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# Development of Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Western Balkans with Focus on Bosnia and Herzegovina

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## Abstract

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*Under the AKP government, Turkey's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans, and Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, has led many analysts to suspect it of possessing neo-imperial, or so-called neo-Ottoman, objectives. These suspicions have been compounded by the repeated declarations of former Prime Minister Davutoğlu and current President Erdoğan that the history and religious identity shared by Turks and Western Balkan Muslims forms the basis of both Turkish-Balkan relations and a common future. Critical examination of official Ankara's attitudes toward the Western Balkans in general, and especially Bosnia and Herzegovina, identifies four distinct phases in which cultural, historical, and religious appeals morphed into the set of distinctive foreign policies. These policies have also been shaped by pragmatic pursuits of regional influence, the effects of internal (Turkish) transformations, and more recently, the ad hoc policies of President Erdoğan.*

*This article will reconstruct the development of Turkish foreign policy since 1990, from multilateral and soft power efforts to religious and economic objectives, and will analyse the limits of this policy.*

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Long before President Erdoğan held a mass electoral rally in Sarajevo in 2018, Turkey's relations in the Western Balkans, and in Bosnia and Herzegovina (hereinafter, Bosnia) in particular, had been noted as a sign of Europe's weakening influence in the region. Along with Russia and China, Turkey is widely seen as having filled the vacuum left by the EU (Bassuener 2019; Chrzová et al. 2019). Unlike these other aspiring power centres, however, Turkey's renewed presence builds on the historic role of the Ottoman Empire in the region and Turkish links to Balkan Muslims.

Beginning in the late 2000s, the assertive foreign policy of Turkey began to be seen as a return to more imperial goals in the form of neo-Ottomanism (Oktem 2012; Rucker-Chang 2014). To that end, Erdoğan exploits the historical allure of *Pax Ottomanica* for Balkan Muslims, in order to re-establish a sphere of influence in the region based on a "special relationship" rooted in culture, religion, and soft-power persuasion. This special relationship is frequently evoked by Turkish leaders, such as when Prime Minister Davutoğlu praised the Ottoman-era Western Balkans as a region not on the periphery but at the centre of the world's stage and vowed to work towards restoring this geopolitical centrality, stability, and prosperity.

Yet, nine years later, any promises that Turkey could deliver peace and prosperity to the region were brought into question by Erdoğan's 2018 rally in Sarajevo. Held mainly for the Turkish diaspora and a domestic audience, the divisive effects of the rally raised concerns about the nature of neo-Ottomanism. Is it a stabilizing neighbourhood policy, a bid for regional influence, or a public relations front for a continued policy of aggressive pragmatism?

While the Ottoman legacy has become part and parcel of Turkey's foreign policy in recent years, the cultural basis for neo-Ottomanism in the Western Balkans should not be presumed. Contrary to the rhetoric of its neo-Ottoman narrative, Turkey was in fact absent from the region for most of the 20th century, only assuming a more active role during the turbulent 1990s, before again strengthening relations with Western Balkan states from the mid-2000s. Both of these periods of heightened engagement were linked to Islamist influences, but they also represented pragmatic opportunities for Turkey to play a key role in international affairs. Indeed, Turkey developed a sort

of activist diplomacy under the leadership of the AKP's Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Foreign Minister and later Prime Minister, who sought to become a regional powerbroker and lay the ground for cultural, religious, and economic ties with the Western Balkans. After he left office in 2016, Turkish foreign policy took another turn back towards pragmatism and opportunism in the wake of a failed coup.

This article examines the strategies and results of Turkish neo-Ottomanism. After presenting an analysis of the main phases of Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans, the tools and limits of Turkish soft power in the region will be discussed. Finally, this analysis will consider recent changes in Turkey's approach to foreign policy in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt.

### **The four phases of modern Turkish Involvement in the Western Balkans and in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

The relations of Turkey with the countries of the former Yugoslavia can be divided into four distinct periods, beginning after the dissolution of Yugoslavia. It was only then that Turkey re-engaged in the region, somewhat tentatively, having kept its distance for the first 70 years of the modern republic. The second phase of these relations was marked by Turkey's active support for Western policies amidst the wars of the 1990s, within the Euro-Atlantic framework. After a short period of passivity, Turkey again asserted itself in the Western Balkans in a third phase of engagement that followed the 2002 ascent of the AKP, and was especially active from 2009 to 2015 when Davutoğlu worked to reorient Turkish foreign policy. The fourth phase has aligned with the reassertion of President Erdoğan's leadership since the 15 July 2016 failed coup, and his highly pragmatic, some would say opportunistic, style of politics.

#### *1922–1992: distance as policy*

Even before the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Ottoman court in Constantinople had largely abandoned Balkan Muslims following the Berlin Congress. Then, upon the founding of the modern Turkish Republic in 1922, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk

actively sought to distance the Republic from its Ottoman past – politically, culturally, and religiously – including by fully disengaging from former Ottoman possessions. For 70 years, from 1922 to 1992, Ankara was fundamentally disinterested in the Balkans and nurtured no ties with Muslim communities in the region.

Historical ties to Balkan states were also denied within the Republic. Turkey hosted hundreds of thousands of Balkan Muslims that fled during the Ottoman retreat or in its aftermath, yet only a small minority retained their Bosniak, Albanian, or Pomak identities. Unlike the Ottoman Empire beforehand, the objective of the Republic was to fully assimilate these Balkan Muslims into the Turkish national corpus. And, while earlier refugees had settled in more or less compact settlements in Western Anatolia, exiles from the Kingdom, and later Republic, of Yugoslavia were scattered throughout Turkey (Mujadžević 2017: 54).

Since these Muslim emigrants from the Balkans often relocated *en masse*, from extended families to entire villages, they maintained few ties with the region. Combined with the policy of Turkification they encountered inside Turkey, which was implemented in earnest in the early years of the Republic, their former cultural and linguistic identities were essentially erased. Thus, of an estimated 350,000 to four million Turks of Bosniak origin, very few speak the Bosnian language (Mujadžević 2017: 53).

The secularist policies of the Turkish Republic also left Balkan Muslims seeking religious instruction in other parts of the Muslim world. Atatürk's opposition to religious education and the diminishing public role of religion in the country, which culminated in the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, motivated Bosnian and Albanian Muslims to pursue their religious educations in Cairo, Damascus, or Sarajevo; and after WWII, in Libya, Saudi Arabia, or Iraq. In fact, the number of religious students in Istanbul, Ankara, or Konya was minimal until the rise to power of the AKP, when Balkan Muslims finally began returning to Turkish religious institutions.

After WWII, Turkish foreign policy was focused on maintaining a firm alliance with the United States, and the agenda was dominated by Cold War concerns. After the fall of the Soviet

Union and the installation of the new world order, however, Ankara began reasserting itself as an increasingly prominent player on the world stage. Yet, in the early 1990s, under President Turgut Özal, Turkey sought to gain influence not in the Balkans, but in the formerly Soviet republics of Central Asia. Özal foresaw opportunities in this Turkic region, with which Turkey shared a certain measure of linguistic, cultural, historical, and religious identity (Larrabee 2003: 99-126). The first Turkish strategic endeavour in Central Asia that was truly independent of the United States was nevertheless countered by pro-Russian resistance and eventually ended in failure; and Turkey only managed to exert a strong influence in Azerbaijan, its closest neighbour, both territorially and linguistically.

### *The 1990s: the era of Atlanticism*

Turkey finally became involved in the wider Balkan region when war broke out in the early 1990s, showing a particular interest in Bosnia. The plight of Bosnian, and later Kosovar, Muslims attracted the attention of Turks and inspired their solidarity, especially among those who traced their roots to Balkan states. Islamist parties also used the circumstances to raise their political profiles and gain legitimacy.

On top of this, the role of the United States in propping up the central Bosnian government late in the war called for the inclusion of allies considered friendly to the Bosniaks. Turkey responded positively and became an active participant in the international community's policy towards Bosnia and Kosovo in the 1990s. However, this was also a time of considerable internal political upheaval in Turkey, which limited the ability of its government to successfully formulate foreign policy vis-à-vis the crisis in the Western Balkans. This constrained Turkish action to diplomatic activities undertaken within the Euro-Atlantic multilateral framework, under US leadership.

At the beginning of the war in Bosnia, in April 1992, the Turkish Grand National Assembly sent a fact-finding commission, which called for the provision of humanitarian aid to Bosnian citizens (Busra 2013). In 1993, Turkish Prime Minister Tansu Ciller implored the international community to lift the arms embargo against Bosnia, and in February 1994, he paid a visit to besieged Sarajevo along with then Prime Minister of

Pakistan Benazir Bhutto (Busra 2013). The Turkish government then engaged in two rounds of forceful diplomacy to assist the government in Sarajevo. Working in concert with the Americans, Turkish Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin visited Bosnia and Herzegovina twice to help convince Bosnian leadership to join diplomatic efforts meant to reconcile conflict between the Bosniaks and Croats, thereby contributing to the signing of the Washington Agreement in 1994.

Turkey was also involved in supplying arms to Bosnia (Vračić 2016: 8), though it did not lead these efforts. Turkish leaders worked with other Muslim actors in the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) to respond to the failure of the West to protect Bosniaks from ethnic cleansing as well, producing a number of resolutions in support of the Bosnian government. This included the 1995 Conakry resolution, which reaffirmed that OIC states were *not* obliged to respect the “illegal and unjust” arms embargo imposed on Bosnia (Karčić 2013: 334).

Despite these activities, Turkey was criticized, even within its own borders, for doing too little to assist the Bosnian government during the war. Many felt the Turkish government had especially failed Bosniak refugees, hundreds of thousands of whom were welcomed and cared for by countries in Western Europe, while only some 20,000 were officially accepted by the Turkey (Mujadžević 2017: 56). Moreover, Turkish leaders chose not to provide these refugees with refugee status, insisting they were guests (*musafir*) and absolving the government of any financial and legal responsibility that would otherwise arise from international legal obligations (Busra 2013).

In this way, Turkey’s participation in diplomatic, humanitarian, and stabilization efforts in both Bosnia and Kosovo was of an auxiliary diplomatic and military nature, and fully within the framework of Atlanticism. While Turkey failed to develop a greater independent initiative, this engagement did allow it to assume a role in Western alliances and in long-term stabilization programmes in the Balkans. The Turkish Army has been engaged in small numbers across the Balkans since then, and Turkey has become part of the Peace Implementation Council, the South East European Cooperation Process, the SFOR, and other EU and UN led structures. Still, following the end of war in Bosnia and the intervention in Kosovo, Turkey largely disengaged again from the region, apart from aid it supplied to

Macedonia within multilateral military structures in the 2000s (Vračić 2016: 18).

### *2003—2016: foreign policy activism under the AKP*

Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans took on a new assertiveness under the AKP government, which increasingly legitimized its interest in regional countries on the basis of both cultural and historical ties. As President's Erdoğan spokesman Ibrahim Kalin put it, "No Turk considers Sarajevo, Mostar, Pristina, Skopje or Novi Pazar distant places. Balkan Muslims feel the same about Istanbul, Bursa, Konya and cities in Anatolia" (Kalin 2018).

This shift in Turkey's foreign policy was facilitated by two key changes within the AKP. First, emboldened by successive electoral successes in 2007 and 2008, the AKP felt free to advocate a more conservative political platform that openly employed religious language and imagery. At the AKP congress in 2012, Erdoğan further emphasized common Islamic identity as a basis for foreign policy (Mujadžević 2017: 75). Second, between 2009 and 2015, Turkish foreign policy was led by the visionary Ahmed Davutoğlu. In his manifesto, *Strategic Depth*, written when he was still an academic, Davutoğlu articulated a foreign policy that reflected the ideological stance of leaders in the Özal era, who embraced a Turkish-Islamic synthesis. This perspective was gradually adopted by Turkish elites, who no longer viewed Islam as a challenge to a secular republic but as an element of Turkish national identity.

Davutoğlu saw both Islamic identity and Ottoman history as resources for a more assertive Turkey, which sought to build its role as a regional power. The Balkans in general, and Bosnia in particular, represented areas of particular interest for Davutoğlu; but it was solidarity with Bosnian Muslims in the 1990s, when Erdoğan was Mayor of Istanbul, that gave Turkish Islamists an opportunity to advance this objective. Islamists seeking to claim a special role in international relations used this solidarity to inspire mass mobilizations, and since this time, Bosnia has remained (along with Gaza, Kashmir, etc.) a focus of AKP foreign policy initiatives (Mujadžević 2017: 59-60, 152).

Between 2009 and 2015, under Davutoğlu — first in his capacity as chief foreign policy adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan and then as the Minister of Foreign Affairs — Turkey became an increasingly active player in a widening sphere that extended from the Central Asian ‘stans’ in the east to North Africa in the west to the Western Balkans in the north. While this area roughly follows the outlines of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish officials reject this comparison. Indeed, during the first years of this phase of Turkish foreign policy, the AKP pursued activities in the Balkans that were less focused on re-creating past relations on the basis of a neo-Ottomanist approach to Muslim societies (in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Albania), instead putting their efforts into engaging across the region to secure Turkey’s position as a centre of influence.

The foreign policy of the AKP has maintained this focus on achieving influence through regional stabilization efforts, economic and strategic investment, and cultural diplomacy. In fact, Davutoğlu referred to “Turkey’s primary interests in the Balkans” as including activities to help to “normalize bilateral relations among the Balkan states, to deepen regional integration” (Raxhimi 2011). Beginning in 2009, Turkey thus engaged in “hyperactive diplomacy” (Aydıntaşbaş 2019: 20) regarding political relations between Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia, with the explicit aim of breaking the political deadlock that existed between Bosnia and Serbia.

After the failure of US-led efforts towards post-Dayton constitutional reform in Bosnia, Turkey stepped in to fill the void, successfully initiating two trilateral consultation mechanisms — one with Bosnia and Serbia, and one with Bosnia and Croatia. To that end, Turkish political figures, including President Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan, and foreign minister Davutoğlu, paid several visits to the Western Balkans between 2009 and 2013. Davutoğlu especially engaged in shuttle diplomacy, eventually fulfilling three highly visible and symbolic objectives: 1) bringing Bosnian and Serbian representatives to the same table, 2) obtaining a Serbian condemnation of the massacres that took place in Srebrenica (albeit without using the term genocide) and an official recognition of Bosnia’s territorial integrity, and 3) unblocking the appointment of Bosnian Ambassador to Serbia Boriša Arnaud. The second of these was achieved through the Istanbul declaration on Peace and Stability, signed in 2010 by



Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia, which recognizes and guarantees the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Bosnia.

Still, Erdoğan's diplomatic activity has been most successful where least expected – in Serbia, a country long considered to have a highly negative view of Turkey – because the Prime Minister and then President of Turkey has strategically pursued personal relationships with every Serbian president since 2010. Notably, he met that year with President Tadić in Srebrenica, on the anniversary of the July 1995 genocide. And Erdoğan has maintained cordial relations through each subsequent change of government in Serbia, including with Prime Minister Ivica Dačić and President Tomislav Nikolić. In 2013, when Nikolić met with President Gül, the Turkish president forecasted an “economic boom” in Serbia and proclaimed the country a “close neighbour” to Turkey (*Turski predsjednik Gül najavio 'gospodarski bum' u Srbiji*).

Relations between Turkey and Serbia have now reached a new peak in the ongoing and very close relationship shared between presidents Erdoğan and Vučić. Nevertheless, continued Turkish efforts towards multilateralism in the Balkans have had only limited results. For instance, when Erdoğan hosted Vučić and Bosnian President Bakir Izetbegović in January 2018, he was unable to heal any of the fractures that remain in Bosnian-Serbian relations as a consequence of the past.

Turkey did succeed in positioning itself as a broker in the conflict within Montenegro's Islamic Community. But after this initial success, Turkish ambition to be a broker of stability faltered as further initiatives floundered. Most notably, attempts to negotiate an agreement between rival factions within the Islamic Community of Serbia failed and led to its eventual split. The limits of this arbitration were related to perceptions that Turkey's approach was less than impartial (*Može li Turska pomiriti muslimane u Srbiji?*). The Turkish plan was seen as favouring the faction of Zilkić and Ugljanin over that headed by Novi Pazar strongman Zukorlić.

#### *2016—present: Erdoğan's post-coup assertion of authority*

Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans changed course considerably in 2016, due both to the departure of Prime

Minister Davutoğlu and to the political earthquake that followed the attempted military coup in July. The period since then has represented a radical departure from a largely predictable Turkish foreign policy approach towards the region in all previous phases. This new posture is characterized by erratic decision making and the authoritarian streak of President Erdogan, discussed in more detail in Section 4.

### **Turkish soft power in the Western Balkans**

By 2010, Turkey had reinvented its political approach to the Western Balkans. By leaning into cooperation and culture, Ankara had increased its presence in the region over 20 years, providing Turkey with significant visibility (Huskić 2020). This was facilitated by soft-power activities (Benhaïm, Öktem 2015) and by an activist diplomacy increasingly accompanied by cooperative efforts in which Turkey appeared to emulate the European Neighbourhood Policy (Demirtaş 2015) — from visa-free relations to cultural diplomacy to religious sponsorship. Turkey sought in this way to expand its influence, especially among Balkan Muslims, through soft power concentrated in four main areas: religious institutions, Islamic history, education, and media and popular culture.

#### *Religion and religious history*

Following the political transformation that took place under AKP leadership, a main avenue for Turkey's soft power has been its Ottoman Islamic heritage. The relatively pious AKP not only replaced the once dominant secular elites who previously helmed the state, but also slowly reshaped the role and form of religious institutions within Turkey. As prime minister, Erdoğan was able to impose a new politics, despite the secular military elite, through a series of symbolic changes that included lifting the ban on headscarves in universities (in 2008), allowing religious high school students to be admitted to universities (in 2009), and generally increasingly the use of religious language in political discourse. He also strengthened the Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, or Diyanet) and gave it a role in foreign policy, in the Balkans and beyond.

Even before these changes to Turkey's foreign policy, Turkish non-governmental religious groups had established a visible presence in the Western Balkans. After the wars in the 1990s, several Turkish neo-Sufi and Islamic revivalist movements found a home in the region, through *Süleymanlılar* student houses, the Menzil Community, and Gülen-run private schools (Mujadžević 2017, Solberg 2007, Huskić 2020). In the 2000s, the Gülen movement (which members refer to as *Hizmet*, or service) was especially active in building an extensive institutional network across Bosnia, Albania, and Macedonia.

These groups, which adhered to a Turkish style of Islam, were seen as only marginally motivated by religion; and unlike Saudi-linked organizations, known for proselytizing, Turkish groups primarily focused on providing quality educational and humanitarian services to local communities. Granted, these services were coloured by a moralist, quietist, neo-Sufi form of Islam. But Turkish groups presented their Islamic tradition as broadly identical to local practice.

Turkish activities in the religious arena, and specifically tied to religious heritage, became more visible with the advent of the AKP's assertive foreign policy, which stressed the historical inevitability of Balkan-Turkish relations by emphasising a shared Ottoman past. The AKP saw the Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TIKA) as a primary means to strengthen cultural relations, investing more than half its funds into the rebuilding or rehabilitation of a number of significant Ottoman Islamic heritage monuments that were damaged or destroyed in the Bosnian war, from mosques in Banja Luka and Foča, to Ottoman-era madrasas, to the old Mostar bridge (Huskić 2020).

Turkey also gained leverage over some Islamic institutions through its financial support of efforts to modernize religious infrastructure. This included the building of new mosques, Islamic centres, and student dormitories, as well as support for the cultural and religious activities of official Islamic Communities (IC) in the region. Still, some of the initiatives financed by Turkish donors were completed independent of or despite the intent or planning of these ICs. For example, the Turkish municipality of Bursa funded the construction of a mosque in central Sarajevo that was situated next to the tomb of a popular, recently passed Sufi authority, without first seeking the approval of the IC.

Turkish foreign influence in the Western Balkans also developed in several more explicitly religious ways under the AKP. Early in its administration, the AKP government re-opened Turkish Islamic higher education institutions to students from both the Balkans and Central Asia and began offering stipends for religious study. Like all Islamic policy in Turkey, this programme was administered by the Diyanet.

In the Balkans, the main activity of the Diyanet was selecting students for Turkish scholarships (Solberg 2007), and it was thus considered to have “only limited impact” when it came to exerting Turkish influence in comparison to private Turkish Islamic organisations (Sarajlić 2011: 185). But this changed after 2009, when the AKP began to see the Diyanet as a key and influential conduit of state religious policy within Turkey, on top of its efforts abroad. To this end, the Diyanet was developed into a centre of religious power and was made directly responsible to the prime minister (Öktem 2010: 31).

This new role of the Diyanet was most apparent in Bosnia, but also in Kosovo and Albania; and it was met with some local resistance. As Öktem notes, the limits of the AKP’s policy were first apparent in Bosnia – the Balkan country with the most institutionalised Islamic administration – where, precisely because the Diyanet was a powerful state institution, it was not seen by Bosnians as a source of religious or spiritual authority (Öktem 2010). Unlike the administration of the former Ottoman Caliphate, the Diyanet is a sizeable ministerial agency of government, whereas the Bosnian *reis* (the highest elected religious leader among Bosnian Muslims) is independent of the state, instead representing a religious community. Hence, the practical influence of the Diyanet in the Western Balkans grew rather slowly.

In Bosnia, long-time Bosnian *reis* Mustafa Cerić (1993-2012) was an ambitious religious and political figure who had sought to balance foreign support from abroad between the Gulf states, Turkey, Europe, and even Libya. While he was close to Diyanet leadership, he fell out with Turkey over its policy towards Serbian Muslims (Mujadžević 2017: 113). It was not until after the September 2012 election of Husein Kavazović as the new Bosnian *reis* that relations between the IC and Turkey improved, and successive heads of the Diyanet have become frequent visitors to Bosnia. Moreover, a permanent representative of the Diyanet is now stationed at the Turkish embassy in Sarajevo.

Upon entering office, *reis* Kavazović was able to build upon his existing relationships with the Diyanet, thanks to the fact that Diyanet leaders have long maintained ties with lower ranking Bosnian Islamic officials. For example, Kavazović already knew the current President of the Diyanet, Dr. Ali Erbaş, from a previous visit Erbaş made to Sarajevo. In a significant gesture, Kavazović invited Dr. Erbaş to deliver a Friday *khutbah* (sermon) at Sarajevo's main mosque, in Turkish, during a March 2018 visit by the Turkish prime minister.

Since the mid-2010s, the Diyanet has also been visible at other religious events in Bosnia, including official *iftars*, outdoor prayers, and historical commemorations (Ramazan u gradovima BiH 2016). Representatives appear at the openings of Turkish investments in Bosnia as well. This presence has influenced and altered some existing local customs and rituals. Turkish organisations stage highly public ceremonies for the circumcision of young boys, for instance, and play Ottoman military marches at traditional outdoor prayer events, such as the annual “Days of Ajvatovica” — both of which were hitherto unknown among Bosnian Muslims.

Across the Balkans, Islamic Communities actively sought and found a certain degree of patronage abroad when they needed resources in the 1990s to rebuild community infrastructure after the communist era, to establish schools and universities, and in Bosnia, to repair the destruction of war; but Bosnia's turn towards Turkey followed what Öktem has called a “Wahhabi intermezzo.” The country's first post-war partners were Gulf states, whose presence was criticized as a channel for Salafi/Wahhabi proselytism. At the time, Turkey was catering instead to small Turkish minorities in Macedonia and Kosovo. It was only under the AKP that Turkish authorities sought and offered collaboration with national Islamic Communities.

Turkey has since become the main partner of the Islamic Community in Bosnia. However, unlike in Bulgaria for example, the Diyanet has no direct (or indirect) financial or administrative control over Bosnian Islamic institutions, though its informal influence is certainly growing. Turkey must contend with a highly organised Islamic institutional structure in Bosnia, where religious leaders maintain a decades-long tradition of managing their own religious and external policies and relations. Turkey has also attempted to partner

with Islamic institutions in Kosovo and Albania, with arguably even less success than in Bosnia. Turkey has reconstructed Ottoman era mosques and has proposed the construction of new mosques in both Pristina and Tirana, even building the largest mosque in the Balkans in Tirana, in the ostentatious Ottoman style. Yet, after President Erdoğan personally opened it in 2015, the project met with strong local criticism (“Mosqued objectives” 2016; Colborne and Edwards 2018).

### *Education and the media*

The rise of the Diyanet in both Turkey and the Balkans was accompanied by a move towards the convergence of state and non-state Turkish Islamic networks (Solberg 2007). Even before the foreign policy turn of the AKP, private Islamic organisations such as those mentioned above – the Quranic study groups of the Suleymancis, the humanitarian Menzil movement, and educational institutions of the *Hizmet* movement – were laying the groundwork for a Turkish cultural and religious infrastructure in the Balkans. These Neo-Sufi and Islamic groups all established religious circles and offered an array of services, but the *Hizmet* was by far the most active. Beginning in 1997, it founded a system of primary and secondary schools and universities in the Balkans, as it had in Turkey and other parts of the world (Knezevic 2016).

High schools established by *Hizmet* were regarded as especially high-quality institutions to which local elites were happy to send their children, including the Bosna Sema school in Sarajevo and the Jahja Kemal school in Macedonia. Universities launched by *Hizmet* in the Balkans drew paying students from the religious strata in Turkey, especially while the headscarf ban in Turkish universities was in force, along with local elite and scholarship students. These universities, such as Burch in Sarajevo and Epoka or Bedër in Tirana, were more modern than state schools and more oriented towards academic output, especially in the humanities.

But aside from its educational offerings, the *Hizmet* movement also represented Turkey, Turkish culture, and Turkish Islam abroad, and it funded the translation and publication of texts by Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen that argued for a modern, moderate Islam, open to dialogue and social responsibility.

Parallel to these activities, the movement also published weekly magazines in Bosnia (*Novo Vrijeme*) and Macedonia (*Macedonia Zaman*) and held regular events with local elites to share the *Hizmet* message. In the early 2000s, support for these private Turkish educational initiatives and the promotion of Turkish Islam flowed from the Turkish administration. In fact, President Gül opened the International Burch University in Sarajevo in 2010, when private religious actors were still seen as crucial to Turkish soft power abroad.

However, by the late 2000s, AKP leadership began taking more direct control of initiatives shaping foreign cultural relations. In 2007, for instance, the Yunus Emre Institute (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, or YEE) — the Turkish equivalent of the German Goethe-Institut — was founded to offer language courses and host cultural events outside Turkey. By 2015, some two dozen YEE locations had opened across the Western Balkans, with multiple locations in several countries in the region (Turkish language courses draw interest in Balkans 2018). In addition to offering Turkish language courses, YEE facilitates educational initiatives such as the Mevlana Exchange Programme, which provides scholarships for exchange students to Turkish universities.

Alongside these state efforts, the AKP engaged businesses close to the party in private educational entrepreneurship, resulting in the establishment of the International University of Sarajevo in 2004 and the International Balkan University in Skopje in 2006. As this form of AKP-led private activism intensified, Bosnia became even more of a focal point. Turkish investors founded several influential media outlets in the country, under the auspices of Simurg Media, the most prominent of which are *Stav* magazine and the web portal *faktor.ba* (which was originally a daily newspaper before it folded due to low circulation). These ventures have strengthened the Turkish media presence in Bosnia, previously filled almost solely by Turkish news agency Anadolu — which began operating in Bosnia in 2012, and broadcasts in local languages.

Many local news outlets distribute free content from Andalou and TRT (Turkish Radio and Television), adding to the space Turkish news agencies account for in Bosnia. And since 2015, when *Faktor* and *Stav* were launched, Turkish media has engaged directly in Bosnian politics. While these outlets also

report on Turkish internal and external policy issues (in a way that is highly propagandised), their main focus is on promoting the agenda and activities of the leading Bosniak political party, the SDA, which receives reliably favourable coverage (Janusz 2015, Huskić 2020).

Elsewhere in the Balkans, Turkey has managed to make inroads partly by achieving greater viewership for its domestic soap operas, which constitute a substantial amount of the programming on some channels, including in Serbia and North Macedonia (Cabric, et al. 2013). In both of these countries, Turkish soap operas are immensely popular, and have successfully projected an image of Turkey as modern and industrious (Huskić 2020). Together with Turkey's visa-free regime and the frequent direct flights offered by Turkish Airlines to and from the region, these cultural diplomacy initiatives have contributed to bringing Balkan societies closer to Turkey.

Through these various soft power projects, Turkey has positioned itself as an influential and desirable neighbour to the Balkans. Turkey's "mosque diplomacy" (Tol 2019) and patronage of Islamic institutions has been aided by intermediaries such as the Islamic Community; and by offering quality private education at all levels, local language media, news wires, and popular culture, Turkey has become a major player in the region, as well as a major partner to many Balkan Muslims, especially in Bosnia. This cultural penetration began well before the rise of the AKP, though private initiatives, but it certainly intensified in the mid-2010s when AKP-oriented companies and state institutions took the foreign policy reins from previous non-state actors.

### **Limits to the thesis of "Neo-Ottomanism"**

The foreign policy of the AKP in the Balkans has met a mixed reception. For some local media and analysts, the term "neo-Ottomanism" has become a critical descriptor for a Turkish foreign policy perceived as high-handed, insincere, and Muslim-biased. Yet some Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia, and the Sandžak region see Turkey as both a partner and a "protector" (Vračić 2016: 6).



### *Distrust of Neo-Ottomanism*

The return of Turkey in its “neo-Ottoman” form has been widely discussed by diverse voices. In the West, it has not necessarily been described in negative terms. In the *Washington Post*, for example, Michael Birnbaum called modern Turkey a “gentle version of the [Ottoman] empire” (2013). Yet in the Balkans, after Turkey’s early years of diplomatic activism, strong local criticism grew towards what some viewed as a covert neo-Ottomanist or even Islamist agenda in Turkish activities. In this context, careless rhetoric by the highest Turkish officials raised suspicions about the AKP’s bias and undermined some diplomatic efforts (Aydıntaşbaş 2019).

To some extent, Turkey may have miscalculated how its history would play in the region. National identities in Serbia, North Macedonia, and Albania are literally constructed upon narratives of liberation from the Ottoman Empire; and in Serbia especially, post-Yugoslav nationalism actively revived the traumas of Ottoman conquest. It is therefore unsurprising that any hints of neo-Ottomanism in Turkish policy have been viewed through a highly critical lens in the Western Balkans. Moreover, Serbian university lecturer, former diplomat, and writer Darko Tanasković has developed an influential discourse on Neo-Ottomanism over recent decades, in which he interprets the foreign policy of the AKP, as articulated by Davutoğlu, as an ideological product of domination.

Since Tanasković began developing the concept, the question of Turkish neo-Ottomanism has been taken up by a wide range of media and academic actors in the region. At an April 2011 conference addressing “New Turkish Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans,” organized by the International and Security Affairs Centre in Belgrade, Serbian authors Žarko Petrović and Dušan Reljić highlighted that careless rhetoric by Turkish officials in public diplomacy played a role in reinforcing perceptions of neo-Ottomanist intentions. Their criticism was especially directed at statements made by Davutoğlu in a 2009 speech in Sarajevo, which emphasised the centrality of Ottoman heritage: “Our history is the same, our fate is the same, and our future is the same. Similar to how the Ottoman Balkans [rose] to the centre of world politics in the 16th century, we will make [the] Balkans, Caucasus and Middle East, together with Turkey, the center of world politics” (Demirtaş 2015). On another

occasion, Davutoğlu expressed Turkey's desire for "a new Balkans, based on political values, economic interdependence and cultural harmony. That was the Ottoman Balkans. We will restore this Balkans. People call this 'neo-Ottoman'. I don't point to the Ottoman state as a foreign policy issue. I emphasize the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman era in the Balkans is a success story. Now it needs to come back" (Malić 2009). As Petrović and Reljić noted, Davutoğlu was "not winning the hearts of non-Muslims in the Balkans" by making such assertions (2011).

Indeed, this rhetoric by leading AKP figures led to a backlash, especially in leading Serb nationalist-oriented media in Serbia and in Bosnia's Republika Srpska (RS). In the RS, suspicions about Turkey's neo-imperialism were echoed by the entity's leader Milorad Dodik, who claimed that a "project of Islamisation" in Bosnia was being led by Bakir Izetbegović, the Bosniak member of the country's tripartite presidency. Dodik said further that he was unsurprised by a highly controversial statement made by Turkish Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2013 that that "Kosovo is Turkey, and Turkey is Kosovo."

Those who have concerns about Turkish foreign policy under the AKP point regularly to Davutoğlu's 2001 book, *Strategic Depth*, which they consider a blueprint for Turkey's perceived neo-Ottomanism. In it, Davutoğlu envisioned Turkey as among the world's "central powers" and contended that "Turkey should develop a proactive policy commensurate to its historic and geographic depth, which is amplified by its Ottoman legacy." Arguing that Turkey aspire to become more than a regional player, Davutoğlu made the case that the country should play a leading role in all of the multiple regions to which it can assert belonging — the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea Basin, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf and Black Sea basins. To do this, he believed Turkey "should capitalize on its soft power potential (...) based on its historic and cultural links with all the regions which it belongs to, as well as its democratic institutions and thriving market economy" (Grigoriadis 2010).

Turkey's foreign policy makers themselves have rejected the term neo-Ottomanism, as well as the notion that they have any grand imperial designs. Davutoğlu addressed the label explicitly in 2011, telling an interviewer, "I am not a neo-Ottoman. Actually, there is no such policy" (Raxhimi). And indeed, an analysis of Turkish foreign policy texts and activities fails to

reveal any cohesive project of neo-Ottomanism with clear goals and immediate objectives, or the actions necessary to achieve them. Rather, it appears that Turkey has simply exploited the existing ties developed on the basis of history and culture by Turkish non-state actors since the 1990s, to boost Turkish state influence in the Western Balkans.

In *Strategic Depth*, Davutoğlu emphasised the importance of Turkey finding a way to use soft power to ascend to the status of a major power, insisting that “Turkey needs to put aside the militaristic image which its strong military and history of military tutelage over society and politics has bequeathed. Instead, it should promote conflict resolution, regional economic cooperation which would obviate the need for regional intervention of great powers” (Grigoriadis 2010). In the Western Balkans, local conditions presented an opportunity for Turkey, which stepped into the void left by the departure of the EU and the US in the late 2000s. In this context it is notable that, despite nationalist critiques of neo-Ottomanism, some Serbian nationalists have lauded Erdoğan for coming in conflict with the EU and have hailed his friendship with Russia (Bechev 2017).

### *Turkish pragmatism*

Beyond taking advantage of existing religious and cultural ties, and the draw of Turkish media, Turkey has shown no strategic favour to Muslim-dominated areas of the Balkans. To the contrary, Turkish trade and military relations follow no clear cultural logic but are instead highly pragmatic. According to Ibrahim Kalin, an aide to Erdoğan, “Turkey invests in all Balkan countries without discrimination in regards to ethnic and/or religious identities.... [and] Turkey supports the NATO and EU membership process of Balkan countries” (2018). In fact, by combining regional stabilization efforts, trade, investment, cultural diplomacy, and soft power, Turkish policy in the region has emulated the Neighbourhood Policy of the EU (Demirtaş 2015), without focusing solely on its cultural and historical legacy.

In trade, Turkey has signed bilateral free trade agreements with every Western Balkan country: with Bosnia in 2003, Albania in 2008, Serbia in 2009, and Kosovo, FYROM, and Montenegro in 2010. And in the wider Balkans region, Turkey’s main trading

partners are not Muslim majority states, but EU members (Romania, Slovenia, Greece, and Bulgaria). Trade with these EU states accounts for more than two-thirds of Turkey's exchange with the entire region. Indeed, Albania is the only Western Balkan country for which Turkey is a top-three trading partner; and trade in the region is generally dominated by EU countries, most notably Germany, Austria, and Italy. In Bosnia, for instance, Germany topped the list of 2018 trade partners and Turkey ranked just 7th (Ministry of Foreign Trade and Economic Relations).

Still, Turkey's bilateral economic relations with Montenegro, Bosnia, and Serbia are growing. Among these, Turkish trade and investments have intensified most significantly in Serbia (Geopolitical Futures 2017). But it is Bosnia that remains the recipient of the largest "cultural investment" by Turkey, through TIKA (Mujadžević 2017). The country's complicated administrative environment and reputation for corruption (Lakic and Buyuk 2018) have weakened investment opportunities, however, and even with support from both TIKA and the state-owned Ziraat Bank, Turkey contributes only 3 percent of its total investments in Bosnia, where it does not figure in the top ten foreign investors (Foreign Investment Promotion Agency).

Turkey appears to favour the ease of relations it enjoys with Serbia, which has become its main economic partner in the region. While Turkish trade with the Western Balkans grew almost tenfold between 2002 and 2016, trade with Serbia constituted a third of this and amounted to some 1 billion USD (Harper 2018). Serbia is also key to large Turkish infrastructure projects in the region with both economic and strategic impacts, such as the TurkStream natural gas pipeline (Zuvela 2019) and the construction of a Belgrade-Sarajevo highway. Turkey pledged to finance this highway at a cost of 3 billion EUR (Lakic and Buyuk 2018), but disputes about how the project should be implemented have raised new questions about Ankara's visions for the Balkans. In Bosnia, Serbs prefer a northern route through the RS, while Bosniaks want the highway to take a southern route that will link Serbia's Muslim majority Novi Pazar with Sarajevo (Lakic 2018).

Other strategic acquisitions by Turkey in the Western Balkans reflect an aim to leverage influence across the region, rather

than to develop religious and ideological projects. For example, in late 2008, Turkey bought 49 percent of BiH Airlines, Bosnia's national carrier (though the company folded in 2015), and Turkish companies have contracted to run Pristina's international airport for the next 20 years, along with airports in Skopje and Ohrid. Turkey also funded the construction of a key highway linking Kosovo to Serbia and Albania, and plans to build part of the planned 445 km highway that will stretch from Belgrade to Bar, Montenegro.

Moreover, although business confidence in Turkey has eroded since 2009 due to the 2008 global economic crisis, the 2016 attempted coup, and the falling lira, Turkish exports to the Balkans increased in 2018. Ideology and historical heritage clearly play a minimal role in these recent Turkish trade and investment decisions in the region, and in Turkey's foreign policy; for, while Serbia is the country most critical of perceived neo-Ottoman tendencies, it has nonetheless become Turkey's main partner in the Western Balkans. It seems Turkish policy in the region may have been one of pragmatism all along.

In fact, by 2011, Davutoğlu had called Turkey and Serbia "key partners for peace and stability in the Balkans," noting "a common will and desire to forge a strategic partnership" (Raxhimi). The reasons for this are obvious. Serbia is the largest country in the Western Balkans, and a neighbour to the EU, and it put great effort into attracting investments. Further, its vertical administrative and political environment is familiar to Turkey and thus a "suitable place for Turkish entrepreneurs' business mentality" (Harper 2018). Of course, this does not mean Turkey is opposed to using the embrace of Muslim-dominated countries in the region to strengthen its political and cultural influence, and to translate this influence into strategic leverage in this geopolitically important area, seen as a gateway to Europe. Yet, Turkey continues to do this within a framework of Atlanticism and continues to support the accession of Western Balkan countries to both the EU and NATO.

### **Post-2016 policy: the AKP, Gülen, and an end to Grand Strategies**

The fourth phase in Turkish relations in the Balkans has followed the breakup between the 2016 AKP and Fetullah Gülen's *Hizmet* Movement, as well as constitutional changes in Turkey

that affected foreign policy. While the direction of this policy has not shifted course, its style has changed substantially. Turkish foreign policy is now marked by the ascendance of an authoritarian president who uses international relations for domestic consumption and embeds domestic priorities into foreign relations.

### *Diplomacy driven by domestic policy*

In 2016, Turkey's approach to the Western Balkans took a new turn for the third time in less than 20 years. First, in May, Davutoğlu — the architect of Turkey's activist foreign policy and the Prime Minister at the time — resigned. Then, in July, a failed military coup fundamentally altered modern Turkey. President Erdoğan accused the *Hizmet* Movement and Gülen himself of planning to overthrow the government and engaged in a systematic and far reaching effort to root out *Hizmet* influencers both in Turkey and abroad.

*Hizmet* had facilitated the AKP's rise to power and its takeover of state institutions that Gülenists had populated. But in 2013, Erdoğan and the AKP moved against their former allies following the collapse of the high-profile "Ergenekon" plot, which involved a secular "deep state" organisation said to be linked to *Hizmet* members in both the judiciary and police. After a failed attempt by the *Hizmet*-infiltrated prosecutor's office and police to move against corrupt businessmen and officials tied to the AKP, the government acted decisively, closing down *Hizmet*-linked schools and businesses and purging the ranks of the judiciary and police. This crackdown only intensified in the aftermath of the attempted coup in 2016.

These actions by the government altered the nature of the Turkish political system, changed the composition of the elite, and redefined the roles of key political actors. Purges of business elites and political institutions had not ended with the imprisonment and exiling of presumed *Hizmet* sympathisers, but had extended into the AKP itself. Leaders at the highest echelons of the party were removed and, for all practical purposes, President Erdoğan alone was left in control of the AKP and the country. Positions formerly occupied by high-profile politicians were filled by AKP loyalists and Erdoğan's authoritarian style reshaped the foreign policies crafted by

Davutoğlu. Policymaking and implementation processes that were once complex were replaced in many cases by unilateral decision making by the President, followed by implementation without examination or criticism. Hence, by 2018, the Turkish political system was classified as unfree by Freedom House, having ceased to represent the democratic model it held to until 2016. These political changes have inevitably affected foreign policy, and the Balkans have become a space in which Turkey now seeks to fight domestic political struggles and gain legitimacy for foreign policies carried out elsewhere.

This use of international relations for domestic purposes did not begin in 2016, though. In fact, many earlier public references made by Turkish officials to Ottoman heritage, viewed by some in the Balkans as neo-Ottoman, were primarily directed to a Turkish audience. On a number of occasions, during elections or military campaigns, this 'domestication' of Turkish foreign policy has clearly been prioritised. In 2014, for instance, Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegović controversially greeted Erdoğan as 'our leader' by video link from Bosnia during an election rally held in Turkey (*Bakir Izetbegović: 'Erdoğan nosi zastavu koju je nosio pokojni Alija Izetbegović u krvavom BiH ratu'*). And in January 2018, prominent Sarajevo mosques organised public prayers for the success of Turkey's "Olive Branch" offensive in Syria (*U Begovoj i Carevoj džamiji u Sarajevu održana molitva za vojnu akciju Turske u Siriji*). Perhaps most visible, however, was a May 2018 election rally in Sarajevo, which was organised by an AKP-linked group as a substitute for rallies the AKP was prevented from holding in Germany and Austria. The Sarajevo rally was part of the Turkish presidential election campaign and was directed at European Turks voting in the elections from abroad (Weise 2018).

Public displays of personal loyalty have also become a more noticeable part of Bosnian-Turkish relations, with Muslim leaders in Bosnia making their affection for Erdoğan clear during his visits and election campaigns, especially since the 2016 coup attempt. In turn, Erdoğan has fully supported Izebegović in his political campaigns, as has the state-owned Anadolu news agency. Erdoğan has developed a similar political partnership with Kosovo's Hashim Thaci (Buyuk 2016) and has also cultivated a personal relationship with Albania's Edi Rama — who received an invitation to Erdoğan's daughter's wedding. Indeed, rather than being driven by Islamist or neo-Ottomanist objectives, the foreign policy of Erdoğan's AKP has

been concentrated on nurturing loyalties and relationships with many regional partners.

In Bosnia, the nationalist SDA party and associated media have emphasised the link between Bosniaks and Turkey. Local SDA groups actively helped promote a book entitled *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan: the Birth of a Leader* (Besli and Özbay 2011), and Turkish-leaning media propagated a story about Bosnia's wartime leader Alija Izetbegović, Bakir's father, having entrusted Bosnia to Erdoğan (Mujadžević 2017). And in 2018, TRT aired a Turkish-made dramatic mini-series, "Alija," about the life of Izetbegović. Still, Turkey's support for Bosniak nationalist leaders appears to have been driven less by a desire to strengthen Muslims in Bosnia than by the personal preferences of Erdoğan based on his own considerations and interests. Before backing SDA leader Izetbegović, for example, Erdoğan had chosen to back his rival Haris Silajdžić, with whom he had developed a close relationship in Istanbul. Silajdžić, who won the 2006 election with Turkey's support, was later responsible for stalling the unsuccessful push for reforms by the EU and the US, and ultimately for their withdrawal. It was only after this that Turkey partnered with the SDA.

### *The effect of the 2016 coup attempt on foreign policy*

Erdoğan's instinct for developing loyalty with other strong leaders was mutually beneficial, but at the expense of institutional relations. In the aftermath of the failed coup in 2016, this approach gradually impacted the quality of Turkish foreign policy. Quite unambiguously, Turkish priorities in relations with Balkan countries began to be defined by the AKPs struggle against *Hizmet*, to the extent that Turkey's prestige and ability to carry out foreign policy were affected. Gülen's movement had once been the vanguard of Turkish soft power across the region, and in combination with the foreign policies of Davutoğlu, Turkish state agencies and AKP-linked private companies had succeeded in building a parallel infrastructure of Turkish schools, media, and businesses. But from July 2016 on, Turkey has pursued a policy of competition and replacement, and no longer by soft means.

Turkish officials and partners of Erdoğan in the Balkans now refer to *Hizmet* as "Gülen's terrorist organization ('FETÖ')," the



term used by AKP leaders. Erdoğan aide Ibrahim Kalin has called *Hizmet* a “cultish belief system” and a threat to Balkan countries (Kalin 2018). For several years, Turkish officials from ambassadors to Erdoğan himself have demanded that *Hizmet*-linked educational institutions in the Balkans be closed down and their property transferred to Turkish embassies or other proxies of the Turkish state, such as the Maarif Foundation. These officials have repeatedly called for the closure of both Epoka and Burch Universities, for instance. Turkey has also pressed governments in the region to extradite a dozen or more people residing in several Western Balkan states (Dizdarevic 2018; Karaj 2018), including citizens sought by Turkish courts for membership in the *Hizmet* movement (Mejdini 2017).

In March 2018, this pressure manifested in scandal with the outright abduction of six Turkish nationals from Kosovo. Among those targeted were a teacher and educational administrator, and footage of their arrest went viral in Kosovo, where the government faced embarrassment. Prime Minister Haradinaj was forced to publicly deny advanced knowledge of the operation (Naddaff 2018).

Balkan countries have faced a dilemma when it comes to Turkish demands for business closures and extraditions: either oblige Turkey, an important partner, in contravention of the law; or refuse to comply and safeguard Turkey’s international reputation, and thus antagonize Erdoğan. Notably, unlike the case in Central Asia, many Balkan governments have resisted Erdoğan’s pressure (Erebara 2018). Still, several have offered verbal assurances to Turkey or have facilitated compromise solutions, such as when the Bosnian Sema schools were transferred to a new owner with no *Hizmet* affiliation.

The one-sidedness of Turkey’s demands on this issue has led to public criticism and even protest. In North Macedonia, for example, after the Turkish ambassador claimed the Yahya Kemal school in Skopje may be grooming terrorists, parents of students replied *en masse* by posting photos of their children online (Turkish ambassador implies Gülen schools in Macedonia raise terrorists). And in Albania, the Majority MP refused to oblige Turkey in exchange for a new mosque, saying that Albania was not a Turkish colony (IPPM 2015). Critical observers in the press have also warned Bosnians that President Erdoğan is not a “sultan” and is not offering them stability (Mujanovic 2018).

It is clear that Turkey's coordinated campaign to foster the loyalty of Balkan leaders has not yielded the results Ankara had hoped for, making it difficult for Turkey to leverage power through any cultural influence it may maintain. And in some places, this approach has plainly backfired by coming off as overtly self-serving and raising questions about the motives of Turkish foreign policy overall. Moreover, President Erdoğan's style — which prioritises personal relationships over traditional institutional channels — has been increasingly on display; such as when he hosted Serbian President Vučić along with Bosniak SDA leader Izetbegović, instead of inviting the actual chairman of the Bosnian Presidency at the time. This style has itself limited Turkey's influence in the region, as Erdoğan has mistakenly expected an equivalent of his authoritarianism in local leaders.

According to Dimitar Bechev, Erdoğan appears less motivated by a desire to support local Muslims than by his need to mark Balkan turf as his, not Gülen's, and to assert Turkish authority among Sunni Muslims specifically (2017). Indeed, the strategic turn Turkey took in 2016 revealed that Turkish influence in the region is weaker than projected and represents less to fear than initially asserted by critics of neo-Ottomanism (Vračić, Ivanović and Joseph 2017: 185). For example, Turkey's continuing efforts to engage in mediation in the region have met only limited success. Erdoğan has been unable to settle the dispute between Bosnia and Serbia concerning the route of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, Turkey is no longer a player in Kosovo negotiations, and it was EU and US diplomats who brokered an end to the protracted crisis in North Macedonia.

## Conclusion

This critical overview of evolving Turkish policy towards the Western Balkans has shown that, since the end of the Cold War, successive Turkish leaders have followed their own paths. Since the 1990s, Turkey has clearly seen the Western Balkans as a region in which its projection of influence is partly facilitated by a shared historical narrative, relationships between religious institutions, and opportunities for the development of friendly relations among political elites. Turkey was first spurred to seek a role on the international stage in the context of Euro-Atlantic efforts in the post-Yugoslav crisis. Later, under

AKP rule, exerting influence in the region was again attractive to Turkey when its own EU accession process stalled and it observed the EU and US withdrawing from the Western Balkans.

Yet, none of Turkey's governments, whether in the secular 1990s or the moderate Islamic 2000s, has formulated a cohesive strategy for dealing with the region. Turkey has succeeded in becoming a key player in the Balkans, in terms of multilateral politics and economic relations, but not more broadly. Initial Turkish successes in other areas have not produced any important breakthroughs, such as in addressing the most pressing security and development issues facing the region.

Cultural diplomacy was only part of Turkey's foreign policy strategy; yet, during the AKP's mandate, Turkish foreign policies around the world did assume a more ideological dimension, with Islamic references featuring prominently in the speeches and actions of the country's leadership. However, any such rhetoric not buoyed by consistent financial and political support had limited practical effect. And Turkey's government had its limits, too. While Turkey's state administration became a general partner to the Islamic Community in Bosnia in 2013, its religious policies were constrained by existing relations with Serbia. Ultimately, this support for Balkan Muslim leaders was highly visible but fickle, and brought Turkey little authority.

The resources Turkey has been able to muster when it comes to regional trade and investment simply cannot measure up to the EU, in terms of financial aid, foreign direct investment, or market opportunities. And Ankara's economic priorities have revealed the extent to which Turkish policy is in fact driven less by ideology and more by pragmatism. Turkey continues to trade at a greater rate with EU members, and larger Balkan countries such as Serbia, than with Muslim majority states.

All in all, Turkish foreign policy has been inconstant, with sometimes wildly shifting priorities, as seen in the superficial and fluctuating support Turkey offered the Bosnian government in the 1990s and 2000s. More recently, Turkey's priorities and the focus of its foreign policy shifted again after the 2016 failed coup. Yet, the heavy-handed and personalised style of President Erdoğan has further limited the effectiveness of this policy as well as Turkey's appeal as a source of stability. For all the grand plans that emerged from the leadership of Ahmet Davutoğlu

and his vision of Turkish foreign policy, under the AKP, Turkey has failed to provide any meaningful and reliable political or economic alternatives to Balkan states.

Thus, if neo-Ottomanism is deployed by Turkey, it seems to be only one of many foreign policy instruments and appears to be used only in countries where Turkish officials believe they can build upon a cultural sameness, that is, in Bosnia and Kosovo. Even there, though, neo-Ottomanism does not play significantly into Turkey's foreign-policy outlook. Instead, Turkish foreign policy is largely guided by pragmatism, realism, and lately, domestic policy.

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