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To cite this article: Birgül Demirtaş (2022) Reconstruction of the 'regional power' role during the pandemic: Turkey's COVID-19 diplomacy towards the balkans, Southeast European and Black Sea Studies, 22:1, 25-43, DOI: [10.1080/14683857.2022.2034383](https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2034383)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2022.2034383>



Published online: 08 Feb 2022.



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# Reconstruction of the ‘regional power’ role during the pandemic: Turkey’s COVID-19 diplomacy towards the balkans

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## ABSTRACT

The CoViD-19 pandemic has led to a resurgence of health diplomacy in international relations. Especially the great powers and middle powers have provided different kinds of assistance to countries in need and utilized health diplomacy as an opportunity to construct, reconstruct or consolidate their role in regional and global politics. Turkey was no exception with its assertive and ambitious health diplomacy, of which the Balkans were central. Crisis periods have proved critical junctures for Turkish decision-makers to assert their ambitions in the Balkans. This article examines Turkish diplomacy towards the Balkan countries during the CoViD-19 pandemic and examines how Turkish decision-makers reconstructed a ‘regional power’ identity. Informed by the constructivist theory, the paper critically investigates how Justice and Development Party tried to consolidate Turkey’s identity as a regional power in the Balkans. It delves into the following questions: What are the main reasons for Turkey’s coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkans? How are Turkish decision-makers trying to reconstruct Turkey’s role as a regional power during the pandemic? What does the Turkish case tell us about the coronavirus diplomacy of the middle powers in general?.

## KEYWORDS

Turkey; Balkans; coronavirus; regional power; health diplomacy

## Introduction\*

In the early months of the pandemic, Turkey’s senior citizens above the age of 65 received a gift package from President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, consisting of face masks and cologne, as well as a letter from him, in which he stated:

“As the family of humanity, we are going through a difficult trial during this process of the pandemic. With thanks to God, our country, together with the state and nation, is becoming successful in this trial . . . During the pandemic, many countries were closed in, and they clung to the limited means at their disposal . . . We, as Turkey, have fulfilled our own needs, and furthermore, we have provided assistance to many people in many friendly and kin states. In a world in which global solidarity is mentioned a lot but not realised, we, as Turkey, have proven our humanity . . . .

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\*This article was written during my research stay at Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen during June-September 2021 thanks to the scholarship of German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD).

This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Turkey is one of the most prepared countries relative to the coronavirus pandemic because of the change and transformation in fundamental service sectors in the last 18 years. Turkey has launched the most powerful general health insurance system in the world and has built the most modern hospitals, and therefore the country is taken as a model by the world . . . . Feel safe; no virus, no pandemic, is stronger than Turkey.” (Letter of the President, 2020)

The letter was the central message of Turkey’s leadership during the pandemic: praising the Turkish health system reconstructed during the reign of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) and portraying it as one of the best in the world, giving the image of a self-sufficient Turkey, and creating a picture of a humanitarian Turkey helping other countries in need. During its two decades of government, the AKP has tried to build the image of a powerful and humanitarian Turkey in its foreign policy. CoViD-19 has provided an unprecedented opportunity for the AKP to reconstruct this image.

AKP leadership has used every kind of crisis to create an internal and external identity for Turkey based on the concepts of ‘powerful state’ and ‘exemplary country’ during its time in government, and the CoViD-19 crisis is no exception. It has tried to give the appearance that the government is coping with the pandemic so successfully that it does not only fulfil the healthcare needs of its own people but also provides every kind of assistance to many countries around the world, in addition to generously helping the Turkish diaspora abroad.

However, there has been a gap between reality and discourse from the beginning of the pandemic. Some 71,724 Turkish citizens had lost their lives as of 5 November 2021 (Website of Turkish Health Ministry). Turkey has the sixth-highest number of cases in the world (*Countries Where Coronavirus Has Spread*, n.d.). According to the Covid Performance Index of the Lowy Institute, Turkey ranks 72nd out of 102 countries in its performance (Covid Performance Index 2021). Its performance is thus below the median according to this evaluation. In October 2021, nearly every day, almost 30,000 Turkish people were infected with the virus, along with more than 200 people losing their lives. The official numbers are disputed by the Turkish Medical Association and opposition-led municipalities (Türk Tabipleri Birliği 2021; Euronews 2020). Despite the high number of cases and a high death toll, the government tried to show that Turkey successfully dealt with the pandemic.

Meanwhile, CoViD-19 came at a time when Turkey was vying to become a regional power in its neighbourhood, including the Balkans. From the early 1990s onwards, as the bipolar world order and the tight dependencies of the Cold War came to an end, Turkey has been trying to find a new manoeuvring space for itself in its regional policies to play a greater role in the neighbourhood. Turkey’s policies during the wars of Yugoslav succession, its initiatives regarding the Black Sea, its policies in the Middle East, and its mediation attempts in different geographies exemplify these attempts. The pandemic has provided yet another opportunity for Turkey to build its agency in the Balkans.

In light of this, this article tries to answer the following research questions: What are the main reasons for Turkey’s coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkans? How are Turkish decision-makers trying to reconstruct Turkey’s role as a regional power during the pandemic? What does the Turkish case tell us about the coronavirus diplomacy of regional actors?

The article is based on an analysis of primary sources, such as official websites of Turkish governmental institutions, newspaper sources, and secondary academic sources. It also draws on five interviews conducted with retired Turkish ambassadors and one interview with a former AKP parliamentarian in 2020.

There is an ongoing discussion on how Turkey is performing as a regional or middle power in its neighbouring regions (Öniş-Kutlay, 2017, 164–183; Parlar Dal 2016, 1425–1453, Parlar Dal 2018, 1–31). Under the guidance of the AKP, Turkey aimed to be a regional power as well as a central state. In his book *Strategic Depth*, Ahmet Davutoğlu, former prime minister and minister of foreign affairs, discusses how Turkey can benefit from its history and geography to become a powerful state (Davutoğlu 2001). Although Turkey's assertive regional policies started in the 1990s, the AKP has accelerated this process and tried to launch new initiatives and make Turkey an 'order setter country' in its neighbourhood. Regional powers can be defined as countries that try to play a leadership role in their neighbourhood, who have a claim to regional leadership and instruments to play that role (Parlar Dal 2016).

The Balkans have been one of the regions in which Turkey has tried to play this role through active diplomacy, and the crises proved crucial critical junctures for Turkish decision-makers to start new diplomatic initiatives. This article examines Turkish diplomacy towards the Balkan countries during the CoViD-19 pandemic and explores how Turkish decision-makers constructed a 'regional power' identity. From the lens of the constructivist theory of international relations, the paper critically investigates how the AKP tried to consolidate Turkey's identity as a regional power in the Balkans.

Identity is an inseparable aspect of Turkey's coronavirus diplomacy, as evidenced by the fact that the AKP's policy of providing different kinds of assistance to Balkan countries has been closely associated with discourses on Turkish identity, which the AKP leadership reiterated and reconstructed along with Turkey's place in regional and global politics with its coronavirus diplomacy. The Turkish government has recreated the discourse of 'us' versus 'them.' Because of the emphasis of Turkish leadership on identity when providing help to Balkan countries, this study uses constructivism as its theoretical framework.

The article consists of five parts. In the first part, the constructivist theory will be analysed with regard to the foreign policy-identity nexus. The second part examines the AKP's approach towards the Balkans. Turkey's own coronavirus policies is the topic of the third part, after which the fourth section will analyse the AKP's coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkans. Lastly, the fifth section will summarize the main findings of the research.

### ***Constructing identity through foreign policy: theoretical framework***

Constructivism was the first international relations (IR) theory to focus on the importance of the interaction between identity and foreign policy. Introduced to the IR discipline by Nicholas Onuf in 1989, constructivism argues that not only material forces but also social forces determine the dynamics of world politics. Constructivists generally believe in the importance of norms, rules, identities and language in global politics, but

with different ideas on the relative importance of these elements. Some constructivists argue that there is no reality in the world except as constituted by language, some argue for the relevance of norms, and others state the primacy of identity.<sup>1</sup>

The two fundamental characteristics of constructivism can be elaborated as follows: First, the international environment in which states are embedded is to a great extent made up of social factors, not material ones. Second, this social structure is determined by the identities and interests of states (Wendt 1999). As states interact, they gain an identity and attach an identity to others. Indeed, the international aspect of state identity is only one part of the whole picture; domestic factors also define what kind of entity a state would become. When one compares the relative weight of domestic and international factors in determining state identity, for Wendt, state identity is to a great extent established by the international system (Wendt 1999, 20–21). But the important thing at this point is the significance of the concept of ‘state identity’ for international politics. First, a definition of the concept is needed: state identity consists of ‘a set of beliefs about nature and purpose of state expressed in public articulations of state actions and ideals’ (Lynch 1998,1999, 349). It is about the definition of a state’s rights, obligations and responsibilities, and the meaning attributed to other actors. In a way, it is about setting boundaries between oneself and others: Who are you relative to others? And who are the other actors relative to yourself? (Chafetz et al. 2007, 7)

States have, in fact, two kinds of identities: internal and external. While internal identity refers to a set of understandings within the boundaries of that state among its constituent parts, external identity stands for a state’s place among others in international politics. The former can also be labelled as national identity. It is the latter concept that will be used in this paper.

There is an important relationship between state identity and foreign policy. One significant way for states to acquire a new identity or protect the current one is through foreign policy (Kowert 1998,1999, 4). Their interactions with other states are a way of getting themselves accepted as part of a certain international community. Especially during identity formulation or reformulation, foreign policy is a key instrument for decision-makers. Therefore, the constructivist approach is expected to have more explanatory power during periods of new identity creation (Checkel 1998, 346).<sup>2</sup> David Campbell’s book *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Campbell 1998) is an important work that elaborates on how the US identity has been constituted through foreign policy, both during the Cold War and afterwards. Campbell shows that US leadership used perceived dangers in global politics to conceptualize the American identity. The following section will focus on the interaction between Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans and Ankara’s search for identity in the post-Cold War era in light of the constructivist approach.

### ***Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans and the role of identity***

This study attempts to understand how the AKP leadership is trying to construct the identity of the Turkish state in global politics via its active diplomacy towards the Balkan countries during the pandemic. This study hypothesizes that the AKP leadership is trying to create a new identity for Turkey as a strong state that is a guardian for states located in former Ottoman territories and other developing countries.

In the literature, Turkey is generally accepted as a middle power in global politics (Hale 2002; Oran 2001). Especially since the establishment of the BRICS in 2010, there has been an increasing number of works on the importance of emerging powers, rising states and middle powers in global politics, and the declining influence of the US in particular, and the West in general. In that context, it is argued that many regional actors on different continents are trying to play greater roles in international relations. Turkey is one of the MIKTA (Mexico, Indonesia, Republic of Korea, Turkey and Australia) countries that are assumed to pursue active foreign policy in regional and global politics. The Balkans is a key region where Turkish decision-makers are trying to launch new initiatives and play facilitation roles. For historical, geographical and cultural reasons, the Balkans has grown as an important region on the Turkish foreign policy agenda. This section will analyse the main parameters of Turkey's foreign policy towards the Balkan countries.

Turkey's relations with the Balkans have multidimensional characteristics compared to other actors, like the EU, Russia and China, all of which also try to play a role in the region. First of all, Turkey is not an external actor in the Balkans; on the contrary, it is an intrinsic part of the region that also played a historical role in the region's construction. Second, there are humanitarian ties between Turkey and the Balkans. The existence of Balkan-origin citizens of Turkey, as well as Muslim and Turkish populations in the Balkans, create transnational linkages between Ankara and regional countries, making the interaction more multidimensional. For these two reasons, decision-makers in Ankara perceive the Balkans as a region to which Turkey also belongs. Therefore, the AKP elite considers Turkey an actor *in* and *of* the Balkans, which is important in analysing Turkey-Balkan interactions. That is also the main reason why Turkey's Balkan policies include both state and non-state actors as well as political, economic and cultural elements. Municipalities, NGOs connected to the Balkan diaspora in Turkey as well as Turkish companies, who continue to establish close ties with the Balkans, are significant parts of Turkish foreign policy.

Whenever the Turkish minorities and Muslim peoples in the Balkan countries have faced difficulties, decision-makers in Ankara have been interested in helping them and coming up with solutions of their own. For instance, Turkey pursued an active foreign policy during the assimilation campaign in Bulgaria in the 1980s and during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s. As the most organized group in foundations and associations, Turkey's Balkan-origin citizens have continuously influenced decision-makers to be receptive towards the people in the Balkans. Thus, Turkey is part of the region, and the Balkan identity is one of Turkey's regional identities. Since the end of the Cold War, Turkish decision-makers have emphasized that Turkey has multiple identities. Turkey is not just a European country, but also an Asian, Black Sea, Mediterranean as well as a Balkan country.

The end of the bipolar era has resulted in a radical change in Turkey's interactions with the Balkan countries. The Cold War had provided only limited opportunities for Ankara to establish ties with regional actors. However, after the Berlin Wall fell, there was an increasing interaction between Turkish people and citizens of Balkan countries, and the increasing flows of people across borders strengthened the ties. Indeed, Motherland Party (Anavatan Partisi-ANAP) governments led by Turgut Özal propelled the active Turkish foreign policy in the 1980s. Especially after the Yugoslav wars had spread to Bosnia Herzegovina, Turkey started pursuing a more assertive and vocal foreign policy.

Although the Ottoman past was remembered and glorified in the formulation of the Turkish reaction to the Yugoslavian wars, Ankara acted in harmony with its Western partners, though still launching its own initiatives from time to time.

After the AKP had won the elections of 2002, it promised to make Turkey more active in global politics.<sup>3</sup> The AKP's foreign policy can be divided into two periods: the first decade, between 2002–2012, and the second decade, after 2013. In the first period, the main characteristic of Turkish foreign policy was interdependence, and the foreign policy revolved around 'zero problems with neighbours,' a phrase coined by Davutoğlu. However, in the second period, the AKP has increasingly tried to achieve strategic autonomy by improving relations and aligning itself with non-Western powers (Kutlay and Öniş 2021, 1085–1104).

Basing its foreign policy on the instruments of soft power in the first period, AKP leadership tried to pursue an active foreign policy in the neighbourhood, including the Balkans. Basing its foreign policy on the Europeanization process and its economic credentials, it aimed to interact more with other actors in the Balkans on different levels. The military aspect of this cooperation has also been part of Turkey's regional policy. The Turkish military has extensively contributed to the peacekeeping missions of NATO and the EU in the Balkans, as seen in the cases of IFOR, SFOR, Althea, and EUFOR.

There has been a new impetus in Turkey's regional ties since the second half of the 2000s, as the AKP has tried to develop new initiatives in Southeastern Europe (For a review of AKP's Balkan policies, see Alpan and Ozturk 2022). The Yunus Emre Institute was established in 2007 and began its activities in 2009, contributing extensively to Turkey's cultural diplomacy. The Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities was established in 2010, increasing Turkey's ties with Muslim and Turkish people abroad, including in the Balkan countries. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), established in 1992 to cultivate Turkey's ties with the Turkic Republics, has become a much more comprehensive institution under the AKP. TİKA's activities now cover almost the whole world. Although TİKA has been famous for its mosque restorations, its activities are much more comprehensive than classical IR literature would suggest. TİKA is providing equipment to schools and hospitals and drinking water supplies to people in the Balkans. In its Annual Report, TİKA stated that it provides help to consolidate Turkey to implement its responsibilities concerning international issues stemming from its historical character and virtuous position (TİKA 2012).

Another of Turkey's important initiatives in the Balkans under AKP reign is its trilateral initiative with regard to Bosnia and Herzegovina. From the perspective of the AKP, Bosnia is one of the key countries in the region; since Bosnia could achieve neither political stability nor economic recovery after the war ended in 1995. Believing that stability in Bosnia could only be possible with contributions from the neighbouring countries of Serbia and Croatia, the AKP initiated a trilateral dialogue with all three of these countries attended by their respective presidents and foreign ministers. Although sensitive problems in Bosnia remain, Turkey's diplomatic initiative has had some limited achievements. However, the politicians in Bosnia are still seeking Turkey's mediation to solve the country's political deadlock. The visits by Bakir Izetbegovic, the head of the Party of

Democratic Action and Milorad Dodik, the Serb member of the Bosnian Presidency, to Turkey in November 2021 to meet President Erdoğan and ask his help to solve the political crisis were important signs of Turkey's importance in regional politics.

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) is another institution that has become an integral component of Turkish foreign policy under AKP rule (Öztürk and Gözaydın 2018). Its budget, personnel and scope of activities have been considerably increased by the AKP leadership. The fact that the AKP has increased the role of Islam in domestic politics – witness the opening of the Imam Hatip Schools; the building of huge mosques in Taksim, Çamlıca and Beştepe; and the increase in the tax on alcohol – has repercussions on foreign policy as well (Uzer 2021, 5–22).

Diyanet has wide-ranging activities in its international relations and a special department dedicated to foreign relations (Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü). The former State Minister Mehmet Aydın stated that ‘... Diyanet's international responsibility is no less important (and difficult) than its responsibility in Turkey.’ (Aydın 2008, 168) Diyanet holds annual meetings with heads of religious institutions of the countries in the Balkans. Meanwhile, it has been sending envoys to Turkey's diplomatic representations. It aims to spread the AKP's version of Islam to Balkan countries and increase the religious ties between Turkey and regional countries.<sup>4</sup>

Although Turkey now has wide-ranging institutions in its foreign policy towards the Balkans under AKP rule, this creates a new problem: the coordination of these different agencies. Some interviewees stated that coordinating the activities of these different institutions is a significant challenge and that Turkish decision-makers need to pay more attention (online communication with a former MP of AKP, Interviewee 6, 24 September 2020; online communication with a former Turkish ambassador, Interviewee 3, 19 October 2020; online communication with a former Turkish ambassador, Interviewee 4, 18 September 2020).

Concerning Turkey's economic ties with the Balkans, it can be noted that, although economic relations have increased since the 1990s, Turkey's importance to the Balkans in economic terms is limited compared to that of the European Union member states. Trade volume with Turkey constitutes less than 10% of regional countries' trade volume except Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo (Hake 2019, 58). In addition, it should be noted that 65% of Turkey's trade relationship with the region consists of low-to-medium-technology goods (Türbedar 2018, 165). With regard to foreign direct investment, Turkish businesspeople have so far mainly invested in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia. Turkish investment has a share of 15% in Kosovo and 8% in Albania and North Macedonia (Hake 2019, 57). In other countries, Turkish FDI is quite limited. Statistical information shows that Turkey does not have economic hegemony in the region. Considering Turkey's financial difficulties at home in recent years, its economic role abroad might decline in the years to come.

Meanwhile, the Balkans have become an essential arena for gaining legitimacy in Turkey's tumultuous internal politics. Whatever happens in Turkey has immediate repercussions in the Balkans. Sometimes, these repercussions occur directly through the AKP; sometimes, pro-AKP groups take the upper hand to show their support for Turkey and the AKP. The presidential election campaign in 2018 exemplified the internal-external policy nexus. When several European countries did not allow



Erdoğan to hold rallies before the presidential elections in 2018, it was Sarajevo where he gave his campaign speech. Turks living in different European countries came to the capital of Bosnia to show their support for the AKP leader.

In addition, all the important events within or related to Turkey are directly felt in the neighbouring region. When the Hagia Sophia was turned from museum to mosque in July 2020, the Islamic Union of Montenegro decided to hold gratitude prostration (*şükür secdesi*) in the mosques. (Balkan Günlüğü, 20 Temmuz 2020) Similarly, the Deputy Head of the Islamic Union of North Macedonia has expressed his satisfaction with the decision to open the Hagia Sophia to Islamic prayers (Balkan Günlüğü, 31 Temmuz 2020).

Whenever the AKP faces difficulties in its domestic or foreign policy, it can find support from its supporters in the Balkans. During the Gezi protests in 2013, or after the coup attempt in 2016, various groups took to the streets in multiple countries to show their support for the AKP and Erdoğan. In addition, when Turkish soldiers were killed in Idlib, Syria, religious ceremonies were held in mosques from Sofia to Sarajevo. Similarly, when an earthquake hit Elazığ and Malatya on 24 January 2020 donations were collected after Friday prayer in accordance with the decision of the Islamic Union of Bosnia Herzegovina (Daily Sabah, 31 January 2020).

The same is true for Turkish responses to challenges in the Balkans. When an earthquake hit Albania on 26 November 2019 Turkey was among the first to send emergency aid and relief personnel to the region. In addition, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism has decided to construct 522 houses in the earthquake-ridden area.

However, there are certain challenges in the AKP's policies towards the Balkans. Six online interviews were conducted in the framework of this study. Five were conducted with former Turkish ambassadors, and one with a former MP of the AKP, who have pointed out certain problems. First of all, Turkey's economic problems, becoming more visible in recent years, were mentioned as a significant limitation in Turkey's international relations. Second, institutional weaknesses and instabilities were cited as another problem (online communication with a retired ambassador, Interviewee 1, 2020).

It is striking that Turkey, as a moderately developed country, has been sending so much aid to its neighbouring countries even when it has been facing a ramping economic crisis. This analysis of the AKP's Balkan policies provides the background for understanding its CoViD-19 diplomacy towards the region. The pandemic started when the AKP had been trying to consolidate itself as a regional power in the Balkans. The following section examines the main dynamics of Turkey's pandemic policies.

### ***Turkey's CoViD-19 experience: images vs realities***

The first case of CoViD-19 was reported in Turkey on 11 March 2020. As of November 5th, 71,724 Turkish citizens have lost their lives in the last 20 months. When the pandemic spread to Turkey, the country was already going through a difficult period. While the Turkish lira was depreciating and a severe economic crisis was unfolding, the populist and de-Europeanizing tendencies of the government were becoming more visible. The local elections in 2019 have become an indicator of the

AKP's declining support as the coalition of opposition parties CHP and İyi Party, known as the Nation Alliance (*Millet İttifakı*), has won most of the largest municipalities all over the country (Aksoy 2020).

The declining level of democracy and the weakening of state institutions is evident. According to the Freedom House Index, Turkey is listed as 'Not Free' (Freedom House 2021). In addition, state capacity in Turkey has been declining considerably. According to the leading state capacity indicators, the country has been losing ground with regard to the rule of law, political stability and transparency (Kutlay and Öniş 2020, 22).

The coronavirus crisis has brought the realities of the Turkish health sector to the centre stage. The AKP leadership had carried out a transformation process in the health sector by building grand new city hospitals (*şehir hastaneleri*), which continually faced criticisms from many health authorities, one of them being their unsuitable locations. While these hospitals were built by the private sector with the 'build-operate-transfer' (*yap-işlet-devret*) model, the Turkish Medical Association elaborated corruption and performance problems involved in the construction and operation of these hospitals.

Both President Erdoğan as well as Health Minister Fahrettin Koca have claimed that Turkey is dealing with the pandemic very successfully because of its robust health system. President Erdoğan, for example, stated:

"In a period in which the health systems of developed countries collapsed—people were dying in their houses, hospital corridors because of insufficient treatment—we should appreciate what we have . . . . We personally see the importance of being self-sufficient and, beyond that, being at a level to lend a helping hand to our friends. At a time when unions, global structures and international organizations founded with great ideals lost their meaning, Turkey showed its power by standing on its own feet. Of course, behind this success, especially the infrastructure we have established in 17-18 years, especially the steps we have taken during the period of our governments, the works that have been built have great importance." ("Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan: Türkiye sağlık hizmetlerinde destan yazdı" 2020)

Similarly, Health Minister Fahrettin Koca stated that the state is dealing with the pandemic successfully and that Turkey would see the end of the pandemic as one of the least affected countries. Arguing that Turkey's strength stemmed from the success of the health system, he claimed that Turkey showed a public-health-service success against the pandemic, something rare in the world.

The construction of the 'strong Turkey image' was the central message of a public relations campaign of the AKP. This has included the transportation of coronavirus-infected Turkish people from abroad via ambulance planes to Turkey with the claim that they were not being treated adequately in European countries. The case of Emrullah Gülüşken, who lives in Sweden, was noteworthy. After he was infected with the virus in Sweden, he was allegedly sent home without receiving proper treatment in the hospital. After his daughters called for help from Turkish authorities via social media, President Erdoğan ordered that an ambulance plane be sent to Malmö, Sweden, to take Gülüşken to Turkey. Reports of this particular transfer were broadcast extensively on pro-government television channels. After his treatment was completed, his following statement was an important sign of the new image the AKP was trying to construct:

“After a successful treatment, I became healthy again. I would like to thank President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Minister of Health Fahrettin Koca, Minister of Foreign Affairs Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and other officials very much. I am proud of being a citizen of this country. There is no other country in the world that transports one of its citizens by private plane and gets him treated free of charge. The Turkish health system is unique in the world.” (Kurt 2020)

Thanks to the extensive coverage of the pro-government television channels, the transnational help campaign aimed to address the domestic constituency. However, as this domestic show was going on, there were insufficient beds for Turkish people infected with CoViD-19 in many provinces (BBC News Türkçe 2020).

Turkey’s populist and de-Europeanizing political system has been reflected in its struggle against the pandemic. President and AKP leader Erdoğan has frequently referred to ‘local and national’ (yerli ve milli) policies, a nationalist term AKP popularized. This discourse has had its reflection during the pandemic as well. AKP leadership has claimed that, although this is a global health problem, Turkey’s struggle is national since it is trying to overcome this problem by its own means. (‘Sorun Küresel Mücadelemiz Ulusal’) The question of how a pandemic, an international crisis by its very nature, can be dealt with by means of national policies without the cooperation of other actors is not clear at all. The discourse and the PR campaigns are indispensable parts of AKP policies; thus, the slogan ‘global problem, national struggle’ reflect their strong nationalist outlook.

In addition, there are other problems with the pandemic policies of the AKP. The issue of face masks has been an important symbol of the lack of planning by the AKP leadership. The government has initially insisted that it would provide face masks to all citizens free of charge; however, the policy did not succeed since many citizens could not get the masks on time. However, at the time when Turkish people did not have access to face masks, Turkey was providing masks to different countries free of charge. After two months of insisting that masks not be sold, the government had to allow the sale of masks throughout the country beginning in May 2020.

The number of infections has become another controversial issue in Turkey. Both the Turkish Medical Association (TMA) and opposition-led municipalities have questioned the official numbers, stating that the actual number of people who died because of the pandemic is much higher than the official numbers. Although there are similar claims and question marks in other parts of the world, the fact that it is the Minister of Health, not an independent institution, who has announced the CoViD-19 infection statistics makes Turkey a ‘special’ case. Claims of the TMA and mayors of opposition-led municipalities about the actual number of deaths are rejected by the government. However, much official statistical information, such as the rate of inflation and the unemployment rate, is a point of contention in the country,

Turkey’s *sui generis* new presidential governmental system has its reflections on its struggle against CoViD-19. After the Gezi Park protest movement in 2013, Turkish democracy took an illiberal turn, reflected in many democracy indexes. In that respect, the government has used the CoViD-19 emergency measures to ban new-year celebrations, prevent mass rallies, and put new limitations on the initiatives of opposition-led municipalities. In other words, the AKP has abused the CoViD-19 precautions to further its political aims and curb the political opposition.

After analysing Turkey's policies towards the coronavirus crisis and reviewing the impact of populist politics on the struggle against the pandemic, the next section will examine Turkey's coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkans.

### **Regional powers and identity construction: the case of Turkish coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkans**

In a shifting global order, pandemics play a substantial role in the balance of power politics among great powers. Rivalry in the political and security realms has spread to competition in health diplomacy. During the very time in which states need to cooperate in dealing with the pandemic successfully, competition has predominated over collaboration in many parts of the world. In addition, not only has providing assistance for strategic reasons become the rule, but its advertisement for domestic constituencies and foreign public opinion has also gained importance.

In other words, health diplomacy during the CoViD-19 pandemic has become part of states' public diplomacy and national branding. From China to Russia, different actors are trying to reflect positive images of themselves through their domestic and external policies, as well as trying to upgrade their role in global politics (Kabutaulaka 2021, 254–261; Verma 2020, 248–258; Lee and Kim 2021, 382–396). Health diplomacy is thus not independent of global competition, even during a pandemic.

In this *Zeitgeist*, health diplomacy, mask diplomacy, pandemic diplomacy, CoViD-19 diplomacy and coronavirus diplomacy have become part of the terminology of the international relations literature (Lee and Kim 2021, 392). In her analysis of the pandemics of the 21st century (SARS, H1N1, MERS, Ebola and CoViD-19), Fazal (2020) found that, instead of trying to foster global cooperation, states preferred to make use of bilateral and regional diplomacy. This is an important indication of the weakness of international solidarity during these difficult times. Fazal (2020, E92) emphasizes the fact that there has been no global leadership during the CoViD-19 pandemic, a time in which no state or international organization has been able to play the role of global actor, resulting in a resurgence of geopolitical competition among great powers as well as among regional actors. Hence, as stated by Fazal (2020, E 78), '... pandemics also create opportunities for states to pursue foreign policy goals that primarily serve their national interest rather than serving global health.'

During this challenging time, the IR vocabulary has been enriched by health-related concepts from recent years. Fazal (2020, E78) defines 'health diplomacy' as 'international aid or cooperation meant to promote health or that uses health programming to promote non-health related foreign aims.' Meanwhile, 'pandemic public diplomacy' is described as 'state-initiated efforts involving non-state actors and networks aimed at communicating with foreign publics in a health pandemic context through sharing and transmission of material and immaterial resources to mitigate the health threat, foster a positive nation brand, and contribute to healthful global environment' (Lee and Kim 2021, 392). Cuban health diplomacy has been a pioneering example, showing how a country can use its health diplomacy to foster its image (Erman 2016, 77–94), and many others have followed this example. Russia and China are among the key actors in health diplomacy towards the Balkan countries during the CoViD-19 pandemic (Bastian 2020; Bechev 2020).

This study argues that Turkey is another example of a country trying to use the pandemic to improve its regional and global standing by recreating its identity through the discourse of a strong and humanitarian country, as opposed to other actors who were supposedly acting selfishly.<sup>5</sup> The AKP's CoViD-19 diplomacy has been a continuation of its efforts to focus on ex-Ottoman states to further Turkey's role. As the AKP leadership has been trying to construct a new identity for Turkey both in domestic and international politics as a strong, self-sufficient and influential country, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to prove these new role conceptualizations. In other words, Turkey's CoViD-19 diplomacy can be seen as a continuation of its attempts to be a 'great actor' in the Balkans (Öztürk 2020, 63). Throughout the CoViD-19 crisis, Turkey has been one of the most generous countries, providing medical help to 155 countries when, at home, Turkish people did not have access to basic medical equipment and infrastructure. During the early months of the pandemic, when the sale of face masks was forbidden and the complimentary packages sent by the Presidential office could not meet the need, when hospitals were overcrowded with CoViD-19 cases, and patients could not find a bed in intensive care units, the AKP leadership was providing generous help to many countries, including the USA as well as Balkan countries.

Then, how can we explain Turkey's health diplomacy in the case of the Balkans? What are the main motivations, dynamics and causes of the AKP's policies during the pandemic? This section will provide answers to these questions from the perspective of constructivism.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry has published a statement entitled 'Our Role and Mission during the Coronavirus Pandemic' (*Koronavirus Salginindaki Rol ve Vizyonumuz*, n.d.), in which Turkey's 'success' in the fight against the pandemic was emphasized with a clear focus on the role of the President, whose name was mentioned seven times in a one-page declaration. According to the Ministry's statement, the 'strong leadership' of the President, his instructions and his negotiations with other leaders had played an important role in Turkey's allegedly effective handling of the crisis. Praising Turkey's health infrastructure and its struggles, the Ministry claimed that other world leaders had asked the opinion of President Erdoğan concerning the pandemic. The Ministry tried to foster the image of strength in Turkey's health sector as follows:

"At the national level, our institutions and society have realized the seriousness of the situation at an early stage under the shrewd leadership of our President, and thanks to the measures taken, the entry of the epidemic into our country has been delayed as much as possible. After the arrival of the epidemic, our country has successfully maintained its resistance against this serious disaster thanks to the opportunities offered by the health and physical infrastructure." (*Koronavirus Salginindaki Rol ve Vizyonumuz*, n.d.)

In April 2020, Turkey sent face masks, medical wares as well as test kits to five Western Balkan countries via a military cargo plane: Serbia, Bosnia Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Kosovo. Table 1 summarises Turkish aid during the pandemic towards the Balkans. On the aid packages appeared the following words of the famous Anatolian poet Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi: 'There is hope after despair and many suns after darkness.' It is also important to note that the label of 'The Presidency of the Republic of Turkey' was put on all aid packages sent to the region, symbolizing that the

**Table 1.** Turkey's medical aid to the Balkans during the pandemic.

Date	Sending Institution	Receiving Country	Type of Aid
April 2020	Turkish state	Serbia, Bosnia Her., Kosovo, N. Macedonia and Montenegro	masks, medical wares and test kits
April 2020	Turkish state	Albania	six ambulances
April 2020	Turkish Embassy in Bucharest in coop. with Turkish Businessmen Association (TİAD)	Romania	medical aid
July 2020	Saruhanlı Municipality (Manisa)	Kırcaali (Bulgaria)	medical aid
July 2020	Mamak Municipality in cooperation with Yunus Emre Institute	Novi Pazar (Serbia)	medical aid
July 2020	Altındağ Municipality (Ankara)	Novi Pazar (Serbia)	medical aid
August 2020	Bursa Metropolitan Municipality (in coop. with businesspeople and NGO's)	Sancak (Serbia)	medical aid
October 2020	Turkish businesspeople and Prizrenliler Association	Prizren (Kosovo)	ambulance and respirator

Source: Compiled from the Turkish press by the author. This is not a complete list of Turkish medical aid but merely a sample of it.

aid was sent through the President. In the Turkish press, it was emphasized that President Erdoğan himself instructed to send the aid. (Balkanlar'a Türkiye'den korona ile savaş yardımını 2020; Gül 2020).

The pandemic has also provided an arena for Turkish leadership to consolidate the concept of 'the European other.' Ömer Çelik, the spokesman of the AKP, stated that Europe was not providing any help, but it was Turkey that was sending aid to Balkan countries during the pandemic. He stated that

"They would say, 'Turkey's growing influence in the Balkans must be prevented.' They spoke with a political ignorance that did not know of Turkey's historical ties to the Balkans. Now they have left the Balkans to their own devices. Turkey is there. The only goal of some European countries regarding the Balkans was to break the influence of Turkey. When the Balkans have needs in relation to the virus epidemic, none of them seems to be around. On the other hand, Turkey delivers aid to the Balkan countries at the most difficult time. What Turkey did alone, the EU could not do for Italy and Spain or for the Balkan countries. Turkey, as a deep-rooted and powerful European state, in addition to all its other dimensions, shows that it is the guarantor of European geography. Europe cannot be defined without Turkey." ('Koronavirüs', 2020)

Therefore, the new identity of Turkey, created step by step after the Gezi movement started in 2013, was brought to the forefront with the pandemic. However, it is also interesting to note that the same spokesman has labelled Turkey as a strong and rooted European country and the insurer of the European geography. Çelik also argued that Turkey represents the heart of the global conscience (Balkan Günlüğü, 2020). This is a reflection of the AKP's new and conflictual identity-creation process. Çelik's statement shows that Turkey perceives Europe as a rival, meanwhile referring to Turkey as a European country. This discourse provides a clear example of the AKP's complex relations with Europe: In Çelik's statement, Europe appears both as the other and an intrinsic part of Turkish identity. Hence, it can be noted that Turkey's CoViD-19 diplomacy has become another instrument to further Turkey's complex relationship with European identity and European actors.

During the coronavirus crisis, the Sandzak region of Serbia, in which Bosniaks constituted the majority, suffered a lot due to weak health institutions. The president of the national assembly of the Bosniaks in Sancak, Jasmina Curic, asked for help from Turkey's President in July 2020, as a result of which Erdoğan called his Serbian counterpart, Alexander Vucic, and asked him to provide support.

Turkey also provided help to Bosniaks in Sandzak through various channels, one of them being municipalities. It is noteworthy that mayors of the AKP reflected the discourse of the Party at the local level and tried to consolidate Turkey's identity as a regional power. Alinur Aktaş, Mayor of Bursa, stated that

“During the pandemic, the medical assistance provided by our country to different countries of the world is also appreciated. While we continue our struggle with the world at the same time, the aid we send to countries in need also shows the strength of our country. To combat CoViD-19, our brothers living in the Sancak region of Serbia sent a letter to our President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. With the instruction of our President, health supplies have started to be collected, to be sent to this region, from all over Turkey. We also send the materials supplied in Bursa.” (‘‘ BBB BILGI 2020)

It is also interesting to note that Turkey's coronavirus diplomacy has been used for domestic purposes, and pro-government newspapers provided the main channel for that. One of the pro-government newspapers has published statements of Turkish ambassadors in some Balkan and European countries who praised Turkey's struggle against the virus and explained how Turkey had been followed and praised by Balkan countries. Turkish ambassadors' self-praise is an important indicator of how the government boosts its legitimacy. (Haykır 2020)

The list compiled above shows the multidimensionality of Turkish aid. During the pandemic, not only the Turkish state but also municipalities, NGOs, and business-people provided aid. This is an indication of the complexity of Turkish-Balkan ties.

This section found out that Turkey has been one of the countries that tried to use CoViD-19 as an opportunity to improve its regional and global actorness like Russia and China. Using its coronavirus aid policy in the Balkans as an instrument to increase its soft power in the region and internal support within the country, AKP leadership aimed to give the image of a 'powerful' country.

AKP's coronavirus diplomacy has a meaning in terms of Turkey's Europeanization process as well. Although the De-Europeanization process has speeded up, Europeanization has already impacted Turkey's Balkan policies (Demirtaş 2015). Turkey has been inspired by the EU foreign policy based on soft power. The increasing multidimensionality shows that the aid campaign is another niche area for Turkey to further its influence via soft power instruments.

In addition, Turkey's historical “love and hate relationship” with the EU is visible during the pandemic as well. AKP Spokesman Ömer Çelik's following statement is a sign of how Turkish leadership show Europe as the other of Turkey, however at the same time try to prove Turkey's European identity: ‘What Turkey did alone, the EU could not do for Italy and Spain, or for the Balkan countries. Turkey, as a deep-rooted and powerful European state, in addition to all its other dimensions, shows that it is the guarantee of

the European geography. Europe cannot be defined without Turkey' ('Koronavirüs', 2020). Hence, Turkey's complex relationship with the European identity can be perceived as Turkey otherwise and simultaneously glorifies Europe during the pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

Pandemics present an important challenge for global actors. Although states need cooperation more than ever to minimize the impact of pandemics at the national and global levels, many actors perceive them as an opportunity to increase their standing in regional and international politics. CoViD-19 is no exception. Many great powers and regional actors use them as important opportunities to consolidate their identities and as a public diplomacy tool. Therefore, an important number of actors provided different kinds of assistance to countries worldwide, accompanied by a discourse addressed to local and international public opinion, of being a great actor.

Turkey's CoViD-19 diplomacy presents a critical case study to analyse how a regional actor tries to reconstruct its identity in a time of health crisis. This study examined Turkey's coronavirus diplomacy towards the Balkan countries from the perspective of constructivist theory. Believing in the central role of identity in international relations, one of the main arguments of constructivism is the nexus between foreign policy and identity. Constructivists argue that states construct their identities by pursuing a foreign policy. Turkey under the AKP government presents an interesting case for constructivism because the AKP leadership tries to build a new identity for Turkey in global politics as a regional power, strong state and model country, hence trying to achieve external legitimacy to consolidate its/a populist regime internally.

The study showed that Turkey had pursued active diplomacy towards the neighbouring Balkan region during the pandemic when the AKP decision-makers also tried to consolidate Turkey's regional-power role in the region. By making Turkey one of the first countries to send aid to regional countries, AKP leaders, ambassadors, and mayors used discourse to praise Turkey. That discourse did not always reflect reality. Therefore, the paper stated that the construction of a new identity has a direct connotation in domestic politics in the Turkish case. On the one hand, many Turkish people infected with the virus could not have timely access to quality health services, while on the other hand, Turkish leadership tried to convey the image that Turkey's health sector is one of the best in the world.

Turkey's de-Europeanization process has increased the AKP's discourse on being a great power. To achieve legitimacy in domestic politics, it has been resorting to the discourse of 'great country' that has been offering assistance to many countries in need. Therefore, the internal-politics dimension of AKP's pandemic diplomacy should be underlined. The AKP elite has to argue uninterruptedly that Turkey plays a vital role in different regions to win the support of the Turkish public.

It is also noteworthy that the pandemic occurred at a time when there were multiple problems in the accession process of the Western Balkan countries. As Alpan and Öztürk argued in the introduction of the special issue, 'The pace of Europeanisation in the region is not very coherent and expeditious either. No significant momentum in terms of the EU accession has emerged after the Thessaloniki Summit for a long time' (Alpan and Öztürk 2022). Therefore, we can argue that this suspended Europeanization provided an ample space for Turkey's coronavirus activism.



The article also provides a case study of a regional actor seeking to benefit from a global health crisis in order to consolidate its own power at the national and global levels. This article contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it analyzes how Turkey's diplomacy towards the Balkans has changed during the pandemic by showing that the AKP tried to recreate a 'great country' image. Second, the findings of the study also have repercussions for the literature on regional powers. The study shows that pandemics provide an opportunity for regional powers to exert their influence in competition with other actors. Hence, at the very time when bilateral, regional and global cooperation is needed at most to minimize the impact of the pandemic; reconstruction of 'powerful country' identity takes precedence.

## Notes

1. For some studies comparing and contrasting different constructivist approaches, see Birgül Demirtaş-Coşkun, *Turkey, Germany and the Wars in Yugoslavia: A Search for Reconstruction of State Identities*, Berlin, Logos Verlag, 2006; Hans-Martin Jaeger, 'Konstruktionsfehler des Konstruktivismus in den internationalen Beziehungen,' *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 3, no. 2 (1996): pp. 313–340; Ronen Palan, 'A World of Their Making: An Evaluation of the Constructivist Critique in International Relations,' *Review of International Studies* 26, no. 4 (October 2000): pp. 575–598; Maja Zehfuß, 'Sprachlosigkeit schränkt ein Zur Bedeutung von Sprache in konstruktivistischen Theories,' *Zeitschrift für Internationale Beziehungen* 5, no. 1 (1998): pp. 109–137.
2. Checkel, 'The Constructivist Turn in International Relations Theory,' p. 346.
3. For an analysis of the changes during the AKP see Başak Alpan and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *Turkey and the Balkans: Bringing the Europeanization/De-Europeanization Nexus into Question*, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* Vol, 22, no: 1, 2022 (forthcoming).
4. A former Turkish ambassador states that Diyanet's activities in foreign policy are not in line with Turkey's secular characteristics. He argues that Diyanet's policies have negative impacts, even in countries like Bosnia Herzegovina, in which the majority of the population consists of Muslims. He argues that in the face of increasing radical Islam in the Balkans, Diyanet's policies are a burden for Turkey. Online communication with a retired Turkish ambassador 6, 22 September 2020.
5. AKP has been implementing health diplomacy as a soft power instrument for some time. For a review of health diplomacy in the world and in Turkey see Mehmet Fatih Aysan and M. Fehim Paluluoğlu, *Sağlık Diplomasisi*. In *Dönüşen Diplomasi ve Türkiye. Aktörler, Alanlar, Araçlar*, ed. Ali Resul Usul and İsmail Yaylacı. . 259–286. İstanbul: Küre, 2020.

## Acknowledgement

*I would like to dedicate this article to the lovely memories of my grandmother Vasfiye Avcı Kılıç, my aunt Kıymet Kılıç, as well as our dear relatives Kısmet Akyol and Sabahattin Avcı.*

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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