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TURKEY'S SOFT POWER POLICY TOWARDS THE BALKANS: CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Muhamed Ali[1*]

[1]University of Sharjah - Sharjah, UAE https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3451-8831 ✉ mali2@sharjah.ac.ae

Abstract: *The Balkans is considered a vital area in international relations. It has always attracted and is still attracting the interest of global and regional powers and factors on the international stage, including Turkey. Besides the political, economic, and defense aspects, the soft power of Turkish multidimensional diplomacy represents one of the most important segments of the relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries. Turkish government institutions like the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), Yunus Emre, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), TIKA, Turkish State Media, Maarif education institutions, and various non-governmental organizations represent some of the most vital segments of the cultural, religious and educational expansion of the Turkish state in the Balkan countries. This paper is mainly based on the following research methods: historical, descriptive, and in-depth analysis. This study aims to answer the main question of this research - Do the above-mentioned soft power policy tools play a vital role in the further development of Turkey-Balkan countries relations? This paper concludes that the Turkish soft power policy in the Balkans faces a series of challenges that affect its expansion's functionality and success.*

Keywords: *Turkey; Balkans; Soft Power; Challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the XIV and the beginning of the XV century, the Ottoman Empire appeared on the Balkan scene as the top military, political and economic factor, which referred to this territory as *Avrupa-i Osmani* (Ottoman Europe) and *Rumeli-i Şahane* (Aydoğmuş 2006, 165). During the rule of the Ottoman Empire in this region by the Europeans, it was referred to as "European Turkey" (Davutoğlu 2004, 121-122). At the beginning of the XIX century, in a parallel manner with the political developments on the international scene, these territories were defined by the Europeans by new names, like Balkans and Near (Middle) East, terms that include within themselves subjective elements from the European point of view and perception. In the political literature, the term 'Balkans' and 'Balkan peninsula' was used for the first time in 1808 by the German geographer August Zeune (Davutoğlu 2004, 121-122; Aydoğmuş 2006, 4; Budak 2006, 165-166; Mazower 2001).

The Balkan peninsula is considered a vital area on the international scene because its geostrategic position stretches towards Middle Europe and the Mediterranean. Its geostrategic position is a barrier or a passage between Asia and Europe and is positioned close to the African continent. The Balkans also possesses logistical importance and is playing the role of a base for eventual military operations against the fuel-rich areas. The Balkans also play an essential role in European integration and have particular importance for the influence of EU politics on the Mediterranean and the Middle-Eastern region (Budak 2006, 168-169). Throughout history and nowadays, the Balkans has always attracted and is still attracting the interest of major powers and factors of the international scene. Besides other global and regional factors (like the USA, EU, Russia and China, France, Germany, and Austria), Turkey has also played an essential role in this territory during the recent period.

MAIN COMPONENTS OF TURKEY'S SOFT POWER POLICY IN THE BALKANS

Besides traditional bilateral and multilateral political, economic and defensive relations with the Balkan countries, Turkish diplomacy in the recent period differs more and more by increasing its soft power in this territory. The end of the XX and the beginning of the XXI centuries is seen as a time when, in addition to good trends, relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries face many challenges. Simultaneously, besides the political, economic, and defensive aspects, the cultural aspect of Turkey's multidimensional diplomacy represents one of the most critical segments of the relations mentioned above. Namely, Turkish cultural expansion and influence include governmental and non-governmental sectors playing a vital role in determining Turkey's position in the Balkan countries (Güzeldere 2021). This paper focuses on Turkey's soft power and its reflections in the Balkan region.

YTB (Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities)

One of the most critical tools for Turkey's soft power in the Balkans is the public institution 'Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB)', established in 2010. This institution, besides other duties, has an objective to support, and assist cultural and social activities of Turkish citizens living abroad, foreign citizens of Turkish origin, and sister communities located in different regions, including the Balkans, such as Albanians, Bosniaks, etc. Through these activities, the institution mentioned above, besides the fact it affirms the values of Turkish tradition and culture outside the country, of them are also the Balkan countries. It is also protecting all Turks outside the borders of Turkey from eventual cultural assimilation. In the direction of reaching the objectives mentioned above, this organization is supporting various NGOs outside the country and awards scholarships to international students for studies at universities in Turkey (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı 2022).

TIKA (Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency)

After the fall of the Soviet Union and the establishment of new Turkish republics in Middle Asia in 1992, Turkey decided to establish the state agency TIKA, which had the primary aim to offer technical assistance to those countries in their development process. However, along with the application of the new concept of Turkish foreign politics and the significant development of the Turkish economy at the beginning of the XXI century, a new situation was created where TIKA grew from an agency that was active only in one area into a Turkish state agency active in many areas and on a global scale. Besides the social, educational, and infrastructural activities, this agency is also active in the cultural area. Namely, the Turkish state is also active in a few Balkan countries through this agency. Namely, in the recent period, Turkey has been very active in the domain of restoration of Ottoman historical heritage. As examples of the interest of the Turkish state for investment in the domain of historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire, we could mention the restoration of the Mihrab at the Stone Bridge, the Mustafa Pasha mosque, the Hatuncuk mosque in North Macedonia, the Mostar bridge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Gazi Mehmet Pasha mosque in Kosovo, the Ethem Beg mosque in Albania and many other religious and historical monuments (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, 2022).

Table 1: TIKA Program Coordination Offices in the Balkans (Source: Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı 2022)

North Macedonia	Croatia	Romania	Serbia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Albania	Kosovo
Skopje	Zagreb	Bucharest	Belgrade	Sarajevo	Podgorica	Tirana	Pristina

Turkish Diyanet (Diyanet or Presidency of Religious Affairs)

The General Directorate (Authority) of Foreign Relations of Turkey's Diyanet is the primary sector that, besides other objectives, it has the objective to develop its relations with representatives of other religions outside the country, which includes the Balkan countries, to monitor and analyze various activities outside Turkey that are focused on Islam, to create solutions for the problems and disputes of the cultural and social character of the Balkan countries citizens with Turkish origin (T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2022).

The Diyanet possesses 52 consultancy offices for religious services and 38 attaché offices overseas, where more than 2,000 officers of this institution are serving outside the country. Besides religious services, the Diyanet organizes education, Qur'an courses, and theological programs abroad. From more than 11 and a half billion TL awarded from the budget of the Republic of Turkey in 2020, more than 46 million TL were transferred for activities of this institution abroad. According to the strategy of this institution, the objective is to increase the number of foreign educational programs organized by the Diyanet from a total of 160 in 2019 to 1,778 in 2023. The Diyanet continues to build mosques abroad through the Turkish Diyanet

Foundation (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı). One of the essential activities of this Foundation, whose budget in 2020 was more than 56 million TL, is also the building and restoration of mosques abroad. Besides the dedicated means for the Turkish Diyanet from the budget of the Republic of Turkey last year, the Turkish Diyanet Foundation (Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı) provided additional 536 thousand US dollars for the support of the activities of Turkish Diyanet's consultancy andattaché offices of the Turkish Diyanet abroad (Karakaş, 2022). The Turkish Diyanet has opened several consultancy/counseling and attaches in Balkan countries (Table 2).

Table 2: Turkish Diyanet's Consultancy Offices and Attaches in the Balkans (Source: T.C. Cumhurbaşkanlığı Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2022)

Country	City
North Macedonia	Skopje
Kosovo	Pristina
Albania	Tirana
Montenegro,	Podgorica
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Sarajevo
Bulgaria	Sofia
Romania	Constanta

Investments in the Field of Education and Media

At the beginning of the 1990s, Turkey began an educational invasion in the Balkan region through colleges controlled by the Gulen movement. On the other hand, since the beginning of the 2000s, we witnessed the establishment of new high education institutions in the Balkans by foundations related to the ruling party in Turkey - AKP (like the International Balkan University in Skopje, International University of Sarajevo, etc.) (Ali 2010, 155-156; Kır 2008, 4-95). However, after the unsuccessful coup in 2016, which, according to the Turkish government, was organized by the Gulen movement, through the newly established state education institution Maarif, decided to begin a new education offensive in the Balkans by establishing new Turkish educational institutions in some countries of the Balkan region, from primary schools to universities (like the example of Maarif - New York University in Tirana, Maarif schools in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, etc.), to turn them into an alternative of educational institutions controlled by the Gulen movement (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı 2022). It should be highlighted that Turkey has had an intensive activity in the sphere of religion and religious education in the Western Balkans region in the recent period. Numerous students from Western Balkan countries are studying at theological faculties in Turkey. Simultaneously, the Turkish Diyanet is playing an active role in the deepening of relations of Turkey with the Muslim population of this region. Turkish support in the sphere of religious education is welcomed by the Western Balkan countries, bearing in mind that precisely the governments of this region face the phenomenon of fighters returning from the war zones in the Middle East (Ekinci 2017). Besides that, Turkey's soft power in the Western Balkan countries manifests through the broadcasting of Turkish series characterized by high ratings among the population

of these countries. Only in 2010, more than 70 Turkish series were sold abroad, most of them in the Balkans and the Middle East. Their price was somewhere between 30 to 50 US dollars, whereas, in 2010, some series were sold from 20,000 to 50,000 US dollars. The sociologist from North Macedonia Hasan Jashari considers that "the compatibility of some values or traditions from Turkish series with our daily life is making these series even more interesting. The characters, topics, and locations are very familiar to this population. Our culture and geography are close; we are highly connected" (Tumanovska 2012). The broadcasting of Turkish series in the Western Balkan countries increases the incomes in Turkey and increases the influence of this country in the region (Tumanovska 2012). We should also note that Turkey has recently been quite active in the Balkan region with its investments in the media sector. Anadolu Agency Balkans differs by preparing information/news in local Balkan languages, some in Bosnian, Albanian, etc. The establishment of TRT Balkans in 2021, with its headquarters in Skopje, is the best example of that idea (Buyuk 2021).

Yunus Emre Cultural Centers

Yunus Emre cultural centers are active in several Balkan countries. They are functioning within the Yunus Emre Institute with its headquarters in Ankara. They represent one of the most vital segments of the cultural expansion of the Turkish state in the Balkan countries. Namely, the cultural centers played a vital role in developing cultural relations between Turkey and Balkan countries at the beginning of the XXI century. The activities of Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkan region's cities are focused on introducing the Balkan population and institutions to the Turkish language, culture, and history. To realize this objective, this Institute is organizing numerous courses to study the Turkish language, initiates cultural activities and scientific conferences, and publishes various editions that promote the Turkish language, culture, and history. It should be emphasized that the coordination body for turkology is functioning within the Yunus Emre Institute. Namely, through the Turkology project of this Institute in 35 countries and 49 desks of the Turkish language and literature/turkology, the recruitment of academic cadres from Turkey is being coordinated, and simultaneously the educational and technical development of the desks is being assisted. The activities of this project are also focused on the Turkish language and literature desks in various Balkan countries (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü 2022) (Table 3).

Table 3: Cultural Centres of Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans (Source: Yunus Emre Enstitüsü 2022)

North Macedonia	Croatia	Romania	Serbia	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Montenegro	Albania	Kosovo
Skopje	Zagreb	Bucharest	Belgrade	Sarajevo	Podgorica	Tirana	Prishtina
		Constanta		Mostar		Shkoder	Prizren
				Fojnica			Peje

Non-Governmental Organizations

After the end of the Cold War and the transformation of the bipolar system with the unipolar, just like in many regions in the world, in the same manner, the socio-political, economic, cultural, and other changes began. As a consequence of the beginning of the democratization of these countries, the presence of Turkish non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in these countries began. One of the most active Turkish NGOs in the Albanian Balkan space since the 1990s were the NGOs supported by the Gulen movement, which in the beginning had the support of the Turkish state, and this support was intensified especially during the period of AKP's rule in Turkey. It should be mentioned that, as a consequence of the activities of this movement which began in the 1990s, the establishment of numerous primary and secondary schools took place, as well as two universities in Tirana (Universities of Epoka and Bedër) and the International Burch University in Sarajevo. Besides education, they were very active in business, media, and NGOs. However, after the unsuccessful coup of 15 July 2016, this movement and, consequently, all institutions related to it were officially claimed as terrorist organizations that endanger Turkey's security. Besides the Gulen movement, the Aziz Mahmut Hudayi movement is also active since the end of the 1990s. The beginning of their activities in this region was after the end of the war in Kosovo, where they were active in the distribution of humanitarian aid for the Kosovo population, which was followed by the establishment of the permanent desk of the Istanbul International Brotherhood and Solidarity Association (IBS) in Pristina. Besides dormitories and Qur'an courses in Kosovo, they also re-opened the old Madrasa in Gjakova (Đakovica) town in 2006, where they are training new Hufadh (Solberg 2007).

On the other hand, this religious movement is also active in North Macedonia through its NGO. Another influential religious movement in Turkey is the Suleymaniye movement. The followers of this religious group are active in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. One of their main objectives is balancing the Wahabi movement in this region by maintaining the Hanafi/Ottoman tradition. They have established dormitories in various Balkan cities, where besides Qur'an recitation, they also teach ethical fundaments of Islam. We must not forget to mention NGOs closely connected with the religious movement named 'Nursi', who are dealing with the explanation and translation of books of the well-known scholar Said Nursi in Balkan languages, which are later distributed between the populations (Solberg 2007). Simultaneously, besides other activities of non-governmental organizations of Turkish origin, we are also witnessing reinforcement of relations between Turkish and Balkan municipalities through twinning and organization of various cultural manifestations in some cities of this region with the mutual organization. These are examples depicting Turkey's interest in investment in the culture in the Balkan region.

Medical Aid During the Covid-19 Pandemic

The most recent manifestation of Turkish soft power in the Western Balkans region was during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. At the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic,

Turkey also provided medical aid for many countries globally, including Western Balkan countries, in their fight against the pandemic. During the pandemic, Turkey sent military aircraft to deliver medical aid to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia (Lika 2020).

Table 4: Covid-19 Medical Supplies Sent by Turkey to the Western Balkans (March-May 2020) (Source: Lika 2020)

Country	Type of Supply			
	Protective Masks	Protective Suits	Protective Goggles	Covid-19 Test Kits
Albania	75,000	2,000	2,000	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50,000	1,000		1,000
Kosovo	50,000	1,000		1,000
Montenegro	50,000	1,000		1,000
North Macedonia (2 times)	125,000	3,000	2,000	1,000
Serbia	100,000	2,000		1,500

TURKISH SOFT POWER POLICY IN THE BALKANS: MAIN CHALLENGES AND PERSPECTIVES

Turkish diplomacy towards Balkan countries in the recent period is also differing through its efficient application of soft power, which is manifested through the deepening of Turkish influence in this region in the sphere of culture, religion, and education, which is very often a subject of discussion between various political and academic elites. Turkish soft power policy in the Balkans is facing numerous challenges. One of the most recent and most complicated challenges in the relations between Turkey and Balkan countries is the issue of the Gulen movement, which is classified by Turkish authorities as a terrorist movement. This attitude very often does not meet understanding by countries of this region. As far as the Turkish NGO's effect in the Balkans is concerned (as a vital tool of Turkish soft power in the region), we should emphasize that these non-governmental organizations have often had a positive role in the Balkan Peninsula in the sphere of humanitarian and cultural activities, however, they have been characterized very often by specific weaknesses. One of the main weaknesses and disadvantages of these NGOs which are active in the Balkans is the fact that they have a sectarian mentality, as a result of which sometimes, some of them might not be open to the ideas of others, something which is opposed to general Islamic values and civilian democratic societies. Very often, some NGOs are transferring their disputes with a political background in the religious field, something that makes some of them might contribute to the ideological/political division of the Muslim population in this region.

On the other hand, the Balkan countries regularly try to cover their economic, social, and cultural failures through the open disputes between these NGOs. The focus of activities of these NGOs towards the raising of cultural values and not division based on political and nationalist

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concepts would be a very welcoming attitude towards the advancement of Turkey's relations with Balkan countries. As far as activities of Turkey's Diyanet, Maarif, and TIKA are concerned, although generally observed, these activities are welcomed by the local states and religious and cultural institutions; however, some harsh criticism is not lacking from certain circles, which are defining these investments as part of the Islamic agenda of Erdogan in the Balkans (Meir 2022). Finally, we should not forget the effect of the very weakened Turkish economy in the direction of Turkey's soft power in the Balkans. The newly established situation of the Turkish economy, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, also has negative reflections on the functionality and activity of Turkey's soft power in the region.

CONCLUSION

Turkish diplomacy towards Western Balkans countries, besides a series of challenges (like the economic crisis, etc.) in the recent period, is also differing through efficient application of soft power, which is manifested through the deepening of Turkey's influence in this region in the spheres of culture, religion, education, and which is very often a subject of discussion between various political and academic elites. The soft power of Turkey's multidimensional diplomacy represents one of the essential segments of Turkish diplomacy at the beginning of the XXI century, which has also profoundly affected the relations between Turkey and Balkan countries in the recent period. Turkey's state institutions like the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs), Yunus Emre, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), TIKA, Turkish State Media, and Maarif educational institutions represent some of the most vital segments of the cultural influence of the Turkish state in Balkan countries. They play a vital role in developing good relations between Turkey and the Balkan countries at the beginning of the XXI century. For other factorization of Turkey on the global stage and development of relations with the Balkan countries, we can recommend increasing investments in the domain of affirmation of Turkish culture in this region. Bearing in mind the fact that Turkey, with its secular system and Muslim identity of its population, represents a model for many countries in the Muslim world and is considered a vital ally of the West, primarily through the increase of Turkish cultural activities in the Balkan region, it can play an essential role for the neutralization of the more and more popular theories of 'clash of civilizations'.

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