairs, which is a part of the Turkish Ministry

<sup>9</sup> The data extracted from OECD Stat include all Western Balkan countries. No data are available on financing aid flows to Bulgaria. Data source: <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/>.

<sup>10</sup> Islamic communities are the highest religious bodies of the Muslim communities in the countries of former Yugoslavia. In Serbia, one community has encompassed the Bosniak populated Sandzak region, while the other included the rest of the Muslim population.

<sup>11</sup> Muhasilovic, J. (2018), Turkey's faith-based diplomacy in the Balkans, *Rising Powers Quarterly*, 3(3), p. 63-85.

<sup>12</sup> Nuroğlu, E. (2013), Tika and Its Political and Socio-Economic Role in the Balkans. In: Muhidin Mulalic / Hasan Korkut / Elif Nuroglu (Eds), *Turkish-Balkans Relations: The Future Prospects of Cultural, Political and Economic Transformations and Relations*, İstanbul: Tasam Publication.

<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to look into the spread of education establishments as related to the Gülenist movement. For a detailed overview see Aydıntaşbaş (2016).

of Foreign Affairs, has been in charge of religious affairs in Turkey since it was established in 1924. Beginning in the 1990s, it started to follow a policy of establishing Islamic influence in the former Soviet republics and in the Balkans. With the backing of the AKP since 2002, Diyanet's influence has become even more pronounced, thus turning it into an increasingly important international player. Therefore, while not directly building on economic interests, it aims to invest in and promote Turkish cultural and religious projects and interests. Projects financed by Diyanet constitute a strong means of expressing Turkish "soft power". Overall, the importance of the Balkans for the international activities of Diyanet has increased over the past two decades and, as of 2015, more than one-third of all projects (i.e. 66 projects) have been targeting the region. From a geographical perspective, Turkish religious influence (through Attaché offices) is particularly widespread in Bulgaria and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The role of the Turkish Diyanet in hosting the Eurasian and Balkan Councils as symbolic leaders of the Muslim communities in the Balkans and Central Asia has also been highlighted.<sup>2</sup>

The two key areas the Diyanet has operated in the SEE region are the education of imams and hafizes,<sup>3</sup> and the restoration and founding of mosques. Interestingly, in both areas Diyanet has cooperated with TİKA – their activities being particularly widespread in Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. Again, together with TİKA, Diyanet participates in the restoration of mosques from Ottoman times and the founding of numerous new mosques. On the host countryside, the perception of such initiatives has not always been fully embraced by the population and the national-religious structures. A case in point is the Albanian opposition to the construction of the Great Mosque of Tirana, and the opposition to the religious split of the then two Muslim communities in Serbia, where Turkey attempted to act as a facilitator.<sup>4</sup>

Both the annual "*Berlin Process*", which was kicked off in August 2014, and more recently the *EU Enlargement Strategy for the Western Balkans* as of February 2018, stressed the importance of regional cooperation for sustained economic convergence in the region. In spite of being an EU candidate country, Turkey has not been included in these initiatives. However, it already has

one foot in the camp of EU-led regional initiatives aiming to strengthen cooperation related to trade, investment, and business mobility within the region.

Turkey was also one of the founding members of the *Regional Cooperation Council* (RCC) in 2008 as a part of the Southeast European Cooperation Process. The RCC operates currently under the Strategy and Work Programme 2017-2019, where Turkey contributes substantially to its budget and plays a pivotal role in regional projects in competitiveness and connectivity. It is noteworthy that there is hardly any evidence that regional cooperation between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries in the framework of the RCC has run counter to EU accession of the non-EU SEE countries. Also grounded in the framework of the South East Europe 2020 Strategy, the cooperation in the framework of the RCC focuses on projects related to improving competitiveness.<sup>5</sup>

#### Hunting for the yield curve or a pull effect from state policy? The engagement of Turkish private businesses in the SEE countries

Turkey has evolved to become one of the largest investors in and trade partners of the SEE region. Since 2002, AKP-led governments have encouraged Turkish businesses to invest in the region.<sup>6</sup> More recently, anecdotal evidence points towards an increased interest of Turkish businesses to invest in the Western Balkan countries due to the relative stability of the rate of return on the back of high economic growth and stable local currencies, among other factors. In addition, an intrinsic motive for Turkish businesses to invest in and trade with the SEE countries has been related to the large share of Turkish minorities in most of the countries. Interestingly, a more granular analysis, to the extent it is possible, hints at the prevalence of Turkish state-owned enterprises as investors in the SEE region.

The European Commission has stressed that investments from some other global non-EU players in some sectors (e.g. energy, infrastructure, construction) in Southeast Europe did not undergo proper screening in line with EU public procurement rules, which can potentially lead to breaches in the obligations vis-à-vis the agreements signed with the EU.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, the EU strategy to support

<sup>2</sup> Öktem K. (2012), Global Diyanet and Multiple Networks: Turkey's New Presence in the Balkans, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 1(1), p. 27-58.

<sup>3</sup> A hafiz (i.e. "guardian" / "memorizer" in Arabic) is a person who memorizes the whole Qur'an.

<sup>4</sup> See Muhasilovic, J. (2018), Turkey's faith-based diplomacy in the Balkans ..., footnote 11.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.rcc.int/pages/62/south-east-europe-2020-strategy>.

<sup>6</sup> See Muhasilovic, J. (2018), op.cit., footnote 11.

<sup>7</sup> European Commission (2019), Commission's Assessment of the Economic Reform Programme of Serbia (2019-2021), Commission

transformation in the Western Balkans includes initiatives on engagement in the areas of security, migration, transportation, and energy – areas where Turkey plays an important role as a major trade partner and investor in the Western Balkans and as a key player in the refugee crisis.

Recent analyses on the motives of Turkish firms to expand into the SEE region flagged several factors as important: (1) the presence of Turkish banks; (2) the opportunity to enter the SEE markets mainly through brownfield investments; and (3) the opportunity for expansion and the use of the SEE countries as a springboard.<sup>8</sup> An RCC report has outlined an additional motive related to the large share of Turkish investors with origins in one of the SEE countries. In addition, the good regional connections, offered by Turkish airlines have been identified as very supportive of the increase of the economic exposure of Turkish investments and trade in the SEE region. All non-EU SEE countries have maintained visa-free entry for Turkish citizens in the past decade, which also facilitates the inflow of investors. In the sections below, the article will discuss the importance of each of the mentioned investment motivations in greater detail.

### Turkish banks as a leading factor for the expansion of Turkish businesses

Turkish banks entered the region shortly after the fall of the Iron Curtain or the end of the Yugoslav secession wars, mainly in the course of privatisation of the banking sectors in the SEE countries. Overall, two main state-owned banks have entered almost all SEE countries, while Turkish private banks are operating in the markets of Albania and Kosovo only. In Bulgaria, Turkish banks only participate in a very minor way (2019: < 5 % of total banking assets), while Montenegro has no Turkish banks at all in its market (see Figure 2).

*Halkbank AD Skopje* in 1993 and *Ziraat Bank* in 1997 were the first ones to acquire shares in the SEE markets – in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, respectively. *Ziraat Bank* entered the Bulgarian banking market in 1998. *Kentbank* acquired *Banka Kombetare Trakere (BKT)* in Albania in 2000, which then changed ownership in 2006 but remained a Turkish investment (owned by the Calik Holding). The small banking market in Kosovo has become a well-covered arena for Turkish investments with three Turkish banks operating currently (*Ziraat Bank*, *Isbank* and *Türk Ekonomi Bankası A.Ş.-TEB*). Only recently, *Halkbank* acquired a small share of the Serbian market, taking over 77 % of the *Čačanska banka* in 2015. Turkey entered the Montenegrin banking market in 2015 when a license for operation was granted to *Ziraat Bank*; however, the bank has so far remained among the smallest in the country. The business model for the Turkish banks could be branded, in most cases, as relatively competitive, aimed to take up a large share of the host country market. Indeed, *Banka Kombetare Trakere (BKT)* has recently replaced *Raiffeisen International* in becoming the largest bank in Albania with a share of close to 30 % of the total banking assets. Similarly, *Halkbank AD Skopje* has recently become North Macedonia's third-largest bank, while *Ziraat Bank* in Kosovo has been rapidly rising in the ranks as well.

The presence of Turkish banks has been very supportive of further Turkish investments in other sectors in SEE. Despite some significant improvements in their rankings, in the most recent wave of the World Bank Doing Business Survey<sup>9</sup> the non-EU SEE countries score poorly concerning market entry and exit. Turkish banks are seen by prospective Turkish investors as facilitators through the numerous regulations of the target countries. In addition, they assist in overcoming the language barrier, to some extent, which is named as a factor that drags on the entry of Turkish small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

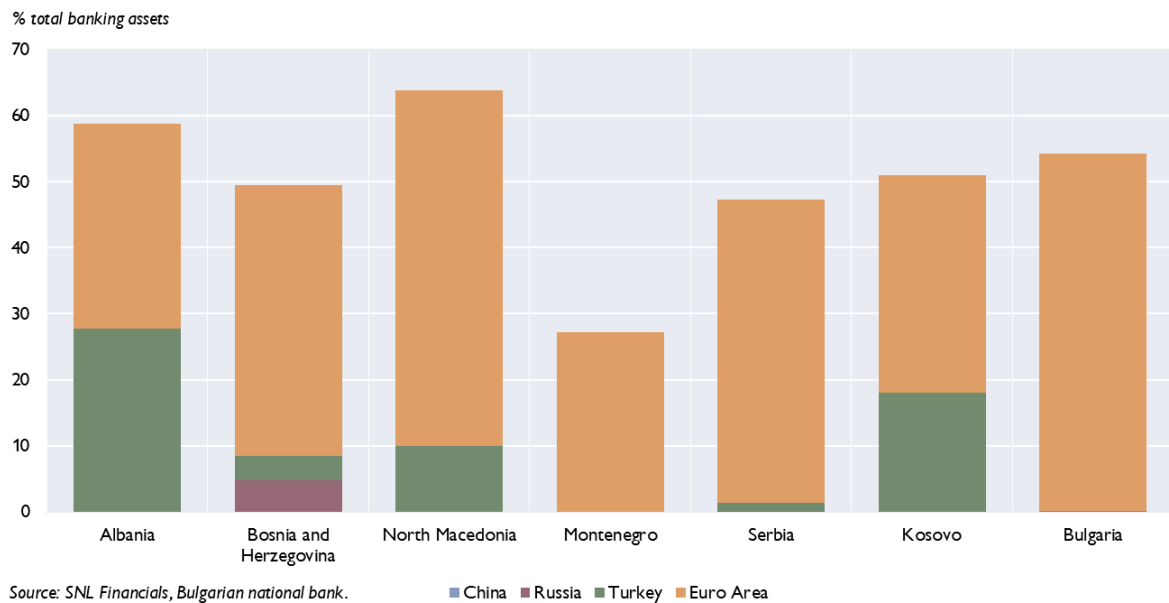
staff working document, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia\\_2019-2021\\_erp.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/serbia_2019-2021_erp.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> Regional Cooperation Council (2016), Strengthening economic cooperation between South East Europe and Turkey, RCC Report.

<sup>9</sup> World Bank (2019), Doing Business 2019. Training for reform. World Bank Group Flagship Report.



Figure 2 Share of banks from China, Russia, Turkey and the Euro area in total banking assets in the SEE countries.



Turkish investors have increasingly opted for *market entry through brownfield investments*, that means to take over an already existing facility or factory instead of setting up a facility from scratch (so-called greenfield foreign investments).<sup>1</sup> The reasons outlined to back such strategic decisions have to do with barriers to entry and exit that firms face in the SEE countries. In fact, it was only North Macedonia in 2018 that was ranked better than Turkey itself in the World Bank's Doing Business Survey. In particular, difficulties related to construction permits and the registration of property have been stressed as weighing on the performance of investments and the set-up of businesses. On a positive note, against the backdrop of strong brain drain in the SEE region, the establishment of Turkish universities, such as the *International University of Sarajevo* and the *International Balkan University* in Skopje potentially offer a better alignment of local supply with the human capital demanded from Turkish businesses.

Available data, which allows for an overview of the sectoral distribution of total FDI stock in each of the SEE countries in 2014 and 2017, shows that the majority of foreign investment flows has targeted the financial industry, the manufacturing sectors, and

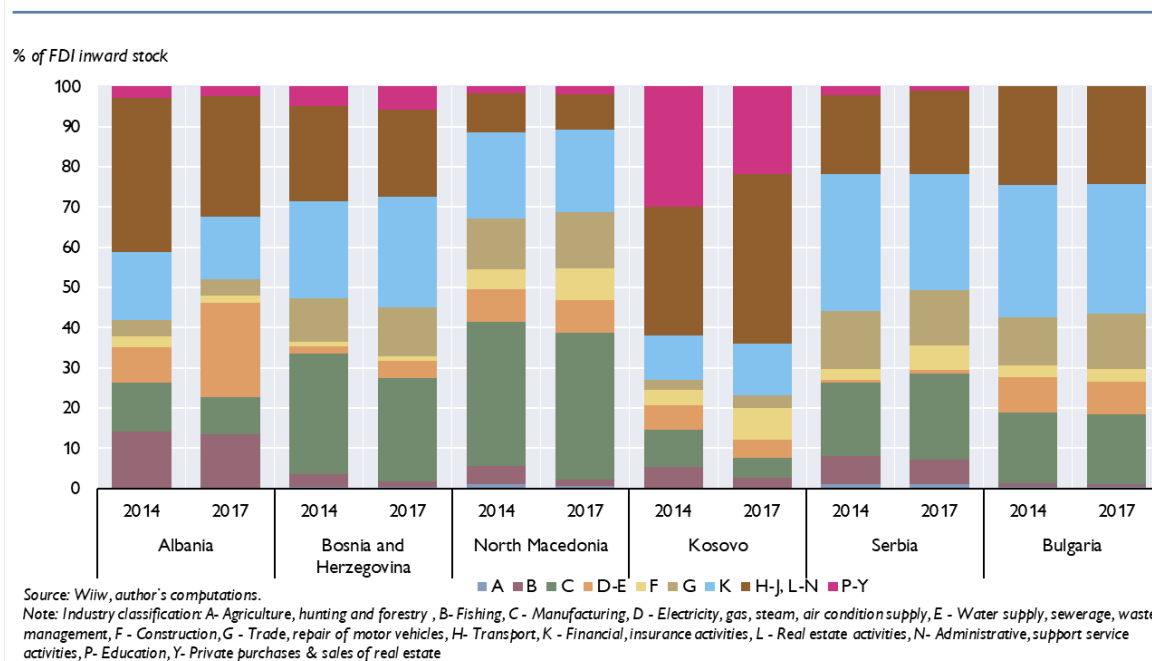
other sectors like telecommunications and tourism (see Figure 3). The only exception is North Macedonia, where the telecommunication sector had attracted the largest share of foreign investment in 2017. However, data limitations do not permit us to have a more granular view of the sectoral distribution of Turkish investments. However, reports from the Turkish Chamber of Commerce and anecdotal evidence deliver some information. Although it is not possible to identify a common strategy of investments of Turkish business for all SEE countries, an overlapping tendency is that investments have targeted the banking sector, the energy sector, the construction sector, and the textile industry.

Investment activities differ somewhat among the SEE countries:<sup>2</sup> Albania and Kosovo have been the largest recipients of Turkish investment in absolute terms in the past decade in the region. From a host country perspective, Turkish investments go into business activities that are key for the host SEE economies. In contrast to Chinese investments flowing mainly into infrastructure and energy projects, the Turkish investment portfolio is more diversified. For instance, North Macedonia tends to be the market that initially attracted strong Turkish interest.

<sup>1</sup> See Regional Cooperation Council (2016), op.cit., footnote 20.

<sup>2</sup> Feyerabend, F. (2018), The influence of external actors in the Western Balkans, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung.

Figure 3 Sectoral distribution of FDI stocks in the SEE countries in 2014 and 2017



In North Macedonia, numerous investments have been made in the construction of residential and commercial buildings (Cevahir Sky City, Limak Holding, Koç), the banking sector, and the private health sector (Acibadem Sistina). Skopje's new airport was also built by a Turkish company, TAV Airports Holding, which also built the airport in Ohrid.

Albania is another very relevant case in point: Since 2014, Banka Kombëtare Tregtare (BKT) owned by the Çalik Holding has become the largest bank in the Albanian banking sector as measured by its share of total banking assets. At the same time, the growth of the tourism sector has attracted the interest of Turkish firms. Very recent investment plans include a Turkish consortium to build an airport near the Albanian town of Vlore. At the same time, an Albanian domestic carrier – Air Albania – has been established as a joint investment by Turkish Airlines and two Albanian state companies and has started operations at the end of April 2019. Turkish Airlines has already bought 49 % of the shares of Bosnia and Herzegovina's flag carrier BH Airlines.<sup>1</sup>

The *globalization strategy of Turkish firms* and the aspect of *SEE as a springboard* is also of main consideration: All non-EU SEE countries have currently visa-free entry for Turkish nationals and vice versa. In addition, Turkey has signed trade agreements with all these countries and has set up regional consular offices in all the countries. Coupled with the subsidies,

some countries have offered to foreign investors. The non-EU SEE countries appear to be a good start for Turkish investors to establish international activities. It is noteworthy that, unlike their Western European and US counterparts, Turkish businesses tend to have a reputation for not being easily deterred by uncertain legal frameworks, red tape, and delays in obtaining licenses.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, one of the elements of the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) between the EU and each of the non-EU SEE countries is to enhance free trade. In particular, products originating in the non-EU SEE countries benefit from autonomous trade measures, allowing (with a few exceptions) for their free entry into the EU without customs duties or quantitative restrictions. In addition, a back of the envelope comparison with Chinese investment shows diverging approaches as Turkish firms utilize primary factors of production of the host country and thus enable more intensive positive spill-overs in the countries, while Chinese investors partially go back to their own resources (for instance, infrastructure projects in Montenegro and Serbia). Anecdotal evidence from Bosnia and Herzegovina suggests that Turkish firms already active in the SEE region have contributed to improvements in the competitiveness of the host country. Accordingly, this improvement is reflected by additional employment, management know-how, vocational training, and higher exports. More intensive

<sup>1</sup> See <https://ahval.io/airlines/turkish-airlines-teams-albanian-companies-launch-air-albania>.

<sup>2</sup> Marinov, M. / Marinova, S. (2017), Foreign direct investments in Central and Eastern Europe, Routledge.

export activities potentially support stronger value chains and facilitate regional trade integration in the host country.

While not directly implementing international development projects, *the role of the Turk Eximbank* was established in 1987 as Turkey's official export credit agency. According to its annual strategy, Turk Eximbank conducts "International Credit and Guarantee" programs aimed at developing economic and political relations between Turkey and other countries and "Credit Insurance" programs that cover the export sector's exposure against political and commercial risks, as well as "Export Credit" programs, which provide the export sector with low-cost financing. The system was initially designed to provide cover against commercial and political risks for only short-term export claims, but its scope was later expanded to cover medium- and long-term goods and services claims. As of end-2017, the statutes governing the state-owned Turk Eximbank have been changed to allow it to lend funds internationally. Accordingly, two countries that were to benefit immediately from this change were Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the case of the former country, a USD 400 million loan<sup>3</sup> has been secured to invest in infrastructure projects (primarily, the highway between Belgrade and Sarajevo). Overall, the media announced at the end of 2018 that over the past 18 months, there has been a significant increase in Turkish private sector investment abroad, because of narrowing profit margins in the country and concerns over the rule of law.

### Unified or diversified: SEE economic exposure in home and host country comparison

The purpose of the following section is to quantify and qualify the degree of intensity of the economic relations between Turkey and each of the SEE countries in three major areas: (1) foreign direct investment (FDI); (2) trade; and (3) migration. Moreover, it will also put the SEE countries' exposure to Turkey into perspective and compare it to other non-EU global players: China and Russia. This analysis thus lays the groundwork for a better understanding of whether Turkey has a different approach to the

region compared to other countries and whether there might be potentially any crowding out of the EU's economic position in the region.

### Foreign direct investments (FDI)

In the process of the SAPs with the EU and the accession in the case of the only EU country in the sample – Bulgaria – economic ties between the SEE countries and the EU have strengthened. Nominal and real economic convergence with the EU countries accelerated before the global economic and financial crisis started in 2008, but have largely stalled in the decade after.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, as a part of the pre-crisis growth model, domestic investments have been fuelled mainly by EU-15 countries<sup>5</sup> due to the narrow fiscal space and low national savings of the SEE countries. A common trend among all SEE countries since 2001 has been that EU-15 investment stocks remained the largest with Germany, Austria, Greece and Italy amounting to close to 80 % of the total EU-15's inward FDIs. Turkish firms started to strengthen their position in the SEE markets in parallel since the 1990s – in line with their "soft power" foreign policy.

On a negative note, in the past years the Turkish government's biggest challenge has been to repair the damage to investor confidence caused by domestic political instability. In addition, the underlying vulnerabilities of the Turkish economy (i.e. high depreciation of the Turkish lira, the higher indebtedness in foreign currency of the corporate sector, sizable external and internal imbalances) have manifested themselves through the limited extent to which Turkey has managed to increase the value of its regional economic relationships. Moreover, the crises in 2001 and 2008 and the recent currency crisis since 2018 have made Turkish businesses more conservative. All these factors are holding back businesses from stronger expansion into the SEE region.

Still, as outlined in the section before, some SEE countries attracted proportionally more Turkish FDI than others – however, these investments do not necessarily reflect the size of the host market (see Figure 4).<sup>6</sup> Turkish investments are particularly strong in the smaller SEE economies such as Kosovo and Albania, while in Serbia, the largest non-EU SEE

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/serbia-negotiating-400-million-infrastructure-loan-from-turkey-129075>.

<sup>4</sup> Zuk, P. / Polgar, K. / Savelin, L. / de Hoyo, L. / König, P. (2018), Real convergence in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, ECB Economic Bulletin 3/2018, p. 36-65.

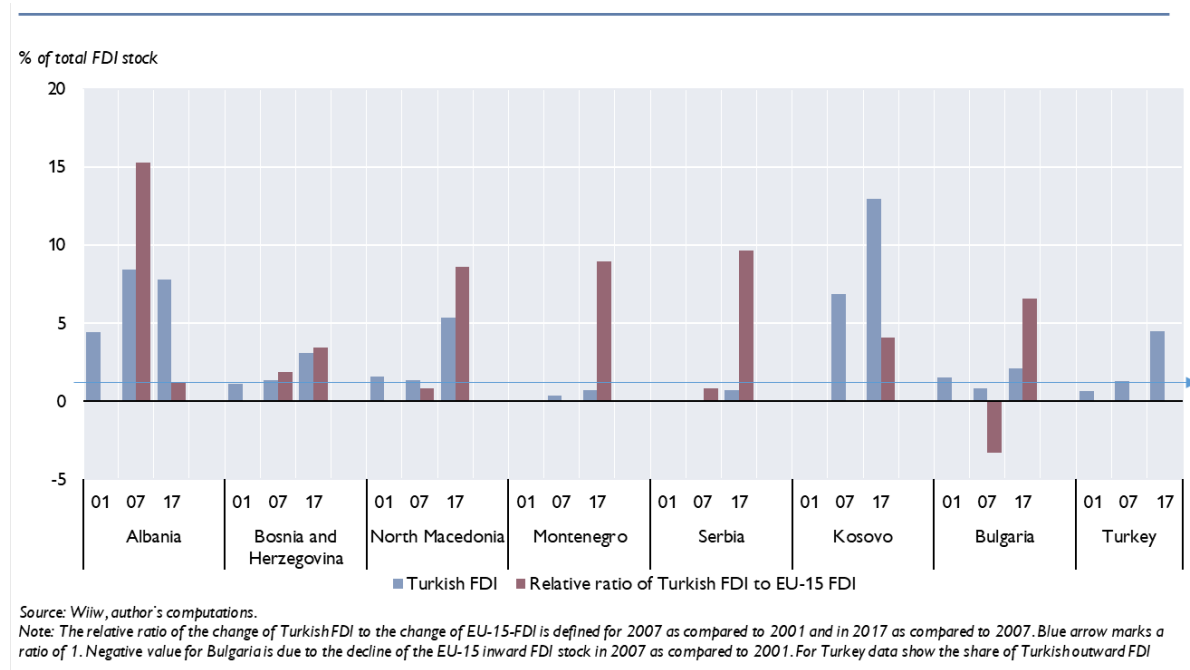
<sup>5</sup> The EU-15 country aggregate consists of: Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom.

<sup>6</sup> The size of the market can be measured by the GDP. Accordingly, in the aggregate GDP of the non-EU SEE countries in 2017, the GDP shares correspond as follows: 43 % Serbia, 19 % Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14 % Albania, 12 % North Macedonia, and 8 % the economies of Kosovo and Montenegro.

economy, Turkey has barely scored more than 1 % of total FDI since 2001. The share in Kosovo, both in terms of GDP and total FDI, amounted to close to 15 % in 2017. At the same time, Turkish investments are also sizable in Albania and North Macedonia reaching some 8 % of the total investments in 2017. Interestingly, in almost all SEE countries Turkish investments have expanded at a much faster pace

than the EU-15's FDIs. Only in Bulgaria, the acceleration of the EU integration of the country in the period 2001-2007 exerted the opposite effect (as expressed by the negative ratio in 2007, compared to 2001 – see Figure 4). In six SEE countries, the relative spread of investment sped up in the outer years of the period since 2007, while only in Albania the expansion decelerated.<sup>7</sup>

Figure 4 SEE investment exposure to Turkey in country comparison



Nevertheless, Turkey has so far failed to become a major investor in the SEE region with levels far below the ones of the EU-28 countries. From the perspective of Turkey, the expansion of investments to the SEE region has accelerated since 2001 but remained piecemeal at best (1 % of total outward FDI stock in 2017). This level fails to match somehow the numerous media reports about visits of high-ranking Turkish officials and President Erdoğan himself to countries in SEE.

#### Trade interlinkages between SEE and Turkey

Although the European Union remains the main trade partner of all SEE economies, trade openness (i.e. the sum of goods exports and imports) of the Western Balkan economies vis-à-vis Turkey have increased in all

SEE countries in the past ten years (see Figure 5). While the share of trade with the EU-15 countries amounted to up to 70% of the total trade in Albania and North Macedonia over the period 2001-2017, the average share in the rest of the countries was lower and hovered around 40 %. The smallest SEE countries – Kosovo and Montenegro – account for the smallest shares of trade with the EU (see Figure 5). What is more important, the trend of the trade developments with the EU-15 has been downward sloping, pointing towards a deceleration of the pace of trade integration with the EU. One possible explanation is the importance of regional trade for the non-EU SEE countries,<sup>1</sup> but also the rise of trade with non-EU global players such as Turkey, China, and Russia.<sup>2</sup> In 2017, the share in total trade between the SEE

<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, no consistent data are available on the sectoral distribution of Turkish investments in the SEE countries.

<sup>1</sup> The trade among all six non-EU SEE countries (as of 2019: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) is arranged by the Central European Free Trade Agreement CEFTA, which has been established in 1992. Apart from the non-EU SEE countries, also Moldova is a CEFTA member country. The aim of the CEFTA Agreement is to guarantee a zero tariff costs trade among

the countries, mostly as related to the liberalization of trade of goods. Recent information points towards some advancement in the liberalization of trade in services, while enhanced cooperation has been envisaged in the area of regional investment (see <https://cefta.int/>).

<sup>2</sup> Hake, M. / Radzyner, A. (2019), Western Balkans: Growing economic ties with Turkey, Russia and China, BOFIT Policy Brief 1/2019.

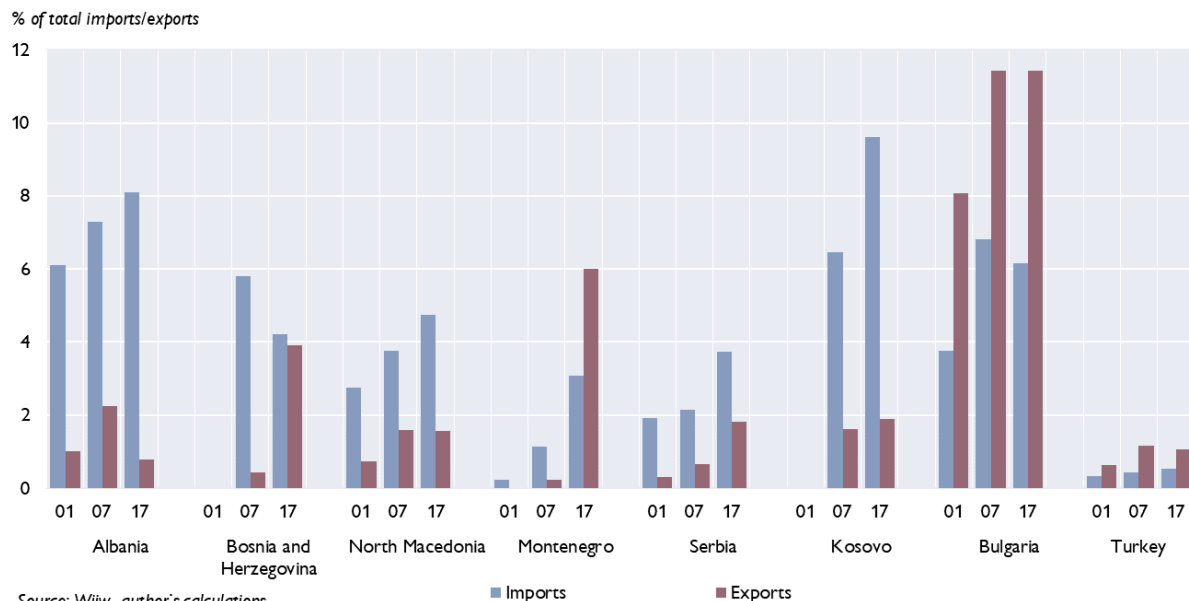
countries and Turkey was the highest in Bulgaria (8.8 %) and Kosovo (7.2 %), while it was the lowest in Serbia (2.9 %).

Due to a relatively narrow export base of the SEE countries as expressed by their export capacities and diversification, SEE imports have prevailed in trade with both the EU-15 and Turkey since 2001. At the same time, goods exports to Turkey have been increasing, even if at a very slow pace. In 2017, Bulgaria and Montenegro scored the highest share of exports to Turkey as measured as a share of aggregate country's exports.

To put the findings so far into perspective, Turkey has still not managed to establish itself as a top trade partner of the SEE countries, although its share has been constantly increasing. With the exception of Bulgaria, and to some extent Albania and Kosovo, Turkey has attained less than 10 % of total trade with the other Western Balkan countries since 2001.

To be able to better assess the scope of trade integration between Turkey and each of the SEE countries, it is not only the share and the level of trade that is important, but also the structure of the goods exports. Lower technology intensive exports would point towards an insufficient degree of spill-overs from trade and, thus, would be less important for the sustainability of GDP growth. Figure 6 shows a comparison of the structure of SEE exports by country to Turkey and to the rest of the world in the last available year, 2017. A common trend is that most exports have been low-tech, mainly commodities and agricultural products. In some of the countries, for example in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the share of agricultural products reached 77%.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, only Bulgarian exports to Turkey tend to be more diversified to include mineral fuels, oils and distillation products making up the second-largest share of exports.

Figure 5 SEE trade exposure to Turkey in country comparison



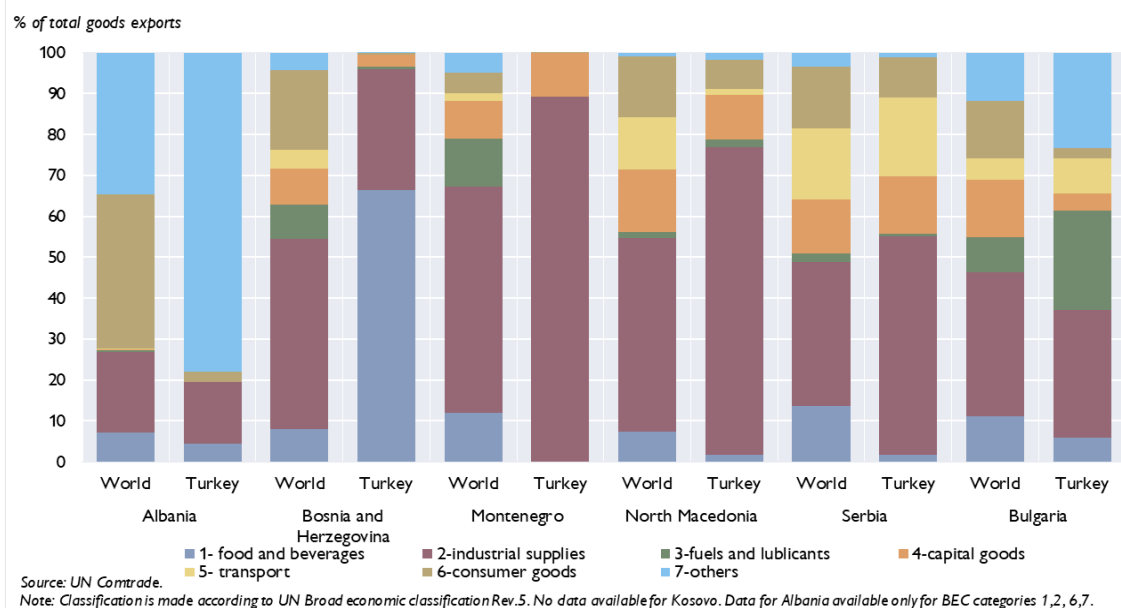
Source: Wiliw, author's calculations.

Note: Trade data for Turkey refer to the share of the SEE in total Turkish exports/imports.

<sup>3</sup> In Figure 6, the bars represent shares of trade in a specific category to the total trade with Turkey or the rest of the world, respectively.



Figure 6 Sectoral structure of SEE exports to Turkey and to the rest of the world in 2017

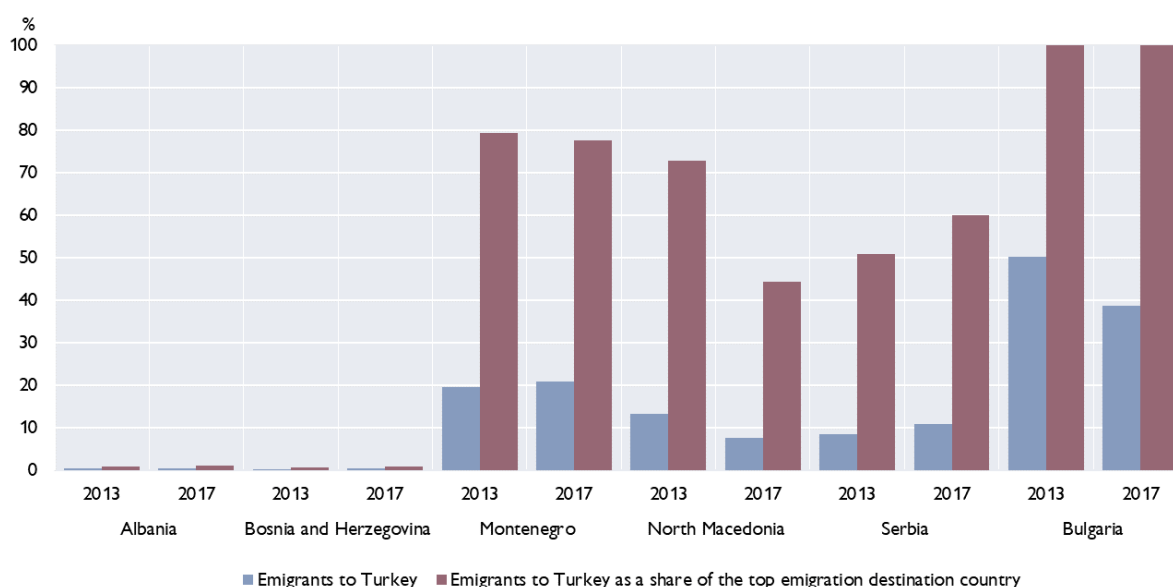


### Migration flows between Turkey and SEE

To be able to adequately assess the interlinkages between Turkey and the SEE countries, economic analyses should also delve into the aspect of bilateral migration flows. On the one hand, migration to Turkey would support Turkish businesses when expanding to

the SEE region. On the other hand, it might increase the inflow of remittances, which would benefit the SEE economies and alleviate their sizable external imbalances and boost private consumption.

Figure 7 Share of SEE emigrants to Turkey in total country's emigration flows and in the top emigration destination country



The motives of Turkish nationals emigrating to the SEE region could stretch from business opportunities and education to attempts to settle in places that were

once pins on the map of the Ottoman Empire. In addition, obtaining Bulgarian citizenship offers visa-free access to the EU single market. According to

recent media reports, as of the beginning of 2019 around 60,000 Turkish citizens were registered in Bulgaria, 12,000 in North Macedonia, 10,700 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 8,000 in Albania, 3,500 in Kosovo, 2,000 in Montenegro, and 600 in Serbia.<sup>1</sup> Reportedly, the Turkish diaspora to the Balkans consists largely of students and entrepreneurs (see Section 2 for a discussion of the motives of business expansion). As a matter of completeness, the large stock of local citizens from Turkish origin in some of the SEE countries should be recalled as well. Ethnic Turks comprise some 8 % of Bulgaria's total population – totalling some 600,000 people – while many Bulgarian Turks live in Turkey, too. Ethnic Turks account for 3.9% of North Macedonia's population of 2.1 million, and in Kosovo they account for nearly 2% of the country's 1.9 million people.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Turks are represented by one of the six stars on Kosovo's flag, symbolising the country's multi-ethnic population. In fact, Turkish speakers in Kosovo and North Macedonia far outstrip the number of ethnic Turks in both countries – an indication of the importance of the Turkish language since Ottoman times.

On the other side of the border, the number of emigrants from the SEE countries to Turkey has been increasing as well. Although the upward trend is similar among much of the region, the significance of the emigration flows differs among the countries. Data from the World Bank on bilateral migration flows for 2013 and 2017 show high shares in total emigration stock of Bulgaria and Montenegro (see Figure 7).<sup>3</sup> In particular, Turkey has been the top destination for Bulgarian emigrants in both 2013 and 2017, which has to do with the large share of Bulgarian Turks in Turkey. On the contrary, Turkey has only a marginal significance for emigrants from Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, ranking well behind the number one destinations Greece (for Albanians) and Croatia (for Bosnians).

### Competing against each other or complementing each other: Turkey's exposure to the region as compared to other global external players

One of the main findings of the previous sections is that the economic exposure of the SEE countries to Turkey has increased since 2001. However, it has remained limited when compared to the EU countries. Thus, a relevant question that still has not been answered would be how and whether economic ties with Turkey differ from the economic ties with other non-EU global players such as China and Russia.

Despite the funding available from EU sources and international financial institutions (e.g. Western Balkans Investment Framework, IPA funds), the financing needs of the non-EU SEE countries remain substantial.<sup>4</sup> A recent assessment points towards an investment gap of up to 12 % of GDP per year in the period from 2018-2022 in the non-EU SEE countries.<sup>5</sup> Because these countries cannot access the large EU cohesion and structural funds until they join the EU, their economic ties with large emerging players and investors from China, Turkey and Russia have gained importance.

Similar to Turkey, Russia has a strong cultural and historical affinity with the SEE countries. To some extent similar to the Turkish "soft" influence, Russia, therefore, also has a way to apply "soft power" in the region.<sup>6</sup> Only three SEE countries have so far closed bilateral trade agreements with Russia, namely Albania (Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreements; Treaty for the Avoidance of Double Taxation),<sup>7</sup> Bosnia and Herzegovina (trade and economic cooperation agreements),<sup>8</sup> and Serbia (bilateral free trade agreement),<sup>9</sup> while a trade agreement with Montenegro is currently under

<sup>1</sup> See <https://ahvalnews.com/balkans/increasing-number-turks-putting-down-roots-balkan-insight>. Although these data tend to deviate from data from the World Bank Group on bilateral migration for 2017. According to these data the emigration was as follows: Albania 1,978 Turkish citizens, Bosnia and Herzegovina 8, Montenegro 78, North Macedonia 19,958, Serbia 385, and Bulgaria 9,867 Turkish citizens.

<sup>2</sup> Central Intelligence Agency (2019), CIA Factbook 2019, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/resources/the-world-factbook/>.

<sup>3</sup> These data should be read with some caution as the bilateral migration data refer to migration stocks.

<sup>4</sup> Radzyner, A. / Schneidewind, P. / Hahn, M. (2011), Analysis of needs for financial instruments in the EU Strategy for the Danube Region (EUSDR), Metis GmbH, [http://www.danube-region.eu/images/olddocs/FinalReport\\_09\\_01\\_2012.pdf](http://www.danube-region.eu/images/olddocs/FinalReport_09_01_2012.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Grievson, R. / Gruebler, J. / Holzner, M. (2018), Western Balkans EU Accession: Is the 2025 Target Date Realistic?, Policy Notes and Reports 22, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies.

<sup>6</sup> See Main Focus "Russia & Southeast Europe" of Südosteuropa Mitteilungen 02/2019. Also Bechev, D. (2015), Russia in the Balkans, conference report, 13.03.2015, <http://www.lse.ac.uk/LSEE-Research-on-South-Eastern-Europe/Assets/Documents/Events/Conferences-Symposia-Programmes-and-Agendas/2015-Report-Russia-in-the-Balkans-merged-document.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Invest in Albania, website <https://invest-in-albania.org/trade-agreements>.

<sup>8</sup> Embassy of Bosnia and Herzegovina, website <https://rf-bih.ru/en/bilateral-relations/agreements-between-bosnia-and-herzegovina-and-russian-federation/>.

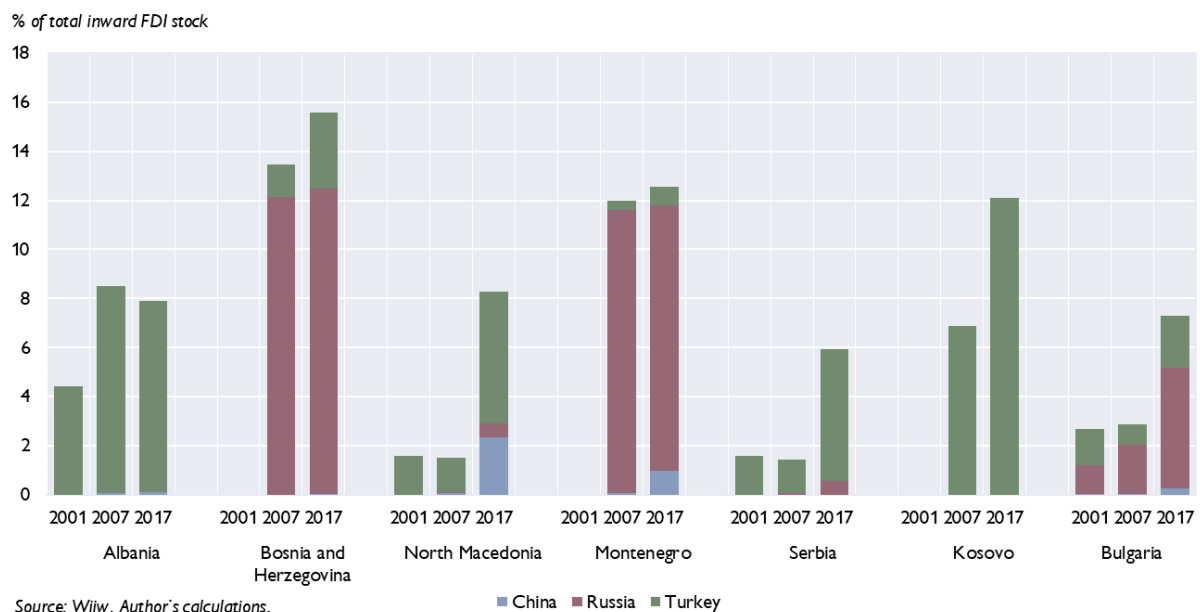
<sup>9</sup> Export.gov, website <https://www.export.gov/article?id=Serbia-Trade-Agreements>.

negotiation.<sup>10</sup> Russia's economic relations with the non-EU SEE countries have weakened in recent years. Russia's share in the region's foreign trade and investment has been decreasing for several years, falling from one of the region's top economic partners at the beginning of the century, to single digits today.

In general, Russian businesses are mainly concentrated in a few sectors, namely banking, metallurgy, real estate, and since the late 1990s, energy. The figures shrunk or stagnated even further in the light of the international sanctions imposed because of the annexation of Crimea. Russian FDI stocks are rather low in the majority of the SEE countries except in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria,

and Montenegro (see Figure 8). Total Russian investment in Montenegro stood at slightly above 11% of GDP in 2017, while it even surpassed 12% of the total investments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the exposure to Serbia and North Macedonia has steadily increased since 2007. As compared to Russian investments, Turkish investments have scored that high only in Kosovo (12.1%) in 2017. Overall, it can be inferred by the data that Russia and Turkey are, to some extent, competitors for market shares because none of the SEE countries has sizable shares of investments from both countries at the same time. In addition, they focus on partly the same sectors (banking, energy, construction).

Figure 8 Inward Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) stock of selected countries to the SEE countries



Unlike Russia or Turkey, China does not have any longstanding historical, cultural or ethnic ties with most SEE countries. Nevertheless, China is, without any doubt, a rising force in the region and its economic influence should not be ignored as the financial and economic links between China and the SEE countries have intensified significantly since 2015. Geographically, the SEE countries (and Greece) constitute the final part of China's new Maritime Silk Road. Because of extending the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) / New Silk Road (NSR) into the Balkans, China primarily invests in regional infrastructure, such

as ports, railroads, and highways, mainly through the so-called "16+1 format" including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia. Since 2015, the "16+1" format also introduced an investment fund of USD 10 billion to finance various projects in Central, Eastern, and South-Eastern Europe (CESEE). The cooperation under this format is increasingly institutionalised, not least through the planned introduction of a permanent business council and the planned signing of several high-profile bilateral memoranda of understanding.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Export.gov, website  
<https://www.export.gov/article?id=Montenegro-Trade-Agreements>.

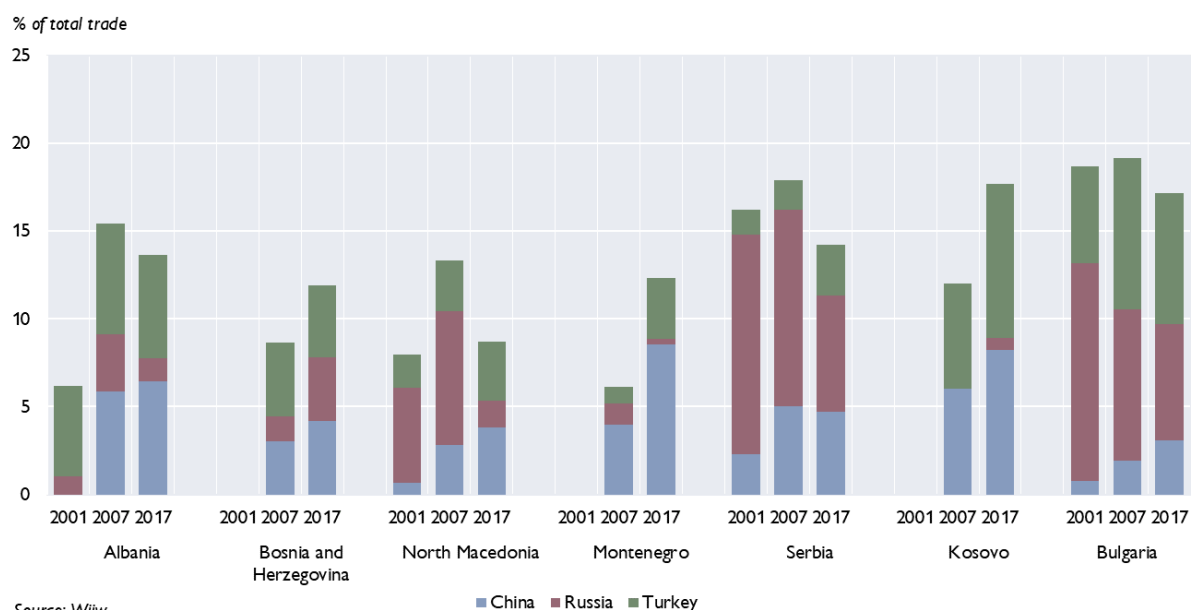
<sup>1</sup> Barisitz, S. / Radzyner, A. (2017), The New Silk Road, Part II: Implications for Europe, Focus on European Economic Integration

Q4/17, OeNB, December 2017,  
<https://www.oenb.at/Publikationen/Volkswirtschaft/Focus-on-European-Economic-Integration.html>.

According to conventional metrics, China does not hold sizable FDI stocks in the SEE countries yet. The FDI statistics, however, underestimate Chinese involvement in the region because in many cases it is structured as debt financing of large infrastructure projects in the transport and energy sectors.<sup>2</sup> State-owned Chinese banks such as Exim Bank usually

finance 85 % of the Belt and Road Initiative / New Silk Road projects. Thus, 15 % must be co-financed through national sources. Particularly in the smaller countries, sceptics fear that this portion will result in indebtedness and, consequently, higher economic and political dependence on China in the future (at least until the investments pay off in the long term).<sup>3</sup>

Figure 9 Trade exposure of the SEE countries to selected countries



Source: Wiiv.

Note: Data include goods only. No data available for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Montenegro in 2001.

When turning attention to trade, for the largest SEE economies (as measured by their GDP) in Bulgaria and Serbia, trade with Russia has surpassed trade flows with Turkey by a significant margin since 2001 (see Figure 9). In addition, Serbian exports to Russia have continuously increased since 2007 with exports coming up to 34 % of total trade with Russia in 2017, while Bulgarian exports show a more erratic pattern. For the rest of the SEE economies, trade with Russia is comparably more important for North Macedonia, Serbia and Bulgaria, where Russia has been among the top trade partners in past years (see Figure 9). On the contrary, trade with Russia has been tepid for Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro<sup>1</sup> since 2001 and even declined to less than 1 % of total trade in 2017. Overall, the findings from Russian investment activities in the region can also be confirmed by the trade developments. It is only in Bulgaria, where relatively high shares of trade with Russia and Turkey could be

spotted, whereas in the rest of the region both countries are competitors.

Trade with China has also been dominated by imports in all SEE countries. This trade is similar to the trade with Turkey, where exports have exceeded imports only in Bulgaria since 2001. In fact, the share of Chinese goods has been on the rise since 2001, coming up to some 8 % in 2017 in Kosovo and Albania. The share of Chinese trade has surpassed trade with Turkey in all SEE countries since 2007, except for Bulgaria. To put it in a nutshell, trade with China has been significantly increasing in the past two decades in all SEE countries, while trade with Turkey, as expressed by the share of total trade of a country, has remained broadly unchanged. This fact stands in contrast to the clearly competing economic influence between Russia and Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> Kaloyanchev, P. / Kusen, I. / Mouzakitism A. (2018), Untapped Potential: Intra-Regional Trade in the Western Balkans, DG ECFIN Discussion Paper No. 080.

<sup>3</sup> Bastian, J. (2017), The potential for growth through Chinese infrastructure investments in Central and South-Eastern Europe

along the "Balkan Silk Road", European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), July 2017.

<sup>1</sup> While Albania and Montenegro joined EU sanctions against Russia imposed from March 2014 onwards, Serbia and North Macedonia decisively opposed such a move so far.

## Conclusion

While the EU is discussing its future strategies about whether to deepen or to enlarge, and a trade war between the USA and China is the “talk of the town”, the EU accession prospects of the Western Balkan countries are moving slowly. Despite some recent significant advancements (e.g. the resolution of the name issue between Greece and North Macedonia through the Prespa Agreement in June 2018) the SEE region, including Bulgaria, has been the object of economic interests also from non-EU global players. This article turned the spotlight on the economic interlinkages between the SEE countries and Turkey since 2001. In particular, the analysis included the areas of development aid, investments, trade, and migration. In addition, a comparison was made of the economic ties with China and Russia as other external actors.

There are several key takeaways from the present analysis:

*First*, the economic importance of Turkey has significantly increased in the SEE countries since 2001. The Turkish economic involvement has been intimately related to the principles of Turkish foreign policy and recent support by the Turkish government, also supported by strong personal relations with the political leaders in some SEE countries. Although well below EU-15 levels, both investments and trade from and with Turkey, respectively, have been rising, amounting to up to 13 % of the total stock of foreign direct investment and 17 % of total trade in some of the SEE countries. Turkey invests mainly in the financial, manufacturing, construction and infrastructure sectors, although country differences are discernible. In addition, Turkish development aid for SEE has been increasing.

*Second*, not all SEE countries have established equally strong economic ties with Turkey. While Turkey has become a key trade partner and investor for Albania, Kosovo, and Bulgaria, its economic influence has remained limited in the rest of the SEE countries although the perception among the population might be different in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina.

*Third*, drawing comparisons with the economic ties of the SEE region with other global non-EU players like China and Russia highlights Turkey’s special position, often competing especially with Russia for market shares. In this respect, Bulgaria constitutes the sole exception because it is equally exposed to both countries. China’s role as an investor in the region is

getting more prominent. However, the crowding-out effects for Turkish investments have been limited so far.

*Finally*, for the EU, the consequences of stronger Turkish economic influence in the SEE countries are manifold. While the situation is different for the EU member Bulgaria, the growing influence of non-EU global players poses an additional pressure on the EU to follow its Western Balkans’ strategy thoroughly. On a positive note, Turkey, as an EU candidate country itself, has hardly been perceived as an unsupportive partner of the non-EU SEE countries for their EU accession. Nevertheless, an increasingly fragile relationship between the EU and Turkey might impact the EU negotiation process for the whole region.

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## Turkey's Soft Power in Southeast Europe during the AKP period

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This paper focuses on the historical presence of Turkey's soft power capacity and the emerging possibility that it may be lost due to the excessive instrumentalisation of religion, transnationalisation of domestic debates, and deterioration in democratic credentials and economic performance. I argue that while Turkey has many soft power tools and much soft power potential, it also has many weak points within its current circumstances. Challenging the previous discussions on whether Turkey is a soft power or whether there is a discursive level of transformation in the Turkish soft power, I claim that Turkey is an ambivalent soft power particularly in the context of Southeast Europe. This study will evaluate the concept of soft power with its requirements and limits to examine this argument and discuss the concepts of public diplomacy, nation branding and agent diplomacy, which are often juxtaposed with soft power. Then, it will scrutinise Turkey's ever-present capacity (Bechev, 2012) and the conditions that enable its rise as a soft power through the concepts of trauma, memory and longing. Finally, it will evaluate the changing roles played by the New Turkey in Southeast Europe through the lens of soft power and provide a projection on the possible future development.

### Introduction

Harvard's world-renowned political scientist Joseph Nye, who initiated the concept of soft power first into academia and then into the realm of politics through the semi-active roles he played during the Bill Clinton (1993–2001) and Barack Obama (2009–2017) administrations, has continued to redefine the concept in line with changing global conditions. While maintaining that soft power is the ability of a state to persuade others to do what it wants without sanctions, force or coercion,<sup>1</sup> in a 2012 article written for Wall Street Journal Nye discussed whether China will be a soft power in any fathomable way, and underlined that the motto 'the best propaganda is not making propaganda' might very well be the new and most appealing aspect of soft power.<sup>2</sup> Nye has modified the concept of soft power multiple times, compared it with classical hard power, enriched it with the concepts of newly emerging smart power and

sharp power, and yet he has never changed his perspective on propaganda and its smart use.

On the contrary, he has emphasised it in a determined fashion (Nye, 2008; 2017).<sup>3</sup> As a prolific and prominent scholar, Nye has mentioned the United States, Russia and China in the context of soft power. However, he has almost never taken Turkey, a country whose name has been identified with soft power, as a case study.<sup>4</sup>

Although Turkey is lost in the shuffle in global academic discussions evoking the concept of soft power, it occupies centre stage in soft power debates in the context of Southeast Europe and beyond, among Turkey originated and regional experts. Indeed, some new and important studies have started to scrutinise Turkey's religious soft power in various ways.<sup>5</sup> These discussions are not constrained by Nye's approach to propaganda and involve a range of perspectives.

<sup>1</sup> Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics, by Joseph Nye, Foreign Affairs, May/June 2004 Issue; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics>, last accessed 13 May, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> China's Soft Power Deficit, by Joseph Nye, The Wall Street Journal, May 8, 2012; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842>, last accessed 28 April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Some examples of Nye's newly discussions on soft power and its limits; What China and Russia Don't Get About Soft Power, Foreign Policy, April 29, 2013, last accessed 29 April 2019; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/04/29/what-china-and-russia-dont-get-about-soft-power/>. Interview of USC Centre on Public Diplomacy with Joseph Nye, April 18, 2017;

<https://www.uscpublicdiplomacy.org/story/qa-cpd-joseph-s-nye-jr>, last accessed 29 April, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> One of Nye's rare studies on Turkey which compares Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with other strong leaders in the world; Can American Democracy Resist the Pull Of, by Joseph Nye, Market Watch, June 6 2016; <https://www.marketwatch.com/story/can-american-democracy-resist-the-pull-of-authoritarianism-2016-06-06>, last accessed 29 April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> One of the important and well-recognized projects regarding to soft power and religion relation has been running by Peter Mandaville and Shadi Hamid under the roof of the Brookings Institute, for the full report see; <https://www.brookings.edu/research/islam-as-statecraft-how-governments-use-religion-in-foreign-policy/>, last accessed 9 May 2019.

Furthermore, most of the scholarly and policy-oriented discussions on Turkey's position as a soft power, and the constituent components of such power, mostly stem from the strategic, tactical and identity-based changes that the country has recently undergone. In this regard, Turkey's influence on Southeast Europe, and the narratives and other political tools that it utilises, have been polarising both non-academic and scholarly inquiry. For example, the state-run news agency Anadolu Ajansı<sup>6</sup> and the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party)-affiliated SETA (*Siyaset Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research)<sup>7</sup> employ valorising language on issues pertaining to Turkey's influence on the neighbouring countries and its cultural, religious and education-oriented activities in Southeast Europe. Both of these institutions portray Turkey as the region's soft power leader. In the research they undertake and the messages they share with the public, the key factors are Turkey's influential transnational apparatuses, including *Diyanet*<sup>8</sup> (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, Presidency of Religious Affairs), TİKA<sup>9</sup> (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Yunus Emre Institute<sup>10</sup> (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*) and YTB<sup>11</sup> (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*,

Turks Abroad and Related Communities Presidency) alongside increasing foreign trade, direct and indirect investments, and various types of humanitarian aid activities. They also stress the protective leadership role, *vis-à-vis* the Turks and Muslims of Southeast Europe, played by Turkey's President and leader of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

However, some studies conducted in the region reflect the presence of a fundamentally different perspective in Southeast Europe and indicate that Turkey's influence is not always welcome. For instance, while Turkey built the largest mosque of Southeast Europe in the Albanian capital Tirana as a reflection of that city's significance and historical importance, Albanian scholar Xemal Ahmeti submitted a report to the Albanian government entitled *Emancipating Albanian Culture from Turkish Effects*, in which he warned that Turkey-centric policies would harm Albanian secularism and the established culture of peaceful coexistence among various religious and ethnic groups. On the other side, some other studies from the mid or early AKP term bring Turkey to the fore as an antidote to Salafism and Wahhabism (Öktem, 2012). Yet, Ahmeti underlines the risk of Albania being stuck between Salafism and Erdoğanism, as a new form of one-man oriented religiosity.<sup>12</sup> The influence of the Turkey-centred Gülen Movement,<sup>13</sup> which has

<sup>6</sup> For an Anatolia Agency article please see; Makedonya referandum, *Batı Balkanlar ve Türkiye* (Macedonia referendum, Western Balkans and Turkey), by Sevdia Abdula, 28 September 2018; <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz-haber/makedonya-referandumu-bati-balkanlar-ve-turkiye/1267173>, last accessed 29 April, 2019.

<sup>7</sup> For a SETA report please see; *Türkiye-Balkan İlişkileri* (Turkey-Balkan Relations), by Mehmet Uğur Ekinci, May 23, 2017; <https://www.setav.org/turkiye-balkanlar-iliskileri/>, last accessed 29 April, 2019.

<sup>8</sup> In 1924, Diyanet was formed as part of the state structure for the implementation of all provisions concerning faith and worship aspects of Islam in the modern Turkey. It has undergone changes under various political forces. Starting from the late 1940s, Diyanet gradually took control over Quran courses and endowments favored by political actors. After the re-establishment of the democratic order annihilated by the 1960 coup d'état, Diyanet gained prominence because the state employed it in its struggle against communism. Since, 1970s, Diyanet has been playing an important role both in Turkey and abroad.

<sup>9</sup> TİKA was established in 1992, as a statutory technical aid organization under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its remit was to provide assistance to the Turkic (Turkish-speaking) Republics of Central Asia as they transitioned after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Especially since 2002, TİKA has increased its activity and visibility through projects of external development assistance that have reflected Turkey's increasing commitment to an expansive foreign-policy orientation under the AKP.

<sup>10</sup> The Yunus Emre Institute is a public body established in 2007 to encourage friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of Turkey and the wider world by promoting Turkish language, history, and culture abroad. In this sense it is akin to the UK's British Council and Germany's worldwide network of Goethe Institutes. It provides a range of cultural relations programs and services, including the promotion of cultural exchange and

partnership and the internationalization of education in Turkish language, culture, history, and art.

<sup>11</sup> YTB was established as a transnational state apparatus at the level of Under secretariat of the Prime Ministry on 6 April 2010, has the task to coordinate the activities for Turks living abroad as diaspora communities, related kin communities and international scholarship students studying in Turkey, and develop the services and activities carried out in these fields it has undertaken. This Turkey originated transnational state apparatus does not have direct offices in the Balkans, but it is slightly active with particular areas such as scholarships to students and create partnerships with other institutions in the fields of economy and culture.

<sup>12</sup> *Albania Must Choose Between the EU and Turkey*, by Alon Ben-Meir, *The Globalist*, May 19, 2018; <https://www.theglobalist.com/albania-balkans-recept-tayyip-erdogan-european-union/>, last accessed 29 April, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> The Gülen Movement, which was founded by Fethullah Gülen, defines itself as an advocate of interfaith dialogue through civil society activities at a global level since the second half of 1990s. However, it is popularly believed to have a political face dedicated to expansion of their political and bureaucratic power and through obtaining and maintaining important positions within the state. Although the Movement has started to place its members to the public institutions at the beginning of 1980s, their presence has reached its peak during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) period and become the unofficial coalition partner of AKP governments. Furthermore, the Movement has expanded its activities abroad and worked in line with the AKP. Yet, through the political crises such as the December 17-25, 2013 corruption scandal and July 15, 2016 coup attempt, this unofficial coalition was dispersed. As a result, the government labeled Gülen Movement as Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization (FETÖ). Therefore, in the aftermath of the coup attempt, AKP government shut down all the civilian institutions of the Movement and tried to expand this abroad

recently been targeted by Turkey, cannot be ignored in the concerns voiced by Ahmeti. A similar approach was articulated by Herbert Raymond McMaster, former national security adviser to US President Donald Trump, who accused Turkey of spreading extreme Islamist ideologies around the world.

Regarding Turkey's Southeast policies, McMaster declared that *we're seeing great involvement by Turkey [. . .] everywhere from western Africa to Southeast Asia [. . .] particularly the Balkans is an area of grave concern now*. While at first glance this claim seems a bit irrational, considering Turkey's commitment to NATO and the international order, it is clear that the idea of Turkey playing a soft power role is also gaining ground among experts.<sup>14</sup>

The issue of Turkey acting as a soft power and/or implementing soft power instruments in Southeast Europe is being discussed in academic circles as well. While some researchers maintain that Turkey, at least at the discursive level, has been moving away from being a soft power (Benhaïm and Öktem, 2015), others argue that because of its religious, cultural and economic activities, Turkey is still an effective soft power in certain regions, such as particularly in Southeast Europe (Yürür, 2018; Ekinci, 2018). Recent developments such as deterioration of Turkey's already flawed democracy (Baser and Öztürk, 2017), the struggle between the Gülen Movement and the AKP (Öztürk, 2019), pushing the boundaries with the aggressive employment of soft power tools (Demirtaş, 2017; Öztürk and Sözeri, 2018) and the dramatically paced alteration of foreign policy (Yavuz, 2016; Aydın-Düzgüt, 2016) all necessitate the rethinking of Turkey's status as a soft power.

Furthermore, the very streets of Southeast Europe seem to reflect the ongoing debate. The fieldwork that I conducted in North Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo in different periods between 2015 and 2018 revealed that Turkey is perceived in radically different ways, transcending ethnic and religious demarcations. People who could be expected to approve of Turkish policies, in Muslim-majority locations like the Old Bazaar (*Стара чаршija*) of the North Macedonian capital Skopje or the Sandžak region of Serbia, instead

reflect polarised views on Turkey. Erdoğan's last presidential election rally with the UETD (*Uluslararası Demokratlar Birliği*, Union of European Turkish Democrats) on 18 May 2018 in Sarajevo is a case in point. The UETD was founded in 2004 as a pro-AKP transnational apparatus and commenced its propaganda activities in Western European countries as the long arm of the party-state. In the 2018 presidential campaign period, since Erdoğan was not permitted to organise election rallies in Europe, the UETD organised its 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly in Sarajevo and invited Erdoğan as speaker. Even though then-president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović, also attended the meeting, Erdoğan's emphasis on internal political struggles and accentuation of Ottoman-Islamic elements were not well received and were observed with concern by local intellectuals.<sup>15</sup> Thus, even though it remains difficult to delineate which groups see Erdoğan's Turkey as a benign actor, one might argue that while the majority of Muslims see the New Turkey as a kind of guardian angel, other groups are evidencing some degree of apprehension.

Taking all the various approaches into account, it might fairly be argued that Turkey is not a purely effective and unarguable soft power in Southeast Europe, according to Nye's coining of the term. Yet, considering the transnational state apparatuses that the country runs and the image that it carries among the Muslim populations of the region, it may also be fairly claimed that Turkey displays strong elements of soft power. Setting aside the debates on whether or not Turkey's soft power capacity is increasing, this paper focuses on the historical presence of this capacity and the emerging possibility that it may be lost due to the excessive instrumentalisation of religion, transnationalisation of domestic debates, and deterioration in democratic credentials and economic performance. I argue that while Turkey has many soft power tools and much soft power potential, it also has many weak points within its current circumstances. Challenging the previous discussions on whether Turkey is a soft power or whether there is a discursive level of transformation in the Turkish soft power, I claim that Turkey is an *ambivalent soft power* particularly in the context of Southeast Europe. This

via its transnational institutions. Since then, the Southeast Europe has been a core battle field between the two and this battle has been negatively affecting Turkey's image in the region. Therefore, the study gives a special attention to the subject of the Gülen Movement. For details see; Watmough and Öztürk, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Erdoğan is Making the Ottoman Empire Great Again, by Michael Colborne and Maxim Edwards, *The Foreign Policy*, June 22, 2018;

<https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/06/22/erdogan-is-making-the-ottoman-empire-great-again/>, last accessed 29 April, 2019.

<sup>15</sup> Erdoğan'ın Avrupa'da Engellenen Seçim Mitingi Bosna'da Tartışma Konusu, by MladenLakic, *EuroNews*, May 18, 2018; <https://tr.euronews.com/2018/05/18/erdogan-n-avrupa-da-engellenen-secim-mitingi-bosna-da-tart-sma-konusu>, last accessed 30 April, 2019.

study will evaluate the concept of soft power with its requirements and limits to examine this argument and discuss the concepts of public diplomacy, nation branding and agent diplomacy, which are often juxtaposed with soft power. Then, it will scrutinise Turkey's ever-present capacity (Bechev, 2012) and the conditions that enable its rise as a soft power through the concepts of trauma, memory and longing. Finally, it will evaluate the changing roles played by the *New Turkey* in Southeast Europe through the lens of soft power and provide a projection on the possible future development.

## Soft power and Turkey

### Soft power: Unstable definitions, limits and more

Whether academic or semi-academic, all but a handful of the most significant works (Mingjiang, 2008; Parmar, 2010) gives but cursory reference to Nye in their examination of soft power, and do not engage in debate on the concept of power more broadly. Even though most of the issues and subjects of social science and global politics are directly and indirectly related to power, past scholars tended to avoid defining it clearly – until Max Weber (into the second decade of the twentieth century), who took the concept of power as a central part of his sociological enterprise. Since Weber one of the major issues among the world-renowned thinkers has become to scrutinise the meaning of power (Dahl, 1957; Morgenthau, 1962; Bourdieu, 1979; Kreisberg, 1992; Arendt 1994; Gramsci, 2000; Berenskoetter, 2007).

Yet, going beyond the classical power discussions and categorisations, Nye, alternatively, offers soft power as a more complicated concept and examines its building blocks. Nye sees soft power working through cultural, ideological and institutional factors, which he regards as potential elements to shape the contemporary world. According to him, if a state creates legitimacy around its soft power rather than its hard power, it faces less resistance to its policies at national and international levels. In the same vein, if the culture and the dominant ideology of a state are attractive to other people and states, it can implement its policies with ease. With such a perspective, Nye also argues that a state that respects human rights embraces the free market and distributes justice is seen as more important than many others with greater military and economic power. Yet, economic power

and the smart use of the other elements of power could support soft power. The components of soft power, Nye posits, include:

- a) Digital infrastructure and skills in digital diplomacy;
- b) Attraction and global access to cultural outputs of the country;
- c) Attractiveness in terms of the economic model and business friendliness and innovation;
- d) Power of the diplomatic network and contribution to global development and participation; and
- e) Commitment to basic freedoms, human rights and democracy and the overall quality of political institutions (Nye, 2004; 2008; 2009).

Over time, intra-conceptual discussions on soft power evolved into debates on *sharp power* with the rise of countries that are economically, culturally and militarily strong yet weak in democratic credentials, such as China, Russia and India (Mead, 2004; Scott 2008). On the other hand, the *smart* instrumentalisation of cultural values through transnational apparatuses by relatively small and less populous countries like Sweden, Norway and New Zealand has brought another dimension to soft power discussions (Wilson, 2008; Gallarotti, 2015).

And then again, - directly related to the discussions on hard and soft power- the dramatic and rapid rise of democratic backsliding has directly influenced a great many countries, since the mid-1990s. The 2018 global report of Freedom House argues that 113 countries have moved backwards in the last twelve years in terms of free democracy and human rights. The same report argues that most of these countries can no longer be regarded liberal democracies.<sup>16</sup> The existing literature variously defines such democracies as *electoral authoritarianism* (Schedler, 2013), *semi-democracy* (Case, 1993), *illiberal democracy* (Zakaria 1997) and *competitive authoritarian* (Levitsky and Way, 2010). The rich conceptualisations around democratic backsliding also indicate a fall in soft power, which essentially relies on having an established democracy and human rights. The new regimes that are cited within the conceptual pool of rising populism, new-right, new-authoritarianism and post-truth demonstrate a clear and rapid move back from liberal-democracy and create foreign policies based on ethnic-nationalist and religious elements (Sandal and Fox, 2013; Mandaville, 2003) and also new

<sup>16</sup> Freedom in the World 2018: Democracy in Crisis. For the full report, please see; <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018>, last accessed 2 May 2019.



hegemonic policies (Tan 2012; Reuter and Gandhi 2011). Indeed, all of these different elements are essential to understand the ambivalence of Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe, since the extraordinary instrumentalisation of religion under repressive policies is one of the most important aspects of Turkey's current power position in the region.

In addition to these, if we aim to scrutinise Turkey's religiously oriented policy transformation through Southeast Europe, it may be useful to introduce the thinking of Jeffrey Haynes on religion and soft power. In other words, I argue that Haynes' approach is also one of the key arguments to understand Turkey's current ambiguous soft power situation. Haynes was the first scholar to speak about religion and soft power. He posited that religious soft power involves encouraging both followers and decision-makers to change behaviour because they are convinced of the appropriateness of a religious organisation's goals (Haynes, 2016, p. 28). In some places, religion-based soft power integrates with authoritarianism, hegemony and political understanding of religion due to the erroneous reading and instrumentalisation of religion (Haynes 2016, Cesari, 2018; 2015). Yet, according to Haynes, in some other cases, religion transgresses the boundaries of soft power (Haynes, 2007, p. 33) and turns into a fragile element that harms international relations (Öztürk, 2018). Religion oriented policies overflow position and its fragility could be the critical point to understand the ambivalence of Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe

In all its variety, Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe – which has to be read within a constructivist framework and in the context of Turkey's classical Ethno-nationalist and newly emerging religion-oriented transformation – is different from the dominant practices of soft power implementation as operated by the US (Fan, 2008), China (Gill and Huang, 2006) and Japan (Lam Peng, 2007). Accordingly, the main questions to be asked here are: How is Turkey's soft power implementation different, particularly in Southeast Europe? And, does Turkey have a monolithic type of soft power for the region? Indeed, the answers to these questions need historical and socio-political background explanation of Turkey's various roles in the region.

### **Southeast Europe in the heart of Turkey: Nostalgia, hegemony and nascent soft power**

Halil İnalcık, a prominent historian of the Ottoman era, argues that what made the Ottoman state into an Empire was its expansion into Southeast Europe, fighting for its ethnic and religious causes (İnalcık, 2013, p. 3). İlber Ortaylı, another historian of the same era and a student of İnalcık, claims that Southeast Europe heavily influenced the Ottomans and this fact was, in essence, a *Balkan* state (Ortaylı, 2008). While both these perspectives can be regarded as biased in favour of the Empire (Öztürk, 2018), the importance of Southeast Europe both in the rise (Hanioglu, 2008; Wittek, 2013) and fall (Lewis, 1958, pp. 111-127; Quataert 2005, pp. 83-84) of the Ottomans cannot be ignored. Thus, the region played a central role in the Ottoman era and the foundation of the Turkish Republic as well. In other words, both the rise of the colonialist and expansionist Ottomans (Todorova 1994, pp. 454-455) and their fall through loss of territories (Yavuz and Blumi, 2013) may be seen through the lens of Southeast Europe – and so, accordingly, can the foundation of the Republic since most of its founding elite were from the former Ottoman territories. The perspective of the remaining Muslim population in the region on the Ottomans and Turkey (Akgönül, 2008) further connects Turkey and the region and complicates the relations between the two.

The loss of Southeast Europe and further disconnection with the region after the foundation of a separate nation-state created trauma for the founding elites of Turkey and the socio-political groups that were ethnically and culturally affiliated with the region. This trauma then facilitated the formation of longing for the region among these people. Against this backdrop, Turkey's presence in the region cannot be taken as a recent rise of activism and as Bechev (2012) argues, Turkey has always been a presence in the region to varying degrees and according to the changes in its domestic political balance and choices in overall foreign policy. In this regard, in the early Republican period, joining the Western world was a priority (Müftüler-Bac, 1996, p. 53) and a pragmatic commitment to a stable international order, strict adherence to the law, and *a la Turca* secularism (in Turkish: *laiklik*) (Öztürk 2016) were determining factors of foreign policy (Yavuz, 1997, p. 23). Since the 1930s, Turkey has been establishing multi-dimensional relations with Southeast Europe (Mazower 2007, pp. 128-129) and despite the emergence of problems with Bulgaria arising from forced population exchange in the 1940s (Kirişçi, 1995, p. 65), from the 1950s to the



mid-1980s Turkey's approach remained grounded in security and balance-of-power. Turkey continued its political and economic relations with almost all the regional states in the period. It established good relations with Tito's Yugoslavia. Yet, as Sayarı (2000, p. 176) points out, the collaborations remained within the constraints of NATO, because as a member-state Turkey could not pursue totally independent policies towards the region during the Cold War period.

Turgut Özal (1983–1989 Prime Minister, 1989–1993 President), who came to power following the military *coup d'état* of 1980, implemented many political changes and sought to establish a new approach based on the concept of *neo-Ottomanism*, referring to Turkey's Ottoman–Islamic–Turkic past and aspiration to regional domination (Yavuz, 1998, p. 23). Indeed, this approach manifested itself in Southeast Europe especially, in the aftermath of the Cold War, and Turkey started systematically viewing the region as an area of interest and involvement. Turkey played an active diplomatic role during the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, as well as in the subsequent peacekeeping operations (Uzgel, 1998, pp. 403-444). *Diyanet* and TİKA did not manage to establish themselves in the region during this period. Yet both of these institutions would later prove to be the major soft power tools of Turkey. One of the reasons for the initial failure was that Turkey lacked the resources to maintain ongoing economic support. Another reason was the unstable coalition governments that followed the Özal period. In this period, Turkish democracy deteriorated, and the country did not have a stable and consistent strategy of foreign policy. Despite its efforts to exercise political, cultural, economic and religious influence on Southeast Europe, Turkey's domestic problems and instability—such as its economy and the perpetual indirect interventions of the military into local politics—limited its success. Turkey of this period could, therefore, be defined as a *nascent soft power* (Öztürk, 2018, pp. 144-159).

*Table 1 Different Approaches of Turkey to Southeast Europe Prior to the AKP*

From the Early Republican Period to the Beginning of the 1980s	From Turgut Özal's Prime Ministry to the mid-1990s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgia</li> <li>• Security</li> <li>• Limited Humanitarian Aid</li> <li>• Protection of the International Order</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgia</li> <li>• Economic and Cultural Influence</li> <li>• Visible, but Limited Humanitarian Aid</li> <li>• Protection of the International Order</li> </ul>

As a final aspect of this historical summary, it is necessary to underline the Gülen Movement's position in the 1980s and 1990s, which is essential to an understanding of the current situation. Despite Turkey's catastrophic domestic politics, the initiatives of the Gülen Movement have not been negatively influenced by the instability in Turkey, and the Movement began to play an active role with the support of the Özal administration. At the beginning of the 1990s, they started opening schools, associations and media organs in Albania, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia. The military intervention that came on February 28, 1997, tried to curb the influence of the Movement in the region but had limited effect. Subsequent AKP governments in the 2000s made use of the ground that had been prepared by the Gülen Movement in the region (Öztürk and Sözeri, 2018; Öztürk and Gözaydın, 2018).

#### **The AKP on the stage: The New Turkey?**

The AKP period has witnessed an unprecedented wave of change in Turkey. Coming to power in 2002 as a single-party government against the pressures of the Turkish Armed Forces and bureaucratic tutelage, the AKP has changed both itself and the country at critical junctures. Different studies have depicted a radically different and self-conflicting AKP. While some argue that under AKP rule, at least in the first period Turkey became an exemplary country which reconciles Islam with democracy (Tepe, 2005; Dağı, 2008), other studies, specifically after 2011, have observed repressive tendencies (Özbudun, 2014; Baser and Öztürk, 2017; Taş, 2015). Framing Turkey's influence on Southeast Europe, under these diverse perspectives, perhaps requires a comprehensive and holistic study, one that can assess the changes in the country's domestic and foreign policy using an integrated approach and evaluate the different

periods of the AKP through both ruptures and continuity.

First, it should be acknowledged that the AKP's ascent is a cumulative result of the march to power of Islamic and conservative groups since the Young Ottomans of the late Ottoman era (Öztürk, 2019). Achieving power with effective leadership, the support of the lower-middle class, and a pro-European Union discourse, the AKP followed non-confrontational policies to avoid the wrath of the Kemalist-secularist guardianship mechanism, that is the well-established bureaucratic tutelage of Turkey (Akkoyunlu, 2014). Fighting the indirect interventions of the military (i.e., the memorandum of 2007) and trying to push back against secularist mass protests (the Republican protests), the AKP formed an unofficial coalition with various anti-tutelage groups. One of the biggest unofficial but visible coalition partners was the Gülen Movement, and in partnership they started implementing a more pro-active foreign policy in Southeast Europe and the rest of the world. This coalition then reflected on domestic politics with the support of the liberal intelligentsia.

In domestic politics, the AKP began in an unofficial coalition with the Gülen Movement publicly fighting the hostile bureaucratic structures with the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. However, the AKP–Gülen coalition became more assertive over time and started implementing more nationalist policies on the Kurdish issue. When Ahmet Davutoğlu, an ambitious yet less-than-realistic scholar of international politics, was appointed as minister of foreign affairs, Turkey started following bolder and more confident policies first in Southeast Europe and then in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and the West. At this point, it is important to note that even though the Gülen Movement and the AKP emerged from different traditions in Turkish political Islam and possessed different worldviews and organisational and political styles as well as completely different historical roots and theological traditions, their agendas coalesced along common interests in terms of foreign policy. Southeast Europe represents an important area for both the AKP and the Gülen Movement as a result of its significant Muslim and Turkish-speaking demographics and its potential for multilateral investment in areas such as trade and education. Therefore, the organisational capacity of the Gülen Movement acted in tandem with the transnational apparatuses of the AKP government is a manifestation of soft power. And, the political power and influence of the AKP helped the Gülen Movement to open some key doors in host countries' corridors of

bureaucracy. Indeed, to define all the policy implementations of that period within the category of soft power would misrepresent what soft power entails since most of the policies were based on self-interest of the Gülen Movement and the AKP, rather than to create a Turkish soft power *per se*.

This open and outward line of policy started to deteriorate with the loss of momentum in the Turkish economy (Erkoç, 2019), rising authoritarianism in line with global developments (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016), the Arab uprisings' frightening effect on the leadership of the AKP and the Party's harsh reaction to the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013. This process of de-democratisation manifested through increasing authoritarianism in domestic politics and significant changes in foreign policy, especially concerning the EU (Saatcioglu, 2016). While this process had several critical junctures, it may be fair to claim that the Gülen Movement–AKP war has affected it the most. After 2013, the unofficial coalition between the AKP and Gülenists that had been based on power-sharing turned into an all-out war, which altered the AKP's choices in both domestic and foreign policy. The crises that the AKP government faced, such as the 17–25 December corruption investigations and finally the July 15 coup attempt, made Erdoğan centralise power in his person. The regime change that came in 2017 and the necessity of obtaining more than 50% of the votes made Erdoğan lean towards nationalism and ally with the MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Action Party), and this new coalition has become a core ideological backbone of Turkey: Ethno-nationalist, repressive and Sunni Islamist. The emergence of what Erdoğan labels the New Turkey has changed Turkey's policies and its image in Southeast Europe.

Table 2 Phases of the AKP's Journey until 2018

Period	Critical Junctures	Party's Attitude
2002–2008 Survival	E-memorandum Republican Meetings	Defensive
2008–2013 Takeover	Ergenekon and Sledgehammer (Balyoz) Trials  Closure Trial of AK Party KCK Operations	Active
2013– 2016/7 Challenge	Gezi Park Protests  17–25 December Corruption Investigations	Reactive
After 2016/7 Hegemonic	15 July Failed Coup Attempt and the State of Emergency  16 April Constitutional Referendum	Aggressive

### Three stages of Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe<sup>1</sup>

The previous part of this study assessed the stages that Turkey has gone through during the AKP period, and there is a strong likelihood that Turkey is about to enter another period after the re-run Istanbul election in late June 2019.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the situation does not render the same in foreign policy in general and as regards Southeast Europe specifically, for two reasons. The first is that, despite the well-known stipulation of classical constructivism that domestic political changes directly affect a country's foreign policy (Waltz, 2010; Klotz and Lynch, 2007; Reus-Smith,

2005), the Turkish case has its historically formed differences. While some domestic changes have later been reflected in Turkey's foreign policy, for others this has not happened (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). As summarised above, Turkey has been going through a hectic period since 2002, and some of this domestic change has not created significant influence on foreign policy behaviours. Secondly, in the AKP period Turkish foreign policy has formed and worked with coalitions with non-state actors, such as Sunni Islamic groups, at an unprecedented level. Even when the AKP's relations with these actors has changed domestically, the transmission of this change to foreign policy relates to domestic factors in the countries where these actors are present.

From this standpoint, while the soft power status of Turkey and its soft power resources are affected by changes in domestic policy, this is not a direct and linear reflection. Based on the existing literature, the state reports of Turkey on the subject, and the fieldwork that I conducted, it would make sense to examine Turkey's varying influence on Southeast Europe in three phases: 2002–2010 as the *rise of soft power*; 2010–2016 as the *decline of soft power*, and post-2016 as *ambivalence of soft power*.

### The rising soft power of the AKP's Turkey

Researchers on Turkey, who tend to focus on Turkey's relations with Southeast Europe and its rising appearance as a soft power in the region in the post-2002 period through the AKP and the Gülen Movement, gravitate towards seeing this as an abrupt development. The interest of the AKP's founding elite in the region is mostly ignored or is reserved under the general historical interest of Turkey. When Erdoğan became the mayor of İstanbul in 1994, he and his close circle from the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, RP) cadres started forming cultural and religious solidarity with Muslim-majority locations such as Gostivar in North Macedonia, Tuzla and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sandžak in Serbia. Furthermore,

<sup>1</sup> This part of this article is based largely on my field-work in various times between 2015–2018, and at the very beginning of 2019 which covers Southeast Europe and Turkey, and consists of approximately 130 interviews with experts, political actors, diplomats, scholars and journalists, as well as religious community leaders/representatives, and imams in terms of the general arguments of this study. This fieldwork, observation and interviews that include Muslim and non-Muslim, Turkish and non-Turkish interviewees, provides a rich body of information that could be utilized examine my suggestions on the complex relations between states, their identities, several soft power types and religion.

<sup>2</sup> In 31 March 2019 local elections, Erdoğan's AKP lost İstanbul's Metropolitan Municipality which is the biggest socio-political force in Turkey. But, after the AKP's and the MHP's pressure on the

Turkey's high election board, and this high judges' council decided to re-run the İstanbul election. Beyond the discussions on whether rightful or not, one point is almost obvious; Turkey has passed the limits of the definition of competitive authoritarianism and has been switching an other dimension in terms of authoritarian turn. In different words, this new incident shows that the definitions of competitive authoritarianism do not hold for Turkey anymore. Indeed, this new situation will effect the foreign policy decisions of Turkey as well as its disputable role in Southeast Europe. For the details of the re-run election decision of Turkey please see; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-election-istanbul/turkey-to-re-run-istanbul-election-lost-by-erdogans-akp-idUSKCN1SC110>, last accessed 10 May 2019.

*Süleymancis*, Nurcu Movement and Aziz Mahmut Hüdai Community which are strong and prominent religious communities in Turkey, started making an appearance in the second half of the 1990s with the student housing, Quran courses they opened in the region, particularly in Albania, North Macedonia, and Kosovo. The Gülen Movement also started gaining influence with a school they founded in 1993, Mehmet Akif Koleji in North Macedonia, and the madrasas they took over in Albania. The Movement then continued by establishing education complexes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Albania, and Kosovo, business associations, dialogue institutions and the Zaman Newspaper with the support of the volunteer financial founders from various cities of Turkey.

In this, it would be fair to claim that Turkey moved beyond its well-established state-centric foreign policy and started forming structures that bring cultural and religious sensitivities to the fore and provide education services. Thus, the increasing visibility of Turkey in Southeast Europe during the AKP period had a preceding formative period. Religious groups such as the Gülenists, *Süleymancis* and others had started their activities more than a decade before the AKP came to power. Yet, perceptions on the rising visibility of Turkey as an effective soft power, manifested through the AKP and non-state actors, have four major grounds.

The first is that under AKP rule, Turkey has increased the effectiveness of its democracy and Constitutional institutions primarily because of a pro-EU stance and associated reforms. The AKP commenced carrying out legal and administrative reforms to make itself permanent on the political stage – that is to say, to avoid the wrath of secularist bureaucracy in the country, to gain recognition by the international society, and eventually to achieve accession to the EU (Rumelili, 2008; Tocci, 2005). The reform process made the AKP and its undisputed leader, Erdoğan, the focus of popular attraction. As Nye points out, democratic developments and their possible export are the most important tools that states can use and Turkey, with reforms in hand, albeit with a relatively short legacy of democracy, started to exercise a larger political influence on Southeast European countries that aspired to maintain democracy in the face of religious differences.

Secondly, in this period Turkey started implementing changes in its foreign policy under the influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the foreign policy advisor to Erdoğan and former Turkish President

Abdullah Gül (2007-2014), and was later appointed foreign minister. However, the perspective that sees an increase in Turkey's soft power under Davutoğlu's influence (Aras, 2014; Kalin, 2012) deserves some degree of scepticism. It is a fact that Davutoğlu brought humanitarian aid to the forefront of Turkish foreign policy and emphasised Turkey as a pivotal country in its region and at a global scale (Davutoğlu, 2001; 2008). He also desired Turkey to represent its Ottoman heritage in cultural, ethnic and religious terms (Ozkan, 2014). This political language created a positive influence on Muslim communities in the region, bring culture and religious values to the fore, yet was not welcomed by non-Muslim communities and the political elite. Davutoğlu, however, did have an undeniable influence on the rise of Turkey's soft power, at least for a limited time (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2019, p. 229).

Before looking at the third reason, it would be beneficial to scrutinise Davutoğlu's thinking on Turkish foreign policy and its strategy for Southeast Europe. The central claim of Davutoğlu's approach is that Turkey, as a result of its Ottoman past and its shared cultural identity and religion with both old Ottoman territories and the Islamic world, could utilise its geostrategic location to enhance its standing in the world. In this way, Turkey has the potential to be a pivotal state in global affairs. This represents a rebuttal of the secular and Western-oriented characteristics of classical Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu also offers an alternative worldview and definition by instrumentalising religion. He focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilisations, particularly the West, and asserts that the differences between Western and Muslim paradigms create an obstacle for the study of contemporary Islam as a subject of the social sciences, especially of international politics. Davutoğlu believes that governments in the Islamic world cannot derive their legitimacy from the same sources as Western states (such as elections and representative institutions) but instead must have a religious basis. He also notes that Turkey is a key part of Islamic civilisation and can resume its rightful place on the world stage only if it embraces leadership of the Islamic world, as it did when the Caliphate was based in İstanbul. He repeatedly drives forward the importance of nationalist ideas supported by glorification of the Ottoman period. Southeast Europe appears to be a suitable context in which to implement these foreign policy aims since it is located within Turkey's geographical, cultural and economic realm of influence (Öztürk 2018, p 188-193). Furthermore, in

one of Davutoğlu's articles (2008), he suggests that the region is in a new era comprising a period of restoration, cooperation and construction: restoration in the sense of restoring shared cultural, economic and political ties, cooperation in developing a new spirit of joint action, and construction as a way to both overcome the legacy of past decades and respond to the challenges of the new decades to come. At this point, suffice it to note that Davutoğlu's ideas were mostly welcomed by the Muslims of the region and could not be comprehensive.

Apart from the Davutoğlu-effect, the third reason is the AKP's relatively more successful and comfortable period in foreign policy between 2002 and 2010, which is closely related to the atmosphere of the global environment. Yet, some other factors, such as economic development and transnational apparatuses, played important roles in the context of Southeast Europe. The AKP showed a good economic performance between 2004 and 2010 mostly because of global economic recovery and AKP's consistent policies following the reforms made before it came to power (Öniş, 2012). This prosperity was reflected in Southeast Europe. In the period 2002–2010, the trade volume between Turkey and the region almost tripled. Turkey also started playing more active regional roles through Diyanet, TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute and YTB<sup>3</sup>. During this period, Turkey became publicly almost more visible on the ground than more prominent actors like EU countries, Russia and the United States. Diyanet has made agreements with the authorities of many Balkan countries, through the attaché offices it maintains in Turkish embassies and through the Diyanet Foundation, to train imams and provide other religious services. TİKA, along with the state-run construction company TOKİ, has constructed public buildings in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo. With the establishment of Yunus Emre Institutes in 2007, Turkey started contributing to the cultural activities of these countries. Even though all of the institutions have also been contributing to the region via aid in kind, and it is therefore almost impossible to state the exact costs of such activities, the annual reports of these institutions indicate that countries of Southeast Europe have been receiving the largest sums of financial and other aid

from Turkey after Somalia and some Northern African countries.

*Table 3 Activities of the Main Transnational Apparatuses' of Turkey in Southeast Europe*

<b>Diyanet</b>	Since the late 1990s, it has highest level representations in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Albania. In Bulgaria, each year Diyanet donates around 2 million leva to support the Grand Mufti of Sofia. Diyanet also meets the demands of more than 1000 mosques by supplying the Quran and other needs. While it also makes similar donations to the Islamic Religious Community of North Macedonia, since 2015 it has cut its support to the Albanian Diyanet due to its Gulenist links. Apart from that, there are no Diyanet representations in Southeastern Europe however with the Diyanet Foundation. It supports Muslim communities in the region.
<b>TİKA</b>	They have one office in Albania, Bosnia, North Macedonia, Kosovo and Montenegro and they have two offices in Serbia. Southeast Europe is the second priority area for TİKA after North Africa, and it receives a lot of investment. TİKA not only renovates schools, mosques, hospitals and public institutions, it also has a budget for renovation of properties that belong to non-Muslim communities. <sup>4</sup>
<b>Yunus Emre Institute</b>	They have representations in Albania, Bosnia, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Serbia. Although they often get engaged in pro-AKP, pro-nationalist and pro-Sunni Islamist activities, they also address wider audiences by the events that they organise <sup>5</sup> and try to have a diverse approach to Turkish and Southeast European communities.

<sup>3</sup> Even though YTB does not have any representation office it is very active with some of the external support to other transnational apparatuses.

<sup>4</sup> In my fieldwork, many representatives of the Turkish state underlined that reality to me. For instance, in our interview, on April

27, 2016, at that time Turkish Ambassador in Belgrade, Mehmet Kemal Bozay, explained TİKA's support to the non-Muslim's properties in Serbia.

<sup>5</sup> On April, 2017, Fuat Korkmaz, the head of the Yunus Emre Institute in Skopje told me about their previous Fazıl Say concert in Lake



These were also the years when the compatibility of Islam and democracy was discussed at a global level (Philpott, 2007; Mernissi, 2009) and the moderate Islamic movements and communities were acting more freely. The relationship between the AKP and the Gülen Movement started bearing fruit in Southeast Europe. As noted previously, representing a non-radical interpretation of Islam in the region since the late 1990s, the Gülen Movement has become very active in Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Serbia with three universities, 20 education institutions, eight madrasas, Zaman newspapers, and many civil society–business organisations. The activities of the Movement, in general, were at that time in line with the policy choices of the Turkish government. While none of these institutions received direct support from the Turkish government, they got respectful financial contributions from the AKP municipalities and pro-AKP holdings (Öztürk, 2018, p. 255).

All in all, with a growing economy, the reforms and democratisation that are carried out for the EU accession process and the activities of state and non-state actors in the region, Turkey rose as a soft power. Yet, it did not accomplish all the factors that Nye mentions in terms of fulfilment of soft power; for instance, digital infrastructure and skills in digital diplomacy – and indeed, well-functioning democratic norms. Furthermore, it should also be emphasised that Turkey did not have enough time to fulfil these factors and establish itself as a permanent, solid and indisputable soft power because of its domestic political instabilities and its over-use of religious discourse and ethnic motives in its policies towards the region.

### Declining soft power of Turkey

Turkey has historically been characterised by dynamic yet unstable domestic politics, and this fact was reflected in foreign policy in the AKP period. The change has been made clear in studies on Turkey, and the discourses of political actors particularly concerning foreign policy (Benhaïm and Öktem, 2015), and is rendered more significant in the context of Turkey's relations with Southeast Europe. As pointed out by Nye and Haynes, the position of soft power relies on the perception of public opinion in other countries, and this requires the sustainable representation of the factors about soft power.

The Arab Spring in foreign policy and the AKP's struggle with the Kurds inside Turkey (Baser, 2017) facilitated the Erdoğan government's embrace of security-oriented conservative-nationalist discourse and policies. Erdoğan elevated himself to the position of a strongman in the absence of effective opposition (Keyman, 2014, p. 21). However, the public reaction evinced in the Gezi protests (Öztürk 2014) and the Gülen–AKP struggle started to reverse the rationalistic instrumentalisation of religion in foreign policy. This transformation highlighted the fact that the AKP's new understanding of foreign policy is anti-Western, Islamist, adventurist and ideological (Yavuz, 2016, p. 440). On top of the political instability, the economy started giving signals of weakening and contributed greatly to the decline of Turkey's soft power (Öniş, 2019).

Although Turkey has maintained its activities through transnational state apparatuses like *Diyanet*, TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute and TOKİ, its accomplishments in basic freedoms, human rights, overall democratic credentials and constitutional resilience have been reversed, specifically after 2011. It now brings a smaller coefficient to the activities of these apparatuses. In this regard, two issues indicate the decline of Turkey's soft power in the region. The first is transnationalisation of the struggle or war between the AKP and the Gülen Movement. This point is primarily important in the deterioration of Turkey's influence in the region, which has been the major battlefield between the two adversaries. Rather interestingly, the two structures that increased Turkey's soft power now seemed to be decreasing it. They ran propaganda campaigns against each other, and this equated to the exportation of domestic conflicts abroad and a subsequent decline of soft power. The second point concerns centralisation and personalisation of power in the persona of Erdoğan, and his desired hegemony through the exploitation of ethno-religious values (Lancaster, 2014). The countries of Southeast Europe were the designated battlefield and became the testing grounds for this process (Öztürk, 2018, p. 291), further deteriorating Turkey's soft power there.

The brutal war of propaganda between the AKP and the Gülenists violated Nye's proposal that propaganda must be performed seamlessly. Furthermore, Turkey's distancing from democratic values has been presented as a positive development by the propaganda machinery of the AKP, and this does not seem to have

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Ohrid. Fazıl Say is a globally renowned pianist who is also known with his critical view of Erdoğan's policies.

paid off. With its weakening economy, Turkey has a much lower trade and investment volume than the EU and the US (Öztürk 2018, p. 302). Exportation of domestic problems also decreased the influence that Turkey had recently had. Yet, despite all such deterioration in its soft power, Turkey remains the most important country for the Muslim communities in the region and their elites.

### The beginnings of ambivalence in Turkey's soft power

Several factors have been at play in the changes Turkey has gone through in its policies on Southeast Europe, and the perception of such changes in the eyes of local actors. The leading factor is perhaps the personalisation of power and the dramatically authoritarian drift of the country in less than half a decade. This change manifested in impulsive attitudes in Turkey's foreign policy that do not constitute feasible conditions for soft power practices. The coup attempt of July 15, 2016, allegedly devised and conducted by the Gülen Movement, created fundamental changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy.

On the one hand, in domestic politics, Erdoğan had to share power with the MHP and the Euro-Asianist bureaucrats in military and judiciary circles.

On the other hand, in foreign policy the AKP has started to use pro-Islamic and ethno-nationalist language at an unprecedented level.<sup>6</sup> In other words, with radicalisation of the leadership and a hegemonic party, the state started to go through an ethno-nationalist Sunnification. It is hard to determine to what extent this has been reflected in policymaking and how much has remained in the realm of discursive management. The clear result, though, is that it has created changes in Turkey's Southeast Europe policies and made the situation more complicated.

Furthermore, as noted previously, the Gülen Movement has more established relations than the AKP with local socio-political actors in Southeast Europe. Until the early 2010s, its civil societal capacity had been regarded as a soft power tool of the Turkish state. Yet, especially after the July 15 coup attempt,

the priority of the AKP government has become to curb the influence of the movement and, if possible, to exterminate it. Alongside the deterioration in the country's democratic credentials and its weakening economy,<sup>7</sup> the fight with the Gülen Movement has created internal conflicts in the soft power capacity of Turkey. The most striking example of these conflicts took place in Albania. The biggest mosque of the region was built by TİKA and *Diyanet*, and the opening ceremony was attended by the Turkish and Albanian presidents in May 2015. In the ceremony, Erdoğan did not shake hands with Skënder Bruçaj, the head mufti of Albania, because of his very close relations with the Gülenists, and openly demanded his removal along with the closure of institutions affiliated with the Gülen Movement.<sup>8</sup> Eventually, the Turkish *Diyanet* cancelled the aid it had been providing to the Albanian *Diyanet* since the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium (Öztürk, 2018, p. 226).

Similar situations can be seen in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. For example, in North Macedonia, in Muslim-majority locations like Gostivari (*Гостивар*) and Tetova (*Тетово*), the activities of *Diyanet* and TİKA are very visible via mosque construction, the education of imams, scholarships and various activities aligned with particular religious, national and cultural days of both Turkey and the host countries. They are even more visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. Thus, it would be fair to say that some soft power tools are still vibrant in the region, but they are intensely instrumentalised. After the coup attempt of July 2016, these institutions openly target the Gülenists, and this attitude is not welcomed by most of the local elite. The major reason behind this disaffection is the trajectory of recent events and the current discourse of the parties. Turkey has recently represented itself as inheriting and employing the region's Ottoman cultural heritage, which is not necessarily regarded as a positive thing in the social memory of the Balkans. In line with this, it has intensified its ethno-religious discourse and policies.

Furthermore, Turkey intervenes in the relations that these countries have with the Gülen Movement, which is not acceptable in any definition of soft power since

<sup>6</sup> Erdogan The Nationalist Vs Erdogan The Islamic, by Asli Aydintasbas, The Caravan, 13 December 2018; <https://www.hoover.org/research/erdogan-nationalist-vs-erdogan-islamist>, last accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Despite, the current economic situation of Turkey, the overall economic relations with Southeast European countries increased significantly during the AKP governments. While the volume of trade between the region countries and Turkey was around 3.5 billion U.S.

dollars in 2002, it exceeded 16 billion US dollars in 2016, reaching its peak in 2014 with 20.8 billion US dollars. But after 2016, the level has started to decrease because of the economic conditions of Turkey.

<sup>8</sup> For the full speech of Erdoğan during the ceremony please see; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quUDSt\\_XN-8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=quUDSt_XN-8) last accessed 5 May 2019.

it is directly related to sovereignty. Albania reacted negatively to Turkey's policies after 2016 at the level of the Parliament and the Presidency.<sup>9</sup> In Kosovo, the kidnapping by Turkish intelligence of six people

affiliated with the Gülen Movement elevated regional concern to an unprecedented level.<sup>10</sup>

*Table 4 The Gülen Movement's Activities in Southeast Europe*

<b>Albania</b>	The Gülen Movement's Gülistan Foundation was established in Albania in 1993, and since then it has been operating widely in the country. As of 2019, it has established two universities, 13 schools, four madrasas and ten dormitories. They also have a publishing house called Prizma, several online newspapers and other media outlets, a businessmen association as well as dialogue centres. In Albania, the Gülen Movement influences approximately 6500 students.
<b>Bulgaria</b>	Bulgaria is one of the countries where the Gülen Movement has its weakest influence. After the coup attempt, the movement closed the newspaper and the businessmen association that it has been running, but a school owned by the movement just outside Sofia is still active.
<b>Bosnia</b>	In Bosnia, the Gülen Movement became active after it opened the Sema Foundation in 1998. It currently runs four schools (in Sarajevo, Bihac and Tuzla) and it has a publishing house called the Hikmet Publishing. In 2017, it transferred the Burch University to a British private higher education institution.
<b>Kosovo</b>	In Kosovo, the Gülen Movement controls Gülistan Education Institutions and Atmosfer Education and Culture Foundation. Some of these schools have nurseries in Prizren, Yakova, Liplan and Pristina, and they also provide primary and secondary education. Among them, some even offer dormitories to male and female students.
<b>North Macedonia</b>	North Macedonia is one of the countries where the Gülen Movement has a lot of influence. They are involved in trade and business, and they also control Yahya Kemal schools in 5 different cities. Those schools accommodate approximately 2000 students. Due to the agreement between Turkey and North Macedonia, Turkish citizens can enter the country without visa requirements and acquiring a residence permit is slightly easier compared to other Southeast European countries. This ease facilitates the mobility of the Gülenists into North Macedonia who used this as a step to reach European member states as the final destination. In terms of media activities, they have a newspaper called Makedonya Zaman which is published in Albanian and Macedonian and distributed to many people by the help of the municipalities. As of 2019, the movement has seven schools.
<b>Serbia</b>	In 2018, 11 companies and four schools that were linked to the Gülen Movement were closed by Serbian authorities upon the request from the Turkish government.

In the scope of its fight with the Gülenists, Erdoğan's AKP established the Turkish Maarif Foundation in 2016.<sup>1</sup> As much as the Foundation defines itself with a mission to serve as a gateway to the international educational arena whereby Turkey will contribute to

enhancing cultural and civilizational interaction and paving the way to achieving common wellbeing, its ultimate and clear mission is to take over the educational institutions run by the Gülen Movement,<sup>2</sup> making it difficult to classify this Foundation as a soft

<sup>9</sup> Albanian MP Blasts Erdoğan's Call for Struggle Against Gülenists, by an anonymous reporter, Hürriyet Daily News, 17 May 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/albanian-mp-blasts-erdogans-call-for-struggle-against-gulenists--82536>, last accessed 19 May 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Erdogan's Long Arm: The Turkish Dissidents Kidnapped From Europe, by Michale Colborn and Maxime Edwards, Haaretz, 30 August 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/turkey/.premium-erdogan-s-long-arm-the-turkish-nationals-kidnapped-from-europe-1.6428298>, last accessed 5 May 2019.

<sup>1</sup> Please see one of the first interviews which was conducted with the President of the Foundation; Maarif Foundation President Birol Akgün: Turkey now controls 60 percent of non-Western FETÖ schools, by Nur Özkan Erbay, Sabah Daily, 29 July 2018, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2018/07/30/maarif-foundation-president-birol-akgun-turkey-now-controls-60-percent-of-non-western-feto-schools>, last accessed 12 May 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In 2017's President of Maarif Foundation, Cem Zorlu underlined the importance of the region for their mission; Türkiye Maarif Vakfı Yönetim Kurulu Başkanı Zorlu: Balkanlar Maarif Vakfı için Özel Önele Sahip, by Cihad Ali, Anadolu Ajansı, 6 June 2017,

power tool, and its success is highly questionable since it can be successful only where Turkey is economically more powerful than the host country. Yet, North Macedonia sets an interesting example: the Gülenists have been active in the country with Yahya Kemal Colleges for over 20 years. Despite all the pressure Turkey has applied and the efforts the Maarif Foundation has expended, they have managed only to displace the general headquarters of these schools in Skopje and established five different individual schools.



Illustration 1



Illustration 2

**Illustration 1 and 2:** The Maarif Foundation took over Yahya Kemal School's head office in Skopje. The photos were taken by the author in April 2017 and in January 2019.

Apart from North Macedonia, the Foundation has started to build and/or take over some of the international schools in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Even though it tried to open schools in Bulgaria and Slovenia, the local political elites did not permit the activities of the foundation. In Montenegro, the negotiation process on school establishment is still ongoing between Turkish authorities and local political actors.

**Table 5** The Maarif Foundation Activities in Southeast Europe

<b>Albania</b>	Four schools that offer primary and secondary education and one university operating under the name of International Maarif Schools. These education networks were purchased by International New York Tirana Education Association in mid-2018.
<b>Bosnia</b>	Four schools that offer primary and secondary education, including one nursery under the name of Maarif Schools of Sarajevo. These schools opened their doors in September 2018.
<b>Kosovo</b>	International Maarif Schools of Kosovo has been active in Prizren with its seven different schools since September 2017.
<b>North Macedonia</b>	In September 2018, Maarif International Schools started their activities in Tetova. In total, there are five different schools in one city including one nursery.

The changing policies and priorities of Turkey have caused its transnational apparatuses to transgress their boundaries as soft power tools. The most striking institution in this regard has been *Diyanet*, which is the most established in Western and Southeast Europe. On 1 April 2017, Germany launched an investigation into *Diyanet*. Prosecutors explored the possibility that some *Diyanet* imams in Germany had spied on members of the Gülen Movement. Germany was not an exception; Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia were included in the activities of *Diyanet*, as well as other Southeast European countries.<sup>3</sup> The transgression committed by *Diyanet*, which as an institution is expected to keep Wahhabi and Salafist Islam away from the continent of Europe, started to shadow its credibility as well as the reliability of Turkey (Öztürk, 2018, pp. 229-234). An employee of *Diyanet* was deported in 2017 with the accusation of meddling in the domestic politics of Bulgaria. Similarly, Uğur

<https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turkiye-maarif-vakfi-yonetim-kurulu-baskani-zorlu-balkanlar-maarif-vakfi-icin-ozel-oneme-sahip/836142>, last accessed 22 May 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Does Turkey use 'spying imams' to assert its powers abroad? by Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *The Conversation*, 15 April 2017;



Emiroğlu<sup>4</sup>, who was working as a social services attaché in the Turkish embassy of Bourgas, and Adem Yerinde, the former coordinator of Turkish *Diyanet* Foundation in Bulgaria, were deported with comparable accusations. The cases of deportation damaged the reputation of Turkey and *Diyanet*.

Another negativity concerns the relations that TİKA and Yunus Emre Institute established in the region. Although both these institutions work with Muslims and non-Muslims and run joint projects with various communities, the overwhelming perception in the region stipulates that they work exclusively with Muslims. One of the underlying reasons for this misperception is the increasing employment of religious elements in the discourses and activities of Turkish officials. Another reason is the AKP's enthusiasm to position various Islamic groups in the region to undermine the Gülen Movement in the sectors of education, health, culture and economic cooperation. The increasing visibility of Islamic communities, such as *Nurcu* and *Süleymanci* groups, creates the image that Turkey only focuses on Muslims since 2016.

Despite all the current concerns, no country in Southeast Europe has cut off relations with Turkey's transnational state apparatuses completely. The main reason is the more pressing concern about the possible invasion of Arabic Islam in the case of Turkey's complete withdrawal. All in all, Turkey still has a normative and positive influence on the Muslim and Turkish-speaking communities of the region. The overall deterioration of Turkish democracy, export of domestic problems to the region, distance from the EU, excessive instrumentalisation of religion and intervention into the domestic affairs of Southeast European countries make it almost impossible to define Turkey as a soft power. Yet, with all its contributions in religious, cultural and economic fields and the financial aid that it provides, Turkey seems to

be fulfilling the minimum requirements of a soft power, which justifies calling it an ambivalent actor.

## Conclusion and policy recommendations

After all these discussions, the questions that remain are, first, whether Turkey has been a foreign policy actor that carries the features of soft power? And second, whether it is possible to define Turkey as a soft power in its historical trajectory? Most researchers focus on the functioning of transnational apparatuses and the discourses that Turkish leaders employ and underplay the factors put forward by Joseph Nye.<sup>5</sup> Nye is clear about the issue: a country's capacity for soft power depends on its technological and information capabilities, the attractiveness of its culture, the success of its economic model, the quality of human and social capital and respect for democratic values. With its fragile economy, less-than-proactive foreign policy, deficits in technological capacity and excessive utilisation of ethno-religious values, Turkey's overall soft power capacity has certainly deteriorated.

It is obvious that Turkey has been passing another domestic transformation period and has been creating new policy preferences to Southeast Europe countries without considering their different characteristics, different demographical structures and historical relations with the Ottoman state.<sup>6</sup> Beyond that, within these new policy preferences, Turkey has been instrumentalising religion more than in previous times via its transnational apparatuses. This new-born religion-based policy of Turkey, it seems, cannot simply be regarded as an element of soft power. It creates, however, different effects on different actors in the region: some groups (mostly Muslims) are rather happy with Turkey's religiously fuelled approach, while some others are seriously concerned. This reason is one of the points why I prefer to define Turkey as an ambiguous actor which has not been instrumentalising its soft power resources efficiently. Even though one might argue that Turkey's new-born religion-based

<https://theconversation.com/does-turkey-use-spying-imams-to-assert-its-powers-abroad-75643>, last accessed 5 May 2019.

<sup>4</sup> The Turkish Diplomat, Consulate in Burgas, Declared Persona Non-grata, by an anonymous reporter, GuideBulgaria.com [http://news.guidebulgaria.com/a/10137/the\\_turkish\\_diplomat\\_consulate\\_in\\_burgas\\_declared\\_persona\\_non\\_grata\\_.htm](http://news.guidebulgaria.com/a/10137/the_turkish_diplomat_consulate_in_burgas_declared_persona_non_grata_.htm), last accessed 19 May 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See; A Muslim Counter-Hegemony?: Turkey's Soft Power Strategies and Islamophobia, by Sinem Adar and Halil İbrahim Yenigün, Jadaliyya; [http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38618/A-Muslim-Counter-Hegemony-Turkey%E2%80%99s-Soft-Power-Strategies-and-Islamophobia?fbclid=IwAR1uENrq5d2gGdxIRT-](http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38618/A-Muslim-Counter-Hegemony-Turkey%E2%80%99s-Soft-Power-Strategies-and-Islamophobia?fbclid=IwAR1uENrq5d2gGdxIRT-g7eIL6sNk4RbgCYwNJaVikwOrvU7SFC3OCtSn-7I)

[g7eIL6sNk4RbgCYwNJaVikwOrvU7SFC3OCtSn-7I](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332111111), last accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>6</sup> The region is usually divided into two parts as the Eastern and Western in academic studies and research. This division, however, seems less-than-convincing in this geography of frequent overlaps and transitions in ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural ways. However, the nation building processes that started in the early 1990s created independent political units that focus on differences, by the very nature of the period. Turkey does not take these differences into consideration in its policies— an approach which seems to be the result of Turkey's historical role in the region, which meant that it saw the region as a whole. domestic previously, to Southeast powernational apparatuses.th in these tures and in creating a new policy preferences to Southeast



policy and new activities could be defined into the territories of the concept of public diplomacy and/or soft power, this policy preference is multifaceted and has great many problematic points, such as exportation of domestic conflicts, which are far beyond to be defined as any kind of positive policy methodology, such as soft power.

Furthermore, it seems that the religion-based transformation that Turkey is going through has created different results in different countries and on different actors. The impact of Turkey's policy changes on Southeast European countries varied depending on their internal dynamics, international positions, economic development levels and demographic structures. Bulgaria, for example, as a member state of the EU, does not permit any foreign organisation other than Diyanet and tries to limit Turkey's influence over its Turkish minority through *Diyanet*. The policies that Turkey defines as soft power do not get the same reaction from all groups and actors. As another example, North Macedonia, with its relatively weak economy and assumed dependence on Turkey, opens more space for Turkey's religion-oriented policies, with reluctant acceptance. The Muslim elite of North Macedonia uses Turkish influence as a source of justification for their policies. The non-Muslim elite, however, is seriously concerned about the Islam-based intervention of a third country. Albania, for instance, exhibits a totally different situation. The AKP can reach only some minor relatively small groups and disturbs both majorities of the Muslim and non-Muslim elites. All the Southeast Europe countries, however, present a common behaviour of avoiding confrontation with Turkey, mostly because of the investments that accompany the penetration and hegemony building policies of the AKP.

A comprehensive analysis of the Southeast Europe policies of Turkey indicates that the new elite in Ankara tends to believe that Southeast Europe imaginary in the Turkish capital is shared by the countries and groups at the local level. This imaginary and the strategies that follow are not unrelated to the transformation that Turkey has been going through. Turkey is building its new approach on the Ottoman legacy in a selective manner and sees some Muslims in the region as *more Ottoman* than others and makes them its natural and historical interlocutors.

Therefore, Turkey does not hesitate to intervene in domestic politics, creating a permanent influence through the elements of culture, language, religion and economics. To claim that Turkey's new policies are totally ineffective would contradict the findings of my personal field-work and readings. However, the effect is polarised. On the whole, Turkey has a Southeast Europe imaginary rather than a well-calculated and internally consistent Balkan policy. This imaginary magnifies policymakers' perceptions of Turkey's influence in the region, and they believe most Muslims in the region see Turkey as a guardian. The much-opposed concept of *clash of civilisations* put forward by Ahmet Davutoğlu and other, minor architects of Turkish foreign policy seems to be internalised in an extreme paradox. Whether this is a historical illusion or a hidden potential has yet to be seen. Another shortcoming of this imaginary is that it downgrades the other actors in the region, including Austria, Russia, Germany, and United States.

Under these circumstances, Turkey still deserves to be called an *ambivalent soft power* in this region. It also still provides financial and economic aid to these economies. Yet, in terms of economic power, Turkey cannot be compared with the EU, Russia, and China.<sup>7</sup> While these entities invest in the manufacture, Turkey invests in the banking sector and GSM services through companies that are close to the AKP government – or we may say to President Erdoğan.<sup>8</sup> With its scholarship and exchange programmes Turkey attracts students, yet its overall performance in education and the relatively lower success rate of its universities render these programmes less than successful. Turkey is an academic destination for the study of theology.

Furthermore, it is the most important country for the Muslims of the region; yet Turkey violates the criteria of soft power with its open propaganda. It utilises religion excessively, which serves only to hinder its influence in the region. Exportation of the conflict that the AKP has with the Gülen Movement, and the rather tense relations that it has developed with the EU and the US, qualify Turkey as a soft power that does not use its soft power capacity effectively.

Yet, Turkey can still increase its capacity. In order to do so, it should acknowledge that it cannot be a

<sup>7</sup> From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans, by Aslı Aydıntaşbaş, European Council on Foreign Relations; [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from\\_myth\\_to\\_reality\\_how\\_to\\_understand\\_turkeys\\_role\\_in\\_the\\_western\\_balkans](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans), last accessed 7 May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> A prominent example to this is Çalık Holding, which has close ties with the AKP. The Holding acquired Banka Kombetare Tregtare that operates in Albania and Kosovo and runs ALB Telecom, which is one of the oldest landline operators in Albania.

fundamental alternative for the countries of the region that aspire to be members of the EU. It should increase its democratic credentials and strengthen the constitutional institutions, and thereby boost the EU process. It should declare that it will not use its religious influence to provide guardianship for Muslims in a hegemonic way. On the contrary, it should promote religious freedom and peaceful coexistence both domestically and in the region. Supporting a specific religious group would harm a region that has suffered greatly from religious divisions and conflicts. Bringing its secular culture to the fore would differentiate Turkey from Wahhabi and Salafist powers that are also trying to exercise influence on the region. Turkey should also be careful in its emphasis on the common Ottoman heritage with the countries of the region because this does not necessarily imply a peaceful and harmonious past, as envisaged by the AKP elite. Lastly, as noted previously, Turkey should not view the region as a single entity and should avoid implementing wholesale policies for the region. Rather, it should tailor specific policies for each country considering the sensitivity of historical, cultural, sociological and political dynamics in each context.

## Political Influence in Southeast Europe in Current Turkish Foreign Policy

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**Abstract:** The gradual weakening of the EU and US presence in the Balkans in recent years has created a power vacuum, which was used by other foreign actors to establish, or re-establish their appearances and influences in the volatile region. Turkey was one of those countries, which used its historical links with the region - especially with its Muslim population - to (re)establish itself as an important actor and power broker. Today, Turkey is perceived by Bosniaks and other Muslims in the Balkans in the way how Russia is perceived by Serbs and other Orthodox Christians in the region, that is a historic friend and important ally at the times of rising global tensions and uncertainty. Unlike Russia - which is almost exclusively linked with selected top Serb leaders - Turkey has from the very beginning established a much broader group of contacts in the region, which as of recently even includes top Serbian officials. Unlike Russia, Turkey has over the past two decades, expanded its operations in the Balkans to include numerous business, cultural, educational, academic and religious programs and projects. Yet just like Russia, all these Turkish efforts are made in this way to corroborate and strengthen Turkey's regional and global political presence. This background paper provides a brief historical overview of the main phases of Turkish domestic and corresponding foreign policies in the region, as well as basic details of Turkish relations with and operations in key Balkan countries.

### Turkish domestic and foreign policy through modern history

The Balkan region has always been at the very centre of Turkish foreign policy agenda - from the days of the Ottoman Empire until today's modern Turkish republic. In fact, the Ottoman Empire itself was originally established as a Balkan rather than Middle Eastern empire. Turkey kept its Balkan identity until it finally lost control over the region after the Balkan Wars (1912-13) when it finally retreated from the gates of Vienna amidst constant clashes with European powers and rebellions in Balkan nations.

Yet even after losing control over the region to the Balkan nations, the Ottoman Empire and later the Republic of Turkey always kept the Balkans in the focus of its attention. Turkey's continued strategic interest in the region was based on the relations with the Muslim population in the Balkans; massive migration waves from the Balkans into Asia Minor and Thrace which shaped the republic's demography; and the general understanding that the Balkans was Turkey's natural hinterland. Furthermore, close relations between Turkey and the Balkans also benefited from the fact that throughout the past few centuries, a major part of Turkey's political, military and academic elite originated from the Balkans and never forgot their homeland.

Among hundreds of thousands if not millions of Turks who trace their origins back to the Balkans was also Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, famous military commander, revolutionary statesman, author, and founder of the Republic of Turkey who also served as its first President from 1923. Atatürk, who was born in Thessaloniki, now in Greece, to parents originally from today's North Macedonia, established a foreign policy which treated countries in the region as equal partners. This approach was also reflected in the Balkan Entente which was signed in 1934 by Turkey, Greece, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and Romania, in which the signatories - amidst growing ethnic tensions following the end of the World War I - agreed to suspend all disputed territorial claims against each other and their immediate neighbours.

Turkey followed the same principle during the World War II and never followed a revisionist or pragmatist policy, despite loud objections at home and abroad which tried pushing Turkey into the war on one or the other side. Turkey's military neutrality was rewarded after World War II. As the West declared Soviet Russia as the next great threat, Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and became a reliable and indispensable Western ally both in the Middle East and the Balkans. The Balkan Pact, which was signed in 1953 by Greece, Yugoslavia and Turkey against a common Soviet threat, is a result of this policy.

### Turkey re-enters Balkan politics in the 1990s

At the end of the Cold war, Turkey rediscovered its foreign policy potential. During the rule of President Turgut Ozal, who turned the Turkish economy into an open-market economy, Turkey started building its relations with post-Soviet Turkic Republics, the Middle East and newly formed countries established after the breakup of former Yugoslavia.

Ozal also laid the foundations for many Turkish institutions which today play an important role in Turkey's foreign policy, such as Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and Turkish Radio and Television's (TRT) services in other languages. These were the times when the US introduced 'the Green Belt Project' which used Turkey to counter Soviet influence among Muslim nations.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and subsequent bloodshed in the 1990s gave Turkey an excellent opportunity to strengthen its role as a regional actor. Turkey took part in various negotiations and often played the role of a mediator or facilitator between Balkan Muslims and the West. At the most difficult times, Turkey also provided significant political and financial support for Muslims (Bosniaks), especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), but also in Kosovo, Serbia, Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, which Muslims in these countries remember and cherish even today. At the time, conflicts - first in BiH and later in Kosovo - also became very important topics in Turkish domestic politics, as the governments for the first time started feeling pressure from the local public urging them to assume an even more pro-active role in the Balkans.

In late 1990's and early 2000s Turkey sought to establish an even stronger role in the Balkan region, but realistically did not have the capacity for that mainly due to its own political and economic crises at that time. However, Turkey's political elite drew many lessons from local, regional and global developments from that period, some of which were used by young and ambitious politician Recep Tayyip Erdogan in his quest to become the new Turkish leader and to rebuild his country as a leading political, economic and military power in the region.

**Erdogan's early years dominated by pro-Western agenda.** Erdogan and his associates had left the political Islamist National Outlook tradition led by Necmettin Erbakan and established their own Justice

and Development Party (AKP) in 2001, from which many expected to address the country's political and economic crisis at the time. The party's programme was pro-Western and pro-EU and proposed a highly liberal economic model which was supported by many local and international circles. Already one year after its establishment, the AKP came out as the single strongest party in Turkish elections in 2002. In the subsequent years, Turkey drew closer to the EU and implemented necessary constitutional, economic and social reforms required by the EU and IMF. The AKP also minimised the traditionally strong influence of Turkey's military elite in politics and established a greater political and societal consensus in the country. Erdogan government's efforts were rewarded by EU candidate status in 2004 and Turkey started accession talks in 2005.

In this period Turkey joined NATO-led peacekeeping missions in BiH and Kosovo, and actively supported Balkan's Euro-Atlantic integration. Furthermore, Erdogan carefully avoided to act as a protector of Muslims in the region but operated as a part of EU and NATO family. Despite its never-ending interest in the Balkans, Turkey's understanding of this region was at that time still relatively limited, so Turkish political, intellectual and religious officials used this time to learn more about local dynamics, meeting local actors and groups and to discover the region's potentials.

At this time, Erdogan still cooperated closely with the Turkish preacher Fethullah Gulen, who has been living in self-imposed exile in the US since 1999, and his supporters. Gulen schools, which were already active in the region since the 1990s, eventually became renowned as some of the most prestigious schools and as such became the preferred choice for the children of local leaders, intellectuals and diplomats.

### Davutoglu designs new Turkish foreign policy

The foundations of the new Turkish foreign policy for the 21st century were established by academic-turned-politician Ahmet Davutoglu<sup>1</sup>, whose ideas were aiming to give Turkey a larger role in its periphery with a particular interest in the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle East and Central Asia. This approach was built on Turkish historical links with the region from the times of Ottoman and Seljuk Empires. Contrary to the previous period in which Turkish foreign policy was almost completely integrated into the Western policies, Davutoglu's plan presumed close cooperation

<sup>1</sup> After serving as Erdogan's chief foreign policy advisor, Davutoglu was appointed Turkish foreign minister in 2009. He outlined his

foreign policy ideas in his book, "Strategic Depth", which has been translated into most Balkan languages.

with EU and NATO countries, but still established Turkey's own foreign affairs.

This new foreign policy also relied on a so-called 'soft power' approach, which the government used across the region utilizing various institutions, including; Turkish aid agency [TIKA]; Turkish cultural centres [Yunus Emre Institutes]; Turkish universities [International University of Sarajevo, University of New York Tirana, International Balkan University in Skopje]; Turkish Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB); media outlets broadcasting in regional languages including Anadolu Agency and TRT; as well as the Turkish Religious Authority [the Diyanet].

In this period, more and more Turkish people started coming to the Balkans, for education or establishing business links with local companies and markets. Meanwhile, Balkan people were watching Turkish soap operas, choosing Turkey or Turkish institutions in the region for their education, learning the Turkish language in Yunus Emre Institutes and enjoying Turkey's historical and coastal cities during their holidays. Only in 2015, when Turkey's engagement in the Balkans was at its peak, nearly 2.5 million Balkan citizens visited Turkey.<sup>2</sup> This socialisation established closer links between the Balkan's and Turkey's societies, which was later used for further strengthening of the Turkey's presence in the region.

In this period, Turkey also strengthened its political presence and activities in the Balkans. As relations among BiH, Croatia and Serbia grew increasingly tense, it was Erdogan who launched a series of meetings with Balkan leaders aimed at normalization of relations in the region. Ankara also played a mediator role between local governments and their Muslim communities which can be seen in Montenegro, Serbia and North Macedonia. As a result of this involvement, Turkey's mediating role between Montenegro's government and its Islamic Community was recognized and officially built into the Montenegrin constitution.<sup>3</sup>

Turkey's proactive policies were welcomed by Balkan Muslims, by Bosniaks in particular and to a lesser degree by Albanians. However, these policies were also met with growing concerns and criticism from some local and international experts who accused Erdogan of trying to become a 'new Sultan' and introduce a 'Neo-Ottoman' state.

However, Turkey's presence in South-Eastern Europe was not limited to the Balkans alone. It included other initiatives such as Turkey-led Black Sea Cooperation, which aimed to improve relations between countries in the greater Black Sea basin, while Turkey also played an active role in the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC). Turkey's efforts in the region were at the time widely recognized in the region but also the international arena.

### **Turkey after 2013: from democracy to hegemony**

Turkey's internal politics started shifting as of 2013, as the Erdogan government started applying more conservative and Islamist policies in the country. Erdogan faced his first serious domestic challenge when a wave of protests swept through the country in May that year. Protests were sparked by the violent eviction of a group of demonstrators who were contesting a new urban development plan for Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park. The outrage over this violence was further fuelled by other burning issues, such as freedom of the press, of expression, assembly, and the government's encroachment on Turkey's secularism. At the end of the protests, it was estimated that some three and a half million people (out of Turkey's population of 80 million) had taken an active part in almost 5,000 demonstrations across Turkey. Twelve civilians and one police officer were killed, and more than 8,000 were injured in the process. Use of excessive violence against demonstrators was met with harsh criticism from both Turkish society and the West. As it will later show, this was the beginning of the demise of the current Turkish political model, which also effectively blocked Turkey's EU path.

At the same time, Erdogan was having more and more problems with his former ally Gulen whose supporters had over the years taken senior positions in the state bureaucracy, and Erdogan seemed to fear that they could even jeopardise his position.

In subsequent years, Erdogan continued hardening his positions and policies, which escalated even further after the failed coup in July 2016, when he moved to take absolute control over his party and the government. Erdogan blamed Gulen and his movement for masterminding the coup attempt with their supporters within the military and state. However, Gulen denied any involvement and asked for an international commission to investigate the coup attempt. Days after the failed coup attempt, Erdogan declared a state of emergency and Turkey was from

<sup>2</sup>TURSAB: <https://www.tursab.org.tr/>

<sup>3</sup> Details are provided in the chapter about Turkish role in Montenegro, page 34.



then on ruled by Presidential decrees for more than two years. Erdogan's response to the alleged coup plotters - who were later dubbed 'Fethullahist Terrorist Organisation' or FETO - was without mercy. Erdogan's 36 presidential decrees fired more than 170,000 public servants from their offices including army and police officers, teachers, bureaucrats, doctors, academics and many others because of their alleged links with Gulen. During the process, 160,000 people were taken in custody, another 70,000 were arrested, and 155,000 people are being investigated or prosecuted because of their alleged links with terrorist organisations. Some 70 newspapers, 20 magazines, 34 radio stations, 30 publishing houses and 33 TV channels were also closed for the same reasons.<sup>4</sup> In the process, 50 journalists were arrested, making Turkey the country with the highest number of arrested journalists in the world. Thousands of schools, universities, associations and foundations were also closed. Several hundreds of companies were also closed or seized by the government. The 94 municipal mayors who were taken from their offices were mostly mayors from opposition parties, and several MPs were imprisoned. It is believed that millions of people were affected by the process. This repression has caused further divisions among Turks back at home and abroad.

Under the state of emergency, Turkey even had elections and a referendum which caused further criticism from the West and the local opposition. During the process, Erdogan turned Turkey's centuries-long parliamentary system into an executive presidential system, where the President has supreme powers with almost no checks and balances, in a controversial referendum held in April 2017, in which OSCE said 2.5 million votes might have been manipulated by Erdogan's government.<sup>5</sup>

On 24 June 2018, Erdogan was re-elected as President, but this time with new supreme powers<sup>6</sup> as approved by the referendum. Even though Erdogan succeeded in the elections, they forced the opposition parties to come together for the first time as they all agreed that working together was the only way to overthrow Erdogan's regime. The most recent local election on March 31, 2019, then became a major defeat for

Erdogan after the united opposition won in all of the biggest cities - including the largest Turkish city, Istanbul, the capital Ankara, and the industrial and tourist centres of Izmir, Antalya, Mersin and Adana. However, Erdogan and his coalition did not accept the defeat in Istanbul and claimed the existence of an organised fraud at the ballot boxes. Turkish Supreme Election Council (YSK) later reversed its decision and cancelled the elections in Istanbul. The verdict was read by the opposition and the West as Erdogan's maybe last step from his authoritarian rule to dictatorship.<sup>7</sup>

The ongoing political crisis has had a major impact on the country's economy, which has been giving alarm signals since the failed coup attempt in 2016. In as recently as 2018, the Turkish lira lost over 40 per cent of its value and dropped additional 20 per cent in 2019 until now. Following this drop, inflation and unemployment saw the worst numbers in decades with 25.2 per cent and 14.7 respectively.<sup>8</sup> Despite Turkish government's repeated attempts to halt this decline, many Turkish flagship companies were forced into bankruptcy, while many local and foreign investors left the country. Turkish Central Bank reserves melted from 125 billion dollars to 16 billion dollars only within the last two years, and for the first time after decades, the Turkish economy is today facing a risk of recession. Yet experts believe that the situation is even worse than the unreliable statistics suggests. Turkey's growing economic crisis is having a serious impact also on its foreign policy since the entire "soft power" approach abroad depended on Turkish economic might, its projects and investments.

### **Turkish foreign policy follows the radicalisation of its domestic affairs**

Rising authoritarian tendencies at home were also accompanied by the Turkish leader's hardening of positions in the country's foreign relations. In addition to Turkey's policy failures in Middle Eastern conflicts, its growing alienation with the West and more recent rapprochement with Russia, Turkey also gradually changed its positions in the Balkans, were from a friendly EU broker and trusted NATO team player it became a separate, self-centred actor, which often used nationalist and populist statements and moves to

<sup>4</sup> Figures are from Turkish Justice of Ministry.

<sup>5</sup> "2,5 milyon oy manipüle edilmiş olabilir." (2.5 million votes might have been manipulated) BBC Turkish April 18, 2017 <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-39628139>

<sup>6</sup> For more information about Turkish presidential system:

"Turkey's powerful new executive presidency" Reuters, June 22, 2018 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-election->

[factbox/turkeys-powerful-new-executive-presidency-idUSKBN1J1O1](https://factbox/turkeys-powerful-new-executive-presidency-idUSKBN1J1O1)

<sup>7</sup> "Erdogan obtains re-run of Istanbul election, opposition

denounces 'dictatorship'" Euroactive, May 7, 2019.

<https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/erdogan-obtains-re-run-of-istanbul-election-opposition-denounces-plain-dictatorship/>

<sup>8</sup> Data for Turkish Economy is from TurkStat.

establish itself as a leading regional - if not global - Muslim authority.

During his visit to Pristina in October 2013, Erdogan addressed the crowd at the main Pristina square, to whom he said; "Kosovo is Turkey, Turkey is Kosovo." Infuriated by this statement, Serbia withdrew from Turkey-led talks with BiH and Croatia. Even greater controversy and tensions were stirred by Davutoglu himself, who - while speaking at the opening of reconstructed Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka in May 2016 - stated that: "If a war happens again, Turkey will stand next to Bosniaks." Davutoglu made this statement after he had already resigned from the position of Turkish Premier. Erdogan forced this resignation unhappy with Davutoglu's growing role in foreign and domestic policies.

Turkey's new foreign policy - including the one in the Balkans - became very much personalised, pragmatist and short-term oriented, as it was based almost exclusively on Erdogan's own ideas, opinions and initiatives. As a result, in the eyes of many local, regional and international experts, Turkey for the first time became considered a spoiler in regional and global developments, just like Russia.

In this period Turkey's bilateral relations became even more dependent on personal relationships which Erdogan developed with leaders in the region like Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegovic, or Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci. But while these links - as well as a gradual weakening of the EU presence in the region - made Erdogan even more influential in the Balkans, they also increased ethnic fears among Serbs and some Croats, thus contributing to the growing ethnic tensions in the Balkans. In this period Erdogan also put up significant efforts to improve political and economic relations with Serbia and more specifically Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic. Some experts saw this as a result of a Turkey-Russia rapprochement and cautioned that Turkey and Russia could together have even greater influence in the Balkans than the simple sum of their individual - quite considerable - influences.

## **Erdogan builds his own support network across Europe and the Balkans**

Working through local Balkan leaders and their political parties was apparently still not enough for Erdogan, who subsequently started building his own power base in the region. He did that by announcing the opening of AKP party offices in Sarajevo and Skopje and establishing a lobbying organisation called the Union of European Balkan Democrats (UEBD) which is a sister institution to the Union of European Turkish Democrats (UETD). UETD later changed its name to the Union of International Democrats (UID)<sup>9</sup> and UEBD became its Sarajevo branch. While local AKP offices have still not been officially opened, it is believed that this will happen soon since the party made necessary arrangements.<sup>10</sup>

The UID aims to mobilise some of the 5.5 million Turks living in Europe. Their number increased rapidly since 2016, as many left the country to avoid prosecution, or simply escaped from Turkey's political and economic crisis.<sup>11</sup> Turkish ex-pats come from different political, ethnic and religious backgrounds and often bring their own divisions and tensions to the local communities which they move in. According to the Turkish foreign ministry, the number of Turkish citizens in the Balkan region alone has reached nearly 155,000 people, which amounts to a large city in the Balkans.

While some of the expats are stark critics of Erdogan, many are still strongly supporting him, believing in his pledge to build Turkey great again. Many of them are mobilised by the UID, but so far, it seems more for Erdogan's personal promotion rather than some other, more concrete benefit for Turkey and its people.

The UID office in Bosnia was established as a pilot project for other countries in the region. Its official purpose is to improve relations between Turkey and the host country. Members of this organisation in BiH are mostly local Muslims, who were educated either in Turkey on government scholarships, or in Turkish institutions in the region.

Furthermore, there is evidence that many Turkish graduates are opening their NGOs all over the globe, as part of a Turkish government project financed by the Directorate for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB).<sup>12</sup> Those NGOs are aiming to

<sup>9</sup> "The lobby behind Turkey's prime minister" Deutsche Well, May 21, 2014. <https://www.dw.com/en/the-lobby-behind-turkeys-prime-minister/a-17652516>

<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Turkish and Bosnian experts and politicians.

<sup>11</sup> "Diaspora Politics: Turkey's new Balkan Ambassadors" Balkan Insight, March 19, 2019.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/19/diaspora-politics-turkeys-new-balkan-ambassadors/>

<sup>12</sup> For detailed information please check Turkey Graduates' website: <https://www.turkiyemezunlari.gov.tr>

connect all of Turkey's graduates - many of whom now hold high positions in their local communities - to help improve relations between Turkey and their country of origin. The Balkans are good areas for implementing this policy given the fact that it is now a home for tens of thousands of Turkish graduates. Most of them also still work at Turkish state or private institutions.

State-run media including Anadolu and TRT which have been operating for more than a decade in the region were also not enough since Erdogan sponsored local newspapers, media portals and magazines which boost Erdogan and his local proxies - such as STAV and Faktor media organisations in BiH.

After the alliance between Erdogan and Gulen broke apart, and especially after the Turkish government declared Gulen supporters a terrorist organisation<sup>13</sup>, Ankara moved to replace Gulen's educational institutions with a newly established Maarif Foundation wherever possible. The Foundation opened schools all over the Balkans including a university in Tirana. Just like UID, the human capital of these institutions comes from mainly Turcophile local Muslims who are expected to support and follow Erdogan's policies at home and abroad.

All these organisations and groups provide Erdogan with his thousands-strong own personal army in many Balkan and even European countries, which he can use to increase pressure on local politicians, but also to show his own strength, abroad as well as at home. He held one of these shows of strength at his election rally held in Sarajevo in May 2018, ahead of the critical presidential elections. The event which was hosted by UID after most European countries banned similar events, was used to increase pressure on Bosniak officials to dismiss or hand over local Gulenists, but also to display Erdogan's global and regional popularity back in Turkey.

However, Erdogan's supportive network in the Balkans is also - unknowingly or not - exporting Turkish internal problems into the region. The best example of this effect is Erdogan's continued struggle to apprehend, or at least remove from important positions, all Gulen supporters. The Gulen-Erdogan fight and local Muslims' division over this issue led to the dismissal of Faruk Suljevic, vice mayor of Novi Pazar from his office

in November 2018.<sup>14</sup> According to local officials, Suljevic was dismissed by his own SDP party - the largest political party representing Bosniaks in Serbia's Sandzak region - which eventually yielded under strong pressure from Erdogan. Suljevic was responsible for the city's international relations and was perceived to be very successful in his work, but he eventually had to leave as he was publicly perceived to be a Gulen sympathiser. Local people and politics in Sandzak were deeply divided over this issue.<sup>15</sup>

### **Turkey's current geostrategic (re)positioning confuses the Balkans**

Turkey's current geostrategic positioning is increasingly placing Balkan countries and leaders in odd situations. In parallel with the rising authoritarian rule at home, its growing political and economic crises and Turkey's rapprochement with Russia, Turkey's EU accession talks were stopped entirely. Relations between the EU and Turkey continue to worsen progressively on one side. The EU continues criticising Erdogan for undermining the democracy and the rule of law, while on the other hand Ankara continues putting pressure on EU countries to hand over Gulenists and other opposition names to Turkey. Erdogan's attempts to mobilise Turks residing in Europe and mostly in Germany, Belgium and Netherlands under the umbrella of AKP backed UID amid Turkey's referendum and elections, has also had a major negative impact on Turkey-EU relations. As a result, the European Parliament advised on March 2019 that the EU should suspend EU-Turkey talks. While the notion that Turkey may never become EU member, is being discussed both in Ankara and Brussels, but despite all this, some half of the Turkish people still support the country's EU membership despite the positions and behaviour of their ruling elites. The refugee crisis is one of the few areas in which the EU and Turkey still seem to be willing to cooperate - Turkey currently hosts nearly 5 million refugees and blocks them from moving to Europe. The EU-Turkey refugee deal, however, was never fully implemented because of the wrongdoings of both sides. Erdogan meanwhile continues using this issue as leverage against the EU and keeps threatening EU officials with opening the 'refugee floodgates'. This scenario would cause security, political and economic

<sup>13</sup> For more information about Turkish government's argumentation on Gulen and his movement check the website of a pro-government think-tank, SETA's series of publications: <https://www.setav.org/tag/feto-yapilanmasi/>

<sup>14</sup> "Pod pritiskom Turske, vlasti smijenila Faruka Suljevića zbog veza sa FETO organizacijom" (Under Turkey's pressure, Faruk Suljevic was

sacked because of his links with FETO organisation) Sandzak Press, October 6, 2018. <https://sandzakpress.net/pod-pritiskom-turske-vlast-smijenila-faruka-suljevica-zbog-veza-sa-feto-organizacijom>

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with local experts in Sandzak, October-November 2018

collapse of the Balkans even before the wave of migrants would reach EU borders.

Turkey's relations with the US have also reached an all-time low. US support for Kurdish militants in Northern Syria delivered a major blow to the relations between Turkey and the US, as Turkey considers the Kurdish statelet to be the greatest threat to its security and interest in the Middle East. In response, Turkey started increasingly siding with Russia and conducted several military operations against an alleged Syrian branch of its outlawed Kurdistan Workers' Party which has fought against Ankara for decades. In these operations, Turkish and American troops might have found themselves for the first time on opposing sides in the battlefield. Finally, Turkey's decision to purchase Russian s-400 missiles is a major problem for the US, which insists that a NATO member country cannot utilise a Russian high-tech missile system over fears that it could access NATO servers and networks. In response, the US threatens to halt delivery of F-35 fighter jets to Turkey and implied further economic and military sanctions.

In recent years, Turkey also hardened its position towards Syria and Egypt. Turkey's relations also soured with Gulf countries, except Qatar, which has also undermined Turkey's positions in the Middle East, the Gulf and the Eastern Mediterranean. All this contributed to the growing isolation of Turkey in the region and forced it to side even more with Russia. The Turkish Stream pipeline project and construction of a Russian nuclear plant in Mersin are also important motives in the relationship. At the same time, Russian-Turkish relations remain troubled in several areas where the two countries have different if not contrary positions on Syria, the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Turkey's shifting geostrategic positions are increasingly creating confusion and headache in the Balkans, where Turkey has been traditionally supporting Bosniak leaders, who are increasingly at odds with the Bosnian Serb leadership, which is openly supported by Russia. Growing tensions between ethnic groups in the Balkans may soon challenge relations between Russia and Turkey, but they also provide a unique opportunity for these two countries to jointly work out some of the Balkan problems, where both EU and US failed over the past two decades.

## The Turkish presence in Southeast Europe – country cases

### Albania

Albania is one of the Balkan countries which attracts significant attention from Turkey. Relations between Albania and Turkey are based on shared culture, history and religion under centuries-long Ottoman rule, the political friendship of its leaders - Premier Edi Rama and President Erdogan - as well as Turkish economic investments in strategic areas. Turkey strongly supported Albania's NATO membership and still supports its EU integration process, despite its own bitter relations with the Union.

Turkey's investments in Albania are selective and strategically and politically calculated. They include ownership of the country's second largest BKT bank, hydropower plants, an iron smelting plant, as well as the former state-owned telecom operator Eagle Mobile. Turkish companies also constructed the Tirana-Pristina motorway which is being connected to Skopje. Air Albania - in which Turkish Airlines is a founder partner and owns 49 per cent of its share - also started operating in 2019. Turkish companies operating in Albania - including Calik, Limak and Cengiz - are very close to the Turkish government and Ankara guides the operational decisions of these companies.

As a part of Turkey's soft power approach, TIKA in Albania renovated and re-constructed several Ottoman-era monuments in Tirana, Berat, Shkodra and other cities. Yunus Emre Institutes operate in two cities: Tirana and Shkodra. Moreover, Turkish Religious Authority, Diyanet, is financing the construction of Tirana's new and largest mosque in the centre of the town.

However, Turkey's past demands for the extradition of Gulenists from Albania and closing of their institutions have had no definite answer from the government in Tirana so far. On the contrary, Gulenist institutions continue to operate without any problem. Albania even offered state-level protection to Muhammed Aydogmus, an alleged Gulen member, after he was detected with a fake passport on October 8, 2017 while on his way to Italy with his family in Albanian coastal town of Durrës.

Furthermore, Turkish officials - including foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu - repeatedly complained that Albania is one of the strongholds of Gulen

supporters in the region.<sup>16</sup> Erdogan's government claimed that Albania's Islamic community itself was under control of Gulenists.<sup>17</sup> The former head of Islamic Community in Albania, Grand Mufti Skender Brucaj was known as a Gulen sympathiser and Ankara pressured Albanian authorities to dismiss him but failed so far. In the latest elections for the new head of Islamic Community on March 2, after Brucaj's mandate has ended, another alleged Gulen sympathiser Bujar Spahiu was elected new Reis. Spahiu was elected although Ankara campaigned against him, and even threatened to halt several ongoing projects funded by Turkey, including the construction of the new main Tirana mosque. Turkish media and officials condemned election results and complained against Albania protecting Gulenists.<sup>18</sup>

This issue remains a soft belly in bilateral relations between Albania and Turkey, and Ankara may consider pushing Tirana even harder soon, presumably by using its strategic investments. A Turkish consortium including Cengiz, Kolin and Kalyon companies has already announced its withdrawal from Albania's second-largest airport project in Vlora.<sup>19</sup> The decision of withdrawal from a highly profitable project was indeed a surprise and cast doubts about the decision's political motivations which came after elections in the Islamic Community.

Despite all this pressure, the presence and status of Gulen supporters in Albania have not caused similarly deep divisions among the public and politicians like in some other Balkan countries. To the contrary, Turkey's attempts to get involved in Albania's internal affairs was met with anger from a significant part of society, who see Albania's liberal way of life and its European agenda more and more in conflict with Erdogan's authoritarian behaviour.

### Bosnia and Herzegovina

Turkey is for Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) what Russia is for Bosnian Serbs. After the Ottoman Empire ruled over the Balkans for some 500 years, Turkey kept close ties with the region, but especially with BiH and Bosniaks. Turkish presence decreased after World War II, yet it started steadily increasing during and after the breakup of former Yugoslavia and especially during

BiH's war. At that time Turkey - like many other Islamic countries - provided Bosniaks with political support and funds, which Bosniak leadership under Alija Izetbegovic mostly used to purchase weapons and ammunition.

Just like in the case of Russia, Turkey's engagement in BiH over the past decade was mostly political, but it was backed up with more diverse business and cultural activities. Just like Russia - and in contrary to EU activities in the region - Turkish business, cultural and religious presence in BiH is often established in the way to corroborate with and further enhance its political activities in the country. Just like Russian presence in BiH's Serb-dominated entity of Republika Srpska, Turkish influence in BiH is mostly built based on close personal, political and some say even business links between Erdogan and the leader of the main Bosniak Party of Democratic Action (SDA) Bakir Izetbegovic. But while Russia remains almost exclusively linked with RS and more specifically RS strongman Milorad Dodik, Turkey - after initially being connected exclusively with Bosniak leaders, or more specifically with the Izetbegovic family - in recent years put up special effort to strengthen relations also with Serbs, both in Republika Srpska and Serbia. Nevertheless, Erdogan's influence in BiH still relies mostly on its close personal links with Bosniak leaders, first with the late founder of SDA party, Alija Izetbegovic, and subsequently with his son Bakir and as of more recently, with the chairman of the state government, the Council of Ministers, Denis Zvizdic.

### Turkish cultural, academic, religious and economic imprint.

Turkish soft power approach in BiH, like in the rest of the region, incorporated Turkish cultural, academic, religious and economic efforts in a country. Yet while all these activities had their own, individual goal and purpose, they were also all carefully planned and executed in a way to corroborate with Turkish political efforts in the given country.

Turkish institutions and organisations which were involved in the 'soft power' approach - which in their number, financial and technical capacity overshadowed Russian academic and cultural institutions manifold - have had a huge impact on the

<sup>16</sup> "Albania is the centre of FETO" Sputnik Turkish, November 2, 2016. <https://tr.sputniknews.com/turkiye/201611021025594175-katar-doha-cavusoglu-gulen-iade/>

<sup>17</sup> "Përpëlitjet e fundit të FETO-s në Shqipëri" (FETO's latest summary in Albania). Anadolu Agency May 18, 2017. <https://www.aa.com.tr/sq/balkan/p%C3%ABrp%C3%ABlitjet-e-fundit-t%C3%AB-feto-s-n%C3%AB-shqip%C3%ABri-/821184>

<sup>18</sup> "Arnavutluk FETÖ'den birtürlü vazgeçemiyor." (Albania cannot give up on FETO) Türkiye, March 5, 2019.

<https://www.turkiyegazetesi.com.tr/dunya/608502.aspx>

<sup>19</sup> "Cengiz, Kolin and Kalyon Arnavutluk'taki projeden çekildi."

(Cengiz, Kolin and Kalyon withdraw from the project in Albania.)

Cumhuriyet. April 23, 2019

[http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ekonomi/1359507/Cengiz\\_Kolin\\_ve\\_Kalyon\\_sirketleri\\_Arnavutluk\\_taki\\_projeden\\_cekildi.html](http://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/haber/ekonomi/1359507/Cengiz_Kolin_ve_Kalyon_sirketleri_Arnavutluk_taki_projeden_cekildi.html)



Turkish cultural and academic presence in BiH. This influence was achieved through free Turkish language classes, frequent visits of top Turkish academics, and Turkish schools and universities which over the years provided free education for tens of thousands of Bosniak pupils, thus exposing them to Turkish culture, ideology, and politics.

As such, these institutions were probably one of the single most important vehicles for the gradual 'Turcization' of Bosniaks, maybe second only to the myriad of Turkish soap operas, which were provided for free by Turkish media and production companies to local TV stations. Thus this media entered most of the homes, exposing the local people to the Turkish way of life day for several hours every day.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, TIKa has renovated hundreds of mosques and other historic monuments in BiH, financed local projects and organised large events designed to reinforce and revive bonds with Turkey. Among the most prominent and visible projects was Turkish participation in the reconstruction of the famous Old Bridge in the southern city of Mostar,<sup>21</sup> the equally famous 16th century Mehmed Paša Sokolović bridge as well as the famous 16th-century Ferhadija mosque in Banja Luka.

Turkish cultural and academic presence in BiH suffered a major blow over the last two years, following the failed military coup against Erdogan's reign in Turkey in July 2016, and the subsequent repression which Erdogan unleashed against his political opponents and public critics. Erdogan's oppression against alleged Gulen supporters has confused and divided the Turkish community living and working in BiH, as well as many of their Bosniak friends and associates. Many purges in Turkish governmental, education, academic and cultural institutions in BiH affected the quality of their work, but also raised questions about the merits and morality of such moves among local Bosniaks, thus turning many of them away from Erdogan.<sup>22</sup>

The Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) as another instrument of Turkey's soft power has been regularly visiting its counterparts in BiH's Islamic Community and organising projects to support Bosniaks who were actively practising Islam.

As a part of its soft power approach, Turkey also relied strongly on its main state news agency, Anadolu, which has established its main regional office in Sarajevo and is broadcasting in local languages and providing free content to other local media. In its work, Anadolu relies on its popularity and frequent re-publications in the mainstream Bosniak media, especially those close to the SDA party. Through this cooperation with local media organisations, Anadolu agency contributed to the positive Turkish image among Bosniaks, not only as a 'trusted friend' of BiH<sup>23</sup> but also as a leader among the Muslim community in the world<sup>24</sup>.

Investments, trade and business deals have been a key part of Turkish influence in BiH. Over the years, most of the Turkish business efforts were focused on the areas populated predominately by Bosniaks. BiH's meat, milk and dairy-producing companies have also been benefiting from their preferential treatment in exporting their produce to Turkey, starting in 2012. According to BiH Foreign Trade Chamber, this export grew from 24 million euros in 2013 to 57 million in 2014, 110 million in 2015 and to 140 million in 2016.<sup>25</sup> However, while Turkey has indeed established itself as one of the key business partners for BiH, statistics in recent years show that levels of Turkish investments and trade exchange with Serbia and Croatia have surpassed Turkish business relations with BiH.

In line with this and despite many other business projects supported by TIKa development agency and Turkish Ziraat Bank in the past years<sup>26</sup>, Bosnia's Foreign Trade Chamber, for the past seven consecutive years registered a trade deficit with Turkey. Alone in the first four months of 2018, this

<sup>20</sup> Interview, Turkish expert, August 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Turkish TIKa participated with 1 million USD in the 15.5 million USD-worth project for the reconstruction of Mostar's 16th century old bridge and a part of the surrounding old town. The bridge was destroyed in shelling during the war in 1993 and was reconstructed in line with the original blueprints in 2004. The bridge was inscribed on the list of UNESCO's World Heritage sites in 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> "BIH Susret Bećirović – Koc: Turska je pouzdan prijatelj Bosne i Hercegovine" (BiH meeting between Bećirović and Koc: Turkey is a trusted friend of BiH), Anadolu agency text carried out by Fokus news portal on June 26, 2018. <https://www.fokus.ba/vijesti/bih/susret-becirovic-koc-turska-je-pouzdan-prijatelj-bosne-i-hercegovine/1149187/>

<sup>24</sup> "Erdogan: Muslimanin ećenikadapognutiglaveinikada se nećespustitinanivotirana" (Erdogan: Muslims will never bow their heads and will never get down to the level of a tyrant), Anadolu agency news report carried out by Faktor web portal on March 15, 2019. <https://www.faktor.ba/vijest/erdogan-muslimani-nece-nikada-pognuti-glave-i-nikada-se-nece-spustiti-na-nivo-tirana/23184>

<sup>25</sup> "AnalizavanjskotrgovinskerazmjeneBosne i Hercegovine" February 2017, ([http://www.mvteo.gov.ba/attachments/hr\\_analiza-vansjotrgovinske-razmjene-bosne-i-hercegovine-2016.pdf](http://www.mvteo.gov.ba/attachments/hr_analiza-vansjotrgovinske-razmjene-bosne-i-hercegovine-2016.pdf))

<sup>26</sup> "Turkey's 'Soft Power' Risks Backfiring in Balkans" Balkan Insight, February 26, 2016. (<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turkey-s-soft-power-risks-backfiring-in-balkans-02-25-2016>)

deficit stood at around 100 million euros.<sup>27</sup> Turkish position in BiH and Serbia could get even stronger if Erdogan delivers on some of his past promises, such as that Turkey will provide some 3 billion euros to finance the construction of the Sarajevo-Belgrade-Sarajevo highway and an additional 4.2 billion euros for the construction of a major ski resort on the Mount Vlasica in central Bosnia.

Nevertheless, these plans seem to be threatened by growing political and economic crisis in both countries.<sup>28</sup>

**Political links and leverage.** During and after BiH's war, Erdogan had established very close and personal links with the late Bosniak leader Alija Izetbegovic. Erdogan's personal approach to Turkish foreign policy became visible after Izetbegovic withdrew from politics in 2001 due to health reasons and especially after his death in 2003. Since then, Erdogan's presence in BiH became somewhat reduced since he never established the same personal relationship with Sulejman Tihic, who succeeded Alija Izetbegovic on the helm of the SDA party. Nevertheless, throughout this period, Turkey remained very much present in BiH through numerous business, cultural and academic programs and projects, but ties between the two countries became more dependent on institutional rather than personal relations.

Erdogan and his AKP party threw their full political and financial support behind Izetbegovic's 2014 bid to become the new leader of the SDA, and then again in the same year when he ran for the Bosniak position on Bosnia's presidency. Izetbegovic and SDA returned the favour, supporting Erdogan in the controversial 2017 referendum and snap elections in June 2018.<sup>29</sup> However, since the 2016 failed coup and subsequent repression against Erdogan's political opponents and critics in Turkey and abroad, Erdogan's regime faced growing criticism in BiH, especially among independent media and experts. Around the same time relations between Izetbegovic and Erdogan seemed to become somewhat colder on occasions, as Bosnian officials failed to close organisations which Turkish officials claimed to be associated with Gulen supporters.

As Erdogan's relations with the West grew sour and as he moved towards (re)establishing Turkey as a separate regional if not global power, Turkey started strengthening its ties with Serbia, which somewhat confused and frustrated Bosniaks. At the same time, as Izetbegovic faced increased criticism from his own party colleagues, Turkey established communication with several other senior Bosniak officials, which some analysts said was their search for possible Izetbegovic's replacement.<sup>30</sup> As the struggle for a new/old Bosniak leader is expected to intensify after Bosnia's October elections, Turkey and Erdogan could play an important role in that race.<sup>31</sup>

If Erdogan decides to get involved in the elections for the new-old SDA leader, which will be taking place at the SDA party congress scheduled for September 2019, this would further strengthen Erdogan's influence in BiH. At that congress, Izetbegovic will likely be challenged for the leadership position by Zvezdic, whose appetites to take over SDA's helm has been growing in recent years.<sup>32</sup> Over the past year, Erdogan has been steadily building his personal relationship with Zvezdic and many experts - as well as SDA officials - wonder whether Erdogan would support Izetbegovic, Zvezdic, or someone else in their bid for the SDA helm. Whoever gets Erdogan's support - if he chooses to offer one - will have a major advantage in the race but will also very much owe to Erdogan for his/her eventual victory.<sup>33</sup>

So far Erdogan was not acting as a spoiler in BiH politics, but the continued escalation of tensions between Turkey and the West, as well as Erdogan's continued rapprochement with the Kremlin, could create situations that would further destabilise the already difficult situation in BiH.

Besides its links with Bosniak leadership in recent years, Turkey has also been steadily building its own power base in BiH, including the establishment of a local branch of its ruling AKP party as well as groups of its supporters made of both residents and Turkish nationals many of whom attended some of the numerous Turkish academic institutions in the country and abroad. These groups - organised and managed directly by people from the local AKP branch office - have already been used in BiH in previous years for

<sup>27</sup> BiH Foreign Trade Chamber

<sup>28</sup> "Turkey-Bosnia 'Love Match' Fails to Sway Investors" Balkan Insight, June 5, 2018 <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/turkey-bosnia-love-match-fails-to-sway-investors-06-02-2018>

<sup>29</sup> Turkey indirectly financially and politically supported SDA's pre-election activities in the elections in 2014 as well as Izetbegovic's

own race for the re-election as SDA leader at party congress in 2015, interviews with Bosniak and Turkish officials, 2015-2017.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Turkish expert, September 2018,

<sup>31</sup> SDA party is expected to hold its congress, including internal elections for new/old party leader by the end of 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Bosniak officials, January - May 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid

staging of demonstrations in support of Erdogan as well as protests against Gulen and his supporters in BiH. Furthermore, according to different sources,<sup>34</sup> Turkey has in recent years also built up the presence of its secret police all over the region. Having in mind that Turkey has already used its secret service to carry out secret, illegal arrests and deportations of alleged Gulenists in several countries in the region, many Turkish nationals living in BiH fear similar situations could eventually happen in BiH as well.<sup>35</sup>

### Bulgaria

Bulgaria and Turkey had serious problems in their relations during and after the Cold War because of their positioning in different camps and also because of the large Turkish minority in Bulgaria and their forced deportation in 1989 and 1990 to Turkey. Turkey had to deal with 400,000 Turks to settle in the times of economic and political hardness, and the public's anger and negative opinion about Bulgaria remained for a long time. Economic and political relations suffered accordingly during the 1990s. Turks currently make up 8 per cent of Bulgaria's 7 million population and few hundred thousand of Bulgarian Turks are also living in Turkey.

Relations between the two countries started to come to life after Bulgaria joined the EU and after Erdogan came to power in Turkey. During the rule of the AKP, trade between Bulgaria and Turkey increased steadily, and the two countries became good trade partners. The annual trade volume in 2018 was nearly 4.4 billion euros - four times higher than in 2002.<sup>36</sup> More recently, with the sharp decrease of the Turkish lira, Bulgarians started coming to neighbouring Turkish cities for shopping, especially during weekends and holidays, which became a significant source of income for Turkey's weakening economy.

Bulgaria's Turks were caught between two fires in 2015 when Turkey shot down a Russian aeroplane in Syria. At that time, Davutoglu, who was PM at the time, forced the main Turkish party in Bulgaria, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms, to submit a declaration in favour of Turkey's action. After some resistance, Lutfi Mestan and his party board announced their support for Turkey's action. However, this favour came at steep price, both for party leadership and Turks' representation in Bulgaria. The old, pro-Russian party leadership expelled Mestan and his team from the party. Mestan and his followers later

established another party backed by Turkey named DOST, with the new party causing a division of Turkish votes in the elections. As a result of their internal divisions, Turkish parties were for the first time unable to take part in the coalition government after the last elections.

Subsequently, the Turkish government's attempt to interfere in the preparation of a new Bulgarian Law on the elections in the country's Islamic community also triggered some tension between Sofia and Ankara, but also between Ankara and Bulgaria's Turks.

Furthermore, Turkey's recent internal problems also affected Turkey's relations with Bulgarian Turks. Bulgaria's Turks generally favour secular and liberal ways of life and do not like Erdogan's increasingly Islamist and nationalist policies with a highly authoritarian style. It should be noted that ahead of the Turkish elections in 2018, while Erdogan chose Sarajevo to organise his rally for Diaspora Turks, his main opponent Muharrem Ince from the social democrat Republican People's Party (CHP) came to the Bulgarian city of Kardzhali where most of the residents are ethnic Turks. In the latest Turkish Presidential elections, out of nearly 60,000 Turkish citizens who live in Bulgaria, 60 per cent voted in favour of Ince while only 25 per cent of them voted for Erdogan.<sup>37</sup>

The existence of Gulenists in the country is another problem, but Turkey does not have any leverage against Sofia to force their expulsion. The existence of Gulenists in the country is another problem, but Turkey currently does not have any leverage against Sofia to force their expulsion. Sofia could not decide what to do at the beginning of Gulen-Erdogan war and it caused one Gulenist's extradition in 2016 who went to Bulgaria long before the failed coup attempt and also a very highly controversial deportation of seven alleged Gulenists who were captured at the Romanian border while they were attempting to enter Europe illegally. However, Sofia now seems to side with the EU on the issue amidst worsening EU-Turkey relations and the EU's serious warnings. Sofia is concerned over the large number of migrants who currently reside in Turkey, and fears that if Erdogan decides to open the door - as he several times threatened to do - Bulgaria would be first on their path. This way, the refugee crisis remains the soft belly of the relations, and Ankara can try to use it as leverage in this or any other case.

<sup>34</sup> Interviews with a leading Turkish expert, as well as a senior BiH government official February - September 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Data of Turkish Ministry for Trade.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

## Kosovo

Since Kosovo's independence in 2008, Turkey has been one of the most important actors in the country. Turkey was among the first to recognise Kosovo's independence and also served in its EULEX mission. With Turkish political, economic and cultural involvement, as well as its international support for Pristina, Kosovo is - after BiH - the second most important Turkish stronghold in the Balkans.

According to Turkey's foreign ministry, the country is the third biggest investor in Kosovo after the UK and Germany, reaching one billion euro in 2016.<sup>38</sup> The annual trade volume - which stands at 262 million euro in 2018<sup>39</sup> with Kosovo registered a high trade deficit - remains relatively low despite a free trade agreement that was signed in 2013. In recent years, Turkey made several major investments in strategic areas - focusing at the same time on political and economic impact. Turkish companies privatised the public national gas distribution company, while the construction of the main motorway, which will connect Kosovo with Albania and North Macedonia, is being built by Turkish companies. Furthermore, Turkish Limak company is managing the main part of the Pristina Airport.

Turkey's soft power institutions in the Balkans seem to be most active in Kosovo. Yunus Emre Institutes operate in three different Kosovo cities: Pristina, Prizren and Pec, while TIKa agency is involved in the construction and renovation projects including several mosques and other Ottoman monuments. Kosovo's 18,000-strong ethnic Turkish community in Kosovo is also actively participating in establishing closer links between Pristina and Ankara. In addition to ethnic Turks, some 300,000 other Kosovo residents are estimated to be speaking the Turkish language - a reminder of the 500-year long Turkish control over Kosovo.

Good relations between Kosovo and Turkey are underscored by close personal links between President Erdogan and Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci - apparently one of Erdogan's favourite politicians in the region. Thaci had established links with Turkey already during the war in Kosovo, which he then used in the post-war period when he became

one of the leading local politicians. In fact, Erdogan has been so far almost completely ignoring other Kosovo politicians, including PM Ramush Haradinaj, which often contributed to tension and divisions in local politics. This situation escalated in March 2018, when the Turkish secret service (MIT) illegally arrested six Gulenists and secretly brought them to Turkey, with the help of Kosovo's police and intelligence agency which were all considered close to Thaci. Later, PM Haradinaj dismissed the interior minister, the head of the police and the head of intelligence because they failed to inform him about this operation, but President Thaci rejected his decision and did not approve this move.<sup>40</sup> Later, a parliamentary investigation concluded that the arrest and deportation were carried out against Kosovo's laws.<sup>41</sup>

This episode left a mark on the relations between Pristina and Ankara. But even after this operation, Gulen schools continued to operate as they were for years viewed to be among the most prestigious schools in Kosovo, and therefore attracted pupils from Kosovo political, business and intellectual elite. Graduates, current students, their families and some residents of the city organised several rallies in Pristina protesting the illegal deportation. Nevertheless, some Gulen supporters have left the country because of a high-security threat and weak prospects in Kosovo. Since then, Erdogan continued putting pressure on Kosovo's leaders to extradite Gulenists and close their institutions, while Kosovo's community remains divided over the fight between Gulen and Erdogan.

Serbia-Turkey and Russia-Turkey rapprochement are also being closely observed by Pristina, even though Turkey still supports Kosovo's EU and NATO agendas. However, just like in BiH, Turkey's new geostrategic positioning is sending mixed signals to Kosovo.

## Montenegro

Influence of Turkey in Montenegro is not only based on its support to Montenegrin NATO and EU bids, but also on the fact that Turkey played an important mediator role in relations between the government and country's Muslims who make 25 per cent of the country population.

Turkey's soft power institutions and activities are significant, especially given Montenegro's small size.

<sup>38</sup> Turkish Foreign Ministry: [http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-kosovo\\_en.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-between-turkey-and-kosovo_en.mfa)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> "Kosovo Minister and Spy Chief Sacked Over Turkish Arrests" Balkan Insight, March 30, 2018. [https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/30/kosovo-intelligence-](https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/30/kosovo-intelligence-director-and-internal-minister-dismissed-over-turkish-arrested-men-03-30-2018/)

[director-and-internal-minister-dismissed-over-turkish-arrested-men-03-30-2018/](https://balkaninsight.com/2018/03/30/kosovo-intelligence-director-and-internal-minister-dismissed-over-turkish-arrested-men-03-30-2018/)

<sup>41</sup> "Kosovo 'Broke Law' When Deporting Turkish 'Gulenists'" Balkan Insight, February 5, 2019. <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/kosovo-broke-law-when-deporting-turkish-gulenists-02-05-2019/>

TIKA renovated several Ottoman monuments including Huseyin Pasa Mosque in Pljevlja and Ottoman watchtower and old town in Podgorica. Economic relations between the countries remain relatively limited, even though these numbers doubled in the last decade.

However, limited trade is more than compensated by the fact that Montenegro became the favourite destination for Turkish investments in recent years. This trend was not helped by the Turkish government, at least not directly. In fact, many Turkish businesspeople moved their businesses to Montenegro, while searching for a safe haven amidst Turkey's deepening political and economic crises. Montenegro's 2017 membership in NATO and expectations that it would swiftly also join the EU further contributed to the country's attraction. According to the Montenegrin Tax Administration, Turkey tops the list of countries whose firms are present in the country (2,162), ahead of even Russia and Serbia. Those companies work in different sectors including construction, tourism, entertainment, real estate and construction materials.<sup>42</sup> Turkish Ziraat Bank also entered Montenegrin Market in 2017 and now operates with few branches.

Sandzak region in the northern and north-eastern part of Montenegro is home for many Bosniaks as well as some Albanian Muslims, and as such is an important element in Turkey-Montenegro relations. Just like in the Serbian part of Sandzak - which is also mostly populated by Bosniaks - local populations share a strong affection towards Turkey and President Erdogan. Both Podgorica and Ankara found ways to use this in their favour. Podgorica agreed to have a significant representation of Muslims in its government and other state institutions, while in return local Muslims and Ankara supported the Montenegrin independence referendum in 2006, as well as Montenegro's lifelong leader President Milo Djukanovic. Furthermore, in January 2012 the Podgorica government officially recognised the Islamic community of Montenegro. On that day, the Islamic community and the Montenegrin government signed a protocol which ensures the protection of Muslim rights. According to the same protocol, the Turkish Religious Authority, Diyanet has been recognised as the mediator in any case of eventual disagreement between Montenegrin Islamic Community and

Podgorica Government. Montenegro's Islamic Community has very close relations with Ankara, and it enjoys the generous support of Ankara for projects including construction of schools, mosques and educational activities including Turkey-funded Sultan Fatih Mehmed Medresa which is a religious high school providing education in both Bosnian and Albanian languages. The head of the Montenegrin Islamic Community, Rifat Feyzic also studied in Turkey with a Turkish scholarship and speaks Turkish fluently and is publicly perceived as one of the strongest Erdogan allies in the country. Turkey-Montenegro relations are not troubled by the issue of Gulen supporters since they closed the few of their institutions that existed in Montenegro and reportedly left the country after the failed coup attempt in Turkey in 2016.<sup>43</sup>

Until now, Turkey's recent rapprochement with Russia did have no visible effects on Montenegro, but it sparks doubts about Turkey's role and position in the region. However, relations between Djukanovic's ruling coalition and Erdogan seem positive as long as Turkey supports Montenegro's EU agenda, Turkish investments continue, and local Bosniaks have good ties with Djukanovic. Montenegro prioritised EU membership and became a NATO member country. By this way, the country turned its back to Russia, Montenegro's historical ally.

### North Macedonia

Turkey has been one of the strongest supporters of North Macedonia, since its declaration of independence in the 1990s, and one of the first countries to recognise it. More recently, Turkey supported North Macedonia in its efforts to reach an agreement in the name dispute with Greece and supported the country's NATO and EU bids. This support was, of course, not only because of Turkey's alignment with the West but also because of Turkey's efforts to find new leverage against Greece, its historical rival in the region.

While the Turkish presence and influence in North Macedonia were on the surface not as pronounced as in BiH or Kosovo, it should still not be neglected. Over the past decade, North Macedonia became one of the countries which enjoyed Turkey's support and donations the most. According to Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar, 1,200 local military students

<sup>42</sup> "After Failed Coup, Turkish Business Booms in Montenegro" Balkan Insight, December 4, 2018. <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/04/after-failed-coup-turkish-business-booms-in-montenegro-11-27-2018/>

<sup>43</sup> Interviews with local experts in Podgorica and Sandzak October-November 2018



attended education in Turkish military schools and Macedonian army officers attended several training sessions in Turkey.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Turkey's export to North Macedonia increased more than three times from 106 million euro in 2002 to 337 million euro in 2018 and North Macedonia's export to Turkey increased nearly sixfold from 16 million euro in 2002 to 91 million euro in 2018. However, throughout this period, North Macedonia maintained a significant trade deficit.<sup>45</sup> The country also saw a number of Turkish investments in strategic areas, including Turkish Halk Bank's capital close to 100 million euro and has 41 branches all over the country, the Skopje-Pristina Motorway which is being constructed by a joint Turkish Betchel-ENKA venture, as well as Skopje International Airport, which has been managed by Turkish TAV. According to the latest figures, Turkish companies' investments in the country exceed one billion euros which equal 35 per cent of FDI in North Macedonia.<sup>46</sup>

Turkey's soft power institutions also actively work in North Macedonia. TIKA completed more than 900 projects in the country which includes several restorations and other projects in agriculture, education and religion.<sup>47</sup> TIKA's renovation projects of historical Ottoman Monuments include Murat Pasha Mosque in Skopje and Ottoman's aesthetic masterpiece Sarena Mosque in Tetovo.

Moreover, Yunus Emre Institute's Skopje branch also work actively. Anadolu Agency's Albanian and Macedonian language services headquartered in Skopje as well. Several other state institutions and Turkish NGOs and municipalities also actively work in North Macedonia. International Balkan University which was financed by Turkish funds also actively operate and takes attention of all Balkan students. Like in other Balkan countries, Turkish soft powers were officially provided for the entire country and its people, but effectively were mostly benefitting Muslims.

North Macedonia's large Albanian and Turkish communities were always in the centre of Turkish attention, especially because of the country's geostrategic position, multi-ethnic structure, ethnic

tensions and its rows with Greece. All these elements made North Macedonia a perfect opportunity for Turkey to show itself as a leading protector of Muslims worldwide. In addition to satisfying its global appetites, the Turkish government also had to keep an eye on North Macedonia because of its strong and vocal diaspora in Turkey. Namely, North Macedonia experienced one of the last migration waves to Turkey during 1950s and 60s, and today there are still many Macedonia-born MPs, mayors, businessmen and academics in Turkey who have never lost connection with their fatherland.

Turkish President Erdogan's personal-style foreign policy approach did not miss North Macedonia, too. Over the past years, Erdogan kept warm relations with Macedonia's former PM and now fugitive Nikola Gruevski. For this reason, Turkey-North Macedonia relations soured when PM Zoran Zaev and its pro-Western coalition came to power. Turkey's selective policies not only caused attention in mainstream political parties but also in minority politics. It is claimed that BESA Movement, an ethnic Albanian political party established in 2014, was a result of Erdogan's Islamist policies and disagreements with mainstream Albanian parties in the country.<sup>48</sup> Although there is no clear evidence that BESA Movement has been financially supported by Erdogan, they kept close ties with him which contributed to the 5 per cent of total votes which they received in 2016 general elections. This small party holds enough leverage when it comes to certain and stormy topics in a multi-ethnic country which always requires coalitions for making decisions. In addition to this, North Macedonia's ethnic Turk representatives in the government and other state institutions include people who are known to be close to Erdogan's government such as Furkan Cako, currently a member of North Macedonia's National Security Council and a former state minister. It is believed that such people are appointed to senior position to appease Turkey and to avoid unnecessary pressure<sup>49</sup>.

However, years of Turkey's generous political and economic support to North Macedonia have been recently threatened after Ankara increased its

<sup>44</sup> "Hulusi Akar: Names of FETO leaders are shared with Macedonian institutions" Hurriyet April 3, 2019. <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/dunya/hulusi-akar-feto-elebaslarinin-isimleri-makedon-kurumlari-ile-paylasildi-41171220>

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> "Turkish investments reached to 1,2 billion dollars" Haberler, February 5, 2019. <https://www.haberler.com/turk-sirketlerinin-makedonya-daki-yatirimi-1-2-11710064-haberi/>

<sup>47</sup> "TIKA'nın Makedonya'daki projeleri 900'u aştı." (TIKA's projects reached over 900 in Macedonia) Anadolu Agency December 21, 2018. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/tikanin-makedonyadaki-projeleri-900u-asti/1344829>

<sup>48</sup> "Erdogan's trojan horse in FYROM (North Macedonia)" Ekathimerini, June 20, 2018.

<http://www.ekathimerini.com/229825/opinion/ekathimerini/comment/erdogans-trojan-horse-in-fyrom>

<sup>49</sup> Interviews with Turkish and Macedonian experts and politicians

demands for handing over Gulenists to Turkey and closing all Gulen related institutions in the country.<sup>50</sup> The Gulen Movement still actively operates in Macedonia with several schools, NGOs, a newspaper and a hospital, and this makes Ankara very uncomfortable. The latest visit of Turkish Defence Minister, Hulusi Akar to North Macedonia in April showed that Turkey might push Macedonia even harder to force it to get rid of its Gulenists. It should be noted that Turkey still did not ratify the NATO protocol for North Macedonia's membership, contrary to its previous swift and generous support to this idea. Erdogan's long arm in North Macedonia may also cause several political crises over Gulenist issues. Until now, government in Skopje resisted Turkey's call and underlined international standards and court decisions for extradition demands.<sup>51</sup> A possible secret service operation to take Gulenists from North Macedonia to Turkey - which has already happened in Kosovo and Moldova - would not be a surprise.

### Serbia

Contrary to the two countries' traumatic memories and wounded past, Turkish-Serbian relations improved rapidly in the most recent years alongside with the personal friendship between the two countries' presidents, Erdogan and Aleksandar Vucic. Only in 2017, Turkish President Erdogan visited Serbia three times, while the two countries aim to reach a two-billion-dollar annual trade volume in this or the next year.

Unlike most other Balkan countries, Turkish relations with Serbia are not based so much on shared history, culture and religion, as on mutual economic benefits and realpolitik. The two countries have very different views on regional and international issues, including Bosnia's ethnic power game and Kosovo's international status. Moreover, Turkey is a NATO member country which actively joined NATO's bombardment of Serbia in 1999. However, in recent years, Turkey and Serbia chose to focus on trade and other topics on which they can work together rather than ancient wounds and conflicting interests of both nations.

Serbia is now Turkey's largest trade partner in the Western Balkans. The two country's originally scarce trade relations boomed, especially after they signed a free trade agreement in 2009. In 2008, when Turkey and Serbia started to get closer, the annual trade

volume between the two countries was only 340 million euro, but in 2018 the annual exceeded one billion euros with a great prospect for future increases. It also should be noted that the increase in bilateral trade relations was much higher than among other countries in the region where Turkey has historically high engagements. In other words, this increase in trade relations was a product of joint political will and efforts.

Serbia is also a very attractive destination for many Turkish companies, especially because of many incentives which this country - unlike any other in the Balkans - offers to foreign investors. Serbia's relatively low bureaucracy, its proximity to European countries and more developed motorways and infrastructure are other reasons why Turkish companies choose Serbia. Lately, in October 2018, Turkey's textile giant Tay Group joint the trend of investing in Serbia. Tay Group will invest 35 million euro, and the textile factory will start operating in 2019, offering 2500 jobs for Serbian citizens.

Turkey's investments in strategic sectors include Turkish Halkbank's purchase of Serbian Cacanska Bank in 2015, as well as several Turkish companies which participate in the construction of a motorway in Serbia's Sandzak region between Novi Pazar and Priboj.

There is no doubt that the Turkey-Russia rapprochement has had a positive effect on Turkey-Serbia relations. It is not a surprise that Russia's old ally in the Balkans becomes Turkey's popular partner in recent years - at the time when Turkey and Russia get closer while Turkey's relations with the West sour. This closeness, however, offers more benefit to Serbia than Turkey or its historic allies such as Muslim Bosniaks and Albanians. Most of the experts say that rapprochement between Serbia and Turkey has led to Turkish decreased visibility and involvement in the Kosovo issue. Even during the recent debates about ideas for a land swap deal between Serbia and Kosovo, Ankara remained almost completely silent.

According to many observers, this was also a result of Turkey's rapprochement with Russia and its desire not to harm its relations with its new partners. Russian influence apparently inspired Turkey to start changing some of its years-long positions on BiH as well. For two decades, Turkey was a great supporter of the Dayton Peace Accords and the political system which was

<sup>50</sup> ibid

<sup>51</sup> "North Macedonia Weighs Turkish Demand to Extradite Suspects" Balkan Insight, April 10, 2019.

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/04/10/north-macedonia-weighs-turkish-demand-to-extradite-suspects/>

created in Dayton, despite the general awareness that this was far from a perfect solution. However, speaking at a press conference in January this year, President Erdogan said that the Dayton system should be revised without stating an alternative or a plan for a better deal. This suggestion delivered another painful blow to Bosniak elites, while some experts accused Erdogan of opening BiH's Pandora's box. This statement indicated that Turkey has been changing its positions in the Balkans and that its views on BiH may have been moving closer to Russia's than to the US or EU ones.

Erdogan's calls for the closing of Gulen institutions was in recent years heeded the most in Serbia. While Serbia did not officially close Gulen schools or language courses, but many of them decided to suspend their operations because of frequent state monitoring, pressure from financial inspections and educational ministries. Many of them reportedly left the country to Europe to avoid further consequences of the Vucic-Erdogan friendship. While Vucic's government so far did not extradite any Gulenists to Turkey, in March this year they extradited Cevdet Ayaz - a Kurdish rights activist and politician whom Ankara considers a member of a terrorist organisation. Vucic authorised the extradition against numerous calls from local and international organisations and human rights groups, in an apparent attempt to appease Erdogan.

Last but not least, the Sandzak region in south-western Serbia, which is populated mostly by Bosniaks, is another important element in Turkey-Serbia relations. Even though the region and its Muslims were used as a tool to improve relations between two countries in recent years, it could easily become an area of conflict of interests. Turkey and its President Erdogan are beloved by most people in Sandzak, while Turkey is a second home for most of them because of the mass migration waves to Turkey [in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries] and prominent Ottoman heritage in the region.

However, this love failed to bring prosperity to Sandzak, while most Turkish investments remained focused on Central Serbia. Turkey's donations and aid are also not significant when they get compared with other sub-regions and countries in the Balkans. However, this might change soon since several agreements for renovation projects of Ottoman monuments, schools and roads in Novi Pazar were signed in 2017. On the other hand, the transportation

which is the region's biggest problem is aimed to be solved by a Turkish project which will connect Novi Pazar and Priboj. Later, this motorway would also be connected to Sarajevo-Belgrade Motorway. Turkey's involvement in Sandzak politics is also very important and selective as usual. Ankara backed Democratic Action Party in Sandzak (SDA Sandzak) for many years, while Ankara more recently decided to support Rasim Ljajic who is the president of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and also a minister in the Serbian government.

The role of Bosniak politicians in Turkey-Serbia relations was mostly constructive, but it might change easily. In the last elections of the National Bosniak Council in 2018, Turkey and Serbia were at different sides. Former Mufti Muamer Zukorlic – who is one of the most influential Bosniak figures in Serbia – was supported by Belgrade, but Turkey supported Sulejman Ugljanin who is the president of SDA Sandzak and in coalition with the SDP. The elections were tight and even some fistfights occurred, but Zukorlic lost. It also should be noted that as result of Erdogan's selective approach, Zukorlic decided not to be present at Erdogan's visit in 2017 as a local leader and he is now known to be supporting Gulenists in Novi Pazar.<sup>52</sup>

The representation of Islamic communities in Serbia is another issue on which Ankara and Belgrade do not want to focus. There are currently two Muslim councils in the country, and they are often conflicting to share the authority over mosques and other Islamic facilities. One of the councils was backed by Belgrade, but the other was widely accepted by local Muslims and Turkey.

## Conclusion

Throughout history, as well as more recently, Turkish presence in the Balkans was built mostly on Turkish links with Balkan Muslims, especially Bosniaks but also Albanians.

For this reason, **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)** was always in the centre of Turkey's new Balkan policies. BiH was often chosen as the pilot for many Turkish Balkan projects and most of Turkish institutions, agencies and companies - including development, cultural and media organisations, universities but even lobbying organisations and political parties - established their local or also regional offices in

<sup>52</sup> Interviews with local and regional experts and people, October-November 2018.

Sarajevo. Special links between Turkey and BiH were reflected and underscored through close links between Turkey's president Erdogan and Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegovic, who remains one of the closest and strongest allies of Erdogan in the region. This relationship also meant that BiH was one of the countries in the region where Erdogan and Turkey enjoyed most popularity, support as well as political influence. Nevertheless, over the past decades BiH also became a home for several organisations close to Fethullah Gulen - who came to the region before but especially during the Turkish "soft power" approach. Because of BiH's decentralised administrative structure, Bosniak politicians were unable to heed Erdogan's requests to close down these organisations and to extradite Gulenists to Turkey, which has affected relations between Turkish and Bosniak leaders. Furthermore, the Erdogan-Gulen struggle as well as more recent Turkish government's clampdown against its critics has also very much confused and divided Muslims in BiH like in the rest of the Balkans.

After BiH, Turkey's influence is strongest and most visible in **Kosovo**. Turkey's support to Kosovo never stopped since Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Turkey was among the first countries to recognise independent Kosovo, and its political engagement there was followed by several high-level investments in strategic sectors. However, Turkey's rapprochement with Serbia - which is also seen as a part of its rapprochement with Russia - has caused dismay and concerns in Kosovo although it is still unclear what kind of impact this development may have on Kosovo or the rest of the region. Erdogan's selective and personal approach to politics and his closeness with Kosovo's President Thaci have already affected Kosovo's domestic politics - the most obvious example being a scandal with the 2018 secret extradition of six Gulenists to Turkey, without the knowledge of Kosovo's government.

While Turkey does not enjoy such visibility in **North Macedonia**, its economic and political presence there is not much lesser than in BiH or Kosovo. Turkey was very much engaged in supporting Macedonia in its dealings with Greece over the years of their name dispute, partially due to its policy in the Balkans, part because of its own historical competition with Greece. This competition inspired numerous Turkish activities in the country, including economic investments, infrastructure as well as cultural, educational, academic and military cooperation projects. The country's multi-ethnic structure - and the strong role of Albanians and other Muslim minorities in its

political life - have also made Turkey influential there. The fact that Skopje - not Pristina or Tirana - has been selected to be the headquarters of the Anadolu Agency's Albanian service, and to be the home of the second AKP party office after Sarajevo, confirms the importance which Erdogan places on North Macedonia. Erdogan's non-transparent relations with local Albanian and Turkish communities in the country also strengthen Turkey's hand in North Macedonia's politics, but also cast more doubts about its true role in the country. Turkey's recent demand from Skopje to hand over its Gulenists in return for Turkey's approval of North Macedonia's NATO accession protocol represents a major test in bilateral relations of the two countries. It also signals a possible path of Turkish future relations with NATO and Balkan countries.

**Albania** enjoyed Turkey's economic investments for years, and Albania's Premier Edi Rama has been one of the closest allies and friends of Erdogan in the region. However, Turkey's worsening relations with the West and authoritarian tendencies at home sent confusing signals to Albania, which remains one of the strongest pro-Western champions in the region. Turkey's involvement in local politics, especially concerning the Erdogan-Gulen clash, was also met with disapproval from both politicians and the general public in Albania.

In recent years, **Serbia** surprisingly became one of Turkey's favourite allies and business partners in the region. Turkey-Serbia relations blossomed in parallel with personal relationships between Erdogan and Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, as well as with the rapprochement between Turkey and Russia - Serbia's historical partner and ally. However, the two countries still have many unresolved, conflicting issues. Turkish and Serbian leaders have for the time being decided to ignore their possible biggest areas of dispute - BiH and Kosovo - and to develop their cooperation in Serbia's predominately Muslim-populated region of Sandzak. But even there, many potentially problematic issues exist for the two countries, so their relations - although currently very strong and economically lucrative - remain on shaky grounds.

Just like in Serbia, **Montenegro's** part of Sandzak region became an important area of cooperation between Podgorica and Ankara. Turkey-Montenegro relation is smooth without any major problems, but further crisis between Turkey and the West may change it, having in mind Montenegro's very strong pro-Western agenda.

Relations between **Bulgaria** and Turkey suffered during the cold war and especially because of the poor

position of the large Turkish minority in the country. Yet, in recent years Bulgaria became the biggest Turkish trade partner in the region. Future relations between the two countries will very much depend on the outcome of the Turkish crises with the West, the refugee crisis, ethnic Turks' conditions amidst the rise of the far-right in Bulgaria and both countries' relations with Russia and the EU.

The Turkish presence in the Balkans has had many stages and many different faces over the past few centuries. For many years, Turkey was carefully building its political, economic, cultural, academic and religious presence across the region, and was acting as a benevolent neighbour willing to help Balkan countries on their individual paths to Euro-Atlantic integrations.

However, significant internal political shifts which took place in Turkey in 2013 and especially after the failed coup in 2016, have drastically changed Turkey's role and position on the global scene. This question, as well as Turkey's growing rift with its old Western allies - EU and US - as well as its gradual rapprochement with Russia, have created additional confusion and tensions in the Balkans.

Yet, the decrease in the EU's normative power and US's continued absence from the region, have added importance to the current and future role of Turkey, as well as other foreign actors in the Balkans. However, Turkey's ongoing political and economic crisis is threatening to undermine some of the major projects which Turkish President Erdogan has promised to support - such as the key Sarajevo-Belgrade-Sarajevo highway. With reduced funds and with its own internal divisions growing, Turkey is no longer able to properly execute its "soft power" foreign policy approach in the Balkans, which was the main basis of its steadily growing influence in the recent past. Yet, even Erdogan himself seems to be not so much interested in continuing with this approach, which he has effectively already replaced with a foreign policy based almost exclusively on close and personal links with a selected few top regional leaders.

However, in the situation in which almost the entire foreign policy of a country becomes determined by one person, it is becoming very difficult to understand the reasoning behind some of his moves, and nearly impossible to envisage how this policy could develop in the near future having in mind the complexity and ever-changing environment at the local, regional and global political level. Yet one could argue that any foreign actor who ignores Balkan's current difficult and

dangerous issues and challenges and is playing with them for his own benefits, is playing with fire and risking destabilisation of the entire region. Recent history has already shown that the Balkans can destabilise not only Europe, but the whole world, but many Balkan, European and world leaders seem to have forgotten those history lessons.



## Turkey and the EU: Partners or Competitors in the Western Balkans?

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**Abstract:** The article analyzes EU-Turkey relations in the Western Balkans (WB) in an attempt to uncover the cooperation and conflict potential between the two in the region. Specifically, it assesses the extent to which Turkey can be considered a partner of the EU versus representing a competitor or even an alternative to Brussels for the WB countries. It argues that positing Turkey as a proactive, alternative regional power seeking to expand its presence and influence in the region at the EU's expense are overstated. Despite the EU's damaged credibility in the pursuit of its enlargement policy, Turkey's capabilities, incentives and foreign policy priorities simply fall short of producing a competitive "Turkish model/alternative" in the region. First, there are practical limits to Turkey's regional power status, which is far from representing a realistic substitute for the WB countries' Euro-Atlantic ties. In addition, despite the difficulties ahead, these countries still aspire for integration into European structures, which is also aligned with Turkey's foreign policy interests. Second, limitations aside, gaining hegemony in the WB is not Ankara's foreign policy priority given the urgency of multiple policy issues waiting to be tackled on all fronts. Third, from a *Realpolitik* standpoint, Turkey and the EU are expected to constructively engage to find solutions for common challenges such as migration, which concerns the WB as well.

### Introduction

The relations between Turkey and the EU have reached their lowest point since Turkey earned official EU candidacy status in 1999.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, Turkey's "de-Europeanization", observable at many levels since 2010-2013,<sup>2</sup> has deepened, bringing to the fore democratic backsliding and in general non-compliance with the Copenhagen EU membership criteria.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, confronted with its own existential crises ranging from migration to Brexit and populism, the EU has adopted more of an inward-looking approach, where enlargement (and much less, Turkey's EU integration) is no longer a policy priority. In addition, mutual mistrust has plagued the relationship further, lowering the chances of constructive dialogue between Brussels and Ankara to openly address critical issues, such as the fate of the EU-Turkey relationship or its *finalité politique*.

Yet, although Turkey's EU membership is unlikely in any predictable future, broader EU-Turkey relations have proven resilient, owing to their deep-rooted and multifaceted nature. Indeed, structural interdependence between the two<sup>4</sup> has largely served to feed continuous engagement, geared towards functional cooperation in multiple areas.<sup>5</sup> However, while economy, migration, energy, and counter-terrorism have topped the EU-Turkey agenda, cooperation over foreign policy broadly put has been less emphasised.

This article seeks to assess EU-Turkey engagement in the Western Balkans (WB6: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) in an attempt to uncover the cooperation and conflict potential between the two in this key area of EU external relations. It discusses the extent to which Turkey can be considered a partner to the EU versus

<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive and up-to-date analysis on EU-Turkey relations, see Soler i Lecha, Eduard (2019): 'EU-Turkey Relations: Mapping Landmines and Exploring Alternative Pathways', FEPS Policy Paper, September 2019, available at [https://www.feps-europe.eu/downloads/publications/feps\\_eu\\_turkey\\_relations\\_soler.pdf](https://www.feps-europe.eu/downloads/publications/feps_eu_turkey_relations_soler.pdf). See also Hoffman, Max / Michael Werz (2019): 'The Effects of a Suspension of Turkey's EU Accession Process', Stiftung Mercator, available at [https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/media/downloads/3\\_Publikationen/2019/2019\\_09/The\\_effects\\_of\\_a\\_suspension\\_of\\_turkey\\_s\\_EU\\_accession\\_process\\_study.pdf](https://www.stiftung-mercator.de/media/downloads/3_Publikationen/2019/2019_09/The_effects_of_a_suspension_of_turkey_s_EU_accession_process_study.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Aydın-Düzgüt, Senem / Alper Kaliber (2016): 'Is Turkey De-Europeanising? Encounters with Europe in a Candidate Country', South European Society and Politics 21 (1), pp. 1-14; Saatçioğlu, Beken (2016): 'De-Europeanisation in Turkey: The Case of the Rule of Law', South European Society and Politics 21 (1), pp. 133-146.

<sup>3</sup> European Commission (2019): 'Turkey 2019 Report', SWD (2019) 220 final, Brussels, 29.05.2019, available at

<https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-turkey-report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Tocci, Nathalie / Dimitar Bechev (2018): 'EU should keep Turkey close and Erdoğan even closer', Politico, 17.07.2018, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-should-keep-turkey-close-recep-tayyip-erdogan-even-closer/>.

<sup>5</sup> Saatçioğlu, Beken / Funda Tekin / Sinan Ekim / Nathalie Tocci (2019): 'The Future of EU-Turkey Relations: A Dynamic Association Framework amidst Conflictual Cooperation', FEUTURE Synthesis Paper, March 2019, available at [http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/monteus/user\\_upload/FEUTURE\\_Synthesis\\_Paper.pdf](http://www.feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/monteus/user_upload/FEUTURE_Synthesis_Paper.pdf). For a detailed discussion on EU-Turkey relations in the areas of politics, economy, security, energy, migration and identity, see the different work package papers generated by the Horizon 2020 FEUTURE ('Future of EU-Turkey Relations') Project, available at <https://www.iai.it/en/collana/feuture-papers>.

representing a competitor or even an alternative to it for the WB countries. The question is also relevant considering Turkey's expanded outreach to the region in recent years, which raised eyebrows in EU circles: "There is fear in Brussels that Turkey is trying to push into the Balkans. Turkey keeps telling us it has no bad intentions and supports [WB's] EU aspirations, but there is scepticism".<sup>6</sup> Notably, as French President Emmanuel Macron has argued: "Given the history of the region, given the existing pressures, [the Western Balkan] countries could turn to Russia or Turkey and this would be a wrong solution both for the region and for Europe".<sup>7</sup>

**I argue in this article that hypotheses positing Turkey as an alternative regional actor competing for hegemony in the WB are overstated and that Turkey is unlikely to part ways with the EU in the region.** Three specific arguments are advanced in this article: *First*, there are practical limits to Turkey's regional power status. Turkey's outreach in the WB – no matter how extensive it may be – far from represents a realistic substitute for closer relations of the WB countries with the EU since it is comparatively limited, compared to the EU's presence and influence there. In addition, these countries aspire for integration into European structures, which is also aligned with Turkey's foreign policy interests. *Second*, limitations aside, competing for hegemony in the WB is not Ankara's foreign policy priority, given the primacy of a broad range of other policy issues that need to be tackled on all fronts. *Third*, from a *Realpolitik* standpoint, both Turkey and the EU are expected to continue mutual engagement – as opposed to divergence – in the WB, as their cooperation over the 2015 Syrian refugee crisis (which has been critical for controlling the Western Balkan migration route) demonstrates. Seen in this light, Turkey is still a key "strategic partner" for the EU.

The article is organised as follows: First, it lays out the rationale for why Turkey is unlikely to seek hegemony in the WB at the EU's expense. A substantial part of this explanation consists of demonstrating the objective constraints for doing so in terms of Turkey's existing economic outreach, as well as political influence in the region. The article then lays out

Ankara's foreign policy priorities, which exclude the WB in the current (and foreseeable) context. It ends by arguing for the strategic importance of EU-Turkey cooperation in migration management, which emerges as a core issue concerning the WB region.

## Turkey in the Western Balkans: Limitations, strategic priorities, and Realpolitik

### The Western Balkans are no defining feature of EU-Turkey relations

Cooperation in the Western Balkans has never been at the forefront of EU-Turkey relations and is not likely to occupy centre stage in the foreseeable future. Turkish foreign policy towards the region had not practically strayed too far from the West (in particular, the NATO alliance's strategic priorities) through much of the Cold War and even after. However, this position has not advanced Turkey's EU membership prospects. Rather, Turkey's compliance with the Copenhagen political criteria understood as the adoption of democratic, rule of law and human rights standards has been pivotal in this regard. Indeed, these items are now more crucial than ever, given Turkey's rising anti-democratic tendencies in the aftermath of the July 2016 coup attempt and the adoption of a political system featuring a strong executive presidency, which has damaged the checks and balances and the rule of law in the country. As widely documented by the European Commission's May 2019 Turkey report, Turkey has shown "serious backsliding" in the areas of rule of law, fundamental rights and freedoms, checks and balances, as well as the economy which now also puts into question "the functioning of the country's market economy".<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, what the European Council decided in June 2018 still holds: "Turkey's accession negotiations have [...] effectively come to a standstill and no further chapters can be considered for opening or closing, and no further work towards the modernisation of the [1996] EU-Turkey Customs Union [Agreement] is foreseen".<sup>9</sup> Under these circumstances, the added value of a 'Europeanized' Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans would be, at best, of marginal

<sup>6</sup> A senior EU official quoted in Aydıntaşbaş, Aslı (2019): 'From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans', March 2019, Policy Brief, European Council on Foreign Relations.

<sup>7</sup> Sputnik (2018): 'Europe Needs Sway over Western Balkans to Stem Russian Influence – Macron', 17.05.2018, available at <https://sputniknews.com/europe/201805171064551055-macron-europe-balkans-influence/>.

<sup>8</sup> European Commission (2019), op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Council of the European Union (2018): 'General Affairs Council. Council Conclusions on Enlargement and Stabilisation and Association Process', 10555/18, Brussels, 26.06.2018, pp. 13, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35863/st10555-en18.pdf>.

importance for Turkey's accession-oriented relations with the EU.

Second, a pro-EU Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the Western Balkans has also not been formulated as a pivotal issue that Turkey should work on as far as alignment with the EU's foreign policy positions is concerned. In other words, the Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy in the region has never topped the EU's rank-ordering of foreign policy items for Turkey.

Principal issues in this respect have been, first and foremost, the resolution of the Cyprus dispute with all its policy ramifications, and second Turkey's good neighbourly relations with Greece with a view to resolving long-standing disputes in the Aegean. Of current particular significance is Turkey's need to normalise relations with the Republic of Cyprus, which, according to the EU, extends to Ankara's non-interference with this EU member state's "sovereign right" to explore hydrocarbon resources in its 'exclusive economic zone' in the Eastern Mediterranean. In fact, this issue has quickly fuelled conflict between Brussels and Ankara, as the former rushed to impose sanctions<sup>10</sup> on Turkey as a result of its "illegal actions" and insistence on drilling activities in the area.<sup>11</sup>

Yet, the absence of accession-related incentives does not mean that Turkey will turn against the EU and/or seek hegemony in order to rise as an alternative regional power in the Western Balkans. At least three factors point into this direction: First, and above all, Turkey's capacity to do so is objectively limited. Second, the WB countries show little interest in such an offer. And finally, Ankara's motivations for asserting itself in the region to the detriment of the EU are

pretty slim, given the urgency of various foreign policy priorities as well as other reasons.

### **Turkey is not in a position to make an offer that is a viable alternative to the EU's offer**

Turkey has indeed expanded its economic engagement with the WB countries since the end of the 1990s when the Balkan wars ended and especially, under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) rule since 2002. Its trade and investment in the region have grown (notably, in regards to Serbia), accompanied by involvement in economic development and financing of various infrastructure projects (e.g., the construction of airports, the renovation of mosques from the Ottoman period, the opening of schools) partially intended for preserving Ottoman cultural heritage and projecting Turkish soft power in the region.<sup>12</sup> Yet, this outreach is nowhere near the EU's presence in the region, which realistically limits Ankara's potential for assuming a position of economic superiority.

The WB's trade volume with the EU is around 145 billion euros, whereas Turkey's trade volume was a low 2.5 billion euros in 2016 (even though this level constitutes an already enormous expansion in comparison to 2002 when the same value was 364 million euros).<sup>13</sup> For instance, although Turkey-Serbia trade has expanded, the volume just exceeds 1 billion dollars (2018), which is far below Serbia's overall trade with the EU, reaching close to 25 billion dollars in 2018.<sup>14</sup> The same idea applies to flows of foreign direct investment between the EU and the WB, with a share of 73 % owned by EU companies in the region. The EU also remains by far the biggest trading partner of the WB with a 73.5 % portion of imports and 80.6 % of total exports.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the EU is also the

<sup>10</sup> As the European Council decided in July 2019: "In light of Turkey's continued and new illegal drilling activities, the Council decides to suspend negotiations on the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement and agrees not to hold the Association Council and further meetings of the EU-Turkey high-level dialogues for the time being. The Council endorses the Commission's proposal to reduce the pre-accession assistance to Turkey for 2020 and invites the European Investment Bank to review its lending activities in Turkey, notably with regard to sovereign-backed lending" (European Council 2019: Press Release – 'Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean: Council adopts conclusions', available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/07/15/turkish-drilling-activities-in-the-eastern-mediterranean-council-adopts-conclusions/>).

<sup>11</sup> European Council (2019): 'European Council Meeting (20 June 2019)', EUCO 9/19, Brussels, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39922/20-21-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion on Turkey's and other external actors' (Russia, China, USA and Gulf States) involvement in the Western Balkans, see Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (2018): 'The Influence of External Actors in the Western Balkans: A Map of Geopolitical

Players', available at [https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7\\_dokument\\_dok\\_pdf\\_53583\\_2.pdf/194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73?version=1.0&t=1539646959279](https://www.kas.de/documents/252038/253252/7_dokument_dok_pdf_53583_2.pdf/194afc48-b3be-e3bc-d1da-02771a223f73?version=1.0&t=1539646959279). Also see Südosteuropa Gesellschaft (2019): 'Final Conference Report', Reality Check Series: Sources, Tools and Impact of External non-EU Engagement in Southeastern Europe Part II – Turkey, available at [https://www.sogde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SOG\\_ExternalActors\\_Turkey\\_FinalReport.pdf](https://www.sogde.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/SOG_ExternalActors_Turkey_FinalReport.pdf). For further academic analysis, see Bieber, Florian / Nikolaos Tzifakis (eds.) (2019): *The Western Balkans in the World: Linkages and Relations with non-Western Countries*, London: Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Politico (2018): 'Turkey's Balkan Comeback', 15.05.2018, available at <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>.

<sup>14</sup> The figures are provided by the Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Serbia, available at <https://europa.rs/serbia-and-the-eu/trade/serbia-eu-total-trade/?lang=en>.

<sup>15</sup> European Commission (2019) '2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', COM (2019) 260 final, 29.05.2019, pp. 8, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood->

principal external provider of aid and funds to the Western Balkans, which Turkey is not in a position to rival via the activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). In short, despite the rising economic activity of other external powers in the WB region (e.g. Turkey, Russia, China), European countries still constitute the largest economic partners for the WB states.<sup>16</sup>

From a comparative standpoint, it should also be noted that Turkey is different from the other external actors vying for influence in the region, notably Russia. The fears within the EU that Turkey, like Russia, is looking to instrumentalise the WB's prolonged EU accession process in order to fill a vacuum, and expand political – if not economic – interference and influence at the EU's expense are highly exaggerated. First, particularly since the end of the Cold War, a core aim of Russian foreign policy has consisted of opposing and disrupting the twin processes of European integration and EU (as well as NATO) enlargement. Russia has considered these developments as threats to its national interests serving to weaken its presence in its traditional sphere of influence – that is in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. To the contrary, Turkey has pursued no such aim. As a NATO member and aspiring EU candidate, it has welcomed the idea of the WB's Euro-Atlantic integration from the start. The fact was also reiterated by Turkish officials in response to European charges that the Balkans represent an area of rivalry between Turkey, the EU, and Russia:

“Being a Balkan country as well, Turkey's aim and priority in the region today, as it has been in the past, is the maintenance and strengthening of peace, stability, and sustainable development [...]. With this objective, we continue to support the membership of all countries of the region to European and Euro-Atlantic institutions.”<sup>17</sup>

Second, Putin's Russia has not shied away from interfering with the WB's domestic politics, at times in

order to weaken the EU's influence in the region. The October 2016 failed coup in Montenegro, in which Russia was implicated, showed how far Russia can go in this respect. In general, however, the country employs a multitude of “soft” methods and intelligence to distract, weaken, and divide the Western community of states. Russian support for certain far-right and Eurosceptic political parties and groups, and targeted public relations and disinformation campaigns via Moscow-friendly media have additionally aimed to cultivate a pan-Slavic friendship among nations.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, Turkey is not a domestic intruder.<sup>19</sup> Nor does it actively invest in exporting its non-democratic regime to the Balkans or projecting a political model to be adopted as an alternative to EU values. At most, what is emphasised by Turkish officials are the cultural components of Turkish soft power including the shared history going back to the Ottoman rule of the Balkans, cultural affinity, and Islam serving as a common religious bond (in the case of the WB countries with Muslim communities). These factors have fed into Turkish initiatives in cultural diplomacy and outreach, and the use of Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*) as a foreign policy instrument in those Balkan countries with a significant Turkish/Muslim community.<sup>20</sup>

On the other hand, soft power projections are mostly employed by the Turkish political leadership during election campaigns in Turkey, which signals that these moves are rather intended for domestic political consumption and gains. The once “neo-Ottoman” policy of re-integrating Turkey into the Balkan region (which was advocated by former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu) has, therefore, no actual basis in Turkey's current policy in the region that seems to be more pragmatically oriented under President Tayyip Erdoğan's leadership.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the EU's fears that Turkey is on a par with Russia in attempting to

enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy.pdf.

<sup>16</sup> Hake, Mariya / Alice Radzyner (2019) ‘Western Balkans: Growing Economic Ties with Turkey, Russia and China’, BOFIT Policy Brief No. 1, 15.02.2019, available at <https://helda.helsinki.fi/bof/bitstream/handle/123456789/16048/bpb0119.pdf?sequence=1>.

<sup>17</sup> Hürriyet Daily News (2018): ‘Turkish Foreign Ministry responds to Macron on Balkans’, 19.04.2018, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-foreign-ministry-responds-to-macron-on-balkans-130547>.

<sup>18</sup> For a detailed discussion, see Secrieru, Stanislav (2019): ‘Russia in the Western Balkans: Tactical Wins, Strategic Setbacks’, European Union Institute for Security Studies, available at [https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans\\_0.pdf](https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%208%20Russia%20Balkans_0.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> The principal exception to this in recent years is Turkey's policy of pressure on the WB countries, geared towards the extradition of suspected Gülenists residing there along with the closure of Gülenist schools and establishments spread-out in the region. But although it may have a justifiable basis within the context of Turkey's fight against the Gülen community (which is presumably behind Turkey's July 2016 coup attempt), the pressure has delivered mixed results, attesting to the limits of Turkish influence.

<sup>20</sup> Öztürk, Erdi / Semiha Sözeri (2018): ‘Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria’, Politics and Religion, 11 (3), pp. 624-648.

<sup>21</sup> For a periodic analysis of Turkish foreign policy in the WB under the AKP, see Aydıntaşbaş (2019), op. cit. See also Demirtaş, Birgül (2015): ‘Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: A Europeanized Foreign Policy in a De-Europeanized National Context?’, Journal of



transform the WB countries' domestic politics to dissuade them from Brussels remain unfounded.

### The Western Balkan countries show little interest in alternative offers

Aside from capacity-related limitations, there is also the fact that the WB countries' priority is integration into European structures rather than establishing closer ties with Turkey as a fall-back option or an alternative centre of gravity. Representing one of the most Euro-enthusiast countries in the region, Albanian Foreign Minister Ditmir Bushati put it bluntly:

"There is no alternative for us – and, I believe, for the entire region – to EU membership. You will not find a single government that is not trying to join the EU, despite difficulties and although this process is tougher than it used to be when Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia joined."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, the EU membership process represents an effective instrument for democratisation as well as socio-economic development and normalisation in the WB region, much like it was the case for the Central and Eastern European candidates benefiting from the EU's "transformative power"<sup>23</sup> in the early 2000s. Although they are currently at different stages of the accession process, Albania, North Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Bosnia-Herzegovina have all actively sought progress towards accession in the past decade. As a result, in 2018 the Commission recommended the opening of accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, and the year 2025 has been put forward as the EU's next enlargement date for the "current frontrunners in the accession negotiations" (i.e. Montenegro and Serbia).<sup>24</sup> To be

sure, key reform challenges are ahead for the WB countries which aspire to membership, notably regarding the rule of law, governance, and competitiveness, as well as regional cooperation and reconciliation.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, the EU's sincere commitment and credibility have also proven critical. Despite the Commission's recommendation, membership talks with Albania and North Macedonia have still not been launched due to political opposition from several member states (France, the Netherlands and Denmark, and until recently, Germany).<sup>26</sup> The potential politicisation of WB membership by anti-immigration far right parties (using this issue as a political opportunity to spread "public fears of another wave of migration to make further electoral gains")<sup>27</sup> as well as the prioritisation of EU reform over enlargement (an argument especially voiced by France)<sup>28</sup> have principally factored into this resistance.

However, in the cases of Albania and North Macedonia, the common feeling within the EU is that they have now been unfairly excluded from EU accession talks. Following France's veto on the matter at the 17-18 October 2019 European Council meeting, the EU member states concluded that "the European Council will revert to the issue of enlargement before the EU-Western Balkans Summit in Zagreb in May 2020"<sup>29</sup> and stopped short of offering any formal justification for delaying the membership negotiations. As European Council President Donald Tusk put it bluntly:

"Let me be very clear: North Macedonia and Albania are not to blame for this. And the Commission reports are also clear that both these countries did what they were asked to do. And the adoption of the Prespa

Balkan and Near Eastern Studies, 17 (2), pp. 123-140, DOI: 10.1080/19448953.2014.994283.

<sup>22</sup> LSEE Research on South Eastern Europe (2014): 'Albanian FM Ditmir Bushati: 'Those still thinking about a Greater Albania live in a different world'', 07.11.2014, available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lsee/2014/11/07/albanian-fm-ditmir-bushati-those-still-thinking-about-a-greater-albania-live-in-a-different-world/>.

<sup>23</sup> Börzel, Tanja / Thomas Risse (2009): 'The Transformative Power of Europe: The European Union and the Diffusion of Ideas', KFG Working Paper, No. 1, May 2009, available at [https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/international/atasp/publikationen/4\\_artikel\\_papiere/2010\\_TR\\_the\\_transformative\\_power\\_of\\_europe/WP\\_01\\_Juni\\_Boerzel\\_Risse.pdf](https://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/polwiss/forschung/international/atasp/publikationen/4_artikel_papiere/2010_TR_the_transformative_power_of_europe/WP_01_Juni_Boerzel_Risse.pdf).

<sup>24</sup> European Commission (2019): '2019 Communication on EU Enlargement Policy', COM (2019) 260 final, Brussels, 29.05.2019, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-communication-on-eu-enlargement-policy.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> European Commission (2018): 'A Credible Enlargement Perspective for and Enhanced EU Engagement with the Western

Balkans', COM (2018) 65 final, Strasbourg, 06.02.2018, available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf).

<sup>26</sup> Reuters (2019): 'Germany pushes compromise on EU talks with North Macedonia, Albania', 04.10.2019, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-balkans/germany-pushes-compromise-on-eu-talks-with-north-macedonia-albania-idUSKBN1WJ1RX>.

<sup>27</sup> Bechev, Dimitar (2019): 'Why is the EU punching below its weight in the Western Balkans?', Aljazeera, 01.05.2019, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/eu-punching-weight-western-balkans-190501154155409.html>.

<sup>28</sup> EUobserver (2019): 'France keen to pause EU enlargement', 15.10.2019, available at <https://euobserver.com/enlargement/146267>.

<sup>29</sup> European Council (2019): 'European Council Meeting (17 and 18 October 2019) Conclusions', Brussels, 18.10.2019, p. 2, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41123/17-18-euco-final-conclusions-en.pdf>.



Agreement was a truly extraordinary achievement. So both countries have the right to start EU negotiations as of today. [...] Unfortunately, a few member states are not ready yet. This is why we didn't manage to reach a positive decision. Personally, I think it was a mistake, but I will not comment on it further.”<sup>30</sup>

Tusk's frustration was also shared by the Commission's President Jean Claude Juncker and the Commissioner for European Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations, Johannes Hahn. Their common concern is that the EU's failure to deliver in regards to North Macedonia and Albania may destabilize the WB region by damaging, inter alia, Serbia-Kosovo talks (given the fact that EU accession talks have not been opened with North Macedonia, despite the successful resolution of its longstanding “name dispute” with Greece).<sup>31</sup> In addition, it also sends the wrong signal to all Western Balkan EU candidates, thereby jeopardizing the EU's official commitment to offer them membership if reforms are met.

Whether the six Western Balkan countries join the EU or not, Turkey only stands to gain from their European integration, which is another reason why it is not likely to assume an anti-EU stance in the region. The WB's admission into the EU would not only signal that these countries have successfully fulfilled accession reforms, but also increase regional stability by anchoring them in an environment of cooperation overcoming past divergences from the Balkan wars of the 1990s. As a country which values economic engagement in the region, Turkey would surely benefit from this situation. At the same time, having some “friendly newcomers” within the EU would/could also contribute to Turkey's relations with the Union, which seems recently to have united both the European left and right against the country's membership due to various political and democracy-related concerns.

## Turkey has ‘other fish to fry’

An expanding outreach to the Western Balkans in a way to seriously rival and challenge the EU, however profitable it may be in real terms, is also not among Ankara's current foreign policy priorities. Nor is it likely to emerge as one any time soon, because Turkey is facing a plethora of pressing foreign policy problems waiting to be tackled on almost all fronts in its relations with the West (including both the USA and the EU) as well as Russia. On the one hand, the already strained relationship with the US, which had been in the making since Turkey's July 2016 coup attempt (due in large part to Washington's resistance to extradite Fethullah Gülen – the Turkish imam and preacher who lives in the USA and whose Islamist Gülen movement, FETÖ, is allegedly behind the coup attempt – to Turkey),<sup>32</sup> is now confronted with some grave challenges, notably in Syria.

Following an agreement with Washington to establish a safe zone in Northeastern Syria in August 2019 (and a phone call between President Trump and Erdoğan in October 2019), Turkey has launched the ‘Operation Peace Spring’ in the area.<sup>33</sup> The purpose of the intervention is to secure the YPG (the Syrian Kurdish affiliate of the PKK, which has been active in Turkey since the 1980s and recognized as a terror group by Turkey as well as the USA and Europe)-controlled region to the East of the Euphrates river and establish a safe zone where Turkey can return a portion of its Syrian refugees.<sup>34</sup> Yet, although these objectives are justifiable,<sup>35</sup> support from Washington has remained conditional at best given concerns about the operation's political and security implications, particularly within the context of the US-alliance with the YPG/PYD and the global fight against ISIS.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Trump was quick to sign an executive order authorising the imposition of sanctions against Turkey. As US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin explained: “These are very powerful sanctions. We hope we don't have to use them. But we can shut down the Turkish

<sup>30</sup> ‘Remarks by President Donald Tusk after the European Council meeting on 17 and 18 October 2019’, 18.10.2019, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2019/10/18/remarks-by-president-donald-tusk-after-the-european-council-meeting-on-18-october-2019/>.

<sup>31</sup> On the name dispute, see Hagemann, Christian (2019): ‘Goodbye FYROM, Welcome North Macedonia: Solving the Name Dispute with Greece and the Way Forward’, *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, 01/2019, pp. 6-19.

<sup>32</sup> Kadri Gürsel (2019): ‘How 2016 Coup Attempt Led Turkey to Buy Russian Air Defenses’, *Al-Monitor*, 10.08.2019, available at <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/08/turkey-united-states-russia-coup-attempt-led-s400-deal.html>.

<sup>33</sup> At the time of writing (18 October 2019), a ceasefire announcement has just been made by US and Turkish officials, as a

result of which an end to the Turkish operation and US sanctions are expected.

<sup>34</sup> Turkey is already home to 3.6 million Syrian refugees.

<sup>35</sup> For a background on Turkey's security concerns within the context of the Syrian war, see Özel, Soli (2017): ‘Turkey: Military Action in a Strategic Void’, *IEMed. Mediterranean Yearbook 2017*, available at [https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/IEMed\\_MedYearbook2017\\_turkey\\_milit\\_ary\\_strategic\\_Ozel.pdf/](https://www.iemed.org/observatori/arees-danalisi/arxiu-adjunts/anuari/med.2017/IEMed_MedYearbook2017_turkey_milit_ary_strategic_Ozel.pdf/).

<sup>36</sup> Gingeras, Ryan / Nick Danforth (2019): ‘Turkey's Plan to Move Refugees to Syria is Dangerous’, *The New York Times*, 07.10.2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/opinion/Turkey-Syria-Operation.html>.

economy if we need to".<sup>37</sup> Falling short of this possibility, the sanctions package announced by the administration is currently limited to certain Turkish ministers and the Turkish steel industry.<sup>38</sup>

Differences over Syria come in addition to another longstanding controversy between the two NATO allies: Turkey's purchase of the S-400 missile defense system from Russia, which has already received some hurtful reaction from the USA (i.e. in the form of ending partnership with Turkey over the production of the F-35 joint strike fighter jets, which has already cost the Turkish companies 9 billion dollars) that may be aggravated if the administration opts to impose additional sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries through Sanctions Act (CAATSA).<sup>39</sup>

Turning to Russia, relations have not been smooth either, despite the S-400 purchase. Russia has a clear presence in Syria as an airpower acting in support of the Syrian regime's ongoing fight against the jihadist/anti-regime groups in the Idlib province located close to the Turkish border. Therefore, Ankara fears that if the resulting humanitarian crisis were to deepen, these circumstances could trigger a new wave of refugee flows amounting to millions of people, which it would not be able to handle.<sup>40</sup> The flows would/could also open the door to new security challenges, given the possibility of jihadists crossing the Syrian border towards Turkey and Europe alongside civilians. Yet, Russia's intransigence for ending the offensive in Idlib was confirmed by its recent veto (along with China) of a UN Security Council resolution calling on "all parties" to "immediately cease hostilities to avoid a further deterioration of the already catastrophic humanitarian situation in the Idlib Governorate".<sup>41</sup> In addition, Putin has also

expressed reservations about Turkey's operation in Northeastern Syria, emphasising the security vacuum, which may emerge as a consequence and which might clear the way for ISIS's resurgence.

As for Turkey's overall relations with the EU, the dossier of pressing issues waiting to be addressed – i.e. "the landmines"<sup>42</sup> to control for – keeps on expanding at an alarming rate. These concerns are not necessarily directly related to Turkey's accession (which seems unlikely given the political situation), but are no less important. Questions such as the modernization of the EU-Turkey 1995 Customs Union (CU) agreement;<sup>43</sup> the achievement of domestic reforms to obtain visa liberalization for Turkish citizens traveling to Europe; and the management of the drilling controversy in the Eastern Mediterranean in view of its damaging consequences, are just a few of the issues that come to mind. Recently, reactions from the EU to Turkey's military involvement in Northeastern Syria have been added to the list. Brussels has "call[ed] upon Turkey to immediately stop its unilateral military action", citing concerns about a revitalised ISIS and jihadist militancy along with further civilian displacements: "Turkey's legitimate security concerns should be addressed through political and diplomatic means, not military action, in accordance with international humanitarian law".<sup>44</sup> Consequently, some EU member states (France and Germany) have rushed to suspend their arms exports to Turkey.

Furthermore, the EU Foreign Affairs Council of 14 October 2019 "condemned Turkey's military action" while signalling that an EU-wide arms export ban may soon follow, in accordance with "member states' strong national positions" regarding this matter.<sup>45</sup> In addition, the Council decided to put in place further

<sup>37</sup> CNBC: 'Trump administration clears the way for sanctions on Turkey: "We can shut down the Turkish economy"', 11.10.2019, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/10/11/trump-gives-his-administration-broad-powers-to-put-sanctions-on-turkey.html>.

<sup>38</sup> 'Trump's Weak Sanctions May Only Help Erdoğan', Foreign Policy, 14.10.2019, available at <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/10/14/trump-turkey-sanctions-erdogan-weak-syria/>.

<sup>39</sup> Voice of America (2019): 'US Still Mulling Sanctions Against Turkey', 12.09.2019, available at <https://www.voanews.com/usa/us-still-mulling-sanctions-against-turkey>.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion on the security situation in Idlib, see Can Kasapoğlu / Emre Kürşat Kaya (2019): 'EDAM Defense Intelligence Sentinel: Idlib on the Verge of Implosion', EDAM Centre for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, August 2019, available at <http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/EDAM-DEFENSE-INTELLIGENCE-SENTINEL-Idlib-on-the-Verge-of-Implosion.pdf>.

<sup>41</sup> Al Jazeera (2019): 'Russia, China veto a UN resolution calling for ceasefire in Syria', 19.09.2019, available at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/russia-china-veto-resolution-calling-truce-idlib-190919163754250.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Soler i Lecha, op. cit.

<sup>43</sup> For an excellent case of the CU upgrade from an economic and political standpoint, see Ülgen, Sinan (2018): 'The Business Case for a Turkey-EU Customs Union 2.0', DEİK Dış Ekonomik İlişkiler Kurulu – Foreign Economic Relations Board, December 2018; and Ülgen, Sinan (2017): 'Trade as Turkey's EU Anchor', Carnegie Europe, 13.12.2017, available at <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/12/13/trade-as-turkey-s-eu-anchor-pub-75002>.

<sup>44</sup> 'Speech by High Representative/Vice President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament Plenary Session on the Situation in Northern Syria', Brussels, 09.10.2019, available at [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68651/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/68651/speech-high-representativevice-president-federica-mogherini-european-parliament-plenary_en).

<sup>45</sup> Council of the European Union (2019): 'Outcome of the Council Meeting, 3720th Council Meeting: Foreign Affairs', 13066/19, Luxembourg, 14.10.2019, available at <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/41051/st13066-en19.pdf>.

“restrictive measures” in relation to Turkey’s “illegal drilling activity” in the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>46</sup> On its 17-18 October 2019 Summit, the European Council endorsed these conclusions, strongly emphasising, in particular, an end to Turkey’s military involvement in Syria, “which causes unacceptable human suffering and undermines the fight against Da’esh [ISIS] and threatens heavily European security”.<sup>47</sup>

In this highly problematic foreign policy context, the Erdoğan administration’s priority lies in restoring constructive engagement rather than aggravating tension with Brussels. Above all, this situation requires the resolution of existing crises with the EU<sup>48</sup> (which include, inter alia, objectively relaying Turkey’s legitimate security needs and concerns in places such as Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean) in addition to working to advance aspects of the EU-Turkey relationship that promise mutual benefits via deepened functional cooperation. It also includes avoiding straining ties further by investing in policies that would counter the EU’s interests in places like the Western Balkans. As explained above, Turkey’s capability and incentives for doing the contrary in the region are already limited and, therefore, a radical policy divergence from the EU over the WB seems unlikely under the current circumstances.

Despite the problematic aspects of its current relationship with Turkey (which extends beyond the question of Turkish accession), the EU maintains also a rational need to preserve engagement and cooperation. After all, Turkey still represents an indispensable “strategic partner” to the EU rather than a viable membership candidate, a fact that has been emphasised continuously by EU representatives (both verbally and officially) since 2015. This fact was particularly evident within the context of the 2015/2016 Syrian refugee crisis, which effectively shifted the EU-Turkey relationship towards functionalism, moving it further away from strictly conditional, value-driven ties.<sup>49</sup>

The March 2016 EU-Turkey “refugee deal” was highly instrumental in this regard as it maximised mutually beneficial cooperation between the two sides,

following a pragmatic bargaining process. In return for helping curtail the refugee flows to Europe, and hosting them in Turkey, Ankara received financial support and international praise in addition to the prospect of revitalized accession talks, visa liberalization, and greater dialogue with the EU over a host of other issue areas (including the modernization of its Customs Union agreement with the EU). The deal proved highly effective for reducing the refugee movements and alleviating, if not eliminating, the strains on the Western Balkan route via Greece and Turkey’s Aegean shores.<sup>50</sup> Externalizing the refugee problem by partnering up with Turkey enabled Brussels to evade responsibility in the management of the crisis (i.e. burden-sharing among member states, including relocation and resettlement of refugees to Europe), which was in short supply among the member states, and secure for both the EU’s external and internal borders (e.g. integrity of the Schengen area).

Against this backdrop, a principal area of continued engagement and cooperation between the EU and Turkey continues to be migration control, which geographically extends to the WB. Despite the current difficulties impacting the sustainability of the EU-Turkey refugee deal, *Realpolitik* demands that the sides remain engaged in cooperation, notably in the wake of the developments in Syria. The past months have seen incendiary rhetoric between President Erdoğan and European officials, revolving around Ankara’s blackmailing geared towards the establishment of a safe zone in Northeastern Syria: “Give us logistical support and we can go build housing [for the refugees] at 30 km (20 miles) depth in Northern Syria. [...] This either happens, or otherwise we will have to open the gates [and send the refugees to Europe]”.<sup>51</sup> The EU responded by categorically rejecting Turkey’s demand (given European reservations about the feasibility of such a safe zone). As European Council President Donald Tusk stated: “Turkey must understand that our main concern is that their actions may lead to another humanitarian catastrophe. And we will never accept that refugees are weaponised and used to blackmail us.”<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Council of the European Union (2019), op. cit., p. 5.

<sup>47</sup> European Council (2019): ‘European Council Meeting (17 and 18 October 2019) Conclusions’, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Inevitably, this also depends on similar engagement from the EU’s part. For an insightful opinion concerning Syria, see Ülgen, Sinan (2019): ‘The Way Forward in Syria’, New York Times, 16.10.2019.

<sup>49</sup> Saatçioğlu, Beken (2019): ‘The European Union’s Refugee Crisis and Rising Functionalism in EU-Turkey Relations’, Turkish Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14683849.2019.1586542.

<sup>50</sup> It must be noted that the migration flux has shifted towards the “coastal route” along the Adriatic shores of Albania, Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina that were hit by a sharp surge in 2018 and 2019.

<sup>51</sup> The Guardian (2019): “Erdoğan: I’ll let Syrian refugees leave Turkey for west unless safe zone set up”, 05.09.2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/sep/05/erdogan-ill-let-syrian-refugees-leave-turkey-for-west-unless-safe-zone-set-up>.

<sup>52</sup> Deutsche Welle (2019): “Don’t ‘weaponize’ refugees, EU’s Tusk tells Turkey”, 11.10.2019, available at

Notwithstanding the controversy about the safe zone, there is a rational need for the EU to invest in a stronger policy of refugee support, which would consist of the resettlement of the refugees from Turkey (as well as Syria) in Europe as well as, among other measures, greater financial aid to Ankara in its existing efforts for hosting the refugees on Turkish soil. In the Balkans, this also extends to Greece that needs greater EU assistance to speed-up its asylum procedures, the lack of which has so far jeopardised the 1:1 refugee return mechanism agreed by the EU and Turkey in March 2016. Furthermore, the situation has deteriorated over the past months given the unprecedented increase in refugee arrivals (since the March 2016 agreement) from Turkey's Aegean shores to the Greek islands.<sup>53</sup> All of these objective problems and further displacements likely to arise in Syria make it imperative for the EU and Turkey to continue working together to address the growing migration challenge.

constructively engaged in order to continue to address mounting common challenges such as migration, which concerns the WB as well. Beyond these circumstances, further European efforts could also be envisaged in order to make greater use of Turkey's strategic value for the WB and avoid simultaneously pushing the country further away. However, this goal would of course have to be a long-term achievement, given the current difficulties in EU-Turkey cooperation.

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## Conclusion

The Western Balkan countries have never been consequential for the EU-Turkey relationship, which has now reached its lowest point in decades. Rather, developments on Turkey's anti-democratic political front, internal politics within the EU and its member states, longstanding disputes (i.e. Cyprus), and recent conflicts over Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean have been decisive, for bringing the relations towards the brink. Yet, these facts do not suggest that Turkey now has a free rein to turn wholesale against the EU. In the WB region, beyond expanding relations on a bilateral basis (e.g. with Serbia), Ankara does not seem willing or able to engage in a wholesale anti-EU policy geared towards pulling all of the WB countries closer, as an alternative to their Euro-Atlantic integration.

The article explained the reasons why an expansive Turkish Western Balkan policy is unlikely to be pursued at the EU's expense, and/or conducted, for that matter, in collaboration with other influential external powers such as Russia (to form a Russia-Turkey axis): Despite the EU's damaged credibility in the context of the WB's delayed and prolonged accession process, Turkey's capabilities, incentives, and foreign policy priorities simply fall short of producing a viable "Turkish model/alternative" in the region. In addition, *Realpolitik* demands that the sides remain

<https://www.dw.com/en/dont-weaponize-refugees-eus-tusk-tells-turkey/a-50794532>.

<sup>53</sup> Bither, Jessica (2019): 'Trump's Syria move will have consequences for migration', EUobserver, 09.10.2019, available at <https://euobserver.com/opinion/146188>.

## Reconsidering Dilemmas of Turkey's Foreign Policy: The Case of the Balkans

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**Abstract:** Turkey has started to play a more active role in the Balkans since the early 1990s because of changes in both local agency and global structure. After coming to power in 2002, the Justice and Development Party AKP added further impetus to Turkish foreign policy towards the region by putting forward new actors and bringing in new issues. Business representatives, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency TİKA, Yunus Emre Cultural Centers, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, Diyanet, and Turkish cities have become new actors in Turkey's ties with the region. The article examines changes and continuities in Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans under the government of the AKP. It first analyses the dilemmas of Turkey's regional policies based on a case study of the Kosovo conflict and then examines the connection between domestic and foreign policy, thereby evaluating new actors and issues. The paper argues that there are challenges ahead and limitations to Turkey's appeal to the region, resulting from the tilt towards unilateral policies.

### Introduction

Just before the start of Turkey's latest intervention in Northern Syria, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan paid an official visit to Serbia for the second meeting of the Turkey-Serbia High-Level Cooperation Council on 7-8 October 2019. During the meeting, Erdoğan stated that the Turkish-Serbian relations were at the best level, naming Serbian President Alexander Vučić as his "dear friend" who "has a great role and support" in the improvement of the Turkish-Serbian relations.<sup>1</sup>

Naming Serbia as a neighbouring country although the two states do not have any common borders, Erdoğan's speech was full of references to soft power credentials and the liberal values of international relations. Underlining the increasing economic relations between Ankara and Belgrade and the development aid of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Turkish President also gave his full support to the Serbian EU accession process and the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo. He stated that Turkey was for "the attainment of a lasting and comprehensive agreement based on the free will and consensus of the parties" concerning the Kosovo issue.<sup>2</sup> During the visit, Turkish and Serbian

leaders signed several treaties ranging from social security to science and technology or defence cooperation, hence extending the areas of cooperation between the two countries both on technical issues as well as strategic areas.<sup>3</sup>

The visit also marked a refreshing of the trilateral dialogue among Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina by bringing the presidents of the three countries together after a six-year break. Serbian President Alexander Vučić stated that he was "grateful to Turkey and Erdoğan for the undoubted stabilising role in the Balkans. For the first time, today, we were drawing lines and roads on maps. (...) Everyone present at the trilateral meeting was happy to look at such maps",<sup>4</sup> referring to the opening ceremony of the construction of the highway between Belgrade and Sarajevo to be built by the Turkish company Taşıyapı and several other Serbian companies with Turkish financial aid. Milorad Dodik, who is well known for his concerns regarding Turkish foreign policy activism in the region, was also present in the meeting as part of the Bosnian Presidency Council. The Turkish President used the opportunity to state that he believed the highway project would strengthen relations, but that

<sup>1</sup> Daily Sabah (2019): "Turkey's Relationship with Serbia at Its Best Level, Erdoğan Says", Daily Sabah, 7 October 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/diplomacy/2019/10/07/turkeys-relationship-with-serbia-at-its-best-level-erdogan-says> (accessed 8 October 2019).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Maja Zivanovic / Hamdi Firat Buyuk (2019): Serbia and Turkey Pledge to Boost Defence Cooperation, 7 October 2019,

<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/07/serbia-and-turkey-pledge-to-boost-defence-cooperation/>.

<sup>4</sup> Presidency of the Republic of Turkey (2019): "President Erdoğan attends Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia Trilateral Summit", <https://www.iletisim.gov.tr/english/haberler/detay/president-erdogan-attends-turkey-bosnia-and-herzegovina-serbia-trilateral-summit>, 8 October 2019 (accessed 9 October 2019).



it was also a friendship project contributing to regional peace and the uniting of hearts.<sup>5</sup> Erdoğan also urged the parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina to work to establish a government.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, Erdoğan expressed or implied the concepts of dialogue, comprehensive agreement, connectivity, economic ties, friendship, and peace that would refer to the use of soft power instruments in foreign policy. His rhetoric summarised the fundamental characteristics of Turkey's interactions with the region since the end of the Yugoslav conflicts in the late 1990s. In contrast, the same Turkish leader also ordered the start of the Turkish military intervention in Northern Syria called "Peace Spring" immediately after his return to the country on 9 October 2019. Turkey, thus, provides an example of a country that implements contradictory policies in foreign relations. Focussing on soft power in one region, but using hard power in another region has become an important characteristic of Turkey's complicated and contradictory foreign policy. **How can it be possible that a country focuses on soft power in one neighbourhood area, but implements hard power in another neighbourhood? How can it use both unilateral and multilateral policies in the same region, as seen in Turkey's approach towards the Balkans?**

This article examines the changes and continuities in Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans under the government of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It will first analyse different conceptualisations of Turkey's neighbourhood policies by the political elite based on the Kosovo issue. Then it will examine the connection between domestic and foreign policy, evaluate the new actors, and finally, the new issues. The main argument of the paper is that Turkey has become an important actor in the region because of its focus on soft power. However, there are challenges ahead and limitations to the appeal to the region resulting from the tilt towards unilateral policies, the struggle against FETÖ, the implementation of authoritarian policies in recent years and the dynamics of de-Europeanisation.

### Turkey's foreign policy: Respecting status quo or claiming assertiveness?

In a previous study, the author of this article analysed the debates at the Turkish parliament during the Kosovo War (1998-1999).<sup>7</sup> It was found that there were two different viewpoints among the political parties represented in the parliament on Turkey's Kosovo policy. First of all, some parliamentarians (many of them representing parties in the coalition government) urged the maintenance of status quo and respect for international law in neighbourhood politics. In contrast, other parliamentarians asked the Turkish government to recognise Kosovo, and some even urged Turkey to intervene militarily. Hence, the first group, on the one hand, wanted Turkey to act multilaterally focusing on soft power elements; the second group, on the other hand, believed that Turkey should act unilaterally if necessary and could even use hard power instruments. I would argue that these two different viewpoints have existed among politicians and intellectuals whenever Turkey's foreign policies in the Balkans, the Middle East, Caucasus, Central Asia and the Black Sea are considered. There has almost always been the contradiction of preferring soft power instruments and multilateralism or hard power instruments and unilateralism. We can conceptualise this as "the dilemma of Turkey's foreign policy".

The contradictory policy alternatives were also put forward when Turkish decision-makers were trying to formulate their policy towards Nagorno Karabakh in the late 1980s as well as with the Bosnian War in the first half of the 1990s (1992-1995). Nationalist and conservative opposition parties (as well as interest groups) have always tried to push Turkey to act unilaterally and not refrain from using assertive foreign policy. However, the governing parties during those years could resist the pressures and act in line with their partners in global politics.

To make this dilemma of Turkey's neighbourhood policy clear, parliamentary debates during the Kosovo War will be evaluated briefly as a case study. The situation in Kosovo illustrates in a very interesting way that after the end of the Cold War, politicians from very different camps were actively arguing for a change of Turkish policy towards the Balkans and a sentiment for stronger involvement could be activated easily by appealing to the legacy of relations. During the wars of Yugoslav succession, Turkey had been developing a new state identity, and Turkish decision-

<sup>5</sup> Daily Sabah (2019): "Turkey's Relationship with Serbia at Its Best, 7 October 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Elections took place in Bosnia and Herzegovina on 7 October 2018. No government could be formed so far.

<sup>7</sup> Demirtaş, Birgül (2019): Analysing the Debates at the Turkish Parliament during the Kosovo Conflict (1998-1999): Impact of

Geography, History and Identity. In: Nebojsa Vukovic (ed.): David vs. Goliath, NATO's War against Yugoslavia and Its Implications, IIPE, Belgrade 2019, pp. 190-204. The author benefitted from this study in writing this section.

makers were trying to consolidate a new position of the country in global politics. The decade of the 1990s witnessed the most active period of Turkey's neighbourhood policy, mainly in the Balkans.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the discussions taking place in the Turkish parliament at the time were showing signs of the country's search for a new identity and all the dilemmas and contradictions stemming from history, geography, and domestic politics.

During the military conflict in Kosovo, different members of the Turkish parliament (MPs) from different political parties criticised Turkish foreign policy. A common criticism of the opposition parties was that Turkey was acting too cautiously and passively. They urged the governing parties to pursue a more active foreign policy and reconsider traditional engagements. Some MPs went even as far as to urge Turkey to take military action. However, it is also interesting to note that even MPs of the governing coalition parties from time to time criticised the foreign policy towards Kosovo. İrfan Demiralp, an MP from one of the coalition parties (ANAP), had stated that the declaration of the Turkish Foreign Ministry supporting the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia should be reconsidered.<sup>9</sup> In fact, "whose territorial integrity" should be supported was discussed extensively in the Turkish parliament. Like Demiralp, many opposition MPs criticised the continuation of traditional Turkish foreign policy, which supported the territorial integrity of existing political parties. Many MPs urged Turkey to recognise the territorial integrity, and, hence, the independence of Kosovo.

Turkey's responsibilities were another important concept that came on the agenda of the Turkish Grand National Assembly (TGNA). Both governing and opposition parties argued that Ankara had "special responsibilities" towards the Balkan region, in general, and in Kosovo in particular. For example, according to Prof. Mümtaz Soysal, a former Minister of Foreign Affairs and MP from a governing coalition party, Turkey had three responsibilities towards the Kosovo issue: First, a responsibility towards the Muslim communities in the Balkans. This responsibility was considered to be a moral responsibility stemming from Turkey's ancestors that meant the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Soysal reminded the MPs that the people in the Balkans had become Muslims because of the Ottoman Empire. Second, he emphasised that

Turkey had a responsibility towards its own citizens because half of the Turkish population consisted of migrants from the Balkans in the foundation years of the Republic. Third, Turkey had a responsibility towards humanity.<sup>10</sup>

Cyprus also became part of the Kosovo debate from different angles: Mümtaz Soysal gave the example of British policy towards Cyprus in trying to legitimise why Turkey should be an active player in Kosovo. He claimed that if Britain continued to play a role in Cyprus, just because it ruled the island for 70 years and felt a responsibility, Turkey should also claim a role for itself in the Kosovo issue.<sup>11</sup> Not only leftist, but also Islamist-oriented MPs as well urged the government to give up its concerns and act assertively. The cases of Cyprus and the Ottoman legacy were used by the Islamist-oriented MPs as excuses to push Turkey towards an assertive foreign policy. How Turkey could pursue such a foreign policy in March 1998 was an open-ended question. Any kind of unilateral action, that would contradict international law, was rejected by the coalition government at that time, which, thus, represented the traditional foreign policy stance that Turkey had taken during the Cold War.

In contrast, Hüseyin Kansu from the religiously oriented Virtue Party (Fazilet Partisi) stated that the Kosovo issue presented a threat to Turkey as well. According to Kansu, Kosovo and other Balkan countries represented a combat outpost in Turkey's strategic defence. Hence, he argued that the Balkans were important for Turkey's defense policies and, thereby, tried to urge the government to respond more actively. – A similar line of thought was followed by the right-wing nationalist Great Union Party (BBP). Recep Kırış from BBP also emphasised the similarity between Kosovo and Cyprus, stating that if Cyprus would be important for Turkey's security now, Kosovo would be important for Turkish security in the future. He further claimed the following: "(...) Turkey has to act following its historical mission, its historical legacy; it has to claim its cultural and political entity, and it has to be conscious of its responsibilities there."<sup>12</sup> What those responsibilities would include was not stated clearly.

Foreign Minister İsmail Cem's visit to Belgrade on 7-8 March 1998 created a lot of controversy in the Turkish parliament. During his visit, Cem met with the

<sup>8</sup> For a comprehensive analysis of Turkish decision-makers' search for new state identity in the 1990s see B. Demirtaş-Coşkun: Turkey, Germany and the Wars in Yugoslavia, A Search for Reconstruction of State Identities?, Berlin, Logos Verlag, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> Turkish Grand National Assembly / TGNA Proceedings, 17 March 1998.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> For both speakers see TGNA Proceedings, 17 March 1998.

Yugoslav leader Slobodan Milošević and submitted to him a letter from Turkish President Süleyman Demirel. The fact that Cem did not meet with Kosovo Albanians led to criticism from the opposition parties from the left and the right of the political spectrum. İrfan Gürpınar from the centre-left Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi / CHP) stated that although the international Contact Group's members were meeting with Kosovo officials, Cem did not go to Kosovo and did not invite Kosovo officials to Belgrade. Hence, he criticised the government for being cautious, timid, and ashamed of the identity, personality and culture in Kosovo that was being destroyed.<sup>13</sup> Foreign Minister Cem responded to the criticisms by arguing that Turkey acted in line with international treaties and that the government respected existing borders.

On the other hand, for the Virtue Party, Kosovo seemed not different from Turkey's own provinces. Mustafa Baş from the Virtue Party argued for a similarity not just between Kosovo and Cyprus, but also between Kosovo and İstanbul, İzmir, and Bursa. He claimed that the people killed in Kosovo should be treated the same way as if Turkish citizens in İstanbul, İzmir or Bursa were killed. It is interesting to note that all the provinces that Baş emphasised were the ones with high concentrations of Balkan migrants. – The same approach was visible in the CHP: Ali Dinçer stated that Turkey had responsibility towards Kosovo. Brethren in Kosovo would "(...) give an account of our history, our culture in our name there. All attacks against them are attacks against us. Therefore, Turkey should spend the most effort."<sup>14</sup> Although both previous statements belong to two different MPs from two very different political parties, there are important similarities in their analyses of the Kosovo problem: What was happening in Kosovo was considered to be happening in Turkey. The approach of "their pain is our pain" was being projected onto criticisms towards Turkish foreign policy.

A similar approach was confirmed by Mehmet Ağar, a MP from the True Path Party (Doğru Yol Partisi / DYP), former general police director and former minister, emphasising Turkey's responsibilities stemming from its history and geography. He argued that what had happened in Bosnia and what was happening in

Kosovo was an indication of that Turkish and Muslim presence on European territories was not being tolerated. Therefore, he claimed that Turkey had to intervene by taking all necessary precautions.<sup>15</sup> The implication was that Turkey should consider the use of military instruments as well.

An important discussion in the parliament was related to the possible role of the Turkish army in the region. Ali Dinçer from CHP made the following argument: "Of course, our army was not established just for the Republic of Turkey, but also to protect our historical and cultural accumulation and brothers / sisters." According to him, Turkey should consider models beyond autonomy in the Kosovo case: "Today, those people in Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and in related geographies (...) defend our culture." Hence, Turkey should support them in every possible way.<sup>16</sup> The projection of the Turkish army acting in the name of Kosovo by an MP from the CHP is noteworthy: When it came to power projection in foreign policy, Turkey's right- and left-wing opposition parties argued quite similar in the case of Kosovo.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, the debates in parliament in 1998 very clearly uncover the dilemma of Turkish foreign policy when it comes to its relations with its neighbouring countries, e.g. in the Balkans. Those people, who argue that Turkey should be on the side of the maintenance of territorial integrity of countries, emphasise international law. Those people who claimed the opposite underlined the Ottoman legacy, Turkish defence priorities and the re-imagination of Turkish geography, which does not only consist of the current borders of Turkey but also includes former Ottoman territories according to their opinion. This article argues that this very dilemma is inherent in Turkey's foreign policies. Hence, the Kosovo case became a mirror upon which Turkey's identity discussions were further projected. After analysing the dilemmas of Turkey's neighbourhood policy, the next section deals with the linkage between domestic and foreign policy.

<sup>13</sup> TGNA Proceedings, 10 March 1998.

<sup>14</sup> For both speakers see TGNA Proceedings, 8 October 1998.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> TGNA Proceedings, 23 July 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, both Ağar from the DYP and Kansu from the Virtue Party considered the Kosovo Liberation Army (Ushtria Çlirimtare e Kosovës / UÇK) as an entity established to protect the population of

Kosovo against attacks. Ağar argued that Kosovo's population had the right of self-defence, and he thought that the struggle of the UÇK was similar to Turkey's own War of Independence. Kansu, similarly, claimed that the UÇK was a reality in Kosovo. The same approach was visible in the speeches of Muhsin Yazıcıoğlu from the Greater Union Party (Büyük Birlik Partisi – BBP). See TGNA Proceedings, 8 October 1998.

## The emerging nexus between internal and external politics under the AKP government

After his party's landslide victory at the local elections on 30 March 2014, despite all the turmoil in internal politics and corruption claims, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister of Turkey and the then leader of the AKP, made a phone call to the mayor of Mamuşa, a village in Kosovo, populated almost only by ethnic Turkish people. 'I am sending to all of you my greetings from İstanbul, dear people of Mamuşa', Erdoğan stated at the beginning of his speech, which was transmitted to all Turkish people in the village live gathering to celebrate the AKP's victory. After thanking Arif Bütüç, the ethnic Turk mayor of the village, for all his interest during the election campaign, Erdoğan thanked heartfully all inhabitants of Mamuşa and asked them to continue their solidarity with Turkey. The mayor of Mamuşa who had just visited the Prime Minister in Ankara one week before the elections answered the Turkish Prime Minister: 'The people of Kosovo, the Balkans and Mamuşa are proud of you. You are a leader who affects world politics.'<sup>18</sup> The phone call was broadcasted by many Turkish TV channels in the prime time news, as it had been the case with all of Erdoğan's speeches in recent years, thus, reaching the hearts and minds of the Turkish public.

This phone call is just one example of what kind of networks the AKP leadership has developed in the Balkans in the recent period and how these networks are being instrumentalised in Turkish domestic politics. The phone call can be considered as a follow-up to the statement made during the Prime Minister's traditional balcony speech after his party's landslide victory at the 2011 parliamentary elections, stating that, as a result of the elections: "Sarajevo has won as well to the extent that İstanbul has won". Erdoğan continued: "Turkey as well as the Middle East, the Caucasus and the Balkans have won!"<sup>19</sup>

It comes as no surprise that the phone call with Mamuşa's mayor was made and transmitted to the Turkish public at a time when both Prime Minister Erdoğan and some of the ministers were facing large-scale corruption scandals. The phone call was a classic example of how the AKP has tried to use its increasing ties with kin communities in the Balkans to get more

support from the Turkish constituency by showing how charismatic and influential the AKP itself as well as its leader were in the neighbouring, ex-Ottoman regions. Because Turkey was going through a turbulent time in its domestic and foreign policies mainly since the outbreak of the Gezi Park protests and the Arab Spring, it had been attracting the attention of international academia more than ever. Being generally characterised as a complex and multi-regional country with accompanying multiple identities, its policies were becoming more difficult for scholars to grasp.

In light of the changing state of affairs in Turkish domestic politics since the brutal repression of the Gezi resistance movement, the de-Europeanisation process was clearly speeding up. The increasing limitations to the freedom of expression and the freedom of assembly as experienced in the high number of journalists in prison and unproportionally violent police response towards peaceful demonstrators can be given as proof of Turkey's de-Europeanisation. According to Freedom House Index in 2018, Turkey finds itself in the "not free" category.<sup>20</sup>

## Turkey and its Balkan neighbours: New roles, new issues, new actors

A new discourse, new issues, and new role conceptions were visible in Turkey's Balkan relations starting from the early 1990s and later consolidated in the 2000s. During the bipolar world system, hegemonic relations on the global scale heavily affected the relations between Ankara and its Balkan neighbours; themselves divided among eastern, western and non-aligned groups. However, following the end of bipolar world politics, Turkey found greater manoeuvrability in its foreign policy, and it could launch important diplomatic initiatives. Among these, Turkey developed proposals for the resolution of the Bosnian War. It tried to become a bridge between the Bosniaks and the international community and negotiated with Milošević to prevent the Kosovo War. These steps resulted in Turkey having a greater role in international affairs, as a result of which international actors, like the US and the EU, contacted Turkish officials frequently during the Yugoslav succession

<sup>18</sup> 'Dik Dur Eğilme Mamuşa Seninle' [Stand upright, Do not Shift, Mamuşa is with You], *Radikal*, 1 April 2014. The author benefitted from the following article in writing some parts of this paper: Birgül Demirtaş (2015): Turkish Foreign Policy toward the Balkan Neighborhood: A Europeanized Foreign Policy in a De-europeanized National Context?, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 123-140.

<sup>19</sup> 'Erdoğan'ın 3. Balkon Konuşmasının Tam Metni: 74 Milyonun Hükümeti Olacağız', <http://t24.com.tr/haber/erdoganin-3-balkon-konusmasinin-tam-metni-74-milyonun-hukumeti-olacagiz,150677> (accessed 25 May 2014).

<sup>20</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/turkey>.



time, especially when the Bosnian War was continuing. Considering the *Zeitgeist* of the Balkans in the turbulent 1990s, Turkey's neighbourhood policies focused mainly on political and security issues as it tried to play an active role in the solution of the Yugoslavian crises. In the aftermath of the wars, it contributed to the establishment of a new regional order by sending soldiers to the peacekeeping missions. When the AKP won the elections in 2002 and formed the government, it did not just benefit from the active diplomatic initiatives of the 1990s, but also added new elements to it through the increasing interaction with the EU at various levels.

As the main architect of Turkish foreign policy from the very beginning of AKP's rule till recently – first as chief advisor to the Prime Minister, then as the Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister himself – Ahmed Davutoğlu has written extensively on the Balkans. As regards his publications on the region, one should draw a clear distinction though between those published before his political career and those during his posts under the reign of AKP. In his pioneer book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), he argued that Turkey should base its Balkan policy on the two important Muslim peoples of the region: Bosniaks and Albanians. He argued that if Turkey wants to establish a sphere of influence in the Balkans, this could only be through developing close relations with the region's Muslim communities because Turkey has a historical and heartfelt closeness to them ('tarihi ve kalbi yakınlık'). After becoming Foreign Minister, however, Davutoğlu tried to develop Turkey's relations not only with Muslim communities but with countries like Macedonia and Serbia that consist of Christian majorities as well.

Davutoğlu's major work on the Balkans during his time as Foreign Minister has been published by the Center for Strategic Research of the Turkish Foreign Ministry with the title 'A Forward-Looking Vision for the Balkans'. According to this book, fundamental policy principles of Turkey's neighbourhood policy were summarised by the key concepts of regional ownership and inclusiveness, regional integration, European integration and the establishment of a common stance in regional and international organisations. These concepts, in general, have relevance to the EU's policies. It is one of the basic principles of EU conditionality towards the Western Balkans that, to complete the full membership process, first of all countries should try to establish a

regional cooperation scheme. Turkey's emphasis on European integration stems from its belief that as the neighbouring countries are integrated into the Euro-Atlantic structures, they would achieve a more stable and peaceful order. So overall, the change of government also meant a lot of continuity because Turkish foreign policy still focussed on multilateralism and engagement through international institutions until the 2013 Gezi protest movement.

### The AKP government and its role conceptualisations

The Turkish decision-makers' understanding of geopolitics has been an integral component of foreign policy decision-making processes since the Republic of Turkey was established. The experience of the wars that the country experienced in its founding phases contributed to the emergence of a geopolitical determinism in which Turkey's geography was presented by the decision-makers as so important in global affairs that hegemonic powers continuously wanted to interfere and intervene. The Cold War years increased the perception of geographical determinism even more because of the proximity to the neighbouring Soviet Union. In the 1990s, different discussions on Turkish identity emerged, each having its own geopolitical understanding.

The AKP, on the other hand, had a clear, new geopolitical understanding accompanied by a 'strong exceptionality narrative', <sup>21</sup> based on the claim of the uniqueness of Turkish geography, according to which being part of multiple regions and ruling over the straits could be a great advantage for Turkey, but only if it employed the right policies. This geographical determinism was followed by historical determinism according to which Turkey's Ottoman past led to new responsibilities on the Turkish side. This understanding has clear implications for Turkey's Balkans policies since it puts forward a leadership role in the region. Davutoğlu explicitly stated this perception in his controversial speech in Sarajevo in 2009: "Our history is the same, our fate is the same, and our future is the same. *Similar to how the Ottoman Balkans had risen to the centre of world politics in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, we will make the Balkans, Caucasus and the Middle East, together with Turkey, the centre of world politics.* This is the aim of Turkish foreign policy, and we will achieve this. To provide regional and global peace, we will re-integrate with the Balkan region, the Middle East and

<sup>21</sup> M. Yeşiltaş: 'The Transformation of the Geopolitical Vision in Turkish Foreign Policy', *Turkish Studies*, 14(4), 2013, p. 671.



Caucasus, not only for ourselves but also for the whole of humanity.”<sup>22</sup>

This discourse is an important indication of how the AKP tries to construct Turkey as *an exceptional state* without reflecting on how this would be perceived by the other Balkan communities. The development of the discourse was fed by Turkey’s rather consolidated relations with the Euro-Atlantic structures. As an example, Turkey, together with Greece, has been among the oldest NATO members and it gave its utmost support for the membership of the Balkan countries with the belief that this would contribute to regional peace and stability. In addition, Turkey has an Association Agreement with the European Union since 1963, and because of the Customs Union since 1996, its economic integration with the EU is further advanced than many other candidate countries. – The next section will elaborate on how the decision-makers in Turkey changed the agenda of their foreign policy and what kind of new instruments they started to use in the neighbouring area.

### New issues and new instruments

As stated above, the 1990s led to a political-security nexus in Turkey’s policies towards the Balkans. However, as the conflicts ended through international interventions and the Western Balkan states embarked on the thorny road of state-building (or re-building) while becoming outwardly western-oriented, Turkey also faced new prospects in its Europeanisation process. In this new period, both Turkey and its Balkan neighbours came to share a common Western foreign policy vision for the first time in the region’s modern history.

Benefitting from the Europeanisation process, the decision-makers in Ankara started to place more

emphasis on cultural, religious and economic ties and the foreign policy started to focus on the region’s human capital. When the political security nexus had dominated relations, classical diplomacy had dominated regional interactions. However, beginning from the 2000s, the AKP started to invest more in human relations and developed Turkey’s soft power instruments. In that process of reformulating foreign policy, Europeanisation became an influential factor. An important indicator of how EU policies were emulated was the initiative of Turkey to establish a visa-free area in the neighbouring regions including the Western Balkans to create ‘a Turkish-style Schengen Zone’. As Davutoğlu himself stated, Turkey started to employ European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) instruments in its neighbourhood<sup>23</sup> and tried to achieve maximum cooperation with all countries around.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Turkish decision-makers used the EU discourse of good neighbourly relations to try to create an area of peace and stability around Turkey.<sup>25</sup> Turkey’s neighbourhood activism should be understood within the framework of the power vacuum that existed in the Balkans, mainly because the US and the EU did not pay great attention to solving the problems of the region since they had other priorities in recent years.<sup>26</sup> Benefitting from the multi-dimensional Western examples of foreign policy implementation, Ankara’s efforts concentrated in the following fields: economy, language, religion, and education.

During the 2000s, Turkish foreign policy-makers restarted using economic tools reminiscent of the Özal era. During Özal’s incumbency, first as Prime Minister and then as President, business people had started to join him on foreign visits. Even though that practice was suspended after Özal left office, the AKP relaunched it. As Kemal Kiriçi stated, Turkey started

<sup>22</sup> Davutoğlu’s address at the conference on ‘Ottoman Legacy and Muslim Communities in the Balkans Today’, Sarajevo, 16 October 2009, [http://cns.ba/docs/osmansko%20naslijede%20i%20muslimanske%20zajednice%20Balkana%20danas%20\(zbornik%20radova\).pdf](http://cns.ba/docs/osmansko%20naslijede%20i%20muslimanske%20zajednice%20Balkana%20danas%20(zbornik%20radova).pdf) (accessed 21 February 2012 / emphasis added by the author).

<sup>23</sup> The European Neighbourhood Policy / ENP was developed by the EU to extend cooperation towards the countries in the surrounding regions that do not have any accession process in the foreseeable future. See Bezen Balamir-Coşkun / Birgül Demirtaş-Coşkun (eds): *Neighborhood Challenge: The European Union and Its Neighbors*, Universal Publishers, Boca Raton Florida 2009. Also see S. Kahraman: ‘Turkey and the European Union in the Middle East: Reconciling or Competing with Each Other?’, *Turkish Studies*, 12(4), p. 708; S. A. Düzgit / N. Tocci: ‘Transforming Turkish Foreign Policy – The Quest for Regional Leadership and Europeanisation’, CEPS Commentary, 12 November 2009.

<sup>24</sup> A. Davutoğlu, Speech at the TGNA, Presentation of the Foreign Ministry’s Budget to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, TGNA

Proceedings, 18 December 2009, [http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/Tutanak\\_B\\_SD.birlesim\\_ba\\_slangic\\_yazici?P4=20525&P5=H&page1=100&page2=100](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/Tutanak_B_SD.birlesim_ba_slangic_yazici?P4=20525&P5=H&page1=100&page2=100) (accessed 4 April 2014).

<sup>25</sup> Ö. Terzi: *The Influence of the European Union on Turkish Foreign Policy*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2010, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> O. Anastasakis: ‘Turkey’s Assertive Presence in Southeast Europe: Between Identity Politics and Elite Pragmatism’. In: K. Öktem / A. Kadioğlu / M. Karlı (eds), *Another Empire? A Decade of Turkey’s Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party*, İstanbul, İstanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012, p. 202; R. H. Linden / Y. İrepoğlu: ‘Turkey and the Balkans: New Forms of Political Community’, *Turkish Studies*, 14 (2), 2013, p. 238. For an analysis of how the suspension of the EU’s enlargement policy affected Turkish international relations see B. Rumelili: ‘Turkey: Identity, Foreign Policy, and Socialization in a Post-Enlargement Europe’, *European Integration*, 33(2), 2011, p. 246.

acting as a 'trading state'.<sup>27</sup> In initiating the practice of economic diplomacy, Turkey tried to establish 'regional integration schemes' as Davutoğlu repeatedly stated. This idea of creating close regional cooperation with the neighbouring countries is very similar to the ENP.

Until recently, the cultural component of foreign policy had been neglected by the Turkish political elite, especially the issue of language. The Yunus Emre Cultural Center was established in 2007 with 14 of its cultural centres in seven Balkan countries so far. Because it has 55 cultural centres in total, it is obvious that about a quarter of its cultural centres have their base in the Balkan region. The pattern of emotional attachment to the Balkans set by Davutoğlu outlived his post. The former Foreign Minister had regarded all former Ottoman provinces as 'geographies of the heart' ('gönül coğrafyası'), hence establishing an emotional link between Turkey and these territories. The fact that Davutoğlu likened these initiatives for cultural diplomacy as a kind of 'Turkish renaissance' is an important indicator of how the Western effect has been felt on Turkey's recent focus on cultural policies.<sup>28</sup> Similar policies and discourses are still relevant in Ankara's international relations towards the Balkans today.

It is important to note that there is no other country in the region that focuses on cultural diplomacy to the degree that Turkey does. Increasing the number of Yunus Emre Cultural Centres throughout Southeast Europe and beyond has led to the emergence of the Turkish language as a *regional lingua franca* in the Balkans,<sup>29</sup> as well as Turkish culture as a *cultura franca*. The Yunus Emre Cultural Centres, like their Western counterparts, are not just places where Turkish language is being taught, but they are also hosting events like seminars with prominent Turkish authors. Turkish art courses like marbling (*ebru*) are offered, and some centres have been promoting the use of Turkish by even offering foreign language elective courses at secondary schools.

Another dimension of Turkey's investment in the human capacity of the Balkans is the project of Turkey's scholarships organised by the newly established Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities. Although Ankara started offering

scholarships to international students in the early 1990s, during those years the scholarships were restricted mainly to students of Turkic origin from the newly independent Caucasian and Central Asian countries, following the Soviet Union's dissolution. The AKP widened the scope of the scholarships, allowing students from all over the world to apply for a Turkey scholarship. This endeavour is the most comprehensive regional scholarship program.

TİKA is another institution that has increased its activities in Southeast Europe in recent years. Established in 1992 with the basic aim of providing aid to the Turkic countries of ex-Soviet influence, TİKA has extended its activities to other regions. The number of its program coordination offices has increased during the AKP government. In the Balkans it has mainly been instrumental in the restoration of Ottoman buildings, providing various kinds of help to educational and health institutions, giving support to building infrastructure, like drinking water supplies. It also supports various conferences, especially regarding the Ottoman legacy. As it is declared in the official report, TİKA helps to consolidate Turkey to implement its responsibilities regarding international issues following its historical character and virtuous position.<sup>30</sup> Hence, TİKA's activities in the Balkan region – ranging from the restoration of schools and museums to providing technical equipment to hospitals – help to increase not only Turkey's sphere of influence, but also contribute to Ankara's visibility to the local populations and distinguish it from other countries that could not afford such an extensive aid program.

As Turkish foreign policy decision-makers started to make more references to Ottoman history and Islam, the role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) also increased in Turkish foreign policy. Through regular meetings with leaders of religious affairs as well as its envoys assigned to Turkish diplomatic missions, Diyanet has been influential in spreading the Turkish version of Islam to former Ottoman territories. According to Öktem, it can be considered the biggest and most centralised Islamic organisation in the world, comparable to the Vatican for the Catholic Church.<sup>31</sup> The statement by a former Turkish State Minister for the Presidency of Religious

<sup>27</sup> K. Kirişçi, 'The Transformation of Turkish Foreign Policy: The Rise of the Trading State', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, 40, 2009, p. 29-57.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>29</sup> K. Öktem, 'Between Emigration, De-Islamization and the Nation-State: Muslim Communities in the Balkans', *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 11( 2), 2011, pp. 151-169.

<sup>30</sup> TİKA Faaliyet Raporu 2012, <http://store.tika.gov.tr/yayinlar/faaliyet-raporlari/faaliyet-raporu-2012.pdf>; [www.tika.gov.tr](http://www.tika.gov.tr) (accessed 3 April 2014).

<sup>31</sup> K. Öktem, 'Projecting Power: Non-Conventional Policy Actors in Turkey's International Relations'. In: Öktem / Kadioğlu / Karlı (eds), *Another Empire? ... op. cit.*, p. 88.

Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*), Mehmet Aydın, is an important indication of how Diyanet took on an increasingly global role: “(...) Diyanet’s international responsibility is no less important (and difficult) than its responsibility in Turkey”.<sup>32</sup>

Another element of Turkey’s non-traditional foreign policy has been media: The opening of TRT-Avaz that regularly broadcasts in the languages of Turkey’s near neighbourhood as well as the establishment of regional offices of Turkey’s official Anatolian News Agency symbolise Ankara’s quest for more dialogue via media. These media contacts have been cultivated by the mayors of cities or towns hosting an important number of Balkan immigrants that the following section will address as well as to look at the role of other non-state actors.

### New actors in Turkey’s Balkan ties: The increasing role of non-state actors

Kirişçi has provided important examples showing how Turkey’s foreign policy has been increasingly trans-nationalising in recent years through the growing role of non-state actors.<sup>33</sup> Municipalities, business communities, non-governmental organisations, soap operas as well as individuals have become important ‘actors’ for Turkey’s Balkan ties. Municipalities that are home to an important number of Balkan origin Turkish citizens are increasingly active in building or expanding ties with the Balkan neighbours as witnessed in recent years. Sister city projects, Ramadan cultural activities, media dialogues, academic conferences, and frequent mutual visits all show how Turkey’s official foreign policy towards the Balkans has been reflected at the municipality level. The AKP’s relaunch of Özal’s practice of taking business people on the plane of politicians has encouraged the Turkish business community to increase trade relationships and foreign investments. Thus, trade and investment in Balkan countries witnessed an important rise.<sup>34</sup>

### Challenges in Turkey’s Balkans policy in its de-europeanised national context

Turkish democracy has been in decline in recent years as the AKP government turned to apply populist

politics via its majoritarian and ballot box understanding of democracy by giving away the pluralist understanding that had marked its early years in power. Especially the rule of emergency that was implemented after the coup attempt on 15 July 2016 has, for two years, radically decreased the level of democracy. The change of the political system from parliamentary to a *sui generis* presidential governmental model has resulted in the collection of all major powers in the Office of the President and the decline of the role of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. However, the local elections of March 2019 (as well as the second election for the İstanbul Greater City Municipality in June 2019) have changed the balance of power in local politics, since municipalities in most of the major cities all over Turkey, including İstanbul and Ankara, were won by the opposition. How the grand victory of the opposition at the local level will affect the course of Turkish political history is yet to be determined.

How the coup attempt and change of political system have affected Turkish foreign policy are also important questions. Since the turmoil in internal politics still continues, there is no clear answer to that question for the time being. Turkey’s struggle against FETÖ (the ‘Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organisation’) creates problems in some of the Balkan countries. According to pro-government Turkish media outlets, there are still FETÖ-related schools and institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo.<sup>35</sup> Despite all Turkish attempts, not all of them so far could be shut down. Turkish efforts to deport six Turkish citizens from Kosovo in 2018, who allegedly had links with FETÖ as a result of apparent cooperation between Turkish and Kosovo intelligence agencies, created a political crisis in Kosovo. The President of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, and Prime Minister Ramush Haradinaj criticised the operation. Prime Minister Haradinaj forced Interior Minister Flamur Sefaj and Driton Gashi, the head of the intelligence organisation, to resign. Hence, Turkish decision-makers have preferred to cooperate with some of the Kosovo decision-makers while ignoring others. Hence, assertive foreign policy was implemented as it had

<sup>32</sup> M. Aydın: ‘Diyanet’s Global Vision’, *The Muslim World*, 2008, p. 168.

<sup>33</sup> K. Kirişçi: ‘Turkey’s Engagement with Its Neighborhood: A ‘Synthetic’ and Multidimensional Look at Turkey’s Foreign Policy Transformation’, *Turkish Studies*, 13 (3), 2012, pp. 1-23.

<sup>34</sup> There are academic studies arguing that Turkey’s economic diplomacy can not be called a full-scale achievement, because all its

potential has not been used and the current increase can be explained by global and regional trends rather than AKP’s successful instrumentalisation of economic diplomacy. See M. Kutlay, ‘“Yeni Türk Dış Politikası”nın Ekonomi Politikası: Eleştirel Bir Yaklaşım’, *Uluslararası İlişkiler*, 9 (35), 2012, pp. 101-127.

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.sabah.com.tr/dunya/2018/07/13/feto-ile-mucadele-balkanlarda>.

been supported by some of the Turkish MPs during the 1990s.<sup>36</sup>

A second instance in which Turkey's assertiveness was evident occurred during the Bulgarian general elections in May 2013 and in March 2017. It is a well-known fact that AKP did not have good relations with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Dvizhenie za prava i svobodi* / DPS – *Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi* / HÖH) whose majority support came from the Turkish people in Bulgaria.<sup>37</sup> The clash of opinions between AKP and DPS has both ideological and practical reasons. Because of the problems between AKP and DPS, the AKP leadership supported the Freedom, Honor and People's Party as opposed to DPS in the Bulgarian parliamentary elections of 2013. However, the party failed to pass the threshold and could not enter the Bulgarian parliament. Four years later, at the next elections, AKP supported the newly established DOST Party in Bulgaria with a similar result of failure at the March 2017 elections. DOST could not pass the threshold, and it was once again DPS that passed the threshold to parliament. These events are also examples of assertive Turkish foreign policy.

There are several substantial limitations to Turkey's Balkan policies: Too much emphasis on religion and history, overlooking the perceptions and misconceptions of regional actors, the exaggeration of Turkey's own power, its own de-Europeanising tendencies in domestic politics, the problem of convincing regional actors of the dangers of FETÖ. Last, but not least, the period since 2011 has witnessed increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government. The increasing number of arrests of journalists, limitations to freedoms of assembly and expression, interference in private lives of individuals, 'otherisation' of those with different opinions than the ruling elite, the creation of a prejudiced version of 'Westernism' by reproducing conspiracy theories have all been symptoms of Turkey's path from procedural democracy to de-democratisation.<sup>38</sup> The main

challenge for Turkey is now whether it can move first to procedural democracy and then further to substantive democracy, as its ability to become an influential regional power depends on whether it can manage to institutionalise its democratic structures.<sup>39</sup>

Interestingly enough, when the AKP's elites faced corruption charges, one after another, in late 2013 and early 2014, the support that came from the Balkans was used to justify their authority in a national context. As Prime Minister Erdoğan and several ministers faced an increasing number of corruption charges, they got various kinds of support from different levels of the region. Political leaders, leaders of the Muslim communities, and Turkish communities living in different Balkan countries extended their support to the Turkish government. As the member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's presidency Bakir Izetbegovic called Erdoğan to state that he was supporting the Turkish government and the 'brother Turkish nation', the leader of the Montenegro Islamic Community Rifat Feyzic claimed that Erdoğan was not only the Prime Minister of Turkish people, he was also the leader of the whole Islamic world.<sup>40</sup> In a reaction to the judicial process initiated against the political leaders of the AKP, in all mosques in Montenegro and Sandzak as well as in the Gazi Hüsrev Begova mosque in Sarajevo, there were prayers on Friday in support of Erdoğan's government.<sup>41</sup> This regional support was utilised by Erdoğan on various platforms as exemplified by his statement that the 'prayers of Bosnia would be enough for us.'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Hallo ich kann das irgendwie nicht einstellen

<sup>37</sup> Some AKP MPs openly supported the Freedom, Honour and People's Party. It was also reported in the press that an MP from the AKP was assigned the job of organizing Turkish origin Bulgarian citizens. <http://www.bursadabugun.com/haber/ak-parti-den-hurriyet-seref-ve-halk-partisi-ne-destek-215698.html>; <http://www.egedesonsoz.com/haber/bulgaristan-krizine-erdogan-el-koydu-sait-e-ozel-gorev/840628> (accessed 1 October 2019)

<sup>38</sup> B. Demirtaş: 'Justice and Development Party's Understanding of Democracy and Democratisation: Cultural Relativism and the Construction of the West as the 'Other'', Iran and the Caucasus, 22(3), 2018, pp. 308-323.

<sup>39</sup> Z. Öniş / M. Kutlay: 'Rising Powers in a Changing Global Order: The Political Economy of Turkey in the Age of BRICs', Third World Quarterly, 34(8), 2013, p. 1418.

<sup>40</sup> 'İzetbegović'ten Erdoğan'a destek' [Support from Izetbegovic to Erdogan], <http://yenisafak.com.tr/politika-haber/izzetbegovicten-erdogana-destek-7.1.2014-602541>; 'Bosna, Sancak, Karadağ'dan Erdoğan'a destek' [Support from Bosnia, Sandjak and Montenegro to Erdogan], <http://www.habercim19.com/gundem/bosna-sancak-karadagdan-erdogana-destek-h9378.html> (accessed on 5 May 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Erdoğan continued his speech by referring to some other ex-Ottoman cities with Muslim majorities: 'Prayers of Damascus would be enough for us as well as prayers of Cairo and Baghdad.' See <http://yenisafak.com.tr/video-galeri/bize-bosnanin-kahirenin-dualari-yeter/12351> (accessed on 7 May 2014).

## Conclusion

Turkey's EU accession process contributed to changing its foreign policy tools as it started to a greater extent to use economic and cultural soft power instruments. Ankara tried to use its European credentials as a means of legitimising its own policies.<sup>43</sup> The article showed that a logic of consequences has driven the path of Turkey's Balkan ties, as seen in its overlooking of different perceptions in the region of both the Ottoman past and contemporary Turkey itself.

This study analysed the dilemmas in Turkey's neighbourhood policy by considering the Balkans as a case study. It argued that there are some limitations to Turkey's Balkan policies – too much focus on religion and history, ignoring the perceptions and misperceptions of regional actors, an exaggeration of own power, own de-Europeanising tendencies in national politics. And it analysed the dilemma of Turkey's neighbourhood policy between protection of the status quo and implementation of an assertive foreign policy by risking friendly relations with countries of the region. Turkish foreign policy bears traces of both policy directions. Another dilemma is about Turkey acting multilaterally following international law or unilaterally in breach of international law and customs. These dilemmas can be clearly observed in the AKP's foreign policy in the Balkans. Finally, the results of Turkey's Syrian intervention again in 2019 might have repercussions for its Balkan policies as well, since it could have an impact on Turkey's position in global politics and could thus influence Ankara's relations with great powers, like the US and Russia.

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<sup>43</sup> D. Günay / K. Renda: 'Usages of Europe in Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East', *Journal of Balkan and Near East Studies*, 16(1), 2014, pp. 50-51.



## Political Implications of the Closer Cooperation Between Serbia and Turkey

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**Abstract:** This paper focusses on the political implications of the recent close cooperation between Serbia and Turkey. Examining the last ten years, the analysis looks into the developments at the bilateral and broader regional level in the period from 2009-2019. Based on interviews with Serbian and Turkish officials, and supported by statistical data and desk research, the study answers three main questions: 1) Who are the most important actors for Serbian-Turkish relations?; 2) Can the Turkish Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) be a role model to authorities in Serbia?; and 3) What is the influence of this relationship over inter-ethnic issues in the region? The indisputable progress of the recent period is somewhat surprising, considering the historical and religious dynamics in the region. In that respect, the paper will outline the differences and commonalities among the two countries, to create a background platform for answering the main research questions. At the end, the paper will zoom out of the presented data and focus on the bigger picture of the described developments. The conclusion summarises the Turkish influence in Serbia and then recaps the political implications of close relations between the two countries.

### Introduction

This paper aims to disentangle the political implications of close bilateral relations between Serbia and Turkey. As Turkish involvement in South East Europe has grown in recent years, many questions were raised about the new and bold Turkey. A scholarly analysis of the relationship between these two countries would be critical for better understanding of the broader political context. Focusing on the period between 2009 and 2018, the study assesses the scope and nature of Turkish influence in Serbia, using that as reference for further analysis.

2009 was chosen as the starting point of the review because it marks the year when Serbia officially applied for membership to the EU, after several setbacks related to the prosecution of war criminals. That same year, after an 18-month blockage, the EU unfroze the Interim Trade Agreement of Serbia's Stabilisation and Association Agreement and liberalised the visa regime for Serbian citizens.<sup>1</sup> Such events contributed toward an improved international image for the country, which many in Serbia hoped would lead to higher credibility and increased foreign investments. In addition, 2009 marks some significant developments related to Turkey as well: a Free Trade Agreement was signed between the two countries and the first visit of a high-ranking Turkish official (then-

President Abdullah Gül) to Serbia took place after a break of 23 years.

Based on data collected through qualitative interviews with Serbian and Turkish government officials and business leaders, as well as secondary data gathered from various financial and other relevant institutions, this paper will look at three core questions, in order to define the drivers and patterns of recent close cooperation. The questions will address the most important actors in the bilateral relationship, the possibilities of Turkey setting a role model for Serbia, and the influence over the inter-ethnic relations in the region. A general overview of the bilateral relations will be offered first, in order to highlight the main features and dominant trends in the relationship.

The findings of this study indicate a complex relationship whose implications move beyond the prevalent conceptualisations of Turkish involvement through 'Neo-Ottomanism' or interactions with Muslim communities. By looking into various political and economic facets, the paper suggests that Serbian – Turkish relations need to be observed further than the limited bilateral scope. Approaching the issue through the lens of a wider regional context gives us a more nuanced comprehension of the realities on the ground. The relationship is volatile and multifaceted, often influenced by the developments on the broader international scene. However, the skilful management

<sup>1</sup> <https://web.archive.org/web/20100108050415/http://www.europ>

[eanforum.net/news/791/eu\\_unfreezes\\_trade\\_agreement\\_with\\_serbia](http://eanforum.net/news/791/eu_unfreezes_trade_agreement_with_serbia) (Access date: 20.12.2018)

by both respective leaderships results in wielding of more political power, domestically and regionally.

### Overview of Serbian - Turkish relations

The closer political cooperation between Serbia and Turkey is simultaneously the cause and the result of closer relations in the fields of economy and soft power. The amount of Turkish investment in Serbia has been on the rise over the past few years, a reality often inviting criticism from Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). In that respect, several factors make the close cooperation somewhat surprising. First, the AKP leadership often explores Islamic links in its foreign policies, and is considerably invested in branding Turkey as the leading country in protecting Muslims around the world. On the other hand, during the notorious 1990s, the political and militant actions of extreme Serbian nationalists created the worst anti-Muslim record in the region. The myth of the Battle of Kosovo of 1389, rich in its portrayal of the other as Turkish/Muslim, was commonly exploited to mobilise nationalistic feelings against the “Turkified ones,” i.e. the regional Muslim population. Despite changes in political power, such narratives lingered even after the wars, fostering scepticism and hesitance on both sides.

Another surprising factor is the leadership of Aleksandar Vučić, during whose rule the relationship underwent a dramatic transformation, from what I call a “thawing” phase (2009-2013) to “honeymoon” stage (2014-2019). During the 1990s, Vučić was on the forefront of the Radical Party, earning his nationalistic fame with the statement “For one killed Serb, we will kill a hundred Muslims.”<sup>2</sup> The very same politician left the Radical Party, and in 2008, together with Tomislav Nikolić, formed the Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska Napredna Stranka - SNS). They won the elections in 2013 and have remained in power ever since, compiling a strongly positive record for their commitment to the EU. Contrary to the expectations of the Muslim populations in the Balkans, Vučić managed to open an entirely new chapter in Serbia’s relationship with Turkey.

The final surprising element of this relationship stems from the disproportionate relationship between these two countries, in terms of their size, economic, military, and other powers. Moreover, Turkey is a NATO member, a status that Serbia would hardly consider after the NATO bombing of 2000. Usually, countries that mark such close cooperation share

commonalities in their socio-economic and political configurations, as confirmed by such examples as the Baltic states or the Visegrad 4. Here we observe an almost David-Goliath relationship, two countries of considerably different composition and resources, exploring a close bilateral relationship.

It is vital to bear in mind that the mutual relations have not always flourished, and continuous efforts from both sides were necessary to reinvent the relationship. Observing Turkish involvement in the region, through its economic investments and tools of soft power, one could argue that Turkey was late in discovering Serbia in comparison to its Balkan neighbours. This phenomenon can be partly attributed to the prevalent conceptualisations of Serbia through the perspective of Ahmet Davutoğlu, Turkey’s former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister. During the early years of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP), Davutoğlu was the leading architect of Turkish foreign policies, propelling pan-Islamism as one of the leading principles and strong capacities of Turkish foreign policy. Hence, he considered Muslim communities to be the main bridges of closer cooperation with the respective Balkan countries. Consequently, Serbia was often treated as the “problematic” piece of a larger regional puzzle, approached through broader regional initiatives or observed through the lens of Bosnia or Kosovo. My interviews with the Turkish business community highlight similar perceptions: “We were very much affected by TV images from the war and thought that it would be risky for our lives and property if we come here.”<sup>3</sup>

Equally, Serbian intellectual (and political) elites were not comfortable with this new and bold Turkey re-emerging in the neighbourhood. Darko Tanasković, former Serbian ambassador to Turkey and university professor, published a book portraying the newly proactive Turkey through the lens of Neo-Ottomanism, thus shaping a compelling narrative in Serbian perceptions. The Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TIKA) had its coordination offices functioning in the neighbouring countries for several years while not emerging in Serbia until 2009. The formalisation of TIKA’s opening took place during the first visit of a high-ranking Turkish official to Serbia (President Abdullah Gül), following a 23-year break. Thus, the early period of renewed interaction was pervaded with ambivalence on both sides.

<sup>2</sup> <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a113168/Vucic-o-100-muslimana-izvucen-iz-konteksta.html> Access date: 10.10.2019

<sup>3</sup> Interview TUR2018\_16.

The Turkish diplomatic community was the first to signal authorities in Ankara that a change in approach was necessary, since: “Only through good relations with Serbia can we help others.”<sup>4</sup> It soon became clear that Serbia was the Balkan country with highest economic potential, and more importantly a capacity for regional leadership unmatched by its neighbours: “When you interact with officials and discuss developments in Serbia, you see the state everywhere, something that is not the case in BiH, Kosovo or any other [country of the region].”<sup>5</sup> Interestingly enough, these changes in attitudes coincided with several other developments on the Turkish political scene. The raging war in Syria and the events following the Arab spring shook Turkish leverage in the Middle East and severely disrupted access to Middle Eastern markets. These developments were shortly followed by Turkey’s downing of a Russian military airplane, prompting Russia to sever relations with Turkey and additionally damaging the Turkish export market. Soon thereafter, the balance of power shifted in the AKP leadership, gradually removing Davutoğlu from the spotlight. In such an environment, the quest for new economic opportunities became more urgent, eventually turning attention toward the Balkans.

To return to the present context, it is essential to underline several similarities in the political sphere, which despite the previous frictions, boost close cooperation between Serbia and Turkey. These include: multidimensional foreign policy, attitudes towards EU candidacy, rising authoritarianism, pragmatism and leading capacity in the region.

Examining the foreign policies of both countries, one quickly perceives that both pride themselves for being bridges between the East and the West. In this respect, it is worth stressing that the concept of “East” refers to different entities for each of these two countries. While Turkey refers to the Turkic republics and the Muslim countries of the Middle East, Serbia considers its East to be Russia. The officials on both sides often highlight these “unique characteristics” when claiming higher relevance on the international stage.

When it comes to their EU candidacy, the two countries share a similarity in treating membership above all as an economic advantage. Each leader is eager to benefit from the privileges offered by the EU (for the prosperity of their citizens), but much more reticent about adopting other EU values. This becomes

particularly apparent when we scrutinise the press freedom in each country. At the discursive level, the leaders send sometimes confusing messages. Erdoğan more than once has pointed to EU candidacy losing relevance in the Turkish context. However, the EU remains the biggest trading partner of Turkey, and therefore a vital asset at the political level as well. Reports on press freedom in Serbia also note a growing decline in recent years, with considerable limitation of critical voices and attacks on journalists.<sup>6</sup> Despite the contradictory statements, relations with the EU remain a significant resource of political credibility for leaders of both countries.

One striking similarity that significantly shapes the closeness of the mutual relationship is the rising authoritarianism in both regimes. Academics and pundits have repeatedly expressed concerns over non-Western involvement in Southeast Europe, as a possible source for importing non-liberal values and impeding the progress of democracy in this region. I reflect more on these tendencies later in the text, when discussing the AKP as a role model, but here it is sufficient to keep in sight the practical nature of autocratic regimes. The vast concentration of power around a single figure facilitates negotiation of further steps and enables considerable efficiency in delivering a given set of goals. The deep penetration through all echelons of power allows Vučić to bypass formal institutions and deliver results far more efficiently than any other leader in the region. Such ability equally strengthens his negotiation position vis-à-vis foreign partners, and also his leverage in the adjacent region. Such a position would not be possible in BiH, for example, due to its complicated administrative rule. Nor is such “efficiency” achievable in the other neighbouring countries.

Another thread that smoothly weaves into the political acting of both countries’ leaderships is the principle of pragmatism. As they are seeking higher bargaining power with other foreign partners, they are quite open to new solutions, and so to reframing the existing narratives. One such example is the switch from thawing to honeymoon stage, soon after the diplomatic crisis caused by Erdoğan’s statement during his official visit to Kosovo in October, 2013. On that occasion, Erdoğan stated that “Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo,”<sup>7</sup> which resulted in withdrawal of the Serbian president from the trilateral

<sup>4</sup> Interview TUR2019\_01

<sup>5</sup> Interview TUR2018\_12

<sup>6</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2017/serbia>  
Access date: 15.10.2019

<sup>7</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/10/28/Davutoğlu-Erdoğan-s-kosovo-statement-misinterpreted/> Access date: 15.10.2019

negotiations with BiH and Turkey, and the cooling of mutual relations. Within a couple years, i.e. once a significant number of Turkish investors entered Serbia and shaped their entry according to requests from Serbian authorities, the relationship morphed significantly. A high-ranking Turkish diplomat described the resolution of the situation as “working in separate files,” whereby both sides focused on items of mutual interest, while setting the Kosovo issue aside.<sup>8</sup> Again, recent Turkish involvement in Serbia is not driven by particular ideologies, but by economic benefits and possibilities of wielding more power, both domestically and regionally. This pragmatic approach makes their foreign policies not strategic, but rather ad-hoc, short-sighted, and oriented towards consumption by domestic audiences.

Beside the comparatively disproportionate scope of both countries’ power, one could easily argue that each one has the character of an anchor state in its regional context. The political climate in each one individually often has implications beyond its national borders. The most apparent example for Turkey is its recent interactions with Syria, while the outflow of the Serbian political climate becomes visible in cohabitations with Kosovo and BiH. The close alliance between Serbia and Turkey increases the added value in bargaining power of each individually. We can also observe this through the lens of changing balances of power on the world map, where turbulences easily affect fragmented actors. The exposure to fluctuations among greater powers brings these two countries into closer consultation and cooperation, therefore allowing them to enhance their bargaining positions. One prominent example is having a common input in the Bosnia issue, where a close alliance between Serbia and Turkey can significantly facilitate further policy steps.

### Who are the most important actors for Turkish-Serbian relations?

When considering the most significant partners of Turkish foreign policy in Serbia, the first who come to mind are the Bosniak political leaders: Rasim Ljajić (Social democratic Party of Serbia – SDPS), Sulejman Ugljanin (Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak – SDA), and eventually Muamer Zukorlić (Justice and Reconciliation Party – SPP). Ljajić is the current Deputy Prime Minister of Serbia and Minister of Trade, Tourism and Telecommunications. Ugljanin is the

president of SDA, and the former president of the Bosniak Council (bodies that are required by law in Serbia, aiming at promotion of minority rights, culture and education). He was an elected Member of Parliament in 2016, but delegated his mandate due to other commitments. Zukorlić is simultaneously a political and religious authority. He is the president of the SPP and elected MP since 2016. He was also the former President and Chief Mufti of the Islamic Community in Serbia (one of two existing official bodies, representing Muslim interests in Serbia). While this might seem an obvious answer, the reality is more complex. During the years of Davutoğlu’s active position, Sandžak (region in southwest Serbia, of majority Bosniak population) and its Bosniak population were often emphasised as the bridge between the two countries. A huge proportion of TİKA’s projects were focused in this area, thus reinforcing negative speculations about Turkey’s intentions in the region. Turkish diplomats invested efforts in including Ugljanin in the first government of Tadić, when the support of two more MP’s was critically needed to form a government.<sup>9</sup> Yet, throughout the last few years, Serbia has undergone political changes itself, accompanied by changes in the Turkish approach toward the country as well. Leading Turkish diplomats in Serbia were heavily engaged in signalling the necessity for change to Ankara, if Turkey wished to achieve a higher impact in dealing with Muslim communities.

It would be misleading to think that the government of Boris Tadić – the Democratic Party (DS) regime in power until defeated in 2012 by the SNS — was in a difficult relationship with its Turkish counterpart. The close friendship between Tadić’s foreign minister, Vuk Jeremić and Davutoğlu would be the first counterexample to such a view. However, the closeness between the two sides significantly intensified during the rule of Aleksandar Vučić, adding a different quality to the relationship. Indeed, Vučić and Erdoğan met six times during 2018. The change in mutual relations resulted from efforts on both sides. During the early years of proactive foreign policy propelled by the AKP, Turkey was not sufficiently engaged in Serbia. As previously explained, Serbia was treated as part of a larger regional puzzle and often observed through the lens of BiH or Kosovo. Leading Turkish diplomats were considerably engaged in bridging the gap. Ambassador Umar invested efforts in assisting the formation of Tadić’s government. Namely, DS won the elections, but despite the support

<sup>8</sup> Interview TUR2018\_1

<sup>9</sup> Suha Umar. 2015. Belgrad 500 Yıl Sonra. Boyut Yayınları.

from his coalition partners Ivica Dačić (Socialist Party), Mladjan Dinkić (G17) and Rasim Ljajić (SDPS), could not reach the majority threshold for government approval in Parliament. During the elections Ugljanin aligned with the opposed party camp led by Vojislav Koštunica (Democratic Party of Serbia -DSS), therefore leaving little space for potential collaboration with Tadić. Ambassador Umar proposed Ugljanin to switch the support of his two MPs to the DS government, which would in return grant him a ministerial position. The whole initiative would be supported by Turkey.<sup>10</sup> After several rounds of re-negotiations, the DS government was formed as described above. Umar's successor, ambassador Çolak started closer interactions with the then oppositional leader Tomislav Nikolić, who became Serbia's president after the elections of 2012. Nikolić remembered these acts during the initial period of his presidency. However, the warming of mutual relations was seriously set back by Erdoğan's October 2013 statement, bringing the Kosovo issue – the usual suspect – into public attention again. Serbia severed its ties, but interestingly enough, the bilateral relationship was reconfigured entirely in the following few years. This is best exemplified through the mandate of Ambassador Mehmet Kemal Bozay, who arrived in Serbia soon after Erdoğan's controversial statement. On the first National Day reception hosted by Bozay, most Serbian officials stayed away, as the state protocol had banned them in a sign of reaction to Erdoğan's statement. When Bozay left Serbia (4 years later), Prime Minister Vučić made an unprecedented diplomatic gesture and organised a special goodbye reception for Bozay, expressing gratitude for his contribution to mutual relations. Unsurprisingly, the number of Turkish investors in Serbia rapidly increased within this period, as the trade exchange grew from \$335,924 USD in 2009 to \$1,131,178 USD in 2017),<sup>11</sup> Halk Bank was opened, along with the Yunus Emre Cultural Institute. The current ambassador, Tanju Bilgiç inherited good relations, and continued to strengthen them further.

The recently flourishing mutual relations are to a large extent a reflection of the deepened personal relationship between the two heads of state. In 2018 they met six times, arranging different aspects of their joint endeavours. It is also noteworthy that they formed the High Council, composed from ministers of both governments and chaired by the two presidents. The Council meets annually, with each minister reporting on the contribution he or she has made

toward improving relations in their respective fields. And while this High Council might be a somewhat symbolic framing of their mutual commitment, it still is significant in light of previous trends. Erdoğan and Vučić are currently in direct communication and their pragmatism and style of rule bring them in even closer connection. As previously explained, the immense concentration of power around them enables them to penetrate various echelons when negotiating new policies, opening a broader political field of play. On the one hand, Serbia benefits from Turkish economic prosperity, through direct investment or assistance programs, while conversely, Turkey projects higher regional power resulting from the close relationship. In light of these developments, one can conclude that Vučić is the first and foremost important actor for Turkish policies in Serbia, exercising disproportionately higher agency than generally expected.

Other actors who are very important in the mutual relations are the Serbian Minister of Transport and Communications, Zorana Mihajlović, and the Serbian Minister of Interior Affairs, Nebojša Stefanović, who are both members of Vučić's SNS leadership. This stems from the nature of their respective positions. The Turkish infrastructural engagement in Serbia, namely the Sandžak roads and the "Peace Road," clearly explain the essence of Minister Mihajlović's role. Additionally, Turkey is highly invested in preserving stability and security in the region, which explains the close relation with Stefanović. One strong indicator of this close collaboration was the joint Serbian-Turkish traffic police patrols, active on the main highways in Serbia in summer 2019. During the summer, many members of Turkish diaspora drive along these roads on their way to and from Turkey, so this initiative was put forward to increase traffic safety. Another example is seen in efforts to deal with potentially "problematic" actors, which can undermine the image of Turkish leadership that Erdogan wishes to project in Serbia. One such case was the warning by the Serbian government to the organisers of the "Pride in Belgrade" event in 2016 not to allow space for their Turkish colleagues to criticise Erdoğan.<sup>12</sup> Potential expression of anger or criticism toward Turkey's government could jeopardise the excellent political relations, and the Serbian government representatives did not hesitate to prevent such possibilities.

<sup>10</sup> Suha Umar. 2015. Belgrad 500 Yil Sonra. Boyut Yayinlari.

<sup>11</sup> National Statistics Agency of the Republic of Serbia, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Goran Miletic. 2019. Presentation orally delivered during ASN Conference 2019. Columbia University, New York.



One continuously important actor for bilateral relations is Rasim Ljajić (of the SDPS Party, in coalition with SNS in current government), the Serbian Minister of Trade and Telecommunications. Ljajić participated in all recent governments, which, in addition to his Bosniak origin, make him a logical choice for close communication between the two sides. His pragmatism and moderate political views generated mutual trust - as an ethnic minority politician he was a significant representative of the Serbian side, and due to his familiarity with Islamic culture could act with greater directness and lubricate eventual tensions. On the other hand, the Turkish side was brought a step closer to the Serbian government, and given direct insight without risking controversial statements and challenges to the relationship with Belgrade. Moreover, Ljajić did not hesitate in urging the Turkish side to direct more assistance to the municipalities of predominantly Serb population, as means of breaking negative stereotypes. He was also closely involved in arranging smooth arrivals for new Turkish investors, which provided him with excellent communication with the business community as well.

Sulejman Ugljanin (of SDA) traditionally enjoys good relations with Turkey; it is a friendship that stretches over several decades. In 1993 he escaped to Turkey to avoid political prosecution in Serbia for allegedly endangering the territorial integrity of the Federative Republic of Yugoslavia and illegally possessing arms. The memoirs of Ambassador Umar point to Turkish diplomatic efforts to include Ugljanin in the government of Tadić, where Ugljanin later became a minister without portfolio, responsible for the development of the least developed municipalities. TIKa channelled several projects into Sandžak municipalities during this period. When Vučić came to power, he did not invite Ugljanin to be a part of the government. This significantly impaired the Serbian leadership's relations with Ugljanin, who thereafter issued a number of provocative statements about Sandžak's potential independence or close cooperation with authorities in Kosovo.

These actions did not sever Ugljanin's relations with the Turkish representatives, as Ugljanin has direct private connections, but they did introduce a layer of caution among diplomats. It is worth noting that during Vučić's government, Ugljanin was president of the Bosnian National Council, a body envisaged by Serbian legislation to represent ethnic minority interests. The majority of representatives in the Council are members of Ugljanin's party (SDA). During his last visit to Novi Pazar in 2018, Erdoğan was

greeted by Ugljanin, in a ceremony that was a bright display of winning people's hearts and minds. The chorus sang "My Sultan" to Erdoğan, adding a mighty emotional layer to the relationship between Sandžak Bosniaks and Turkey's leadership.

However, in his public speech in Novi Pazar, Erdoğan made clear that Turkey would not support any secessionist movements in Serbia. This invites the conclusion that a close relationship with Ugljanin will be preserved, especially for its symbolic value, but his political agenda is perceived as anachronistic and potentially troublesome for good relations with Belgrade. Ugljanin is evidently aware of and not pleased with such an attitude, and will instead direct his minority rights' endeavours toward the European Union. Occasionally heated debates among him and government representatives from Belgrade occupy the press, but these are often aimed at claiming political relevance and diverting public attention, rather than at achieving a real commitment to secession.

The relationship of Turkish authorities with Zukorlić, the third Bosniak political (and religious) representative, is rather volatile, marked by distrust on both sides and frequent challenges of authority. A major turning point in this relationship was the Turkish efforts for uniting the two Islamic Communities into a single one (throughout 2011). Ahmet Davutoğlu propelled the initiative during his years as Minister of Foreign Affairs. One major point of the unification agreement was the withdrawal of both Communities leaders, Muamer Zukorlić and Adem Zilkić, and the creation of a united Islamic Community with a new president. Just as the process seemed to have progressed, the whole initiative fell apart. The Turkish side understood this as undermining Davutoğlu's authority and good intentions, which later resulted in gradual withdrawal from closer interactions with Zukorlić's institutions. At a formal level, there was no open show of animosity. Moreover, Zukorlić often accepted invitations to events organised by Turkish officials during the early phase of the relationship. However, the unsuccessful unification efforts and Zukorlić's close connections with Arab initiatives contributed toward Turkish officials questioning his reliability. The current relationship can be described as subtle ignoring, occasional poking, eventual irritations and keeping each other at arm's length.

Furthermore, it would be naïve to say that Turkey completely detached from closer interactions with official Islamic Communities after the unsuccessful unification efforts in 2011. These are a crucial part of

Turkish foreign policy, yet far more complex in Serbia. The existence of ossified stereotypes against the Turks, reinforced by Neo-Ottomanism literature, together with two parallel Islamic Communities functioning in perpetual animosity, required continuous precaution by Turkish diplomats. Unlike in neighbouring countries, where Turkey exercised relatively straightforward relations with Muslim communities, such actions in Serbia were at times interpreted as undermining Serbian state authority. TIKa struggled with the persistent suspicion that it was active in Serbia solely to advance the interests of Sandžak, and so had to intensify its activities in non-Muslim municipalities to correct that image.

However, on the ground, and particularly in strategically important microcosmoses like Sandžak, Turkey cannot afford to lose its connection with the Muslims. Through its Diyanet, it provides support for the mosques and the imams, regardless of their affiliation. In such a way it navigates through the complicated relations of official institutions, preserving the image of a neutral actor concerned with the best interest of all Muslims. Turkey considers its strand of Islam, often described as “our Islam”, as the safeguard against Salafi influences in the region, and is thus highly invested in keeping a close relationship at local levels. Such policy is partly related to Turkish ambitions for branding itself as the top leading country in the Muslim world.

After the unsuccessful efforts to unify Serbia’s Islamic Communities, Turkey did not openly support one Community over the other. It did not want to be perceived as having a preference and therefore undermine its own mediating capacity. Moreover, actors from both Communities were invited and included in several initiatives and events. Turkey’s recent actions on the ground show an inclination toward the Islamic Community of Serbia, yet not in any straightforward way. TIKa has provided several donations for the Bayrakli Mosque in Belgrade (led by the Islamic Community of Serbia), the only remaining mosque in the capital. Despite the symbolic value of this mosque, no major architectural projects could be implemented there, as previous structures supported by Azerbaijan donations interfered with more substantial reconstruction work. TIKa did conduct a few projects on Islamic religious sites, such as the reconstruction of Šejh Mustafa Turbe, Damat Ali Paša Turbe and the Sultan Valide Mosque, but these were completed in cooperation with the respective state institutions responsible for protection of cultural

heritage (Cultural Monument Protection Institutes), not any of the Islamic Communities.

Another Muslim community that lives in Serbia are the Albanians, mainly located in three municipalities in the south: Preševo, Medvedja and Bujanovac. TIKa has had its donations in all three municipalities, with efforts in Bujanovac being among the first projects in Serbia. Here, a new school was built from scratch, but its official opening initially caused frictions. Namely, the municipal authorities displayed Albanian flags around the school, causing fierce reactions from the Serbian officials. The opening ceremony was finalised after several delays, once it was agreed to display no flags on the outside and few Turkish flags on the inside of the school. Turkey preserved good relations with these municipalities, but in light of potential problems with Belgrade, channelled its further actions through the “Friends of South Serbia” initiative. This platform was formed by the donor community in Serbia, to address the least developed municipalities. The Albanian municipalities often address their existing problems through this platform, one being lack of textbooks in Albanian language. Usually, several countries and international donors take joint action in solving these issues. In such manner, Turkey is still involved in assistance, but from a more internationalised platform. It enables them to partake in stability efforts, without itching any ethnic issues or raising questions about Turkish intentions in Serbia.

Speaking of municipal actors, Turkey enjoys quite a close relationship with the mayors of Sandžak municipalities: Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, Prijepolje, Nova Varoš and Priboj. The link is more intense with the first three, having Muslim majority population, and every year a significant portion of TIKa’s budget is allocated in that direction. However, these are not the only municipalities practising close relations. Good examples are observed in Veliko Gradište, mainly due to the continuous work on the reconstruction of the Ram Fortress. Other positive models stretch out through southern and parts of central Serbia, usually resulting from good cooperation through TIKa assistance projects or the presence of Turkish investors in the respective municipality.

To summarise, Turkey is involved with a wide variety of actors in Serbia. The most important actor is President Vučić, whose power trickles down to all echelons, oiling potential frictions. It is thanks to this relationship that Turkey could get more involved economically, but also through soft power. The other important actors are also from the sphere of central authority, such as the ministers of interior affairs or of

infrastructure. Their positions are vital for Turkish interests in the region and therefore bring closer cooperation. Another such actor is Minister of Trade Ljajić, largely due to his position in negotiating deals, but partly reinforced by his Bosniak background. Municipal actors are also involved in the equation of Turkish-Serbian relations, with particular accent on municipalities with greater TIKa involvement or the presence of Turkish investors. In religious terms, Turkey cultivates reasonably good relations with both Islamic Communities, with subtle preference for the Islamic Community of Serbia. At the time being, developments point to continued restricted acting in that respect. Turkish officials will maintain good relations with Sulejman Ugljanin and his body of supporters. This is mostly due to the existing private friendship, but also the symbolic importance of this relation. However, Turkey will refrain from efforts that could jeopardise its closer relations with Belgrade, a strategically important relationship for legitimising the Turkish presence in the region. Such an approach would further nurture the image of Turkey as a country involved with all ethnic communities and having the mediating capacity in protecting the interests of all actors in the Balkans.

### Is the AKP a role model for Serbian authorities?

In addressing role models, I will partly rely on Joseph Nye's concept of soft power. According to Nye, the agent country creates attraction and a role model to follow through its values of liberal democracy. As Nye has argued, a country can emit soft power relying on three main resources: "its culture (in places where it is attractive to others), its political values (when it lives up to them at home and abroad), and its foreign policies (when they are seen as legitimate and having moral authority)."<sup>13</sup> The political values immediately pose the question of whether Turkey can be such a role model for the Balkans. Turkey can certainly afford expensive state tools of soft power, such as TIKa and the Yunus Emre Cultural Institute. In parallel, non-state mechanisms communicate a more extensive and more popular image of Turkey beyond its political actions (soap operas being one obvious example). Overall, I argue that the Turkish model does not fit entirely into Nye's concept of soft power, but the country nevertheless generates a considerable amount of attraction in the region.

To continue with the analysis proposed by Nye, Turkey definitely cannot be a leading example in democratic values. Due to the Gezi protests and all the domestic developments following the failed coup d'état, its image regarding such values has been severely damaged. As one Turkish diplomat reflected on this: "Serbia will not listen to us, but to the EU, or even far more to Germany. Not even the US on these." What is even more critical here is the receiving end of such a relationship. Namely, the nature of the current regime in Serbia suggests that while Turkey cannot export democracy, Serbia is not particularly interested in importing it either. The stabilitocracy literature highlights the different turns to autocracy that Serbia has undergone in recent years, while simultaneously preserving its image of commitment to EU membership. Moreover, the EU often turns a blind eye to these developments, as the price for leaders who deliver political stability.<sup>14</sup> Yet, this should not be misinterpreted as the EU having entirely lost its legitimacy. Recent events might have shaken its credibility, but the EU still is crucial actor for both countries.

Another field where one could think of Turkey as a role model is in its multidimensional foreign policy. I submit that Serbia, despite the interruptions of the 1990s, has a much longer and stronger tradition stemming from its Yugoslav heritage. Yugoslavia was a leading country of the Non-Alignment movement, and Serbia still uses some of those relations in its foreign policies. Such a multidimensional approach is mostly related to the power shifts at the global level, where both actors try to capitalise on their historical and socio-economic background to enhance their international legitimacy. Thus, despite their disproportionate differences, the two countries are even more motivated to accumulate added value in the Balkans, through their alliance.

One sphere where both Serbian and Turkish officials confirm that Turkey sets a prominent role model is in the economic realm. Despite its recent currency crisis, Turkey is seen on a longer time scale and treated as a regional success story. The lira crisis might slow the arrival of new investors, as the minimum wage in Turkey has fallen below that in Serbia. Yet, this will not be a lengthy trend (the authorities will quickly correct the minimum wage), and future investors can be expected to plan on much longer timescales when deciding to locate to Serbia. All the countries trading with Turkey see deficits at the domestic level, which clearly highlights Turkish economic might. Another

<sup>13</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., 2004. *Soft Power – The Means to Success In World Politics*. Public Affairs, New York, p.11.

<sup>14</sup> Florian Bieber, 2018. Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans. *East European Politics*, 34(3), pp.337-354.

marker is the commitment to attracting more Turkish investors who provide employment in regions of economic scarcity.

Concerning working culture, the business representatives I interviewed pointed out two opposing realities. Some talked about the necessity of learning from Turks about “hard work and efficiency”, while several Turkish businessmen admired the “work-life” balance existing in Serbia and long forgotten in the capitalist society of Turkey.<sup>15</sup> Several Serbian entrepreneurs expressed their positive surprise with the offer of sophisticated technological products, fully designed and produced in Turkey: “We were used to finding these only in EU countries. Now we can import them from Turkey – the quality is the same, but it is much closer, cheaper and faster.”<sup>16</sup> According to Nye, a country’s economic power cannot be considered as soft power resource, but in the case of Turkey, it is the primary resource of attraction.

When considering Turkish influence in the Balkans, Western actors are mostly concerned with its autocratic tendencies and the possibility of infecting the Balkans. In my opinion, the Balkan nations did not need any external involvement in that respect, as they already developed authoritarianism in domestic conditions. Turkey is not a role model in that respect, as Serbia itself developed several homegrown models of autocracy during recent years. Within the framework of competitive authoritarianism, it is debatable whether the country ever reached a sufficient degree of democratic rule in the first place.<sup>17</sup> Is the current regime an example of democratic backsliding or just another shade of authoritarianism? However, Turkey may inspire a deepening of such a code of conduct in the future. As previously explained, the two national leaders share various commonalities in their ruling style, which motivate them to expand the scope of their power outreach. Such circumstances will continue the trend of reaching decisions behind closed doors, efficiently diffused throughout the whole socio-political bloodstream. Again, the broader international context should be kept in sight, especially in the light of a gradual return to power politics.

### Influence over inter-ethnic relations

Serbia is a multi-ethnic country, though its recent history does not represent a glorious portfolio in

dealing with minority issues. Relations with Muslim communities still exhibit missteps, and that is where the relationship with Turkey gains augmented value. There are two major Muslim communities in the neighbourhood and in Serbia proper - the Bosniaks, in the region of Sandžak and BiH; and Albanians, in three municipalities in the south: Bujanovac, Medvedja and Preševo, but also in Kosovo and Albania. I will start with the Bosniaks within the territorial borders of Serbia, and gradually highlight the intersections in effort to sketch the bigger picture.

The people of Sandžak bring a significant emotional component to their relationship with Turkey, which is not surprising given recent and distant history. Many Bosniaks from this region migrated to Turkey during the 20th century, often maintaining family ties that remain vibrant. Additionally, considerable numbers of young people from Sandžak gained higher education in Turkey through state scholarships, and many of these graduates have returned to live in their hometowns. The regional wars and nationalistic tensions are not a distant memory for many Bosniaks who, despite being Serbian citizens, were treated as “others” and hence targeted for their Muslim identity. The complex problems BiH faces, together with some idiosyncrasies of local outlook, prevent them from co-identifying more closely with Bosnia. Yet Turkey exemplifies a big brother, who not only did well in life but also did not forget his siblings. All the above helps to explain why the visits of Turkish officials to Novi Pazar sometimes cause such sentiments and fanfare.

However, Sandžak’s connection to Turkey should not be overly sentimentalised, as there are inevitable reactions to the complete lack of Turkish investments here. The area suffers from high unemployment, while many Turkish factories located their businesses in majority Serb municipalities, along the main highways. Empirical data points to several enthusiastic Turkish investors who initially considered placing their companies in Sandžak, but were soon discouraged by the poor infrastructure and dysfunctional institutions. This nevertheless increased the dissatisfaction of Sandžak Bosniaks who, though grateful for the assistance, need long-term solutions. Turkish officials are aware of this reality and hence highly invested in “not losing Sandžak.” They partly cushion the lack of investments by channelling considerable development assistance to these municipalities. Another layer of this policy is the support for the reconstruction of the

<sup>15</sup> Interview SRB2018\_8, Interview TUR2018\_8 and Interview TUR2018\_17.

<sup>16</sup> Interview SRB2018\_5

<sup>17</sup> Levitsky, S. and Way, L.A., 2010. Competitive authoritarianism: Hybrid regimes after the Cold War. Cambridge University Press.



local roads between Novi Pazar, Tutin and Sjenica. Unfortunately, this project was initially promised during Turkish officials' first visits to the region, but only recently pushed toward fruition. The construction of the Peace Road between Belgrade and Sarajevo might eventually boost the economic development of this region, due to the relative proximity to the new routes.

In assisting with inter-ethnic relations, Turkey may capitalize on its close relations with the mayors of the Sandžak municipalities, but even more importantly, on its connection to Rasim Ljajić. As previously explained, Ljajić is a key actor, as his political alliance with Belgrade does not risk Turkey's good relations with the Serbian leadership. Turkey will also nurture the relationship with Sulejman Ugljanin and his supporters, but not at the price of undermining ties with Belgrade. In the current Serbian system of power sharing, Ugljanin is perceived as a politician of expired leverage. Thus, attention will be directed through the Bosniak National Council. Videos of warm welcomes in Novi Pazar become extremely valuable for broadcasting to the domestic Turkish audience, as they portray Erdoğan as an influential statesman. Maintaining an image of a protector of Muslims in the world is a significant layer in AKP's foreign policies, meaning that interactions with Ugljanin will remain relevant going forward.

Relations with Albanian communities mark a somewhat different story in Serbia. They do receive support – even more so recently through international donor platforms. The next inevitable question is about the Turkish role vis-a-vis the Kosovo issue. Turkey is supporting the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue, while keeping a clear position on Kosovo's independence. The latter has provoked friction at particular points of the mutual relationship, but has been resolved in the interests of both sides. The growing relationship now results in requests for a lessening of lobbying on Kosovo's behalf in international organisations. Additionally, Turkey is vocal in not supporting the initiative for a land swap between Serbia and Kosovo, as this would shake the regional balance with Bosnia, a consideration of vital importance to Turkey. According to an anonymous Turkish diplomat: "When tensions in that region increase, Turkey's attention and involvement increase as well."<sup>18</sup>

Analysis of the implications on inter-ethnic relations inevitably invites discussion about BiH. Several events

on the ground indicate that Serbian-Turkish intervention stems from the very top. One example is the visit of the president of Republika Srpska, Miroslav Dodik, to Turkey, marking two firsts for him – the first time for him to represent all of BiH, and the first time to officially visit Turkey. While it is clear that Dodik benefited from the power vacuum inside the Bosnian Federation, it can still be considered a success for a representative of Republika Srpska to be included in direct official communication with Turkey, as Turkish officials have mainly circumvented them. In this example, one can observe the commitment and value that both Vučić and Erdoğan, bring to preserving their high-quality relationship. Since Turkey was cautious in its relations with Bosniak and Albanian representatives in Serbia, Vučić clearly signalled to Dodik, conversely, to keep a low profile while in Turkey. Turkish officials were conscious of Dodik being cooperative, which was not sufficient to consider him a reliable regional partner. It would be no surprise if Dodik changes his rhetoric abruptly and enters regional politics from an ethnic angle analogous to the approach of Ugljanin, disinterring old ghosts from the 1990s. It is in this constellation that one can see the value added by a close alliance between the Serbian and Turkish leadership. The two of them can practice control over smaller, yet important actors in negotiating more substantial policies. During Erdoğan's latest visit to Serbia in October 2019, the trilateral meetings (between Turkey, Serbia, and BiH) were brought to life again, with particular attention given to the Sarajevo-Belgrade road.<sup>19</sup>

Overall, one could say that Turkish-Bosniak relations are not a marriage of convenience, but of persisting affection. As in similar unions, there are occasional disagreements and perpetual renegotiations of status. The position of the primary breadwinner in the relationship is quite clear, and for the sake of perpetuating the mutually beneficial relationship, blind eyes are turned toward Turkey's closeness with Belgrade's leadership. The interactions with the Albanian communities are mainly channelled through multi-actor mechanisms, creating two-fold success – support for the communities and preserving good relations with Vučić. A proper analysis of the implications of a close Serbian-Turkish alliance over inter-ethnic relations necessarily includes BiH and Kosovo. As previous examples showed, this is one of the crucial points of attraction for both leaderships, thus driving continuous commitment to preserving a

<sup>18</sup> Interview TUR2018\_1

<sup>19</sup>

<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3688850/trilate>

[rala-srbija-turska-bih-i-pocetak-gradnje-auto-puta-.html](http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/politika/3688850/trilate)  
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Access



prosperous relationship. They can rely upon each other's specific capacities when managing inter-ethnic issues, both domestically and regionally.

## Conclusion

Before summarising the implications of closer cooperation between Serbia and Turkey, it would be useful to recap Turkish influence in Serbia. As the frequent conferences and think-tank events confirm, it has recently been a heated topic, infused with an abundance of mysteries and misinterpretations. When "measuring" that influence (to the extent that it is quantifiable), it is essential to examine two paradigms: a) Turkish influence in Serbia *per se*; and b) Turkish influence in Serbia compared to EU influence.

Numbers can help to a certain extent to understand the dynamics. Regarding the first paradigm, and basing our assessment on the extent of mutual trade exchange and foreign investment, Turkish influence in Serbia has clearly been on the rise over the past few years (see Table 1 below). This in itself is an indicator of closer cooperation, and of rising influence. However, when numbers are compared with the weight of the EU, it is clear that the two do not play in the same league. The trade exchange or foreign investment of a number of individual EU member countries (comparison with the EU as a whole would not be logical), dwarfs the extent of Turkish involvement (see Table 2 below).

Table 6: Trade exchange between Serbia and Turkey 2009-2018 expressed in millions of US dollars. <sup>1</sup>

Year	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Amount in USD	335.924	410.818	588.320	625.503	749881	820.589	815.784	926.972	1.131.178

Table 7: Export-import quotas between Serbia and Germany/Turkey respectively, expressed in thousands of euros. <sup>2</sup>

	Year	Export (in thousands EUR)	Import (in thousands EUR)
Germany	2009	623.787	1.385.487
Turkey		32.057	208.127
Germany	2012	1.306.556	1.697.796
Turkey		164.695	399.403
Germany	2015	1.503.773	1.988.022
Turkey		223.919	510.501
Germany	2018	1.942.240	2942228
Turkey		251.571	832.656

At the political level, the EU matters very much in Serbia. The EU's credibility might have been challenged recently, and the EU's attractiveness might be in predominantly economic terms, but these moderating influences will not undermine Serbia's commitment to membership. Additionally, the significance of the EU for both Serbia and Turkey is what broadly defines the closer economic relationship

between them. Namely, the EU is Turkey's largest trading partner, and the majority of Turkish producers prefer truck transportation over rail, sea, and air. Placing production of Turkish companies in Serbia provides such manufacturers with a much closer connection to the EU, reducing both miles and borders. In addition, even manufacturers situated in Turkey desire uninterrupted transportation of their

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Agency of the Republic of Serbia, 2018

<sup>2</sup> National Statistics Agency of the Republic of Serbia, 2018

goods, as the fastest route passes through Serbia. It is thus significant that both Serbia and Turkey have a joint interest in close relations with the EU and its highly attractive market.

Media and pundits have frequently depicted Turkey as an actor competing with the EU in the Balkans, which is partly understandable considering the visibility of Turkey's involvement. Instead of orientalising Turkey and portraying it as more exotic (and therefore more powerful) than it is, a simple look into economic statistics of Serbia-EU relations reveals a different reality. Moreover, Serbian-Turkish relations are sensitive to tensions, with the diplomatic incident with Kosovo being a clear example. It is the continuous effort of both sides to strengthening ties and smoothing over potential problems that has recently kept the relationship so prosperous. In a way, this submerged tension blinking in the background intensifies the commitment of both countries, as good relations enable much greater manoeuvring potential for both in the region.

However, there are specific cleavages in the Serbian domestic and regional context where Turkey's power amplifies. The frictions with the Albanian and Bosniak communities, or issues between the Islamic Communities, exemplify such cases. The earlier years of Turkish involvement were burdened by mistrust of their intentions and suspicions of the possible misuse of such power. The recent period shows how mutual coordination can magnify such power for the benefit of both leaderships. Unlike EU assistance, Turkey does not impose any conditionality on Serbia. As the two leaders share similar pragmatism and both enjoy vast concentrations of power in their respective countries, they can directly negotiate joint solutions and policies, without any additional pressures. Such communication opens a much more extensive field of play for both countries, and this is where the political implications become visible.

The close cooperation between these two countries increases their potential for projecting more domestic and regional power. At the domestic level, Serbia benefits from the various assistance programs offered through TIKa, in some ways delegating its state responsibilities to a foreign donor (providing quality education and health care facilities, support of agriculture etc.). This possibility becomes even more attractive in areas of "problematic" ethnic background, where Belgrade often lacks enthusiasm to invest, wholly aside from the money. Additionally, newly arrived Turkish investors boost the Serbian economy, but this has a political dimension as well.

Many of these factories are placed in small towns with high unemployment, which then stimulates the image of Vučić as a leader who brings solutions for his people. This easily translates into mobilising voters for his re-election. Turkey also explores this relationship for domestic purposes. As explained previously, images from interactions in Serbia are broadcast to a domestic Turkish audience, reinforcing the image of Erdoğan as a capable statesman, powerful beyond Turkey's borders.

At the regional level, the close coordination enables the two countries to take a common stance on BiH. Hence, Turkey can push the leadership of the Bosnian Federation, while Vučić uses his leverage over the leadership of Republika Srpska, with each pushing his own selected policy outcomes. The power vacuum caused by decreased US involvement and the inability of the EU to deal with post-Dayton Bosnia and Herzegovina is what extends this unique opportunity. In this way, Turkey also increases its mediating relevance in the eyes of Western partners. One example that demonstrates this process is the Turkish support for the construction of the "Peace Road" between Belgrade and Sarajevo, which the EU dismissed as unfeasible. Through this initiative, Turkey solidifies its relationship with BiH and Serbia, while projecting more power vis-à-vis Western actors.

The strong cooperation between Turkey and Serbia extends to security and aspects of interior affairs as well. While this brings more stability to both partners and the region, it is accompanied by the diminution of liberal-leaning policies. State officials refrain from criticism on issues of human rights or press freedoms and instead prominently proclaim positive cooperation. They rely on each other's particular capabilities to address problems on their respective domestic agendas – downplaying issues with minorities, political prisoners, or public criticism. And while authoritarianism continues its advancement, these developments are rarely exposed to the broader public.

But there is no escaping the importance of rising authoritarianism on both sides – the close relationship between the two leaders has proven very fruitful and efficient for both states. On the one hand, it serves various domestic purposes, while on the other it maintains the status of anchor state for each respective country. Despite Serbia being much smaller than Turkey, the strong concentration of power around Vučić enables a better regional position for Serbia vis-à-vis its neighbours. These factors, together with numerous administrative, political and industrial

capacities (many remnant from former Yugoslavia), push Serbia several steps ahead of BiH, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Kosovo. For all these reasons, Serbia is an attractive economic and political partner, and hence nurtures good relations with other actors on the wider international level – such as Russia, China, and the United Arab Emirates – while preserving its EU candidate status. The involvement of various foreign actors reinforces the image of Serbia as a key player in the Balkans, both economically and politically. In the light of its own crisis, the EU seems unwilling to impose any restrictions on the spreading of autocracy, as long as the leadership preserves stability and progresses with the Kosovo negotiations.

In summary, the close cooperation between Serbia and Turkey appears destined to affirm the belief in authoritarianism as a most efficient mode of rule, able to deliver prompt results on domestic and foreign level. Decisions will continue to be reached behind closed doors, often negotiated in the interest of the political elites. “Problematic” actors, whether civil activists, political opponents or potentially troublesome figures, will be subtly pushed away from shaping the agenda, while the two nations continue publicly to communicate the image of strong leadership and work that benefits their people. On a more positive note, the close relationship contributes to greater stability in the region, especially in relation to the smaller, yet challenging political actors. These will face more obstacles in providing support and approval for their ethnically based policies. This is particularly valuable in the areas in Serbia mainly populated with minorities, but even more so vis-a-vis BiH. The construction of the “Peace Road” should additionally strengthen the economic relations between the regions, narrowing the space for extreme nationalism in the future. Time remains the test to confirm the sustainability of such endeavours.

## Pro-Turkish activism and media in Bosnia and Herzegovina (2002-2015)

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the official and unofficial influence of the Republic of Turkey in Bosnia in the period of the AKP rule (2002-today). The paper asks which discourses of politicians and activists from Turkey and Bosnia were used for the promotion and legitimation of Turkey's presence in Bosnia. Additionally, the author seeks to present the main arguments from his recently published book "Asserting Turkey". He argues that the main promoters of the contemporary Turco-Bosnian cordial ties were actors he describes as members of the conservative Islamic scene in Turkey and Bosnia, political parties (AKP, SDA) and religious actors (Sufi groups, Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina) but, as the analysis of printed media shows, in the predominantly Bosniak part of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the support was present also in the more mainstream context. The discourses used to promote the Turkish presence in the Bosnian setting heavily relied on the notions of the common Ottoman legacy, but other themes were also used (humanitarian assistance, economic investment, etc). The paper focuses on three areas of analysis: qualitative analysis is applied for the discourses of the official Turkish policy on Bosnia and the Bosnian conservative media. In turn, the Bosnian mainstream printed media were studied with a corpus-assisted approach.

### Introduction

Turkish foreign policy under the conservative AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) party (2002 – present) is usually seen as a product of a political and cultural transformation within the Turkish elite that led to the greater acceptance of the Islamic and the Ottoman heritage. After gaining power with massive popular support in 2002, the AKP was able gradually to create and impose an alternative foreign policy, based largely on values of the conservative political spectrum in Turkey, in contrast to previous Kemalist, secularist policies.<sup>1</sup> AKP-led Turkey has shown a great deal of interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and has managed to establish its influence in this Balkan country. This influence is especially strong with Bosniak conservative political and mainstream Islamic religious actors.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Turkish state actors have become increasingly visible through their programmes of financing the renovation of Ottoman historical heritage, mosque building and developmental aid.

Bosnian media mostly positively covered the Turkish presence in the country, with the Bosniak conservative media becoming the main propagators. Nevertheless, the Turkish foreign policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina under the AKP hasn't been merely a matter of foreign policy, but also an integral part of Turkey's internal political dynamics. Contemporary Turkey's attitude toward Bosnia has been heavily influenced by the presence of a large Muslim population and by the Ottoman cultural heritage in the country, as well as by perceptions of the 1992-1995 Bosnian war. During the 1992-1995 war and its aftermath, the Turkish conservative scene profited from the situation by using the narrative of an endangered ex-Ottoman Muslim population in Bosnia, threatened with extinction, for the plight of which Kemalist Turkey had no concern, the only true supporters of which were, supposedly, the conservative Turks, who insisted on providing assistance to the endangered Muslim communities

<sup>1</sup> For the transformation of the Turkish foreign policy after AKP came to power and Neo-Ottomanism see Yücel Bozdağlıoğlu, "Modernity, Identity and Turkey's Foreign Policy," *Insight Turkey*, 10, no. 1 (2008), pp. 55-70; Nicholas Danforth, "Ideology and pragmatism in Turkish foreign policy: from Atatürk to the AKP," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, 7(2008), no. 3, pp. 83-95; Bahar Rumelili, "Turkey: Identity, Foreign Policy, and Socialization in a Post-Enlargement Europe," *Journal of European Integration*, 33 (2011), no. 2, pp. 235-49; Kerem Öktem et al. (eds.), *Another Empire? A Decade of Turkey's Foreign Policy under the Justice and Development Party* (Istanbul: Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012); Günther Seufert, *Außenpolitik und Selbstverständnis. Die gesellschaftliche Fundierung von Strategiewechsel in der Türkei* (Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik – Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2012); Riva Kastoryano (ed.), *Turkey between Nationalism and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2013); C. Saraçoğlu and Ö.

Demirkol, "Nationalism and Foreign Policy Discourse in Turkey Under the AKP Rule: Geography, History and National Identity", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 42 (2015), no. 3, pp. 301–319;

<sup>2</sup> For Turkish official and unofficial foreign policy, including religious actors, in the Balkans since 1990s see; Kerem Öktem, *New Islamic actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's return to the Muslim Balkans*, Paper presented at the conference "After the Wahhabi Mirage: Islam, politics, and international networks in the Balkans" (Oxford: European Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2010), available at <http://balkanmuslims.com/pdf/Öktem-Balkan-Muslims.pdf>, accessed on March 10, 2016, pp. 21-25.; Birgül Demirtaş, "Turkey and the Balkans: Overcoming Prejudices, Building Bridges and Constructing a Common Future", *Perceptions. Journal of International Affairs*, Summer 2013, pp. 163-183.

related to Turkey on the basis of Islamic and Ottoman cultural solidarity. The AKP government has, ever since it came to power in 2002, been striving to acquire the role of Bosnia's protector and to forge special relations with Bosnia.<sup>3</sup> The topic of Bosnia – as well as of the Balkans in general – emerged as an important topic as part of foreign policy that increasingly championed the use of the Ottoman heritage as a foreign policy tool. In the post-2007-08 period in particular, when Turkish foreign policy took a more conservative turn, its discourse on Bosnia produced by the representatives of the Turkish state and public institutions as well as of non-official activists relied on an exclusively positive view of the Ottoman historical heritage, asserting simultaneously Turkey's role as the region's leader and the protector of regional stability and the Bosnian statehood as well as of the very existence of Bosnian Muslims. On the other hand, a significant part of the Bosniak population and elite – primarily the leadership of the conservative party SDA (*Stranka demokratske akcije*) and by far the largest Muslim organization, Islamic Community in Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH) – have eagerly accepted and supported the notion of special relations with Turkey, in which they saw a possibility for the affirmation of the Bosnian Muslim identity, as well as for political security and economic prosperity.<sup>4</sup> In addition to purely political and economic influence (deemed by many as a rather minor one), the Turkish presence among Bosniaks and other Balkan Muslim groups displays strong cultural, educational and religious features. The discourses of both the Bosniak and the Turkish conservative scenes, the main actors in this development, have heavily relied on the Ottoman legacy, which provided the general framework of communication. While completely dominant within the conservative Muslim media in Bosnia, Turkish influence and pro-Turkish activism, albeit in a less direct form, has also had some impact on the mainstream Bosnian media, especially in those parts of the country with a Bosnian Muslim majority.

The enhanced activities of Turkish governmental and non-governmental actors in Bosnia aroused a considerable level of controversy in some regional circles and started a great deal of, often very wild and politically motivated, speculation on the nature and

extent of the Turkish presence in this country.<sup>5</sup> My research is an attempt to move away from such a heated debate. In my book *Asserting Turkey in Bosnia* (Harrassowitz, 2017) I studied the language and message of the Turkish state and non-state groups concerning foreign policy (especially relating to Bosnia) and the adaption of these messages by local actors in Bosnia that want to promote Turkey. In other words, the focus of my research was the approach of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP to Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as the use of this discourse from Turkey by the network of Turkish and local actors in Bosnia to support the Turkish foreign policy in that country. I call this phenomenon 'pro-Turkish activism' in Bosnia. Besides adding to the analysis of this discourse and the actors producing them, this study attempts to contribute to the analysis of the cultural dynamics among Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead of viewing Bosniaks as merely the objects and consumers of Turkish discourse, as well as minor players in the network disseminating them, I rather investigated their autonomous operations and their reactions and local adaptations of the originally Turkish message. I wanted to look into how the discourses and actors that emerged in this framework – both in Turkey and in Bosnia – interact and respond to each other, and how they have been adapting to the local challenges in the context of the recent regional conflicts, the pragmatic interests of the Turkish state and other Turkish elites in the post-Yugoslav space. By exploring this subject, I also had to research other important features of Turkish foreign policy – its planning in Turkey and implementation in Bosnia – as well as the phenomena of the Islamic conservative activism in both countries as the most important player in the political and cultural rapprochement between the two countries. To the purpose of the research two main questions were posed:

1. "How were the discourses under investigation structured: what were the topics and rhetorical means they implemented?";
2. "What was the underlying motivation for the use of particular discursive strategies and what other conditions shaped their production?"

<sup>3</sup> For the Turkish role in Bosnia under AKP see also Alida Vračić. & Kerem Öktem. "Two views on... The Balkans: Alida Vracic and Kerem Öktem," *Turkish Review*, 1 September, 2013, available at [http://www.turkishreview.org/interviews/two-viewson-the-balkans-alida-vracic-and-kerem-Öktem\\_540692](http://www.turkishreview.org/interviews/two-viewson-the-balkans-alida-vracic-and-kerem-Öktem_540692), accessed March 10, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> For the general currents among contemporary Bosnian Muslims including the convergence between conservatism and ethnic

nationalism see Dino Abazović, *Bosanskohercegovački muslimani između sekularizacije i desekularizacije* (Zagreb – Sarajevo: Synopsis, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> See for example Darko Tanasković, *Neoosmanizam. Doktrina i spoljnopolička praksa*. 2nd ed. (Beograd: Službeni glasnik, 2011).



The texts that were created by Turkish foreign policy actors in Turkey and pro-Turkish actors in Bosnia in a specified time were approached through the prism of a theoretical framework called critical discourse analysis (CDA). In addition to purely qualitative CDA – observation of chosen cases in textual material - which dominated my research, I decided to use another approach that needs further explanation: synergy between computer-generated methods of corpus analysis and qualitative discourse analysis on the basis of digitized textual collections or corpora, so-called corpus-assisted CDA, which combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. In the first part of the book much emphasis was given to the context – historical, societal, institutional, political and other backgrounds of the actors involved in the production, dissemination and/or adaptation of Turkish foreign policy discourse in Turkey and Bosnia. I chose three separate focuses in the investigation of discourses used by pro-Turkish activists in Bosnia. The first focus dealt with the role of Bosnia in Turkish Foreign Policy as developed by the Turkish political elite. Here, the analysis was only qualitative. These positions are very often reproduced by supporters of Turkey in Bosnia. I especially investigated the utterances of former FM Ahmet Davutoğlu and Prime Minister (later President) Erdoğan on basis of source material ranging from Davutoğlu's academic writing, Turkish official statements to Erdoğan's speeches and Turkish newspaper articles. This research shows Bosnia as one of the key symbolic places in the AKP discourse which is heavily influenced by references to the Ottoman era. It has primarily used Bosnia as a potent symbol of Muslim persecution and the destruction of the Ottoman heritage, often employed for mobilizing support among Turkish conservatives and Turks with Balkan roots. The determination to establish the presence in Bosnia was almost exclusively a product of need to project Turkish leadership as doing something to help disregarded Ottoman and Muslim relatives as well to gain respect internationally. The second focus of my research were texts produced by the most ardent Bosnian pro-Turkish activists themselves, namely the groups and individuals I call the Bosnian Muslim conservative scene. These groups adhere to the mainstream culturally Ottoman Sunni Islam and are close to the leadership of SDA and ICBH. Here I used also only qualitative analysis. The investigation in this chapter is conducted on the basis of printed and online texts from the Bosnian media as well as interviews. It is within this socio-cultural group that the Turkish impact is the deepest, on the basis of influence from the conservative scene in Turkey. From

its ranks come most of the local pro-Turkish activists and, save for the media controlled by the Turkish state, conservative Bosnian Muslim media are considered to be the staunchest supporters of the Turkish foreign policy in their country. The backbone of this chapter is a qualitative analysis of the articles published in the ICBH magazine *Preporod* since the beginning of the 2000s. As my research shows, the discourse of conservative actors, especially media, followed closely the discourse produced in Turkey under the AKP, but with minor local variations. Finally, the third focus in the investigation of discourses used by pro-Turkish activists in Bosnia was the Bosnian mainstream media. Due to the large mass of material that I had to research, I decided to go with corpus-assisted CDA. For that purpose, the corpus of all available electronically encoded mainstream Bosnian newspaper and magazine articles was collected. The analysis showed the presence of a pro-Turkish bias, mostly in articles that dealt with Turkish diplomatic and economic activity in Bosnia.

#### Outline of Turkish activities in Bosnia

The Bosnian branch of the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Coordination (TİKA) has become the most visible Turkish governmental actor in Bosnia. In 2012 alone – let's take this year as an example - Turkey allocated to Bosnia around 16 million euro in official developmental aid through TİKA, which is a 5-fold increase of the assistance given in 1998. In 2012, the Bosnian branch of TİKA had the third biggest budget of all TİKA branches worldwide. According to TİKA officials, in 2012 around 50-70% of its budget went for renovation of the Ottoman architectural heritage that was the property of ICBH or otherwise, while the rest went mostly for smaller entrepreneurial and small infrastructure projects, as well as supporting Turkish language classes and university departments. Turkish municipalities, usually with AKP incumbents, contribute to Turkish foreign policy in their own ways, by financing various projects in Bosnia, usually coordinated by TİKA, or by developing links with Bosnian municipalities or NGOs. Their activities reflect even more clearly the conservative values of the AKP than official Turkish institutions. Turkish cultural diplomacy in Bosnia and elsewhere took a conservative turn after PM Erdoğan in May 2007 established the government-funded and directed Yunus Emre Foundation. Since 2009, this foundation has been the founder of Yunus Emre Institutes in foreign capitals. These institutions were planned as Turkish cultural centres abroad, with similar purpose

like Goethe Institutes or the British Councils. Such a Yunus Emre Institute in Sarajevo was opened in November 2009 by foreign affairs minister Davutoğlu and was the first outpost of the institute outside Turkey, which strengthened the impression that Bosnia was very important for the Turkish AKP government. During the period 2003-2014, Turkish official foreign policy attempted to coordinate efforts to advance the Turkish economic presence in Bosnia and used economic issues (for example announcements and interest in investment) in the media to strengthen Turkish influence within the Bosnian public discourse. Nevertheless, even the Bosnian media and politicians with pro-Turkish leanings and Turkish businessmen themselves noted the disparity between the very high intensity of political and cultural relations and low intensity of economic relations. According to reliable data, Turkey is one of Bosnia's less important trading and investment partners. For example, according to the Central Bank of Bosnia and Herzegovina from 1994 to 2011, Turkish economic actors have invested in Bosnia 141 million euro, making Turkey only the ninth country according to the origin of investment. These 141 million euros of Turkish investment amounted to merely 2.6 percent of all foreign direct investment (FDI) in Bosnia during that period. The most important country in the same period was Austria with an investment of 1.194 billion euros, followed by Serbia, which invested 938 million euros and by Croatia with 679 million euros. Data shows that Turkey is in recent years not even among the top 10 of countries according to foreign investment in Bosnia. Very recent announcements about investment in highways in Bosnia haven't yet materialized.

This limited economic engagement stands, as already mentioned above, in stark contrast to Turkey's efforts in the cultural realm. The Turkish private educational institutions – the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) and Burç University as well as 13 primary and secondary schools established by the private foundations BSEI and SEDEF until 2015 – can be seen as a very effective way of investment in promoting and sustaining pro-Turkish activism in Bosnia. Additionally, the unofficial Turkish actors, primarily Sufi groups (*cemaatler*) have built up their religious, educational and humanitarian, even media, presence and have often established circles of adherents.

## Domestic support for Turkish involvement

The bulk of local support for AKP Turkey in contemporary Bosnia has come from the ranks of the conservative Bosnian Muslim scene, mainly its two pillars: SDA party and the ICBH. Bosnian Muslim conservative (and Bosniak ethno-nationalist) politics is dominated by SDA, which is without doubt one of the most important supporters of pro-Turkish activism. From 2009, Alija Izetbegović's son Bakir Izetbegović grew stronger in the SDA with the help of the conservative forces within the party, as well as the assistance of Turkish diplomacy. The two parties SDA and AKP are considered to be 'sisterly' and entertain close contacts, exemplified in frequent public contacts between the Member of the Bosnian Presidency Izetbegović and Turkey's president Erdogan. Since 2015, the online news portal *Faktor.ba* and the weekly magazine *Stav*, both close to the AKP and the SDA, have become very influential representatives of pro-Turkish activism. When researching and writing about Bosnian pro-Turkish actors, I had to approach what I call the problem of autonomy (or lack of it) of Bosnian pro-Turkish actors towards Turkey. Or concisely put: Are supporters of Turkey merely its puppets or independent players? Obviously, the pro-Turkish activism of Bosnian actors cannot be reduced to mere Turkish influence and funding, and its independent motivation, at least partially, must be considered. In fact, close relations to Turkey bring clear benefits to some part of the Bosnian elite: pro-Turkish activism very often serves the purpose of legitimization for those Bosniak conservative actors who use the Ottoman heritage and ties with Turkey to affirm and strengthen their own status among the Bosniak conservatives and assert their own identity within the wider society. The main conservative Bosnian Muslim actors, like the ICBH and the SDA, accept Turkish patronage (in case of ICBH this is mainly financial support for the renovation of old and building of new mosques as well as scholarships; SDA leadership received diplomatic support) to a certain degree, but maintain the basis of their own independent power status. They choose to support and promote AKP Turkey not merely to get political support or material gain, but to use symbolism of the Ottoman heritage and, relatedly, the strong modern Turkey for their own legitimization and within the context of the contemporary Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) conservative scene. According to polls, one third of Bosnian Muslim population is religiously observant and could be therefore

considered conservative leaning.<sup>6</sup> A large majority of conservative Bosnian Muslims seems to be supportive of SDA. Simultaneously, the cultural impact of the Ottoman legacy is very strongly resonating with this part of the Bosnian electorate. It is also not surprising that AKP and PM Erdoğan are also very popular with them. The tension between the wish to position themselves as being close to AKP Turkey on the basis of the common Ottoman heritage and the issue of defending particular Bosnian Muslim interests, sometimes contrary to the expectations and interests of Ankara, is noticeable with these actors. On the other hand, the discourses of conservative Bosniak groups that are controlled from Turkey as well as the discourses of Turkish and Bosnian actors who work for Turkish official and non-official organisations active in Bosnia are identical to the Turkish foreign policy messages of the AKP era produced in Turkey.

The new Turkish foreign policy orientation under the AKP (often described by detractors as Neo-Ottomanism) was introduced gradually since this party came to power and was openly presented only since around 2009. This language served the goals of the Turkish government and Turkish non-governmental actors as a means of legitimization and mobilization with the purpose of influencing the power relations in the former Ottoman territories including establishing close alliances particularly with culturally related communities as possible strongholds of Turkish influence. Let me be more specific. According to the Turco-American political scientist Ömer Taşpınar, Neo-Ottomanism is the predominant concept in the foreign policy circles in the Republic of Turkey under the AKP and has the following characteristics: the embracing of the Muslim and the Ottoman heritage in Turkey and abroad, and using both to increase “soft” Turkish influence in formerly Ottoman territories; as well as the simultaneous acceptance of tropes of “liberal secularism” and “multiculturalism”.<sup>7</sup> In his October 2009 Sarajevo speech, Turkish FM Davutoğlu used the Ottoman Empire as the crucial important symbolic reference constructing its past as an exclusively positive historical experience, a sort of golden age, in which not only Islam and Muslims, but also Christian and Jewish subjects prospered and expanded under the leadership of the Turks.<sup>8</sup> This ahistorical view of the Ottoman past, which discursively constructed the

Ottoman values and praxes as supposedly analogous to modern notions of co-existence, tolerance and multiculturalism, was constructed for contemporary purposes, as a narrative that serves the Turkish side for the propagation of cooperation in the former regions of the Empire under its own leadership. Similarly, PM/President Erdoğan’s election speeches and other public appearances during the post-2009 period very often referred to the closeness of and bonds between AKP Turkey with the “brothers” in Palestine, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia.

Nevertheless, due to its inherent limitations, in the Balkans this type of message had some lasting resonance only in the conservative parts of Muslim communities of that region. On the other hand, the actions and official language of Turkish diplomacy under AKP in other environments took other shapes: for example, in predominantly culturally Christian countries of the Balkans (like Serbia) it focused on pragmatic aspects of cooperation like business ties. In other circumstances, like intervention against Kurdish guerrillas in Syria, the language of Turkish foreign policy had Turkish nationalist overtones reminiscent of the Kemalist era. Within the Ottoman framework as point of reference, Bosniaks have been perceived by Turkish conservative policy makers and intellectuals as one of “related communities” precisely on the basis of strong influence of Ottoman culture and Ottoman Islam in Bosnia. As the Turkish role in Central Asia and in the Middle East after 2011 became increasingly contested by rivals, the importance of having friends and some influence in the Balkans, especially Bosnia, increased. Bosnia became a discursively important locus which has been used by the AKP leadership, for projecting ideas of historical greatness and contemporary national importance. The AKP and other Turkish conservative actors have used Bosnia related material, especially the 1990s war atrocities, as a highly potent symbol used to mobilize their own support base. Also, it was far from unimportant to show to their supporters and electorate that Turkey is able to stand up for Muslim rights patronizing and, possibly, defending a symbolically important native Muslim European group, which was once a victim of ethnic cleansing and genocide. Simultaneously it could assert itself as the major international Muslim power

<sup>6</sup> The World’s Muslims: Unity and Diversity, available at <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/08/the-worlds-muslims-full-report.pdf>, pp. 41, 47, accessed on March 14, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ömer Taşpınar, “Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalist foreign policy”, *Today’s Zaman*, 22nd September 2008, available at [http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-153882-neo-](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-153882-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalist-foreign-policy.html)

[ottomanism-and-kemalist-foreign-policy.html](http://www.todayszaman.com/columnists-153882-neo-ottomanism-and-kemalist-foreign-policy.html), accessed on December 1, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> For the text of the speech see H.Eren, (ed.), *Osmanlı mirası ve günümüz Balkan Müslüman toplumları* (İstanbul – Sarajevo: Balmed – CNS, 2011) pp. 13-19.

and secure a presence in Southeast Europe, where the Ottomans had left significant traces. Although geopolitical, economic and other reasons meant that Bosnia was not a very suitable place for establishing Turkish 'hard' influence (including building up an economic presence of great magnitude), Turkish official foreign policy actors turned their energies to the creation of 'soft' influence or, in other words 'discourse power'. They focused on projecting Turkey in Bosnia as a diplomatic mediator, a sponsor of the renovation and maintenance of the Ottoman-era heritage and a provider of developmental assistance, building cultural and educational cooperation and strengthening its media presence. In respect to Bosnia, to be more precise its Bosniak part, Turkey basically assumed or tried to assume the roles of humanitarian caretaker, cultural father figure and sponsor of the Bosnian independence that might be endangered by its neighbours. The Turkish foreign policy actors also occasionally used their veneration of Alija Izetbegović, the founder of the conservative Bosniak party SDA, as an additional emotional bridge towards conservative Bosniaks. Simultaneously, unofficial religious Turkish actors (Sufi groups), to a lesser degree in combination with the official Turkish religious authorities, embarked upon a project of the re-connection of Bosnia to Turkey in religious and other related terms. It must be stressed that the bulk of Turkish foreign policy efforts in Bosnia seem to be oriented to the symbolic politics and public diplomacy focusing on the population with a Muslim background and its possible impact on important political and real-life developments, especially outside the predominantly Bosniak parts of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, is fairly limited.

### The Bosniak conservative scene

The groups I call the Bosniak conservative scene are a loose network including persons and organizations from Turkey present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and domestic Bosnian pro-Turkish activists. This network has used common discourses of the spiritual, cultural and historical links rooted in the Islamic faith, the Ottoman past and the common struggle against secularist and/or Western challenges. It is within this socio-cultural group that the Turkish impact is the deepest, on basis of influence from the sisterly conservative Muslim sector of Turkish society. From the ranks of the Bosniak conservative scene come most of the local pro-Turkish activists and, save for the media controlled by the Turkish state, conservative Bosniak media are considered to be the staunchest

supporters of Turkish foreign policy in Bosnia. The arguments used to advocate and mobilize public support for it in the Bosnian public space are articulated primarily within this group and then disseminated in other parts of society. Often, pro-Turkish texts circulating among conservative Bosnian Muslims re-use pro-AKP material produced in Turkey, but also include local adaptations of the arguments from Turkish sources as well as independent ones. The backbone of this investigation was a qualitative analysis of the articles published in the ICBH's magazine *Preporod* since the beginning of the 2000s. Due to its continuity (since 1970) and relatively wide societal reach, I considered the *Preporod*, the official publication of the ICBH, to be the most influential medium of the Bosniak conservative scene. The arguments used in this publication are largely representative for the whole of the Bosniak conservative scene. The Bosnian Muslim conservative actors have generally seen the contemporary Turkish presence and Turkish foreign policy towards the country as the natural and desired continuation of the Ottoman era cultural influence albeit in an adjusted form due to modern circumstances. While some texts openly called for closer relations with Turkey on the basis of the common Ottoman culture, others indirectly rallied support for Turkish foreign policy under the AKP in Bosnia and Turkey merely by emphasizing the importance of the Ottoman legacy. Such texts created a supportive atmosphere for the rediscovery of contemporary Turkey and its conservative scene which has commonly been perceived by the mainstream of the Bosniak conservative elite – primarily the leadership of SDA and ICBH - as the direct inheritors and revivers of the Ottoman legacy, especially the supposedly high Islamic values of the Ottoman era, which they articulate and actualize in the 21st century as a possible role model for Bosnian Islam. Accordingly, there has been a noticeable tendency within the media and other cultural production of the contemporary Bosniak conservative scene to depict the Ottoman past and surviving Ottoman-Islamic legacy in the Western Balkans as something that has been distorted and vilified by religious and political opponents throughout recent history. Thus, the apologia for the Ottoman Empire that presents it as a tolerant and law-abiding state, challenging critical scholarly and other views, often by using contemporary Turkish sources and already existing lines of argumentation, became a widespread meme in the pro-Turkish conservative media. Relatedly, the apologetic defence of the emergence of Ottoman rule and Islam in Bosnia in the

15th century were seen as a crucial pro-Turkish task. Particularly, the affirmation of the Ottoman ruler Mehmed II, as the symbolically pregnant embodiment of the arrival of Islam in Bosnia and a person revered by both conservative scenes, has played an important role in these apologetic efforts. The Islamic conservative media in Bosnia have especially closely followed public gatherings and other events that have been organized, usually in collaboration with Turkish conservatives, in order to celebrate the arrival of Islam to Bosnia. At the same time, contemporary Turkey, ruled by the AKP, has been constructed in the conservative Bosnian Muslim media discourse as a role model for coexistence among dominant conservative Muslim cultural values, political democracy and technological and economic success in the global capitalist environment. The Turkish and AKP leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was presented as an exemplary modern Muslim leader, and one who has since the 1990s shown a great deal of interest in helping Bosnia and its Muslims. Furthermore, AKP Turkey has often been presented as the regional power capable of protecting both Bosnia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and the existence of Bosnian Muslims and Islam in the event of a new attempt to extinguish it, as happened between 1992-95. The apologia for AKP Turkey, especially for its leader, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, defending them against various types of criticism, was very common in the texts published in the mainstream Islamic media in Bosnia, especially *Preporod*.

### Bosnian mainstream media

For the purpose of corpus analysis, the collection of electronically encoded mainstream Bosnian newspapers (*Oslobođenje*, *Dnevni avaz*, *Nezavisne novine*, *Dnevni list*) and weeklies (*Dani*, *Slobodna Bosna*, *Reporter*) from the period 2003-2014 was available for investigation. Within this corpus there were 20,211 articles that include at least one mentioning of the noun 'Turkey' or the adjective 'Turkish' in BCS language. Thereafter a corpus analysis technique called collocation analysis as the main analytical method was applied. Collocation analysis is the examination of words that tend to co-occur more frequently with the words that are under analysis – so called search words - based on calculations by computational tools. Such frequently co-occurring words (known as collocates) are especially important for textual analysis because they point to assumptions and connotations specifically associated with the search words (in this case *Turkey* and *Turkish*).

The qualitative analysis of collocates and the text that surrounded them (concordance analysis) shows that representations of Turkey in Bosnian mainstream printed media between 2003 and 2014 were often used to influence public opinion about Turkish foreign policy towards Bosnia. Collocates with pro-Turkish implications were the majority in two major groups of collocates related to Turkey: collocates dealing with the Turco-Bosnian diplomatic relations and those dealing with the Turco-Bosnian economic relations, which taken together represent roughly one third of all collocates. Discourse supporting Turkish foreign policy dominated the reporting on both of these major topics, albeit with greater emphasis within the topic of Turco-Bosnian diplomatic relations. The authors of pro-Turkish texts did not express open support for Turkish foreign policy in most of the analysed texts. Nevertheless, Turkish official foreign policy actors were often reported as contributing, or as being willing to contribute, to the renovation of the Bosnian Ottoman era heritage and to assist Bosnia with humanitarian projects and to encourage investments from its private sector, while Turkish diplomats were covered in a positive manner, often by the publication of official statements completely or in summarised versions without any critical distance. The tendency to allow Turkish or Bosnian pro-Turkish officials to voice their opinions without scrutiny and to report statements of Turkish officials and Turkish institutions *in extenso* and verbatim points to the existence of the subtle, but very widespread, pro-Turkish bias in these texts. Information about Turkish foreign policy activities tended to be reported in detail and without any critical distance, which suggests pro-Turkish discourse prosody. Central thematic sequences used to convey the pro-Turkish position were 'Turkey as help provider', 'Special relations between two countries' (within the macro-topic of Diplomatic relations) and 'Investment coming from Turkey'. These results suggest the conclusion that Turkish foreign policy under AKP was successful in its public diplomacy efforts in Bosnia, which were focused around cultural and media projects, and they indirectly influenced media reporting. A large part of the Bosnian media, mostly from Sarajevo, but often from other parts of Bosnia as well, readily agreed to convey the pro-Turkish message when reporting on Turco-Bosnian diplomatic and economic relations and in more cases than not supported Turkish foreign policy towards Bosnia.



## Conclusion

In the post-2009 period in particular, the foreign policy discourse on Bosnia produced by the representatives of the Turkish state and public institutions as well as of non-official activists relied on an exclusively positive view of the Ottoman historical heritage asserting simultaneously Turkey's role as the region's leader and the protector of the region's stability and the Bosnian statehood as well as of the very existence of Bosnian Muslims. Bosnia became a discursively important *locus* which has been used by Turkish conservative elites, primarily the AKP leadership, for projecting ideas of historical greatness and contemporary national importance. It was far from unimportant to show to their supporters and electorate that Turkey has friends and respect in the world and is able to stand up for Muslim rights – possibly, but not only, against Western powers – defending and patronizing a symbolically important Muslim European group.

Generally seen, the pro-Turkish activism in Bosnia has been since 2002 based on a loose network that includes persons and organizations from Turkey present in Bosnia and Herzegovina and domestic Bosnian pro-Turkish activists, by and large belonging to the Bosnian Muslim conservative scene. This network has been enabled using common discourses of the spiritual, cultural and historical links rooted in the Islamic faith, the Ottoman past and the common struggle against secularist and/or Western challenges. The Turco-Bosnian relationship that emerged as the result of these activities has not been equal and has put Bosnian partners of Turkish institutions and groups in a passive, sometimes even an inferior and dependent, position. In this framework, the ready-to-use concepts and practices created by foreign policy makers based in Turkey – on Bosnia and other topics – shaped the emerging pro-Turkish activism in Bosnia itself. The bulk of support for AKP Turkey in contemporary Bosnia has come from the ranks of mainstream Islam in that country. Conservative scenes in both countries have fundamentally drawn on Ottoman-era references and symbols, which naturally became the general framework of their agencies and communication. The emergence of cooperation between Turkey and pro-Turkish conservative activists has also enabled a significant knowledge transfer of discursive material, with the Bosnian Muslim side as junior and passive partner in this relationship. The analysis of media sources shows that the Bosnian conservative scene, regardless of the strength or form of connection to Turkey, has absorbed and partially adapted, most of the topics of the Turkish foreign

policy discourse that are related to its presence in Bosnia, but also to promotion and defence of AKP policies in general.

The Bosnian Muslim conservative actors, as witnessed in their media, have generally seen the contemporary Turkish presence and Turkish foreign policy towards the country as the natural and desired continuation of the Ottoman era cultural influence albeit in an adjusted form due to modern circumstances. A corpus-assisted analysis of the Bosnia mainstream printed media shows that representations of Turkey in Bosnian mainstream printed media between 2003 and 2014 were used to influence the public opinion on the Turkish foreign policy toward Bosnia. This was clearly detectable in texts dealing with Turco-Bosnian diplomatic and economic relations, which largely tended to present concepts related to Turkish foreign policy in Bosnia in a positive light. These topics were very often constructed in the framework of the supposed special relations between the two countries, based on historical and cultural proximity. Particularly, Turkish official foreign policy actors were often reported as contributing, or as being willing to contribute, to the renovation of the Bosnian Ottoman era heritage and to assist Bosnia with humanitarian projects and to encourage investments from its private sector, while Turkish diplomats were covered in positive manner, often by the publication of official statements completely or in summarised versions without any critical distance.

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