

THE BALKANS AS A TEST FOR THE MILITARIZATION OF TÜRKİYE'S FOREIGN POLICY HYPOTHESIS

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Abstract: The Balkans has always had important strategic significance for Türkiye due to its geographical proximity and historical, political, and economic ties. The objectives of this article are several: first, to offer a brief information for the Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP in Turkish) since 2002. The text argues that the main tool of the Ankara's engagement with the region is the soft power. Secondly, another aim of the text is to explore whether features of the Turkish foreign policy in other regions are also applicable to the Balkans. While most authors note an increased militarization of the Turkish foreign policy in the period 2016 – 2020, especially in the Middle East, after extensive review of the foreign policy instruments, used by Türkiye, the article demonstrates that the “soft power” remain the key characteristic of Türkiye's foreign policy vis-à-vis the Balkans. Thus, it can be argued that the Balkans are a case study, which shows that the hypothesis of the militarisation of the Turkish foreign policy is not universally applicable. The use of the hard power in the Middle East by Türkiye is to counter a direct threats to its national security, while there are no such threats, emanating from the Balkans. At the same time, the NATO and EU-integration are other factors, pacifying the region and leading to emphasize on the use of non-military foreign policy instruments.

Keywords: The Balkans, Türkiye, foreign policy, soft power, militarization

Introduction

The Balkans has a significant importance for Türkiye because of their geographic proximity, especially for Istanbul, and the most industrially and economically developed Western region of the country near the Sea of Marmara and the Straits. The Balkans are the gate of Türkiye to the West, and the bulk of Türkiye's trade with Europe is carried out via the Balkans. In addition to this, Türkiye and region has historical, ethnic and religious ties due to the Ottoman rule of the Balkan lands and Turkish and Muslim minorities living in the Balkans.

During the interwar Türkiye signed bilateral friendship treaties with Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Yugoslavia, as well as the multilateral Balkan Entente with Greece, Yugoslavia and Romania in 1934. The primary aim of Türkiye was to counter growing Italian revisionism in the Eastern Mediterranean (and for the other countries in the pact - Bulgaria) via collective security system. After World War II, the bipolar world restricted substantially the Turkish sphere of action in the Peninsula. Encouraged by the USA, Greece, Türkiye and Yugoslavia signed the Second Balkan Pact in 1954, but Belgrade's reconciliation with Moscow and the flare-up of Turkish-Greek tensions over Cyprus rendered it defunct a short time later (Mufti, 2009: 31). During the Cold War, Türkiye maintained correct, but aloof relations with Bulgaria, Romania and Yugoslavia. Relations with Greece were highly problematic on account of Cyprus, while Albania was in self-isolation from the world.

In a nutshell, the opportunity structures for Turkish engagement in the Balkans were very weak during the Interwar and Cold War periods. The difficult communications, the restricted economic contacts, lack of the concept of 'soft power' or its tools were a barrier for a serious Turkish penetration into the Balkans.

The interest of the many international actors, including Türkiye, towards the Balkans significantly increased during the breakup of Yugoslavia wars. Ankara was actively involved on the international arena in the US and UN-led diplomatic campaign for military intervention against the Serbs. Aiming at balancing Greece, Ankara focused on developing strategic ties with Albania and Republic of North Macedonia (RNM).¹ The strategists in Ankara believe that influence on RNM would break at the middle also a possible Serbian-Greek "Orthodox" axis in the Balkans, which would be detrimental of the Turkish interests. Türkiye

1 The official name of the country since 11 January 2019 is Republic of North Macedonia (RNM). Due to the dispute about the name of the country with Greece and the lack of official recognition of the name, from 1991 to 2019 the country was frequently refer as Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). In this text the current name of the country will be used, regardless of the period.

developed its trade relations with Bulgaria and Romania as well, while Sofia and Bucharest relied on Ankara's support in their NATO bid.

Turkish state activism in the Balkans during the 1990s was restrained due to the fact that the country suffered from three parallel weaknesses: political, foreign policy and economic (the crises in 1994, 2000, 2001). The political instability was the result of fragmented parliaments, which brought to light eleven patchwork coalition governments between 1990 and 2002. Additionally, the foreign ministry saw the change of 13 foreign ministers, which made following a consistent policy difficult. At the same time, Turkish institutions remained preoccupied with domestic affairs, notably the war against the Kurdistan Workers' Party, and the Balkans remained relatively low priority.

The relative lack of state involvement of Türkiye was compensated by the Turkish non-state actors. Turkish religious groups stepped on the Balkans in the early 1990s. The local context was favorable, since the collapse of the secular socialist model, the subsequent economic crisis and the war in some of the countries created nationalist and religious mobilization, resulted in a rediscovery of religion.

Among the pioneers were Turkish Sufi Orders (*cemaat/tarikat*) and neo-Sufi communities. The starting point for the religious and educational efforts of these groups was usually Albania in the midst of a crisis in the 1990s, and during the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), a number of Turkish charity organizations provided assistance to the Bosnian Muslims. After the wars in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, their actions spread towards those two countries, as well as towards the North Macedonia. The choice of these countries was logical both due to the deteriorated socio-economic conditions, and on account of the fact that certain *tarikats* had been preserved in Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia since the Ottoman times. These Turkish Islamic charities have played an important role in establishing contacts between the pro-Islamic civil society in Türkiye and Muslim communities and institutions in the Western Balkans. (Solberg, 2007) After 9/11, due to US pressure, some of the Salafi and Wahhabi actors were arrested, and the others were forced to leave the Balkans. This facilitated considerably the possibility of Turkish religious organizations penetrating into the Balkans.

Türkiye's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans During the Early Years of the Justice and Development Party's Rule

A new era in Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans begins when the Justice and Development Party (JDP, also known by its Turkish abbreviation, AKP) came to power in Türkiye in 2002. Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans become more active due to two groups of reasons - internal and the regional conjuncture. Domestically, the JDP formed the first single-party government in two decades and began large-scale structural reforms aimed at European integration of the country. Relative political stabilization and favorable international conditions lead to economic growth.

Türkiye's increased activism was also favored by the regional situation. By 2001, the conflicts in the Balkans had been subdued. By the year 2000, most Balkan countries (with the exception of Croatia, Kosovo and Serbia) had generally already completed their internal economic and political transformations related to the transition from one-party to multiparty regimes and from a centralized economy to capitalist free market economy and the period of adaptation to the new conditions has passed. Taking advantage of the favorable global situation, the Balkan countries are experiencing good economic growth.

During the first years of JDP government, Türkiye sought consolidation and strengthening of its relations with the countries in the region, predominantly in the economic sphere, but this continue the trend from the previous decade, so it was entirely within the Atlantic paradigm, meaning its foreign policy actions were in line with the EU and U.S. policies (Rašidagić & Hesova, 2020: 101), (Андреев, 2021).

Two factors are important for the development of the economic ties of Türkiye with the Balkan countries. The first one are the free trade agreements (FTA). After the Customs Union between Türkiye and the EU came into force in 1996, Ankara concluded FTA with almost all other Balkan states: Romania (1997), Bulgaria (1998), North Macedonia (1999), Bosnia and Croatia (2002) and Albania (2006), after all these countries had signed their own association agreements with the EU. The last countries were Montenegro (2008) and Serbia (2009), due to obstacles after the Montenegrin independence (Bechev, 2012: 136). Secondly, the end of the conflicts in the Western Balkans opened new possibilities for the trade relations between Türkiye and the region. Under the AKP, trade with these countries rose six-fold from 3.6 billion USD in 2002 to 18.6 billion USD in 2008 and to remain steady above 20 billion annually after that. This was part of a general trend. The amount of trade with other regions also grew during that

period. However, despite the rise, the share of the Balkans in Türkiye's foreign trade never exceeded 6.1 per cent that had been reached in 2007 (Muhasilovic, Bosnian-Turkish relations, 2022: 137) The cumulative value of Turkish foreign direct investments (FDI) in the Balkans increased as well, and in 2009 it stood at around USD 4.6 billion, while the total value of Turkish construction projects in the Balkan countries during the 1994–2009 period was around USD 8.8 billion (Türbedar, 2011: 142).

Turkish construction companies also built some big infrastructural sites in the Balkans, including highways. Turkish companies invest in other strategic sectors such as communications, transportation and banking, having at least one bank with Turkish capital in each Balkan state.

In the meantime, Türkiye made efforts to attain agreements for visa-free travel with all Balkan states that are not EU members, and these efforts were finalized at the start of the next stage in the Turkish foreign policy vis-à-vis the Balkans. Due to all these changes, interactions between Türkiye and the Balkans became easier, cheaper and quicker.

Ahmet Davutoğlu and Turkey's Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans

In 2009, Ahmet Davutoğlu, an IR Scholar and foreign policy adviser to the then Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, was appointed as a Foreign Minister. Thus, Davutoglu gets the opportunity to put his ideas into practice. In a number of texts written in his capacity of foreign minister, he clearly presented the principles on which he wished the Turkish foreign policy to be built. They comprise rhythmic and proactive, not reactive diplomacy, multi-dimensional foreign policy (opening new vistas, not focusing solely on the relations with the West), zero problems with neighbors, and desire Türkiye to be an order-instituting actor (*düzen kurucu*) (Davutoğlu, 2012). A document published by the Turkish Foreign Ministry summarizes his views on the Balkans: regional ownership, inclusiveness, regional and European integration, and the establishment of a common stance in regional and international organizations. (Davutoğlu, 2011) His main aim is in short and medium term Türkiye to develop economic partnerships and to establish a strong political, economic and cultural presence, hoping that in the long run it would become a more influential regional power, ideally a pivotal state across different regions (Ekinci 2017, 164-165), including the Balkans and the Middle East.

Certain ambition was obvious from the words and deeds of A. Davutoğlu. In a speech in Sarajevo in 2009 he claimed that the history of the Balkans during the Ottoman period was history of success that can be repeated today by building intercultural cooperation and a joint economic area. Türkiye is the “certain refuge” and “relative” for all Muslim peoples in the Balkans, in the Middle East and in the Caucasus. For that reason, everything happening in those regions is “our problem” and “responsibility.” “If a 1,000 km circle is drawn from Ankara, it comprises 23 countries, each of which is with “our relatives and is expecting something from Türkiye”, Davutoğlu states. He concludes his speech by saying:

“Our history is the same, our fate is the same, and our future is the same. As the Ottoman Balkans had risen to the centre of world politics in the sixteenth century, we will make the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East, together with Turkey, the centre of world politics. This is the aim of Turkish foreign policy and we will achieve this. To provide regional and global peace, we will reintegrate with the Balkans region, the Middle East and the Caucasus, not only for ourselves but for the whole of humanity” (Davutoğlu, 2009).

The emphasis on the use of the so-called “soft power” is among the hallmarks of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s foreign policy. During that period, Türkiye expanded considerably the toolbox that it was using, and built over the efforts of initiatives that had existed earlier as well. The efforts of different state and non-state players were engaged in symphony. However, the use of the soft power as a main tool of Turkish engagement with the region outlived the term of Ahmet Davutoğlu and remain a constant characteristic of Turkish foreign policy in South East Europe ever since.

Mediation was instrumenting that Turkish diplomacy started using frequently all over the world at the time of Davutoğlu. On the Balkans Türkiye launched trilateral mechanism initiatives: regular gatherings of the foreign ministers of Bosnia, Serbia and Türkiye, as well as the foreign ministers of Türkiye, Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia (Demirtaş, 2018: 137-138). In spite of its initial successes, the trilateral mechanism soon exhausted its potential and faced challenges ahead. Although not entire flawless, the economic dimension of the trilateral cooperation has experienced fewer problems than the political one. (Pavlović: 27-35); (Mulalic, 2019: 138). In addition to acting on inter-state level, Türkiye also made efforts to mediate in the relations between the respective states and their Muslim minority, as well as in the disputes within the Islamic communities in the Balkans, e.g. in Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro. (Muhasilovic, 2020: 125-212); (Kelkitli, Turkey and the Western Balkans during the AKP Period, 2013: 97).

The work abroad of Yunus Emre Cultural Centers started from the Balkans. These centres are part of the Yunus Emre Foundation, which was established in 2007, tasked to present Turkish cultural heritage, to promote cultural exchange, to make information about Türkiye available and to provide educational services on Turkish language and culture. The first two centers were established in 2009 in Sarajevo and in Tirana, followed by another one next year in Novi Pazar, the “capital” of the Serbian region of Sandžak, populated by many Muslims. During the inauguration of the centre in Sarajevo Ahmet Davutoğlu was explicit that this was on purpose, because the Bosnian capital is “place that reflects Turkish culture in the best way, ... the city of our common culture. Istanbul and Sarajevo are twin souls.” (Aydın, 2014: 16, 18-19). Currently, 15 out of all 58 (26% of the total) Yunus Emre Cultural Centers are located in the Balkans. Branches of the Institute are active in all Balkan countries, with the exception of Bulgaria, Greece and Slovenia (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü: 14).

In 2010, the Office for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB) was established to support not only Turkish citizens abroad and their associations, but also “related communities” - people who have historically shared the geography and “culture” of the Turks as well as to support students of Turkish or Muslim origin from the Turkic republics and the Balkans to study in Türkiye (Aydın, 2014: 17-18).

The activities abroad of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı), were also enhanced. The Diyanet’s budget expanded more than fourfold since 2006, reaching 35 billion Turkish liras in 2023 (Çakır, 2022). Its personnel have constantly grown as well to 128,000 people in 2020 from 80,000 a couple of years earlier (Sonmez, 2021). In the early 1990s, the principal activities of the Diyanet with respect to the Balkans comprised the theological education of students coming from the region, as well as providing Islamic literature in Turkish and in the local languages. However, the activities in which the Diyanet was involved gradually increased. Coordination Offices for Religious Services in Turkish embassies and Religious Attaché Offices in Turkish General Consulates were created. The Diyanet has Consultancies in every Balkan country except Slovenia. Attaché Offices are active in Bosnia and Romania, while Coordination Offices exist in Greece and Serbia. In Bulgaria there are both a Coordination Office and an Attaché Office. The Twin Cities Programme was launched in 2006, within its framework mufti’s offices in Türkiye cooperated and implemented joint projects with the religious hierarchies in other countries. As of 2015, 215 cities in Türkiye were responsible for the construction of over 100 mosques, Quran courses and madrasahs in 203 sister cities in 95 different countries; 66 of these

cities are from the Balkans, which represents almost a third of all matchings (Muhasilovic, 2018: 70-72).

The Diyanet donates sheep and food packages for the Muslim and Turkish population in various Balkan countries for the Eid al-Adha holiday. Very often during religious holidays Turkish municipal and non-state actors are organizing mass public circumcision ceremonies for predominantly poor families in Bulgaria, Bosnia and Serbia. The Diyanet also provides financial support to official Islamic institutions in the Balkans, especially in Bulgaria. In the past several years, the Diyanet financed the building of the biggest Islamic places of worship in the respective Balkan countries as a symbolic and even physical expression of the Turkish prestige and influence. Among the projects are the biggest mosque in Tirana, the “Central Mosque” in Pristina and a large new mosque in Skopje.

Turkish scholar Ahmet Erdi Öztürk observes that during the AKP era, the Diyanet became a high-profile institution, with more conservative worldview, which became synchronized with the ruling party's discourses and actions in spheres like gender, social media, and even political questions such as strikes, coup attempt reaction, etc. (Öztürk, 2016). He summarizes that the Diyanet's activities take place at the intersection of Türkiye's Neo-Ottoman ambitions, its newly-emerged kin and diaspora policy, and its commitment to belief-based transnational solidarity (Öztürk & Gözaydın, 2018: 335).

The Balkans are one of the centers of activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), founded in 1992. TİKA's data on the distribution of the aid demonstrate that the Balkans and Eastern Europe are the region that ranks second with the number of projects, but the number of the projects in Eastern Europe (with the exception of the Gagauz region of Moldova and Hungary) is negligible. The volume of its aid to the Balkans amounts to about USD 150 mln. annually, i.e., about USD 10-20 mln. per country (author's own calculations on the basis of TİKA official website). The realized projects are in the fields of the preservation of non-material and material Ottoman heritage, including restoration of a number of significant monuments, such as historical bridges, mosques and others. Due to the indisputable emphasis on the restoration and reconstruction of Ottoman monuments and Islamic institutions, most authors examine TİKA's activities through the prism of Neo-Ottomanism. However, others express doubts about that hypothesis and explain TİKA's activities as “a way of Türkiye gaining soft power through foreign aid” (Todorović, 2021). Be it as it may, the Balkans are an indicative example of TİKA's evolution, which started as agency for technical aid and worked in the sphere of restoration, but in recent years it is already acting as an agency capable of implementing projects

from A to Z: designing, financing and building from scratch of various sites and infrastructures.

Providing humanitarian aid is another aspect of the Turkish “soft power.” After the severe floods that hit Serbia, B&H, and Croatia in May 2014, Türkiye was one of the first countries to offer a helping hand (Pavlović: 34). In 2016, the Diyanet helped 2,000 families affected by floods in RNM, and contributed to the restoration of the flood-damaged mosque. (Daskalovski, 2022: 67). Türkiye was one of the first countries to offer help to Albania after the severe earthquake in November 2019 and to Croatia after the earthquake in the Petrinja region in December 2020. After the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Türkiye proved to be in the privileged position of a major manufacturer of face masks, protective clothing and other consumables, and it supplied large shipments of materials to Albania, BiH, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia (Zdravković & Peović, 2022: 156).

With the end of the Cold War, Türkiye started actively offering scholarships to students from the countries of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Balkans. In 1992-2007 more than 26,000 students of Turkic/Turkish origin from 55 countries studied in Türkiye. In the 1990s half of the foreign students in Türkiye came from the Balkans and Central Asia, and youngsters from Albania and the former Yugoslav countries had the highest graduation rates among them. Later on, the share of representatives of the Balkan group declined and they became the third largest cohort, accounting for 5,000–7,000 people (Turkish Review, 2014: 510-513, 542). According to other data, between 1992 and 2011 the beneficiary countries sent 31,307 students to Türkiye, but only 8,914 students ultimately graduated. Ankara launched the state-funded Türkiye Scholarships Programme (Türkiye Bursları) under YTB aegis in 2012. This programme avoids past mistakes and covers tuition fees, a scholarship, one year induction Turkish language training, accommodation in state dormitories, health insurance and a round-trip flight ticket. The Programme has introduced two significant novelties that were absent in the previous ones. First, it organizes various academic and social programmes to inform the international students about Turkish history and culture. Second, launching a website for the graduates and the establishment of alumni associations in the sending countries lends greater sustainability to the efforts invested.

The success of these programmes can be explained with the combination of good conditions for the students coming predominantly from poor Balkan communities, and the possibility to reconnect and rely on relatives from the diaspora Balkan communities in Türkiye. However, infrastructural problems surrounding dormitories and the overall difficulties encountered by international students

while adapting to Turkish educational programs persist. There have also been criticisms against the selection criteria (Kelkitli, 2021: 42, 46-47).

In addition to attracting students from abroad, Turkish educational institutions were also established in the Balkans. In 2004–2005, the International University of Sarajevo (IUS) opened its gates, and a year later – the International Balkan University (IBU, Skopje) followed suit. With the support of Turkish teachers, Turkish language is taught as an elective subject in primary and secondary schools in Bosnia. (cf. Yunus Dilber's article in this volume).

The Gülen movement² also opened schools (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia) and universities (Albania, BiH) in different Balkan countries. In the aftermath of the coup attempt of 15 July 2016, Türkiye started a campaign for all Gülen-affiliated schools around the globe to be closed down or handed over to the Turkey Maarif Foundation, which was founded in June 2016 by the Turkish Parliament as the sole entity “authorised to provide educational services abroad.” The Foundation is represented in 67 countries worldwide, including Albania (eight educational institutions), Bosnia (six), Kosovo (seven) and Macedonia (four institutions + one students' hostel). (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı)

Turkish state media such as TRT Avaz and Anadolu Agency (AA) are also targeting the audiences in the Balkans, having broadcasts and websites in different local languages. AA has offices in Belgrade, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje and Tirana. Turkish soap operas have been immensely popular throughout the Balkans. They are of major importance for familiarising many people with Turkey and for heightening the interest in tourist visits to the country. Productions like the “Magnificent Century” (Mühteşem Yüzyıl) demonstrate the Ottoman past in a positive light.

In the political sphere ruling AKP is maintaining close contact with different Balkan parties, representing the Muslim and Turkish minorities in the region, and also Turkish president R. T. Erdoğan is having a regular high-level contact with local political leaders such as Alexander Vučić of Serbia, Boyko Borissov of Bulgaria, Bakir Izetbegović of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Edi Rama of Albania.

Until 2011, this approach characterized Türkiye's foreign policy as a whole. After the outbreak of the so-called “Arab Spring”, conditions for an increase in Turkish foreign policy activism in the Middle East emerged. Domestically, there are two prerequisites for this: first, the AKP has already managed to limit the influence

2 This movement has been recognized as a terrorist organization since 2016 by the Republic of Turkey, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Gulf Cooperation Council. (By Editors)

of the military-civilian bureaucracy, and second, it won again the general elections in June 2011, which gave it renewed democratic legitimacy. Regionally, the Arab Spring simultaneously creates opportunities to expand Türkiye's influence, but also risks and threats.

At one hand, the foreign minister Ahmed Davutoglu has repeatedly stated that what is happening in the Middle East is a revision of the colonial order imposed after the First World War, which is a "historical parenthesis" that a hundred years later the peoples of the region will close, reuniting Türkiye with the rest of "Mesopotamia" (Davutoğlu, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey, 2013). He also several times highlights Ankara's ambitions to restore regional order in the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East (Anadolu Ajansı, 2013).

On the other hand, threats also surfaced. When the Syrian governmental forces withdrew from northern Syria, in March 2012, local Kurdish organizations affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) announced the creation of their quasi-state with an area of about 40,000 sq km in the region. Ankara is deeply disturbed by this development, fearing for its internal security (Yeşiltaş, 2020).

In response to the meteoric rise of the Islamic State (ISIS, ISIL), in March 2015 the United States began providing arms and air support to the Kurdish People's Protection Forces (YPG), which are fighting against the terror group. In June 2016, YPG captured from ISIS the northern Syrian towns of Manbij and Tel Abyad near the Turkish border, forming a continuous corridor along the Turkish-Syrian border east of the river Euphrates. They were also heading to take from the Islamists Jarablus west of the river (Tanchum, 2020). However, Türkiye considers the YPG to be a Syrian branch of the PKK and in August 2016 Ankara launched operation "Euphrates Shield" against both ISIS and Kurdish forces. Another Turkish military operation against Kurdish militias ("Olive Branch", beginning at 20 January 2018), "Peace Spring" (9 October 2019) and the Syrian army ("Spring Shield", 27 February 2020), as well as a series of commando-supported airstrikes on the ground against Kurdish fighters in northern Iraq (Operation Claw (Pençe - Kilit) in 2021) will follow in the coming years in Syria.

Türkiye is also intervening in the civil war in Libya. Since 2014, Türkiye began training forces of the internationally recognized Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), close to the Muslim Brotherhood, and supplying them with weapons. After Marshal Khalifa Haftar-led Libyan National Army launched an offensive against the GNA in the spring of 2019, Türkiye intervened even more decisively. On 27 November 2019, Ankara and the Tripoli government signed agreements on military cooperation and the maritime border delimitation, and

Türkiye shifted from indirect (training and supplies) to direct support to GNA, sending not only fighters from Turkish-controlled areas in Syria, but also regular Turkish military and intelligence personnel with command, coordination, training and advisory functions. There has also been a significant increase and diversification in the amount of weaponry supplied to the NTC, which now includes not only ammunition and light weapons, but also drones, missiles and other advanced systems (Tanchum, 2020). This reflects the increased importance of Libya as Ankara's only ally in the Eastern Mediterranean, as the relations of other countries in the region (Egypt, Israel, Cyprus, Greece) with Ankara are strained. Moreover, in Libya many construction projects of considerable value are carried out by Turkish companies and Türkiye hopes for their completion, once the situation has calmed down.

Türkiye's support to Azerbaijan during its operation against Nagorno-Karabakh in September 2020 took roughly the same form already worked out in Libya - training, supplying drones, missiles and providing mercenaries (Heukelingen, 2022, s. 9) (Yaşar, 2021, s. 15).

These developments are both a result and a stimulus for the development of the Turkish military-industrial complex. For the country, its defense industry plays several roles: strengthening the Turkish armed forces, gaining a stronger position for Türkiye in its competition with some neighboring countries and the possibilities of projecting power abroad, as well as related to the military doctrine of forward defense. In October 2016, President R. T. Erdogan stated that Türkiye needed a new security strategy that would meet threats against the country "where they nest" (BBC Türkçe, 2016). In 2019 his speaker elaborates that this includes places beyond the borders of the Turkish "National Oath" from 1920. (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı, 2019) This forward defense doctrine includes a military presence and the establishment of military bases not only in neighbouring countries such as Syria, Northern Iraq, the unrecognised Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, but even in more distant countries and regions such as Libya, Qatar, and Somalia. (Adar, 2020)

All this leads a number of authors to talk about a change in Turkish foreign policy. Italian researcher Federico Donelli notes that after 2015 the previous Turkish proactive or assertive foreign policy behaviour (since 2011) was replaced by interventionism and instead of soft power (2002–2009) or a combination between soft and hard power (2010–2014), hard power became the main Turkish foreign policy tool. At the same time, increasing use of force came together with an "Erdoğan doctrine" of preemptive action (Donelli, 2020: 230-244). According to the Washington-based analyst Gönül Tol, this mind-set is deeply suspicious of

multilateralism and urges Türkiye to act unilaterally when necessary; it is anti-Western and anti-imperialist in a sense that it challenges the Western-dominated order. The new foreign policy doctrine views Türkiye as a country surrounded by hostile actors and abandoned by its Western allies (Tol, 2020). Turkish author Şaban Kardaş simply calls it “coercive diplomacy” (Kardaş, 2020).

By 2020, however, militarisation in Turkish foreign policy has been gradually abandoned and replaced by a drive to restore good relations with countries in the Middle East. This is due to the lack of allies at the state level (except non-state actors); the problematic international legal legitimacy of Turkish operations in Iraq, Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean; the difficulty in many cases to consolidate victories on the ground into diplomatic successes; the lack of exit strategies from conflicts as well as the creation of coalitions of countries balancing against Türkiye; and the risk of political-economic and operational overstretch (Kardaş, 2020); (Yeşiltaş, 2020: 110) (Uzgel, 2022).

However, as demonstrated above, notwithstanding the changes in the toolkit used in Turkish foreign policy in other regions, in particular in the Middle East, the use of “soft power” remains dominant vis-à-vis the Balkans. There are several reasons for this. First and foremost is the absence of open conflicts at the peninsula from which direct threats to Turkish national security and territorial integrity can arise. This is due to NATO’s presence in the region and the overall paradigm of European integration. Secondly, Türkiye’s policy towards the Balkans can be assessed as successful and therefore, from a Turkish point of view, no change in the instruments used is necessary. In general, any claims about a possible militarization of Turkish foreign policy should be historicized, meaning placed in a specific historical moment, and cannot be drawn as its overall characteristic due to the presence of the example of the Balkans.

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