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# TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY IN THE BALKANS AMIDST ‘SOFT POWER’ AND ‘DE-EUROPEANISATION’

Başak Alpan and Erdi Öztürk<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

Since the beginning of the 2000s, an extensive degree of academic research has been echoing one popular opinion, which is ‘Turkey is back to the Balkans’. These studies have been scrutinising the complicated role of Turkey in the Balkans, usually drawing upon the use of soft power by the former. This impact in the region remained intact during the 2010s, although the overall Turkish foreign policy in the 2010s has been highly securitised and de-Europeanised, losing its soft power character that had been its trademark starting from early 2000s. In this regard, this paper aims to decipher different dimensions of Turkey’s foreign policy in the Balkans through a more general exploration of the de-Europeanisation of Turkish foreign policy in the 2010s. Through more than 80 semi-structured interviews, which were conducted between 2016-2020, with political actors, diplomats, religious leaders, scholars and journalists in Turkey and in the Balkans, we address the question of whether the divergence Turkish foreign policy from a soft power perspective and its concomitant de-Europeanisation tendency had been crystallised in its policy towards the Balkans within the context of the 2010s.

*Key Words: Turkey, Balkans, de-Europeanisation, soft power, Turkish Foreign Policy*

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## Introduction

‘I would easy argue that Turkey is back in the Balkans during the AKP period’

These are the words of Bulgarian Grand Mufti Dr. Mustafa Hadzhi from our interview back in April 2017. Alongside Dr. Hadzhi’s clear argument, ‘Turkey’s back in the Balkans’ had been the slogan used quite extensively to denote Turkey’s increasing cultural, political and religious influence in the region, focusing on the soft power approach epitomised by an excessive use of religion and nationalism and investments as well as through personal links between Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and various Balkan leaders. Indeed, Turkey has been associated with a thorough soft power approach in its foreign policy orientation starting from early 2000s within the context of the ‘zero problem with neighbours’ policy of the ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP from now on) and Turkey’s newly assumed leadership role in the East as a ‘regional power and global force’ (Davutoğlu 2011). This soft power approach had been substituted with a more securitised foreign policy perspective in the 2010s intertwined with a process what is called in the literature as *de-Europeanisation*, which denotes a lesser and more limited Europeanisation context. In this respect, the main argument of this paper is that Turkey’s soft power foreign policy perspective remained intact in the Balkans in the 2010s. Nevertheless, due to Turkey’s de-Europeanisation in domestic governance, Turkey’s soft power in the Balkans has taken a particular form in the 2010s, highly endowed with religious, nationalist, economic and neo-patrimonialist elements.

Turkey’s foreign policy approach to the Balkans as well as the overall shifts and changes in Turkish foreign policy (TFP from now on) had been thoroughly studied in the literature. Oft-debated topics in this respect include the authoritarian transformation that the incumbent AKP underwent (Başer and Öztürk 2017; Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018) as well as the institutional and normative distancing from the ideas of Europeanisation (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016; Alpan 2016; Kaliber and Kaliber 2019). The distancing from the ideals of liberal democracy by the Balkan states due to populist right-wing leaders and institutional inadequacy has also been a common issue of debate (Bieber 2018; Lavric and Bieber 2021). The way in which these transformations interacted, Turkey’s aggressive and overdose use of religion and nationalism in foreign policy, and the positive and negative reactions to this development in the Balkans are among the key issues discussed in a multifaceted manner (Öztürk and Akgönül 2018; Szerencses 2021; Noutcheva and Aydın-Düzgit 2012; Athanassopoulou 1994; Tanaskovic 2012; İçduygu and Sert 2015). Nevertheless, it is worth exploring in particular how Turkey’s soft power approach in the Balkans could be located within the country’s overall foreign policy trends and de-Europeanisation claims, which forms the main crux of the article. In addition to this endeavour, the article will examine three dimensions of Turkey’s soft power approach in the Balkans in the 2010s: a) *Normative soft power* (the use of religion, synthesised with nationalism), b) *material soft power* (Turkey’s economic investments into various state and non-state-oriented apparatuses in the Balkans) and, finally, c) *personalised soft power* (use

of neo-patrimonialism in light of the bilateral relations maintained by leaders and their inner circles).

Methodologically, this work relies on a rich ethnographic study conducted between 2016 and 2020. This ethnographic study utilised a series of interviews conducted with political and social elites in both Turkey and the Balkans between 2016 and 2020 and discussions held with experts over the internet after the first quarter of 2020. The primary reason why the study was not conducted directly in the region over the past year is mainly the restrictions on travel and face-to-face interviews due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A total of 83 face-to-face interviews were conducted in Turkey, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia and Bulgaria. These interviews featured clergymen, politicians, state officials and prominent members of the community. Additionally, interviews were held over the internet with 20 regional experts to better understand Turkey's changing role in the region during the era of COVID-19. This study also utilises the official data from state sources, primarily on the economic relationship between Turkey and the Balkans.

The article will be divided into four main sections. The first section will examine the general contours of the TFP in the 2010s with a particular focus on the shift from the soft power perspective of the 2000s to the rather securitised hard power foreign policy orientation that had been prevalent in the 2010s. In the second part, we will pay particular attention to the Europeanisation/de-Europeanisation nexus within the context of TFP during the 2010s, which would lay ground to understand Turkey-Balkan relations in the same era. The third section will shed light to the historical background of Turkish-Balkan relations stretching from the Ottoman period until the AKP era and will reveal how these relationships followed a degree of historical continuity. The fourth section will describe in detail the three dimensions of Turkey's soft power approach in the Balkans, as mentioned above. All these sections will predominantly benefit from the data of the ethnographic field study. Last, but not least, the conclusion will discuss what the findings of the research tell us regarding both Turkish-Balkan relations and as well as for a more global context.

### **TFP in the 2010s: From a soft power approach to a security-oriented perspective**

To start with, two diverse, yet interlinked processes had been characterising the TFP during the 2010s. As will be detailed in the forthcoming section, whereas Europeanisation and European Union (EU from now on) accession had still been a significant agenda item of the TFP, it has been dramatically transformed into a security-oriented one that once more resorts to hard power and coercive diplomacy (Aknur and Durmuşlar 2019, 1356). Although such a security-centred approach had dominated TFP throughout the 1990s, there was a dramatic shift in the 2000s towards more cooperative, liberal policies, which was termed as 'Europeanisation' as well. Throughout the 1990s, Turkey's relations with neighbouring states, including Iraq, Iran, Syria and Greece, significantly deteriorated due to their support for the PKK. This led Turkish governments to confront neighbouring states with military measures. However, starting from the mid-2000s, the AKP's 'zero problem with neighbours' policy and Turkey's newly assumed leadership role in the East as a 'regional power and global force' (Davutoğlu

2011) dovetailed with the EU's push for democratic reforms which were still deemed as credible led to the 'Europeanisation and de-securitization of TFP' (Aknur and Durmuşlar 2019: 1356). Turkey's region-focused activism in the 2000s drew on the construction of a particular foreign policy identity that defined Turkey as a peace-promoting soft power bearing the capacity for 'instituting order' (Davutoğlu 2009) in its surrounding regions, namely the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus. In this context, Turkey's policy toward its neighbourhood aligned with the EU's 'soft power' approach and employed resources such as 'cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions' (Nye 1990, 167). During this period, Ankara attempted to establish peaceful and harmonious relations with its neighbours. Yet, by the beginning of the 2010s, TFP had drastically shifted away from Europeanisation and transformed its liberal policies back to security-oriented policies (Oğuzlu 2016).

The main turning point towards securitization was the transformation of the uprising in Syria into a civil war in the early 2010s. The shared 900-km border increased Turkey's security concerns related to revived PKK (The Kurdistan Workers' Party) terror and attacks by ISIS members entering the country alongside millions of Syrian citizens seeking refuge (Ayata 2014, 95-96). The nuclear deal that the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) plus Germany (P5 + 1) signed with Iran in 2015 concerning Iran's nuclear program which brought possibility of Iran playing a much more decisive and assertive role in the region (Oğuzlu 2016, 63) plus the increased ISIS and PKK attacks leading to the death of many Turkish citizens. These all seem to demonstrate a realist readjustment process taking place in TFP. Things reached a whole new level when, after the attempted coup of 2016, Turkey intervened in northern Syria and did so again early in 2018 (Tziarras 2018, 597). In August 2016 and January 2018, Turkey launched two military operations in northern Syria (Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch) with the objective of cleansing areas close to the border with Turkey of terrorists, including the PYD (Democratic Union Party)/YPG (People's Protection Units International) and IS (Hürriyet Daily News 2018; Torun 2021, 334). The great domestic turbulence that followed the coup attempt led to a 'belligerent foreign policy' with efforts made by authoritarian elites to divert popular attention from internal problems (Coşkun, Doğan and Demir 2017, 89). Concerning Operation Euphrates Shield, the then EU High Representative Javier Solana (2017) stated, 'the US and the EU are concerned about Turkey's attacks against the PYD, given its central role in pushing back the Islamic State' (cited in Torun 2021: 334). Similarly, regarding Operation Olive Branch, the then EU High Representative Federica Mogherini raised EU's concerns about Turkey's further operations in Syria which might fuel up instability in the region (Aktan 2018). 'The bottom line is that TFP during the 2010s became increasingly revisionist and -as some could argue- expansionist' (Tziarras 2018, 597).

### **Europeanisation/de-Europeanisation of TFP in the 2010s**

'It is better for us to host a pro-EU Turkey in our territories since it gives Turkey more credit in regional issues'

These words belong to one of the senior foreign ministry officers from Kosovo (dated back to October 2018), which have been echoed numerous by other interviewees in the region. Therefore, it is essential to scrutinise Turkey's EU journey in order to understand its role in the Balkans. Since the 1999 Helsinki decision, when Turkey was granted EU candidacy, Europeanisation has been one of the leading conceptual approaches through which EU–Turkey relations have been examined. According to the seminal conception of the term by Radaelli, Europeanisation is, ‘a process of construction, diffusion and institutionalization of formal and informal rules, procedures, policy paradigms, styles, ways of doing things, and shared beliefs and norms which are first defined and consolidated in the making of EU decisions and then incorporated in the logic of domestic discourses, identities, political structures and public policies’ (Radaelli 2003, 30). As far as the EU–Turkey relations are concerned, Europeanisation could be explained as the transformation of the way in which Turkish institutions, policies and ‘way of doing things’ are constructed and implemented so as to ensure Turkey's overall convergence towards EU standards (Alpan 2021, 108). Along this vein, Tonra explains the Europeanisation of foreign policy as ‘... transformation in the way in which national foreign policies are constructed, in the way in which professional roles are defined and pursued and in the consequent internalization of norms and expectations arising from a complex system of collective European policy-making’ (Tonra 2013).

Therefore, Europeanisation had also been the dominant trend in the post-Helsinki period as far as the TFP was concerned. This foreign policy approach had mainly been in form of civilianisation and initiatives taken for settlement of conflicts with Greece and Cyprus and aligning with the CFSP *acquis* (Aydın and Açıkmeşe 2007). Another essential point in the Europeanizing TFP is that Turkey has begun to take place in the EU-led NATO operations. By this mean, Turkey has become the fifth-largest contributor to the EU force (Rodoplu 2019, 3). Also, Müftüler-Baç and Gürsoy argued that ‘Turkey's willingness to contribute to European security after 2003 shows that the Turkish military and government still support taking joint decisions with other European countries, at least for operations that draw upon NATO assets and provide for the security of the continent’ (Müftüler-Baç and Gürsoy, 2010). In other words, in the late 2000s, the security concerns of Turkey had close parallels with the EU's approach, especially in respect to the ‘zero problems with neighbours’ approach dominant in foreign policy.

Nevertheless, the post-2005 period has been characterised by a downturn in EU–Turkey relations and growing disenchantment on both sides. The notion so-called, *de-Europeanisation* has entered the agendas of the EU studies for the last 10 years or so as to explain ‘deterioration of the quality of integration or more simply as “it is worse than it was”’ (Domaradski 2019, 221) for the candidate states as well as the member states. *De-Europeanisation* is broadly defined as ‘the loss or weakening of the EU/Europe as a normative/political context and as a reference point in domestic settings and national public debates’ (Aydın-Düzgüt and Kaliber 2016, 6). This period of de-Europeanisation in Turkish politics was mainly marked by ‘the downturn in EU-Turkey relations and the growing disenchantment by both sides’ (Aydın-Düzgüt and Kaliber 2016, 1). Two important practical implications of the depreciation of the EU conditionality and the de-Europeanisation process at the Turkish domestic scene had been

the reduction of EU-Turkey relations on issue-based cooperation in various fields such as migration and energy and the concomitant selective Europeanisation where policy reforms continued more as a continuation of the government's political agenda rather than as an attempt of harmonization with EU legislation (Alpan 2021, 126). Although the growing scepticism and indifference towards Europe, and even a turning away from European project in many spheres of politics and society, would not necessarily indicate a fully-fledged de-Europeanisation (Alpan 2016, 16), the prospect of revisiting the European project emerged.

The conceptual framework of de-Europeanisation with regard to Turkey had been studied thoroughly in many various fields such as domestic politics (Alpan, 2016; Aydın-Düzgit 2016; Cebeci 2016; Ökten-Sipahioğlu 2017), civil society (Kaliber 2016; Boşnak 2016), gender equality policy (Soyaltın-Collela and Süleymanoğlu-Kürüm 2020), rule of law (Saatçioğlu 2016), media freedom (Yılmaz 2016), education policy (Onursal-Beşgül 2016), citizenship policy (Soyaltın-Collela and Göker 2019) and migration policy (MacMillan 2018; Kaya 2021). Although studies on de-Europeanisation of the TFP are rare (see Rodoplu 2019; Ovalı 2015 for good examples) other concepts such as 'divergence' (Torun 2021) or 'anti-Western populism' (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019) had also been used to denote the depreciation of the EU as a foreign policy anchor in this period.

This turning away from the EU anchor had been intertwined with Turkey's descent into authoritarianism. There were various domestic and foreign elements that accelerated this process and fuelled the authoritarian twist such as the Gezi Park protests, the failure of the Kurdish peace process, the contestation between the AKP and the Gülenists and, last but not least, the failed coup attempt on 15 July 2016 in which some Gülen Movement are known to have played an organizing role (Esen and Gümüşçü 2017; Yavuz and Öztürk 2020). This wave of authoritarianism endowed the AKP with populism, mainly through the use of religion both instrumentally and objectively and, a stark opposition to the West. In this context, Turkey pushed itself to pursue a more religious, nationalist and aggressive foreign policy in the latter half of the 2010s, relatively weakening the historical relationship it had established with the West. Although this situation helped the AKP consolidate its base of electoral support in domestic politics (Öztürk 2021), it caused many political circles to raise eyebrows and a deterioration of bilateral political relationships with Europe as elsewhere.

Thus, during this period, it was also possible to observe a process of de-Europeanisation in the realm of TFP. The 2010s and the course of Arab Spring in particular proved to create an unpredictable turn. With the Arab Spring, Ahmet Davutoğlu's foreign policy and claim to be the mediator begun to crumble in the same place where it began: The Middle East, primarily within the course of turbulent regime changes in Egypt and Syria (Vuksanovic 2016). Turkey committed a series of miscalculations in its approach toward Syria, believing that the regime would collapse within a few months in the face of mounting societal opposition and international pressures (Kösebalaban 2020, 341). As Öniş points out, 'Turkey has over-engaged itself in Syria, contributing to further instability and undermining both its own interests and its international image in the process' (Öniş 2014, 211). Turkey's 'trade-oriented' and soft-power approach in foreign policy has been replaced by a 'security-oriented' one

(Tziarras 2018, 597). The Syrian politics of Turkey demonstrated that it was drifting away from the soft power of diplomacy and dialogue, and from the EU norms (Rodoplu 2019, 5).

Another aspect of the de-Europeanisation of the TFP in this period was the hijacking of the EU conditionality in the realm of foreign policy by the migration crisis. The 2015 refugee crisis had been followed by the *EU–Turkey Deal*<sup>2</sup> of 18 March 2016, which implied enforced border-control measures by Turkey and a strict re-admission of refugees who are trying to reach the EU territories via Turkey. The visa liberalisation process which had earlier been introduced as a strong tool for Turkey’s compliance with the EU *acquis* in field of migration was instrumentalised through this Deal and turned into a ‘bargaining chip’ (Kaya 2021) between Turkey and the EU, contributing to an issue-based cooperation between Turkey and the EU (as already discussed above) and a concomitant de-Europeanisation trend.

The 2010s also witnessed Turkey and the EU having clashes over the Cypriot and Turkish drilling activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. The ongoing tension between Ankara and Athens over gas reserves and maritime rights in the East Mediterranean has flared up in July after Turkey put out a Navtex that it was sending its Oruç Reis research ship to carry out a drilling survey in waters close to the Greek island of Kastellorizo. The specific route of Oruç Reis, which would bring it close to the Greek islands, provided the East Mediterranean quarrel -already escalating since 2019- with a tripartite structure, the other two footings being the Cyprus issue and the Aegean dispute (Alpan 2020). After a video conference on 14 August, the EU foreign ministers issued a declaration, reaffirming the EU’s full solidarity with Greece and Cyprus and underlining that sovereign rights of EU member states must be respected (EEAS 2020). It has also been aired many times by EU High Representative Josep Borrell that Turkey’s drilling activities in the East Mediterranean might face punitive measures.

All in all, Turkey’s de-Europeanisation in domestic governance has had a direct effect on the ways in which Turkey’s *soft power* has taken form in the 2010s. The link between the domestic politics and the foreign policy is an extensive theoretical debate that is going beyond the limits of the research questions of this paper. Nevertheless, it suffices to say that Turkey’s descent into authoritarianism in the domestic sphere led to a more radical recalibration of the TFP, characterised mainly by the re-inscription of the West as the ‘other’ of Turkey (Kaliber and Kaliber 2019, 2). This foreign policy discourse has introduced the ‘essentially different and morally higher Islamic’ Turkish self-vis-à-vis the essentially inferior and threatening Western other (Alaranta 2015, 31). Added to this picture was the securitisation of relations with neighbour countries such as Syria and Greece, which led to the reshaping of Turkey’s soft power approach, endowed with more intense references to religion, nationalism, personal links with the political leaders and economic ties. There cannot be a better realm than the Balkans to project this varied soft power approach, which the next sections will scrutinise.

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<sup>2</sup> The Deal, which was announced by the European Council and Turkey, aimed to end irregular migration from Turkey to the EU, stipulated that ‘all new irregular migrants crossing from Turkey into Greek islands as from 20 March 2016 will be returned to Turkey’ and ‘for every Syrian being returned to Turkey from Greek islands, another Syrian will be resettled from Turkey to the EU taking into account the UN Vulnerability Criteria’ (European Council 2016).

## **Setting the Background of a Multifaceted and Intricate Relationship: Turkey and the Balkans**

“Ottoman Empire was a Balkan Empire, but Turkey is an independent state. Therefore, Turkish policy makers should understand that they are not representing the Ottoman Empire anymore. Indeed, using culture, history, language and religion are the main tools of the contemporary foreign policy, but having hegemonic and imperial desires is a different issue”

In our interview in 2018 one of the leading scholars of University of Sofia’s Political Science Department underlined the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and Turkey as such, pointing out to the need on the part of Turkey not to act like its predecessor in the region. Indeed, various studies about the history of the relationship between the Ottoman Empire and the Balkans focus on various aspects of this relationship. One of the most significant points underlined in these studies is the particular characteristics of imperialist and Western identity of the Ottoman state, rendering the acquisition of territory, political influence and networks of economic relations in the Balkan geography possible, mainly through cultural and religious interaction (Inalcık and Faroqhi 1997; Mazower 2001). This argument also gets confirmed when we take into consideration that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire began with its loss of influence in the Balkans and that the foundation of the Republic of Turkey became possible thanks to the efforts of military officers coming from the Balkans. It is worth noting here that there are significant differences between how the Balkan states and Turkey describe this case during the Ottoman era.

After the foundation of the Turkish Republic, the rapid and relatively permanent rectification of ‘problems of the past’ between Turkey and the Balkan states mainly owed to Turkey’s determination of its own position and regional role from a realist perspective. Turkey defined itself as a medium power and sought to maintain good relations with both Western and Eastern powers (Çalış and Bağcı 2003). Turkey had never abandoned the Balkans but had instead pursued diplomatic relations as equal nations. The wave of migration that began during the Ottoman era and continued into the early Republican era undoubtedly continued to nourish the religious, cultural and economic relations between Balkan and Turkish societies (İçduygu and Sert 2015). This situation persisted consistently throughout the Cold War era, even though Turkey diverged with many Balkan states, including Yugoslavia, on different issues.

The first breaking point in Turkish-Balkan relations appeared after the 1980s when Turgut Özal came to power with his Motherland Party (*Anavatan Partisi*, ANAP) and through the impact of the Cold War. It was also underlined by a North Macedonian member of parliament in late 2019:

‘For the Balkan people, Özal always stays in a different and special position because of his close relations with us’.

The Balkans had a special position in the foreign policy that Özal crafted by integrating -though to a limited extent- economics, culture and religion. Many Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers, politicians and religious figures in the region have noted that Özal's Turkey maintained relatively closer relations with the Balkan region than before. During the Özal era, it is clear that Turkey did not only engage with the Balkans through official diplomatic channels but also introduced controversial structures to the region such as the Gülen Movement (Rasidagic and Hesova 2020). However, Özal's sudden death, the complexities that emerged at the end of the Cold War and the convoluted nature of Turkey's domestic politics caused Turkey to become an actor perceived to a relatively lesser extent in the Balkans in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Turkey always sought to make its presence in the region known in such situations as the Bosnian War and other special issues. In the 1990s, for example, Turkey maintained its top-down and bottom-up diplomatic work through its mobilisation of many transnational apparatuses – particularly the Diyanet – in countries such as Bosnia, Serbia, North Macedonia and Albania. We can assert that Turkey's use of its soft power, public diplomacy efforts and fostering of relations with the regional public dates back much earlier than the AKP era and are remnants of the circumstances that formed particularly during the Özal era.

However, the AKP and Erdoğan occupy a special position for the region. Almost all the individuals we spoke to during the field work articulated that Erdoğan and his associates know the region very well and that their good relations in the Balkans have persisted in a multifaceted manner since the 1990s, as confirmed by one of the local imams from Serbian Sandžak region back in March 2016:

“We knew Erdoğan before 2000s, and I can say that even when he was a mayor of Istanbul, he was dealing with the issues of the Balkans”

Moreover, ever since he served as the Istanbul mayor, Erdoğan has been working with individuals who have come from the Balkan region or who have family ties to the area. This both contributed to his reputation in the Balkans and made him familiar to the region. After coming to power, Erdoğan's economic development program and the pro-Europe language he employed as well as his claim that democracy and religious freedom could co-exist elevated his profile to an attractive position for the Balkan people, who were eager to 'return to' Europe in search of economic growth. For example, in a 2018 interview with former Albanian Foreign Minister Genc Polo, he argued:

“Erdoğan, the pro-Europe entrepreneur, was one of the most important partners for the Balkans in the early 2000s.”

This sentiment was reiterated by numerous political actors. With the impact of this positive environment, Turkey began to assume a more active role in the region through institutions such as the Diyanet, TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) and the Yunus Emre Institute. It was certainly not only through these institutions during this period that Turkey began to amass influence. In this context, structures began to emerge in the region that operated

as education institutions and student dormitories and worked on other matters relating to directly to the local communities.

It would be difficult to claim that this atmosphere disappeared and fully inverted after 2010. During our research in the region, we witnessed how perceptions of Turkey varied, with most of the Muslim political elite viewing the AKP's Turkey positively while others harboured suspicions. However, despite this clear difference, two points and related ruptures were echoed as main determinants of the Turkish-Balkan relations in the recent years by almost all interviewees: Turkey's own domestic politics as well as the departure of Turkey and the Balkans from the ideals of the EU respectively have a great influence on the relations between two parties in the 2010s, the period we now turn to.

### **Turkey and the Balkans in the 2010s: Rupture or Continuity?**

As already scrutinised above, TFP in the 2010s has mainly been shaped by various developments and the novel policy tools adopted by the foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who assumed the position in 2009. Coming from an academic background, Davutoğlu sought to implement in TFP the concepts he had adopted in his own line of thinking. In his view, Turkey should be elevated to a key role by implementing a proactive foreign policy, first in the region and then elsewhere in the world. The country should achieve this elevation in global affairs by being bound to the religion, culture and other normative values it had inherited from the Ottoman Empire (Özkan 2014). Irrespective of whether this view was successful or not, it indicated a breaking point for the Balkans. While the Turkish public thought that Turkey's presence in the Balkans grew as a result of the historical ties, it was claimed in the Balkans, particularly by the elites, that Turkey was once again seeking to establish a hegemony like it had during the Ottoman period or was transitioning toward a neo-colonialist policy (Bebler 2017). Political figures throughout the region certainly began to articulate this viewpoint more frequently. For example, between 2016 and 2018, when Davutoğlu was still a member of the AKP and somewhat maintained his influence, most of our interviewees claimed that Davutoğlu's doctrine failed to understand the sensitivities of the Balkans, was crafted through calculations of Turkey's domestic politics and excessively used elements of soft power.

This period has also witnessed Turkey's rapid departure from the ideals of the EU as well as the descent into authoritarianism, as already scrutinised in previous sections. In this respect, Turkey's overall de-Europeanisation at the domestic level has had a direct effect on the ways in which Turkey's *soft power* has taken form in the Balkans in the 2010s. A former government minister whom we interviewed in Albania in 2018 confirmed this view:

'In the past there was a more democratic Turkey, one that had close relations with Europe. I would like to say that this was the case during Erdoğan's initial years. But the chemistry has change; now there is a more oppressive Turkey that lacks good relations with the West. Turkey is certainly a part of us – we still have many economic, cultural and political ties. But we would like to see not this Turkey but the other Turkey as an active partner in our region. There are certainly many actors in the Balkans who like and want this new Turkey'

This quote demonstrates the degree to which Turkey's domestic politics and its corresponding relations with the EU are important in its relationship with the Balkans, as already discussed in the previous section. Nevertheless, Turkey's soft power approach still lingering in the Balkans is confirmed by almost all of our interviewees, which is epitomised through three dimensions, which we will scrutinise in the following section.

## **Turkey's 'soft power' in the Balkans: Three Dimensions**

### ***Normative soft power: The use of religion synthesised with nationalism***

During our field work, it did not go unnoticed while discussing Erdoğan's Turkey that the issue is mostly stirred for activities conducted in the domain of religion. Most of our Muslim interviewees were relatively pleased with Turkey's implementation of a religious foreign policy synthesised with nationalism, while our non-Muslim interviewees found this approach excessive. Additionally, some Muslim actors expressed that the growing element of religion in foreign policy after 2016 was somewhat more than necessary. For example, a Kosovar Muslim political actor, interviewed online platform in 2020, said:

'The fact that Turkey has introduced both religion and nationalism into every activity it has conducted in the region in recent years has compelled people to ask the question of how and in what manner any policy will be produced if not through the use of religion and nationalism. Moreover, some groups define this policy as Islamist foreign policy, which is not very good for Turkey's image in the region.'

This viewpoint, as we mentioned above, is not too uncommon, but there is a clear precedent for this. As has been already scrutinised above, Turkey began to directly assume a more active role in the Balkans in the 1990s through official and unofficial religious institutions. Turkey's Diyanet began to establish various bureaucratic and official representative offices as well as craft agreements throughout the Balkans, particularly in Bulgaria, Albania and North Macedonia. Additionally, structures such as the Gülen Movement and the Sulaimani Jamia began operating in the region as a natural result of the need arising after the Cold War. In the Balkan region, where nationalism and religion are such important elements (Aktürk and Lika 2020), these initiatives were met with relative appreciation in the 1990s and early 2000s. As a result, these institutions directly and indirectly served the Muslims in the region. There are three underlying reasons for Turkey's use of religion synthesised with nationalism in its recent foreign policy in the Balkans.

Firstly, the economic predicament that grew after 2011 in relation to Turkey's domestic policy precipitated a loss of power for Turkey's ruling party, whose desire to preserve its electoral base compelled AKP elites to adopt a foreign policy synthesised with nationalism both domestically and internationally. We can call this *the boomerang effect* (Liotta 2002). The AKP used the influence it had engendered in the Balkans through religion and its mass support to

explain how powerful Erdoğan had become in domestic politics. For example, Erdoğan was able to hold rallies in Bosnia before elections, and he sought to demonstrate to the Turkish public that he was preserving Islam – or, more accurately, the Islam of Turkey – internationally by putting into operation mosques that TIKA and the Diyanet had restored in Serbia’s Sanjak region. This undoubtedly relates to the reflection in the Balkans of the global struggle Turkey entered with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran and other Muslim countries.

Secondly, on a more international note, when populist and oppressive regimes began to administer the AKP’s Turkey and the Balkans, as was noted above, the more instrumental use of religion began to emerge. This situation is fundamentally consistent with the historical practice of some authoritarian leaders’ using religion as a tool of domestic and foreign policy. Similar examples are found in Muslim regions and elsewhere in the world (Kuru 2019; Koesel 2014). As these countries further departed from the ideals of the EU, they began to use religion more often and more excessively. We reached this conclusion following the interviews we conducted with political elites and this is an indicator of how religion was used as a political force.

Last, but not least, the use of religion synthesised with nationalism as a tool of foreign policy in the Balkans, especially after 2015 and 2016, is a struggle that was experienced within Turkey and spilled over its borders. The contestation between the AKP and the Gülen Movement that had mainly been prevalent after 2012 culminated in the bloody coup attempt in Turkey on 15 July 2016 (Öztürk 2018), and the Gülenists were forced to disperse themselves throughout the diaspora following this process (Watmough and Öztürk 2018; Yavuz 2018). Although this has been reflected everywhere in the world, the circumstances in the Balkans also spread into the realm of religion. The most fundamental reason for this was the fact that the Gülenists were already quite influential in the Balkans, whom the AKP desired to pacify through religion, Turkishness and other identity-based discourses. For example, an important figure in Albanian politics interviewed in 2020 argued:

‘After 2014, the two movements accused one another of not being Muslim, of fraud, especially after 2016. This eventually carried the political struggle to the mosques and the religious organisations.’

This essentially summarises the interviews we conducted as well as our fieldwork. AKP governments, while coercing the Balkan countries to outlaw the activities of the Gülenists, seek to leave no place for the movement in the relatively civil religious space. While doing so, it is using the Diyanet, an official state apparatus, as well as religious organisations that have indirect relationships with the AKP. It has begun to establish relationships with both local umbrella religious institutions and community organisations and to demonstrate its own religious reach in the region. It is worth noting that this excessive use of religion and nationalism pleased prominent segments of society in the Balkans that espoused Islamic values such that these largely deterministic policies do not have an entirely pejorative dimension.

### *The material soft power: Turkey's economic investments in the region*

‘Turkey and its institutions thankfully have always been by our side. Through floods, earthquakes and other natural disasters, it is always Turkey that is first to run to us. Additionally, Halkbank, Ziraat Bank and other institutions are here with us. Your Turkey is here in more areas than I can count. We can see its investments. Believe me, these are not new, but they began to become more visible in the AKP era.’

The above quote came from an Orthodox clergyman we met with in 2017 in the North Macedonian capital of Skopje. This and similar views have spread through nearly all the Balkan states. We can comfortably say that the economic dynamics during the AKP era constituted one of the main elements of Turkish-Balkan relations. The direct investments in the Balkans are what constitutes the most important leg of Turkey's economic presence in the region. Since the 2000s, there has generally been an increase in Turkey's investments in the Balkans. In 2016, a total of \$200 billion in investments from Turkey entered 11 countries in the region. This was the highest investment total after the amounts recorded in 2011, 2012 and 2015, respectively (Ekinçi 2017, 8–19). Additionally, Turkey provides direct and indirect investments to the region through TIKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Diyanet, TOKI and similar institutions. In this regard, Turkey has been developing its own foreign trade capacity while strengthening the connections it has established with the Balkans in various manners. The economic relations Turkey crafted in the Balkans during the AKP era after 2002 can be divided into two separate policies: one that was maintained directly through state apparatuses and another that was maintained through commercial operations with business leaders close to the state. In this regard, we can actively see organisations such as Cengiz Construction and Albayrak Holding, which are close to the state or to AKP members, in sectors ranging from construction to telecommunications (Öztürk 2021, 118). This certainly pertains to the balances in Turkey's domestic politics and to the outward reflection of these balances. It is evident based on this background that Turkey is making itself more visible in the region through indirect and direct investments while maintaining aid activities to guarantee its influence over various segments of society. And although this may allow Turkey to be perpetually visible in various domains in one way or another, Turkey engages in economic activity in the backdrop of the European Union and countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, China and Russia. However, this does not mean that Turkey lacks influence or is ineffective. The trade Turkey maintains with Western Balkan states constitutes only a small amount of the €145 billion (\$165 billion) of foreign trade with the European Union, its visibility is, in fact, very high.

For example, although Turkey's share of Serbia's foreign trade represents only 3.5 percent of the total, it has managed to enter the 10 countries that have the highest levels of trade, almost going completely unnoticed (see Pacariz 2022 in this volume). Additionally, Turkish construction firms are building in Serbia 20 electric power stations that they will subsequently operate. Turkey is among the top three countries for foreign trade with Kosovo (see Hoti, Bashota and Sejdiu 2022 in this volume). However, the economic crisis Turkey encountered after 2018 has clearly had a negative impact on these figures. The Turkish lira's loss of value resulted in a negative impact in the expenditures of the Turkish government, and many experts

concur that this situation severely limited the resources that Turkey had allocated for its activities in the Balkans. But although it may appear that Turkey's economic recession will reduce its investments in the Balkans, Turkey's influence still appears to be significant in the region, according to our observations and the data at hand. However, two basic problems emerge in this regard.

The first problem becomes clear when comparing Turkey's economic investments with those of the EU and the United States in that it has relatively fewer investments that are aimed at producing added value and are future oriented. Turkey, which typically operates more often in the construction sector and in similar fields works in the Balkan economic space through direct and indirect assistance from the government, originating from its domestic authoritarian structure. Under these circumstances, it does not compete directly with countries that have much larger economies such as China and the United Kingdom.

The second problem relates to the direct and indirect economic assistance that Turkey has made through the state rather than economic investment. In this context we find statements and impressions regarding Turkey's engaging in operations that pertain more often to Sunni Muslim societies or to issues that relate directly to them. During the interviews we conducted in 2017, the head mufti of Bulgaria said that Turkey had provided them with both financial and immaterial support during the AKP era, while Bektashi Leader Baba Mondri, whom we interviewed in Tirana, complained that they had not received any support despite their requests. Prominent among the basis for this difference is the identity change that Turkey has experienced domestically.

### *Personalised soft power: Neo-patrimonialism and leadership-based relations*

Turkey increasingly started to be defined as a neo-patrimonial country after 2013 and especially after 2016, placing Erdoğan at the centre and, concurrently, his family and inner circle growing stronger in proximity to him (Uğur-Çınar 2017; Yılmaz and Bashirov 2018; Cengiz 2020). As it further distances itself from the EU, Turkey has ignored criteria such as merit and entitlement and instead been governed through an understanding of politics that is administered domestically and internationally through the notion of leadership proximity. This reinforces the decisiveness of the leader. While this certainly does not create a greater degree of decisiveness in political relations with more developed, Western nations, it does have a certain predictive value in Balkan states in which strong men are in power and the ruling administration determines the foreign policy. And the influence that Erdoğan has engendered over the Muslim population in the Balkans represents a greater element of pressure over these leaders. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Bulgaria are among the most striking examples in this context, and we discussed above both how Turkey used religion and nationalism as an instrument in these countries and which groups rose to economic prominence. The matter of proximity to the leaders of these countries is relevant in all these cases. However, there are varying determining factors in these countries.

On 20 May 2018, when Erdoğan and the Office of the President in Turkey were unable to receive permission to hold political rallies in European capitals, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bakir Izetbegovic, one of the country's prominent politicians, hosted Erdoğan. In the venue where he held a political rally, Izetbegovic referenced Erdoğan, claiming that he had been sent by God to the Muslims. This discourse indicates deeper connections than a mere populist slogan. The field research we conducted in the region demonstrates that there exists a more profound degree of collaboration between Erdoğan's family and that of Izetbegovic that ties their countries together. On the one hand, Turkey actively uses state institutions and banks in Bosnia and Herzegovina through the support of the Izetbegovic family, and on the other hand Izetbegovic receives support from Erdoğan and his family in his own domestic politics. For example, members of Izetbegovic's family host the openings of structures and institutions that Turkey has restored. Bakir Izetbegovic's wife Sebija resides as the director of the Sarajevo City Hospital, which TIKA put back into operation. Although the cases we highlighted may appear to be purely symbolic, the leaders and their relatives clearly occupy key positions of power structures starting from decision-making mechanisms at the highest peaks of the state spreading downwards. Moreover, these leader-oriented understanding of governance discursively and materially support one another.

In this context, we can say that there is an intricate relationship that has emerged between Balkan leaders and Erdoğan. While Balkan leaders attended special celebrations, including wedding ceremonies, for Erdoğan's family, Erdoğan also was present as a key guest on occasions that Balkan leaders sought to use as political propaganda. It is clear that Balkan leaders have established some degree of proximity with Erdoğan in a rhetorical and image-based sense. The blazer jackets they wear, their discourse regarding making their countries great and powerful and the populist language they most often use demonstrate their political similarities. Additionally, their support for major projects and their desire to develop their countries in fields such as construction that provide little added value also highlight the practical dimensions of this similarity.

## **Conclusion**

The Balkans have always been a significant region for TFP. While the region has been ruled by the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century, since the foundation of the Republic, it has been a neighbouring region of the country with deep-running historical, cultural and social ties. This geographical and cultural proximity has been the pretext of what had been dubbed as 'Turkey is back in the Balkans', a motto which had preoccupied TFP agenda since the 2000s. This article, departing from the claim that TFP had clearly deviated in the 2010s from its soft power approach, intertwined with a twist of de-Europeanisation, argued that this divergence has been crystallised in a particular way in Turkey's approach to the Balkans during the same period. The de-Europeanisation trend in Turkish politics as well as in the TFP (mainly intertwined with a rising authoritarianism in the country) led to a soft power approach in the

Balkans endowed with highly nationalist, religious, economic and neo-patrimonialist elements. Through more than 80 semi-structured interviews with political actors, diplomats, religious leaders, scholars and journalists in Turkey as well as in the Balkans, the article aimed to explore the crux of Turkey's soft power in the Balkans by deciphering various dimensions of soft power. The salience of soft power approach to the Balkans mainly owed to the use of religion synthesised with nationalism within the relations (*normative soft power*) and Turkey's economic investments in the region (*material soft power*) as well as neo-patrimonialism and personal relations between President Erdoğan and the political leaders in the region (*personalised soft power*). This thorough analysis is crucial to underline that soft power is not always that 'soft' and should be scrutinised more critically and always with a pinch of salt. Theoretically speaking, *soft power* exists when a country becomes attractive to a wide range of actors where the influence is fielded. Our field research showed that Turkey's *soft power* showed itself in the Balkans through three dimensions elaborated above. Nevertheless, some respondents also pointed out to the lack of it (such as the Bektashi leader who complained about not taking any support from Turkey). Therefore, there could always be a dissonance between the analytical framework we use to understand *soft power* and its practical use.

On a different note, the main take away message of the interviews in the region proved to be that the aforementioned trend of de-Europeanisation on the part of Turkey would run the risk of detaching the country from the Balkans as well, debilitating its influence and reliability in the region. Another crucial finding of the interviews has been that TFP in the region is never deemed only about foreign policy. The domestic developments in Turkish political scene were perceived by our respondents to boil down to Turkey's foreign policy approach to the Balkans. This is not a new story, since Robert Putnam already argued back in 1988 that domestic politics and international relations are often inextricably entangled, and (the then) existing theories - particularly 'state-centric' ones do not adequately account for these linkages (Putnam 1988). All in all, the way in which the Turkey's foreign policy approach to the Balkans as well as other regions is intermingled with the domestic factors and political processes is a task that definitely deserves particular attention, which needs to be scrutinised in a further research endeavour.

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