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Between Emotions and Realism: Two Faces of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans

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June 2023



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Publisher:

Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

Đure Jakšića 6/5 Beograd

www.bezbednost.org

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Peer review:

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Language and style editor:

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Design:

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ISBN: 978-86-6237-219-2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55042/WZVW6831>

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Turkey's more assertive posture towards the Balkans is neglected compared to the commentariat that deals with Russia and China. To fill this policy gap, the research team of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP) has conducted research based on the analysis of secondary source material and, even more importantly, on fieldwork interviews that involved 16 sources, academics and think tank researchers based in Istanbul and Ankara.

Although the consulted sources have different backgrounds and political sympathies, the research established a presence of common themes. Namely, Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans has two aspects. The first is based on emotions, where Turkish foreign policy towards the region is framed by Turkey's special ties with the region based on shared history, social connections, identity factors and the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. The Balkan country that is most frequently mentioned in the context of special ties with Turkey is Bosnia and Herzegovina, in light of socio-cultural ties and the fact that it is a country in which the Ottoman legacy is felt most strongly.

The second approach is rooted in traditional foreign policy realism derived from an objective and calculated assessment of the regional balance of power and one's own interests. Within this approach, Turkey is trying, for security and strategic reasons, to act pragmatically and be effective in the Balkans without entangling itself in crises that could impede its regional influence. This approach leads Turkey towards engaging Serbia, the region's strategically consequential country, because Ankara is deeply convinced that if it wishes to be effective in the Balkans, it needs to have a partnership with Belgrade. In doing so, it must strike a balance between emotions and realism. It needs to walk the fine line between nurturing ties with communities with which it has cultural and religious ties, like Bosniaks and Albanians, while avoiding alienating countries whose partnership Ankara needs to be able to succeed in the Balkans, such as Serbia.

Turkish foreign policy in the region has undergone two stages. In the first, its Balkan policy was overly focused on historical and identity factors. This practice particularly came to the fore during the phase that critical voices like to refer to as "Neo-Ottomanism", which is most frequently associated with Ahmet Davutoğlu, former Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–14) and Prime Minister (2014–16). It needs to be underscored that Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was in power even then, although the responsibility for the Balkan policy was primarily in Davutoğlu's hands. However, during that period, precisely due to the rhetoric that emphasised emotions, history and culture, Ankara's foreign policy in the region experienced setbacks as the local Christian nations perceived Turkey as an expansionist power invoking the past imperial legacies and a biased mediator favouring Muslim communities such as the Bosniaks.

It was in the second stage that the realist impulses of Turkish foreign policy come to the surface. This stage began with the departure of Ahmet Davutoğlu and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan taking firmer control over the country's foreign policy, including in the Balkans. Since then, Ankara has placed greater emphasis on realism and pragmatism, to the detriment of the past emphasis on passionate, historical rhetoric. This transformation was symbolised by closer ties with Serbia, allowing Ankara's Balkan policy greater freedom.

As Turkey underwent presidential and parliamentary elections in May 2023, there was a strong debate about the direction of the country's foreign policy before the news of Erdoğan's victory emerged. While some sources argued that foreign policy had to remain unaltered irrespective of the electoral outcome,¹ others believed in potential changes in the country's overall relationship with the players such as the EU, the US and Russia.² However, there were no indications, either before or after the elections, that the country's foreign policy in the Balkans would change in any meaningful way. On the contrary, it can be expected that the perseverance of international and domestic factors at play will make Turkey's Balkan policy consistent, leaving Turkish foreign policy elites to balance emotions and realism when engaging the Balkans.

The field research in Turkey, for the needs of this report, was conducted only a month after 6 February 2023, when two powerful earthquakes devastated southeast Turkey and north Syria, leaving almost 60,000 people dead and hundreds of thousands homeless.³ The traumatic effect on the entire Turkish society was quite obvious during the interviews. The consequences of the disaster were particularly visible in Ankara, where thousands of people were displaced from affected areas. As shock and sorrow (as well as anger) caused by the disaster were still fresh during the interviews conducted by the research team, the links between the crisis response management and the constraints of Turkish foreign policy were established on a few occasions. Almost a month after the devastating earthquake, hundreds of thousands of people in the affected area were still without water and electricity, while the state has failed to provide tents for the homeless people on time.⁴ On the other hand, Ahmet Davutoğlu's visions and policies of transforming Turkey into a global power were followed by the so-called "humanitarian diplomacy". The humanitarian aid that Turkey provided during the rule of the AK Party (AKP – Justice and Development Party) was bilateral; the country opted to distribute bilateral humanitarian aid rather than donate to international organisations. In that regard, Turkey provided aid to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina after the 2014 floods,⁵ and to Albania after the Durres earthquake.⁶ Under the umbrella of "humanitarian diplomacy", annual emergency and humanitarian aid skyrocketed from USD 178 million in 2005 to USD 7.5 billion in 2019.⁷ This example (the gap between the impossibility to offer humanitarian assistance to its own citizens and the large donations and humanitarian aid that are provided globally) represents a specific kind of irony in Turkish foreign policy, clearly deconstructing the overly ambitious goals of Turkish foreign policy (particularly during the Davutoğlu era) and setting the base for a more realistic and pragmatic approach thereto, both globally and in the Balkans.

The state and national identity are important factors that are shaping Turkish foreign policy. Society is highly polarised, with divisions deepening under Erdoğan's rule. This division of state identity can be identified as two strong currents that exist in the Turkish society: secularism and conservatism (accompanied by religious, Islamist elements). After the Gezi Park protests and unrest in 2013, this identity crack overlapped with other identity fractures (Turks/Kurds, class division). With Erdoğan embracing conservatism, Turkey's foreign policy (including the one in the Balkans) largely served to gain domestic electoral support and shape the Turkish state and national identity.⁸ In that sense, much of the policies implemented in the Balkans in the last 10 years could be understood in that way (such as investments in Muslim-dominated communities and rebuilding and reconstruction of sites from the Ottoman era). However, even in this context, the Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans has always oscillated between two themes: emotions and rationalism/realism.

Turkey is Historically Tied to the Balkans – Emotional Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans

There is a powerful emotional drive in Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans. It is primarily the product of its historical interactions with the area that date back to the Ottoman Empire. It underlines Turkey's special relationship with the region, particularly with certain ethnic groups such as the Bosniaks and occasionally Albanians, based on identity factors like religion and culture. In that regard, the Ottoman legacy the modern-day Turkey inherited is considered to belong to the Balkan history, and not so much to the Anatolian legacy (or any other legacy connected to the old imperial identity, including regions such as the Middle East).⁹ This implies that the Ottoman Empire's former presence in the Balkans has played a much more powerful role in shaping Turkish perceptions of national greatness than its present-day territories in Asia Minor. While Turkish citizens are generally aware of the Albanians and some of the links between the two ethnic groups, Turkish society emotionally does not see Albanians the same way it does Bosniaks.¹⁰

The strong historical linkage is exemplified by the simple reality that the word "Balkan" is in fact Turkish, compounded by the fact that a sizeable portion of the Turkish population has Balkan origins¹¹ - according to data from 2019, up to 18 million.¹² In a similar context, Turkey does not perceive itself as an external actor; it sees itself as a Balkan country or, more precisely, a multi-regional actor, where the Balkans happen to be just one of those regions.¹³ In the above context, many interlocutors noted Turkey's disdain towards the term "Western Balkans", which is not viewed as a natural geographic and descriptive term, but rather a geopolitical term that is aimed at excluding Turkey from the region by challenging Turkey's identity as a Balkan country.¹⁴ This particular attachment to the Balkans especially came to the fore within the school of thought that some called "neo-Ottomanism", which in terms of domestic politics implied the restoration of Ottoman cultural and political heritage. In foreign policy terms, it meant that Turkey needed to become a power in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.¹⁵

Turkey is no exception to the rule that to exercise power in the Balkans, there has to be a local demand in terms of local partners who are susceptible to Turkish soft power and willing to accept Turkey as a diplomatic partner and protector. In this case, these are nations such as Bosniaks and Albanians.¹⁶ As a result of such an approach, where Turkey was perceived as having special relations with certain regions like the Caucasus and the Balkans based on history, there was "a vision" grounded in "the totality" whereby these regions were treated as a unique whole, without realising that countries that make up regions, particularly the Balkans, significantly differ from each other.¹⁷

The roles of history and culture cannot be neglected, as these factors are transformed into lobby pressure groups operating within Turkey.¹⁸ According to some sources, this emotional element frequently impedes the rational moment in Turkish foreign policy,

resulting in frequent loss of balance between the two elements. In that context, any Turkish overture towards Serbia can be met with resistance from Bosnia and Herzegovina and pro-Bosnian groups in Turkey. Turkish elites encounter the same resistance from pro-Azerbaijani groups concerning Armenia and pro-Pakistani groups in the case of India.¹⁹

Many areas in northwest Turkey have a sizeable population originating from the Balkans. Entire neighbourhoods in Istanbul - most notably, Bayrampasa - have a population claiming that they are of Balkan origin.²⁰ The relationship with Bosniaks is an emotional issue in Turkey in the context of the Srebrenica massacre from the Bosnian war (1992-1995), which several international judicial bodies qualified as genocide. As a result, the opposition is becoming equally attentive to the issue of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ties with Bosniaks, as the government led by the AK Party, implying a consensus across Turkish political spectrum when it comes to Balkan policy.²¹ Because of large Bosniak communities that are primarily concentrated in the Istanbul area and Western Anatolia, the narratives of the Bosnian war are part of the public discourse in Turkey, while public commemorations of the Srebrenica genocide are organised each year in several cities across Türkiye.²² From among Erdoğan's personal relations with some of the Balkan leaders, one especially tugs at emotional strings – that with the late Bosnian president (Bosniak leader) Alija Izetbegović, where the urban legend is that Izetbegović, lying on his deathbed, told Erdoğan that Bosnia is now a Turkish *amanet* (something that is entrusted for safekeeping).²³

An important aspect of the emotional approach to Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans are the communities of Turkish citizens living in the region. Estimates about the number of Turks living in the Balkans (excluding Turkey) tend to vary. The biggest Turkish minority in the Balkans lives in Bulgaria (at least 60,000 people), followed by North Macedonia (12,000).²⁴ These figures are based just on Turks who are registered in foreign missions, so the exact number is higher.

In the opinion of the Turkish Balkan expert Burak Yalim, the perception of the Balkans in Turkish society is based on a stronger sense of familiarity than with the Middle East and the Arab world.²⁵ For the academic Başak Alpan, the Balkans have a higher position in Ankara's discourse on neighbouring regions. According to Alpan, while some Middle Eastern issues have a stronger personal resonance with Erdoğan, the Western assimilation of the Turkish republic is creating something of an anti-Arab perspective in the Turkish psyche.²⁶ From the standpoint of Turkish domestic politics, it is easier to accommodate requests related to the Balkans than those related to the Kurdish issue.²⁷

In Turkey, There is only Realism, Nothing Else – The Realist Aspects of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans

While identity and emotional factors are important in Turkish Balkan policy, they are still trumped by foreign policy realism. In that respect, the realist school of international politics is the dominant school of thought in the Turkish intellectual community, but more importantly, also in the country's foreign policy community.²⁸ While the cultural and historical factors underpin the emotional aspects of Ankara's Balkan policy, the realist aspect is rooted in much more practical realities. The Balkans is primarily a physical space between Turkey and Europe, a passage and a connection between the two.²⁹ To underscore the importance of the Balkans and Serbia for Turkey, academic Hüseyin Bağcı drew a parallel with the Berlin-Belgrade-Baghdad railway, a never-materialised historical project from the early 20th century.³⁰ If Ankara needs connectivity to Europe via air, sea or land, the route goes through some of the Balkan countries such as Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia.³¹ That is why even though Turkey, for historical reasons, cannot be indifferent to what happens in the Balkans, it is the geopolitical, geostrategic and geoeconomic interests that guide it in the region.³²

Turkey also has a security stake in the Balkans because of demographic interactions, as every security crisis since the First Balkan War of 1912 has caused a demographic influx into Turkey; even the financial crisis of 2008 led to the arrival of a large number of Greek citizens who were seeking work in Turkey in an attempt to escape crisis-hit Greece.³³ Indeed, Turkey is not an external actor in the Balkans, like Russia, China or the Gulf states, as its smaller European section is *in* the Balkans, which makes it a Balkan country. Therefore, Ankara has a vested interest in having a defence perimeter there. Turkey believes that without a secure European rear it cannot have an effective policy in other regional theatres and cannot be an independent geopolitical player in Eurasia.³⁴

Even the narrative of historical ties cannot be separated from practical power relations; namely, while Kemalist and non-AKP Turkey might have displayed an interest in being more active in the Balkans earlier, it could not do so because of the existence of Yugoslavia. It was the Yugoslav disintegration that provided a power vacuum in the region and an opportunity for Ankara.³⁵ However, not even this strategic reality produced immediate Turkish diplomatic and geopolitical activation in the region, as the country lacked adequate material capacities to follow through on its ambitions until the rise of the ruling AK Party.³⁶

Even the term “neo-Ottomanism is not very significant in the Turkish discourse”; “it is significant in TV series and the commemoration of days important to Ottomans”, but it was just a narrative that did not turn into a practice, noting a great divergence between narratives and practices in Turkish foreign policy.³⁷ Despite a warm façade, the invocation of religious factors also contains a component of cold geopolitical calculation.

Ahmet Davutoğlu noted that Turkey had to nurture ties with Balkan Muslim communities, as otherwise Russia and Greece would outweigh it by invoking pan-Slavic and pan-Orthodox sentiments.³⁸ Some Turkish authors even used to perceive Germany in the same context because of its ties with Croatia and Slovenia.³⁹

Unlike Turkey's traditional rivalry with Russia and Greece, there are other more recent reasons why Turkey is willing to engage the Balkan Muslims, the main of which is the fact that since the Bosnian War, Turkey has had to compete with Middle Eastern powers such as Iran and Saudi Arabia for the hearts and minds of Balkan Muslims as part of a wider competition for influence in the global Islamic community.⁴⁰ In this battle, Turkey uses its old historical ties with Balkan Muslims, with whom it shares similar Islamic practices, to battle Saudi Arabia which promotes Wahhabism, and Iran, which after being a security backer of the Bosniaks during the war, uses political and civil society networks to promote its own version of political Islam.⁴¹

This realism behind Ankara's Balkan policy is also reflected in the defined need of its regional policy to keep the balance of power between various local ethnic groups as the best way (in Turkey's view) to preserve regional stability.⁴² In that context, many sources noted that for Turkey, in purely strategic terms, Albania and Serbia are the two most important countries in the region – strategically the most consequential, representing two dominant ethnic groups present in various countries.⁴³ Many sources noted that there is a spectrum between realpolitik and culture, and that in its Balkan policy "Turkey switches back and forth between the two, like a pendulum". According to these sources, this is manifested as Turkey's ties with Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which are deemed culturally more important than others, and with Serbia, which has grown closer to Turkey in recent years.⁴⁴

Some interlocutors noted that Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates a shift in Ankara's policy from emotionalism to realism, where Turkey's attitude towards the country is similar to the US foreign policy in the Middle East. The security of Israel is a priority for the US in the region, but it is not preventing the US from having good relations with other regional players. Israel's survival is not threatened, so consequently the US can focus on other regional issues. From Turkey's standpoint, since Bosnia and Herzegovina is protected, Turkey can reach out to others, primarily Serbia.⁴⁵ Naturally, such statements can also be taken with a small reservation. Despite the discourse and ambitions, Turkey cannot offer Bosnia and Herzegovina the security guarantees the US provides to Israel because great powers restrain its actions. Still, this statement illustrates a dynamic in Ankara's Balkan policy that is more nuanced and complex than one-dimensional sympathy for individual countries. Turkish policymakers perceive Serbia as a pivotal country in the region, imperative for regional security.⁴⁶ Although Turkey knows that its human ties are stronger with Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is also aware that it is a multi-ethnic country shared by Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats, while Serbia, being the regional hub, is more important for the Turkish grand strategy in the region.⁴⁷ To build up on this point, Ankara is convinced that issues related to Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be resolved without Belgrade's cooperation.⁴⁸

Ahmet Davutoğlu and the Failure of Emotionalism

The change in the international system caused by the end of the Cold War brought about a debate on Turkey's place in the world, with three schools of thought emerging: 1) one that insisted that Turkey needed to continue with its Western alignment, 2) one that believed that, in a new world, Turkey needed to change its foreign policy into one that would allow it to be a leader of Turkic republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and 3) one that stressed that "we (Turkey) cannot ignore Islam anymore", insisting that Turkey needed to have better relations with Muslim, particularly Middle Eastern, countries.⁴⁹

The emotional and identitarian components of Turkish foreign policy were present when Turkey started expressing interest in countries with which it had cultural kinship in the wake of the end of the Cold War. The emergence of independent Turkish-speaking post-Soviet countries in Central Asia and the Yugoslav wars, primarily the one that was fought in Bosnia, awakened the idea of Turkey emerging as an independent great power in Eurasia.⁵⁰ During this time, the idea of Turkey being a geopolitical force across the Eurasian playing field, exercising leadership in territories that are culturally or historically tied to it, was symbolised through the phrase "Turkic world from the Adriatic to China."⁵¹

Turkey's attempt to be a role model for Turkic republics failed because the Russian Federation had the biggest influence on those countries, showing that the Turkic origins did not matter for the newly independent countries, for whom Moscow remained the power centre.⁵² In the Balkans, after the outbreak of Yugoslav wars and the recognition of breakaway republics, Turkey took on the role of guardian of the Bosniaks, wishing to act as a bridge between them and the international community.⁵³ According to the Turkish political scientist Birgül Demirtaş, Turkish foreign policy during the Bosnian War was the most activist since the Cyprus issue in the 1970s.⁵⁴

In the 1990s, the main fear in Serbia and Greece was the concept of the "Islamic Arc" or "the green transversal", where Turkey would project power through territories inhabited by Balkan Muslims, with the arc including Turkey, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Albania, the Muslim-populated Serbian province of Sandžak, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁵⁵ Beyond Turkey expanding its influence, the main fear in Athens and Belgrade was that Turkey would cut Greece off from its Balkan hinterland and sever the Belgrade-Athens axis by cutting off the land route between Serbia and Greece.⁵⁶

Turkey's first post-Cold War president, Turgut Özal, became the herald of what became known as "neo-Ottomanism"⁵⁷, a school of thought that glorifies Ottoman legacy and advocates geopolitical engagement with former Ottoman provinces, which later became more associated with the ruling Justice and Development Party (the AK Party). The more conservative leanings of the AK Party and the invocation of the Ottoman legacy reawakened Turkey's interest in the Balkans.⁵⁸ The apex of the

Balkan policy that was based on historical, identity and emotional narratives came under the stewardship of Ahmet Davutoğlu, a political scientist who was first Erdoğan's foreign policy adviser and then Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–14) and Prime Minister (2014–16), which earned him the nickname "Turkey's Kissinger". Davutoğlu's 2001 book "Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position" was based on a strong assertion that the country needs to become a major geopolitical player in the former provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including the Balkans.⁵⁹

According to Davutoğlu, the Ottoman cultural and spiritual legacy in the Balkans was significantly destroyed in the post-Ottoman era, particularly in Greece and Bulgaria, so Turkey had to strengthen two key components of the old Ottoman Balkan policy - the Bosniaks and the Albanians.⁶⁰ A powerful example thereof was Erdoğan's 2011 speech after winning parliamentary elections: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul did, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir."⁶¹ Turkish support for Bosniaks in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albanians in Kosovo is frequently framed and justified in the rhetoric of brotherhood between Turks and these groups.⁶² To achieve the task of becoming a power in the former Ottoman territories, according to Davutoğlu Turkey had to conduct a "zero problems policy" to resolve conflicts and disputes with neighbouring countries that prevented Turkey from operating internationally.⁶³ The 2010 diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks showed that, at the time, even the US embassy in Turkey expressed concern over Turkey's growing engagement with the Balkans.⁶⁴

As part of this engagement, Turkey launched a trilateral mechanism to address the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina, involving Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and Serbia. The initiative held its first meeting in Istanbul in April 2010, producing the Istanbul Declaration that affirmed the principle of territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina and regional cooperation.⁶⁵ The members of this initiative had two more meetings – one in Karadjordjevo, Serbia, in 2011, and the other in Ankara in 2013.⁶⁶ Turkey later organised another set of consultations that involved these three countries, plus Croatia.⁶⁷ Turkey mediated not only in inter-state disputes, but also in those of intra-state nature, trying to resolve a dispute between two Islamic communities in Serbia, one from Belgrade and the other from Novi Pazar, a town in the Bosniak-populated Serbian province of Sandžak.⁶⁸

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was another instrument of the Turkish Balkan policy that tended to have an identity or emotion-based underpinning, as the Agency financed the reconstruction of Ottoman heritage in the region, including mosques, clock towers, bridges and schools - a total of more than 80 structures.⁶⁹ According to some estimates from early 2020, in 24 years TIKa implemented 900 projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone.⁷⁰

However, although TIKa's activities as part of developing Turkish soft power in the Balkans are significant, they cannot be compared with other countries' contributions to its economic development.⁷¹ TIKa is financing the reconstruction of Ottoman heritage in the region, but the EU is making significant financial contributions to the

reconstruction of Medieval and other historic heritage sites across the Balkans. Only in Serbia, the EU contributed EUR 8 million to the reconstruction of the famous Golubac fortress⁷² and EUR 1.3 million to the reconstruction of the Fetislam fortress near Kladovo.⁷³ Unrelated to TIKa, Turkey opened two Yunus Emre centres in Albania, three in Bosnia, one in Serbia, three in Kosovo and three in Macedonia to spread Turkish cultural influence.⁷⁴ In 2012, it also introduced new scholarship opportunities for students and classes held in the Turkish language.⁷⁵

In Albania, the Turkey Diyanet Foundation (TDV), tied to the Government's Religious Affairs Directorate (Diyanet), has been constructing the Namazgah Mosque since 2015.⁷⁶ Once the construction is completed, this mosque will surpass the King Fahd bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud Mosque that was built by Saudi Arabia in Sarajevo in 2000 and is currently the largest mosque in the Balkans.⁷⁷ In Kosovo, Diyanet is constructing a mosque in the centre of Priština that is expected to be the largest in Kosovo.⁷⁸ The cultural centre Yunus Emre Institute, which promotes the Turkish language and culture, has 11 offices in the Western Balkans.⁷⁹ The Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMF), intended to provide education, secure scholarships and manage educational facilities, grew in importance as it took over the management of schools that used to be run by the anti-government Gülen movement, with 23 schools currently managed in the Western Balkans.⁸⁰

These increased cultural activities did not significantly affect the general population and it can be concluded that the soft power political project in the Balkans did not succeed the way its creators had anticipated. Turkish did not become a popular language in the Balkans, as the cultural centres of other countries (such as Spain, France and Germany) attracted more people, particularly the younger generation. The extremely popular TV series "Magnificent Century", depicting the life of Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent and his wife, Hürrem Sultan, did break viewership records. However, in the eyes of the vast majority of the population it did not change the perception of the Ottoman Empire as a force that had historically caused harm to their nations.⁸¹

So the approach based on emotions, historical narratives and shared identities produced a rhetoric that backfired on Ankara's Balkan policy. In 2011, Davutoğlu said the following: "As a matter of fact, the Balkans had its golden age of peace during the Ottoman reign. This is a historical fact. Those who blame the Ottoman period for the region's economic backwardness and internecine fights are under the influence of historical prejudices and stereotypes."⁸² A year before that, in a similarly provocative fashion, Davutoğlu said: "We did not drop in, we came to Bosnia on horseback, many centuries ago. And if need be, we will come again."⁸³ This rhetoric – based on the emotional and historical – ultimately led to the collapse of Ankara's Balkan policy in 2013 when Erdoğan, as Prime Minister, visited Kosovo and, in the historic city of Prizren, said: "Do not forget, Turkey is Kosovo, and Kosovo is Turkey!"⁸⁴ In response to this statement, Serbia withdrew from Turkey's trilateral initiative on Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁸⁵ The trilateral initiative is where Turkish policy failed because of the language that angered Serbia. This led some interlocutors to conclude that "today, this jargon is dead". Said jargon and language were described

as “meta-centric, based on romanticism and totalism”, insisting on special cultural, historical and emotional ties while not making a distinction between the countries of the region.⁸⁶ The approach viewed the region as a whole, which led to the estrangement of Serbia and the failure of Turkey’s policy. The policy, coloured by emotions, identity and historical and cultural motives led the Christian nations of the Balkans to perceive Turkey as a biased power and mediator that favours Muslim nations.⁸⁷ For some, like political scientists Murat Onsoy and Hüseyin Bağcı, the Balkans was also a case of failure because Turkey, with Davutoğlu at the helm of its Balkan policy, was overly ambitious and not mindful enough of its limitations.⁸⁸ Davutoğlu ultimately resigned in 2016 after a political fallout with Erdoğan.

Realism Kicks In: Erdoğan Takes over the Balkan Policy

Realism and pragmatism became more prevalent after Erdoğan took command of the Balkan policy. The realist component, however, was never fully gone. Even during the 1990s, one could see that Turkey was attempting to take a more pragmatic, realist course. At the beginning of the Yugoslav crisis it supported Yugoslavia and its territorial integrity, only to shift its support towards the Bosniaks with the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the ensuing war.⁸⁹ Later on, it tried to mediate between Kosovo Albanians and the Serbian government and, at the beginning, had a lower profile policy during the Kosovo War compared to Bosnia.⁹⁰ When war broke out over Kosovo, Turkey participated in the NATO intervention as a member of the Alliance.

Later on, as the AK Party government became more ambitious in the Balkans, the tension between realism and emotionalism was always present, frequently regarding the ties with Serbia. Even during Davutoğlu, Turkish diplomacy attached particular importance to Serbia, to the extent that “some of the most active and promising diplomats of the Turkish Foreign Ministry were employed at the Turkish embassy in Serbia.”⁹¹ As such, Davutoğlu’s policies were not entirely deprived of realism and pragmatism; however, the emotional and identity motives were simply too strong, leading to the ultimate collapse of the policy. The failure of Davutoğlu led Ankara to make a clear distinction between individual countries and tailor its policies accordingly, with a language and policies that are much more pragmatic and rational.⁹² The main aspect of Davutoğlu’s foreign policy was the invocation of imperial legacies, which led to the policy’s failure and caused Ankara to adopt an approach where it no longer acted as the “big brother” of the Balkans, but as a partner in a region that is important for Turkey’s national security.⁹³

This marked the beginning of the third stage in Turkish foreign policy: one that was activist but not neo-Ottoman, unlike the previous two stages, i.e. the pre-AK Party era of non-activist foreign policy and Davutoğlu’s era of active foreign policy in the former

Ottoman territory.⁹⁴ In that context, one can say that Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans is also dictated by the wider changes in the international system; as the global order becomes more multipolar and more conflictual, Turkey is more likely to embrace more pragmatic and realist policies, including in the Balkans where cultural ties are overtaken by security and geopolitical reasoning.⁹⁵

The process where realism became more ingrained with Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans also corresponds with the period when Erdoğan took firmer control over the country's foreign policy apparatus. During the first five to 10 years of the AK Party rule, informal circles (focused on the political party) were more influential in Turkish foreign policy. The power pendulum shifted in the direction of the formal structure after 2016, when the presidential system in Turkey was formalised and formal networks became more influential. Within this process, as Erdoğan became more entrenched in power, he and his entourage became more formal than the AK Party. This resulted in a process where, according to some, Erdoğan asserted himself as the most powerful leader since the days of Atatürk.⁹⁶ As Erdoğan consolidated his power, the role of public opinion in shaping foreign policy did not disappear, but it did weaken.⁹⁷ This, too, helped bring Erdoğan's foreign policy pragmatism to the fore.

Before Erdoğan and during the first years of his era, foreign policy was viewed as mostly de-politicised and mainly bureaucratic and professional, left largely to the Turkish Foreign Ministry.⁹⁸ What followed was the process in which the Turkish presidency started playing a much larger role in formulating foreign policy. As President Erdoğan is more trusting of the intelligence than the foreign or defence ministries, the intelligence community became very influential in formulating policies, the Middle East policy being a striking example.⁹⁹ Still, it was stated that Erdoğan's foreign policy is still deeply popular with the military.¹⁰⁰

One of the consulted Turkish academics noted that there are three actors in Turkish foreign policy: the Ministry of Defence (particularly when it comes to Turkey's participation in international conflicts), the intelligence sector (the National Intelligence Organisation (MIT)), and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰¹ Prior to the 2023 elections, these institutions were led by Hulusi Akar, Hakan Fidan and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, respectively. Erdoğan is the essential coordinator of all three layers of policymaking; it was said that he is enthusiastic about foreign policy and is very much involved, both formally and informally as all three figures at the top of these institutions are his confidants.¹⁰²

The situation does not appear to have changed as a result of the elections and the new appointments, as Erdoğan's confidants dominate foreign and security policy under their leader's watchful guidance. The former head of intelligence Hakan Fidan, whose father is an ethnic Kurd, will take over as Minister of Foreign Affairs, proving the growing importance of intelligence in foreign policy, while the MIT will be taken over by Erdoğan's spokesperson and foreign policy adviser Ibrahim Kalin.¹⁰³ Yasar Guler, Chief of General Staff of the Turkish Armed Forces, who supervised the country's military operations in Syria and Iraq, will be the new Minister of Defence.¹⁰⁴

The year 2015 was deemed a turning point for Turkish policy towards the Balkans and Serbia, as Turkish domestic politics changed after the AK Party regained the parliamentary majority in the elections after losing it five months earlier, which resulted in Erdoğan's diversifying relations with third countries.¹⁰⁵ That year in particular, the Kurdish issue impacted national security and relations with the West were strained. A combination of domestic challenges and foreign policy failures led Erdoğan to a more pragmatic policy deprived of Islamist zeal, which some experts called the "patchwork foreign policy".¹⁰⁶ The Balkans was also one of the places where such a policy, based on repairing broken ties, was applied. Hüseyin Bağcı claimed that the Balkans was the only success of Turkish foreign policy.¹⁰⁷ In that context, according to Hüseyin Bağcı, it is easier for Turkey to deal with the Serbia-Kosovo dispute than the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where it would be arguably punching above its geopolitical weight.¹⁰⁸

The landmark moment and the sign of a new, more pragmatic Turkish policy in the Balkans was Erdoğan's visit to Serbia in October 2017. Greeting Erdoğan, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić made a reference to the famous 1389 Serbs' battle with the Ottomans in Kosovo, showing that pragmatism – rather than identity – would be the new norm in the relationship for both Ankara and Belgrade: "This is not 1389. Serbia and Turkey are friendly countries."¹⁰⁹ There were several factors that made rapprochement possible: Davutoğlu was no longer the main policymaker concerning the Balkan affairs; Turkey was diverted away from the Balkans by the security crises in Syria and the Middle East; Turkey's disputes with the West made Ankara an acceptable partner for even the hardline elements of Serbian society, and Belgrade embraced Ankara as another partner in its policy of diversifying partnerships.¹¹⁰

Economic opportunities, the not yet materialised TurkStream gas pipeline project and the migration flows also played a part in Ankara and Belgrade getting closer.¹¹¹ Erdoğan's hunt (after the failed coup in 2016) for the members of the movement FETÖ, led by the exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, caused a temporary cooldown in relations with Albania and Kosovo, helping Ankara to reach out to Belgrade.¹¹² Since 2018, there have been several instances of the Serbian government arresting supporters of FETÖ and members of the Kurdish organisations and deporting them to Turkey based on Turkish arrest warrants.¹¹³ As a result of the widespread presence of Gülenist schools and universities in the Balkans, the region is an important arena in the fight between Erdoğan and Gülen.¹¹⁴ The presence of Gülenists in the Balkans is visible inside the Turkish society,¹¹⁵ for this reason, official Ankara requests full collaboration in the fight against Gülenism, including the extradition of Turkish citizens affiliated with this movement. The most controversial example of the extradition of Gülenists occurred in Kosovo in 2018, when Kosovar authorities, in collaboration with the Turkish intelligence service, arrested and deported six Turkish citizens.¹¹⁶ UN human rights bodies raised serious concerns about extradition from Kosovo,¹¹⁷ while the UN Committee against Torture urged Serbia not to extradite Turkish citizens connected with FETÖ and wanted by the courts in Turkey.¹¹⁸ According to a few Turkish foreign policy experts, Ankara is not satisfied with the way Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia are collaborating with the government in Ankara regarding the Gülenists.¹¹⁹ Turkey regularly applies

diplomatic pressure on the North Macedonian government regarding their extradition, as Skopje is reluctant to act on Ankara's extradition requests due to concerns over human rights and international law.¹²⁰ In 2020, Albania closed down a school and kindergarten in Tirana because they were linked with the networks allegedly supported by Fethullah Gülen.¹²¹

Turkish companies have been trying and succeeding in finding opportunities for economic investments in the Balkans. One of the main fields where Turkey invests in the region is infrastructure. There is a widespread perception in Ankara that Turkish companies have an advantage over EU and Western partners when it comes to investing in countries with poor infrastructure and low level business environment.¹²² Indeed, some major infrastructure projects in the Balkans have been Turkish investments. In March 2023, the Macedonian ruling coalition signed an agreement with the American-Turkish consortium "Bechtel and Enka" to construct a 110 km long highway in the country.¹²³ Priština's international airport was rebuilt by the Turkish-French consortium Limak-Aéroports de Lyon, involving EUR 140 million in investments and the presence of the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan at the official opening ceremony.¹²⁴ Finally, the planned highway connecting Sarajevo and Belgrade is one of the most significant infrastructure projects. The contracts for the construction were signed between Turkey's Tasyapi company and the Serbian government in December 2018,¹²⁵ and between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina in March 2021.¹²⁶ According to the then-President of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Milorad Dodik, Turkey was ready to provide USD 3.41 billion for the project.¹²⁷

Through economic cooperation, investments and trade, Turkey is trying to cement its position in the Balkans vis-à-vis its Western partners, Russia and China. In Kosovo, Turkey holds the third place in foreign direct investments (after Germany and Switzerland).¹²⁸ In 2021, 28.8% of all foreign-owned companies in Montenegro were Turkish.¹²⁹ Therefore, economic ties also play a significant symbolic role in Turkey's presence in the Balkans. Turkish Airlines has direct flights from Istanbul to every capital city in the Balkans, despite the fact that some of these routes are not profitable.¹³⁰ Similarly, Turkish banks are visible in the region, with state-owned Halkbank operating in Serbia and North Macedonia.¹³¹

Erdoğan's approach to foreign policy was more personalised compared to that of Davutoğlu.¹³² In the Balkans, Erdoğan used it to establish closer ties with local leaders, including Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia, Edi Rama from Albania, Albin Kurti from Kosovo and Bakir Izetbegović from Bosnia and Herzegovina¹³³ (until Izetbegović's electoral defeat). For many, this newly gained ability to nurture ties with everyone in the Balkans stands out as Ankara's greatest foreign policy success in the region.¹³⁴ Improved ties with Serbia stand out as a major part of that success.¹³⁵ In that context, Erdoğan's position in the Balkans is better described as that of a "a power broker" rather than mediator, as the mediating role is deemed too exposed and too mild in terms of power relations by the Turkish leader, who prefers to nurture the image of "a deal-making leader."¹³⁶ By being power brokers, Erdoğan and Turkey profited and ceased being perceived as champions for individual ethno-religious groups, increasing instead their

regional diplomatic clout by being able to engage everyone in the Balkans, proving Ankara's pragmatism.¹³⁷ Turkey's illiberal polity based on personalist rule can also be an important cohesive factor in ties with the local nations and a relevant political model for the Balkan countries, including Serbia.¹³⁸

Greece heavily factors in shaping the Turkish policy in the Balkans. By engaging Serbia, Ankara is trying to dilute the potential axis between Serbia and Greece, countries that have traditionally been aligned in undermining the Ottoman Empire.¹³⁹ During and after Davutoğlu's era, the main potential threat for Turkey in the Balkans would be the formation of an anti-Turkish balancing coalition formed by Serbia, Greece and Bulgaria,¹⁴⁰ whose alliance defeated the Ottoman Empire in the First Balkan War (1912). As the three countries are small, such an alliance would not be able to outweigh Turkey in the traditional logic of balance of power. Still, it would be formidable in thwarting the Turkish regional position and would add to the long list of rivalries that Turkey faces in other regions. In the same context, the 1990s concepts such as the "Islamic Arc" or "the green transversal" are discounted since these efforts would be too ambitious for Turkey and would be perceived by local nations as expansionist and threatening, leading precisely to the scenario that Turkey wants to avoid, i.e. the Serbo-Greek-Bulgarian alliance.¹⁴¹ Ensuring that relations with Serbia are friendly and cooperative is a way for Turkey to prevent the emergence of such a triple anti-Turkish alliance in the Balkans.¹⁴²

Erdoğan's approach has also resulted in stronger economic ties with Serbia. Turkey is among the top 10 of Serbia's most important foreign trade partners, with 1,300 Turkish companies currently operating therein.¹⁴³ This is particularly important, as many Turkish sources did not believe in the ability to convert political ties with local nations into a stronger economic collaboration.¹⁴⁴ Renowned Turkish academic Hüseyin Bağcı noted that it is frequently neglected that Serbia has been giving citizenship to Turkish citizens whose origins are in Serbia, a policy deemed significant as these are young university-educated individuals who can help Serbia tackle problems related to economic growth and demographic decline, as well as important from the human rights perspective and building stronger communal ties.¹⁴⁵

Under Erdoğan, we have seen a gradual evolution of instruments that Turkey uses in the region, starting with soft power instruments (nurturing social, religious and cultural ties), moving to economic cooperation, and ultimately venturing into stronger security and defence cooperation with the region.¹⁴⁶ In recent years, Turkey has also been trying to strengthen military and security cooperation with the Balkans through security training, military education, exporting military equipment and technology transfers (e.g. the Bayraktar drones). Particularly since Ankara is aware of the limitations of soft power tactics and the fact that, in contrast, security and defence cooperation generates a stronger degree of political dependency.¹⁴⁷

The Bayraktar drones are in demand in the Balkans, but they show how challenging Ankara's Balkan balancing can be. Serbian President Vučić expressed interest in these drones in 2020 and 2022, having seen their performance in the Nagorno-Karabakh war

of 2020 and the ongoing Ukraine war. Erdoğan allegedly promised them to Vučić in 2022.¹⁴⁸ In December that same year, after Albania signed an agreement with Turkey to buy three Bayraktar drones, Kosovo's Minister for Regional Development, Fikrim Damka, expressed Kosovo's interest in acquiring them as well.¹⁴⁹ In response, Serbian President Vučić stated that supplying "Bayraktar" drones to Kosovo would affect relations between Serbia and Turkey.¹⁵⁰

Therefore, security partnerships will be another case of Turkey having to strike a delicate balance given cultural and pragmatic concerns, as ethnic Albanians cannot be estranged. Still, Serbia provides Turkey with the ability to produce drones in the region thanks to "know-how" transfers and Serbia's military-industrial infrastructure.¹⁵¹ In 2019, during Erdoğan's visit, Serbia signed an agreement with Turkey to cooperate in the defence and military industry.¹⁵² Recently, news emerged in the Turkish media that professors from Turkey's Bolu Abant İzzet Baysal University and the University of Niš from Serbia are collaborating on a NATO-approved project to develop an early warning system against a nuclear attack on NATO border states.¹⁵³

So far, Ankara has demonstrated pragmatism in balancing its ties with Serbia and other nations of the Balkans. In the past, even when it displayed displeasure over Belgrade's cooperation with its rivals such as Armenia, Cyprus and the United Arab Emirates, Ankara never fully severed all its ties with it.¹⁵⁴ Going forward, Ankara will continue to try to maintain a balance between the Balkan nations, and between the emotional and pragmatic impulses in its Balkan policy.

Conclusion – Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans after the Elections

The question now arises as to whether Turkish foreign policy, not just in the Balkans but in general, will be impacted by the presidential and parliamentary elections that were held in May 2023, and if yes, how. The consulted sources had different views on how they will impact the country's foreign policy. Some claimed that there was one thing that would not change even if the opposition won – namely the country's foreign policy, as both foreign and security policies, such as they are, are deeply embedded in the state.¹⁵⁵ Others were more willing to believe that if the opposition won, the new government would reduce but not fully cut Ankara's relations with Moscow, and tilt more Westward while compromising on the Kurdish issue and the country's relations with Syria and the Assad regime.¹⁵⁶ Some elements of decision-making and policy implementation would have probably changed if the opposition had won, particularly because some in the opposition advocated for a return to the parliamentary constitutional system. In that case, the role of the parliament and the Foreign Ministry would have become more powerful in the country's foreign policy, as opposed to the present-day personalist approach where the President and his advisers dominate the process.¹⁵⁷

However, the international and domestic structures will provide a strong continuity to Ankara's foreign policy in the Balkans. Two imperatives, which some see as reverting to the days of Atatürk, will still drive Turkey: the need to secure autonomy, and the need to be a great power, or at least a country capable of influencing things, all with the purpose of Turkey having agency.¹⁵⁸ In that regard, the Balkan policies will continue to be shaped by strategic realities of geography, the balance of power, and domestic realities. For Turkey, which wants to have geopolitical agency, being involved in a region where its policy is not impeded by conflict is a must. Turkish foreign policy elites are also becoming increasingly aware of the global multipolarity, which will allow Turkey not to be always aligned with the West, so even if Erdoğan loses the elections, this systemic reality would lead Ankara to frequently have an independent foreign policy, including in the Balkans.¹⁵⁹

In addition, 20 years of the AK Party have also created a strong political, diplomatic and strategic inertia regarding the Balkan policy that will hardly be abandoned even if parties that are rivals of the AK were to assume power in Turkey, generating a force of continuity in Turkish Balkan policy.¹⁶⁰ The institutions like the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and Yunus Emre Institute will also contribute to said continuity.¹⁶¹ The domestic structures will remain unaltered as the opposition, if it wins power, will still have to deal with a population that has its origins in the region and issues such as support for the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which has become a matter of political consensus in Turkey.

Any government in Ankara will also have to deal with the prospect of the Balkan lobby in Turkey becoming stronger and more coordinated, forcing the new government to consider this when engaging the Balkans.¹⁶² The 2023 elections have demonstrated this reality. The Albanian Prime Minister expressed his support for Erdoğan in the elections.¹⁶³ Although normally with conflicted views regarding every major issue, both the leader of Bosniaks, Bakir Izetbegović, and the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, Milorad Dodik, expressed support for Erdoğan in the elections.¹⁶⁴ In an attempt to attract the votes of Bosnians, in between two rounds of presidential elections the mayor of Istanbul Ekrem İmamoğlu (from the opposition ranks) addressed the gathered citizens in Yildirim, a Bosniak neighbourhood, in their native language: “E vala nećeš, Tajip (I swear, Tayyip, you will not [win]).”¹⁶⁵ Moreover, the electoral demographic and global trends are pushing Turkey, like many other countries, towards the culture of nativism and nationalism, which will have to be entertained by a more liberal government as well.¹⁶⁶

For Ankara, the Balkans’ integration into NATO and the EU is desirable as it would imply that the region is stable; there would also be fewer problems for Turkey to worry about, and more resources that Turkish foreign policy could dedicate elsewhere.¹⁶⁷ It would be beneficial for Turkey if the rest of the Balkans was to enter the EU as this would increase the number of countries within the EU that are friendly, or at least not hostile, towards Turkey.¹⁶⁸ Turkey would also profit from this transformation as it is already a part of the Customs Union with the EU.¹⁶⁹ For Turkey, ensuring the protection of Bosniak interests cannot be done effectively without EU membership.¹⁷⁰ Should Turkey have a new government, it would be less likely to be viewed by the EU as a competitor in the Balkans.¹⁷¹ However, some interlocutors, like e.g. Murat Aslan, noted that Turkey, to the best of its ability, would oppose any policy of the EU that would aim to push it back from the Balkan affairs and Balkan security.¹⁷² Among a large number of state officials and members of public administration there is a strong feeling that the EU has betrayed Turkey. These opinions come from officials who believe that the EU is not treating Turkey as an equal partner. Some retired officials even claim that Europe is behaving discriminatively towards it.¹⁷³ These perceptions are accompanied by strict foreign policy views set up by Atatürk. They believe that the future of the Balkans (including Turkey) is in the EU, yet they blame it for not fulfilling its promises to the Western Balkan countries and Turkey itself.

Turkish foreign policy experts agree that what might change if the opposition wins concerns Ankara’s policies towards Syria and warmer relations with the EU.¹⁷⁴ In the context of warmer relations with the EU, there might be some improvements in the field of human rights when it comes to Kurdish activists who are not labelled as terrorists. In addition, as the Kurdish issue would certainly be one of the most important for the government, engaging with the Kurds in Syria might achieve stability in that region.¹⁷⁵ With geopolitical turmoil brewing in Turkey’s other neighbouring regions, the Balkans will not be affected by eventual changes in Turkish foreign policy.

As Russia is becoming more bogged down in Ukraine and its interactions with the Balkans are expected to decrease as a result of Western pressures, a player like Turkey, with ties to the Western security institutions, might partly fill the space left by a distracted Russia estranged from the West.¹⁷⁶ Turkey is already a part of regional security affairs. Within NATO's peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR), Turkey is a nation that contributes 350 out of the total of 3,762 soldiers.¹⁷⁷ This number is set to increase now, as NATO decided to strengthen the KFOR mission in response to ethnic unrest in the north of Kosovo in late May 2023. Turkey dispatched a 500-member commando battalion of its 65th mechanised infantry brigade, which makes up the bulk of NATO's enforcement of 700 troops.¹⁷⁸ Turkey is also a contributor to the EU missions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, EUFOR ALTHEA and the European Union Police Mission in Bosnia-Herzegovina (EUPM), and the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX).¹⁷⁹

Indeed, as a member of NATO, Turkey has the advantage that powers like Russia and China do not. Although Ankara's interests are not always aligned with those of the West, it can brand its policies within the Euroatlantic framework. The weaponry and security assistance that Turkey provides to the Balkan countries can be easily justified on the ground by saying that Turkey is a member of NATO and that provided weaponry is in line with NATO standards.¹⁸⁰ Turkey and Turkish companies would also like to profit from the process they expect is coming - the one where Western companies will move their production facilities to the Balkan markets.¹⁸¹ However, Turkish foreign policy will still drift between two seemingly contradictory goals: the need to have strong ties with the West, and the need to preserve independence and strategic autonomy wherever possible,¹⁸² including in the Balkans.

Therefore, while Turkey might be more accommodating to the West regarding the Balkan affairs, Turkish Balkan policy will also try to preserve its autonomy irrespective of who is in power in Ankara. In that same context, Turkey will have a pragmatic degree of geostrategic interactions with the EU, but not a full value-based mindset associated with Western powers.¹⁸³ As such, it will exercise the policy of being part of the wider Western system, but within that system it would still exercise a multi-vectoral foreign policy towards other players in the international system such as Russia, China and India.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, what remains is the conclusion that the Balkan policy will experience fewer changes than any other domain of Turkish foreign policy, and that this would have been the case even if the electoral outcome was different.

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