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Identity, Nostalgia and Religion: Making Sense of Turkey and the Balkan Relations in the Twenty-first Century

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Abstract

This article deals with Turkey's increasing involvement and activism in the Balkan Peninsula between 2002 and 2022, under the rule of the Justice and Development Party and asks two different questions 1) If the Balkan elites perceive the policies implemented by Turkey differently and relatively pejoratively, what is the reason for this and how can we explain it theoretically? 2) What kind of differences does the current position of Turkey-Balkan relations cause us to observe in classical international relations? To answer these questions, this study seeks to shed much needed light on this aspect of Turkish relations with its Balkan neighbours in the context of the broader shift in Turkish domestic and foreign policy under the AKP from a realist-secular orientation to an ambiguous Sunni Islamic. Therefore, it explains the complex relations between religion, nostalgia and identity, and its reflections on state power.

Keywords: *Turkey; Balkans; Islam; Soft Power; Identity*

Introduction

How can we understand the complicated roles of Turkey in the Balkans within the new Millennium? This is a brain twister question which has been in the minds of political actors, civil society activists and academics. This article aims to brighten most of the parts of this big questions. Therefore, it deals with Turkey-Balkan relations in the twenty-first century, which has to be constantly re-evaluated due to its dynamism and variability, even though it has been previously studied a lot. Turkey-Balkan relations is a rich subject that can cover many different issues such as security, conflict, harmony, economy, along with the integration of both Turkish studies, Balkan studies and international relations. In this context, Turkey-Balkan relations, which have historical, cultural, strategic and geo-political unity, were discussed within many different theoretical frameworks, especially realism, in the twentieth century. This issue has been discussed many times in different dimensions during the years of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*-AKP) which could be considered the most dynamic and most variable years of Turkish politics after 2002. One of the main reasons for this intense work, as Bechev correctly stated in his 2012 article, is the resulting multidimensional policies that Turkey carried out with the Balkans during the Recep Tayyip Erdogan era. In this context, on the one hand, Turkey's individual relations with countries such as Bosnia (Huskic & Büyük, 2022), Serbia (Pacariz, 2022), Kosovo (Hoti et al., 2022) were discussed, and on the other, Turkey-Balkan relations have been examined by taking into account the mutual transformation of the two structures (Alpan & Ozturk, 2022; Demirtas, 2015; Ruma, 2010). In addition to these studies, Turkey-Balkan relations were discussed in terms of religious institutions and other transnational state

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apparatuses (Oktem, 2010; Ozturk & Gozaydin, 2018), minorities and diaspora issues (Akturk & Lika, 2022; László, 2021).

While these rich and diverse studies shed a beneficial light on Turkey-Balkan relations, this article deals with an issue in the world of international relations, which has moved away from classical approaches with the effect of post-modernity and in which different elements are intertwined. This article centers on how Turkey implements normative elements such as identity, history and religion, which have a decisive role in Turco-Balkan relations apart from the classical power elements such as economy and military. It also focuses on how this is perceived by the political and cultural elite of the Balkan countries and how Turkey's political elite have been creating various different realities in the Balkans. In so doing, these are the basic questions this article asks; 1) If the Balkan elites perceive the policies implemented by Turkey differently and relatively pejoratively, what is the reason for this and how can we explain it theoretically? 2) What kind of differences does the current position of Turkey-Balkan relations cause us to observe in classical international relations? Within these discussions, how political actors and elites can read the past and present differently with different normative values (Foucault 1986, 88) and how the use of normative power elements as determinants in bilateral relations causes differences in time, space and perception will be taken into account (Agnew, 1994; Sassen, 2000).

This article has to go beyond a desk study methodologically, mainly because it examines the use of normative power elements and socially constructed realities and how these elements and realities were perceived by the Balkan elites in different places at different times. Thus, this study is primarily based on "participant observations" made in some particular Balkan countries such as Serbia, Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Albania and Bosnia-Herzegovina 2016-2019 and 124 interviews conducted during this extensive ethnographic study. These interviews are divided into three groups within themselves. The first group is the representatives of Turkey's institutions in the Balkans, such as the Embassy, Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), and the Yunus Emre Institute. The second group is the representatives of religious structures operating in the region such as the Gulen Movement and the Suleymanci Community that originated in Turkey but somehow established differing relations with the Turkish state in different periods. The third group is the political and cultural elites in Balkan countries, including former foreign ministers, state ministers, political actors, bureaucrats, and religious community leaders. In addition to these three interview groups, there are also interviews conducted over the internet under the conditions of the global Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 with investigative journalists, think tank employees and representatives of non-governmental organizations working in 22 regions. Although the majority of the interviewees were not citizens of the Republic of Turkey, a large part of the interviewees did not want their names disclosed due to the political pressures both in the Balkans and in Turkey, and because the issue had many sensitive dimensions. In fact, even this is an indicator of how transitional the perception is in the time and space we live.

This article proceeds as follows. The first part discusses how and in what ways normative influence elements have been handling in contemporary international relations, and how and in what way these approaches are important in Turkey-Balkan relations in the AKP period. The second part describes the main breaking points of Turkey-Balkan relations from the late Ottoman period to 2002 in a historical chronology. This part helps us better perceive the AKP period that comes after it. Third, it briefly discusses Turkey's domestic political change during the AKP era. This is actually very important for understanding Turkey's current relations with the Balkans because the AKP period is one in which domestic and foreign policy are intertwined in Turkey. The fourth part of the article



analyzes how Turkey's normative policies created different perceptions on the Balkan elite under four different headings, and the conclusion summarizes what the whole article tells us theoretically and empirically.

The coexistence of domestic and foreign policy and the uncertainty of normative elements

Over a long period of time, scholars working in the field of international relations have been claiming that domestic policy is one of the main determinants of foreign policy-making processes for countries. Many, based on the theory of “two-level games” by Putnam (1988), actually claim that, although foreign policy is to some extent related to the identities and interests of states, it does not operate in a completely independent manner. In foreign policy, the preferences of the states are determined by domestic political calculations, interests, leaders and priorities. At this point, with one side, although foreign policy is fed from domestic politics, it actually has a side that affects it. In this case, it brings about mutual interaction and dependency (Peterson, 1996; Kaarbo, 2015; Wajner, 2021). Although at this point there is no sudden reciprocal reaction, changes in domestic policy can affect foreign policy directly and indirectly. Of course, when this is considered within a classical reading of international relations or from a realist perspective, it may somehow indicate a change in the powers and sanctioning capacities of countries. However, as the international system changes, transforms and becomes more multidimensional, this unity goes beyond the classical boundaries. As Waltz (2010) stated, one needs to address not only states, but also their multidimensional identities, historical accumulations and power elements in a transnational way. And this takes us beyond the situation of interpreting international relations, which we know in the classical sense, only as relations between states (Acharya, 2014). Such an approach actually allows us to examine the relations between Turkey and the Balkans, which have a common historical, religious and cultural background, on a broader level, even though they are close to each other geographically.

This actually brings us to a constructivist point of view, both theoretically and methodically. The intertwined state of the world, both vertically and horizontally, requires the examination of states, institutions and structures that are in direct and indirect relations with the state, identities, perception of history, beliefs and other normative elements (Grant, 2018). This actually shows us how realistic alternative readings, also known as “spatial turn” in international relations, can be, while reconstructing normative elements creates an alternative to classical humanitarianism (Middell, 2020). Undoubtedly, one of the most important reasons for this is that while the normative power elements are used in international relations together with globalization, their ability to interact with some hard power elements has changed the capacity of states to be influential (Alcalde, 2018). When we talk about constructing the ideas it would be better to note that under the effect of spatial turn space, time and geography have become a socially produced and constitutive of social reality (Gundogan 2011, 393). This transformation not only changes the mindscape of individuals, but also transfigure the tools and methods of the political actors both in domestic and foreign policy (Giddens 1984; Tuathail and Dalby 1998). This new constructive-imaginary realities have been changing the classical understanding of sovereignty, identity and ethnicity (Anthias and Hoffmann 2021).

From these theoretical discussions, it is not difficult to realize that Ankara's religion, culture or ethnicity-based policy change would be felt instantly from Sarajevo or Belgrade thanks to globalization. However, it is a relatively recent situation that normative power elements capable of crossing borders uncontrollably cause different reactions in different geographies. At the same time, it is possible for different groups to react differently in the same geography. When considered this way, the fact that some of the policy practices of Turkey (Alpan & Diez, 2014), whose domestic and foreign policy was formed from a single center and is intertwined cause different reactions for the

Balkan countries, which contain a wide variety of ethnic, cultural, religious and class structure is a good point to test the above argument.

The aforementioned coexistence of domestic-policy and foreign policy and the use of normative elements should bring another very familiar concept to mind; “Soft power” introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990. Those who are interested in the subject after Nye basically say the similar things. According to them, soft power is countries’ protecting their own interests by using soft power elements such as culture, language and history without using direct hard power elements such as the military and the economy, and also having an impact on the public opinion of other countries. However, in order for soft power to manifest itself in religion (Haynes, 2012; Henne, 2022), culture (Matlary, 2006) and similar forms, it must have a network power both connected and separate from the state, have a historical background and somehow have data to use it (Bettizza, 2020). In short, in the mixed world of international relations, the fact that states have one normative power elements that can easily cross the borders does not mean that they will use it directly as soft power. Somehow, there must be other elements of power behind soft power. However, as stated above, there is again a situation of uncertainty here. Because normative power elements are both variable and may show different effects in each structure (Kavalski, 2017; Whitman, 2011). In short, soft power is uncertain, and a tool that was useful in the past that may not have today the features which it used to possess. At this point, this state of not having is of great importance depending on the change of the user and the place of use. In short, the situation of spatial imaginations and/or constructed realities contains an ambiguity in itself and can transform the power roles of the countries. Once again, one of the most suitable areas to test this is the last twenty years of Turkey-Balkan relations.

The intertwined history of Turkey and the Balkans

“We cannot think of either Turkey or the Balkans separately. In fact, when viewed through a detailed examination, Turkey means the Balkans and the Balkans mean Turkey.”

The sentences above are of a Muslim MP in the North Macedonian parliament in 2017. I've heard of many such opinions during field research over the years. Most of these opinions actually came from the Muslim elites in the Balkans or from representatives of those who sympathize with Turkey. Although it is not possible to read history exactly, it would be appropriate to say that Turkey and the Balkans have an ongoing connection since the Ottoman Empire. In this context, Inalcik (2013) says, if the Ottoman Empire is defined as an empire, it owes it first to the Balkans, and then to the statesmen coming from the Balkans. Ortayli (2008) argues with a similar logic that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire somehow accelerated with the loss of the Balkans. Although we cannot establish such a direct similarity for Turkey, we know that especially the founding figures in the establishment of Turkey came from the Balkan lands of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, as Zurcher (2002) put forth, many members of the constituent assembly were born in the Balkans and socialized there. Thus, Balkan culture and society are important for Turkey.

Turkey and the political life of Turkey have an important place in the Balkans, especially for the Balkan Muslims. So much so that Dr. Ismail Cambazov mentioned one person who has a symbolic meaning for Bulgarian Muslims in our meeting in April 2017. He said, “Ataturk is not only the savior of Turkey, but also an important symbol for us Balkan Muslims.” However, some Balkan Muslims claim that Turkey left them to fend for themselves for two reasons during the early republican period. One is that Turkey, in the establishment stage, took a relatively neutral and no belligerent stance in world affairs. The second is that Turkey left the Balkan Muslims alone by separating religion and state affairs in its own way (Kuru, 2009), or in other words, turning religion into an apparatus used by the



state (Ozturk, 2021, 56-62). Despite these relatively negative views, Turkey did not completely break away from the Balkans in the early republican period, but established diplomatic relations in accordance with its new state identity. In this context, Turkey, with its security priority in its foreign policy, formed the Balkan Entente with Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania against Bulgaria, which showed expansionist features in 1934.

However, the Second World War and the Cold War that started after it caused a relative change in Turkey's Balkan policy. One of the important reasons for this change is the bipolar structure of world politics and the Balkans 'being stuck between this dual structure (Rajak, 2010). In other words, the Balkans was a risky region both before and during Yugoslavia. The second reason is the turmoil in Turkey's domestic politics, especially in the period between 1960 and 1980. This was a period when Turkey had to keep good relations with Soviet Russia due to its geographical location, even though it was in the western block. However, this was a period when the right-left conflict increased in Turkish politics and governments were constantly changing in an unstable way. For this reason, Turkey, which was not very strong economically and politically, could not lean towards the Balkans as much as it wanted to or as much as it should have. Although it established a balanced policy within the region, especially with Yugoslavia, it could not make its presence substantially felt.

However, the 1980s created one of the main ruptures for Turkey-Balkan relations. In addition to the gradual loss of the effect of the Cold War here, the takeover of power in Turkey by Turgut Özal after 1983 also had an effect. This is actually not an effect to be taken lightly. In almost every interview, the name Özal was used at least once by the regional elites, and basically what was widely accepted among the positive or negative views was the return of Turkey to the Balkans during the Özal era. In this context, we can claim that Özal laid the foundations of a policy based on culture, religion, trade and a very subjective reading of the Ottoman Empire that AKP would establish in the Balkans. Özal started to revive the relations with the region formally and encouraged the activities of both official and semi-official Turkish institutions in the region (Laciner, 2009, 162). In this period, with the encouragement of Özal, the Gulen Movement started to establish educational institutions, publishing houses and associations in the region, especially in Albania. For example, at this point, one of the officials of the Gulen Movement in Albania summarized the effect of Özal as follows;

"Maybe Turgut Özal didn't do anything directly for us to exist in the region, but his not portraying us as enemies or not making an indirect reference to us at some points accelerated the start of our activities in the Balkans."

Apart from the Gulen Movement, Özal wanted other Turkish institutions, especially the Diyanet, to be active in the region, because, according to him, the Balkans was a region that Turkey had inherited from the Ottoman Empire and that had a partnership with Turkey in terms of religion, language and culture. For this reason, Turkey's effectiveness in the region partly depended on being effective through these partnerships. At this point, we can claim that Özal was in some sense the founder of neo-Ottomanism, which Turkey aimed to establish in the Balkans during the AKP period, and if there is a use of soft power against the classes, it started during the Özal era (Yavuz, 2020, 111; Ozturk & Sozeri, 2018, 634). At this point, Özal's implementation of neo-Ottomanism and elements such as religion, language and culture in Balkan politics was not looked on askance by the Balkan elites. There are basically three reasons for this. The first of these is the relatively short duration of the Özal period and the inability to fully maintain these policies after it. Secondly, the fact that Turkey had a fragile economic structure in the 1980s, which, despite everything, caused Turkey not to go so far as to disturb some elements in the Balkans. A third point is that Turkey could not focus very much on its activities due to the turmoil in the Balkans itself in the late 1980s. In this context, a

political official I spoke to in Bosnia in 2020 used the exact following sentences; “We were so busy with our own problems that we were not in a position to think about what Turkey was doing, whether it was trying to establish a hegemony here.”

In fact, the internal turmoil of the Balkans showed itself as conflict and war in the 1990s. Although Turkey's influence after Özal was not as much as before and the instability in its domestic politics caused Turkey to withdraw from the Balkans for a while, Turkey managed to exert itself where necessary. For example, in the Bosnian War and the recovery period after it, Turkey continued to exist not only in Bosnia but also in all other Balkan countries, both as a peacekeeper and as an actor helping the recovery afterward (Demirtas-Coskun, 2011). However, external interventions in Turkish politics, like February 28, somehow prevented the normative influence elements of Turkey from reaching the region directly.

In spite of all these interruptions, it is necessary to express one last thing: In May 2017, a senior official in the Bulgarian Mufti conveyed the following; “Whether Turkey is here or not, whether we see Turkey or not, it is always a special place for us.” In this context, it would be appropriate to say the following: We can argue that Turkey itself is ontologically a soft power, especially for Balkan Muslims. However, as we mentioned above, normative power elements are slippery and it is always possible to observe changes in their effects. In this regard, we can actually explain this situation by looking at the AKP period, as Turkey's fastest changing times are not in the twentieth century, but the first quarter of the twenty-first century.

The Mutual Transformation of AKP and Turkey

“Actually, we and the whole of the Balkans have a mixed relationship with Turkey and AKP. I can summarize it in this way; when the AKP came to power, it was a pro-European, progressive and aggressive political structure. When it was like that, our faces were completely turned towards them. However, although the AKP's authoritarianism and its separation from the west did not completely disrupt our relations, it caused us to position ourselves differently in Turkey on some issues.”

These words belong to the experienced politician Genc Polo, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State in Albania. Polo said these words in our meeting with him in 2017. In fact, we heard many similar words in Bulgaria, Serbia, Bosnia and other Balkan countries. This shows us how effective Turkey's domestic policy in the Balkans is, and that it has a dimension that crosses the border. Therefore, a short summary of Turkey's AKP years will allow us to better understand the complicated issues in the relations between Turkey and the Balkans.

But before moving on to this, it must be said that both Erdogan and AKP cadres were very active in the region before they came to power, despite the withdrawal of the Turkish state from the Balkans in the mid-1990s. After Erdogan became the Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor in 1994, he brought the cities of the region and Istanbul closer with sister city agreements, and provided assistance to the region, especially to the Sunni communities in the region. However, in order to understand and to be active in the region, he worked with consultants who were trained there and knew the region very well. For example, Erdogan's advisor on the Balkans since his mayoralty has been Sabri Demiri, who was born in Skopje and has a good command of the regional languages. There are two reasons for this interest and concern of the AKP cadres. The first of these is Erdogan's desire to somehow be a part of larger politics since his mayorship, and the necessity of being a regional actor in it. The second is the high voting potential of Balkan immigrants living in Turkey, but especially in Istanbul. In short,



Erdogan was aware that even before he took over the administration of the country, the Balkan policy would be used both internally and externally.

Although Erdogan was an important and visible actor in the mayorship, his real visibility was when he came to power alone in 2002 with the newly established AKP. Erdogan, who said that Islam and democracy can coexist, that religion should have a limited effect on the state, and that Turkey's way is to integrate with the West and increase democratic values, formed a broad popular coalition. The masses who were fed up with military tutelage, with more liberal values and wanting Turkey to ride itself of internal conflicts, brought the AKP to power in 2002 (Dagi, 2008). Although the AKP seems to be a single structure that has been in power since 2002, the groups with which it acted together in the political and social fields changed during its rule and they transformed within the AKP in line with these changes. Of course, when we consider the hegemonic and inclusive structure of Erdogan and the AKP, these transformations have changed Turkey as well. In this regard, considering the changes in AKP's domestic and foreign policy, we can divide Turkey's AKP adventure into four periods.

The first of these periods is the one between 2002-2008. In this period, while the AKP government was struggling with the military and civilian bureaucracy and trying to provide a space for legitimacy, it was also establishing good relations with both the European Union and other Western powers in abroad (Keyman 2010, 313). The AKP, which took over its economic program from the previous government, was expanding Turkey with the effect of the world conjuncture, while opening up abroad and starting the process of harmonization with Europe. However, while the secular elements inside Turkey saw the AKP primarily as a threat to Turkish-style secularism, they were trying to prevent its rooting in state cadres. At this point, this process was a period in which the AKP presented itself very well abroad, but was not able to do so inside the country even though it was in power.

However, after 2007-2008, that is, in what we can call the second period, the AKP government and Erdogan cooperated with a structure that they did not agree with historically in order to be even more dominant within the state. This structure was the Gulen Movement, which was essentially a para-political structure, organized under the leadership of Fethullah Gulen, which we will focus on more later (Watmough and Ozturk 2018). This movement, which established educational institutions throughout the world compatible with Islam and the liberal order, but wanted to be active in bureaucracy, especially the police and the judiciary, entered into a self-interested partnership with the AKP (Turam 2011). In this unity that lasted approximately until the end of 2013, while the Gulen Movement somehow advertised the AKP inside and outside and acted with it, the AKP was opening up the cadres it could open for the Gulen Movement within the state (Ozturk 2019). In short, this unofficial unorthodox coalition partnership, established both within and abroad, was in the interest of both these structures. Thus, while the Gulen movement, which realized the political power behind it, left the AKP and the structures that might be against it in the military, universities and other institutions throughout the judiciary, the AKP somehow supported this process. In short, this was the period when the AKP was active both domestically and abroad with the Gulen Movement and clinched its power even more. AKP, which also took over the Presidency in this process, showed its superiority in bureaucracy with the partial constitutional amendment made in 2011. Concurrently the end of this period, that is, the beginning of 2013 was the year when the AKP began to be visibly authoritarian for the first time and used both ethnic and religious elements in its administration (Yesilada and Rubin 2013). As will be discussed in more detail later, during this period, the new Ottomanism established by the AKP Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoglu, with Ottoman eulogy based on religion, Turkish identity, and a subjective narrative caused the foreign policy of

Turkey (Ozkan 2014) to become more active in many places, including the Balkans, and to be perceived differently in this context.

However, the process that started with the summer of 2013 witnessed one, even two breaking points for the AKP government and Turkey, which caused a major change in the state identity of Turkey under AKP rule. In this period, which one can call the third period and would last until July 2016, the AKP became increasingly tough by maintaining a reactive policy both domestically and abroad (Baser and Ozturk 2017). There were three main developments that caused this toughening. The first of these was the Gezi Park Protests, which started in Istanbul in the summer of 2013 and then spread to almost all of Turkey. The government, thinking that the West supported these protests, started to move away from the west and shift its direction towards the China-Russia axis. Undoubtedly, this is a process that still continues and has its own ups and downs, but we can still say that the first breaking point was in 2013. The second breaking point is the relentless and annihilator struggle between the Gulen Movement and the AKP, which they entered into due to the so-called separation of principles, but in actuality due to a conflict of interests. In this process, while the AKP was launching the Gülen Movement as a terrorist movement that instrumentalized Islam, both within Turkey and abroad, the Gülen Movement, especially in the outside world, described the AKP as an authoritarian government that was detached from the west and entangled in corruption (Ozturk and Baser 2022, 7). This struggle did not remain within the borders of Turkey, as both actors have transnational characteristics. In this context, especially the Balkans showed itself to be the area in which the struggle was experienced. The last breaking point was the peace process with the Kurds, that started in early 2011 but ended completely in 2015 (Gurses 2020). The destruction of this process paved the way for AKP Turkey's further nationalization in domestic and foreign policy.

The last phase of AKP Turkey and the transformation process it is still in started in 2016. The state of emergency, which was declared after the 15 July coup attempt and lasted for about two years, brought with it the constitutional amendment of 2017 (Esen and Gumuscu 2017). In this process, all segments of opposition to the Erdogan regime, especially the Gulenists, who had a share in the coup, were criminalized. Consequently, they either had a hard time in the country or were forced to go abroad and leave the country. However, Erdogan, who remained unopposed for at least a certain period of time, started to make policy choices with more religious and nationalistic aspects, which affected his foreign policy. In other words, as he toughened domestically, he carried this toughness to possible extraterritorial regions with his different apparatuses. Sunni Islam, subjectively read as Ottoman history and positioning itself as its heir, caused a significant change in the state identity of Turkey during the Erdogan regime, and this also spread to foreign policy preferences, particularly in the Balkans.

Reflection of Turkey's transformation to the Balkans on three issues

“It would be a lie if we say that Turkey only exists in the Sandzak region for Serbia. Turkey exists everywhere and is in a position whose influence will not diminish no matter what.”

The statement above is taken from a conversation we had with a senior official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Serbia in 2020. This official uttered these words while explaining that Turkey was very influential in the region with the opening of Halkbank, the activation of Turkish Airlines and similar initiatives during the period of Mehmet Kemal Bozay, the former and one of the most successful Ambassadors of Turkey to Serbia. It is possible to hear these and similar words from many people in the Balkans. However, it is also possible to see the impact of Turkey in every sense; that is, historically, culturally and economically from Ljubljana in the Balkans to the Edirne border. In this



context, although some studies try to portray Turkey as an international or foreign actor such as Russia, China, and Britain, Turkey, unlike all other actors, can actually penetrate the Balkans by going beyond its borders. When this happens, all kinds of normative and monetary policy changes can show themselves in different ways in the Balkans, in a very different manner from other actors. At this point, the changing state identity of Turkey after 2002 and the fact that this identity includes religion, culture and a nostalgic understanding of history causes Turkey's activities in the Balkan lands to be differentiated and these activities to be understood differently in the region. We can examine this differentiation under three sub-headings.

Increasing Investments as a Service to the Umma

All of the state officials that we had the chance to speak to in North Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina and Albania in 2017-2018 and 2020, expressed their gratitude to Turkey for one particular reason; Turkey is the country that provided the first aid in the recent flood and earthquake disasters in the region. However, there was an impression that it was sent directly by President Erdogan due to the personalization of Turkey's image in the region. Furthermore, Turkey was at the forefront of countries that sent the necessary medical supplies to the region during the COVID-19 era. At this point, one can claim that Turkey has provided unrequited aid and investments to the region, except for mutual trade. Of course, this aid and investments are also related to Turkey's economic power, but the investment issue is not very simple and cannot explain with one dimension. It has a complicated background and layers.

Mustafa Hadji, the head mufti of Bulgaria, stated the following on this subject in 2017 and it might give us a little bit of presumption;

“We have had a cooperation agreement with Turkey and its Diyanet for many years. In this context, we receive financial and material aid from Turkey. However, this aid sometimes came and sometimes did not before the AKP period, but with the AKP, these things were in order.”

Diyanet has been one of the most active and most visible organizations in the region during the AKP period. Although the official consultancy office is only in Bulgaria, North Macedonia and Albania, the Diyanet acts as the elder brother to the Muslims of the region particularly in Serbia and Bosnia/. In this connection, it trains regional imams, assists other mufti offices in the region and cooperates with them. However, at this point, we can say that the Diyanet serves only Sunnis in parallel with its structure in Turkey. Although the Diyanet officials we spoke to in 2016 said that this was not true, Baba Mondi, the leader of the Bektashis living in the Albanian capital Tirana, stated the following in 2017;

“Actually, we have nothing to do with politics, but politics wants to take care of us. In this context, Turkish politicians are always interested in us. They always promise before we demand anything. But of course, these promises are often not fulfilled. For example, in 2011, Turkey promised to restore the Harabati Baba Lodge. Of course, this did not happen, and on top of that, TIKA started to build mosques next to some of our lodges.”

As Baba Mondi stated, besides the Diyanet, TIKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency) is another institution active in the Balkans. Moreover, it works in coordination with the Diyanet. For example, the Diyanet appoints imams for mosques restored and opened by TIKA or the Diyanet trains imams to work there. Although there are many schools and other structures built by TIKA in the region and it supports some non-Muslim elements, when we look at the TIKA annual reports, one can see that most of the projects serve Sunni Muslims in some way. On the other hand, although

the TIKA officials we interviewed said that they restored the Saint George church in Varna or many Orthodox structures in North Macedonia and Albania TIKA is seen as an institution that serves mostly Sunni Muslims in the eyes of regional elites, especially after 2013. The Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, with whom we spoke in 2018, states that the main reason for not introducing TIKA into their country is that Turkish institutions go beyond their own job descriptions and engage in different activities, and this may disrupt the social structure in the future. At this point, it is necessary to state that TIKA has built the largest mosques in the region together with the Diyanet in the countries it enters, and this has been creating some question-marks in the mind of the

Apart from TIKA and Diyanet, the other two institutions that are influential in the region are Yunus Emre Institutes, which carry out cultural activities, and Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), which comes to the region from abroad. Although these two institutions do not directly operate through Sunni Islam and Turkism, all these cultural activities are viewed with suspicion in the eyes of the regional elites, since they are generally controlled from Erdogan's Turkey and working with other transnational state apparatuses. For example, the journalists we consulted for their views on the subject in Bosnia, a highly ranking foreign ministry officer from Serbia and Kemal Eyup, one of the former MPs we spoke to in Bulgaria, said that these institutions intrinsically only serve Sunni Muslims, giving rise to suspicion among non-Muslim segments of society. As a result, Turkey's transformation within itself is reflected in the service it renders to the Balkans and in the perception of these services. This makes Turkey an actor that is viewed with suspicion in some uncertain places.

Exportation of Domestic Conflicts

At the ground-breaking ceremony of the Namazgah Mosque, which is currently the largest mosque in the Balkans, built by the Diyanet in Tirana in May 2015, Erdoğan asked the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama, with a stern style, to send people with ties to the Gulen Movement to Turkey and demanded that the Gulen institutions be closed immediately. This speech had a tremendous impact on the Albanian public. So much so that the parliamentary speech of the Albanian Socialist Party Deputy Ben Blushi, in which he said that Erdogan's demand was interference in Albanian internal affairs, had significant repercussions in the region. In 2017, a very different event from Albania was experienced in Kosovo. It began to be heard both in the media and in the Balkans that the National Intelligence Organization, which kidnapped six people in Kosovo on the grounds that they were members of the Gülen community and brought them to Turkey, was preparing similar operations for other Balkan countries. In addition, Turkey tried to explain to the Balkan countries how dangerous the Gulen Movement could be, through official channels. In this context, Suleyman Gokce, the former Ambassador of Turkey to Sofia, stated the following in 2017;

"We are trying to explain to our friends in the region what kind of a terrorist organization FETO is, but some people do not want to understand. Also, they have been operating in these regions for years and deceived people, and this has an effect."

The fact that the Gülen Movement has been in the region for years, as stated by Ambassador Gökce, is somewhat correct, but we can also say that the reaction of each country to both the Gülen Movement and Turkey is different. Two issues play an important role in this difference. The first of these is the resistance power of the countries against Turkey and the credit of the Gülen Movement in the countries they are in. For example, schools and madrasas under the control of the Gülen Movement in Albania are still in operation because Albania is both strong enough to resist Turkey's demands and the Gülen Movement is in a more institutionalized position in this country. However,



North Macedonia, for example, exhibited a contrary attitude to Albania on both these issues, and had to close the newspaper Zaman Macedonia first and then the Yahya Kemal Educational Institutions. A different example from these two occurred in Serbia. The Serbian government, which could have resisted Erdogan's demands if they wanted to, ended the Gülen Movement activities relatively quietly. In Bosnia, the Movement has become silent and invisible after the coup attempt. However, there is another aspect of Turkey's carrying its internal issues to the Balkans, which is that the AKP's fight with the Gülen Movement, especially between 2013-2020, somehow extends its borders to the Balkans. This second point is also related with subject of service to Ummah. At this point, AKP somehow expresses its own state apparatuses and Muslims and state elites in the region that the Gülen Movement does not represent true Islam but only instrumentalizes it for its own benefit. In return, the Gülen Movement claims that the AKP is corrupt and in fact only thinks of its own interests, not the interest of Islam.

The external spread of this conflict in Turkey causes discomfort in the Balkans in two ways. The first is that the elites in the Balkan countries feel stuck. The second is that other Muslim groups are expected to take sides in this struggle. A senior state official we met in Kosovo in 2020 summarized the issue as follows, and in fact, we heard points similar to what he said in other countries:

“It is a very disturbing that the two structures to carry their struggle to our countries. We do not have much intelligence, but we know who is who and who they claim not to be. Some of the claims from both sides are seriously disturbing. But we want to think that this is temporary. Likewise, our only wish is that other Muslim groups do not join this struggle. Because if this continues, it may affect social peace.”

Indeed, the outward reflection of all this internal conflict somehow happens with the apparatuses of both the Gülen Movement and Turkey in the region. Officials in Bosnia, North Macedonia, Bulgaria and Albania in particular claim that Turkey is fighting against the Gülen Movement with transnational state apparatuses and basically accuse them of “crossing its legal limits”. On the other hand, it is a fact that the Gülen Movement also engages in negative propaganda whenever it can raise its head against AKP Turkey, and this disturbs the Balkan authorities.

Interfering in the Internal Affairs of Host Countries

There is a popular conviction among the political elites of the Balkan Peninsula that the Turkish state has been involving itself in the internal affairs of the states in the region by supporting new political parties and/or dividing the existing parties, using the financial power, and religion-oriented influences of the transnational apparatuses. Despite the fact that the domestic conflicts are exported in different ways to different Balkan Countries the effects of this exportation are similar. The most prominent of these effects is the change in the perception of Turkey in the eyes of the socio-political elites.

Süleyman Gökçe, the former Turkish ambassador in Sophia, clearly defined the normative duty of Turkey for Bulgaria and the Balkans and during the interview:

“Turkey is much stronger compared to previous times and ready to run for the needs of Muslims and Turks in Bulgaria and in the Balkans. I can easily say that as long as we are here, no one can violate the rights of these people in the political and social arenas.”

But the story in Bulgaria is quite different, for instance, the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Движение за права и свобода, Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi, HÖH*), under the leadership of Ahmet Dogan, was officially established in 1990 and the HÖH managed to find a reasonable number of seats in the Bulgarian Parliament, starting from the first democratic elections. Between 2001 and 2009, the Party reached the position of being a part of coalition governments and controlled some

ministries. Despite the fact that the HÖH has a relatively successful election record and has a respectable acceptance rate among both Bulgarian Muslims and some non-Muslim Bulgarians, since the very beginning of the 2010's some of the former party members and members of the parliament have aimed to establish a new political structure against the presence of the HÖH. Among them, the People's Party for Freedom and Dignity (*Narodna Partiya Svoboda i Dostoyinstvo*) was founded by Korman Ismailov, a former HOH member of parliament, in 2011, but did not pass the 4% election threshold in 2013. During the establishment period of the People's Party for Freedom and Dignity, some news agencies claimed that the Party received direct financial support from Turkey and put forward Erdoğan's October 2010 visit as an indicator of this. In October 2010, Erdoğan paid a diplomatic visit to Sofia and met Korman Ismailov and other leading figures of the Party but refused to meet Ahmet Doğan.² Furthermore, in 2010, Boyko Borisov openly warned Erdoğan with these words: *'No party intermediaries are necessary between Bulgaria and Turkey. I insist that our Turkish colleagues review their relations with certain circles in Bulgaria who present themselves as actors expressing the will of the Turkish state in Bulgaria.'*³ Four years later an interview was conducted with Korman Ismailov in the field study of this study. On April 7, 2017, he commented on the claims about the establishment of a new party.

Even though the People's Party for Freedom and Dignity was not successful, it was the first signal regarding the division of the pro-Turkish HÖH and Turkey's direct or indirect intervention in the Bulgarian domestic political arena. Inside the HÖH, some leading figures started to argue that it had become Ahmet Dogan's personal party and had started to lose its inclusionary vision. Even though Dogan did not want to give up the chair of the Party, he left it to Lütfi Mestan because of intense opposition, in January 2013. Dogan then constituted a new position for himself: that of honorary president. With Mestan's chairmanship, a new discussion started within the party ranks: Turkey's direct support to the HÖH under Mestan's rule. Despite the fact that Mestan managed to override these claims and all the intimidation he faced, in 2015 he was removed from his post by the central council and expelled from the party for what it considered an excessively pro-Turkish government stance following the downing of a Russian bomber jet by the Turkish Air force. Then, he founded another pro-Turkish political party, Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance (*Демократи за отговорност, свобода и толерантност, DOST*) and the claims about the direct influence of the Turkish AKP had reached their peak.

On February 21, 2016, the Bulgarian press reported that Uğur Emiroğlu and three other *Diyaret* imams in Bulgaria had been declared 'persona non grata'. According to the official declaration, Emiroğlu and the other imams' activities were 'incompatible with their diplomatic status'. According to the allegations, these *Diyaret* officials had been putting pressure on Bulgarian Muslims to extend their support to DOST. Furthermore, according to news in the Muslim houses of worship, *Diyaret* imams were asking for support for DOST. The allegations even held that they were involved in some illegal financial activities supporting DOST.⁴

Even though there is no substantial evidence for the AKP's support to particular political parties in Macedonia, other than popular claims, one might argue that it has been following a different strategy than that used in Bulgaria. Furthermore, the interviews in Bosnia Herzegovina show that the case of North-Macedonia is quite similar to Bosnia. The AKP has worked with both the old Macedonian

² Some of the news about the claim; <http://www.bghaber.org/bghaber/erdogandan-korman-ismailova-basarilar-dilegi/> .

³ For details see; <http://www.novinite.com/articles/112559/Bulgaria+PM+to+Erdoğan%3A+No+Ethnic+Parties+Needed+as+Mediators> .

⁴ For details see; <http://bnr.bg/en/post/100662409/on-turkish-persona-non-grata-and-more> .



pro-Turkish political parties and the new pro-religious Albanian-Muslim political parties. Even though the AKP has exercised a significant influence on all of the pro-Turkish and pro-Muslim Albanian political parties, two of them come to the fore: the Turkish Democratic Party (*Демократска партија на Турците*, TDP)⁵ and the newly emerged BESA Movement (*Lëvizja Besa*, BESA)⁶.

On September 19, 2017, the general director of the Turkish branch of the Association for Democratic Initiatives in Gostivar, Abdullah Sencer Gözübenli, declared that:

“There has been an increasing visibility of Turkey in Macedonia and this has been causing different points of view. Firstly, the non-Muslim Macedonians are just enjoying the Turkish investment. Secondly, Muslim Macedonians and Albanians have been pleased to see Turkey’s appearance, but in hushed voices they have been talking about some discomfort. Yet, it is so hard to hear these voices because since late 2013, the TDP has been receiving support from the AKP and particularly Erdoğan in very visible ways. Even though the TDP is not a strong party, due to its support from Erdoğan its impact is bigger than its vote percentage.”

During the fieldwork in Macedonia, it was observed that most Macedonian Non-Muslim interviewees believed that Erdoğan’s Turkey did not only provide support for the pro-Turkish political parties, but had also created a pro-Albanian and pro-Muslim political party, *Lëvizja Besa* (BESA Movement). The BESA movement was founded by some prominent Muslim Albanian-Macedonian figures such as Zeqirija Ibrahim, Bilal Kasami, Afrim Gashi and Skënder Rexhepi in November 2014. At this point, it could be argued that Albanians would be the best channel through which to exert influence on Macedonia through Islam, since the Albanians constitute the majority of Muslims in Macedonian socio-political corridors.

In these circumstances, following the foundation of the BESA in 2014, most of the pro-Albanian political parties and some of the Macedonian political groups claimed that BESA was founded with the support of Erdoğan and particularly the *Diyaret* and that other Turkish transnational state apparatuses have been supporting the activities of BESA in indirect ways.⁷ Furthermore, in the country, both the Gülenists and other anti-AKP influential groups claimed that ‘*BESA was founded by Erdoğan both to serve his Islamist neo-Ottomanism aims and influence Macedonian political life in direct ways*’. However, none of the officials that have been interviewed revealed any substantial evidence in support of these claims.

Regarding the same issue, on April 21, 2017 Afrim Gashi, a prominent former journalist in Macedonia and a leading figure in the BESA Movement, was interviewed. In response to a question about his party’s relations with Erdoğan, he replied:

“You are not the first one who has asked that question and most probably you will not be the last. Therefore, I have a ready answer for you. This is one of the biggest lies that have been produced by our competitors and enemies of Turkey. Indeed, Turkey is a very important country and we have good relations with them like every political party in Macedonia, but can you believe that we would have the aim to impose any other state’s ideas on Macedonia as a political party of this country? Our aim is very simple: finding reasonable solutions to the fundamental problems of Macedonia and defending the rights of minorities here, including the Albanians and Turks for sure.”

⁵ For the history of the party, see; <http://tdp.org.mk/>, last accessed 3 May 2018.

⁶ For the details of BESA Movement, see; https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoyvizjW3WknFijnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXW06uco/wiki/L%C3%ABvizja_Besa.html.

⁷ For relevant news see; <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-albanian-party-in-macedonia-denies-erdogan-connection> . <http://theduran.com/albanian-parties-in-macedonia-begin-fighting-among-themselves/>.

As a consequence, it is obvious that one of the fundamental issues in Macedonia is ethno-religious discrimination against non-Christian citizens. Therefore, many Albanians, Turks and other Muslim groups have been demanding their rights in various ways, and throughout this process the external support of Turkey seems to have been very important. At this point, it would be good to note that Albania stands out among the other country cases in the small geography of the Balkans because of the role and position of religion in politics and its attitude *vis a vis* Turkey's ever increasing interventionist policies. As noted previously, the harmony of various religions and religious groups in socio-political life is both a moral and constitutional norm in Albania. This is because of the historical background of Albania and its bitter past experiences regarding religious issues.

Albania has a rich spectrum of political parties and none of them position themselves against the secular nature of the state and constitutional norm of religious harmony. In 2011 Tahir Muhedini and Shpëtim Idrizi founded the Party for Justice Integration and Unity (*Partia Drejtësi, Integrim dhe Unitet* PDIU) whose official aim is to protect the rights of the ethnic Albanians (mostly Muslims) and support them in the international arena. Some religious declarations of the party's leading cadre created concerns about its anti-secular tendencies. In this regard, during the fieldwork in Albania, almost all of the interviewees argued that Erdoğan had been supporting the PDIU and sending financial support via Turkey's transnational apparatuses. However, just like the Macedonian case, none of them revealed any substantial evidence and the representatives of Turkey's transnational apparatuses regarded the claims as 'nonsense'. Despite serious efforts to conduct an interview with the representatives of PDIU, no positive response has been recorded during the fieldwork. Yet, in the interview with Polo, a former minister in the Albanian government, it was noted that *'this issue has been discussed in the corridors of the state and the parliament, and the Albanian state officials and politicians do not talk without evidence.'*

In April 2016, Kathimerini, a Greek daily, published an article claiming that Erdoğan's Turkey had been supporting the PDIU in its religious ambitions in Albania and in the Balkans generally. The article is based on the testimonies of political actors in the Albanian parliament whose names have not been specified. Furthermore; Kathimerini quotes the leader of the Union for Human Rights (PBDNJ) which represents the Greek-Orthodox minority in Albania, who claims that the PDIU buys votes using money obtained from Turkey: *'The only party representative who met with Erdogan during his last visit to Tirana, was Shpetim Idrizi of the PDIU'*⁸

Even though there is no substantial evidence supporting the direct or indirect support of Erdoğan's Turkey to the PDIU, most of the Muftis, the Chairman of the Albanian Islamic Community, Turkish expert journalists and political actors who have been dealing with the issues regarding Turkey have been arguing that Turkey's Erdoğan has been supporting the PDIU and through that support has been trying to increase the influence of Turkey on Sunni communities. Indeed, the negative propaganda of the Gülen Movement about the AKP has a significant influence on this perception. Relatively neutral socio-political actors are also concerned about a possible increase in political Islam and radical Islamic formations in society. Regarding the very same issue, Besnik Mustafaj, one of the former foreign ministers of Albania between 2005 and 2007, was interviewed on April 20, 2017:

"Throughout its history Albania has been trying to fight off radical religious ideas and groups in its territories. This is very important not only for the stability of Albania, but also for peace in the region. For instance, in the 1990s, some

⁸ For the related part of the article see; <http://www.tiranaecho.com/latest-news/kathimerini-article-linking-erdogan-to-the-cham-party-stirs-waters-between-greece-and-albania-again/>



radical Muslim communities settled in Albania and used our territories to recruit human capital to Osama Bin Laden. Salafism and Wahhabism have also become active in our society. But, we have managed to deactivate these groups via our local Muslim community, various Turkish groups and the support of Turkey. However, there are still some groups who are acting and indirectly supporting jihadist groups in the Middle East. At this point, our concern is Turkey's unconscious support for these groups. Because Turkey is not the country that we used to know. Under Erdoğan's rule, it has become a more religious country and some of the groups have been encouraged by that. Maybe the PDIU is one of them, I do not know really but some words reach my ears. This is unacceptable for us..."

As a conclusion, the situation in terms of Turkey's involvement in the political sphere of Albania via religion and transnational apparatuses is not as significant as that in Bulgaria and Macedonia. Yet, the overspill of Turkey's identity transformation is visible in the country and has been creating apprehension among some of the socio-political elites of the country, likewise the other Balkan countries.

Conclusion

This study deals with Turkey's increasing involvement and activism in the Balkan Peninsula after 2002 under the rule of the AKP. Therefore, it seeks to shed much needed light on this aspect of Turkish relations with its Balkan neighbours in the context of the broader shift in Turkish domestic and foreign policy under the AKP from a realist-secular orientation to an ambiguous coercive Sunni Islamic one with ethno-nationalistic basis and it has two main findings. First; domestic politics are the main transformative drivers of state identity and also have an impact on foreign policies. Secondly, after the state identity is transformed by domestic politics, naturally it is used in foreign policy by mostly the same political groups. Yet, after that point, the activities and situations in domestic and foreign policy start to feed into each other in different ways and could create crises in both domestic and foreign political arenas. These new situations would also transform the state's powers in foreign relations and would establish new patterns of relations between countries and we can see that from the Turkey-Balkan relations within the new millennium. Furthermore, what this study shows us countries have multifaceted and multi-layered identities, some of which have an indirect relation with religion, power and ethnicity.

When all these are considered together, it is hard to define the new policy preferences of Turkey in the framework of public diplomacy and/or the influential use of religion, within the boundaries of the concept of soft power. Because specific groups seem to be targeted in the host countries rather than the whole society, the consent that this new policy creates is strongly relevant to the sense of belonging, the behaviour and the beliefs of individuals. These policies cannot be defined, then, simply in the framework of religion-soft power, because economic incentives and sanctions are used alongside religion. Beyond that, it is difficult to claim that Turkey is a pure hard power, with its authoritarian practices and failures to accomplish its targets. On the whole, Turkey is an unpredictable, uncertain and ambiguous power, and this is reflected in its new identity in the Balkans.

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