

Beyond the EU's influence: cultural and religious determinants of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans

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Abstract: The main scientific goal of this proposed paper is to analyse Turkish foreign policy activities towards the Western Balkan states (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia) in the context of the EU enlargement process. Even though countries in the region recognize EU membership as top priority, they are still interested in enhancing cooperation with other external actors in the region. Turkey, which for historical and geographical reasons maintains quite unique position on the Balkan Peninsula, has been for decades pursuing an active and multidimensional policy aimed at strengthening its ties with the Western Balkan countries. Under the rule of the Justice and Development Party (tur. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP) there has been a fundamental shift in Turkish international perception, as a result of which Turkey's accession to the EU is no longer supported by the majority of citizens, and the Community itself is perceived as a rival to the AKP cooperation initiatives. Importantly, the Western Balkans is arguably the region where EU-Turkey competition at several levels (e.g. political, socio-economic, cultural) has been currently the most fierce in recent years. In this study, special attention has been given to Turkish public diplomacy organisations (i.e. TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute, Diyanet, Maarif Foundation) that ensure projection of Turkey's soft power among the Western Balkan countries. Due to aforementioned historical circumstances connected with the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, cultural aspects are probably the only factors in which the AKP government might have an advantage vis-a-vis the EU in this region.

With the purpose of identifying the most relevant actions related to cultural and religious determinants of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans, a broad range of original sources (government documents, public reports) as well as literature on the subject (academic publications, policy briefs) have been studied. An in-depth survey of official interviews and statements of Turkish policy-makers was also essential for this research. The image theory in international relations, which allows for examining trends and directions in the state's foreign policy based on investigation of political perceptions, was selected as a theoretical framework in this study. By employing qualitative research methods (e.g. content analysis, political discourse analysis, historical methods, process tracing method) this paper attempts to examine and assess the effectiveness of Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives in the Western Balkans by comparing them with EU activities in this field. As a conclusion, prospects for Turkey's involvement in the Western Balkans, and its further relationship with the EU in the region are presented and discussed.

Keywords: Turkey, Western Balkans, Justice and Development Party, public diplomacy, regional cooperation

Introduction

The Justice and Development Party (tur. Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP), which has been in power in Turkey continuously since 2002, conducts an active and multidimensional foreign policy aimed at strengthening relations with all neighbouring regions. The principal goal of the authorities in Ankara is to become a regional power capable of shaping political situation in its immediate geopolitical environment. However, despite several years of diplomatic efforts, Turkey's actions and initiatives have not yet given expected results. Territory commonly defined in political science literature as the Western Balkans (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Serbia) is one of the key areas in AKP's political strategy, since Turkey has maintained strong historical, religious and cultural ties with this region for decades (Cihangir-Tetik, 2021, pp. 252-253). In line with assumptions of Turkish foreign policy doctrine, the government in Ankara has been attempting to develop regional cooperation, creating an image of Turkey as a state responsible for security and stabilisation in the Western Balkans. In addition to the traditional diplomatic services, an extensive public diplomacy structure (whose organisations are active in all countries of the region) is also responsible for implementation of Turkish foreign policy objectives in the Western Balkans. Referring to the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, these institutions engage in a range of initiatives at different levels (from intergovernmental to municipal), thus facilitating promotion of Turkey's soft power in the region (Bieniek, 2019, pp. 84-86).

This research paper is divided into seven main sections. It begins with introduction of a theoretical framework on the basis of which particular events and processes were studied. Image theory in international relations examines activities of a state through the prism of images created by its political elites (Herrmann, 2013, pp. 336-338). The second part provides a brief historical overview of Turkish-Balkan relations to shed some light on the sources of Turkey's contemporary involvement in the region. The third part discusses determinants of Turkish foreign policy in the AKP era, as well as presents methods employed by the authorities in Ankara to implement the adopted political strategy. In this part successive modification of Turkish foreign policy doctrine was also indicated (Haugom, 2019, pp. 212-218). The fourth part describes the timeline of Turkey's EU accession process during the AKP era, along with listing the reasons that have caused the current stagnation in mutual contacts. The fifth part of the paper focuses on Turkey's relations with the Western Balkan states. Due to the unprecedented significance of the Balkan Peninsula in AKP's

political concept, dynamics of Turkish-Balkan relations throughout the last two decades have been outlined chronologically. The sixth part introduces Turkish public diplomacy organisations whose aim is to promote Turkey among the Western Balkan countries. As part of this research, special attention has been given to five institutions: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı - TİKA), Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (tur. Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı - YTB), Yunus Emre Institute (tur. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü - YEE), Turkish Maarif Foundation (tur. Türkiye Maarif Vakfı - TMV), and Directorate of Religious Affairs (tur. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı - DİB). An analysis of selected activities of the above-mentioned organisations can be considered as the main subject of the article. The final part summarises conclusions of this research and attempts to forecast the development of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries.

This study has employed a broad range of written sources concerning Turkish-Balkan relations, including scientific publications and policy briefs. In addition to the works comprising the literature on the subject, analysis of documents, reports and information bulletins made available by Turkish public diplomacy organisations was equally crucial for this research. Given the requirements set by the adopted theoretical perspective, political discourse analysis is the basic research method. Other methods with which the collected materials were studied include: content analysis, factor analysis, comparative analysis and foreign policy analysis. Based on methodology specific to qualitative research, this paper seeks to examine and assess the effectiveness of Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives in the Western Balkan.

Theoretical framework

Image theory in international relations originates from research on national images which has been conducted since the end of the 1950s. In an article published in 1959, philosopher and economist Kenneth Boulding argued that while making political decisions, the rulers did not rely on facts, but only on their ideas about given situations. According to the researcher's position, state policies depend on perceptions of decision-makers who are generally deprived of access to complete and objective information. In Boulding's opinion, it is the political elites that are responsible for constructing national images, but their vision of the state should correspond to views of the majority of citizens. Analysing various aspects that shape images, the author distinguished four categories (hostility, friendliness, strength

and weakness) which were to have a decisive impact on forming international relations (Boulding, 1959, pp. 121-128). Although Kenneth Boulding's considerations were devoid of a clear theoretical foundation, his observations allowed for continuation of research on international images.

In the early 1960s, American political scientist of Finnish origin Ole Holsti studied relationships between belief systems, national images and decision-making processes. After tracing actions of the US President Dwight Eisenhower's administration against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, the researcher concluded that in the Cold War realities, foreign policies of two opposing blocs were based on belief systems in which a political opponent was portrayed as an enemy. Since all relevant information has been filtered through the lenses of image adopted beforehand, a peaceful resolution to ongoing ideological dispute was virtually impossible (Holsti, 1962, pp. 244-248). Research on mutual images of the United States and the Soviet Union was also conducted by psychologist Brett Silverstein who pointed to the use of distorted and critical ideas about the USSR by the most prominent US politicians. Like Holsti before, Silverstein also believed that American prejudices against the USSR resulted from historically conditioned depiction of Russians as enemies of the United States. Importantly, these hostile images had been perpetuated in public consciousness for years by media and statements of representatives of political elites (Silverstein, 1989, pp. 903-909).

The researcher who made the greatest contribution to development of image theory in international relations is political scientist Richard K. Herrmann. Recognising important role of images in foreign policy analyses, Herrmann and Michael P. Fischerkeller realised that theoretical models limited to the enemy image significantly narrowed the field of research on international relations. In the next step, the political scientists identified three basic dimensions that constitute any international image: perception of a potential threat or opportunity, relative power, and cultural status. Subsequently, the researchers introduced five ideal types with which explanation of complex international political processes was to become unsophisticated and more realistic. In the proposed approach, the authors distinguished the following images: enemy (perceived threat, comparable power and cultural status), degenerate (perceived opportunity, comparable power, inferior cultural status), colony (perceived opportunity, inferior power and cultural status), imperialist (perceived threat, superior power, comparable cultural status) and ally (perceived opportunity, comparable power and cultural status) (Herrmann, Fischerkeller, 1995, pp. 422-438). Among the presented variants, only the ally image assumes cooperation, since both parties perceive their

relationship in terms of mutual benefits. All other images, in turn, are associated with an inevitable occurrence of conflict between the perceiving and the perceived states. In 1997, Richard Herrmann expanded his typology with one additional ideal type (barbarian image) that was characterised by perceived threat, superior power and inferior cultural status (Herrmann et al., 1997, pp. 409-412). According to the researcher, in order to define the image that given states attach to other participants of the international system, it is necessary to analyse statements of their political leaders using indicators included in ideal types. In line with assumptions of this theoretical approach, perceived opportunity or threat evokes specific emotions that, along with perception of relative power and cultural status, trigger creation of a specific image of a given country, which in turn is conducive to taking a certain action in the international environment (Herrmann, 2003, pp. 286-299).

Image theory has been refined as a result of research conducted by a team of social psychologists led by Michele G. Alexander. The main contribution of researchers to expanding the state of knowledge on international images was advancement of the theoretical model with category of social identity. In developing Herrmann's thought, Alexander and her colleagues emphasised that opinions about other participants of the international system are organised into structured patterns, and that each group of such schemas is composed of beliefs about strategic goals of a given state. Moreover, perception of other states stems from historical contacts and implies expectations for bilateral relations in the future. By pointing to relationships between perception of foreign policy and structural determinants of the international system, Alexander brought image theory closer to traditional theoretical perspectives in international relations (Alexander et al., 2005, pp. 32-41).

Although initially the vast majority of researchers employed image theory to analyse the US foreign policy, a significant part of literature on the subject also includes studies on images of the European Union. In this context, it is worth mentioning a research of political scientist Sonia Lucarelli who examined external perception of the EU. On the basis of surveys on images of the European Union, Lucarelli stated that mechanisms of functioning of the EU were not widely known outside of Europe, which may result in serious problems for the Community, particularly in the area of foreign policy (Lucarelli, 2007, pp. 259-270). In turn, Tuuli-Marja Kleiner discussed national images with regard to the European integration process. In an article published in 2012, she ascertained impact of trust and cultural values on the level of cooperation between countries in Europe. Confirming that international perception is a basic element of certain political strategies, Kleiner noted that social, economic and cultural development in the European Union affected creation of a positive

image of the Community in the world (Kleiner, 2012, pp. 225-231). In 2017, an article by Natalia Chaban, Ole Elgström and Olga Gulyaeva was published, in which Russians' perception towards the EU was investigated. In the conclusion of their research, the authors argued that in times of a deep crisis in mutual relations (annexation of Crimea, war in Eastern Ukraine), the image of the European Union as an enemy of Russia has been rooted in the public conscience. Extremely negative perception of the EU has been also influenced by President Vladimir Putin's anti-European narrative (Chaban et al., 2017, pp. 484-495).

Image theory researchers were also interested in analysing foreign policy of Turkey. In 2010, Rezarta Bilali conducted a study in order to verify internal consistency of the theory on the example of Turkish-American relations. As a result of the research, it has been proved that there are two separate images of each state: one concerning this state as a political entity, and the other one representing the perception of its nation (Bilali, 2010, pp. 280-297). Binnur Özkeçeci-Taner, in turn, focused on changing dynamics in relations between Turkey and Israel, which, in her opinion, had not fit into the Herrmann typology. In conclusion of her article there was a statement that it is required to further improve the theoretical model, especially in terms of developing new types of images (Özkeçeci-Taner, 2012, pp. 121-125).

Historical background

The Balkan Peninsula has been an area of Turkish expansion almost from the very establishment of the Ottoman state, which was founded in north-western Anatolia at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries by Osman Gazi. In 1352, the army led by Sultan Orchan, son of Osman, defeated the combined Serbian-Bulgarian forces near Demotika in Thrace, as a result of which first lodgements on European soil were captured by the Turks (Shaw, 2012, p. 43). Two years later, troops commanded by Süleyman Pasha conquered the strategically important city of Gallipoli sited at the mouth of the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara. Having strengthened their position on the European shore of the strait, the Ottoman Turks began to regularly attack lands located in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula. Following military advances, by the end of fourteenth century the Ottomans seized Christian principalities of Serbia and Bulgaria as well as Wallachia and territories of present-day Albania and North Macedonia (Çelik, 2010, pp. 11-18). At the same time, the Ottoman Turks gradually took over the Byzantine Empire's domains. Finally, a besieged Constantinople fell under Turkish assault in May 1453 (Babinger, 1992, pp. 88-93). With the onset of its imperial period, the Ottoman sultanate steadily expanded its borders, becoming one of the most

powerful empires of mediaeval Europe. In particular, almost immediately after the capture of Constantinople, the Turks conquered nearly the entire Balkan Peninsula (Bostan, 2009, pp. 86-94).

However, at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries, the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire ensued, which was reflected also in its territorial losses. Among the reasons for this process one should mention weakening of sultans' power, which led to increasing autonomy of provincial governors, and the lack of necessary internal reforms to transform the Empire's inefficient socio-political system (Kodaman, 2005, pp. 151-152). Although the Balkan Peninsula was one of the regions over which the Ottomans maintained control for a relatively long time, eventually independence aspirations emerged there too. Following a series of rebellions and anti-Turkish uprisings that occurred in the Balkans in the first half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire lost Greece and was forced to grant autonomy to the Serbs. In the aftermath of further defeats, the unconditional independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the autonomy of Bulgaria were recognised in the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 (Karabulut, 2016, p. 64). Soon afterwards Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 ended in a definitive failure for the Turks who struggled to hold on to their possessions in the region. The weakened empire was no longer able to defend its borders effectively, losing its last lands in the Balkan Peninsula (Macedonia, Albania and Thrace) (Yıldırım, 2012, pp. 78-79). The Ottoman Empire ultimately fell apart as a result of the defeat of the Triple Alliance (Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy) during the First World War. The victorious Entente powers (Great Britain, France and Russia) decided to divide the sultanate into several semi-sovereign states and zones of influence, granting the Turks only the central part of Anatolia. Consequently, the Turkish War of Independence broke out in 1919, leading to the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in October 1923. Under the terms of the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed in the same year, Turkey received a small piece in the south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula (Eastern Thrace), representing only 3 percent of the total area of the country. However, a remnant of the former splendour of the Ottoman Empire is the Turkish minority which, although its population is gradually declining, still lives in most of the Balkan states today. (Sancaktar, 2019, pp. 13-18). This is a major factor for the implementation of Turkey's soft power in the region.

Foreign policy doctrine of Justice and Development Party

Since November 2002, Turkish foreign policy has been controlled by the Justice and Development Party. Having originated from a moderately Islamist milieu, a party led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan continued Turkey's accession negotiations with the European Union by implementing deep structural reforms, which ensured a successive increase in public support (Bermek, 2019, pp. 119-130). Along with gradual strengthening of its position within the state apparatus at the end of the first decade of the 21st century, an ideological dimension of AKP's activities became more visible. Religious roots of the Justice and Development Party emerged relatively quickly in the area of foreign policy which was influenced by Ahmet Davutoğlu, an author of the strategic depth concept (Yeşiltaş, 2014, pp. 46-48). According to his political strategy, adopted by AKP as a new doctrine of Turkish foreign policy, Turkey was to become a dominant state in the international system by extending the scope of its diplomatic activities to neighbouring regions: Middle East, North Africa, Central Asia, Balkans, and Caucasus. As explained by the originator of the strategic depth, the crucial goal of Turkish political elites should have been to successively regain influence throughout territories of the former Ottoman Empire (Davutoğlu, 2001, pp. 70-85).

Due to largely negative perception of Turkey by its closest neighbours, which resulted from unequivocally pro-Western foreign policy of previous governments, Ahmet Davutoğlu proposed a series of measures to improve Turkish image in the region. In this context, the main tool for implementing his political vision was the 'zero problems with neighbours' tactic which assumed mitigation of regional tensions with all available means (e.g. diplomacy, trade, culture). Equally important was transformation of Turkey's geopolitical surroundings into a danger-free zone (Terzi, 2016, pp. 49-51). For this purpose, a project of developing strong economic links was intended to bring tangible economic benefits to all parties involved in Ankara-led multi-levelled cooperation initiative. Finally, by promoting Turkish values and systemic solutions, Turkey was supposed to create its image as a role model for its neighbours (Wódka, 2019, pp. 249-263).

In political practice, however, execution of Ahmet Davutoğlu's concept did not meet the expectations. First and foremost, Turkish diplomacy encountered great difficulties while implementing the 'zero problems with neighbours' tactic, since efforts to maintain equally positive relations with countries in conflict (e.g. Armenia and Azerbaijan, Serbia and Albania) have proven to be hardly effective. In 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, thereby assuming personal responsibility for appropriate fulfilment of his own political vision (Öztop, 2016, pp. 301-302). Nevertheless, during five years in office, Davutoğlu did not make any breakthrough. Although Turkey managed to

consolidate its image as a state strongly involved in the affairs of neighbouring regions, the government in Ankara failed to gain strategic influence in any area of the former Ottoman Empire (Çağaptay, 2019, pp. 54-59). On the contrary, Turkish foreign policy during the Arab Spring ended in total disaster as AKP diplomacy was first unable to prevent the outbreak of internal conflicts in the Middle East, and then attempted to impose its own rules on particular states (e.g. Egypt). At that time, Turkey lost credibility with its regional partners which accused the authorities in Ankara of imperialistic intentions (Özdamar, 2016, pp. 94-97).

After Ahmet Davutoğlu's marginalisation in structures of the ruling party in 2016, and following a series of constitutional amendments, it is now President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan who has been determining directions of Turkish foreign policy as the main political figure in Turkey. Although AKP's diplomacy still refers to some basic principles of strategic depth doctrine in the rhetoric, international activities of Erdoğan and current Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu have been definitely more confrontational (Aydıntaşbaş, 2020, pp. 7-12). Being a pragmatic politician, the President rejected idealistic assumptions of Davutoğlu's vision, focusing instead on establishing ad hoc alliances with other important actors in the region (Russia, Iran, China) and prioritising cooperation with selected states with whom Turkey shares common interests (Azerbaijan, Qatar, Libya). Erdoğan's assertive model of foreign policy has led to emergence of numerous regional disputes, yet from his perspective provocative actions in the international sphere are perceived as an excellent instrument for mobilising the electorate against external threats (Kutlay, Öniş, 2021, pp. 1094-1102).

EU-Turkey relations during the AKP rule

After taking power in Turkey, the Justice and Development Party announced that priorities of Turkish foreign policy would be to accelerate integration with the European Union and to strengthen relations with neighbouring regions (Çarkoğlu, 2002, pp. 152-154). Willingness to continue the accession process after the 2002 elections was welcomed by the EU, since there were concerns that the new government would undertake a complete political reorientation. For the AKP, cooperation with Brussels was an important step to further consolidate power, as one of the EU's main requirements included imposition of civilian control over the military, which was the traditional opponent of conservative and Islamist parties in Turkey. Consequently, the Justice and Development Party initially stepped up its efforts to eventually open accession negotiations with the EU. In order to emphasise the

pro-European stance of the new government, Prime Minister Erdoğan made official visits to several EU member states (Akdoğan, 2010, p. 12). As a result of strengthening of ties between the Turkish government and EU institutions, there was an improvement in the level of respect for human rights, with particular reference to the situation of the Kurdish minority, previously treated as second-class citizens. Also, the AKP's model of active foreign policy engaged in resolving regional conflicts contributed to creating an image of Turkey as a reliable partner of the EU (Aslan, 2018, pp. 45-46). At the same time, the ruling party gradually took control of various sectors of the state, and weakened political opponents at home and abroad.

The degree and extent of Turkey's fulfilment of the Copenhagen criteria was positively assessed by the EU in the '2004 Regular Progress Report for Turkey', which was subsequently confirmed by the European Council on 17 December 2004. Furthermore, it was agreed that accession negotiations between the EU and Turkey would be launched on 3 October 2005 (Özer, 2010, pp. 99-101). Despite Turkey's problematic relations with Greece and Cyprus, the negotiation process started on schedule. The entire catalogue of rules, procedures and individual chapters accepted by both sides was included in the document titled 'Negotiating Framework'. The official commencement of the accession process was regarded as a great success of the AKP government, but soon afterwards first serious discrepancies between Turkey and the EU emerged. Hence, social enthusiasm for entering the EU faded (Güreşci, 2010, pp. 76-79). When its candidate Abdullah Gül was elected as the new president in 2007, the AKP achieved another stage in the process of power consolidation. Under the guise of democratisation, the government gradually increased its control over the army, judiciary, media and universities. Even if the European Commission had previously regarded similar measures as necessary steps for a smooth overhaul of the state system, it then became apparent that the AKP's aim was to impose its own systemic solutions, which in several cases violated the EU standards set out in the 'Negotiating Framework' (e.g. low level of observance of human rights and civil liberties, lack of respect for defendants' rights during trials) (Yılmaz, 2014, pp. 66-68). It can therefore be concluded that the EU negotiation process was exploited by the AKP as a tool to maximise power and to weaken the opposition. When Prime Minister Erdoğan decided that cooperation with the European Union was no longer necessary to implement his policies, Turkey's interest in accession negotiations was significantly reduced, which led to serious problems between the two sides.

In the field of foreign policy, Turkey's expansive approach (especially in the Middle East and North Africa) was contrary to the expectations of its European partners. The actions of the AKP government during the Arab Spring led to many diplomatic disputes between Turkey and the European Union, as most EU member states openly criticised Turkey's support for radical opposition forces in Syria, Libya and Egypt. Later Erdoğan explained the ultimate failure of Turkish foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa as being caused by the EU which allegedly feared Turkey's growing position in the region. This confrontational rhetoric further deteriorated the mutual relations (Efegil, 2016, pp. 51-53). At that time, Turkish authorities became intolerant of criticism from the EU institutions that called for a return to the implementation of pro-democratic reforms. From the AKP's perspective, these appeals were considered illicit interference in Turkey's internal affairs, which resulted in an increase in tensions between Ankara and Brussels. Over the course of a few years, the image of the European Union in rhetoric of the ruling party has changed from a friendly and reliable partner into one of the main threats to Turkey's national interests (Yılmaz, 2019, pp. 26-28).

After being elected president in 2014, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan did not observe the constitutional principle of impartiality, still acting as the de facto party leader and head of the executive branch. As a consequence, the EU issued another series of opinions and recommendations criticising Turkey for breaching democratic standards. This turned out to be another opportunity for Erdoğan to showcase his anti-Western rhetoric as he accused several EU member states of supporting terrorist groups in the region (Yabancı, 2016, pp. 19-20). Approximately since that time critical narrative towards the European Union (and the West in general) has become a regular feature of the Justice and Development Party's policy. Almost every challenge that Turkey faced in recent years has been explained by the authorities as being provoked by hostile actions by the EU (e.g. loss of parliamentary majority in June 2015, military coup d'état in July 2016, beginning of economic crisis in 2018) (Çoban Oran, 2018, pp. 436-439). Moreover, the EU and the West have been portrayed by the ruling class as rivals in Turkey's regional initiatives, the best example of which is the civil war in Syria. For years, the AKP has been creating its image as the only party defending traditional Turkish values, which has contributed to its stable support. Thus, perception of the EU as an enemy of Turkey facilitates mobilisation of the electorate against external threats. On the other hand, the EU itself had an indirect influence on Turkey's radical shift in approach towards European integration. After all, the accession process has been hampered for years by several Member States that openly questioned the idea of Turkey's membership,

pointing to cultural, religious and economic differences (Çalış, Metkin, 2017, pp. 25-30). And this fact is raised in the contemporary public debate in Turkey as an argument for a definitive withdrawal from cooperation with the EU. Thus, the number of Turks who perceive EU membership as a real opportunity for Turkey has been constantly decreasing (Bayraklı, Özdemir, 2019, pp. 363-366).

Balkan states in Turkish political strategy

In AKP political discourse, Turkey has been depicted as a state whose identity, for historical and geographical reasons, is inextricably connected with the Balkan Peninsula. Consequently, the Balkans was the region where Turks decided to begin implementation of the strategic depth doctrine in the early 2000s. Among several factors that influenced this choice, one should mention efforts to strengthen Turkey's image as a reliable partner of the European Union before the awaited accession. Therefore, Turkish diplomacy focused on developing contacts both with other candidates for EU membership (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania) as well as with Greece, thereby overcoming decades of reluctance in mutual relations (Koukoudakis, 2013, pp. 162-164). Another sign of Turkey's positive involvement in regional affairs was its support for NATO expansion to the Balkans. In addition, comprehensive assistance (including financial support) provided by the Erdoğan cabinet led promptly to rapprochement between Turkey and most of the Balkan states (Ekinci, 2015, pp. 379-382). With time, however, an ideological dimension of AKP's activities became quite apparent. For instance, a significant part of Turkish funds, originally allocated to infrastructure investments, was transferred to renovation of Ottoman monuments. Local authorities widely regarded it as an attempt to preserve Turkey's domination in the Balkans. Cultural and religious assistance offered by the AKP government to Muslim communities also faced growing opposition (Gibas-Krzak, 2017, pp. 91-98). Finally, numerous historical references expressed publicly by Turkish politicians led to a situation in which many countries (whose national identities had been shaped amid struggles for independence from the Ottoman Empire) began to distance themselves from initiatives proposed by Ankara (Yavuz, 2020, pp. 207-214).

Arguably the greatest challenge for Turkish diplomacy in the Balkans was moderation of the peace process between governments of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia. Despite organising a series of high-level meetings under the auspices of Ankara and signing of the Istanbul Declaration in 2010, ultimately Turkey did not succeed in reaching an

agreement. According to experts in the subject, the main reason for this prestigious defeat was unofficial support provided to the Bosnian side by AKP, which undermined Turkey's credibility for Serbs and Croats (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019, pp. 44-46). Turkish-Serbian relations were also negatively affected by recognition of the independence of Kosovo by Erdoğan's cabinet in 2008. However, it was consistent with expectations of the US and the EU, i.e. priority partners for AKP at the time (Progonati, 2015, pp. 290-298). Nevertheless, beginning with the second decade of the 21st century Turkish foreign policy has become more assertive towards some vital interests of the West, as the ruling party politicians realised that prospects of Turkey's membership in the European Union turned into an illusion. This radical shift in perception can be observed also in the Balkans where recent partners are now perceived as rivals for Ankara's initiatives. In opinions of AKP politicians, internal problems of the EU (e.g. euro-zone crisis, rule of law crisis, migration crisis), which have hampered accession talks with the Western Balkans, provides opportunity for Turkey to strengthen its position in the region (Hänsel, Feyerabend, 2018, pp. 6-38).

Having recognised that foreign policy based on historical sentiments cannot be received positively, the AKP government focused on developing economic cooperation, which resulted in signing free trade agreements with several Balkan states. Overall, Turkey maintains the closest ties with neighbouring Greece and Bulgaria, but in recent years Turks have been strongly involved in the Western Balkan countries which have limited access to the EU market. Currently, Turkish enterprises are particularly active in the Muslim-majority states of the region, affecting crucial branches of local economies (e.g. banking, infrastructure, energy sector) (Baba, 2018, pp. 83-86). The AKP government is also committed to enhancing socio-cultural linkages between Turkey and the Balkan states. To this end, the Justice and Development Party has been employing numerous public diplomacy agencies whose primary task is to promote Turkish soft power in the Balkans (Demirtaş, 2017, pp. 140-143). The said organisations provide a wide range of services in fields of education, administration, development and humanitarian aid as well as renovation of historical heritage, hence their activities are usually appreciated by local communities. However, the ever-frequent use of public diplomacy to pursue certain political goals by AKP raises legitimate objections (Kurtuluş, 2020, pp. 216-219). Although declaratively the government in Ankara is addressing its message of multidimensional regional cooperation to the entire Balkans, in practice the Justice and Development Party gives priority to Muslim-majority states, which is related to successive bolstering of religious component in Turkish foreign policy (Muhasilović, 2018, pp. 68-77). It follows from the above that a

serious limitation in Turkey's activities in the Balkans is creation of a double image in which the main variable is Islam.

Turkey's public diplomacy activities in the Western Balkans

In accordance with the AKP regional strategy, Turkey's public diplomacy activities are conducted within two main frameworks: governmental and civic (i.e. specialised agencies, non-governmental organisations, research centres, media). During its twenty-year rule, the Justice and Development Party has substantially expanded and strengthened the institutional structure of public diplomacy. Among organisations, whose main task is to promote Turkish soft power at home and abroad, the following ones should be mentioned: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. Türkiye İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı - TİKA), Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (tur. Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı - YTB), Yunus Emre Institute (tur. Yunus Emre Enstitüsü), Turkish Maarif Foundation (tur. Türkiye Maarif Vakfı - TMV), Directorate of Religious Affairs (tur. Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı - DİB) (Eren, 2017, pp. 41-42). Having created a system based on a complementary triad of culture, political values and foreign policy, the originators of the Turkish soft power model referred directly to the classical theory developed by Joseph Nye. One can argue that Turkish soft power reached its peak at the end of the first decade of the 21st century when Turkey (at least in certain respects) could actually be considered a regional leader. In the 2010s, however, the tense internal situation and increasingly confrontational foreign policy led to a noticeable deterioration in Turkey's international image (Torelli, 2018, pp. 59-61). Therefore, for over a decade now, Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans has been based primarily on the socio-cultural dimension, which is particularly appreciated by the local Muslim communities. Another important element of Turkey's involvement in the region is development of economic partnership, which has accelerated in recent years. In the struggle for hearts and minds of the Western Balkans' citizens, the AKP government is competing with external powers such as the US, Russia, China and the EU. In the religious and cultural aspect, Turkey's position in the region has been exceptionally strong, which results from historical conditions and multifaceted activities of public diplomacy organisations (Mitrović Bošković et al., 2015, pp. 108-116).

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

Among Turkish governmental institutions and organisations that are currently active in the Western Balkans, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) plays arguably a key role. TİKA was founded in 1992 with the initial task of strengthening ties between Turkey and the Turkic states established after the collapse of the USSR (i.e. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan). In this context, the agency developed a number of projects and initiatives aimed at showcasing the cultural unity of the Turkic world (Poyraz, Dinçer, 2016, pp. 43-44). In the following years, the scope of TİKA's activities was extended to other regions of Turkey's interest. However, it was not until the Justice and Development Party came to power that the agency's structure was reorganised, resulting in TİKA becoming the primary tool for promotion of Turkish soft power in the international arena. Today, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency manages 62 field offices on five continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, South America), and coordinates or co-finances several thousand projects in various fields (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2022).

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has been present in the Balkan Peninsula since the late 1990s and conducts a wide catalogue of activities there, including health services, administrative assistance, educational support, humanitarian aid, cultural cooperation and restoration of historical legacy. This last initiative has been particularly intensively developed recently. Every year, a sizable portion of the agency's total budget (estimated to be around 30 million euro annually) is allocated exclusively to the renovation of Ottoman heritage in the Western Balkan states (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2023). According to TİKA representatives, each such project must be carried out in consultation with local authorities in order to bring tangible benefits to both parties involved. On the one hand, the restoration of monuments has a positive impact on the tourism sector in the Balkans, which in turn can improve the general well-being and prosperity of society. On the other hand, from the perspective of the Justice and Development Party, the socio-cultural presence in the region strengthens the potential Turkish soft power elsewhere (Yılmaz, Kılıçoğlu, 2017, pp. 122-127). As per published reports, from 2008 onwards TİKA restored more than eighty historical buildings in the Western Balkans, about half of which were Ottoman mosques. In addition, dozens of historical sites are currently undergoing restoration work (e.g. mosques, castles, palaces, tombs, hamams), and approximately fifty renovation

programs are in the preparatory phase (Todorović, 2021, pp. 143-149). In this context, it should be clarified that for some projects TİKA is the only institution involved in the restoration, while for others the agency acts as one of several organisations coordinating the renovation process. It is also worth noting that TİKA is committed to the protection of Christian monuments in the Western Balkans (e.g. the Roman Catholic Cathedral of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in Sarajevo and the Orthodox Saint George Church near Kumanovo in North Macedonia), which casts doubt on repeated allegations that the AKP has been pursuing Islamist or neo-imperialist policies in the region (Öztürk, 2021, pp. 143-146).

According to official information, TİKA has completed over 3000 projects in the Western Balkans to date. In recent years, there has been a considerable increase in the share of the organisation's expenditure related to improving economic relations with countries in the region, which is in line with the updated AKP foreign policy strategy. Apart from pragmatic aspects of this particular engagement (compared to the previous socio-cultural support), commercial and trade projects allow Turkey to reach out on a larger scale to the non-Muslim states of the region, of which Serbia plays a key role. Due to its economic potential, this country is even considered by the Turks to be the 'gateway to the Balkans' (Bieniek, 2021, pp 186-187). In this context TİKA often acts as an intermediary that facilitates establishment of closer ties between the Turks and their partners in the Western Balkans. As a result, there are currently more than 1000 Turkish companies in the region in sectors such as construction, banking, transport and logistics, ect. (Kočan, Arbeiter, 2019, pp. 181-185).

Furthermore, TİKA was also active in the Western Balkans during the Covid-19 pandemic, contributing to strengthen Turkey's image as an international humanitarian donor. Acting jointly with the Ministry of Health and Kızılay (Turkish Red Crescent), the organisation was responsible for the supply of modern ambulances, respirators, face masks, personal protective equipment sets, rapid Covid test kits, and disinfectant products to all six countries in the region. President Erdoğan's declaration on comprehensive cooperation to improve the quality of health care in the Western Balkans was especially appreciated by local governments (Aydın, 2020, pp. 2-4). In this context, Turkey has inaugurated a program of delivering vaccines to neighbouring countries under which, for instance, 30 000 doses of Sinovac were sent to Bosnia in the spring of 2021. A specific example of Turkish so-called 'covid diplomacy' was construction of a hospital in the city of Fier in Albania which was built with the financial support of TİKA. Cooperation in the field of health care between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries was also deepened through the periodic 'Balkan Countries

Anesthesia Days' congresses organised by the agency. According to TİKA representatives, Turkey would continue to invest in the health sector, as the Turks intended to share their experience and skills with partners in the Western Balkans (Niemic, 2022, pp. 218-219).

Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities

Another Turkish governmental organisation involved in the Western Balkans is the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB). This institution was established in 2010 and has since been directly attached to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey. Compared to the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, the scope of its activities is clearly narrower, as the main task of the YTB is to coordinate various types of programs dedicated to Turks living abroad, as well as to representatives of so-called related communities (i.e. Turkic ethnic groups). The rationale behind creation of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities was AKP politicians' intention to rally all members of the Turkish diaspora around their socio-political narrative. Thus, the government chose to establish an institutional structure whose functioning was to be based on shared historical memory and ethno-cultural ties (Yıldırım, Yıldırım, 2017, p. 209).

The Balkan Peninsula is one of the regions where YTB operates most dynamically. There, the institution conducts cultural exchanges and educational programs for students, as well as organises conferences, symposia and seminars aimed at building friendly relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan states. According to data published by YTB, the organisation's involvement in the region has been steadily increasing year by year, especially in countries with a large Turkish population (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, 2021). The socio-cultural aspect of Turkish soft power is implemented through a plethora of programs and projects managed by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities. For example, under the 'Evliya Çelebi Youth Bridges' program, hundreds of children and adolescents of Turkish origin were given the opportunity to visit the land of their ancestors. Furthermore, in 2016 YTB launched the 'Balkan Youth School' project, during which students from all Western Balkan countries can learn about Turkish culture, art and history. A similar goal inspired the founding of the 'Idea Art Workshop Activities in the Balkans' program, which was organised the year before. In addition, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities collaborates with a number of local non-profit

organisations, creating a favourable environment for improving the level of teaching and education in the Western Balkans (Yılmaz, Kılıçoğlu, 2017, pp. 119-122).

The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities is also engaged in research activities. Along with Turkey's Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (SETA), YTB organised a conference in Ankara in 2015, attended by members of think tanks from six Western Balkan countries as well as from Greece and Croatia. The aim of this event was to create a platform for public debate on the most serious problems and challenges the region faced in recent times. As a follow up, the 'Balkan Think Tank Workshop' took place a few months later in Kosovo, where leading academics from Turkey and the Balkans debated possible ways to strengthen and develop mutual cooperation in areas such as economy, culture, science, society, etc. Since then, think tank conventions co-sponsored by YTB have been held every year (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, 2023).

Another dimension of engagement of the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities in the Western Balkans is diplomatic activity. Within the framework of the 'Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' program, YTB offers professional courses and internships at Turkish embassies and consulates in Muslim-majority countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) (Niemic, 2020, pp. 54-55). Representatives of the organisation are also in constant dialogue with diplomats from the Western Balkans, with the aim of enhancing bilateral relations and ensuring the establishment of a coordinated response mechanism in case of unforeseen events. Thus, the YTB is slowly becoming an institution that, by effectively coordinating a wide range of programs and projects designed for deepening the Turkish-Western Balkan partnership, may in the future contribute to Turkey's greater political influence at least in the Muslim part of the Balkan Peninsula (Tabak, 2018, pp. 89-90).

Yunus Emre Institute

An important organisation within the structure of Turkish public diplomacy is the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE). Established in 2007 by the AKP government as a specialised unit of the Yunus Emre Foundation, the institute aims to promote Turkish history, culture, art and language. Among the most common activities offered by the YEE are Turkish language courses, organisation of cultural events and art exhibitions, and support for scientific research. Yunus Emre Institute has been performing its tasks through Turkish cultural centres

located in 62 cities in 50 countries across the world (Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, Australia). According to plans made almost a decade ago, approximately one hundred centres of the YEE were supposed to operate worldwide by 2023 to mark the 100th anniversary of the Republic of Turkey (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2015). However, it is already obvious that this ambitious goal will not be achieved. Having traced the institute's ongoing activities, it appears that the Balkan region (Muslim-majority countries in particular) is a top priority for this organisation, although recently there have been notable efforts to increase YEE's presence in Sub-Saharan Africa as well (Eren, 2020, pp. 130-131).

Following the instructions of then-Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu, the YEE began to expand beyond Turkey's borders in 2009, when the institute's first foreign centre was opened in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This decision may explain the special place of the Western Balkans in AKP foreign policy (Szyszlak, 2021, p. 185). Providing a wide catalogue of programs and projects for multidimensional social and cultural cooperation, Turkish cultural centres are currently located in all six Western Balkan countries. In some of them, there are even more than one office (e.g. Sarajevo, Mostar and Fojnica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tirana and Shkoder in Albania, Prishtina, Prizren and Peja in Kosovo) (Ekşi, 2017, pp. 198-200).

The activities of the Yunus Emre Institute in the Western Balkans can be divided into two main sections: education and culture. YEE is first and foremost a leading institution for teaching Turkish language, which AKP politicians believe should reach global language status (given the number of its speakers). A qualified staff of teachers and lecturers conducts language courses for foreigners, culminating in a Turkish language proficiency exam. Furthermore, in cooperation with other organisations of Turkish public diplomacy, the institute organises periodic summer schools in Turkey, during which students learn not only the language, but also about Turkish culture, history and customs (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2021). In this context, one of YEE's most notable programs in the field of education is the 'Turcology Project' which offers a comprehensive model for learning Turkish. This program also provides scholarships and stipends, which is an important incentive for students from the Western Balkan countries. Other projects carried out in recent years by the Yunus Emre Institute in the region include such programs as: 'Turkish Elective Foreign Language', 'Rebuilding the Cultural Heritage in the Balkans', 'Revival of the Traditional Turkish Handicrafts in the Balkans', '100 Turkey Library Project' (Ekşi, Erol, 2018, pp. 32-33).

As a result of the activities undertaken by the Yunus Emre Institute, the popularity of Turkish in the Western Balkans is steadily increasing. Especially in the Muslim countries of

the region, Turkish is often chosen by students as their preferred foreign language. According to data published in late 2017, in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone as many as 20,000 people have benefited from the Turkish education system since the first cultural centre was established in Sarajevo in 2009. Almost half of this number was accounted for by school children who participated in courses organised by YEE under the 'My Choice is Turkish' program (Muhasilović, 2020, pp. 88-91). Since language is an important element of culture, the relative success of YEE educational programs in the Western Balkans may indicate that at least some communities in the region are gradually adopting the Turkish model. However, a vital challenge for AKP politicians will be to attract non-Muslim states to participate more actively in these initiatives (Eşki Uğuz, Saygılı, 2017, pp. 147-149).

Turkish Maarif Foundation

One of the most recent organisations that became a part of the structure of public diplomacy in Turkey is the Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMV). In accordance with its founding charter, the institution's tasks are limited almost exclusively to the sphere of education. In particular, as a transnational organisation, the Maarif Foundation is responsible for organising thematic courses (from kindergarten to university), awarding scholarships, managing educational facilities and dormitories, training teaching staff, conducting research, publishing scientific works, and performing various other tasks in agreement with host countries (Akgün, Özkan, 2020, pp. 63-67). According to official figures, the Maarif Foundation's educational facilities are now located in 44 countries around the world. In addition, the organisation has so far concluded more than a hundred international educational cooperation agreements, which has enabled its representatives to launch operations in 67 countries. Moreover, the foundation's management oversees 360 educational facilities and 41 dormitories worldwide with a total of around 40,000 students at various stages who are part of the TMV's education system (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2021).

The Turkish Maarif Foundation was founded in 2016 as the AKP government's response to the popularity of the religious and socio-educational Gülen movement which has achieved a particularly strong presence in the Balkan region. It is worth mentioning that Fetullah Gülen is a Muslim preacher and philanthropist who has carried out missionary work in Turkey since the 1960s by drawing attention to various issues related to religion, education and the social system. Persecuted by the republican authorities for his activities, Gülen established various local associations outside the country (e.g. in Western Europe, the

Balkans, Central Asia) which preached his spiritual message, first among representatives of the Turkish diaspora, and later also among other believers of Sunni Islam. One of the major achievements of the 'Hizmet' ('service') or 'Cemaat' ('community') movement was the creation of a network of educational institutions in more than 150 countries (Fitzgerald, 2017, pp. 3-6). After the 2002 elections, members of the Gülen movement collaborated closely with the AKP in order to deprive the secular republican elites of their influence on the state's affairs. In an informal alliance with the new conservative government, by the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, movement followers had taken control of some sectors of the state (e.g. the judiciary, police and security forces). However, conflict between the movement and the AKP over the vision for Turkey's future began to arise. When the 'Hizmet'-linked prosecutors initiated corruption cases against AKP politicians, Erdoğan accused Gülen of attempting to overthrow his government. After the 2016 coup, which authorities in Ankara believe was also orchestrated by the preacher, the movement was declared a terrorist organisation in Turkey, and Turkish services launched a wide-ranging operation targeting members of the movement at home and abroad (Dogan, 2020, pp. 76-98).

Contemporarily, the education sector is one of the fields of competition between the Gülen movement and the AKP in the Western Balkans. In recent years, the Maarif Foundation has contributed to the establishment of numerous educational facilities in most countries in the region (e.g. New York University in Tirana, International Maarif School complexes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Kosovo), thus creating an alternative model for Turkish private education (Tabak, Bozkurt, 2022, p. 129). In addition, the institution has become involved in the activities of two Turkish universities operating in the Western Balkans since the beginning of the 21st century (i.e. International Balkan University in Skopje, International University of Sarajevo). At the same time, representatives of the AKP government have been agitating among local authorities for the closure of Gülen-linked schools, but these actions have not yielded many positive results so far (Ali, 2022, pp. 258-259).

Official data shows that the Maarif Foundation currently manages over twenty kindergartens, schools and universities in five Western Balkan countries. Last year, TMV started its activities in Serbia by opening three educational facilities there (Türkiye Maarif Vakfi, 2022). The institution is not yet operational only in Montenegro, but talks are underway to open Maarif schools in the predominantly Muslim-populated northern regions of the country. Being closely related to authorities in Ankara, the Maarif Foundation is often accused of transmitting AKP's political ideology and interfering in the host countries' internal

affairs, but nevertheless it has already become a vital part of the private education sector in the Western Balkans due to its competent staff and relatively high quality of teaching (Rrustemi et al., 2021, pp. 139-144).

Directorate of Religious Affairs

The last institution to be presented as part of this research is not a typical public diplomacy organisation, yet nevertheless its activities are extremely important for promoting Turkey's soft power. The Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB) was established in 1924 as governmental agency responsible for managing religious affairs on behalf of the republican state authorities. Initially, the Diyanet's responsibilities were very narrow, but over time its rank in the administrative structure of the state grew substantially. The Directorate of Religious Affairs inaugurated its transnational activities after the General Directorate of Foreign Affairs (tur. Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü) was established in 1971. By moving beyond Turkish borders, the Diyanet was to ensure the coordination of religious support for Turkish diaspora in Western Europe (Yakar, Yakar, 2017, pp. 9-28). A decade later, representatives of the Directorate initiated contacts with Muslim communities in the Balkans, however these attempts were not received positively by the Communist authorities. It was only after the end of the Cold War and the establishment of a number of independent Muslim-majority states in the former socialist bloc area that the Diyanet's efforts began to yield tangible results (Bakırcı, 2019, pp. 73-75). As a consequence of bilateral talks, the institution's staff was given the official status of religious consultants, which legitimised their activities in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Macedonia) and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) (Balçı, 2018, pp. 43-48).

After the AKP won parliamentary elections in Turkey, the Diyanet became one of the key institutions that contributed to restoring the importance of religion in Turkish public life. The fundamental role of the Directorate is evidenced by the fact that only in the years 2002-2010 its budget increased fivefold, and the staff grew from 74,000 to 117,000 (Turner, 2013, pp. 209-213). Having changed the priorities of Turkish diplomacy, the government focused on development of cooperation with Muslim countries, as a result of which Islam became one of the basic tools in the strategy of the authorities. Through numerous references to the religious and cultural community, Turkey was to improve its image among its neighbours and consequently to achieve the status of a regional power (Wódka, 2019, ss. 156-163).

Currently, the Diyanet maintains a particularly strong position in Europe, where it is even considered as the leading institution among all transnational Muslim organisations. The Directorate offers there a wide scope of religious services (ceremonies, practices, gatherings), delegates imams, popularises knowledge of Islam (conferences and publications), provides Quranic education (programs, facilities, teachers), and finances the construction and renovation of mosques (e.g. in Tirana, Skopje, Prishtina and Olovo in the Western Balkans). In addition to its main tasks, the Diyanet cooperates with Turkish public diplomacy organisations and engages in a range of social and cultural projects, such as comprehensive educational support, historical heritage preservation programs and humanitarian aid in the face of natural disasters (Şar, 2019, pp. 126-127). In these areas, Directorate's activities (similarly to all governmental agencies and institutions) are closely linked to the policies of the Justice and Development Party. Therefore, the authorities in Ankara gained yet another channel through which they can influence international public opinion. In implementing these identity policies, representatives of the Directorate seek to unify the Turkish diaspora around the official AKP narrative, while often going against interests and positions of host states (Çitak, 2013, pp. 177-180). It should be noted that at the beginning of the 21st century, Turkey's religious support for Muslims around the world was perceived positively, especially with regard to limiting impacts of radical Islam. However, it soon became apparent that in addition to religious cooperation, the Diyanet in the Balkans and Western Europe was also involved in promoting the political discourse of the Justice and Development Party (Öztürk, Gözaydın, 2018, pp. 348-349). In particular at the local level, the representatives of the Directorate attempted to influence public perception by popularising the Turkish model based on imperial past and superpower aspirations. Consequently, the Turks inspired establishment of a number of associations that referred directly to the Ottoman cultural community and embraced the ideological message of the authorities in Ankara (Öztürk, 2016, pp. 625-628).

Nowadays, the non-religious aspect of Diyanet's activities is sparking controversy especially in the Balkan Peninsula. The doctrine of Islamic internationalism, which was formulated after 2010, has been perceived as an attempt to subordinate the Western Balkans by Turkey (Öztürk, 2017, pp. 21-23). It is significant in this context that concerns about the real intentions of the Directorate of Religious Affairs were expressed not only by official representatives of Christian-majority states (Serbia, North Macedonia) but also by local Muslims (e.g. in Bosnia and Herzegovina), who openly criticise the instrumental treatment of Diyanet by President Erdoğan and his political milieu. For example, some members of the Bosnia's Riyaset, the main Muslims organisation in the Balkans, publicly condemned the

non-religious activities of the Directorate and accused it of spreading politicised Islam in the region (Öktem, 2012, pp. 45-46). Nevertheless, due to existing bilateral arrangements, it is almost impossible to close local branches of Diyanet without Ankara's consent. Apart from that, a significant part of Muslim population in the Western Balkans seems to fully support Turkish policies implemented through this institution, which demonstrates a relative success of the Justice and Development Party's strategy in this regard (Büyük, Öztürk, 2019, pp. 126-127).

Conclusion

The analysis conducted as part of research on Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans proves an important role of public diplomacy organisations in the AKP's regional strategy since early 2000s. In its political expansion, the authorities in Ankara have been making extensive use of soft power attributes, taking advantage of historical and cultural ties which connect Turkey with the countries of the region. With a well-organised and successively expanding institutional structure of public diplomacy, for two decades the AKP has been pursuing a wide variety of projects and programs in the fields of religion, culture, art, education and architecture. All these initiatives are aimed at gaining greater political influence in the Western Balkans, which invariably demonstrates the region's prominent place in Turkish foreign policy (Çevik, 2019, pp. 56-65). Further growth of Turkey's regional role, however, depends on the progress in the Western Balkans' integration with the European Union, since the states in the region continue to perceive their possible accession to the EU as top priority. Nevertheless, it cannot be excluded that in the event of serious internal problems within the Community, or as a result of lack of a coherent EU enlargement strategy, the Western Balkan countries might be inclined to enhance their political cooperation with other actors that have been active in the region. This would open the way for Turkey, which is already relatively firmly embedded in the Western Balkans (i.a. through its public diplomacy organisations) (Vračić et al., 2017, pp. 196-198).

Referring to the adopted theoretical framework, it should be noted that the AKP employs soft power as a convenient political tool in order to create a positive image of Turkey by emphasising the socio-cultural community of all the regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire. Due to radically different historical experiences, perceptions of Turkey in the Western Balkans vary from country to country. In general, Turks are perceived rather positively in the region's Muslim-majority states, while in those where Christians make up

the majority of the population the impression of Turkey is quite ambivalent (Avdić-Küsmüş, 2022, pp. 184-186). Therefore, one cannot argue that Turkish political strategy has been utterly effective and successful, or that the narrative conveyed by the AKP government and its institutions has been particularly appealing to any country in the Western Balkans. Quite on the contrary, the over-politicisation of public diplomacy organisations (e.g. persecution of alleged members of the Gülen movement, promotion of conservative lifestyle, interference in the religious affairs) makes local governments reluctant to willingly and unconditionally engage in all initiatives proposed by Turkey (Henne, Öztürk, 2022, pp. 9-11). In retrospect, it would appear that the strategy of addressing a homogeneous message to all neighbouring regions adopted by AKP in the early 2000s has significantly reduced the expansion potential of Turkish foreign policy. While promoting Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision, the Justice and Development Party politicians often ignored interests and expectations of their partners. Difficulties with correct perception of local specificity and inconsistent activities in the international environment resulted in the ultimate failure of the strategic depth doctrine (Sazak, Kurç, 2018, pp. 16-18).

Authorities in Ankara seem to have realised that their exaggerated emphasis on the region's Ottoman past (e.g. AKP's slogans about the 'golden age of the Balkans') could not fall on fertile ground, as a result of which Turkish politicians have begun to back off from this rhetoric. Turkey's focus has now shifted towards developing economic cooperation, in which TİKA is also strongly involved. Consequently, religious and cultural aspects have receded into the background in the AKP's official political discourse, but at the local level, various organisations associated with Turkish public diplomacy continue to actively transmit Turkey's ideological message (Atcı, 2022, pp. 559-561). It can be concluded that the AKP government's pragmatic turn and change in approach vis-a-vis the region meets the expectations of representatives of the Western Balkan states who are primarily interested in improving economic relations and (to certain extent) in military cooperation with Turkey. In this context it may be mentioned that several politicians (e.g. Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Turkey Adis Alagić, North Macedonia's Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi) called on the authorities in Ankara to increase the level of investment in the region (Jaćimović et al., 2022, pp. 5-6). Thus, the religious and cultural dimension, which used to be at the core of the Turkish regional concept, is now limited only to maintaining closer contacts with selected Muslim communities (Öztürk, 2020, pp. 39-43).

It would appear that the aforementioned pragmatic turn in Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans accelerated during the Covid-19 pandemic. From then on, views began to prevail in the official AKP narrative that, instead of exposing ideological and historical community, Turks need to focus on directing an individualised message to each state of a given region. In present circumstances, it should be considered a more adequate policy than rather idealistic strategic depth concept (Güzeldere, 2021, pp. 7-10). In other words, Ankara attempts to move away from being merely an advocate of the Balkan Muslims in order to become an 'honest broker' between various ethnic groups in the region, taking its recent economic, military and humanitarian involvement as an advantage. Drawing on previous experiences Turks are now aware that in the Western Balkans an authentic community can be formed only with participation of local Muslim communities whose representatives share religious and cultural values conveyed by AKP and its public diplomacy organisations (Aktürk, 2020, pp. 172-173).

In an attempt to predict further prospects for Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans, the most realistic scenario assumes a successive development of economic contacts with the entire region as well as strengthening of cultural and social ties with Muslim-majority countries. Apart from maintaining friendly relations on an interpersonal level, Turkish politicians need to develop specific systemic and institutional arrangements to permanently consolidate their presence in the region. This is a necessary condition for Turkey to achieve its ultimate goal of gaining a dominant political role in the Western Balkans. The protracted economic crisis has been certainly a major challenge for the government in Ankara and may affect Turkey's commercial exchange with its regional partners. Moreover, President Erdoğan's authoritarian style of governing is not a desirable model for the Western Balkan citizens who expect expansion of civil liberties and respect for human rights. AKP politicians' excessive interference in the internal affairs of Muslim communities has been also perceived negatively by a large part of residents of the region (Rašidagić, Hesova, 2020, pp. 116-121). Eventually, the image of Turkey in the Western Balkans (and its compliance with President Erdoğan's expectations) depends on consistent and thoughtful actions of AKP politicians.

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