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Analysis
Post "zero problems with neighbours" in the Western Balkans
A view from Serbia

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Paper was originally prepared as an introductory analysis for the expert workshop "Re-thinking Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans - Ruptures in the neighbourhood" (November 6, 2019 in Belgrade, Serbia) organized by HBS Belgrade, Istanbul, and Sarajevo offices`, IFRI, ISAC fund and Al Sharq Forum

Introduction

Guided by the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu, at the beginning of this decade Turkish foreign policy aimed to implement a fresh and dynamic approach that would change the country's position in the wider region. Dr. Davutoglu's vision was backed up by Turkey's impressive economic growth and was implemented in a very different international context to that of the Cold War. As an academic, in his book "Strategic Depth," Dr. Davutoglu had urged decision makers in Turkey to reject the notion that the country was on the frontier of the Western world and to assert itself based on its historical legacy, geopolitical position and economic weight. He argued that Turkey should become the centre of its own wider region by using soft power and its inherited historic potential. This potential was said to lay in the fact that modern Turkey's predecessor, the Ottoman Empire, was a centre of civilization in its own right, which gave greater significance to its peripheral territories than they would have otherwise had. In practical terms, particularly in the Balkans, there is a significant Muslim population in several states, which continues, more or less, to look up to Turkey and maintains numerous connections, including family ties with Turkish citizens and descendants of people who had migrated to the Balkans. Finally, Dr. Davutoglu argued, Turkey was a crucial NATO member and possessed one of the largest armies in the Alliance. Thus, Dr. Davutoglu concluded, Turkey had the potential to foster a proactive policy that would result in "zero problems with neighbours" and renew Turkey's position at the centre of the wider region. With the rise to power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (AKP) and subsequent economic growth, Dr. Davutoglu got his chance to implement his vision.

However, in the Balkans, this policy has been shattered over the past decade. Firstly, the Arab Spring and the consequent civil war in Syria created turmoil on Turkey's southern border, occupying much of Turkey's strength. Secondly, Turkish interpretation of history often conflicted with the narratives upon which most of the country's neighbouring States were built, creating issues in mutual relations that pop-up occasionally. Thirdly, Turkey's practical interests dictated foreign policy moves that caused, at best, suspicion among neighbouring countries. And finally, internal turmoil, which began with the Gezi Park protests and continues to this day, contributed to the increasing personalization of Turkish politics, which has had consequences Dr. Davutoglu's "zero problems with the neighbours" foreign policy vision. **In the Balkans, the proactiveness that characterized Turkish foreign policy at the beginning of the century has largely dissipated and is now barely visible.**

In the meantime, authoritarian and populist tendencies have prevailed in Turkey. Civic protests and internal clashes, due to alleged non-democratic practices, the undermining of the internal checks and balances, corruption and nepotism have resulted in an increasing concentration of power in the hands of Prime Minister/President Erdogan. Over time, all notable officials, in particular the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister Dr. Ahmet Davutoglu, former president Abdullah

Gul, and the former Deputy Prime Minister Ali Babacan, were dismissed or demoted, removing all of Erdogan's possible competitors from the ruling AKP. The 2016 *Coup* shook the political ground in Turkey and, through a successful referendum on changes to the Constitution and consecutive presidential elections, sped up the concentration of key powers in Erdogan's hands. Gülenists, together with the elements in the army, were marked as instigators of the *coup*, and thus began a purge that has had a profound influence on Turkey's international position, including in relation to the Western Balkans.

Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo have set EU membership as their main foreign policy goal and are all at different stages of the EU integration process**. But as the EU's focus has shifted away from the region, due to the internal turmoil caused first by the economic crisis and then the migration crisis (where Turkey has played a crucial role), illiberal tendencies in some EU states, and finally Brexit, as well the growing unpopularity of the enlargement policy in the member states themselves, the situation in the Western Balkans has deteriorated. After the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the inauguration of the Belt and Road initiative in China, the West became particularly alarmed by the prospect of other actors gaining a footing in the region. In addition to Russia and China, the Western press has frequently highlighted Turkey and several Gulf States as being particularly interested in exerting their influence, which could potentially disrupt the EU's approach in the region**. The pinnacle of this came in Emannuel Macron's 2017 speech in the EU Parliament, when he stated that he does not "want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia". Images of Erdogan holding a presidential campaign rally in Sarajevo, which was widely covered in the Western press, only contributed to this image. Thus, Turkey was marked as an external power aiming to attract Balkan states into its sphere of influence.

But how much, in reality, is Turkey willing, ready and able to influence the countries of the Western Balkans? This paper will try to provide a summary of relevant issues regarding Turkey's position in the Western Balkans as a baseline for discussion at the upcoming November 6th roundtable in Belgrade.

The paper's aim is not to offer conclusions or present a negative view of Turkey. It presents a (liberal) perspective from one Western Balkan state. Our vision is that Turkey is one of the most important countries for the region and that, without continuous dialogue and cooperation, the security and economic prosperity of the region, at the least, could be imperilled. There is therefore a need for communication, cooperation, analysis and re-evaluation of the positions and goals of the countries in the region and Turkey - as well as the EU, which offers the only substantial and long-term vision for the region based on peace and prosperity.

The results of the Davutoglu era in the Western Balkans

The Cold War era saw Turkey mostly dormant in the Balkans, despite being partially a Balkan country itself. **However, even at that time, the Balkans remained important in the internal discourse of the country because, as Alsi Aydintasbas has described it, the Balkans continues to be "an emotional hinterland".[1], due to the legacy of the past and family ties. Furthermore, the Balkans constituted a central piece of the Ottoman Empire and in several states there is a significant Muslim population, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo, which to this day looks up to Turkey**. The end of the Cold War opened up geopolitical and economic opportunities for Turkey. The wars in the former-Yugoslavia began an emotional spiral within both the Turkish elite and population, pushing Turkey to intervene. Many Turkish politicians, including Dr. Davutoglu, claimed that the war , and the danger faced by Muslim populations in the Balkans, directly impacted on domestic issues in Turkey, due to pressure placed on the government by Turkish citizens of Balkan descent. **However, Turkey sought to reach practical outcomes too, the most important of which was to re-establish some influence in states where its historical role is not perceived entirely negatively**. For example, Turkey was one of the first states to recognize (North) Macedonian independence, as well as the independence of Kosovo. It was a vocal supporter of Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina during and after the Bosnian War. And it was one of the first investors in Albania, immediately following the fall of communism. Over time, in North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey became a major political partner and vocal supporter of their integration into the EU and NATO. Turkey also tried to compete with its long-time rival Greece and its growing influence in the Balkans, which has been boosted through EU channels, using the Western Balkans as leverage against Athens.[2] **However, Turkey sought to wrap its own engagement in multilateralism, as almost every step was implemented in line with UN, NATO and, to an extent EU approaches in the region.** This engagement did not raise any suspicion in the West, enabling Turkey to present its own position on these issues and seek support from its partners. Turkey was included into the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a representative of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation during the 1990s. Turkey also sought to establish political, economic and defence cooperation with these states, as well as utilizing soft power influence through religious cooperation, culture and

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1 Aydıntaşbaş, Asli. "From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans." ECFR.EU. European Council on Foreign Relations, p. 4 https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans. p4.

2 Petrović, Žarko. "Turkey's New Approach to the Western Balkans." International and Security Affairs Centre - ISAC Fund, 2011, p. 7 https://www.isac-fund.org/en/publication/turkeys-new-approach-to-the-western-balkans.

education. **However, it seems that this approach was not formulated as part of a grand vision for the region, but rather as practical reflex to the situation.**

In this respect, the early period of the AKP's and Erdogan's rule, at the beginning of the 2000s, was no different than the previous period. The focus of AKP and its leadership was primarily on domestic policies. The radical shift in Turkey's foreign policy activism occurred with the economic strengthening of Turkey and, most importantly, as a consequence of Dr. Davutoglu's appointment as Foreign Minister, in 2009. In his new role, Dr. Davutoglu was finally able to implement the vision he outlined years before in his book Strategic Depth. **The approach, dubbed "zero problems with neighbours", elevated qualitatively and quantitatively old approaches from Turkey's past, but more importantly it included all of the country's neighbours. In the Western Balkans Serbia and Montenegro also came into focus**. Turkey presented itself as a good-will partner and mediator, aiming to help its neighbours develop economically and solve inter-state and intra-state disputes, among other issues. At the same time, Turkey launched a plethora of initiatives and programmes, combined with a continuous activism by then Foreign Minister Davutoglu, Prime Minister Erdogan and President Abdullah Gul. **One of the major successes of this policy was the establishment of the Serbia-Bosnia-Turkey and Croatia-Bosnia-Turkey trilateral**. This initiative achieved some early success, contributing to the relaxation of Sarajevo (Bosniak elite) - Belgrade relations.

As Zarko Petrovic noted in 2011, Dr. Davutoglu operationalized the concept of "strategic depth" through five foreign policy principles: "First, balancing security and democracy to portray Turkey as a democratic country that fully adheres to the Western values; Turkey is safe because it is democratic. Second, adopting a zero-problems approach towards neighbours to foster cooperation with all adjacent states and reinforce security through the absence of problems with neighbours. Third, pursuing proactive and preventative peace diplomacy aimed at fostering security and high-level political dialogue, economic integration, interdependence and multicultural coexistence. The Belgrade-Sarajevo thaw is a powerful case in point. Fourth, leading a multi–dimensional foreign policy whereby Turkey seeks to complement its NATO anchor by building relations with other influential players such as Russia. Finally, developing a "rhythmic diplomacy", which implies an increased role of Turkey in international and multilateral arrangements".[3] Dr. Davutoglu also combined a number of different ideologies to justify his approach, stemming from Turkish history as well as its geopolitical position, to formulate his single policy approach: From so-called Neo Ottomanism, third-worldism, Islamism, nationalism, and pan-Turkism to Westernism.[4]

During Dr. Davutoglu's **mandate, Turkey launched a multi-sectorial coordinated approach towards the region.** Free trade agreements were concluded with all of the countries in the Western Balkans by 2013, contributing to a rise in exports and imports in the region. The Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) also became significantly more active, focusing mainly on restoring

[3] Ibid

[4] Debate at the ISAC-HBS roundtable on New Turkish Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans, April 2011, Belgrade.

Ottoman-era monuments, but also engaging in economic development and aid. This was coupled with an increase in investment in the region and infrastructure projects. Turkey, through official and independent institutions, also stepped up the promotion of educational and cultural cooperation through state and private initiatives (mainly connected to the Fethullah Gülen movement, popularly dubbed as Hizmet).

The most important asset in this period was the improvement of relations and cooperation with Serbia, the central and largest country in the region. Despite the fact that Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo, **Serbia's self-imposed diplomatic isolation due to massive recognition of independence of Kosovo, and the effects of the economic crisis, led Belgrade to receive Turkey's initiative with open arms**. Turkey offered political and economic cooperation, infrastructure investment and mediation between Serbia and Bosnia, as well as between Bosniak elites in Serbia, who were in conflict at the time, and between the two Islamic communities in the region.

However, from the outset, the initiative caused a great deal of suspicion and controversy. It began with Dr. Davutoglu's famous 2009 speech in Sarajevo, in which he called the Ottoman centuries in the Balkans a successful story, raising eyebrows in most of the countries in a region where for many statehood is defined by an historical struggle against the Ottomans. Sometimes, Dr. Davoutoglu's visits were followed by a public outcry or protest, as was the case during his visit to Banja Luka in 2011, when he allegedly demanded the removal of the flag of Republika Srpska[5], and during a visit to Tirana in the same year, when he demanded the removal of the bust of the Albanian national hero Skanderbeg.[6] There was increasing criticisms of paternalistic treatment of the Balkan Muslim population, acting sometimes as their superior, as if they were only a part of Turkey's imperial legacy. This behaviour prompted many in the region and abroad to dub the new Turkish initiative "neo-Ottomanism", interpreting it as an ambition to set Turkey up as an alternative to the EU and Western alignment. More moderate spectators welcomed the new Turkish engagement, particularly because it was focused on maintaining stability in the region, but remained skeptical about the discrepancies between Dr. Davutoglu's foreign policy vision and its implementation in practice. **It was highlighted that Turkey's approach was still primarily focused on Muslim populations in the region, despite the opening to the others and Turkey efforts to present itself as a regional leader and centre, which was something that countries in the region, with their own EU ambitions, were, in most cases, not ready to accept.**

It is important to note that, in the Balkans, the new Turkish initiative was not seen as something that complemented the EU approach to the region, but as an independent phenomenon. As Alida Vračić has pointed out, the final outcome was that Turkey was neither able to convince the public in the Western Balkans of its universal approach to the region nor of its impartiality. [7]

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5 Dobrić, Željka. "Neviđeni Diplomatski Skandal." Glas Srpske, January 30, 2011. https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/nevidjeni-diplomatski-skandal/52487.

6 Debate at the ISAC-HBS roundtable on New Turkish Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans, April 2011, Belgrade.

7 Vračić, Alida. "Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans." German Institute for International and Security Affairs. Accessed November 1, 2019., p. 6 https://www.swp-berlin.org/fileadmin/contents/products/research_papers/2016RP11_vcc.pdf

Turkey's internal crisis, which began with the Gezi Park protests and the Arab Spring and its aftermath, as well as statements such as those made by Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2013, then Prime Minister, when he stated in Prizren that "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo", alienated some in the Western Balkans. Major breakthroughs, such was the Serbia-Bosnia-Turkey Trilateral, fell into obscurity because of renewed clashes between leaders in the region, while other mediation efforts proved to be unsuccessful.

Enter *Erdoganism* and the post-2016 shift – prosecution of Gülenists

As noted above, ever since the Gezi Park public protests, the Turkish political scene has increasingly shifted towards its own brand of authoritarianism. The Syria conflict and Turkey's inability to systematically implement the "zero problems with neighbours" policy caused it to slowly depart from a vision-based foreign policy and reorient towards a more visibly interest-based approach, but this time with the addition of Erdogan's personal relationships with other leaders from surrounding countries, which are shaped by his regime's internal goals. **Officially, Turkey has not departed from the "zero problems with neighbours" policy in the Balkans. The policy's key achievements, such as Serbia-Bosnia-Turkey Trilateral, have continued, but the whole approach was toned down as Turkey became increasingly engaged elsewhere, while the promise of EU integration was, to some extent, rejuvenated with the 2013 Belgrade-Pristina Brussels Agreement.** Free trade agreements did achieve results, with increases in imports and exports, and Turkish investment also grew. But there was no "grand policy" to combine these developments into practical influence, with the exception of those areas with significant Muslim populations. **However, the consequences of the on-going war in Ukraine, the 2015 migration crisis, and especially the 2016 *coup,* brought Turkey back to the region, although in a very different manner from the 2009-2013 period.**

The migration crisis again reminded Europeans that Turkey is crucial for the security of the region and of Europe as a whole. The war in Ukraine, Russia's increasing assertiveness and China's increased activity in the Western Balkans, as well as the activities of other players in the region, in particular the Gulf states and Turkey, has gained the interested of Western media and politicians. **A crucial watershed for perceptions of Turkey's position in the Western Balkans was the 2016 *coup* and the subsequent support that Erdogan received from regional leaders, most of whom condemned the *coup* and offered their support**.[8] That subsequent support proved to be even more important, and depended on the will of Balkan leaders to fulfil requests by Turkey to arrest or deportation old and newly found internal enemies of the Turkish state (Gülenists) and the closure of educational institutions connected to the Hizmet network. Erdogan's regime labelled the Hizmet as FETO, a terrorist organization, and began to leverage pressure aimed at dismantling the network, which was once one of the key pillars of Turkey's influence in the Balkans.

Balkan leaders' willingness to conform to Erdogan's prosecution of FETO defined their relationship with Turkey. If they conformed to Turkey's desires, they could count on Erdogan's political and, to an extent, economic support. **While the institutional**

[8] Some messages were rather informal, such was the one of Edi Rama, who used the similar language that Erdogan uses when addressing close nations, by calling him his brother. But it seems that this kind of approach had an effect to the Turkish president.

framework in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Macedonia did not allow the leaders of those countries to fully comply with Erdogan's **requests, it situation was different in Kosovo and Serbia.**

The arrests and deportation of six Turkish citizens from Kosovo, carried out in secrecy and without an appropriate court decision, opened a rift between the then-Prime Minister, Ramush Haradinaj, and Kosovo's President Hashim Thaci. Haradinaj, as well as most of the opposition and public, questioned the legality of the move and established a parliamentary commission tasked with uncovering the chain of command. Many people pointed toward Thaci. Erdogan reacted, heavily criticizing Haradinaj, describing him as a puppet and went as far as calling for the citizens of Kosovo to protest against him.[9] To this day, the issue remains unresolved; the parliamentary commission failed to complete its investigation before the early parliamentary elections in 2019.

Serbia's willingness to conform to Turkey's requests caused much less turbulence with the public. As early as October 2016, Turkey dispatched a request to Serbia to close all of the educational institutions in the country connected to Gülen. According to the Turkish authorities they immediately received positive signals from Serbia.[10] Bejza primary school and educational center in Belgrade was closed in May 2018, with almost no public reaction. In December 2017, Serbia deported an official of the Kurdistan Freedom Party to Turkey, despite his claim for asylum and a request by the UN Committee Against Torture (OHCHR), at the beginning of the same month, that Serbia not deport the official because of the risk that he would again be subjected to torture.[11] Despite the fact that Serbia is an EU candidate country and a member state of the Council of Europe, the Justice Minister quickly approved the extradition order, acting upon Turkey's Interpol warrant. In its decision issued on August 2 2019, the UN's Committee Against Torture concluded that Serbia violated Article 3 of the UN Convention Against Torture.[12] Other than the reaction of civil society and opposition parties in Serbia, the decision, and its consequences, which has mostly affected Serbia's reputation in the international community, received only lukewarm condemnation from the public. **But the impact on Serbia's relationship with Turkey was great. Belgrade and Ankara's relationship reached unprecedented heights, with a number of cordial visits of officials and meetings between Prime Minister/ President Vucic and Erdogan, investment and increasing trade between the two states. So much so, that some media suggested that Serbia is becoming a key**

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9 Radio Television of Serbia. "Erdogan: Haradinajeva karijera će se završiti." RTS, March 31, 2018. http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/10/svet/3091374/erdogan-haradinajeva-karijera-ce-se-zavrsiti.html.

10 Filipović, Vladimir. "Zahtev iz Turske: zatvorite gulenove škole u Srbiji." Blic.rs. Blic Online, October 26, 2016. https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/zahtev-iz-turske-zatvorite-gulenove-skole-u-srbiji/zrscxrv.

11 "Press Release on the Case of Cevdet Ayaz." www.azil.rs, December 24, 2017. http://azil.rs/en/press-release-on-the-case-of-cevdet-ayaz/.

12 "Serbia to Respect Decision by UN Committee Regarding Cevdad Ayaz's Extradition to Turkey." Civil Rights Defenders, September 12, 2019. https://crd.org/2019/09/09/serbia-to-respect-decision-by-un-committee-regarding-cevdad-ayazs-extradition-to-turkey/.

Turkish partner in the Western Balkans.[13] Erdogan's recent visit to Serbia, in October 2019, was the crown jewel of the countries' improved relations.

Other countries are also trying to please Ankara, despite the legal constraints. Recently it was announced that North Macedonia is processing a request for the extradition of fifteen Turkish citizens due to their connection to the Hizmet movement. Interestingly enough, this was reported at the time when Turkey was questioning the ratification of North Macedonia's NATO membership, precisely because of the lack of a cooperative attitude in Skopje.[14] Montenegro's local court has recently ruled to extradite a Turkish citizen, labelled as a terrorist by Ankara, who applied for asylum in the country. This decision was later overruled by the Appeal Court.[15] Due to its complex internal architecture, Bosnia and Herzegovina was unable to approve many of Turkey's requests, but the Bosniak political leadership took every opportunity to support Ankara's position. Examples include revoking a prize previously awarded to a professor because he was nominated by an institution close to Hizmet, rejecting awarding honorary citizenship of Sarajevo to Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk, the recent cancellation residency permits of several Turkish citizens wanted by Turkey for their connection to Gülenists, and blocking access to accounts by the Burch University-Bosna Same (an institution which was close to Hizmet). Bakir Izetbegović, the leader of the Party of Democratic Action, the main Bosniak party, never misses an opportunity to publicly condemn Hizmet as a terrorist organization.

Albania is still under heavy pressure to close schools and extradite Gülenists, but it has managed to resist, due to pressure from the public and elites.[16] Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have welcomed the Maarif Foundation (TMF), a Turkish state agency tied to the presidential cabinet, which was founded in 2016 with the aim of limiting Hizmet's influence around the world.[17]

Leading Bosniak politicians in Bosnia, including the president of SDA, Bakir Izetbegovic, Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, Kosovo's president Hashim Thaci, Macedonia's former-Prime Minister Nikola Gruevski and Serbia's president Aleksandar Vucic have all established a personal relationship with Erdogan. They constantly work to foster good relations with the President Erdogan, narrowing foreign policy communication to personal relationships. For example, in March 2019, President Vucic congratulated Erdogan on the results of local elections, despite the major breakthrough by the opposition in Istanbul and Ankara. Albanian Prime

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13 "Viši sud da ponovo odluči da li Ajvaza izručiti Turskoj." Vijesti.me, October 8, 2019. https://www.vijesti.me/vijesti/crna-hronika/visi-sud-da-ponovo-odluci-da-li-ajvaza-izruciti-turskoj.

14 Kuzmanovski, Blagoja. "Severna Makedonija isporučuje guleniste Turskoj." Radio Slobodna Evropa, April 11, 2019. https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/29874760.html.

15 Zivanovic, Maja, and Hamdi Firat Buyuk. "Montenegro Reconsiders Extradition of 'Gulenist' to Turkey." Balkan Insight, October 8, 2019. https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/08/montenegro-reconsiders-extradition-of-gulenist-to-turkey/.

16 "Albania Rejects Ankara's Call to Extradite Turkish Nationals over Alleged Gülen Links." Stockholm Center for Freedom, October 19, 2018. https://stockholmcf.org/albania-refuses-turkish-govt-call-to-hand-over-turkish-nationals-over-alleged-gulen-links/.

17 See "Dünyada Türkiye Maarif Vakfı." Türkiye Maarif Vakfı. https://www.turkiyemaarif.org/page/42-maarif-in-the-world-16.

Minister Rama has referred Erdogan as his brother in public statements on several occasions, and occasionally praises Erdogan's foreign policy approach and criticizes alleged emerging Turkophobia and Islamophobia.

Some political leaders, such as Izetbegovic, even act as AKP proxies. Izetbegovic continuously praises Erdogan, on one occasion even calling him the leader and prime minister of the Bosniak nation. Izetbegovic's SDA party has diligently organized ceremonies to commemorate the anniversary of the 2016 *coup*, and helped Erdogan organize a rally in Sarajevo during the 2018 presidential election campaign. This is not happening by chance. Due to their history, despite changes, Bosniaks very often identify with Turkey, much more than the other ethnic groups in the Balkans. It is common practice in Bosnia to pay the Turkish national anthem after the anthem of Bosnia and Herzegovina, celebrate victories of Turkish national sports teams, and, without question, follow the Ankara's policies. A telling example is the erection of a monument in the small town of *Sanski most* and celebration of Turkey's victory in World War I over the Entente forces, better known as the Battle of Gallipoli. Since 2015, this celebration has become a event of bilateral importance for the two countries, attended by top Bosniak officials and Turkish representatives. The monument was erected at the site of the final conquest of Sultan Mehmet Fatih in 1463 when Medieval Bosnia fell under Ottoman occupation.

Local communities with Muslim majorities have also shown great sensitivity towards Erdogan. The Party of Democratic Action of Sandzak (SDA of Sandzak), quickly expressed their support for Erdogan after the 2016 *coup* and have organized events marking the anniversary of the event. The local government of Novi Pazar, the historic and economic centre of the Sandzak region (led by another Bosniak party, the Sandzak Democratic Party), in July 2016 officially disassociated itself from the Gülen movement (by referring to it as FETO) and all local organizations connected to it, warning citizens to be careful not to be misused by them.[18] Esad Dzudzo, a former president of the Bosniak National Council in Serbia and a former SDA of Sandzak official, stated several years ago that Bosniaks in Serbia do not have a classical kin country, because Bosnia is distorted by the Dayton Agreement, thus they consider Turkey as their protector country, in line with the international law.[19]

As several other authors have pointed out, the Balkans are very important for the internal discourse in Turkey, thus Erdogan's relationship with regional leaders is beneficial to both.

The situation described above clearly illustrates how Turkey's multidimensional and multi-actor approach to the Western Balkans, fostered by the state, private sector and individual initiatives, was narrowed to a multidimensional (as we shall see further in the text) but single-actor approach, embodied in the personal agenda

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18 "Grad Novi Pazar upozorava: Pazite se Gulena i njegovih organizacija." Sandžak PRESS, July 26, 2016. https://sandzakpress.net/grad-novi-pazar-upozorava-pazite-se-gulena-i-njegovih-organizacija.

19 "Džudžo - Republika Turska je naša zemlja zaštitnica." Sandžak Haber - Sandžačke Internet Novine, September 11, 2014. https://sandzakhaber.net/2014/09/dzudzo-republika-turska-je-nasa-zemlja-zastitnica/.

of President Erdogan. This does not mean that Erdogan completely dismantled Dr. Davutoglu's vision, but rather that he has adjusted it to the goals of the ruling elite and the internal discourse in Turkey. The latest evidence of this is the media revival of the Trilateral in October 2019. Aslı Aydıntaşbaş was right when she dubbed Turkey's new foreign policy approach as *Erdoganism*.

What about the EU and NATO?

The EU

It would be brave to say that Turkey's EU integration process has been an uneven one. With no realistic prospect of EU membership at the current moment, Erdogan occasionally devalues the worth of EU membership, pointing out that Turkey is capable of surviving on its own and does not necessarily need EU integration.[20]

In the Western Balkans, Turkey actively supported the EU integration of the region for years, probably aiming to friends among future members of the bloc. But somehow, despite the rare statements, the EU component and mutual support of the EU bid was missing. Since Dr. Davutoglu's tenure in the foreign ministry, Turkey has opted to develop a pragmatic bilateral approach, with more criticism of the EU than support for its aims in the region. Indeed, Turkey was part of the CSDP missions in the region and a large contributor. **But references to the EU's reformist efforts aimed at transforming these countries and its push for the improvement of the rule of law are missing.**

Mediation efforts, most notably between Croatia and Bosnia and Serbia and Bosnia, together with mediation between Bosniak leaders in Sandzak in 2009-2011, were not perceived in the region to be connected to the EU, despite the fact that these initiatives did have some political results that were beneficial for the EU integration process and its aim of improved regional cooperation. **With the institutionalization of Erdoganism, it is unlikely that Turkey will tie its approach to the region to EU integration, but it could be possible Turkish foreign policy will have practical benefits for the EU.** However, there are also risks, as Turkey does not particularly care about structural reforms and, when it is in its interests even encourages violations of the rule of law.

Western Balkan states do not see themselves as a part of the same wave of EU integration as Turkey. Their bid to join the EU is based on the 2003 Thessaloniki Summit promise, which is seemingly slowly fading away. **The 2018 Western Balkans Integration Strategy[21] clearly separated the integration prospects of the region from those of Turkey**, which was hailed by many experts. It was argued that some EU states (such as France) tie the whole process of enlargement with the integration of Turkey, and that a separate integration strategy reinforced the Western Balkan's EU prospects. However, recent events regarding the opening of EU negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia, which was prevented by France, while some other states also have reservations, proved that the EU integration of the region will be much

[20] Alida Vračić, *op.cit.*, p.11

[21] In fact an EU communication document, and not a real strategy, as it was not endorsed by the EU member states. See "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", 2018 https://eeas.europa.eu/sites/eeas/files/communication-credible-enlargement-perspective-western-balkans_en.pdf

more challenging and thorny. Paradoxically, it could open up a path for third countries to gain more influence, among them Turkey.

Today, Turkey's approach in the region vis-à-vis the EU is much more pragmatic than it used to be. In terms of the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), both Western Balkans countries and Turkey make a significant contribution to Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions and operations. Today, Turkey contributes to just one ongoing CSDP operation – EUFOR Althea in Bosnia (but provide more than 160 personnel). The contributions of Western Balkans states is much more modest, but they do also contribute to out-of-area CSDP missions and operations in Africa, thereby contributing to the wider approach of the CFSP. More importantly, in regard to values and interests, CFSP is also a framework where the EU issues common positions and measures embodied in CFSP declarations and statements, where the EU invites candidate countries, potential candidates, members of the European Economic Area and Eastern Partnership to align with. While this issue is challenging for Western Balkans countries (especially for Serbia), they typically align with more than half of the declarations and measures annually. Turkey, on the other hand, aligns with measures and declarations only when they are also in line with its own interests, which in the past few years has been so in between ten to twenty per cent of cases.

Turkey's importance for the region, as well as for the EU, was clearly visible in 2015-16, at the height of the migrant crisis. The war in Syria had already produced millions of refugees, with Turkey accepting more than two million of them. Alongside them, migrants from other parts of the Middle East, as well as Afghanistan, have streamed into the EU through the so-called Balkan route, usually through Greece, North Macedonia and Serbia. Approximately one million people have used the route since 2015. This prompted the EU to act to make a deal with Turkey. The main idea of the deal was that any irregular migrants that entered the EU through Turkey without having already formally applied for asylum will be returned to Turkey in return for a package of financial aid. Thus, the EU tried to "plug the gap" in its south eastern neighborhood through a specific arrangement with Turkey.

The Berlin Process, which began in 2014, and the infrastructure and communication goals emphasized in the EU's Connectivity Agenda, have significance for Turkey. Countries in the region, together with the EU, have established a regional Transport Community, of which Turkey is not a party. Yet, the improvement of infrastructure in the region is for Turkey, as it will improve its ties with Western Europe and with the countries of the region. But Turkey is not showing any particular interest to participate. All of the infrastructure projects in which Turkey was, is or is planning to engage in are not a part of the EU's TENT extension for the Western Balkans. With the construction of the TANAP natural gas pipeline, Turkey should also be interested in EU supported diversification projects in the region, but has not been very vocal about them.

NATO and defence cooperation

The situation with regard to NATO is also complex. As one of the most military powerful NATO member states and important allies of the USA, Turkey has sought, in the past, to formulate its approach in line with that of NATO. Turkey was very vocal during the 1990s in this forum, but never diverged from general line taken by the alliance. Turkey strongly supported the integration of the Western Balkans states into NATO for more than two decades, which was particularly evident in the cases of North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, primarily due to Turkish lobbying efforts, Bosnia gained a conditional NATO Membership Action plan in 2009. For the first time, Turkey used NATO membership as leverage against a country in the region, as mentioned above, in regard to the ratification of North Macedonia's accession to the alliance.

Turkey has been a large contributor to NATO missions in the region, and a strong supporter of the armies of Albania, Macedonia, and, to an extent, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the end of the war, Turkey has signed a number of bilateral agreements with Bosnia, usually focused on meeting NATO standards, training military pilots and officers, etc. Most of the soldiers that have participated in these bilateral activities are of Bosniak origin, who make up the majority of personnel in the BiH Army. Turkey also actively supports the Kosovo Security Force and has encouraged its gradual transformation into a fully-fledged army, despite the constraints of the Kosovo Constitution (Ahtisaari Plan). In Kosovo, Turkish KFOR personnel are concentrated in Prizren, the key area of Turkish influence. President Erdogan has officially stated that Turkey will defend Kosovo in case of any attack.[22]

The dynamics of Turkey–US relations could result in serious consequences for the Balkans. The Turkey–US relationship was first strained due to the war in Syria and the American's alliance with Kurds in Syria, and further deteriorated after the 2016 *coup* in Turkey and the alleged role of the US in protecting army officials that were involved. The major point of friction has been the American's unwillingness to deport Fetulah Gullen to Turkey and Turkey's increasing cooperation with Russia, in particular the purchase of the S-400 air-defense system. The recent retreat of the US Army from Kurdish held area's in Syria, which allowed a subsequent Turkish operation in that area, caused further friction, and even calls for Turkey to be ejected from NATO. However, this will not happen, unless Turkey opts for this option itself, which is unlikely. But what options does this strained relationship leave for the Western Balkans?

In the past few years, despite all of the confusion caused by Donald Trump's actions, there are glimpses that the US has some kind of systematic approach to the Western Balkans. Most probably, the major reason for this is that "the soft belly" of Europe is exposed to foreign influences, above all Russia, but also China. **As secretary of state Mike Pompeo recently stated, the Balkans is an area of "strategic competition"[23] and it is plausible to suspect that the US is trying to contribute to**

[22] Interview with an expert from Kosovo, October 9, 2019.

[23] Lantier, Alex, and V. Gnana. "Pompeo Signs US-Greek Military Alliance and Threatens Iran, Russia, China", October 7, 2019. https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2019/10/07/pomp-o07.html.

solving outstanding issues between the countries in the region and encourage their integration into NATO, if it is possible do so and if the countries in question are willing. Montenegro's NATO membership, US contribution to ending the internal crisis in North Macedonia in 2016, and recent US involvement in the push to settle relations between Belgrade and Pristina, suggest that this may be the case. Recent radical improvements in US-Greek ties[24], crowned by the signing of a new defence treaty between the two states, US approval for tripartite cooperation between Greece, Cyprus and Israel, and consideration of moving the US's nuclear arsenal out of Turkey, suggests that Greece is becoming a crucial US ally in the East Mediterranean. The US almost certainly pushed Greece to sign the 2018 Prespa Agreement with now-North Macedonia and finally end the naming issue between the two countries.

This could leave Turkey as an unwilling and, in the case of further strained relations, even an unwanted partner in NATO. If this assumption is correct, then the future of the Western Balkans, where Turkey is very much influential and present, remains an open question.

[24] Bechev, Dimitar. "Greece Is Getting Good at Geopolitics." Foreign Policy. Foreign Policy, July 25, 2019. https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/25/greece-is-getting-good-at-geopolitics/.

Third-states' engagement in the Western Balkans and Turkey

In the past few years Western media has frequently reported on the increasing engagement of several third-states in the region – most notably Russia, China and the Gulf States. Their engagement is often treated with suspicion and portrayed as potentially detrimental for the European and Euro-Atlantic integration of the region, and for the interests of the West.

Prior to 2007, EU integration was unquestionably the goal of all of the states in the region. Most of Russia's troops departed Kosovo 2003, abandoning NATO's Kosovo Force (KFOR), while the involvement of China and the Gulf States was limited. **However, the proclamation of the independence of Kosovo and the economic crisis contributed to opening the door to third-party actors. The Kosovo issue pushed the largest country in the region, Serbia, to seek the support of the non-Western members of the UN Security Council, thus opening a path for their potential involvement in the region.**

Russia

Russia was first, leveraging its support for Serbia in international forums in order to purchase the Petroleum Industry of Serbia and subsequently penetrate Serbia's energy sector. Russia was already present in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a member of the Peace Implementation Council, and in Montenegro through investments in the metallurgical industry and real estate; however, these positions only gained importance after the deepening of cooperation with Serbia. Similarly to Turkey, Russia focused on those regions in which the population has been historically and religiously oriented towards Moscow, namely Orthodox Christians – mainly Serbs and Montenegrins, but also Macedonians. Russia's involvement in regions with Muslim and Catholic majorities has been quite limited. **As has been the case with Turkey, Russia has used its influence to extract privileges, obtain economic influence, and increase its visibility in the region, and to use this as leverage vis-à-vis the West.[25] But unlike Turkey, Russia is keen to prevent countries joining NATO, if not the EU itself. Russia's engagement is therefore much more divisive and contrary to the interests of the West.**

At first glance, Russia and Turkey's interests in the Western Balkans are not connected; indeed, their positions are even confrontational, similar to the 19th century. Both countries are members of the Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia, where

[25] See Vladimirov, Martin, Milica Kovačević, Igor Novaković, Marija Mirjačić, Nemanja Todorović Štiplija, Emina Nuredinoska, and Slagjana Dimiškova. "Assessing Russia's Economic Footprint in the Western Balkans. Corruption and State Capture Risks." Center for the Study of Democracy, 2018. http://old.csd.bg/artShow.php?id=18131.

they often display completely opposing positions, with Turkey often supporting the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosniak standpoints), while Russia supports Republika Srpska and Serbs in general. However, aside from the situation in Bosnia, and Turkey's support to Kosovo's independence, their interests do not collide in the Western Balkans.

Since Dr. Davutoglu's imposition of Turkey's new foreign policy, Russia-Turkey relations have boomed by comparison to the previous period. There was a short hold, after the downing of a Russian airplane in 2015, but their cooperation was resumed after the failed 2016 *coup*, when Russian intelligence allegedly informed President Erdogan that the *coup* was about to happen. A case where the two countries could cooperate in the Balkans is the Turkish Stream II/Balkan Stream gas pipeline, which plans to expand from Turkey to Bulgaria and towards Serbia and Hungary. The project is still under construction, and it is not clear if it will be completed, as many questions remain answered – such as the market for the projected capacity of the pipeline. On the other hand, competition –natural gas produced by Azerbaijan (TANAP)– also passes through Turkish territory, and Russian and Turkish interests could clash if Ankara supports European efforts to diversify gas supplies in the Western Balkans, such as the construction of the proposed pipeline between Serbia and Bulgaria.

China

China is another story. Relatively new to the Western Balkans, China began into penetrate the region through the "Belt and Road initiative" and the relatively recent formation of 16+1 (now 17+1) initiative aimed at facilitating cooperation with 16 (now 17) Eastern European states spanning from the Baltic, over the Black Sea and the Adriatic Sea, to the Eastern Mediterranean. **China entered at a moment when investment from the EU was falling and the countries of the Western Balkans were looking for sources of fresh capital. The Chinese arrived with an offer of fresh loans for infrastructure and energy projects (highways, railways, bridges, power plants, etc.), usually on the condition that they are implemented by Chinese companies and Chinese workers.** In some countries, such as Serbia, the approach was upgraded and the Chinese also offered investment in brownfield and greenfield projects and cooperation in the areas of telecommunication and the defence industry. In some cases, projects covered by Chinese infrastructure loans partially overlap with TEN-T, as China's main focus has been to support the construction and rehabilitation of the main transport routes in the region, which lead towards the main market for Chinese goods – Western Europe.

Although a NATO member, and an EU candidate, in previous years President Erdogan publically toyed with the notion of improving ties with China several times. However, Turkish positions on Chinese policies in Xinjiang and their treatment of Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic groups, as well as Kazakhs and Kyrgyzs, has prevented a deepening of ties. However, in 2019 Turkey's economic decline, increasing quarrels with the US, and its uneven relationship with the EU, pushed President Erdogan to search for alternatives. An infusion of cash and investment from China arrived in

mid-2019, when China transferred a support package of one billion US dollars, just before critical local elections in Istanbul.[26] That was followed by a 200 million US dollar loan from the China Development Bank (under the Belt and Road Initiative) to the support projects in manufacturing industries, SMEs, energy, infrastructure, health and education sectors in Turkey.[27]

At first glance, there are no points of friction between China and Turkey. China is new to the region, and has no ethnic or religious preferences in these states. Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the main transport routes will certainly help Turkish business and political interests in the region, as it will improved connections between all of the states in the region and Turkey itself, and allows Turkey to focus on other transport routes that have more significance for Turkey, such as the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway. The only potential contentious issue is the construction of the Peljesac Bridge in Croatia, which is the first project in Europe financed by the EU and implemented by a Chinese company. This project is a matter of dispute between the Bosniak elite in Bosnia, led by SDA, and Croatia, as Bosniaks' see the bridge as a sort of blockade for Bosnia's only sea port in Neum.

Gulf States

The influence of Gulf States in the region is very different to that of Russia and China. The Gulf States became active in the region in 1990s, during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo, by providing aid and volunteers for the Army of Bosnia and Herzegovina. **That aid was followed by some volunteers permanently settling in Bosnia, funding the construction of new mosques across the Balkans, scholarships to study in Arab countries, and support for various religious and cultural institutions**. The immediate consequence of this was the limited spread of Salafi teachings in the region, at the expense of the traditional and moderate Hanafi school of Islam. The outcome of this was seen in the formation of so-called ISIL in the Middle East, when significant groups of volunteers from Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and other places went to fight for ISIS. The repatriation and integration of these fighters has proven to be a huge challenge for countries in the region. **The outbreak of the economic crisis in 2008, and the subsequent search for foreign investors, increased the interest of Gulf States to enter the region**. One of the largest penetrations in the region has been in Serbia, with a Strategic Partnership Agreement signed with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2013, which was immediately put into action through several large scale controversial projects, such as the Belgrade Water Front, Etihad's "minority" ownership of Air Serbia (Serbia's new airline), the takeover of PKB (a formerly state owned agriculture and food processing company) arable land around Belgrade, and a number of other examples.

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[26] China Development Bank extends USD 200 million loan to TSKB. Accessed November 1, 2019. http://www.tskb.com.tr/web/307-4340-1-1/tskb-site-en/en-hakkimizda/tskbden-haberler-en/china-development-bank-extends-usd-200-million-loan-to-tskb..

[27] China Development Bank extends USD 200 million loan to TSKB. Accessed November 1, 2019. http://www.tskb.com.tr/web/307-4340-1-1/tskb-site-en/en-hakkimizda/tskbden-haberler-en/china-development-bank-extends-usd-200-million-loan-to-tskb.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are active in real estate and are implementing various other projects across the Balkans, most of which are surrounded by controversy. It should be also noted that their renewed interest in the region came, more or less, at the time of the outbreak of conflicts in the Middle East following the Arab Spring, when the UAE and other states began purchasing large amounts of weapons from Serbia, Bulgaria and other states.[28] Some of these weapons shipments ended up on the battlefields of Syria and elsewhere in the Middle East.

The most obvious conflict between Turkey and the Gulf States' growing influence in the region is religious, as conservative teachings from the Gulf are piercing the religious fabric of the Muslim communities in the region. Turkey, through its Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), is interested to maintain influence and to suppress the spreading of other non-traditional teachings. This is in line with the dominant attitude of Muslim populations in the Balkans vis-à-vis Salafism.

[28] See Gaytandzhieva, Dilyana. "Islamic State Weapons in Yemen Traced Back to US Government: Serbia Files (Part 1)." Arms Watch, September 15, 2019. http://armswatch.com/islamic-state-weapons-in-yemen-traced-back-to-us-government-serbia-files-part-1/.

Other elements of Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans

Turkish influence relies on several tools, from economic to soft power, which show a degree of success in the Balkans.

The Economy and Trade

Due to a network of free trade agreements, trade between countries in the region and Turkey has grown in recent years. Although Turkish officials have announced a rise in trade with the Western Balkans (for example, one billion euros with Bosnia, and goals of two billion Euros with Serbia in short term and five billion euros in long term), in most cases it remains at the same levels as the peaks reached by 2016. Furthermore, a recent drop in the value of the Turkish Lira has encouraged Turkish exports to the region, while imports from the Western Balkans have dropped due to higher costs for Turkish importers. For example, in the first nine months of 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina exported 74 million euros worth of goods to Turkey, while imports were values at 314 million euros, over four times more. Domestic goods are under increasing competition from imported goods from Turkey. Some officials in Bosnia recently stated that Bosnia should consider countermeasures, such as quotas for Turkish goods, to protect domestic production.[29] There is a similar situation in Serbia and other countries in the region.

While over the previous 20 years the principal countries for Turkish investment were Bosnia, Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo, since 2014, and particularly following the 2016 *coup,* the situation has changed. Serbia has seemingly becoming the principal focus of Turkish investors. Montenegro too has experienced a rise in Turkish investment, with 53 million euros invested in 2018. In the same period only five million euros were invested in Bosnia and Herzegovina.[30] There have been subtle indications, probably thanks to mediation by President Vucic's, that Turkish investors may be interested in investing in Republika Srpska, while a number of investors already relocated to the smaller Bosnian entity, which was until recently a no go area for Turks.[31] **Pragmatism currently dominates Turkey's long-term approach, with Serbia, Republika Srpska and Montenegro offering much better incentives to foreign**

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29 Jelin-Dizdar, Tina. "Dva glavna razloga za pad razmjene između Turske i BiH." N1 BA. Accessed November 1, 2019. http://ba.n1info.com/Vijesti/a382978/Kolika-je-razmjena-izmedju-BiH-i-Turske.html.

30 "Ljubav bez pokrića: Turska manje ulaže u bih nego u Srbiju i Crnu Goru." Biznis i Finansije, October 16, 2019. https://bif.rs/2019/10/ljubav-bez-pokrica-turska-manje-ulaze-u-bih-nego-u-srbiju-i-crnu-goru/.

31 Buyuk, Hamdi Firat. "Turkey's 'Sultan' Unites Feuding Balkan Leaders in Admiration." Balkan Insight, October 16, 2019. https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/11/turkeys-sultan-unites-feuding-balkan-leaders-in-admiration/.

investors than the other countries in the region. Turkish banks such as Halk Bank, Turkish Economy Bank, Ziraat Bank and İşbank, as well as others, have entered the region in the past 20 years. While their market share varies from country to country, their main purpose is to facilitate Turkish investment and trade in the region.

With Turkey's economy predominantly based on private business, the country was not able to completely "persuade" Turkish investors to choose certain destinations, such as Sandzak in Serbia.[32] This situation has created friction between Turkey and local Muslim communities.[33]

As one member of the Serbian government has assessed, Turkey's goal is to improve infrastructure in areas with significant Muslim populations, and to connect these areas with main transport corridors.[34] This point is proven by previous Turkish investment in airports in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia (Kraljevo airport – close to Novi Pazar), the announcement of Turkish companies' involvement in the construction of portions of the highway towards Serbia in Montenegro and a highway from Sarajevo to Belgrade, as well as investment in the reconstruction of local roads in the Sandzak region of Serbia. In Muslim-populated areas such as Bosnia, Turkey is considered to be ready to invest directly, while in the other areas the deal is usually a "standard" loan with an obligation to use Turkish companies as the main contractors – the same type of scheme that has already been seen with Chinese and Russian loans for infrastructure.[35] **However, the often-criticized case of highway construction in Kosovo, where the Turkish-American consortium Bechtel-Enka supposedly charged a much higher price per kilometre than the cost of construction through mountainous terrain in neighbouring Albania, raises doubts about the notion of Turkey's exclusive good will towards their "religious kin."** Again in Kosovo, the electric distribution network company was bought by Turkish investors for 26 million euros, while its estimated value was between 200 and 300 million euros.[36] This is very reminiscent of the Petroleum Industry of Serbia (NIS) case, of which 51 per cent was sold to the Russian company Gazprom for 400 million euros, while its estimated value was around three billion euros.[37]

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32 https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/neosnovan-strah-od-turskih-investicija/27044901.html

33 Buyuk, Hamdi Firat. "Turkey's ...*op.cit.*

34 Interview with a member of Serbia's current administration, October 11, 2019

35 The Bosnia-Serbia highway is the most recent example – while Turkey should, according to the reports, directly finance a portion of the highway in Bosnia, it gave one billion euro loan to Serbia for the construction of the remaining parts in Serbia.

36 Likmeta, Besar, Erjona Rusi, Lawrence Marzouk, and Petrit Çollaku. "Albania-Kosovo Highway Costs Soar To 2 Billion Euros." Balkan Insight, May 28, 2018. https://balkaninsight.com/2014/04/23/albania-kosovo-highway-costs-soar-to-2-billion-euro/.

37 International and Security Affairs Centre – ISAC Fund and Law Office 'Nikolić, Kokanović, Otašević', (2009), "Pravna analiza aranžmana između Srbije i Susije u oblasti naftne i gasne privrede," December 21, 2009, p. 6, accessed on September 21, 2019, https://www.isac-fund.org/download/Pravna%20Analiza%20Aranzmana%

Soft Power

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) is one of the principal vehicles of Turkish soft power in the region. According to Turkish legislation from 2011, TIKA's role is to develop economic, cultural, social, technical and educational cooperation in developing countries, but also to implement projects that will remove prejudices about Turkey.[38] Unlike Western development agencies, which primarily finance projects that foster the transformation and economic development of countries in the region, TIKA's activities are to a large extent oriented towards the preservation of Ottoman cultural and historic heritage (mosques, bridges, burial places, important buildings, etc.), and to a lesser extent on other projects such as the empowerment of women in the countryside, entrepreneurship, modernization of health care facilities, flood relief, renovation and construction of parks, and archives, etc. Of course, a significant number of these projects are focused on areas with a Muslim majority, but TIKA is also active in other areas. It should be emphasized that TIKA was very generous during the catastrophic floods in Serbia and Bosnia in 2014, when it donated 1.35 million euros. It is interesting to note that, in 2012, TIKA's Bosnia budget was the third largest of all TIKA's activities in the world, with 16 million dollars invested, of which 50 to 70 per cent was spent on the reconstruction of the Ottoman heritage.[39]

TIKA's activities are implemented in line with those of the Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and other related state and private institutions that support the construction of new religious buildings and the preservation of the traditional Hanafi school of Islam in the region against the incursion of other teachings, primarily from the Gulf. The Bayrampasa Isabey Mosque in south Mitrovica and Prishtina Central Mosque, both in Kosovo, Namazgâh Mosque (the largest in the Balkans) in Tirana, Albania, and Kayseri Mosque in Gorazde in Bosnia and Herzegovina are among the latest projects supported by Turkey. In many cases construction was opened by President Erdogan himself. In the previous period, most mosques were constructed in North Macedonia, in Albanian majority areas. Diyanet's previous activities led some experts and politicians to see it as a vehicle for the interests President Erdogan and AKP. Several years ago, the independent Turkish newspaper Cumhuriyet, reported that Diyanet was very active in collecting intelligence, specifically on the activities of Gülen sympathizers, in 38 countries across Europe, including Germany and the Balkans.[40]

Another pillar of soft power influence is the Anadolu Agency news agency, regionally headquartered in Sarajevo, which serves as a primary means of transmitting the views and standpoints of the AKP, as well as covering issues of importance for Turkish interests in the region. The Anadolu Agency acts similarly to the Russian agency Sputnik in Serbia, offering free content (usually photographs)

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38 Statutory Decree Law no. 480 Turkey

39 See "TİKA 2012 Annual Report." Turkish Development Assistance Reports - TİKA. Accessed November 1, 2019. http://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/oldpublication/tika2012AnnRep.pdf.

40 Dobrić, Željka. "Neviđeni Diplomatski Skandal." Glas Srpske, January 30, 2011. https://www.glassrpske.com/lat/novosti/vijesti_dana/nevidjeni-diplomatski-skandal/52487.

to other media. A number of emerging portals transmit the agency's news. Turkish National radio-television (TRT) offers online news and radio programmes in all of the languages in the Balkans. In addition, there are a number of portals that present views favouring Turkey and Turkey's role in the region, particularly in Bosnia, but also in other states, though in most cases there is no obvious evidence of Turkish ownership or ties.

At the same time, as many other papers and articles have pointed out, the Turkish entertainment industry has exploded in the Balkans. According to the Turkish Ministry of Culture, when the first soap operas appeared (in 2006), the price per episode was around €25,000; today prices reach €360,000. Not only have soap operas become a significant export product for Turkey, broadcasting in 156 countries, they appear to be planned and strategically designed tools of serious diplomacy. Speaking in 2019 on this topic, Fahretin Altun, President of the Presidential Communication Department of the Presidency of the Republic of Turkey, said that this programme is currently watched by over five hundred million people and are a valuable export worth more than three hundred and fifty million dollars, ranking them second in the world; and that soap operas, with the help of the media, contribute to "creating a positive image of Turkey and to changing of perceptions about this state."[41] To illustrate this point, each and every TV station in Kosovo broadcasts at least one Turkish soap opera. However, they have also achieved huge success across the Balkans. An example of how important the Balkans are for Turkey is the recent announcement that a new series, currently in production, that will depict the life of Alija Izetbegovic, the late president of Bosnia and war-time and post-war leader of Bosniaks and the SDA.

Turkish influence is also spread through education and educational institutions. In the past, the Hizmet movement played a crucial role in region, founding a number of educational institutions, from kindergartens to schools. However since 2016 state sponsored institutions have taken the lead, while Hizmet related institutions have been under pressure. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are three universities connected to Turkey. The International University (informally dubbed the "Turkish university" by locals), the Burch University-Bosna Sema (originally close to Hizmet) and, since 2019, the Anadolu University, a local branch of the university seated in the town of Eskisehir in Turkey. Turkish universities ensure that all students learn the language of the host nation if they are from Turkey or Turkish if they are locals. Due to its connections to Hizmet, and despite a change in ownership structure following the 2016 *coup*, the Burch University is under constant attack from institutions. The other two universities are close to AKP and President Erdogan (the International University recently awarded an honorary PhD to Erdogan), and currently perform the role of suppressing the influence of institutions close to Hizmet. In the words of the Turkish ambassador to Bosnia, among other things, the purpose of the Anadolu University is to "protect youth from the negative impacts of dangerous organizations

[41] "Turske " sapunice " nakon američkih najprodavanije na svetu." TRT Srpski. Accessed November 1, 2019. https://www.trt.net.tr/srpski/kultura-turizam-i-umetnost/2019/03/11/turske-sapunice-nakon-americkih-najprodavanije-na-svetu-1161320.

such as FETO operating under the mantle of education".[42] The previously mentioned Maarif Foundation also operates in Bosnia and has, in the past few years, founded kindergartens, primary schools and high schools, again in a clear attempt to counter Hizmet educational institutions.

The situation is similar in Kosovo and Albania, where existing universities and networks of schools and kindergartens that have operated for years (the first Turkish college in Albania was founded in 1993) are under threat of closure due to pressure from Ankara. A number of new educational institutions were founded, but a number of local schools were also bought by Turkish institutions. One private school in Albania protested against this expansion, calling it "Turkish cultural aggression".[43] In addition to countering Hizmet, some experts have expressed the view that these schools also exist to promote the Turkish worldview and values,[44] thus creating a more solid basis for preserving Turkish influence in these countries.

Turkey has founded a number of Yunus Emre institutes in the region, the first of which was established in Sarajevo in 2009. The institutes' main activities are language courses and supporting cultural projects, similarly to cultural centers run by other countries. The distribution of institutes is interesting: In Bosnia there are three in Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo, Fojnica and Mostar) and none in Republika Srpska, three in Kosovo (Pec, Prizren and Pristina), and two in Albania (Skoder and Tirana), while in Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro there are just one in the capital of each country. In Sandzak, Turkey has also opened the Centre for Turkish Culture in Novi Pazar. After years of negotiation, Turkish language was introduced in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a second foreign language of choice for students, with eight thousand pupils having already chosen Turkish as a second foreign language. Turkey gave a similar promise to Albania. There is practical value in doing so – knowledge of Turkish can help students to Turkish scholarships. In turn, in Turkey, since 2016, the governmental programme "living languages and accents in Turkey" has resulted in Albanian and Bosnian becoming a foreign language of choice. Many pupils with Balkan origins are interested in these classes.[45]

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42 "U Sarajevu prezentiran turski Anadolu univerzitet: prilika za studiranje na daljinu." Anadolu Ajansı. Accessed November 1, 2019. https://www.aa.com.tr/ba/obrazovanje/u-sarajevu-prezentiran-turski-anadolu-univerzitet-prilika-za-studiranje-na-daljinu/1508276.

43 Mejdini, Fatjona. "Schools a New Tool of Turkish Influence in Albania." Balkan Insight, September 5, 2019. https://balkaninsight.com/2019/09/04/schools-a-new-tool-of-turkish-influence-in-albania/.

44 ibid

45 Buyuk, Hamdi Firat. "Pioneer Albanian Class Starts in Turkish School." Balkan Insight, May 18, 2018. https://balkaninsight.com/2018/04/18/turkey-welcomes-albanian-and-bosnian-language-classes-in-schools-04-18-2018/.

Conclusion

Turkish influence in the Western Balkans is somewhat different than the influences of other "third actors", such as Russia or China. Firstly, Turkey differs from the other two in that it is also a Balkan state – therefore a sort of insider. Secondly, unlike China and Russia, there is an apparent lack of any sort of systematic approach or concisely based policy to the Turkish state's approach to the Balkans. Although there is somewhat of a vision linked primarily in the Ottoman past of the region and domestic Muslim populations, who Turkey sees as a sort of "kin". Thirdly, President Erdogan's prosecution of the Hizmet movement is one of the main spoilers of the previous Turkish approach in the region, anchored in the "zero problems with neighbours" policy. At the same time, this clash with Gullenists has undermined the Turkey's network in the region and caused them to establish a new one. It also defines the partnership with the Western Balkan states and their leaders. The personalization of foreign policy, based on Erdogan's personal relationships, creates many weaknesses for growing Turkish influence in the region. However, on the other hand, it does open new avenues for cooperation, particularly with the predominantly non-Muslim countries in the region, such as Serbia.

However, none of the countries in the region see Turkey as a substitute for the EU; rather Turkey is merely a useful partner that can potentially fill the void caused by the lack of investment in the region, as well as reaping potential benefits from Turkish influence over the Muslim populations in the Western Balkans. Therefore, countries in the region are trying to satisfy President Erdogan's wishes vis-à-vis Gullen's network, in some way or another, sometimes violating the rule of law and human rights.

Even if President Erdogan and Turkey were interested in undermining the process of EU integration, it is not likely that such an initiative would be supported by the Western Balkans states. However, the EU's inactivity and the regions increasingly blurred European prospects could actually strengthen Turkey's actions, thereby give it more opportunities to act. However, the role of a spoiler may come exclusively as a consequence of other issues between the West and Turkey, for example the EU's inability to find common ground with Turkey on the migrant/refugee issue and further deepening of US-Turkish misunderstandings. Turkey will remain a part of NATO as long as it wishes to, while the EU has some leverage to act, if it actually focuses on foreign policy.

However, aside from the role of potential spoiler, Turkey's actual strength in the region is falling, alongside the decline of the Turkish economy. The rise of Turkish exports in the region are just a fraction of the overall trade in the Western Balkans states, and therefore do not count as a major factor. At the same time (in June-October 2019) President Erdogan has demanded loans from China under the BRI scheme, with which he promises investment measured in the billions of dollars.

The general conclusion is that Turkey is a player to be reckoned with in the region, but should not be viewed as black and white, as there are options for cooperation.

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