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The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans¹

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Abstract

The scientific aim of this paper is to analyse and evaluate actions taken by Turkey's leading politicians with regard to the Western Balkan states (i.e. Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, Turkey has attempted to increase its international influence through diplomatic, economic and cultural measures. Western Balkans region, with which Turks have historical and ethnic ties, is one of the key areas in AKP's doctrine. Adopting image theory in international relations as the theoretical foundation, this research examines implementation of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans in times of SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic. By employing available original Turkish sources (academic publications, public reports, press releases), the main objectives of Turkey's political strategy towards the region have been determined. Detailed analysis of official statements and speeches of Turkish policy-makers was also fundamental for this study. In this context, the values and symbols to which the AKP government refers in its activities in the Western Balkans have been identified. Based on content analysis, comparative analysis and political

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discourse analysis, this research seeks to explain the rationale of Turkish actions in recent months. As a conclusion, future prospects for Turkey's involvement in the Western Balkans have been presented and discussed.

Keywords: Republic of Turkey, Western Balkans, COVID-19 pandemic, regional diplomacy, foreign policy

Влияние пандемии COVID-19 на внешнюю политику Турции в отношении Западных Балкан

Аннотация

Научная цель этой статьи — проанализировать и оценить действия, предпринятые ведущими политиками Турции в отношении западно-балканских государств (т. е. Албании, Боснии и Герцеговины, Косово, Черногории, Северной Македонии и Сербии) во время пандемии COVID-19. С тех пор как в 2002 году к власти пришла Партия справедливости и развития, Турция пыталась усилить свое международное влияние с помощью дипломатических, экономических и культурных мер. Регион Западных Балкан, с которым турки имеют исторические и этнические связи, является одним из ключевых направлений доктрины ПСР. Принимая теорию имиджа в международных отношениях в качестве теоретической основы, это исследование изучает реализацию внешней политики Турции на Западных Балканах во время пандемии коронавируса SARS-CoV-2. Используя доступные оригинальные турецкие источники (академические публикации, публичные отчеты, пресс-релизы), были определены основные цели политической стратегии Турции в отношении региона. Детальный анализ официальных заявлений и выступлений турецких политиков также имел основополагающее значение для данного исследования. В этом контексте были определены ценности и символы, на которые ссылается правительство ПСР в своей деятельности на Западных Балканах. Основанное на контент-анализе, сравнительном анализе и анализе политического дискурса, это исследование призвано объяснить причины действий Турции в последние месяцы. В заключение были представлены и обсуждены будущие перспективы участия Турции в делах на Западных Балканах.

Ключевые слова: Турецкая Республика, Западные Балканы, пандемия COVID-19, региональная дипломатия, внешняя политика

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, economic, social 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 image of Turkey as a state responsible for security and stabilisation in the Western Balkans. In the face of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, which was officially declared by the World Health Organisation in March 2020, politicians of the Justice and Development Party have been increasingly advocating for enhancing economic ties in Turkish-Balkan relations (Uğur Ekinci, 2022, pp. 121–128). This change of emphasis in Turkey's narrative has undeniably satisfied its Western Balkan partners, as they had been wary of earlier AKP political projects where Ottoman heritage of the region appeared to be in the foreground. Currently, Turks maintain closer contacts in the socio-cultural and religious spheres almost exclusively with certain Muslim communities.

This article aims at analysing Turkey's actions towards the Western Balkan region during the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to primary assumptions of Turkish foreign policy doctrine, it has been demonstrated which elements of AKP regional strategy remained unchanged at that time, and which were modified under the influence of ongoing pandemic crisis. The paper 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 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 after political transformation (i.e. transition from parliamentary system to presidential system) was also indicated (Haugom, 2019, pp. 212–218). The third part of the article focuses on Turkey's relations with the Balkan states. Due to 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 fourth part, in turn, refers solely to activities of Turkish politicians in the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the main subject of the article. An analysis of Turkey's policy towards each of the six countries in the region has revealed changes that have occurred in Turkish political strategy over the past several months. The final part summarises conclusions of this research and attempts to predict development of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan states.

This study has employed a broad range of written sources concerning Turkish-Balkan relations, including scientific publications, policy briefs and public reports. Due to the time constraints, the fourth part is based on online articles and press releases regarding Turkey's activities in the Western Balkans during the pandemic. In order to meet requirements of the adopted theoretical perspective, the basic research method is political discourse analysis which was used to examine interviews and public statements of the most prominent politicians from Turkey and the Western Balkan states. Other research 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 answer a research question of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected Turkey's foreign policy towards the Western Balkans.

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).

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 year 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).

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 (i.e. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, Yunus Emre Institute) 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 activities in the Western Balkans during the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic did not restrain Turkey's international activity. Turkish politicians have taken a number of actions in neighbouring regions, intending to strengthen the country's position in times of the global crisis. In case of the Western Balkans (a key European area in AKP's regional strategy), the foreign policy of the Erdoğan cabinet has been based on five pillars: diplomacy, security, economy, humanitarian aid and culture (Aksoy, 2020, pp. 241–242). An analysis of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan states during the pandemic demonstrates that the most attention was given to Muslim communities in the region.

Albania

Over the last several months, Turkey has maintained particularly fruitful relations with Albania. An attempt to create a common platform against Greece's resource policy in the Eastern Mediterranean was one of reasons for enhancing ties between Ankara and Tirana. According to AKP politicians, Turkey has been traditionally defending the strategic interests of Albanians as a result of which Albania's international position has grown (Turan, 2021, pp. 85–86). In February 2020, an agreement for military cooperation was signed, under which the Turkish government undertook to regularly transfer modern military equipment to its partner. In this way, Turkey intended to

consolidate its image as an ally responsible for modernisation of Albanian Armed Forces (Madhi, 2021, pp. 7–9). At the end of the same year, President Erdoğan visited Albania at the inauguration of a project to rebuild over five hundred houses that had been damaged by the recent earthquake in Lezhë County. In the President's opinion, the initiative coordinated by Turkey's Housing Development Administration (TOKİ) was yet another proof of "unbreakable friendship" between the two nations (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2020).

Excellent atmosphere in Turkish-Albanian relations was confirmed by the visit of Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama to Turkey in January 2021. During the joint press conference, the head of the Albanian government and President Erdoğan emphasised their desire to develop a strategic partnership in every possible area, referring to strong historical bonds and converging political interests. The then-established Turkey-Albania High Level Strategic Cooperation Council was to ensure coordination of activities in this respect (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2021a). The process of strengthening bilateral relations was complemented in the summer of 2021 by the signing of protocol on protection of the common heritage. Pursuant to provisions of the agreement, renovation of Ottoman monuments in Albania would be conducted by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, 2021). However, mutual contacts have been adversely affected by the presence the Gülen movement (recognised in Turkey as the FETÖ terrorist organisation) in Albania. Despite a special extradition treaty being in force, Albanian authorities have so far expelled only a dozen alleged Gülenists to Turkey (Cela, 2020, pp. 11–12). The FETÖ issue was among topics discussed during President Erdoğan's visit to Albania in January 2022. Seven additional agreements on economy, military, education, culture and tourism were then signed, thus bolstering the capacity of strategic partnership (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2022).

Bosnia and Herzegovina

From Ankara's perspective, the ongoing pandemic was also an opportunity to strengthen ties linking Turkey with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Bilateral talks held in the second half of 2020 between representatives of both countries

focused on establishing mechanisms for effective implementation of the free trade agreement in order to stimulate economic contacts after the period of pandemic-driven stagnation (Ankara Sanayi Odası, 2020). Turks also stressed the great importance of socio-cultural relations by declaring that Turkish public diplomacy agencies would be even more active in the region. According to the then-ambassador Haldun Koç, AKP's mission was to ensure sustainable development for Bosnia (Gül, Crnovrsanin, 2020). In March 2021, the members of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Milorad Dodik, Željko Komšić and Šefik Džaferović visited Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara. Expressing his will to deepen cooperation in sectors such as energy, health care, arms industry and tourism, President Erdoğan stated that a fundamental aspect of Turkish government's activity in Bosnia was to provide comprehensive assistance to all inhabitants, regardless of their ethnic origin or faith (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2021b).

Political crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which erupted in mid-2021 after formal introduction of law banning the denial of genocide and war crimes, has become a huge challenge for Turkish diplomacy. In response to new regulations, representatives of Republika Srpska demanded renegotiation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (Cenić, 2022). With the intention of reducing tensions in Bosnia, President Erdoğan arrived in Sarajevo at the end of August and offered to act as a mediator. Despite Turkish involvement, however, tensions in Bosnia have not been reduced. When in November 2021 Milorad Dodik, the chief representative of Republika Srpska, declared creation of a separate Serbian armed forces, judiciary system and tax regime (i.e. threatening with secession), Turkish politicians once again called for negotiations, stressing that Turkey had always been a guarantor of Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Erdoğan himself publicly announced that he recognised the Bosnian crisis as Turkey's internal affair. The President then invited Dodik to Ankara where his mediation plan was revealed (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2021c). Importantly, Turkish engagement was appreciated by all Bosnian communities, as confirmed by Bosnia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Bisera Turković, and the chairman of the Democratic Action Party Bakir Izetbegović. Several members of the Erdoğan cabinet (including Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, Hulusi Akar, Faruk Kaymakcı) have also spoken out against the possible secession of the Republika Srpska,

encouraging leaders of Serbia and Croatia to intensify their diplomatic efforts to defuse the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hamit, Aliyev, 2022). The Turkish mediation offer has been finally approved by Dodik, but internal tensions persist.

Kosovo

Among the Muslim-majority states in the Western Balkans, Kosovo has had arguably the least positive relationship with Turkey during the pandemic. Although an agreement on military cooperation was concluded at the beginning of 2020, and a plan to strengthen economic ties was agreed, mutual relations have been overshadowed by the issue of the Turkish minority in Kosovo whose rights (according to Ankara) are not being properly secured (Akgün, 2012, pp. 23–24). Another disagreement in bilateral contacts occurred in March 2021, when the government of Kosovo, after establishing diplomatic relations with Israel, officially opened its embassy in Jerusalem. The decision has been severely criticised by AKP politicians who consider themselves as defenders of Palestinian interests (Hamit, 2021). Nevertheless, the government in Pristina ultimately did not succumb to pressure from Ankara. Moreover, since 2016 Turkey has been unsuccessfully insisting on arresting members of the Gülen movement in Kosovo. Despite these differences, in the summer of 2021 the Erdoğan government launched a large-scale diplomatic campaign (e.g. in Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan) to recognise the independence of Kosovo (Vuksanović, Tzifakis, 2021). However, it would seem that the main objective was to reinforce Turkey's image as a leader of the global Muslim community.

Regardless of AKP's intentions, Kosovan politicians appreciated Turkish commitment and relations between both countries have gained new impulse since mid-2021. In June 2021, President Vjosa Osmani-Sadriu spoke at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, stressing the key importance of Turkey's continued support for Kosovo in its struggle for global recognition. She added that she perceived Turks as guarantors of peace and stability in the Balkans (Çetinkaya, Yüzbaşıoğlu, 2021). In addition, economic and military cooperation with Turkey was also crucial for Kosovans. The Prime Minister Albin Kurti held a consultation meeting with members of the Kosovo-Turkey

Chamber of Commerce in the autumn of 2021 where he outlined possibilities of investing in Kosovo (Kosovo Prime Minister Office, 2021). In turn, Minister of Defence Armend Mehaj met his Turkish counterpart Hulusi Akar, discussing tightening of military contacts (e.g. training program for Kosovan units in Turkey) (Atalay, 2021). A breakthrough in mutual relations may be Erdoğan's declaration in March 2022 that he would be pushing for admission of Kosovo to NATO.

Montenegro

In contrast, Turkey's contacts with the other three Western Balkan states during the pandemic were significantly less intense. At the beginning of 2020, Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu undertook a diplomatic visit to Montenegro where he highlighted the importance of economic and military cooperation for Turkish-Montenegrin relations. Referring repeatedly to needs of local Muslim community (approximately 20 percent of the country's population), Minister Çavuşoğlu indirectly confirmed the increasing role of religion in AKP's foreign policy (Büyük, 2020). In August 2021, President Erdoğan's first-ever official visit to Montenegro took place. At the conference with President Milo Đukanović, directions of bilateral cooperation were approved, and the goal of establishing trade contacts at the level of 250 million USD was set. President Đukanović admitted that while Turkey had contributed to development of Montenegro as one of the largest investors, further deepening of economic cooperation would be expected (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2021d). President Erdoğan, in turn, praised activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations, referring in particular to TİKA (approximately 400 completed projects in Montenegro) and Yunus Emre Institute (over 450 special scholarships for Montenegrin students). At the meeting with Prime Minister Zdravko Krivokapić, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan addressed mainly economic issues, with particular emphasis on Turkey's potential support for the North-Eastern part of the country which has the largest Muslim population in Montenegro (Government of Montenegro, 2021). In December 2021, Mustafa Şentop, Speaker of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, arrived in Podgorica to sign a cooperation agreement between parliaments of the two states. During his visit, Şentop also

held a series of meetings with representatives of local Muslim community (including Rifat Fejzić, Chairman of Montenegro Islamic Union), pointing to Montenegro as a model of peaceful coexistence of various religious and ethnic groups (Talha Öztürk, 2021).

Serbia

In the summer of 2020, Turkey provided humanitarian assistance to a pandemic-stricken Serbian region of Sandžak, the majority of which has been inhabited by Muslims. It is worth noting that the aid program was prepared in consultation with local administration, not with central authorities in Belgrade (Crnovrsanin, Talha Öztürk, 2020). In September 2020, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić met with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Ankara where both politicians debated topics such as regional security, Turkish investments in Serbia and methods of combating the pandemic. At the joint press conference, Vučić declared that he recognised Turkey as an essential actor in the region, and that he intended to improve mutual relations at all levels (Balkans News, 2020). After a short period of impasse in mutual relations, Turkish and Serbian ministers of transport and infrastructure Adil Karaismailoğlu and Tomislav Momirović agreed in the summer of 2021 that the pace of Turkey's investments had to increase (especially construction of the Belgrade-Sarajevo motorway which is of key importance for the entire region) (T.C. Ulaştırma ve Altyapı Bakanlığı, 2021). On the occasion of ceremonial opening of the Consulate General of the Republic of Turkey in Novi Pazar (a town in the Sandžak region) in August 2021, Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu debated regional security issues with the Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and his counterpart Nikola Selaković. Serbian politicians reiterated President Vučić's words about the role of Turkey as a guarantor of regional order, while Çavuşoğlu promised that Turkish involvement in Serbia would increase (Republic of Serbia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). In the time of unrest over the political crisis in Bosnia, contacts between politicians in Turkey and Serbia have multiplied, as both countries have been considered as mediators (along with Croatia). In January 2022, Aleksander Vučić and Recep Erdoğan jointly declared that they would mediate for a peaceful settlement of disputes in Bosnia. President Vučić reassured that Serbia fully respected

Bosnia's territorial integrity and called on Milorad Dodik to take part in negotiations without any preconditions (Tosun, 2022).

North Macedonia

In December 2020, Mustafa Şentop paid a visit to North Macedonia where he held talks with President Stevo Pendarovski. At the consultations it was agreed that efforts should be stepped up to systematically develop Turkish-Macedonian relations, taking the current cooperation in defence policy as a role model (Abdula, 2020). In June 2021, then-Prime Minister Zoran Zaev arrived in Istanbul at the invitation of President Erdoğan, and politicians discussed a free trade agreement between the two countries. During the one-day working visit, both sides also underlined strong historical ties and mutual activities for peace and stability in the region, while addressing fight against terrorism and commitment to respect international law (Özkan, 2021). In the same month, President Pendarovski met with Recep Erdoğan at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum. In his opinion, Turkey has been for decades North Macedonia's greatest ally in terms of security (Republic of North Macedonia – President, 2021). Soon afterwards, both countries extended their military-economic agreement for another five years. Signed during the visit of Minister of Defence Radmila Šekerinska Jankovska to Turkey, the agreement provides for a schedule to modernise Macedonian Armed Forces with Turkish military equipment (Balkans News, 2021). At the turn of 2021 and 2022, two more visits by Mustafa Şentop to Skopje took place. Having met with several representatives of the Macedonian authorities (i.e. Dimitar Kovačevski, Bojan Maričić, Hüsni İsmaili), the Speaker of Turkish Parliament emphasised multifaceted dimension of mutual cooperation, referring to tightening of economic and military relations, as well as congratulating North Macedonians for creating a multicultural society in which all individuals were respected (Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi, 2022).

Turkey's "covid diplomacy" in the Western Balkans

Following the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic, Turkey has been creating its image as a reliable ally and state responsible for

improving the health condition in neighbouring regions. Turkish so-called “covid diplomacy” also extended to the Western Balkans as each of the six countries received medical donations from Turkey to mitigate impacts of the pandemic (Lika, 2020, pp. 9–10). The aid program has been coordinated by the Turkish Red Crescent and the Ministry of Health by order of President Erdoğan who called for global solidarity in times of crisis. Turkish authorities have provided the Western Balkan countries with, among others, modern ambulances, respirators, face masks, personal protective equipment sets, rapid COVID test kits, and disinfectant products. The support from Turkey has been received very positively by the governments of all 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 (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 “covid diplomacy” was construction of a hospital in the city of Fier in Albania which became operational in April 2021. On this occasion, Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca announced that Turkey would continue to invest in the health care sector, since Turks intended to share their experiences and skills with all partners in the Balkans (Cuka, Aliju, 2021).

With the benefit of hindsight it can be argued that Turkish “covid diplomacy” has been relatively successful as Turkey has once again strengthened its image as a selfless ally by being responsible for the region and offering necessary support in times of need. This statement can be confirmed by the fact that the Western Balkan states have definitely appreciated Turkey’s assistance in supply of vaccines to a much greater extent than the EU’s COVAX program whose complicated procedures significantly delayed the entire operation and therefore many countries were disappointed with the pace of deliveries from the European Union. It should be noted, however, that overall EU aid in absolute figures was substantially larger in comparison with medical assistance provided to the Western Balkans by other external actors, namely China, Russia and Turkey (Tzifakis, 2021, pp. 179–180).

Conclusion

The analysis conducted as part of research on Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that recent activities of the AKP government contributed to improving the general image of Turkey in the region, yet authorities in Ankara still lack necessary tools to ensure a lasting political impact. The Balkan states are primarily interested in development of economic relations and (to certain extent) in military cooperation with Turkey, while the socio-cultural dimension, which has been extremely important for Turks, is limited basically to close contacts with selected Muslim communities (Öztürk, 2020, pp. 39–43). 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).

As evidenced above, the actions of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and other high-ranking AKP politicians during the pandemic also did not give new impetus to Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans. Despite Turkey's emphasis on developing multi-faceted strategic cooperation in the face of a serious global crisis, governments of the Western Balkan states (except Albania) have been preoccupied with economic issues. It is worth noting in this context that all six countries in the region have a negative trade balance with Turkey, and discrepancies in this respect have grown dynamically in recent years (Nuroğlu, Nuroğlu, 2019, pp. 215–218). The pandemic-driven turmoil on global markets has thus created an opportunity to change this tendency. In an effort to equalise volume of trade between Turkey and the Western Balkans, several politicians (e.g. Ambassador of Bosnia and Herzegovina in Turkey Adis Alagić, North Macedonia's Minister of Economy Kreshnik Bekteshi) called on the government in Ankara to increase the level of investment in the region. According to representatives of the Balkan states, it is only economic cooperation bringing equal benefits to

all parties involved that would allow for a quick recovery from the pandemic stagnation (Jaćimović et al., 2022, pp. 5–6).

The impact of the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus pandemic on Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans is therefore revealed in a gradual shift of attention towards regional security and economic relations. At the same time the pragmatic turn in the Justice and Development Party's approach to the Western Balkans has also gained momentum in recent months. The core of the process, which began with Erdoğan's takeover of full power in Turkey, is that instead of exposing ideological and historical community, the AKP government tends to direct 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 (Lami, 2020). 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 (Aktürk, 2020, pp. 172–173). A well-organised (also in terms of propaganda) transfer of medical equipment has certainly had a positive impact on improvement of Turkey's image in all Balkan states, but it should be noted nonetheless that further prospects of conducting "covid diplomacy" are for objective reasons limited in time. The authorities in Ankara must thereby develop new regional engagement initiatives that would be attractive to all Western Balkan states. It would seem that Turkish politicians' proposal for cooperation in the field of security is a reasonable strategy in this context, especially since Russia's invasion of Ukraine has proved that the level of threat in international relations has been increasing on the verge of the third decade of the 21st century (Gilliam, Van Wie, 2022, pp. 11–13). The Erdoğan government's focus on military aspects of regional stabilisation gained particular relevance in recent months when Turks delivered military equipment to countries in the Western Balkans in several separate transports. Furthermore, negotiations with interested parties on purchases of modern weaponry have been launched lately (e.g. sales of MTP rifles to North Macedonia, and Bayraktar TB-2 drones to Albania).

However, at present, the ultimate goal of AKP's foreign policy, i.e. to gain a lasting political influence in the region, is far from being achieved. In this regard, Turkey has been dependent on 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 of the Community, which would result in suspension of accession processes, the Western Balkan countries might be inclined to enhance their political cooperation with other actors that have been active in the region. Turkey, already having an established position on the Balkan Peninsula, would then gain an opportunity to expand its sphere of influence (Vračić et al., 2017, pp. 196–198). That being said, the most realistic scenario assumes a successive developing of economic contacts with the entire region as well as strengthening of cultural and social ties with Muslim-majority countries, with no greater prospects for Turkey to achieve a dominant political role in the Western Balkans. 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. The protracted economic crisis has been certainly a major challenge for the government in Ankara and may affect Turkey's commercial exchange with the Western Balkans. 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 (e.g. prosecution of the Gülen movement members, exaggerated support for Turkish religious organisations) 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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