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## Thirty years of relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Serbia: Changing political and international dynamics

Trzydzieści lat wzajemnych relacji Republiki Turcji i Republiki Serbii:  
Zmiana dynamiki politycznej i międzynarodowej

**Abstract:** Bilateral relations between the Republic of Turkey and the individual successor states of former Yugoslavia differ, after thirty years since its dissolution, in form and in substance. While just after the breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia Turkey managed to establish and sustain cordial ties with such countries as, for instance, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, relations with Serbia (Serbia and Montenegro) remained tense and the two countries perceived themselves, in the best case, as traditional opponents. The basic aim of this paper is to analyse the bilateral relations of these two states and Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia, a country currently perceived as a ‘neighbour’, despite the fact that they do not share common border. The paper argues that rapprochement of two countries, so clearly visible in several dimensions after 2002, marks a new phase in Turkey’s general foreign policy. The paper will trace the thirty-year evolution of bilateral contacts while arguing that the current positive relations have their source also in the domestic arena, both of Turkey and Serbia, which is willing to increase influence in the Western Balkans and strengthen its international position. Thus, the two states for the first time share similar foreign policy goals. The whole analysis is theoretically anchored in the behavioural approach of the ‘middle power’ paradigm. An author-applied qualitative content analysis is the main research technique. The main sources are official documents, selected monographs, academic articles, and analytical reports.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Serbia, Foreign Policy, The Balkans, Middle Power

**Streszczenie:** Wzajemne relacje pomiędzy Republiką Turcji a poszczególnymi państwami powstałymi po rozpadzie Jugosławii, po trzydziestu latach od jej rozwiązania różnią się pod względem formy i treści. O ile tuż po rozpa-

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dzie Socjalistycznej Federalnej Republiki Jugosławii Turcji udało się nawiązać i utrzymać serdeczne stosunki z takimi państwami, jak np. Macedonia i Bośnia i Hercegowina, to kontakty z Serbią pozostawały napięte, a oba kraje, w najlepszym przypadku, postrzegały siebie jako tradycyjnych przeciwników. Podstawowym celem artykułu jest analiza stosunków dwustronnych tych dwóch państw oraz tureckiej polityki zagranicznej wobec Serbii, państwa obecnie uznawanego przez Turcję za „sąsiada”, pomimo faktu, że nie posiadają one wspólnej granicy. W artykule stwierdzono, że zbliżenie dwóch państw, tak wyraźnie widoczne w kilku wymiarach po 2002 r., wyznacza nowy etap w polityce zagranicznej Turcji. W artykule prześledzona zostanie trzydziestoletnia ewolucja dwustronnych kontaktów, a punktem wyjścia jest założenie, że obecne pozytywne relacje mają swoje źródło także w obszarze polityki wewnętrznej, zarówno Turcji, jak i Serbii, która chce zwiększenia wpływów na Bałkanach Zachodnich i wzmocnienia swojej pozycji międzynarodowej. W ten sposób oba państwa, po raz pierwszy, mają podobnie zbieżne cele w polityce zagranicznej. Cała analiza jest w wymiarze teoretycznym zakotwiczona w behawioralnym ujęciu paradygmatu „średniej potęgi”. Jako główną technikę badawczą autor zastosował jakościową analizę treści. Głównymi źródłami są oficjalne dokumenty, wybrane monografie, artykuły naukowe i raporty analityczne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Turcja, Serbia, polityka zagraniczna, Bałkany, średnia potęga

## Introduction

The end of the Cold War was a period of tremendous change in Turkish foreign policy. While since 1952 the country has been a NATO member and was deeply linked with the Western camp, the end of the bipolar world order made the Republic of Turkey not only reconsider its political goals in the international environment but also to create, maintain and sustain relations with several new states that suddenly appeared in Turkey's neighbourhood.

The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia made Turkey establish relations with new, from that time on, independent states like Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to observe that Turkey immediately managed to establish cordial relations with most of the countries, while relations with Serbia remained tense due to several factors, such as, for instance, Turkey's stance towards the war in Bosnia and later Turkey's involvement in the Kosovo issue at the end of 1990's. Without a doubt,

1 In this paper the names 'Serbia' or 'Republic of Serbia' will be used. However, the country has been renamed several times. In 1992, after disintegration, the term 'Federal Republic of Yugoslavia' was used. Then, in 2003, the new official name of the country 'State Union of Serbia and Montenegro' was introduced. The republics separated in 2006.

overall relations between the two states after Yugoslavia's dissolution are marked with periods of tensions and rapprochements.

The basic aim of this paper is to analyse bilateral relations of these two states and Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia. The paper will trace a thirty-year evolution of bilateral contacts while arguing that current positive relations have their source in the domestic arena, both of Turkey and Serbia, which is willing to increase influence in the Western Balkans and institutionalise her international position. Thus, the two states for the first time share similar foreign policy goals.

This paper consists of four fundamental parts. The first part provides a theoretical framework for analysing Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia in particular and towards the Balkans in general. The second part offers a brief general overview of Turkey's foreign policy towards Yugoslavia and the region in the twentieth century. The third part describes how bilateral relations of Turkey and Serbia evolved, since today one can say about their heyday. Finally, in the last section, conclusions are presented.

Qualitative content analysis remains the main research technique of this paper. The main sources are official documents, selected monographs, academic articles, and analytical reports.

## 1 Theoretical framework

● This analysis is theoretically anchored in the behavioural approach towards the states and their actions. This kind of approach is to find an answer to the fundamental question: What do the particular engaged social actors actually do and how do we best explain why they do this? Thus, the state and its observable behaviour are at the centre of the analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, the paradigm of 'middle power' is used with a view to understand Turkey's international behaviour, particularly Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia and the Balkans in general. The paper argues that in her foreign policy towards Serbia, Turkey resembles, with some restrictions to be mentioned, a middle power, i.e. a state in

2 D. Sanders, *Behawioralizm*, [in:] *Teorie i Metody w Naukach Politycznych*, D. Marsh, G. Stoker (eds.), Kraków 2006.

which diplomacy is responsible for achieving not only specific, easily achievable tasks in accordance to its national interests. Middle powers take care of the international *status quo*. They do not raise the questions about the political, military or economical balance of power but rather attempt to legitimise it.<sup>3</sup>

Andrew Cooper, Richard Higgott and Kim Nosal tend to identify middle powers by their foreign policy behaviour, which includes their proclivity for seeking multilateral solutions to international problems, for advocating compromise and for being a part of the solution to challenges at the international level.<sup>4</sup> The definition of middle power status has been encapsulated in famous five 'Cs' by John Ravenhill, who referred to Cooper, Higgott and Nosal's contribution in the literature on middle powers. According to Ravenhill, one can indicate five criteria of middle powers: capacity, concentration, creativity, coalition-building and credibility.<sup>5</sup>

The first category, *capacity*, refers to the diplomatic potential of the state, the number of diplomatic missions and the possession of foreign services with high levels of analytical skills that are coupled with successful intelligence and a variety of communication networks<sup>6</sup>. As for Turkey, one should underline here the traditional quality of its diplomacy, dating back even to the Ottoman period. Today, the existing diplomatic network seems to be rather impressive – with 252 diplomatic and consular missions abroad, Turkey occupies fifth position globally.<sup>7</sup> Turkish activism is visible also in the relations with the Republic of Serbia together with an impressive amount of seventy-six bilateral agreements between the two countries.<sup>8</sup>

Their *concentration* is what differentiates middle powers from superpowers; to put it simply, middle powers must remain focused on

3 E. Jordaan, *The Concept of a Middle Power in International Relations: Distinguishing between Emerging and Traditional Middle Powers*, "Politikon", 2003, vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 166-167.

4 A. F. Cooper, R. A. Higgott, K. R. Nosal, *Relocating Middle Powers: Australia and Canada in a Changing World Order*, Vancouver 1993, p. 19.

5 J. Ravenhill, *Cycles of Middle Powers Activism: Constraint and Choice in Australian and Canadian Foreign Policies*, "Australian Journal of International Affairs", 1998, vol. 52, no. 3, p. 310.

6 Ibidem, p. 311.

7 Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, *Türkiye'nin Girişimci ve insani Dış Politikası*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/genel-gorunum.tr.mfa> [01.04.2021].

8 Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Bilateral Relations – Turkey*, <https://www.mfa.gov.rs/en/foreign-policy/bilateral-cooperation/turkey> [03.04.2021].

the limited number of foreign policy aims and objectives that they can pursue at any given time, while superpowers 'may play simultaneously on multiple cheeseboards.'<sup>9</sup> With respect to this definition, Turkey's status is questionable – in the Cold War era, the country remained a part of the Western camp, thus her aims overlapped with her allies' aspirations. In the 1990s, Turkey had to follow world events and started to be active in various regions, such as the Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. Again, with the raise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) in 2002 and implementation of the 'strategic depth' paradigm a few years later. Turkey revealed her ambitions to become an influential player in several areas with simultaneous utilisation of new foreign policymaking tools.

Two restrictions shall be mentioned here. First, Turkey's current success is highly questionable, since the country did not exercise its desired level of influence in international relations, destabilised relations with traditional allies, i.e. the USA, NATO and Israel, and involved herself in rather fragile partnerships, such as the one with the Russian Federation. On the other hand, regarding its relations with traditional allies, Turkey remains focused on the Balkans and her strategy towards the whole region, including Serbia, remains cohesive even despite tensions in bilateral relations, as will be shown in the following sections.

*Creativity* is strictly linked with intellectual and entrepreneurial leadership – the ability to offer such leadership relies on a middle power's *capacity*.<sup>10</sup> With reference to Serbia, Turkey's negotiating skills clearly demonstrated how successful Turkish governments are in putting together deals that would otherwise elude participating sides – shaping the perspectives of those who participate in institutional negotiations seems to be crucial here. As will be shown, both in the 1990s and later, Turkey has been able to offer Serbia a common intellectual platform for creating proper bilateral relations and general stability in the region.

*Coalition-building* among like-minded states means that middle powers are not powerful enough to impose their will or solutions

9 J. Ravenhill, *Cycles of Middle...*, p. 311.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 312.

on the other actors but are powerful enough to be a perfect benchmark for other states – middle powers' diplomacy is often conducted within multilateral institutions.<sup>11</sup> The case of relations between Turkey and Serbia clearly reveals the former's ability for coalition-building – among Western and several Balkan states in the 1990s during the war in Bosnia and the Kosovo crisis, and later with Serbia herself within both international frameworks and a multilateral cooperation mechanism involving Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2010 onwards.

*Credibility*, as Ravenhill argues, means that middle powers are able to play a constructive role in the international system not because they are so powerful but quite the contrary: due to their weakness – 'initiatives (...) may be more acceptable (or, at least, regarded with less suspicion) if they come from a country that, while undoubtedly acting in pursuit of its own interests, is unlikely to be in a position to be the single largest beneficiary of a negotiated outcome. This external dimension of credibility depends on the middle power not being perceived to be a stalking horse for a more weighty actor.'<sup>12</sup> In this context, Turkey seems to be a credible partner for Serbia since particular elements of Turkey's foreign policy towards this country contribute largely not only to her own interest, but also successfully develop and sustain peace and stability in the whole region or at least are a win-win for both parties (this is the context of bilateral trade relations). However, the second dimension of credibility is somehow problematic for Turkey – i.e. consistency in the implemented policies, both domestically and internationally.<sup>13</sup> Although currently Turkey cannot be perceived as a democratic model, the weight of the democratic mechanism and values is underlined in the state's international rhetoric.

As it will be analysed, Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia since the collapse of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is close to the behaviour and features of a middle power. Despite open tensions and challenges in the bilateral relations, Turkey managed to establish pragmatic relations with this country in the 1990s, at the same time contributing largely to the peace and stability of whole Balkan Pen-

11 Ibidem.

12 Ibidem, p. 313.

13 Ibidem.

insula. Later, since 2002 with the AKP in power, the Balkans became crucial in terms of trade and as an area of regional political cooperation in which Serbia – as the most populous country of former Yugoslavia and Turkey's traditional gateway to Europe – does have special meaning.

## **2. The Republic of Turkey and Yugoslavia – an overview**

The Balkans in general occupy a special place in the minds of Turkish foreign policymakers and in Turkish society, since much of the region was under Ottoman rule that lasted almost six centuries until the early twentieth century. The length of this rule makes the Ottoman Empire largely a Balkan one, since its ruling cadres and bureaucracy came from families with Balkan roots in a great number. Even today, it is impossible to estimate the number of Turkish citizens who have a family background originating from the Balkans and, for instance, some districts of modern Istanbul, like Pendik or Bayrampaşa, have populations that claim to be descendants of Balkan emigrants.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and establishment of the modern Republic of Turkey in 1923 opened a new chapter in the common history. Since the Balkans had been lost to Turks even earlier, finally as the consequence of 1912–1913 Balkan Wars, the new Turkish state was willing to adopt particular foreign policies towards the Balkan countries.

It must be underlined here that in the early republican period, the Balkans were not a priority for Turkish foreign policy and relations with the regional states remained rather formal and official with high level diplomacy imposed. It was to be a particular feature of that time that Turkish governmental foreign policy since the start of the Kemalist regime remained rather focused on domestic issues, political, social and economic reforms and securing power.

Despite that, the Turkish political elite was clearly aware that friendly relations with the Balkan countries would be the key to bringing stability to the region. On 25 October 1931, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state and its first president, delivered a speech at the Balkan Conference held in Ankara with the following statement: 'The basis and target of Balkan cooperation is to work together in the economic, cultural and civilisational realms

based on respect for political independence. If we achieve this, it shall be praised by the entire civilised world.<sup>14</sup> These words remained with an accordance with his famous motto 'peace at home, peace in the world.' Thus, together with other Balkan countries, Turkey tried to transform the region into a stable one. In 1934, Turkey, Yugoslavia, Greece and Romania signed the Balkan Entente, which was intended to guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of its signatories against other states – in practice, against Bulgaria and the regional power, i.e. Italy.<sup>15</sup>

Turkey remained neutral during the Second World War while Yugoslavia was invaded by the Axis in 1941. With the start of the Cold War, the two countries were members of different blocks and had different foreign policy orientations within this bipolar structure; under Soviet pressure, the Republic of Turkey decided to become a part of the Western block and joined NATO in 1952, together with Greece.<sup>16</sup> Under Joseph Broz Tito, Yugoslavia soon began developing a policy of non-alignment and distanced herself from the USSR after being removed from Cominform in 1948. From the beginning of 1950s onward, relations of the two countries started to develop within a framework of bilateral and multilateral cooperation. The Treaty of Friendship and Collaboration was signed by Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia on 28 February 1953 in Ankara, thus paving the way for the creation of the Balkan Pact, signed on 9 August 1954 in Bled, Yugoslavia. In Turkish foreign policy, creation of this regional alliance should be perceived as the realisation of then prime minister of Turkey Adnan Menderes' aspirations, since he was willing to create 'a security chain from the Atlantic to Pakistan.'<sup>17</sup> Actually, this agreement had two basic purposes. The first, officially, was to strengthen the security of its signatories, while the second, behind the scenes, was to envisage cooperation between Yugoslavia and the United States.<sup>18</sup> The 1954 Balkan Pact soon

14 *Balkan Konferansı Üyeleriyle Konuşma 25 Ekim 1931*, [in:] *Atatü'ün Söylev ve Demeçlerinden Seçmeler*, Ankara 2006, pp. 264-265, [http://ankaenstitusu.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/soylev\\_ve\\_demeçleri.pdf](http://ankaenstitusu.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/soylev_ve_demeçleri.pdf) [09.04.2021].

15 M. Türkeş, *The Balkan Pact and its Immediate Implications for the Balkan States*, "Middle Eastern Studies", 1994, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 139.

16 W. Hale, *Turkish Foreign Policy 1774-2000*, London 2000, p. 118.

17 H. Bağcı, *Türk Dış Politikasında 1950'li Yıllar*, Ankara 2001, p. 51.

18 *Ibidem*, pp. 52-55.



lost its meaning and value – reconciliation between the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia after Stalin's death in 1953, tensions over the Cyprus problem and Tito's leadership in the Non-Aligned Movement contributed largely to its depreciation.<sup>19</sup> Despite that, it was a clear example of both countries cooperating in the regional context, even though they had different political regimes and overall foreign policy orientations.

In general, the dynamics of the Cold War did not put Turkey and Yugoslavia in adversarial positions – on the contrary, bilateral relations remained rather cordial but limited. This was soon to change in the case of Turkish-Serbian relations, together with the end of the Cold War era and the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

### **3. Turkish foreign policy towards Serbia after the breakup of the Yugoslav Federation**

One can indicate two basic periods of bilateral relations between Turkey and Serbia. The first period of the 1990s should be described as strained, basically due to Turkey's attitude towards war in Bosnia after Yugoslavia's dissolution and later Turkey's approach towards the Kosovo crisis in 1998-1999. The second phase is marked with AKP and R. T. Erdoğan's electoral success in 2002 that led to a tremendous change in the whole of Turkish foreign policy, since the country became an active Balkan player and started to develop close links with the Balkan states – this was also a case of Turkish-Serbian relations, even despite the temporary setback of 2008 over the independence of Kosovo.

During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey tried to avoid sharp divisions in her relations with Serbia. However, from the very beginning, the former has been supportive towards the Bosnian Muslims. The government of Turkey decided to label this crisis as a humanitarian one and was against any unilateral intervention, utilising its diplomacy in favour of multilateral solutions, mainly within the United Nations framework – Turkey was the first country to be signed up to the UN-backed action plan and also strongly insisted on the adoption of a resolution that would clearly defined Serbs as the ag-

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem, p. 56.

gressors and Bosnian Muslims as the victims.<sup>20</sup> During the conflict, Yugoslavia's approach and perception of Turkey was based on Serbian nationalism and strong anti-Turkish and anti-Islamic statements.<sup>21</sup> Despite that harsh rhetoric, soon after the Dayton Agreement was signed, Turkey made an effort to normalise her relations with Serbia; bilateral contacts resumed soon after and Turkey invited Serbia to join the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Organization.<sup>22</sup> This temporary rapprochement was again overshadowed by the Kosovo crisis in 1998-1999. As in the case of the Bosnian conflict, Turkey again cooperated with the Western countries, mainly the USA and NATO, with the use of diplomatic tools. Within the NATO framework, Turkey was ready to open her military airports in Bandırma, Balıkesir and Çorlu for military aircraft.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that during the 1990s, Turkey was willing to use her diplomacy with a view to overcoming the ongoing crisis had a serious impact on future relations, which were soon to be improved following domestic changes in both countries. The ousting of Milosevic in Serbia and the rise of the Justice and Development Party in Turkey paved the way for a new opening in bilateral contacts, while since the early 2000s both countries shared a similar foreign policy identity.

The new principles of Turkish foreign policymaking were provided by Ahmet Davutoğlu in his famous book entitled *Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position*, published in 2001. According to Davutoğlu, two factors are crucial determinants of foreign policy – geography and history – thus anchoring them in Turkey's Ottoman presence and power in particular regions surrounding the country.<sup>24</sup> From then on, Turkish foreign policy, also towards the Balkans, should be considered as a continuation of existing geographical, historical

20 D. Ekinci, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkish Parliamentary Debates (1992-1995): A Constructivist Approach*, "Uluslararası İlişkiler", 2009, vol. 6, no. 22, pp. 37-60.

21 O. Karatay, *Milosevic Dönemi Yugoslav Dış Siyaseti: Başarısız Bir Mirasyedilik Olayı*, [in:] *Balkan Diplomasisi*, Ö. E. Lütem, B. Demirtaş-Coşkun (eds.), Ankara 2001, pp. 148.

22 Ş. Kut, *Türkiye'nin Balkan Politikası*, [in:] *Türkiye'nin Yeni Dünyası: Türk Dış Politikasının Değişen Dinamikleri*, A. Makovsky, S. Sayarı (eds.), İstanbul 2002, pp. 111.

23 İ. Uzgel, *Balkanlarla İlişkiler*, [in:] *Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar, Cilt II 1980-2001*, B. Oran (ed.), İstanbul 2005, pp. 512-513.

24 A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul 2001, p. 321.

and cultural links<sup>25</sup> and should be performed, as Davutoğlu later defined, in accordance with five basic principles: a) a balance between security and democracy, b) a zero-problem strategy towards neighbours, c) the development of relations with the neighbouring regions and beyond, d) adherence to a multidimensional foreign policy, and e) rhythmic diplomacy.<sup>26</sup>

As for relations with Serbia, which in past were rather strained, adoption of this strategy had a double side-effect since it has led to tremendous improvement in political and economical relations. One can argue here that Turkish desire to stabilise relations with the Balkans cannot be completed without having Serbia inside this process – a fact of which the current political elite of Turkey is clearly aware. On the other hand, Serbia was and still is also willing to stabilise and institutionalise her status in the Balkans and Europe, since officially this country is declaring her will to join the European Union and NATO, which the Republic of Turkey is constantly supporting.

Turkey was the second country to recognise Kosovo's independence in 2008. In contrast to what was expected, this did not lead to a serious setback of bilateral relations with Serbia. Although it temporarily jeopardised Serbian political rhetoric, it did not prevent the two countries from developing and further institutionalising political and economic relations.

A Free Trade Agreement between the two countries was signed on 1 June 2009. It was followed by a series of agreements on economic cooperation and cooperation in the field of infrastructural projects (both signed on 26 October 2009). This economic cooperation should be perceived as a base for the further political rapprochement realised in 2010 together with an Istanbul Declaration signed by the presidents of Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia. The regional reconciliation process and Serbian recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina's sovereignty was a major positive outcome of this first trilateral meeting. It also positioned Turkey as a key mediating player in the region and strengthened her image as a proactive power in the Balkans, promot-

25 H. Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States*, Washington 2000, p. 147.

26 A. Davutoğlu, *Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı*, Radikal, 26.02.2004, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/turkiye-merkez-ulke-olmali-702116/> [09.04.2021].

ing both regional integration and the integration with external structures such as the EU and NATO.<sup>27</sup>

Trilateral meetings at the presidential level became a mechanism of cooperation in the Balkans between Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The second meeting was held in 2011 in Karadordevo (Serbia). Again, this meeting focused on peace, reconciliation and the prospects of the Western Balkans for EU and NATO integration.<sup>28</sup> During the third meeting in 2013, the Ankara Summit Declaration was adopted. This underlined the common future of the region, based strongly on European values, democracy, cultural pluralism and the rule of law; the presidents also declared that the trilateral relations mechanism should be an institutional framework for regional cooperation in the Balkans.<sup>29</sup> The next summit was to be held in 2014 in Sarajevo; however, it was postponed and finally held in 2018 (Istanbul) due to R. T. Erdoğan's famous remark 'Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo.' The trilateral presidential meetings since 2010 are accompanied with a high number of bilateral visits and contacts at the premiership and ministerial level.

Bilateral trade and economic relations occupy an important place in Turkish-Serbian relations. Since AKP perceived trade as a foreign policy tool and Serbia is the biggest and most populous country in the Western Balkans, the volume of trade exchange between two states has improved greatly since 2002. For instance, the value of Turkish exports to Serbia rose from 122 million USD in 2002 to 925 million in 2019. In the same period, the value of Turkish imports from Serbia rose from 11 million USD to 337 million USD, and in 2017 for the first time the total volume of trade exchange exceed 1 billion USD.<sup>30</sup> In the period 2010-2020, Turkey took twenty-fourth position in terms of foreign direct investments in Serbia with almost 160 million USD invested. Turkish investments in Serbia have been on the rise since

27 İ. Rüma, *Türkiye'nin Bosna-Hersek ve Makedonya Politikası: Etkin İstikrar*, [in:] XXI, *Yüzyılında Türk Dış Politikasının Analizi*, F. Sönmezoğlu, N. Baklacioğlu, Ö. Terzi (eds.), İstanbul 2012, pp. 438-440.

28 D. Bechev, *Turkey in the Balkans: Taking a Broader View*, "Insight Turkey", 2012, vol. 14, no. 1, p. 141.

29 *Türkiye-Bosna-Hersek-Sırbistan Üçlü Zirve Toplantısı'nda kabul edilen Ankara Zirve Bildirisi, 15 Mayıs 2013, Ankara*, [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-bosna-hersek-sirbistan-uclu-zirve-toplantisi\\_nda-kabul-edilen-ankara-zirve-bildirisi\\_15-mayis-2013\\_-ankara.tr.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-bosna-hersek-sirbistan-uclu-zirve-toplantisi_nda-kabul-edilen-ankara-zirve-bildirisi_15-mayis-2013_-ankara.tr.mfa) [13.04.2021].

30 Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu, *İstatistik Veri Portalı*, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=Dis-Ticaret-104> [15.04.2021].

2015, and currently almost 800 Turkish companies operate in Serbia with 10,000 employees.<sup>31</sup>

Turkey attempts to maintain cordial relations with Serbia also with her presence in cultural sphere and development aid. Currently, there's one branch of the famous Yunus Emre Institute operating in Serbia. Development aid is provided by the prominent Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency run by the Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı*, TİKA) however its value is far behind that granted to the other Western Balkan states, such as, for example, Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Currently, the bilateral relations of the two countries are better than ever and one can trace their evolution. From being opponents in the 1990s, Turkey and Serbia have become strategic partners in the Balkans and established a well developed network of political and economic contacts. The former remains fully supportive, at least in rhetoric, towards Serbia's NATO and EU accession. On the other hand, the EU's inability to successful political incorporation of the Balkan states and indecisive stance towards the Western Balkans in general result in fertile ground for further bilateral cooperation.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusions

With its diplomatic potential, Turkey was able to create a new impetus in her relations with Serbia. Implementation of the 'strategic depth' paradigm and Turkey's transformation into a 'trading state' overlapped with domestic shifts in Serbian internal politics, thus paving the way for the establishment and development of cordial bilateral relations. Turkey does have a coherent strategy towards the Balkans and today, thirty years after Yugoslavia's collapse, Serbia is a crucial actor within the region. Turkey's creativity and coalition-building ability has brought the opposing sides of the Balkan conflicts together, while offering peace and stability. Thus, in her relations with Serbia, Turkey

31 *Turkish Investments in Serbia on the Rise Since 2015; 133.7 mill Euros in FDI*, N1, 31.01.2020, <https://rs.n1info.com/english/news/a565438-turkey-has-800-companies-in-serbia/> [16.04.2021].

32 S. Subotić, *Serbia: The Hub for External Actor Involvement* [in:] *The Strategic Role of External Actors in the Western Balkans: Study*, Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, December 2020, pp. 76-78.

demonstrates behaviour typical for a 'middle power.' Unlike in the Middle East, for instance, the Balkan Peninsula for Turkey remains an area of broadly understood cooperation, since the Turkish state does not perform daring unilateral actions and is able to find allies in her pursuit for the realisation of foreign policy goals – the Republic of Serbia remains among them.

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