Turkish–Balkan Interactions: Impact of Historical Legacy, Global (Dis)Order, and Agency

Birgül Demirtaş [iD]

In 2020, as the world was trying to cope with the Covid-19 pandemic, the impact of climate change including numerous floods and forest fires seemed to have come to a truly alarming point. Both the global health crisis and human-made natural disasters are just two examples of the nontraditional threats faced by humanity. These asymmetrical threats keep pushing the states to implement fundamental changes in their approach toward world politics. In fact, countries' performance in terms of their responses to these crises will affect the success of their foreign policy as well.

In the meantime, global international order has been changing in various ways, in conjunction with economic and political domains. On the one hand, the economic supremacy of certain Western countries is being replaced by players such as China and India.[1] On the other hand, some of the traditional concepts of international relations, made up of security- and development-dominated notions, have been acquiring new meanings. As some of the recent crises have revealed, the biggest challenges do not necessarily come from other states, perceived as enemies, but from pandemics

---

[1] On this issue, see: Ikenberry, G. J. (2018). The end of liberal international order? *International Affairs*, *94*(1), 7–23; Kupchan, C. (2014). Reordering order: Global change and the need for a new normative consensus. In T. Flockhart, et al. (Eds.), *Liberal Order in a Post-Western World*. Washington, DC: Transatlantic Academy, 1–12; Öniş, Z. & Kutlay, M. (2020). The new age of hybridity and clash of norms: China, BRICS and challenges of global governance in a postliberal international order. *Alternatives*, *45*(3), 123–142.

This text builds upon my previous work: Demirtaş, B. (2017). Reconsidering Turkey's Balkan ties: Opportunities and limitations. In P. G. Ercan (Ed.), *Turkish Foreign Policy: International Relations, Legality and Global Reach*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 129–149; Demirtaş, B. (2019). Reconsidering dilemmas of Turkish foreign policy: The case of the Balkans. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen*, *59*(5–6), 64–81.

B. Demirtaş (✉)
Faculty of Economic and Administrative Sciences, Turkish-German University, Istanbul, Turkey
e-mail: birgul.demirtas@gmail.com

21

and a rise in temperatures, thus human-made disasters. Simultaneously, as a direct impact of the economic shifts in the global order, the political weight of the Western countries is falling. For example, the rise of authoritarianism in Hungary and Poland, and the European Union's incapability to change its course is a good case in point (Öniş & Kutlay, 2019). In addition, the failure of Western policies in Afghanistan and the inability of Brussels and Washington administrations to bring peace to Syria have exposed a major political weakening.

Global changes are accompanied by regional and domestic changes. The Balkan region forms part of the European continent and therefore situations occurring elsewhere in Europe are likely to impact the Balkans. Accordingly, Brexit, economic uncertainty, refugee flows, and the rise of nationalism have affected transitions in the Balkans, followed by the rise of illiberalism and reemergence of populist nationalism. Thinking of Turkish national context and foreign policy, since 2010 the country has experienced de-Europeanizing tendencies. Its recently instated sui generis presidential–governmental system is based on an overly centralized governing mechanism. During the second decade of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the pluralist nature of the Turkish political system has been severely eroded. Due to the widespread suppression of opposition groups, Freedom House (2021) has labeled Turkey "not free."

This chapter examines Turkey's international relations toward the Balkans, with a special emphasis on the post-Cold War context. It starts by shedding light on the changing identities vis-à-vis a shifting international system. Then, it will move on to look into the historical background of relations, prior to analyzing security issues in the Balkans. This section will be followed by a scrutiny of the fundamental characteristic of Turkey's regional policy of the last decade. Finally, the chapter will conclude with an examination of the main challenges confronting Turkey's international engagement.

1   Trends and Challenges of the Current (Dis)Order

To understand Turkey's regional policies, it is necessary to consider the events taking place at the global level, since the global system itself has become drastically different from the time when bipolarity was the dominant framework. During the Cold War when formulating its foreign policy, Turkey had to closely analyze the attitudes of the then great powers. However, following the end of the Cold War, the Ankara authorities have had more space for maneuver; in fact, they have exploited the new setting to launch initiatives across diverse regional contexts, ranging from the Caucasus to the Middle East, from Central Asia to the Balkans.

In the view of the neorealist school of thought, change or progress in global affairs stems from two factors: either from a variation of the number of great powers, or from the relative capability of the participating units (Linklater, 1995: 248). Statistics have demonstrated that the center of global economy has been shifting from the West to the East; while the share of the United States and European states has shrunk, the

share of the BRICS countries has gradually increased from 15.6 percent in 1990 to 30.4 percent in 2019 (Kutlay & Öniş, 2021: 1088). The accompanying argument is that the shifting international system has given rise to regional (or middle) powers, and Turkey is one of them. In fact, in the case of Turkey both factors explaining transformation in global affairs are relevant: not only has the international system undergone a radical change, but Turkey's domestic context has also changed. In the new constellation, Turkey has created initiatives geared toward its neighboring regions, providing for the institution of alternative approaches and involvement in various mediation-facilitation activities. Yet, in contrast to the early 2000s, the second decade witnessed some problems in Turkey's relations with the Balkans. Such a climate is concerning, given the global instability and lack of leadership, or semiorder, in which some states try to solve problems whereas others ignore them.

In terms of the Balkans, while the wars of the 1990s did come to an end and the region has claimed to be ready to pursue processes of democratization and Europeanization, sustainable peace is lagging; expressions of ethnonationalism, the rise of populism and authoritarianism, as well as conflicting arguments about borders continue to shape the headlines. Thinking of Turkey's involvement in the region, a meaningful examination of its current approach necessitates an understanding of the country's own national and state identity. Back in the early 1990s, in response to the new global circumstances, Turkey embarked on a fresh debate about its foreign policy in the new millennium—a debate tightly connected to those related to Turkey's identity. For some, Ankara was supposed to focus on the newly independent states in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and forge bonds based on the common identity of so-called Turkishness. Others maintained that Turkey should embrace a much more religiously framed foreign policy, and hence try to consolidate its relations with countries with a Muslim majority population. Finally, another group believed that it was best if Turkey simply continued with its European orientation, as was the case during the Cold War (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2008).

The dominant view turned out to be that while Turkey should follow the European path, it must neither ignore the newly established states in its neighboring regions nor other states that have been ignored by the great powers. Within such a mindset, the 1990s was also a period seeing frequent discussions about Turkey's Ottoman past. Traditional Turkish foreign policy tended to ignore the Ottoman period as much as possible and acted as if the Ottoman legacy did not have any influence upon Turkish society, or on Turkey's foreign and security policies. But, with the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, Turkey's decision-makers started to advocate that the Ottoman legacy could no longer be ignored (Çalış, 2001). Indeed, this chapter assumes that interests cannot be understood by isolating identity in foreign policy analysis; in other words, those in charge of foreign policy can define national interests only if taking national identity into account. While located in Asia and Europe, with history based on both Western and Eastern values, Turkey is an insightful case study in constructivist terms. This study argues that Ankara's shifting positioning in international politics as well as the country's identity and reinterpretation of its own history gives meaning to Turkey's policies toward the Balkans.

2   Historical Background of Turkey–Balkan Interactions

The Ottoman Empire has left a considerable impact on Balkan territories and their societies, with the Ottoman legacy still being found in many political and sociocultural aspects. One important effect of this legacy concerns the state borders, which were drawn as a result of their wars with the Sublime Porte as well as the interventions of the Great Powers (Todorova, 1996: 54). Another aspect of the Ottoman legacy can be observed in the demographic structure. The empire's settlement policies contributed to the multicultural and multireligious nature of the Balkans. Besides placing Turkish populations in various parts of the region, Ottoman rulers brought the Serbian and Romanian populations to Banat and Albanians to Epirus, Kosovo, and Macedonia (Sugar, 1977: 283). Turkish minorities, especially in Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia, as well as the Muslims of Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, form part of the Ottoman legacy (Váli, 1971: 197). The fact that Muslims populating the territories of the former Yugoslav state were and continue to be called Turks is a symbol of the living memory of the Ottoman state among the Balkan peoples. Moreover, the remaining Ottoman buildings, common cuisine, and social beliefs point to the strong influence of the Empire (Jelavich, 1983: 105; Steinke, 1990). Many Turkish-origin words are found in Balkan languages; the term "Balkan" itself is a Turkish word meaning a series of mountains (Jelavich, 1983: 1).

It is worth stressing that after the formation of nation-states across the Balkan peninsula, their leaders often resorted to the discourse of the "Ottoman yoke" (Jelavich, 1983: 104–105) and started to depict the Ottoman past and, above all, the Ottomans as the "Other"; by overemphasizing the negative features of the empire (and ignoring the positive parts), they hoped to strengthen national consciousness. Such an attitude of the ruling elites led to hatred toward Turkey and suspicion toward Turkish minorities living within their borders, and consequently posed a challenge to cooperation between Turkey and some of the Balkan states. However, the historical legacy—with all its features, including misrepresentation—remained a relevant dimension in Turkish–Balkan interactions. For example, and in the context of state identities and the international system, the multipolar environment of the interwar years provided for regional initiatives, as seen in the case of the Balkan Pact of 1934. The pact was an important step in the history of cooperation among Balkan countries, even more so given that it was a Balkan-originated treaty and not a product of external interference (Özcan, 1995: 285). In comparison, the post-1945 bipolar structure witnessed the dominance of great power politics in regional affairs. Aware of risks and threats, the countries of the region had to act within the limitations of the Cold War environment. Under such circumstances only countries with similar identities (Eastern or Western) had an opportunity to come closer together.

With the détente period, and thus improvements in relations between the opposing blocs, Turkey pursued a more active policy toward the Balkan region, as confirmed by the 1968 Agreement on Migration and Family Unification between Sofia and Ankara, which aimed to reunite families that had been separated because of the expulsion policies of the Bulgarian regime in the 1950s (Özcan, 1995: 288; Váli, 1971: 203).

Later, as the Cold War came to an end, Turkey's approach toward the Balkans was primarily preoccupied with security issues due to the wars of Yugoslav succession. The changing international circumstances means that Turkey could develop its own initiatives and seek to contribute to the solution of the Yugoslav drama. Indeed, the outbreak of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 and then the war in Kosovo in 1999 provided Ankara with an opportunity to find a new place and identity for itself in the international system.

From the very beginning of the Bosnian crisis, Turkey launched a number of far-reaching initiatives while insisting on the necessity of international military measures. As the then-term president, it invited the Organization of the Islamic Conference to an extraordinary meeting and proposed an action plan for the solution to the conflict. It also convened a Balkan Conference and made major moves within the UN, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), all to convince its Western partners of a military campaign. In addition, Ankara invested efforts in reaching an agreement between Bosniaks and Croats. In sum, its approach throughout the war was active, consistent, and assertive (Demirtaş-Coşkun, 2006). As it happened, the Turkish leadership kept emphasizing that Ankara had to play a leading role in regional affairs. By referring to the expectations of Bosniaks from Turkey, Turkish decision-makers made sure that they would listen to such expectations and act accordingly. Furthermore, members of the Turkish political elite compared Turkey's role in Bosnia and Herzegovina to that of the US in the Persian Gulf, since the Bosniaks perceived Ankara as a key factor in their home affairs (Toker, 1992). They believed that for as long as they managed to prove Turkey's indispensability in the Balkans, they were to be considered in international forums— as suggested by various visits and official exchanges, including Turkey's invitation to the London Conference. Therefore, it could be argued that Turkey's Western identity, and its interest in the preservation of this identity in the post-Cold War context, appeared as crucial in formulating Turkish policies. By being active on the Balkan stage and undertaking a supportive role for Bosniaks in international platforms, Turkey attempted to prove its significance to the Western world.

Similarly, in the case of the Kosovo war, Turkey's approach was proactive though it kept a low profile. It joined the West's efforts to find a solution, and while it was not as active as it had been during the Bosnian war, it nevertheless acknowledged that it would not hesitate to take part in a joint military intervention. The Ankara administration warned the Western countries not to be too late in reacting to the atrocities in Kosovo. All this showed Turkey's ambition not to remain on the sidelines of international efforts but to be engaged in them. As rightly remarked elsewhere, Kosovo was another case where Turkey could present itself as an important ally of the West; in congruence with its mission, it took part in the air strikes (Uzgel, 2001).

3   Regional Security Issues: From Negative to Positive Peace

Although the current security environment in the Balkans is radically different from the one characterizing the 1990s, it has not yet reached the level of positive peace. Considering that the concept of security has acquired multiple meanings and cannot be limited to military security, there are various security issues remaining to be resolved in the region. One of them is the predominance of ethnic nationalism in the majority of the post-Yugoslav countries (Yugoslavia itself represented one of the best examples of multiculturalism). Despite the fact that more than two decades have passed since the end of the violent conflicts, ethnic nationalism is still a fact of life in many parts of the former Yugoslav territories—an aspect illustrated by the high level of support that nationalist parties receive from the electorate. Because of emigration, both during and in the aftermath of the wars, the post-Yugoslav space lost a solid portion of its former multicultural outlook. Strangely enough, the nationalist rhetoric has also been reflected in the legal structures; for example, according to the constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina, only members belonging to one of three major ethnicities can be a candidate for the presidency. Even though the 2009 decision of the European Court of Human Rights in the Sejdić and Finci cases ruled in favor of changing the relevant law (ECtHR, 2009), the Bosnian authorities have not implemented the necessary change yet.

Furthermore, there are still disputed borders in the Balkans, such as those involving Kosovo and Serbia, or Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina. World history has taught us that only in regions where no dispute over borders exists, can there be durable peace. In fact, it is the absence of territorial issues that permitted the European integrationist project—an example of security community. Therefore, it can easily be assumed that the resolution of border issues is a sine qua non for the establishment of a positive peace in the region. On the other hand, if EU membership prospects for the Western Balkans were clearer, the vitally important problems could be solved in an easier way. But due to reasons stemming from the regional countries' reluctance to reform themselves, as well as the EU's economic crisis and enlargement fatigue, make discussions about progress highly speculative since the general ambiguity in relation to EU membership complicates transformation processes across the Balkan peninsula. As some scholars have warned, delaying EU accession of the Western Balkan region runs the risk of seeing parts of the Balkans turn into a ghetto (Massari, 2005).

In fact, another important security issue is related to the mushrooming of organized crime due to the violent events of the 1990s. The problem had reached such a level that EU Member States mentioned it in the 2003 European Security Strategy (European Council, 2009). The degree of the problem is better understood with the example of the chaotic environment in Albania in 1997, when one million Kalashnikov rifles were stolen from the army barracks (Ramet, 2010: 2–14), and it can be imagined that some of these weapons ended up abroad. The range of activities of the regional crime groups varies from arms to drugs and human trafficking. Linking these issues is the persistence of economic problems. While going through multiple transition

processes, the Balkan region has taken a long time in most of the countries. While experiencing multiple transition-related obstacles, it has taken a long time for the Balkan countries' GDP to return to the 1989 levels. For example, Romania was able to reach its 1989 GDP only in 2004 and Croatia reached it in 2005, whereas for Bulgaria and North Macedonia, it took until 2006 (Bardos, 2008). The high unemployment rates among the youth—for example, 34 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina (World Bank, 2021b) and 46 percent in Kosovo (World Bank, 2021a)—give a clue about the seriousness of the economic situation.

Finally, Balkan countries have found it difficult to deal with the past. The respective parties have adopted one-sided responses to questions about what happened back in the 1990s. Individually, and without paying due regard to the narratives of the other side, they tend to argue that it was only them who suffered and were victims of the bloody conflicts, while the other party was the aggressor. In light of this, it can be argued that although the era of violent conflicts is over, there is still no durable peace; in other words, the transition from negative to positive peace (Webel & Galtung, 2010) across the post-Yugoslav space is still ongoing.

In terms of Ankara's involvement, during the Yugoslav wars and transition processes of the 1990s, Turkish decision-makers sought to provide adequate responses and contribute to conflict termination and post-conflict peacebuilding. By taking part in a variety of initiatives and by being vocal about the region in different international gatherings and organizations, the Turks kept raising awareness of the magnitude of the crisis and inviting the international community to adopt a more proactive approach. For example, the Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) actively participated in the UN Protection Force, Implementation Force, and Stabilization Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in operations Essential Harvest, Amber Fox, Concordia, and Proxima in North Macedonia, in the UN Mission in Kosovo, the OSCE Kosovo Verification Mission, and Kosovo Force (KFOR), and Operation Alba in Albania. Furthermore, in the framework of the Partnership for Peace, Turkey provided training to officers of the countries seeking to become full NATO members (TAF, n.d. [a]). In short, by looking at the main course of Turkey's activism in the 1990s, it is right to conclude that it was mainly political and security oriented. However, it is noteworthy that some of the military missions have also contained cultural components. For example, TAF provided Turkish language courses in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Romania (TAF, n.d. [b]).

In response to changing regional and international circumstances as well as Turkey's growing self-confidence, Ankara's approach has gradually shifted and as such, has been dominated by soft policy instruments. Though the political and security dimension in bilateral and multilateral relations have continued without any interruption, the use of economic and cultural tools has steadily increased—a trend which may be interpreted as one of the consequences of Europeanization of Turkish foreign policy (Bechev, 2012: 133). The intellectual basis of Turkey's new approach was explained by the then foreign minister Ahmet Davutoğlu (2011) in his article "A forward-looking vision for the Balkans." At a time when it seemed that most international actors had lost their enthusiasm for new initiatives to address the remaining regional problems, Turkey stood out as an actor closely following the developments

and working to find solutions to some of the regional issues. Its approach was often described as value-based and future-focused, with the main principles being linked to inclusiveness and regional reintegration, with a particular emphasis on European integration and development of a common stance in regional and international organizations (Aras, 2012). With the aim of overcoming the bitter memories of the past, Ankara has favored an approach focusing on the future and imagined witnessing a more constructive relationship between the parties. Another feature of the Turkish approach has been its insistence that the Balkan region belongs to its own people, and therefore they are the ones who should be deciding on its future.

In the list of features of Turkey's ties with the Balkan countries, transnationalization has stood out as ever-increasing. In a 2012 study, Kemal Kirişci pointed out that transnationalization has been a major feature of Turkish foreign policy toward its neighboring regions, mainly thanks to three channels: economy, movement of people, and civil society initiatives. The Balkan region represents an appropriate case study to examine the increasing ties beyond the state-to-state level (Kirişci, 2012).

4   Anatomy of Turkish Foreign Policy Toward the Balkans: Recent Developments

Many of the policies of the early 2000s were nothing more than a continuation of Ankara's post-Cold War foreign policy. With fundamental goals having remained almost the same, only differences in instruments and accompanying discourses can be identified. To begin with, Bosnia and Herzegovina has featured as a key Balkan country on the Turkish foreign policy agenda mainly because of the fragility of the interethnic relations and the resulting deadlock in the functioning of the political system. As Turkey was not part of the EU-US-led Butmir process, aimed at fixing some of the alarming problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Ankara leadership launched its own initiative to bring the parties together and encourage them to engage in robust dialogue (Türbedar, 2011). Although the 1995 Dayton Peace Agreement ended the war, it did not provide for a stable and well-functioning political system; the fact that it takes more than a year to form a new government after elections is a sign of a political stalemate. Furthermore, the statements of Republika Srpska leaders, with its former president and one of the presidents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, at the forefront, in which they regularly question the territorial integrity of the country (including calls for an independence referendum), sustained the crisis (Türkeş et al., 2012).

The Turkish initiation of two trilateral mechanisms pointed to the relaunch of an active foreign policy. It was within that framework that encounters of the foreign ministers of Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, as well as the foreign ministers of Turkey, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia took place. The summit in Istanbul, which for the first time brought together the presidents of Serbia and

Bosnia and Herzegovina, Boris Tadić and Haris Silajdžić (Kohen, 2010), resulted in the Istanbul Declaration on June 24, 2010. It was considered a historic document since it guaranteed the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina (SEECP, 2010). Moreover, given the total failure of the Butmir process, Turkey's initiatives did prove a success, even if limited. Besides Belgrade's assurances in relation to the Bosnian territorial integrity, Bosnia and Herzegovina agreed to send an ambassador to Belgrade after a three-year interruption. In addition, in 2010 the Serbian Parliament adopted a declaration condemning the crimes in Srebrenica (SBG, 2010). Furthermore, Turkey assisted with Sarajevo's acceptance into the Membership Action Plan, as part of the NATO accession process (Rüma, 2011: 135–137). In this vein, where Turkey based its mediation efforts on trust-building measures between the parties (Zenelaj et al., 2015), some progress could be achieved. However, the initial enthusiasm surrounding the trilateral mechanism has gradually lost its momentum.

In the meantime, we have witnessed the most astonishing improvement in relations between Turkey and Serbia. Although the Ankara–Belgrade rapport went through a hard time in the 1990s, as soon as the Yugoslav conflicts were over, they agreed to fix their relationship. In fact, in the view of both countries' leaders, the current Turkish–Serbian relations have lived a golden period and have been in the best shape ever. Even though the two countries do not share any border, their decision-makers still refer to each other as neighbors, which is an indication of the degree of rapprochement (*AA*, 2010). While there are obvious points of disagreement between them, such as the status of Kosovo and its international recognition, Ankara and Belgrade have ignored differences between them and given priority to issues on which they can cooperate (Arežina, 2018).

Kosovo is another important partner of Turkey in the region. When Kosovo declared independence in early 2008, Turkey recognized it the following day; this move took place in the midst of discussions as to whether Kosovo's declaration was in line with international law. Here, the question is, how can we explain Turkey's positive attitude toward Kosovo's independence considering its traditionally cautious policy? Accordingly, does Ankara's policy represent a change or continuity in Turkish foreign policy? Looking back, it was the Turkish president Turgut Özal who recognized Ibrahim Rugova as president of Kosovo, which was a symbol of Turkish sympathy toward the Kosovo Albanians. However, with the conflict eruption between the parties in the late 1990s, Turkey initially tried to engage in dialogue with both the Serbs and Albanians. Ankara supported the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia, while emphasizing the rights of Albanians as per Yugoslavia's 1974 constitution. In the aftermath of the 1999 NATO intervention, Turkish forces took part in KFOR, and Turkey also started to pay close attention to the problems of the Turkish minority living in Kosovo.

At home, both leftist and rightist political parties in the opposition supported the recognition of Kosovo's independence in sessions of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. Almost all opposition parties accused the government of only supporting the territorial integrity of Yugoslavia and not paying adequate attention to the problems of Kosovo. Therefore, from the very beginning, the government's cautious approach inspired heavy internal exchanges. As suggested by Charles Hermann (1990), it can be argued that a policy can be re-evaluated if it leads to a reaction

from other actors, and this has been visible in Turkey's policy toward Kosovo. When the negotiations between Albanians and Serbs seemed to have reached a deadlock in 2007, and as US-led Western countries started to look more favorably on the idea of Kosovo's independence, Turkey also began reconsidering its own stance. By analyzing the discourse of Turkish politicians and diplomats from 2005 onward, it is possible to identify the beginning of a change in the Turkish approach. Hence, Turkish recognition of Kosovo's independence on February 18, 2008, represents continuity rather than change. According to Hermann's model, we can interpret it as a program change, and thus as a tactical change rather than a total restructuring. Furthermore, Turkey's recognition of Kosovo did not lead to any deterioration in its relations with Serbia; both countries "agreed to disagree" on the Kosovo matter (Petrović & Reljić, 2011: 169).

An important feature of Turkey's Balkan policy in the first decade of the 2000s has been its emphasis on soft power (*The Economist*, 2011). In continuation of the foreign policy approach of the Özal era, economic aspects have occupied an important place. In accordance with the liberal view and the idea that increasing economic relations will lead to an improvement in political relations and economic interdependence, Ankara has advocated better economic ties with regional countries. However, as it is not the state but the private sector that is expected to increase trade and investment, the basic aim is to facilitate and encourage an increase in bilateral trade relations. The practice of having business people join foreign trips of key decision-makers began under Özal, but then it was suspended by subsequent coalition governments. It was brought back by the Justice and Development Party after it came to power in 2002. This indicates the impact of a "trading state" approach in Turkish foreign policy (Kirişci, 2009). Affected by the dynamism of Turkish foreign policy in the first decade of the 2000s, some Turkish companies have also started to use a similar rhetoric. For instance, Can Akın Çağlar, the general director of Ziraat Bank—the largest public bank—stated that they aimed to transform the "local power" of the bank into "regional power" and become "a big player" (*Vatan*, 2010).

Besides benefiting from multidimensionality and robust economic ties, Turkish foreign policy has also relied on another element of soft power—culture, primarily language. In 2007, the Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü—YEE) commenced its activities and so far, fourteen Yunus Emre Cultural Centers have been opened in eight Balkan countries. In addition to offering Turkish language courses, they host other cultural activities as well. The role of language in Turkey's ties with the region has only been recognized lately, despite the fact that there are many similar words between the Turkish language and the languages of the region. In some places, Yunus Emre Centers have also delivered classes in the Turkish language in public schools. The center in Sarajevo is a good example since it is thanks to its attempts in the academic year of 2012–2013 that 59 primary and secondary schools introduced Turkish as an elective course, resulting in 4,863 students selecting Turkish language courses (YEE, 2013). It is noticeable that the Turkish language has been emerging as a lingua franca in the region, unrivaled by any other regional language (Öktem, 2011). Furthermore, the region has seen a trend to open Turkish universities, including the

International Balkan University in North Macedonia and the International University of Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, among others. In Turkey itself, since the early 1990s, a robust scholarship scheme has been implemented (and has gradually covered the whole world), allowing foreign students to pursue higher education in Turkey. Thus, while benefiting from culture has surely formed part of the foreign policy of Western countries, Turkish decision-makers have also become aware of the increasing salience of soft power instruments in an ever-globalized environment.

The increasing interest in Turkish media in the Balkan countries stands out as a proof of Turkey's soft power. The *Turkish Radio and Television Corporation* (TRT) founded *TRT Avaz* to broadcast cultural programs as well as daily news in Balkan languages, and hence to serve as a cultural bridge. Most recently, *TRT* has also opened a branch in Sarajevo. Such a move corresponds to the opening of the Directorate of the Balkan Region in the *Anatolia Agency* (AA), also in Sarajevo. Broadcasting in all three local languages—Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian—the Turkish news agency provides not only a medium to report about developments in Turkey to the region, but also to familiarize the Turkish public with the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since Turkish media outlets mostly depend on foreign sources on Balkan issues, and the media in the Balkans also take news about Turkey from foreign broadcasters, the AA office in Sarajevo has proved to be a strategic decision with great potential. It is of symbolic relevance that a member of presidency at the time, Bakir Izetbegović, attended the opening ceremony (*AA*, 2012). The news content across the Balkan countries is heavily supplemented with Turkish soap operas. Although the trend started to take place in the first decade of the 2000s, it reached its peak with the series "Magnificent Century" (Jovanović & Tokyay, 2012). While thorough examination still needs to be conducted to explain the massive popularity of Turkish TV series, arguably cultural similarities have driven it. As experienced by the author of the chapter, there are people in Bosnia and Herzegovina who have learned to carry out daily conversations in Turkish just through these series.

Finally, in Turkey, interactions are also evident in the activities of municipalities, especially those with a significant number of Balkan-origin people. For example, 32 percent of all Turkish twin-town partnerships are with the Balkans (Muhasilović, 2020: 147). The demographic structure impacts city diplomacy. To name just one case, Istanbul's Bayrampaşa Municipality, where many residents have origins in the Balkans, has been quite active in that regard; since 2005 the municipality has organized social and cultural activities within the "Ramadan in the Balkans" project (Bayrampaşa Belediyesi, n.d.). Another example is the İzmit Municipality, which has pursued various projects including the construction of a center for social and cultural activities in Momchilgrad/Mestanlı in Bulgaria, and the building of a children's playground in Travnik in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, some of the activities of city diplomacy have been directly related to the policies of the AKP, which has undoubtedly implied politicization of Turkey's local diplomacy (Muhasilović, 2020).

5   Challenges in Turkey's Balkans Policy in Its De-Europeanized National Context

In recent years Turkish democracy has experienced a decline, largely due to the AKP-led government's abuse of power, which has given away the pluralist understanding that had marked its early years. In particular, the rule of emergency, implemented after the coup d'état attempt on July 15, 2016, has radically decreased the level of democracy. The change of the political system from parliamentarian to a sui generis presidential–governmental model has resulted in the aggregation of all major powers in the Office of the President and the erosion of the role of the Turkish Grand National Assembly. However, the March 2019 local elections (and the second election for the Istanbul Greater City Municipality in June 2019) have changed the balance of power in local politics, since municipalities in most of the major cities, including Ankara and Istanbul, were won by the opposition.

In terms of the coup attempt and changes in the political system, Turkey's fight against the Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization (FETÖ) has created problems in the Balkans as well. As reported by the pro-government Turkish media, FETÖ-related schools and institutions continued to operate in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia (*Sabah*, 2018). Despite all Turkish attempts, not all of them could be shut down. Turkish efforts to have six Turkish citizens who allegedly had links with the FETÖ deported from Kosovo in 2018, as a result of apparent cooperation between Turkish and Kosovo intelligence agencies, created a political crisis locally. Kosovo president Hashim Thaçi and prime minister Ramush Haradinaj criticized the operation; the latter forced Interior Minister Flamur Sefaj and the head of the intelligence organization, Driton Gashi, to resign. Hence, Turkish decision-makers have continued cooperating with some members of the Kosovo authorities while ignoring others.

Another instance of Turkey's assertiveness was evident during the Bulgarian general elections in 2013 and 2017. Given that the AKP was not on good terms with the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (HÖH), whose majority support came precisely from the Turks in Bulgaria, some AKP MPs openly supported the Freedom and Honor People's Party in 2013 (*Bursada Bugün*, 2013; *Ege'de Sonsöz*, 2013). However, the party failed to meet the threshold needed to enter the parliament. Four years later, the AKP decided to support the newly established Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity, and Tolerance (DOST), which also failed to meet the threshold. Since then, the AKP has refrained from influencing the outcome of elections in Bulgaria.

The above examples show that there are several substantial limitations to Turkey's Balkan policies. Moreover, the period since 2011 has witnessed increasingly authoritarian tendencies of the AKP government, characterized by arrests of journalists, interference in the private life of individuals, limitations to freedom of assembly and expression, otherization of those holding different opinions from those of the ruling elite, the creation of a prejudiced version of Westernism by reproducing conspiracy theories—all symptoms of Turkey's path from procedural democracy

to de-democratization (Demirtaş, 2018). Nowadays, the main challenge is whether Turkey can actually move to procedural democracy first, and then to substantive democracy, as its ability to become an influential regional power depends on whether it can manage to institutionalize its democratic structures (Öniş & Kutlay, 2013: 1418).

Interestingly enough, when the AKP's elites faced a sequence of corruption charges in late 2013 and early 2014, the support coming from the Balkans was used to justify their authority in a national context. While facing corruption charges themselves, the then prime minister Recep Erdoğan and several ministers gained various kinds of support from different levels of the region. Political leaders, representatives of Muslim communities, and Turkish communities living in different Balkan countries extended their endorsement to the Turkish government. As a member of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Presidency Bakir Izetbegović called Erdoğan to express support for the leadership and the "brother nation," the leader of the Islamic Community of Montenegro, Rifat Fejzić, claimed that Erdoğan was not only the prime minister of Turkish people but he was also the leader of the whole Islamic world. In fact, in response to the judicial process initiated against AKP key figures, in all mosques in Montenegro and Sandžak as well as in the Gazi Hüsrev Begova mosque in Sarajevo, there were Friday prayers in support of the Erdoğan government (*Habercim*, 2014; *Yeni Şafak*, 2014). This kind of regional support was consequently exploited by Erdoğan himself when stating on various occasions that the prayers of Bosnia, among others, such as those of Baghdad, Cairo, and Damascus, "would be enough for us" (*Yeni Şafak*, 2013).

6   Conclusion

While tracing the changes and continuities, this chapter has put forward three arguments. First, Turkish foreign policy toward the Balkans is no longer based on political-security issues alone but also on soft power, which has gradually consolidated its importance. Second, the nature of relations has become transnationalized, which suggests that there are some elements of adjustment, mainly with regard to actors and instruments, whereas the basic goal remains the same—construction of a stable region anchored in the Euro-Atlantic structures. Third, the increasing level of proactivism in Turkey's Balkan policies has faced important challenges as well. Though Western Balkan countries are yet to achieve durable peace, some progress has been recorded through Turkey's courageous initiatives. Nevertheless, such developments have lately taken place alongside a frequent reference to the Ottoman past that provokes mixed feelings across the region. According to some observers, regardless of whether Turkey is willing to admit it publicly, the Ottoman past is present and as such it impacts all foreign policy aspects, with some going so far as to claim that Turkey has a hidden agenda that is supposed to result in the recreation of the Ottoman Empire. While the latter point of view has been rejected by the Turkish elites

as unfounded, even misperceptions deserve sufficient attention given their ability to reassure the most concerned actors and eventually contribute to problem solutions.

In any case, a reconsideration of Turkish identity alongside the country's perception of interests has come hand in hand with the changing international circumstances and Turkey's need to adapt to them. This has brought with it the use of new instruments and a fresh formulation of Ankara's ties with the region. The roots of the changes can be traced back to Turkey's Europeanization process where it acquired a new understanding of security; even though Turkey's EU accession has been suspended, its impact is still visible. However, as Turkish democracy has been deteriorating, problems have also emerged in the relations with the Balkan region. Involvement in internal affairs of different countries and assertive unilateral initiatives have created tensions. While Turkey has tried to become a regional power in the Balkans since the early 1990s, the recent experiences have shown that it is a good record of democratic practices coupled with Ankara's soft power instruments that is needed more than any other arrangement to ensure robust prospects for Turkish progress in regional ties. Otherwise, the prospects remain highly questionable. In addition, the global problems such as the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change, and Turkey's responses to them, as well as the future of Ankara's now-stalled Europeanization process, are likely to affect Turkish–Balkan interactions in the coming years.

References

AA. (2010, September 24). *Minister Dincer views Serbia as Turkey's important partner in the Balkans.*

AA. (2012, March 10). Balkanlar Bölge Müdürlüğü Hizmete Giriyo.

Aras, B. (2012). Turkey and the Balkans: New policy in a changing regional environment. *The German Marshall Fund of the United States.*

Arežina, S. (2018). Turkish foreign policy towards Balkans and Serbia under Davutoğlu administration. *Marmara University Journal of Political Science, 6*(2), 203–216.

Bardos, G. N. (2008). The new political dynamics of Southeastern Europe. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 8*(3), 171–188.

Bayrampaşa Belediyesi. (n.d.). Bereket'in İlk Durağı Mostar. http://www.bayrampasa.bel.tr/icerik. asp?is=118q1295q10q1118q1116q10q12q1hadq1qpis

Bechev, D. (2012). Turkey in the Balkans: Taking a broader view. *Insight Turkey, 14*(1), 131–146.

Bursada Bugün. (2013, May 3). AK Parti'den Hürriyet, Şeref ve Halk Partisi'ne destek. https://www.bursadabugun.com/haber/ak-parti-den-hurriyet-seref-ve-halk-partisi-ne-destek-215698.html

Çalış, Ş. (2001). *Hayalet Bilimi ve Hayali Kimlikler: Neo-Osmanlılık, Özal ve Balkanlar*. Çizgi Kitabevi.

Davutoğlu, A. (2011). *A forward-looking vision for the Balkans.* Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Center for Strategic Research.

Demirtaş-Coşkun, B. (2006). *Turkey, Germany and the Wars in Yugoslavia: A search for reconstruction of state identities.* Logos

Demirtaş-Coşkun, B. (2008). Systemic changes and state identity: Turkish and German responses. *Insight Turkey, 10*(4), 31–54.

Demirtaş, B. (2018). Justice and development party's understanding of democracy and democratisation: Cultural relativism and the construction of the West as the 'Other.' *Iran and the Caucasus, 22*(3), 308–323.

ECtHR. (2009, December 22). Sejdić and Finci v. Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/app/conversion/pdf/?library=eCHR&id=001-96491&

Ege'de Sonsöz. (2013, May 9). 'Bulgaristan' krizine Erdoğan el koydu: Sait'e özel görev. https://www.egedesonsoz.com/haber/bulgaristan-krizine-erdogan-el-koydu-sait-e-ozel-gorev/840628

European Council. (2009). *European security strategy: A secure Europe in a better world*. https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf

Freedom House. (2021). Freedom in the world 2021: Turkey. https://freedomhouse.org/country/turkey/freedom-world/2021

Habercim. (2014, January 11). Bosna, Sancak, Karadağ'dan Erdoğan'a destek. https://www.habercim19.com/gundem/bosna-sancak-karadagdan-erdogana-destek-h9378.html

Hermann, C. F. (1990). Changing course: When governments choose to redirect foreign policy. *International Studies Quarterly, 34*(1), 3–21.

Jelavich, B. (1983). *History of the Balkans* (Vols. 1&2). Cambridge University Press.

Jovanović, I. & Tokyay, M. (2012, December 21). TV series fosters Balkan-Turkey relations. *Southeast Times.*

Kirişci, K. (2009). The transformation of Turkish foreign policy: The rise of the trading state. *New Perspectives on Turkey, 40*, 29–56.

Kirişci, K. (2012). Turkey's engagement with its neighborhood: A 'synthetic' and multidimensional look at Turkey's foreign policy transformation. *Turkish Studies, 13*(3), 1–23.

Kohen, S. (2010, April 27). Balkanlar'da yeni bir başlangıç. *Milliyet.* https://www.milliyet.com.tr/yazarlar/sami-kohen/balkanlar-da-yeni-bir-baslangic-1230297

Kutlay, M., & Öniş, Z. (2021). Turkish foreign policy in a post-Western order: Strategic autonomy or new forms of dependence? *International Affairs, 97*(4), 1085–1104.

Linklater, A. (1995). Neorealism in theory and practice. In K. Booth & S. Smith (Eds.), *International relations theory today* (pp. 241–261). Polity Press.

Massari, M. (2005). Do all roads lead to Brussels? Analysis of the different trajectories of Croatia, Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 18*(2), 259–273.

Muhasilović, J. (2020). Turkish local communities and city diplomacy with Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies, 3*(4), 139–168.

Öktem, K. (2011). Between emigration, de-Islamization and the nation-state: Muslim communities in the Balkans. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 11*(2), 151–169.

Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2013). Rising powers in a changing global order: The political economy of Turkey in the age of BRICS. *Third World Quarterly, 34*(8), 1409–1426.

Öniş, Z., & Kutlay, M. (2019). Global shifts and the limits of the EU's transformative power in the European periphery: Comparative perspectives from Hungary and Turkey. *Government and Opposition, 54*(2), 226–253.

Özcan, G. (1995). Continuity and change in Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans. In G. G. Özdoğan, & K. Saybaşılı (Eds.), *The Balkans: A Mirror of the New International Order* (pp. 281–293). Eren.

Petrović, Ž, & Reljić, D. (2011). Turkish interests and involvement in the Western Balkans: A score-card. *Insight Turkey, 13*(3), 159–172.

Ramet, S. P. (2010). Democratic values and ethnic polarization in the Western Balkans: An introduction. *Südosteuropa, 58*(1), 2–14.

Rüma, I. (2011). Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans: Overestimated change within underestimated continuity. In Ö. Z. Oktav (Ed.), *Turkey in the 21st Century: Quest for a New Foreign Policy* (pp. 135–158). Ashgate.

Sabah. (2018, July 13). FETÖ ile mücadele Balkanlar'da. https://www.sabah.com.tr/dunya/2018/07/13/feto-ile-mucadele-balkanlarda

SBG/Srebrenica Genocide Blog. (2010, April 17). Text of Declaration on Srebrenica adopted by the Parliament of Serbia. http://srebrenica-genocide.blogspot.com/2010/04/text-of declaration-on-srebrenica.html

SEECP/South-East European Cooperation Process. (2010, April 24). Istanbul Trilateral Summit Declaration. http://www.seecp-turkey.org/icerik.php?no=60

Steinke, K. (1990). Die Türken und die Balkanküche, Kulinarisches und Sprachliches aus Bulgarien und Rumänien. *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen, 30*(1), 65–71.

Sugar, P. (1977). *Southeastern Europe under Ottoman Rule, 1354–1804.* University of Washington Press.

TAF/Turkish Armed Forces. (n.d. (a)). *Türkiye'nin Barışı Destekleme Harekatına Katkıları.* https://www.tsk.tr/Sayfalar?viewName=BarisiDestekleme

TAF/Turkish Armed Forces. (n.d. (b)). TSK Askeri Eğitim ve İşbirliği Faaliyetleri. https://www.tsk.tr/Sayfalar?viewName=AskeriEgitimIsBirligi

The Economist. (2011, November 5). Turkey in the Balkans: The good old days.

Todorova, M. (1996). The Ottoman legacy in the Balkans. In L. C. Brown (Ed.), *Imperial Legacy the Ottoman Imprint on the Balkans and the Middle East* (pp. 45–77). Columbia University Press.

Toker, M. (1992, July 12). Doğru bir dış politikanın Helsinki'de meyveleri. *Milliyet*.

Türbedar, E. (2011). Turkey's new activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and obstacles. *Insight Turkey, 13*(3), 139–158.

Türkeş M., Rüma, Ş.İ. & Akşit, S. (2012). Kriz Sarmalında Bosna Hersek: 'Devlet Krizi'. *Boğaziçi Üniversitesi-TÜSİAD Dış Politika Forumu.* http://www.dispolitikaforumu.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/kriz-sarmali.pdf

Uzgel, I. (2001). Kosova Sorunu ve Türkiye. In B. Oran (Ed.), *Türk Dış Politikası, Kurtuluş Savaşı'ndan Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar* (pp. 508–523)*.* İletişim.

Váli, F. A. (1971). *Bridge across the bosporus: The foreign policy of Turkey.* The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vatan. (2010, June 4). Ziraat Bankası: Kapımızı Çalan Yunanistan ve Balkanlar'daki Bankalarla 2011'de El Sıkışırız. https://www.gazetevatan.com/ekonomi/bankalari-aliriz-309365

Webel, C., & Galtung, J. (2010). *Handbook of peace and conflict studies.* Routledge.

World Bank. (2021a, April 8). *Kosovo.* https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/kosovo/overview#3

World Bank. (2021b, June 15). Unemployment, youth total: Bosnia and Herzegovina. https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=BA

YEE/Yunus Emre Enstitüsü. (2013). Türkçe'nin Resmi Müfredatlara Girişi. http://yunusemreenstitusu.org/turkiye/index.php?lang=tr&page=66&anIIcat_1=0&anIIitm_1=34

Yeni Şafak. (2013, December 24). Bize Bosna'nın Kahire'nin duaları yeter! https://www.yenisafak.com/video-galeri/politika/bize-bosnanin-kahirenin-dualari-yeter!-12351

Yeni Şafak. (2014, January 7). İzzetbegoviç'ten Erdoğan'a destek. https://www.yenisafak.com/gundem/izzetbegovicten-erdogana-destek-602541

Zenelaj, R., Beriker, N., & Hatipoğlu, E. (2015). Determinants of mediation success in post-conflict Bosnia: A focused comparison. *Australian Journal of International Affairs, 69*(4), 414–437.