

Report Part Title: Turkey

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5: Turkey

Introduction

The relationship of Turkey with the region is based on two core elements: Islam, the kinship with many of the Muslim communities in these countries, as well as the Neo-Ottoman narrative that combines Islamic narratives and narratives of kinship with historical and cultural ties in the region. Overall, Turkey is not “shying away from taking initiative” when pursuing their foreign policy (MFA Turkey). This so-called ‘Enterprising and Humanitarian Foreign policy’ is guided by the objective of achieving peace at home and in the world. Globally, the Turkish diplomatic network is the 5th largest one, which enables the country to employ political, economic, humanitarian and cultural cooperation in complementary fashion (MFA Turkey). Turkey’s foreign policy reiterates the strong, close ties to the Western Balkans, among other regions (*ibid*).

The Ottoman Empire has been the ruling empire of the region for centuries. Therefore, the existence of a relationship across different matters between the states of the region and Turkey is not entirely unexpected. Strong economic, socio-cultural and religious ties exist. After the Balkan wars, Turkey’s intent with Western Balkans was mostly in line with NATO and the EU, favoring Atlanticism and Europeanism. This did not change after the currently governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in 2002 (Aydintaşbaş 2019). Besides the historical ties, Turkey regards the region as a gateway to continental Europe.

Erdogan has pragmatically reset the diplomatic ties with the Western Balkans region, by fostering great personal relationships with the Western Balkan leaders (Balkan Insight 2018). Currently, the region is seen as a “breathing space” for Turkey’s foreign policy. With unrest at its eastern borders and rising tensions at home and with the US, the Western Balkans countries are friendly neighbors (*ibid*). Over the past five years, Erdogan has been depicting the global West, most notably NATO, the US and the EU, as unfavorable towards Turkey (Jan Zürcher 2018). This is predominantly due to the divergence in policies towards the Syrian conflict. However, the Turkish relationship with the Eastern Powers has also deteriorated, due to lack of mutual support on internal questions, such as the Uyghur and Kurdish minority issues (Ahval News 2019). Euro-Asianism is on the rise in Turkey urging the country to leave NATO and end its bid for the EU (Colakoglu 2019). Their aim seems to be aligning Turkey with Russia and China, also in terms of security, in order to render it less pro-Western and less democratic. Recently also, most political leaders in Turkey have increased their anti-Western discourse (Jan Zürcher 2018). This represents a disconnect regarding the foreign and security policy of Turkey, as Euro-Asianism contradicts the spirit of NATO which Turkey is crucially a member of.

Turkey has national interest to protect the Turkish minority, since people of Turkish ethnicity and heritage are living in Western Balkans. In North Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Turkish citizens enjoy the status of a national minority, protected by either the Law on Minorities or by the Constitution (Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia). In Serbia, Albania and Montenegro, the Turkish do not enjoy the status of a constitutionally recognized or a national minority recognized by law. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “[t]he Balkans is a priority for Turkey not only from the political, economic and

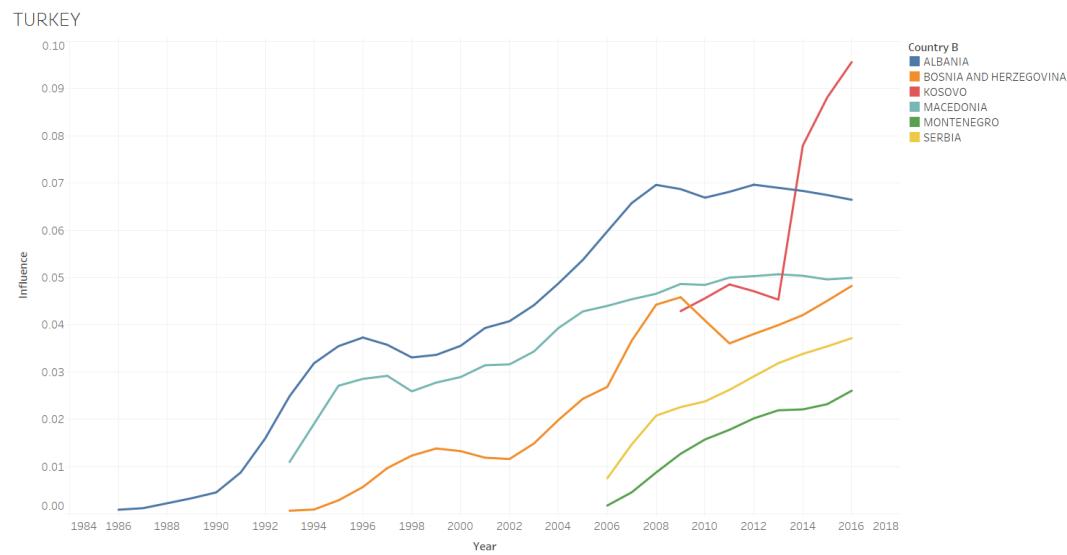
geographical perspectives, but also due to its historical, cultural and human ties with the region. The Balkans, being the geographical connection of Turkey with the rest of Europe, bears great importance with the special place it had in the historical process that shaped the Turkish nation and the future potential it carries within the context of regional integration and the EU accession objective which we share with all the countries of the region" (MFA Turkey). They point out that they maintain good relations with all countries in the Western Balkans region and aim to promote: "High level political dialogue, security for all, utmost economic integration and the preservation of the multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious social structures" guided by the principles of "regional ownership" and "inclusiveness" (ibid).

Turkey is considered a traditional external influencer in Western Balkans, pursuing an independent, 'Neo-Ottoman' foreign policy. The relationships between Turkey and the states in the region predominantly focus on soft power. Interestingly, Turkey has kept on fostering fruitful relationships with the Western Balkans states that do not have a Muslim-majority population, such as Serbia, through diplomatic and economic activities. Turkey seems to employ security, political, economic and cultural tools as part of its foreign policy in the region.

A complicating factor is that, until a few years ago, schools supported by the Gülen movement were also an important element of Turkey's soft power policy (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Summer 2018/019, Turkey, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania). Nevertheless, this has become a source of discord, both within Turkey and in the region, following the fallout in the wake of the 2016 coup attempt. Moreover, it is possible that Ankara's recent rapprochement with Moscow means that Turkey will tend towards pursuing a less aggressive approach towards Slavic interests and concerns in the region, thus ceding some ground to the Kremlin. This may manifest in a reduction of support towards the Albanians, a shift that would be counter intuitive considering the established Turkish foreign policy interests. Turkey's interest in the region is likely motivated by making sure that it maintains leverage vis-à-vis the EU and NATO. After all, most Western Balkan states aspire to become EU and NATO member states one day.

Turkey portrays itself as a regional player in the Western Balkan and can also be viewed as a reactionary strategy due to the lack of EU membership, using the Western Balkan as a leverage tool toward the EU. In fact, such tensions could affect the continued implementation of the EU-Turkey deal regarding the returning of migrants that seek to cross into Greece to use the so-called 'Balkan route'. Lastly, it can be questioned whether Turkey's lurch towards authoritarianism will increase its standing as a model to be emulated. Many leaders in the Western Balkan may be attracted to the authoritarian model at first, but it is not likely to help their aims to join the EU and NATO. In order to address these questions, the following sections will outline the influence trends in Turkey as well as Turkey's influence in each sphere: economic, political, security and cultural/religious.

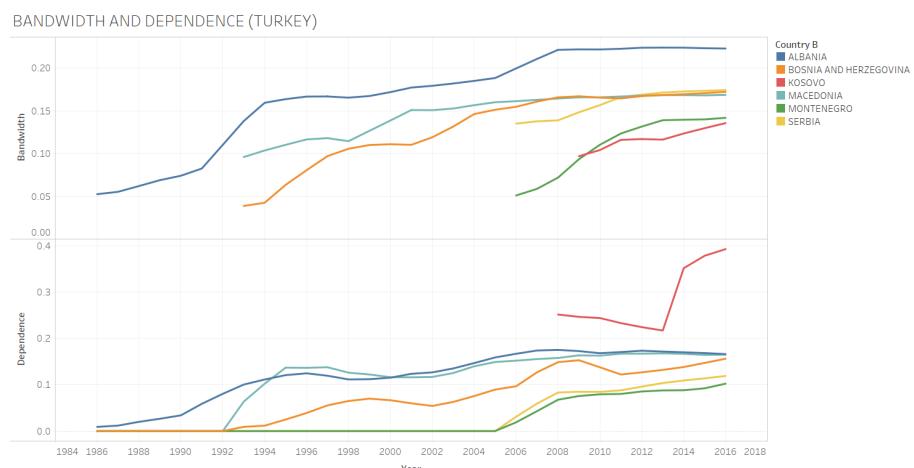
The Influence Trends in the Western Balkans



The trend of sum of Influence for Year. Color shows details about Country B. The view is filtered on Country A, Country B and Year. The Country A filter keeps TURKEY. The Country B filter keeps 6 of 261 members. The Year filter ranges from 1986 to 2016.

Figure 26: Influence of Turkey in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

The long-term trends show a significant increase of the influence of Turkey in all Western Balkans states. In Kosovo, the sharpest rise has been observed, increasing from 8.67% in 2012 to 16.18% in 2016. This renders Turkey the most influential international actor in Kosovo for 2016. Turkey is also highly influential in Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Albania, representing 3.27%, 3.35%, and 4.86% in 2016, respectively. The lowest influence is observed in Serbia and Montenegro, with 1.99% and 2.36%, respectively. The steady increase of Turkey's influence after the 90's is likely due to high historical, religious and cultural connections with these states in the past, which serve as a basis for strong economic, political and military relations as well.



The trends of sum of Bandwidth and sum of Dependence for Year. Color shows details about Country B. Details are shown for Country A. The view is filtered on Country A, Country B and Year. The Country A filter keeps TURKEY. The Country B filter keeps 6 of 261 members. The Year filter ranges from 1986 to 2016.

Figure 27: Bandwidth and Dependence (sub-indices of Influence) of Turkey in Western Balkans from 1984-2016 (FBIC Index)

Figure 27 shows that the high level of influence that Turkey exerts in Kosovo does not translate into high Bandwidth, due to its lowest score among all Western Balkans countries in 2016. However, their dependency score remains the highest, which is because Kosovo has a smaller economy than the other Western Balkans countries, and given that many of the other international powers (China and Russia) do not recognize Kosovo, Kosovo is able to become more reliant on Turkey for economic, political, and security support. Turkey has concluded free trade agreements with all states in the region (with the exception of Kosovo, the trade agreement of which is in the process of ratification) (Ministry of Trade, Turkey 2018). Trade between Turkey and the region has been clearly increasing over time as well, reaching over \$2.5 billion in 2016, with nearly half of this amount resulting from trade with Serbia (WITS 2016). In terms of security, Turkey has strong connections to Albania, as both are members of NATO and Albania's army is using Turkish imported weaponry (Ministry of Defense Albania 2013). Additionally, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Capital.ba) trade arms with Turkey (Savic 2018). In terms of political influence, all countries have substantial levels of representation and shared membership of IGOs, except for Kosovo, which is not a member of several IGOs.

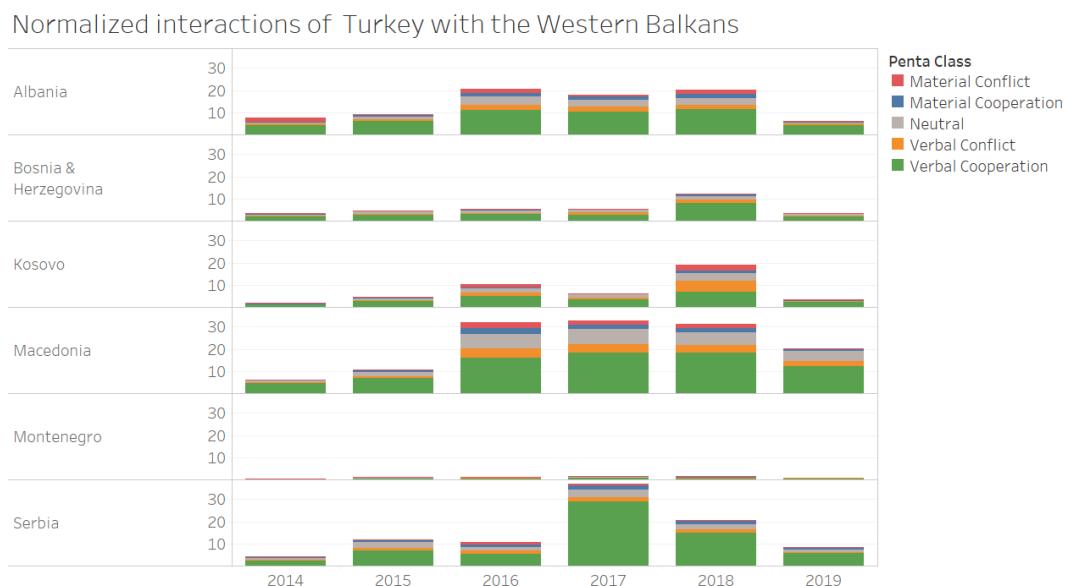


Figure 28: Normalized and categorized events between Turkey and Western Balkans, 2009-2018 (HCSS Datawarehouse)

Figure 28 shows the recent interactions between Turkey and Western Balkans over the past five years. When analyzing the past ten years, it is revealed that from 2014 onwards Turkish interactions with Western Balkans states have risen substantially. This is particularly visible for North Macedonia, Albania, Serbia and Kosovo, while Bosnia and Herzegovina has seen an increase but to a lesser degree. Montenegro does not have a noteworthy number of interactions with Turkey. Interestingly, Kosovo shows increasingly negative tones in relation to Turkish interactions in 2018. This is largely due to Turkey's controversial actions in extraditing teachers with suspected links to the Gülen movement from Kosovo, the legality of which has been questioned in the media and by political figures (Naddaff 2018). The peak in interaction with Serbia in 2017 has various underlying reasons, mainly due to economic cooperation. The negative interaction with North Macedonia is mainly

related to the unrest caused by Turkey's request to extradite Gülen movement's members.

The Economic Influence Trends

As elaborated above, Turkey is exerting influence in all spheres, including the economic one. When it comes to economic cooperation, there is an upward trend of economic cooperation between Turkey and the six states, predominantly fueled by private consumption and investment (Center of Excellence in Finance 2018). In particular, Ankara has committed to steadily improving its trade relations with Western Balkans. Notable projects include construction, commissioning and the management of the international airports of Skopje and Pristina, the creation of Albania's national airline, the construction of the Belgrade-South Adriatic Highway, and the purchase of local firms such as the Albanian telecommunication company ALB telecom (Savic 2018). Turkey has also been among the top ten donors of development aid to Kosovo, Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Kelkitli 2013). Despite the increased Turkish economic influence in the region, a local researcher argues that Turkey's influence, including economic, is non-existent in comparison with Western influence (Anonymous Interview, Academic, Spring 2017, Kosovo).

There are positive trends in trade and foreign direct investment in all countries, which shows that Turkey's economic relationship with the region is quite strong. Its involvement is cross-sectoral and cross-regional. Despite not being in the top of the charts when it comes to investment on a country basis (with the exception of Albania and Kosovo), Turkey and Turkish companies explore all the possibilities for business involvement in the region (Çakir 2014). The strong economic cooperation is based on "win-win" strategy due to the geographical location and proximity of the six states with both Turkey and the rest of European states, as well as the alignment with the EU membership aspirations (*ibid*). The liberalization processes in line with the EU accession requirements have proven to be particularly beneficial to Turkey's economic growth.

Turkey's economic influence in Western Balkans should be seen in the context of its domestic economy. The Turkish economy has boomed and slumped often in the past 15 years with a general trend of substantial growth. Recent trends, such as the depreciating currency, high inflation, high debts and the sanctions imposed by the US show that the Turkish economy is in a "danger zone" (VOX 2019). This makes trade with Western Balkans more attractive, while also being able to distract the Turkish population from internal struggles (Phillips 2018).

Albeit still being overshadowed by its European counterparts, Ankara has been steadily improving its trade relations with Western Balkans (European Parliament 2017). Compared with the numbers in 2002, Turkey's trade volume has improved by 373 percent until 2012 (*ibid*, 20). Especially, in Kosovo, Turkey has consolidated its economic power, securing 8 percent of the countries' imports (*ibid*), and exhibiting the third largest FDI (*ibid*), which has primarily flown into the telecommunication, banking, transportation or construction sector (*ibid*, 20). Since 2008, when the Kosovar-Turkish Chamber of Commerce began its work, €327 million of Turkish investment has flown into Kosovo (*ibid*). Turkish-Kosovar bilateral trade volume was around \$289 million in 2013 and 2014, and amounted to \$248.750 million in 2015. A major proportion of this mutual trade volume is the Turkish exports to Kosovo (\$279, \$276 and \$240.8 million in 2013, 2014 and 2015 respectively) (*ibid*). The Free Trade

Agreement between Turkey and Kosovo was signed in Ankara on 27 September 2013, which is the first FTA Kosovo has ever signed with a second party. In addition, an approximate number of 500 Turkish companies operate in Kosovo. The total value of their investment is around EUR 340 million. Turkey, currently the third foreign direct investor in Kosovo after Germany and the UK between 2007-2013, was the biggest investor in Kosovo in 2012 and 2013. Significant opportunities for investment are present in Kosovo, especially in the sectors of contracting, mining and banking. The total amount of projects that have been undertaken by the Turkish contractor companies up to the year 2016 has reached an approximate EUR 1 billion. Moreover, the highway is being constructed by a joint consortium of Turkish - US investors. Kosovo and Turkey will extend their economic cooperation in the field of agriculture (Insajderi 2019).

In Serbia, Turkey has invested particularly heavily in the textile industry, especially in Sandzak area inhabited by Muslims, and Turkish companies are the main job creators in this region. Serbia has also sought investments from Turkey, due to the disengagement from the European Union on economic matters (Daily News 2018b). The target for the trade volume is \$2 billion (Daily News 2018a).

In Montenegro, the Turkish company Toscelik has bought the struggling ironworks in Niksic, one of the country's few large industrial complexes (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

In Albania, Turkey assisted in Albania's national airline, and the purchase of local firms such as the Albanian telecommunication company ALBtelecom (ibid, 2). Issues of transparency have been raised since a suspicious private company, the MND Investment, was formed a few days before the inauguration of Air Albania who became a shareholder upon PM Edi Rama's decision (Exit 2018). Moreover, public information lack regarding the project (ibid). Moreover, questions transparency issues were raised regarding the planned construction of the airport in Vlora. Nonetheless, the project stopped for unknown reasons and is open to new bidders. This shows that Turkey's investments in Albania implemented with a lack of transparency, and thus exploits the wider trend of corruption in these countries. However, Turkey is considered a strategic partner and fourth largest investor in Albania (Konrad Adenauer Stiftung 2018).

Moreover, a multi-billion investment in a key motorway connecting Belgrade and Sarajevo has been promised by Erdogan in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A project estimated to cost €3 billion (\$3.5 billion) involving credits from Turkey's Exim Bank. So far it has been blocked by the Bosnian Serbs, who dispute the road route (Sito-Sucic 2018b).

Turkey's economic influence is also demonstrated in the health sector. A number of private hospitals have been acquired or are managed by Turkish companies. For example, the Turkish Acibadem Grotup is operating in North Macedonia (Acibadem Sistina), Serbia (Acibadem Sistina) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Acibadem), whereas Aksoy Group is operating the Millennium hospital in Kosovo. The International Turkish Hospital is operating in Albania. Montenegro is the only country without a hospital that is operated by a Turkish holding or parent company. However significant donations by Turkish donors have been made towards state hospitals (CrnaGoraTurska 2019). Cooperation in the sector is very prominent for Western Balkans since the early 2000s (Raxhimi 2011), especially when it comes to

cancer care and serious illness treatments. Medical tourism is also present, especially in the sphere of corrective and plastic surgery, as well as hair transplants.

Another industry in which the region is fostering strong ties with Turkey is tourism. Turkey is a highly popular tourist destination for the region. The close proximity on land, multiple direct and chartered flights from Turkish Airlines and Pegasus Air, and the appeal of all-inclusive and ultra-all-inclusive offers at reasonable prices make Turkish sea-side resorts appealing for many from North Macedonia, Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The Political Influence Trends

Nearly a century after the retreat of the Ottoman Empire from Western Balkans, Turkey is experiencing a new “golden age” (Ugur Ekinci 2013) in its relations with the states and communities in Western Balkans. Turkey views “the Balkans part of its natural sphere of influence as a former imperial power, with the Ottoman Empire famously stopping only at the gates of Vienna at its peak” (Weise 2018). This has led to claims that Turkey is pursuing “Neo-Ottoman” (i.e. imperialist) aspirations. Several interviewees reaffirm that view as it is illustrated below:

“Religion has been promoted from Turkey. 10-15 times higher and it popularized Erdogan. It is a danger to Albanians. It is a neo-Ottomanism. He sees the Albanians as his subjects, like the Commonwealth of the Ottoman Empire” (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2018, Kosovo).

While this assessment is debatable, it is clear that Turkey’s involvement in the region is increasing across all spheres of influences. Turkey utilizes their historical, geographical and socio-cultural proximity to the region to advance their political agenda (Dursun-Ozkanca 2013).

Much of Turkish policy towards Western Balkans has been shaped by the former Turkish Prime Minister Davutoglu, who in the conference Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today, justified this increased focus on the region with his country’s “aims to establish order in ... the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East... [making] these areas with Turkey ... the *centre of world politics* in the future,” (Coşkun 2015), reflecting Turkey’s desire to be viewed as *a power of its own*, rather than a “perennial [persistent] candidate knocking on Europe’s door” (Archives 2016). In fact, Turkey seeks to maintain the right to act as ‘protector’ of Muslims in Western Balkans (Vračić 2016), in contrast with Russia’s role in safeguarding pan Slavic interests, combined with abrogating rights to ‘intervene’ (i.e. through mediation).¹¹ The “zero problems” policy implies that Western Balkans would be seen as part of Turkey’s ‘zone of influence’ in which it would seek to keep geopolitical rivals, such as the US, Russia, China, Iran and the GCC countries (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman), at bay. Turkish foreign policy in Western Balkans seems to fall on four pillars: transatlantic institutions, trade, Muslim communities, Erdoganism and the battle with Gülenism (Aydintaşbaş 2019).

¹¹ This somewhat constitutes a reversal of earlier Christian -chiefly French and British- rights to protect the Christian millets in the old Ottoman Empires under the ‘capitulations.’

Some argue that Neo-Ottomanism is overstated. The European fears of Turkish expansion have little basis in reality and are thus exaggerated (Aydıntaşbaş 2019; Zivanovic 2019). There is a separate reality between the real Turkish power in Western Balkans and the domestic rhetoric of Turkish leaders, which is mainly used for domestic consumption (Aydıntaşbaş 2019). In addition, Western Balkans is not perceived as a priority for Turkish foreign policy, as Turkey is predominantly focused on the Syrian conflict and relations with Europe. Lastly, Turkey's capacity to truly carry out an expansionist strategy in the region is non-existent (Aydıntaşbaş 2019, 3). This criticism will be refuted below.

Turkey uses various political tools to exert influence. It derives from the country's adoption of a mediator role in the post-2000 period in facilitating trilateral meetings between (among others) Serbia and BiH, Serbia and Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia (*ibid*). On top of its mediating efforts, Turkey has also encouraged the integration of Western Balkans states into the international community, most prominently Kosovo, despite sensitivities owing to Turkey's position towards its own Kurdish minorities. Turkey has had an active role in the process of capacity building and stabilizing the region throughout the turmoil in the 1990s, through NATO, the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative, Stability Pact, and the South-East European Initiative, to name a few. Additionally, the Embassies and Consulates are utilized across the region to represent Turkish political views and lobby accordingly. The Turkish Adalet ve Kalkınma (AK) Party's assertiveness and active diplomacy assisted in improving the relations between Western Balkans and Turkey (*ibid*, 1). In addition, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) is also active within this realm, as the Agency is, in their own words "[...] an implementing intermediary of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in the countries with whom we have shared values, as well as in many other areas and countries" (TIKA). Yunus Emre Institut is active as well on the cultural sphere. This has been confirmed also by our interviewees in Turkey as well (Spring 2019).

In the processes of assessment of its political influence in Western Balkans, Turkey's complex relationship with the EU is to be considered as well next to its relationship with the US, Russia and China (Ducourtieux and Stroobants 2018). Turkey has applied for EU membership in 1987 and has formally entered negotiations in 2005. Throughout this period, their policies vis-a-vis Western Balkans reflected their own European aspirations and strategic values (Krastev 2019; European Parliament 2018). However, this has changed with President Erdogan's anti-European sentiments. The concerns of the Union with regard to Turkey's attitudes towards European values, next to the ways in which Turkey has handled the Migration Crisis, the Syrian Conflict, as well as their relationships with Russia have undermined the belief that Turkey is committed to pro-Western values (European Parliament 2018). In fact, Turkey is shifting away from the EU, as seen with the violations of human rights at home and abroad, violations of the NATO principle of interoperability by purchasing missiles from Russia, and fighting against the US allies in Syria (D. L. Phillips 2019b).

Parallels can be drawn between the soft power exerted by Turkey and Russia. Both countries similarly rely on cultural and religious ties, as well as its historical affinities (Sadriu 2019; Bechev 2019). However, Turkey is not as external to the region as Russia is. Its history and location make it part of the region and legitimizes its presence (Bechev 2015). In a scenario where the EU withdraws from Western Balkans, the latter countries may shift their orientation more towards Turkey than towards other countries that have exerted some type of influence, despite the strong religious ties, as the case with the Gulf states, or strong economic relationship, as the case with

China. The strong historical ties render Turkey as one of the most important international influencers in Western Balkans. This has been reaffirmed by the recent statements by Macron, illustrating the European suspicions towards Turkey's intentions in Western Balkans, pointing out that he does not want Western Balkans "to turn towards Turkey or Russia" (Weise 2018). While some authors argue that there is no Turkish-Russian coordination in Western Balkans (Aydintaşbaş 2019), the interviews indicate that Turkey's policy regarding security has been aligned more with the Russian one, and it is perceived to also collaborate with Serbia. Counter intuitively, the interview data also suggests that religious radicalisation is being supported by Turkey-Russia alliance (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, NGO Officials, Journalists, Spring 2017/18, BiH, NM).

It is important to note that most of the Western Balkans states have explicitly and implicitly shown support toward Turkey, Erdogan and his policies (Balkan Insight 2018; Colborne and Edwards 2018), be it for their management of the Refugee Crisis or for showing support in the aftermath of the attempted 2016 coup (Weise 2018). In addition, it is simpler to spread influence over the former "Ottoman heartland" (Ugur Ekinci 2013), also due to the *creation of new independent states*, and the *power vacuum left by the EU's dwindling attention* for the Western Balkans states (Vračić 2016). While the arguments above show that Turkey is shifting away from the EU aspirations, this may as well attract the region to shift away from the EU accession processes as well.

While the nostalgic *desire to revive the Ottoman Empire's old geography* as a power center of contemporary world politics may play a role in Turkey's involvement in Western Balkans, the greater motivation thereof may perhaps be Turkey's desire to *strengthen and integrate* its political, economic and cultural position in the region, as part of its quest to become *the leading external actor* with strong social and cultural ties to Western Balkans people (Ugur Ekinci 2013 14). In fact, Erdogan aims to become a leading external actor in Western Balkans but through utilizing pan Ottomanism. Janusz Bugajski, a senior fellow at CEPA, argues that "Turkey's president portrays himself as a protector of Muslims in former Ottoman dominions" (Kljakic 2016). He also uses this image in domestic politics, as millions of Turkish citizens have Bosnian or Albanian backgrounds (Deutsche Welle 2018). Since 2009, Turkey has *greatly increased its visits by both high and low government officials to Western Balkans states*. These visits have been accompanied by an ever-growing number of *bilateral agreements* as well as the establishment of regional organizations (Ugur Ekinci 2013 9-10). Strikingly, Vucic and Erdogan have strengthened their relations due to frequent visits, despite the lack of religious commonalities (Bjelotomic 2018). Interviewees view this as a part of long-term strategy in Western Balkans of Russia-Turkey reapproachment (Anonymous Interviews NGO Officials, Academics, Spring 2019, Serbia, North Macedonia and Kosovo). As a fully pledged NATO member state, Turkey has openly expressed its commitment toward North Macedonia's accession to the organization (Marusic 2019b). The Turkish Deputy Foreign Minister, Faruk Kaymakci, said Turkey is North Macedonia's "biggest supporter when it comes to NATO Membership" (Altiparmakova 2019). Lastly, NATO and the EU representatives view the role of Turkey as un-problematic since they are supportive of EU and NATO integration for the Western Balkan countries, and Turkey is already a member of NATO (Anonymous Interviews, International Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium).

The statement supporting the North Macedonia's membership by the Turkish Deputy FM has come at an interesting time. North Macedonia's newly elected President, Stevo Pendarovski, confirmed the request by Turkey to North Macedonia for the extradition of 15 individuals allegedly linked to the Gülen Movement. Some are Macedonian citizens, whereas some are Turkish citizens (Turkish Minute 2019). The

extradition has not taken place yet, however, relevant judicial authorities have been weighing in on the situation. The “hunt for Gülenists has been a hot topic in the bilateral relations between the states” (Apostolov 2019). The extradition request has been previously made by the Turkish Minister of Defense, Hulusi Akar in April 2019, who, upon his meeting with his Macedonian counterpart, Radmila Shekjerinska, has stated that the terrorist calamity [of the Gülenists] harms bilateral relations (Marusic 2019a). Interviewees indicate that Erdogan asked Bosnian political elites to close Gülen-affiliated colleges and schools (Anonymous Interview, Academic, BiH, Spring 2019). The Gülenist movement - the so called Fethullahist Terrorist Organization (FETO) has caused a great stir in the relationship between the leaders in the region and the Turkish political establishment. While some states, like Kosovo, have complied with the extradition requests by Turkey (Zogiani 2018; Mingardi 2018), Bosnia and Herzegovina has rejected the extradition of a suspected Gülenist and the crackdown on education facilities related to the movement (Sito-Sucic 2018a; Deutsche Welle 2016). Despite close leadership ties, Albania has been pronounced a haven for Gülenists (Michael 2019).

The political leaders of various political parties in the region have very close ties with Erdogan. Some parts of the Albanian political elite views Turkey as ‘brothers’ (Anonymous Interviews, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Interviewees indicate that the political party BESA has close ties with Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Academics, Spring 2019, North Macedonia). Moreover, several elite members are invited for official visits to Turkey. However their influence efforts have also caused resistance. For example, an interviewee representing a common perception among the elites, refused to travel to Turkey since “the Ambassador wanted to redact the speech to make it more ideological” (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). Another interviewee presenting some perceptions among elites points out the Islamization challenge posed by Erdogan: “It is important to understand the intention. How to spread Islamization not Islam. This [Erdogan’s agenda] is an ideological agenda, not religious. It is to spread the anti-West sentiment through religion” (Anonymous Interviews, Academics, NGO Officials, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). It is interesting to note that Turkey backed and recognized the Prespa Agreement.

Turkey’s role seems prominent also in Albania. Interviewees point out that the Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama has good connections with Erdogan (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2018/2019, Albania). This reflects the recent placement of the memorial in the capital. Recently, a memorial commemorating the victims of the failed coup has been set with the backing of the Albanian PM and Erdogan’s support as seen with the presence of the representatives of the Turkish Embassy. The has been viewed as being controversial as it has not been announced publicly and no similar memorial from another country seems to exist in Albania. This raises issues of transparency as well as political influence inside Albania into high levels as the memorial was introduced three days before PM Rama traveled to Turkey for a visit into Erdogan’s summer residence (Exit 2019). Several interviewees point out the links between the political elites and Turkey and the potential negative impact, respectively moving away from the EU, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: “There is a law stopping the establishment of political parties on religious grounds. These parties close their eyes for votes. Erdogan’s pressures are really high. There is no plan B. If the EU enlargement is rejected then Balkans will be placed in a quarantine” (Anonymous Interview, Journalist, Fall 2018, Albania). Moreover, some institutions are known to be supported by Gülen, which the state allows to function.

However, the government seems to be fractionalized towards Turkey. An investigation by Balkan Insights shows that regardless of the close relationship between the Prime Minister Rama and Turkish President Erdogan, Albania was one of the many countries in which Turkish citizens affiliated with the Gülen movement have sought refuge since 2016. However, not all of them have officially applied for asylum. One of the main reasons for not doing so is the persistent fear considering the close relationship between Turkey and Albania and especially the economic influence that Turkey yields through investments. Politically, Erdogan has invited Tirana authorities to shut down all Gülen related schools in Albania which is considered a terrorist organization allegedly affiliated with planning the coup d'état of July 2016. So far, no Turkish citizen was extradited to Turkey and it is estimated that around 60 families are residing in Albania after the crackdown by the Turkish government was unleashed. Nevertheless, the recent visit of Rama in Turkey might change the turn of events. According to media reports, Turkish interior minister is happy with Rama's approach towards Gülen movement and that "serious decisions have been taken during these meetings" (Gazeta Tema 2019).

Moreover, Erdogan is using the Marif Foundation to promote its national interest in Albania through schools and kindergarten to counter the Gülenist movement groups (Mejdini 2019). Ermir Hoxha, an Albanian journalist argues that "more than educational intervention, Marif is political [and] Now it needs to be seen whether education will prevail over politics in these schools" (ibid). On the other hand Genc Pollo, an opposition member said that rules regarding international schools are well outlined: "It is emphasized that schools should demonstrate a national and secular nature, not engage in politics, not incite racism, terrorism, anti-Semitism etc,... guarantee pro-European and Western orientation and values, promoting democracy and individual freedoms" (ibid). However, since he claims that there is a lack of political will to enforce them, then the burden is placed on the student to be resilient from "the *political and cultural spirit* of today's Turkey" and engage only within the education (ibid). This is also viewed as 'cultural aggression' as Marif Foundation is attempting to buy all Albanian schools (ibid).

The following quote from an interviewee shows the intricacies of the Turkey relations with Albania but which reflect authoritarianism-democracy, East-West dilemma processes across the region, preferring the former rather than the latter due to familiarity with the former, perceived to care more and provide socio and economic rights, such as the right to food, work and so on:

"In the Balkans, there was never democracy in history, so there will always be a dictator leading. Why do we need democracy? Look what we have now here in Albania. All elites trying their best to maintain themselves in power. This is a reality. And we learn fast so Erdogan is doing well. He is a great leader, can push back the Europe to the place where it needs to be. And also we follow more Erdogan type of democracy or authoritarianism, and this suits more to us in Albania rather than democracy. What is also better in democracy? The elite gets everything and workers nothing, can barely make it to feed themselves, here in Albania. There is nothing, no jobs, nothing. Everyone wants to migrate. At least people in Turkey have to eat, have dignity, have respect. Erdogan is great. He thinks about his people. US and other people never think of us." (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, Albania).

In Kosovo, Turkey's influence among many interviewees is viewed as very dangerous: "Turkey's influence is more worrisome rather than terrorism" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Fall 2019, Kosovo). PM Thaci in Kosovo is as well viewed to have close relationship with Erdogan since 90's (Anonymous

Interviews, NGO Officials, Academia, Fall 2018/Spring 2019, Kosovo). Several other interviewees argue that 'Vetvendosja' in Kosovo is influenced by Turkey as well. While Vetvendosja members were interviewed, they diverted the questions toward Serbia representing the problem rather than Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

The consequences of these influences can be seen now for instance in the society. For instance, some argue pointed out that the Ottomans were not repressive, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: "all documents existed in Albanian, thus we could learn freely Albanian" (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). Inquiring on Turkey's role among the political elites is usually encountered with hesitance in Kosovo, and some argue that the focus of the political debate should lie on Serbia rather than Turkey, as illustrated by one interviewee saying "Serbia is the real problem for Kosovo" (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The interviewees hesitancy suggests that Turkey's role in the Balkans is apparently a delicate subject, one that merits further inquiry. Other political party members on the other side argue that Turkey represents a long-standing ally with historical and cultural ties, and should therefore be endorsed fully by Kosovo.

Moreover, history is attempted to be changed by some political party members but it is noticeable also among the ordinary citizens. The following interview demonstrates it. For example, a political party member, claimed that youth is turning toward Turkey since Albanians are closer to them culturally and historically. He considered himself more Turkish than Albanian, as he believes that Albanians are originally Turkish. Moreover, Turkey was seen by the interviewee as an ally rather than occupier historically. The close connections are desired and he foresees that it will increase in the future (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). The Turkish influenced political parties are seen to portray religion as crucial for the development of the Albanian identity, providing a different interpretation from the Albanian Rilindja, such as Sami Frasher, who was one of the prominent leaders working on the Albanian national awakening. Their struggle led to the creation of the state Albania in 1912. Moreover, an interviewee notes that a pro-Ottoman version of history is being distributed, as Turks emancipating Albanians and strengthening them is being distributed among the media and population (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). Moreover, scholarships are given to historians to conduct PhDs on the role of the Ottoman Empire, especially in Kosovo (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2017, Imam, North Macedonia).

Another example illustrates also the polarization in the society. In a death in a town, men were talking about politics and many said that Erdogan is their leader and without him, Albanians in Kosovo would still be occupied. Interestingly, the role of the US was never mentioned in the humanitarian intervention (Anonymous Interview, NGO Official, Spring 2019, Kosovo). Lastly, interviewees emphasize the negative impact of the domestic politics, as illustrated by the following quote: "votes are the most important thing, so they [political parties] are compromising [with religion]", such as VV and BESA (Anonymous Interview, Governmental Official, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). This shows the depth of the Turkish influence, not only among elites but also the ordinary population whose perceptions seems to be altered gradually towards Turkey.

Vucic and Dodik similarly maintains close relationship with Erdogan as well, as seen in the number of frequent state visits. Interviewees point out that the autocratic tendencies of these leaders, alike with Erdogan, provide a closer understanding amongst each other and assist in maintaining the relationships, except

for the Sanjak region which provides additional similarities on religious grounds (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Serbia). Moreover, Vucic may foster this relationship to maintain a leverage in the region with existing problems between Serbia and other areas, such as Kosovo, Sandjak, Vojvodina, RS. Several interviews uncover that there is a perception that Turkey operates through the SDA party (Anonymous Interviews, Academia, Spring 2018, BiH). Turkey allegedly fosters relations with providing cash, and the Bosniaks are believed to have more sympathy towards Erdogan than Turks themselves (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, BiH). With the lack of prosperity regarding NATO and the EU membership, Turkey for them is rendered as the first ally.

Gülen movement has been very active in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1997, mainly in the field of education. According to a media report by Radio Free Europe, there are several hundred kindergartens, high schools and universities who are part of the Gülen network. It is dedicated to investing in education for the lower and middle classes. Gülen schools are present in all major centres in the Muslim-Croat Federation, including Sarajevo, Mostar, Tuzla, Zenica and Bihac (Knezevic 2016). However, most of the news on the Gülen movement after the coup d'etat in Turkey in 2016 include Turkey's demand for the extradition of Turkish citizens residing in BiH suspicious of collaborating with the Gülen movement. This request was also discussed during the last meeting between Erdogan and Dodik which took place in July 2019 (Dragojlovic 2019). Local media such as N1 and Independent Balkan News Agency, have also reported that the Ministry of Security of BiH received a list with names of supports of Fetullah Gülen from Ankara (N1 Sarajevo 2019); (Dragojlovic 2019). However, Bosnian authorities have rejected Turkey's request to extradite one of the eight citizens wanted by Turkey due to lack of legal grounds as of July 2019 after ongoing request from the Turkish government. This can possibly set a strong precedent for other Turkish citizens currently living in BiH.

The Security Influence Trends

The relationship between Western Balkans and Turkey in terms of security should also be seen through the lens of NATO membership and accession (MFA Turkey). Officially, all countries want to join, or are members to NATO, and officially Turkey's goal for the region is accession for all. Regarding NATO, the current purchase of S-400 missile systems from Russia raises questions regarding its NATO membership. The improving ties with Russia, while also being in the process of acquiring F-35s from the US, makes the relationship complex. The US has currently withheld its delivery of the stealth fighters while the Turkish Minister of Defense claims that the S-400 sale is a done deal (Yegin 2019). This violates the NATO agreement of interoperability. This geopolitical change is mirrored as well in the Western Balkan region as there is a common view among interviewees that "Russia is deployed via Turkey" (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Fall 2018/2019, North Macedonia).

Additional drivers of a rift between Turkey and NATO is Turkey's involvement in Syria, with regards to arming ISIS, and with regards to its war crimes against the Kurds in Syria (D. L. Phillips 2018). David Philipps argues that a break between Turkey and NATO is possible, Turkey is Islamist, anti-American and anti-democratic (D. L. Phillips 2019a), even though its membership has many benefits for Turkey (ibid). Current tensions with the de facto leader of NATO, the US, complicates

this situation and it is currently unclear regarding the path forward, mainly because there is no procedure for removing a country from NATO.

During the 1990s, Turkey became involved in supporting Muslims in the region. This represented an alignment with NATO at a time when Turkey was looking westward toward an EU accession. Such support took the form of military and peacebuilding activities as Bosnian Muslims were given covert military support through the provision of arms (Ugur Ekinci 2013), the smuggling of weapons into Bosnia and Herzegovina, and participation in NATO airstrikes in FRY (Vračić 2016). At the same time, Turkey participated in NATO's Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey also partook in *humanitarian intervention* in Kosovo through the peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) (European Parliament 2017), along with its military and peacebuilding efforts, since the early 1990's. Kosovo also allowed the extradition of teachers (one being wrongly identified and extradited) with suspected links to the Gülen movement, which resulted in a controversial situation and a lack of credibility of the state of Kosovo, who has been declared independent on the basis of systematic human rights violations. The legality of extraditions has been questioned in the media and by political figures (Naddaff 2018). This incident resulted in strained bilateral relations with various countries. Moreover, several interviewees claim that the extradition has been organized by allegedly both Turkish and Serbian intelligence with the permission of the PM Hashim Thaqi. Some interviewees claim that it is a money driving extradition, while other interviewees point out that this extradition aims to damage politically Kosovo in front of the international community (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, North Macedonia, Kosovo).

In the military sphere, Turkey has provided training and given grants to officers of Western Balkans states, especially from Bosnia and Herzegovina in order for them to attend Turkish military schools (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 167). Similarly, the Kosovo Security Force members went for a training in Turkey (ibid). Likewise, Turkey has donated military equipment and has commanded the Albanian contingent in Afghanistan (European Parliament 2017). Additionally, according to an interviewee, in the Ministry of Defense of Albania, there is permanent Turkish mission for cooperation between the two countries. This is viewed positively by interviewees, since the Turkish army is not politicized and very professional (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Spring 2019, Albania).

Turkey, namely Erdogan, is viewed by many interviewees as maintaining a key role to counter violent extremism through Hanafi ideology, which is viewed as closer to the Islam that Albanians follow (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, NGO Officials, Spring/Fall 2018, North Macedonia and Kosovo). Therefore, Turkey is viewed as an actor that could counter Wahabi influence in the region due to the cultural similarities.

However, several interviewees also uncover a different role of Turkey regarding terrorism, as a country being used as a transit route for terrorists traveling to Syria, preparatory training/brainwashing ground as well as a ground for illegal trafficking of terrorists and victims (Anonymous Interviews, Spring/Fall 2018, Spring 2019, Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia). To illustrate this, the following life-story told by a member of a family will be explained. His cousin, a young gay, who was a

good student has followed training in Struga, North Macedonia. His cousin claims that his brainwashing process began there, and after two weeks, he went to Turkey, where he remained for three months for another training, labeled as financial training. However when the youngster returned, he was incapable to interact, except saying “Good will save us” and reciting the Quran all day, which indicates trauma and brainwashing. He stays alone in this room and only prays all day (Anonymous Interview, Family member, Spring 2018, North Macedonia). This view was common story among several interviewees across the Western Balkan region, which indicates that Turkey has been used as a training ground for religious violent extremism.

Moreover, some interviewees view Turkey’s accession in NATO as peculiar due to their religious affiliations, as illustrated by one of the interviewees: “Turkey is unnaturally integrated in NATO because NATO is a sort of a Christian-Judaism alliance, there are no Muslims or Orthodoxs there” (Anonymous Interview, Political Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). Moreover, with their recent withdrawal from the Western values, some countries in the NATO are questioning internally their right to remain a member (Anonymous Interviews, Political Officials, Spring 2019, Belgium). For greater detail regarding the political-security nexus, please read the Turkey’s political sub-section.

The Cultural and Religious Influence Trends

First, it is important to note that Turkey has a political interest to promote their cultural ties due to elections. In fact, Turkish people living abroad can vote in elections (Firat Buyuk, Clapp, and Haxhiaj 2019). Therefore, there is a high amount of diaspora in Western Balkans that will be targeted for this purpose. Family relations are crucial but they will wane through time (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Fall 2018, Kosovo).

In terms of economic aid for cultural activities, 18 percent of the global aid budget goes to Western Balkans, which is a comparatively large part of the total aid budget, but not enough to make a substantial difference in these economies (Aydintasbas 2019). This aid is focused around Turkish language classes, renovating Ottoman mosques and in general on the Muslim population. It more specifically reconstructed objects related to the Ottoman period (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Fall 2007/2018, Kosovo, Albania, North Macedonia). Following the end of the war, Turkish investment increased, with large amounts being provided for the (re-)building of Islamic educational institutions across the region (Birnbaum 2013; Türbedar 2010). Moreover, Turkey acted as a mediator, and has attempted to reconcile the division between the two main Islamic Religious Communities organizations in the Sandzak region of Serbia (Barlovac 2011). Turkey has been reaching out to Balkan Muslims through the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) for decades (Bechev 2019). Interviewees explicate that Diyanet pays imams to serve in North Macedonia (Anonymous Interviews, Fall 2018, North Macedonia). Currently, Erdogan uses the Balkans to make the case that he is the leader of the wider (Sunni) Muslim community (ibid). However he also built relations with majority non-Muslim countries, such as President Vucic of Serbia. Some argue though that that Turkish Islamic NGOs are perceived as positive as they promote *a more tolerant interpretation of Islam* when compared to the Arab-led Wahhabism that has also penetrated Western Balkans (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 11). However, precaution is raised since Turkey supports Islamism

as in terms of ideology rather than religion, which poses challenges for the region and the world (D. L. Phillips 2019b).

Turkey employs *cultural* measures to increase its influence in the region, through restorations of old Ottoman buildings, cataloguing of Ottoman manuscripts in libraries, providing public courses on Islamic art and painting, the provision of scholarships to study abroad (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 23), establishing numerous Turkish-language schools, universities and mosques (*ibid*, 2), and instituted visa-free travel for Western Balkans citizens (*ibid*, 166). But perhaps Turkey's greatest *soft power tool* manifests in its ability to nurture demographic and cultural linkages – a phenomenon that has been reinforced considerably through the popularity of Turkish pop culture (e.g. Turkish TV shows) (European Parliament 2017). In addition, Diyanet (Turkey's ministry of religion) and (TIKA) have channeled the majority of their efforts into populations with which Turkey shared an intrinsic relationship, and have (in doing so) made Muslim the privileged beneficiaries of Turkish soft power (*ibid*, 6). Marif Foundation is also used to promote Turkish policies. Scholarships across the region are offered. In this case, 300 EUR students have received to study in Turkey (Anonymous Interviews, Family members, Spring 2018, North Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo).

The expansion of cultural ties is also due to the growing Turkish diaspora (Firat Buyuk, Clapp, and Haxhiaj 2019) in the states of the Western Balkans region. Throughout the 1990s, migration trends showed that many people, especially from Muslim communities, moved to Turkey due to economic possibilities and higher standard of living, whereas in the late 2010s, the trend is reversed, with many Turkish moving to Western Balkans, basing their families and businesses there (*ibid*). Moreover, an estimate of 10 million Turkish citizens are of Western Balkans descent (Petrović and Reljic 2011), while more than one million Turkish minorities are believed to be living in Western Balkans (Birnbaum 2013), and 300.000 Turkish-speaking people live in Kosovo (MFA Turkey). Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly mentions the "existence of the Bosniaks, Montenegrin Muslims and Albanians comprising 17% of the population of Montenegro" (MFA Turkey), as a motivation for the intensification of bilateral relations. Similarly, it states the "Sandzak region, where Bosnians having many relatives in Turkey live, is viewed as "a bridge of friendship" by both countries. Therefore, the region plays an important role in the context of bilateral relations (MFA Turkey).

Despite a recent EU report concluding that "Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans remains mainly based on cultural and educational programs offered to those countries with a large Muslim community and steadily developing trade" (European Parliament 2017). Ankara's multi-pronged approach towards the region has provoked public debate between few journalists (Vračić 2016).

Turkey has been viewed with skepticism, and has been accused of pursuing "Neo-Ottoman" (i.e. imperialistic) aspirations (Ugur Ekinci 2013, 24). In order to portray the Ottoman Empire in a better light, the Turkish government has requested the revision of history textbooks in which the Ottoman Empire is often portrayed as a brutal occupier instead of a liberator actor, not only in Western Balkans states, but also in EU member states such as Bulgaria (*ibid*, 17). Sometimes, Turkish leaders even consider some countries in the region to be 'Turkish' (Vračić 2016, 10, 15). Interviewees point out that polarization among the society is being created from some individuals viewing themselves as Turks rather than Albanians. This may be a minority of

individuals however some interviewees were part of the political elite, resulting in a higher potential to amplify such sentiments through political decision making and intensify the impact on the society.

Moreover, attempts to destroy the archives in Kosovo have been observed, meaning that attempts to erase the Albanian history and culture are present. Even digitalization of books has been rejected, as that would cement the current history portraying Turkey as an occupier (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Political Official, Fall 2018, Kosovo). In addition, cultural and religious ties are strengthened through bottom up societal activities such as holding an iftar (the meal eaten by Muslims after sunset during Ramadan) in the city center of Pristina. This resulted in criticism from some interviewees which is illustrated in the following: "It is strange. All roads were blocked. This is a big problem and no one reported it. It never happened before. I lived in this neighborhood for decades before the war. How do you do this?" Moreover, in the university, students that speak only Turkish follow Albanian courses and Professors are reported to be told by students to speak to the Dean of the University in order for them to pass exams. This illustrates the Turkish influence not only in religious aspects but also on education in higher level (Anonymous Interview, Academia, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

However others view the Turkish influence as 'no harm to the national Albanian identity'. However, an imam illustrated the attempts to re-engineer the identity through modifying history which represents a common picture in the Albanian inhabited territories: "imagine now, it turns out that the allegiance for the establishment of the Albanian state between Egerem bez Vlora, Ismail Qemali, Hasan Prishtina, Esat Pashë Toptani who did the agreement inside the Egerem Bez Vlora's Residence in Taksim neighborhood in Istanbul did so while swearing in Quran" and they are denying the Albanian origin to Mother Tereza calling her a Turk (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Spring 2018, Albania).

Another technique that is used to promote cultural links is the renaming of streets. The renaming of certain streets is taking place in Bosnia from Serb/Yugoslav names into Ottoman names (Zavod za Informatiku i Statistiku), which, according to an interviewee is due to Turkey's influence in the area (Anonymous Interview, Spring 2019, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Another example is the Sultan Murad I shrine complex in Kosovo, which has recently turned into a significant attraction for Turkish state visits and tourists, creating a Turkish historical landmark outside of Turkey (Sadriu 2019).

Turkey is also exerting influence through media content, which best portrayed by the expansion of Turkish soap operas on a multitude of TV channels in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro (European Parliament 2017). Not do they only serve as a booster of the Turkish image in the eyes of the local population, but they also have a historical revisionist penchant. Over the past ten years, almost every TV outlet in Western Balkans has broadcasted at least one Turkish soap opera (Ely 2019). Turkey is the 2nd biggest exporter of televised content in Western Balkans, trailing behind the US. North Macedonia is at the forefront of "consuming" Turkish Soap Opera content - they are the second most watched type of program (Macedonian Institute for Media, 2017), after news casts. Despite the fact that such TV content is not an official product of the Turkish government, Ankara is appreciative of it and assists the production houses to disseminate their products.

This type of portraying soft power by Turkey is not only prominent in Western Balkans: the same is done in North Africa and in the Middle East (Arab Weekly 2018).

Religious schools have been as well built from various Turkish foundations, i.e. Istanbul Foundation, Marif Foundation and so on (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Officials, Imams, Fall/Spring 2018, Western Balkans). Interviewees outline the main media outlets used for propagating pro Erdogan content are Era and Shenja in North Macedonia. Moreover, the International Balkan University is promoting pro-Erdogan content as well (Anonymous Interviews, NGO Official, Spring/ Fall 2018, North Macedonia). Cultural centers, language and computer courses, orphan houses, girls are as well used by the Turkish to promote their agenda, as an imam said: "We provide the religious culture since people do not believe in God" (Anonymous Interviews, Imams, Spring/ Fall 2018, Albania). Al Nun is also believed to promote Turkish pro-Erdogan sentiments. In Northern Macedonia, for instance, Turkey is trying to deepen its ties with the ethnic Albanians by engaging on messaging Albanians. An interview explained how a high number of documentaries are filmed highlighting the significance of cultural buildings and portraying them as part of a joint Albanian-Turkish heritage (Anonymous Interviews, Journalist, Spring/ Fall 2018, Albania). Turkish books are provided to 3500 Albanian children (in NM) to insight the learning of the Quran, which supplemented in the curriculum of Turkish school programs (Anonymous Interview, Imam, Fall 2017, North Macedonia). This shows the increasing importance of Turkey in North Macedonia and it raises questions as to whether this role is positive or negative among the Albanian community, since the cultural and religious ties are not being strengthened with the same method as the Serbian community. On the latter, there is a lack of messaging.

Among the ordinary citizens, dissatisfaction has been uncovered with the usage of religion. The many mosques that have been built have also been described in Kosovo as interfering into the personal life. An interviewee explained that before the war, the mosques were not heard, whereas nowadays, the father that works for the parliament needs to stop the meetings since no one can have a conversation while various mosques are praying at the same time and one cannot hear the other. On the other hand, for the child of the parliamentarian, it is absurd how in the garden, she can be disturbed so many times by both the noises by the church bells and the imam's prayers. Her desired solution would be to have the noise within the religious buildings, as she is not against religion but that religion should be seen as something private, rather than disturbing citizens in public spaces and private spaces like at home, in the garden and so on. Moreover, since in each neighborhood mosques have been built, with numerous in disuse, then she suggests to make them spaces to organise open activities (Anonymous Interview, Community Observer, Spring 2019, Kosovo).

Conclusion

Turkey's resurgence in this region derives from its active employment of a combination in foreign policy tools including: military, political, economic and cultural instruments. This study demonstrates that Turkey has had significant influence in multiple spheres that it has been steadily increasing, due to Turkey rekindling their historical links across the Western Balkan region, which other international influencers lack. Firstly, Turkey has upped its economic investments in

all Western Balkans states, focusing on the sectors of infrastructure, telecommunications, mining, banking, development aid, health sector and tourism. Strikingly, Serbia has been approached for economic investments despite the lack of religious commonalities.

Additionally, the political sway of Turkey in the region has been increasing. The most political interferences are observable in North Macedonia and Kosovo, most notably regarding their domestic conflict with Gülen, which creates security risks in Western Balkans and beyond. Moreover, Turkey's recent rapprochement with Russia heightens the likelihood for the Serbia-Turkey relations to improve, as proven by recent state visits. This political influence may shift the Western Balkans states away from EU norms as Erdogan's rhetoric often targets Europe and the US, which is currently also rethinking its relation with Turkey. Moreover, the changing relations between the US and Turkey and the strengthening of the relations with Russia may violate the interoperability clause of NATO which poses challenges for the future of Turkey to remain a NATO member, compounded by a shift away from Western values. Turkey is also seen as an actor countering Wahabi sects in the Western Balkans.

Politically, Turkey is supporting Islamization of the countries, and attempting to portray themselves as a key regional actor. The long-standing relations can be rationalised by the abundant Turkish diaspora across the West Balkans and, in vise-versa, Turks with Western Balkans descent. Interestingly, some political parties seem to have been influenced by Turkey, namely BESA in NM, Vetvendosje and PM Hashim Thaqi in Kosovo, PM Edi Rama in Albania, SDA in BiH and Vucic seems to have formed strong relations with Erdogan. The leadership styles of both Turkey and Western Balkans states align because of their emphasis on personal relations. Turkey has been mainly focusing on countries with Muslim majorities, along with Serbia. This poses challenges in the long term since the perceptions of ordinary citizens seems to be gradually gravitating towards not only Turkey, but also to the elites who resemble and authoritarian leadership quality. Reasons for this can be apportioned to the lack of EU foresight towards the Western Balkans. Therefore, the Western Balkan states are also beginning to display autocratic tendencies which may further remove the region from the spheres of the EU and democracy. This calls for further engagement with the EU enlargement agenda to connect the Western Balkans region with the rest of Europe in order to bolster European peace and security.

Lastly, yet most importantly, Turkey's religious and cultural influence is being exerted in many ways through restorations of old Ottoman buildings, Islamic building, public courses, scholarships, exchanges, media, diaspora, visas and the renaming of streets. Strikingly, history is attempted to be erased by removing the image of Turkey as an occupier. This revisionist narrative is mirrored by "Neo-Ottoman" aspirations among parts of the Muslim population in the region. As a result, Islamization poses a threat if Erdogan remains in power, since the region has historically been dominated by Turkish culture.