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**Türkiye in the Balkans:  
the role, position  
and bilateral relations  
(part 2)**

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(part 2)**

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## Theses

- The Balkans are an important element of foreign policy, and have deep historical and cultural ties with the region. Thus, bilateral relations between Türkiye and the Balkan states are focused on the political stability of the region, increased economic influence, and use of religious, historical, ethnic and cultural links with the Balkan countries.
- Türkiye in the Balkans is focused on high-level political dialogue – leading to broad regional integration and the creation of so-called “areas of common interest” in which Türkiye uses a trilateral mechanism of meetings such as the Romania-Poland-Türkiye relationship, or Serbia-BiH-Türkiye, or Serbia-Kosovo-Türkiye relationships. At the same time it acts as a mediator in resolving political disputes among the states. Such meetings in the period after 2002 increased, although the effectiveness of such tools remains doubtful despite the high number of political declarations.



- As a result of growing economic interests and the number of internal and external policies pursued, Türkiye wanted to develop pragmatic trade relations with the Balkans in the regions where the Turkish population is settled or is linked to Muslim communities (the Dobruja region in Romania, Sanjak of Novi Pazar in Serbia and southern and northeast regions in Bulgaria). Türkiye's relations with the region focus more on cultural and educational programs, and aid which may contribute to the growth of economic relations. However, the economic cooperation of the Balkan states indicates that contacts with Western Europe are still dominant.
- The growing interest in the Turkish diaspora is seen through securing the religious rights and protection of the cultural heritage of the Turkish minority as well as the cultural heritage left over from the Ottoman Empire. Bulgaria is a particular case due to its size and national activity and the fact that it operates as a country that was under Turkish rule for a very long time and in which this rule is assessed unequivocally negatively.
- *Soft power*, an important instrument for building Türkiye's own position is performed by such institutions as the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), the Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, TİKA*), the Turkish cultural institute Yunus Emre Foundation (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, YEE*) as well as the Turkish Maarif Foundation (*Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, TMV*). TİKA has its seven overseas offices in the Balkan capitals

of Albania, BiH, Croatia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – but also in South Eastern and Central Europe, in Hungary, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine. There are also YEE institutes in the same countries (with the highest number being three in Kosovo and BiH and two in Albania). TMV poses 46 institutions located in the Balkan region – ten in Serbia, nine in BiH, eight in Albania, seven each in Kosovo and Romania, and five in North Macedonia<sup>1</sup>. There are no TIKa office, YEE or TMV educational institution in Bulgaria.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkish Maarif Foundation, <https://maarifschools.edu.ba/page/2018-MAARIF-IN-THE-WORLD-16> [9.09.2022].





## Introduction

The Balkans remain of great importance to the Republic of Türkiye because of the special place they occupied during the entire historical, political, cultural and economic process. Since the 1990s, and the collapse of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, Türkiye slowly began to depart from a one-dimensional foreign policy and towards a multi-dimensional policy focused on cooperation with European countries and the Middle East<sup>2</sup>. The Balkans again became an interesting direction in the development of Turkish influence after 2002.

The new principles of Turkish foreign policy were provided in Ahmet Davutoğlu's<sup>3</sup> famous book entitled "Strategic Depth: Turkey's International Position", published in 2001. According to A. Davutoğlu, who served first as the main advisor for foreign policy to Recep T. Erdoğan, two factors

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<sup>2</sup> A. Domachowska, A. Jagiełło-Szostak, K. Smoleń, *Türkiye in the Balkans: the role, position and bilateral relations (part 1)*, "Policy Papers" 2022, no. 10, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2009-2014 and Prime Minister of Türkiye and leader of the Justice and Development Party in 2014-2016.

are crucial determinants of foreign policy – geography and the history, thus anchoring it in Türkiye’s Ottoman presence and power in particular regions surrounding the country<sup>4</sup>. From now on Turkish foreign policy, also towards the Balkans, should be considered as a continuation of existing geographical, historical and cultural links<sup>5</sup> and should be performed, as A. Davutoğlu later defined, in accordance with five basic principles: a) a balance between security and democracy, b) a zero-problem strategy towards the neighbours, c) the development of relations with the neighbouring regions and beyond, d) adherence to a multidimensional foreign policy, and e) rhythmic diplomacy<sup>6</sup>. Thus as an heir of the Ottoman Empire and due to its unique location in various geopolitical areas of influence, Türkiye is uniquely endowed. This signified a major shift from the cautious approach of treating neighbouring areas as zones of interests, so characteristic of Kemalist doctrine and Turkish foreign policy in the 1990’s, to perceiving them as zones of influence – focus on developing relations with neighbouring countries became a major principle in Turkish foreign policy decision-making; however, with new tools such as lively diplomatic contacts, trade exchange and *soft power*.

Although the *strategic depth paradigm* proved to be insufficient in the context of expanding Türkiye’s influence, which was bitterly proved to Turkish policy-makers by the 2011 Arab Spring and its aftermath, there’s no doubt it

<sup>4</sup> A. Davutoğlu, *Stratejik Derinlik. Türkiye’nin Uluslararası Konumu*, İstanbul 2001, p. 321.

<sup>5</sup> H. Kramer, *A Changing Turkey: The Challenge to Europe and the United States*, Washington 2000, p. 147.

<sup>6</sup> A. Davutoğlu, *Türkiye merkez ülke olmalı*, Radikal, 2004, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/yorum/turkiye-merkez-ulke-olmali-702116/> [9.08.2022].

revitalized the country's foreign policy, making it far more active and leading to the establishment of close ties with neighbouring countries.

In the areas of foreign and security policy an important speech, which defined the framework of Türkiye's approach towards the Balkans, was made in 2011. In the "Vision 2023: Türkiye's Foreign Policy Objectives" presented at the "Türkiye Investor Conference: The Road to 2023" organized by Goldman Sachs in London, defined Türkiye as a global power. The Minister of Foreign Affairs outlined a vision that covered not only the Caucasus and the Middle East, but also the Balkans. He indicated the key elements implemented in Türkiye's foreign policy, for example free economic and business cooperation, creating a stable, secure and prosperous belt based on political dialogue and assistance to countries in the region and neighbouring Türkiye. The common goal has been integration with the European Union and support for the states of the region in this matter. Türkiye stressed the importance of reacting quickly to crises in its neighbourhood through mediation, without the long procedures that exist in the EU. He noted, inter alia, that Romania and Serbia, despite the difficult history and governments of N. Ceausescu and S. Milošević, have overcome difficulties and are becoming a more economically efficient area<sup>7</sup>. The withdrawal of A. Davutoğlu in 2016 and the personalization of Turkish foreign policy within the presidential

<sup>7</sup> Speech entitled "Vision 2023: Turkey's Foreign Policy Objectives" delivered by H.E. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey at the Turkey Investor Conference: The road to 2023 organized by Goldman Sachs (London, 22.11.2011), [https://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-entitled-\\_vision-2023\\_-turkey\\_s-foreign-policy-objectives\\_-\\_delivered-by-h\\_e\\_ahmet-davutoglu\\_-minister-of-foreign-af.en.mfa](https://www.mfa.gov.tr/speech-entitled-_vision-2023_-turkey_s-foreign-policy-objectives_-_delivered-by-h_e_ahmet-davutoglu_-minister-of-foreign-af.en.mfa) [11.09.2022].

system by R. T. Erdoğan after the 15 July 2016 coup d'état<sup>8</sup> attempt marked a new period in the AKP's foreign policy – further deterioration of relations with traditional partners like USA, Israel, NATO and the EU, rapprochement with Russia and the country's overall international isolation made Ankara's foreign policy choices chaotic and oriented rather towards short-term goals instead of conducting a comprehensive paradigm.

For Türkiye, 2023 may turn out to be a breakthrough year. On the one hand, Türkiye will be celebrating the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, but on the other hand, it is the year of the tragic earthquake that hit Türkiye in February 2023 and deepened the economic crisis in the country. It is also the year of the presidential and parliamentary elections which are due to take place on 14 May 2023. The elections will be crucial for Türkiye's political future and will affect the future shape of various aspects of its foreign and security policy regarding relations with the EU, NATO, Russia and Middle East. It appears that Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Balkans will not undergo any major changes, as Turkey maintains its position of supporting the Western Balkan nations' accession to the EU. However, unstable EU-Türkiye relations may also mean that Europeans increasingly see Türkiye as a competitor to the EU in the Balkans. In the context of Romania and Bulgaria, an important issue will be the continuation or not of

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<sup>8</sup> Three coups took place in Türkiye in 1960, 1971, 1980 and another one was about to take place in 1997. See: M. Chudziak, *Pucz jako mit założycielski. Filary ideologiczne Nowej Turcji*, Punkt Widzenia, no. 66, Warszawa 2017, [https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/\\_pw\\_66\\_pucz-jako-mit\\_net\\_o.pdf](https://www.osw.waw.pl/sites/default/files/_pw_66_pucz-jako-mit_net_o.pdf).

the policy in the Black Sea region and the question of the Turkish diaspora living in both countries.

The bilateral relations of Türkiye and the selected Balkan states discussed in this paper fall under the rule of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, leader of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), who served as prime minister in 2003-2014 and president from 2014<sup>9</sup> until the present. Contemporary Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans refers to the concept of A. Davutoğlu<sup>10</sup>. Thus the main goal of this paper is to analyse the current bilateral relations between Türkiye and Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. While the main focus is on high-level political dialogue, political stability and security across the region, as well as growing economic contacts, *soft power* elements such as religious, historical, ethnic and cultural links with the Balkan states have a significant part to play too. Qualitative content analysis remains the main research technique of this paper. The main sources are official documents, selected monographs, academic articles, and analytical reports.

The volume consist of three chapters which were problematically composed. The aim of chapter one, entitled “Serbian-Turkish “business” cooperation during the presidency of Aleksander Vučić (2017-2022)”, is to investigate the political, economic and socio-cultural relations between Serbia and Türkiye. The article will discuss aspects of the impact

<sup>9</sup> The ministers of foreign affairs in Türkiye’s in the 2002-2022 period were: Abdullah Gül (2003-2007, also Prime Minister 2002-2003 and President 2007-2014), Ahmet Davutoğlu (2009-2014, also Prime Minister 2014-2016) and Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu (2014-2015 and from 2015 until now).

<sup>10</sup> Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations with the Balkan Region*, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/relations-with-the-balkan-region.en.mfa> [25.07.2022].



of relations between Serbia and Türkiye in the Western Balkans. The main attention in this chapter will be paid to the 2017-2022 caesura which is related to the presidency of Aleksandar Vučić.

The next chapter is titled “The Turkish minority in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Knotty issues”. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria is analysed in this context because of its size and national activity, and the fact that it operates in a country that was under Turkish rule for a very long time and in which this rule is unequivocally assessed in a negative light. The topic of the Turkish minority has constantly been present in Bulgarian-Turkish relations facilitated by the foreign policy pursued by R. T. Erdoğan. Cultural and historical matters play a significant role in Turkish foreign policy building Turkish *soft power* and the growing interest in the Turkish diaspora.

The basic aim of chapter three, titled “Türkiye’s foreign policy towards Romania during the AKP era”, is to analyse bilateral relations of these two states and Turkish foreign policy towards Romania. The paper will trace an evolution of bilateral contacts while arguing that current positive relations have their source in the domestic area, both of Türkiye and Romania, which is willing to increase its economic ties with Türkiye and securitize the Black Sea region. The evolution of bilateral relations of Türkiye and Romania since 2002 is described.



## Serbian-Turkish “business” cooperation during the presidency of Aleksander Vučić (2017-2022)

### Introduction

The Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Türkiye have a long political, cultural and economic relationship. They established diplomatic relations in 1879, during the Ottoman Empire. The rapport was broken off during the Balkan Wars at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and then from the moment of the creation of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 mutual communications with Yugoslavia were limited and not treated by the Turkish side as a priority. After the end of the Cold War, Türkiye’s attitude towards the Balkan region changed in a more proactive way<sup>1</sup> to what was related to the war in BiH and Kosovo, and protection and solidarity with the Muslim population (mainly Bosniaks

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<sup>1</sup> See: K. Bieniek, *Thirty years of relations between the Republic of Turkey and the Republic of Serbia: Changing political and international dynamics*, “Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej” 2021, vol. 19, issue 4, pp. 175-189.

and Albanians). The period, after AKP took power in 2002, showed a growing interest in the Balkan peninsula and Serbian-Turkish relations underwent a specific evolution. Despite antagonistic issues in Turkish-Serbian relations, such as Türkiye's recognition of Kosovo's independence in 2008 and its pressure on other governments to do the same, or Serbian-Cypriot defence cooperation, Serbia's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, or Belgrade's arming of Armenia in the Karabakh war in 2020, they manage to establish a good and business-like relationship. During the presidency of A. Vučić, mutual pragmatic cooperation was raised to a very good level. Thus the aim of the chapter is to investigate the contemporary political, economic and socio-cultural relations between Serbia and Türkiye. The main attention in the chapter is paid to the 2017-2022 caesura which is related to the presidency of A. Vučić and also the presidency of R. T. Erdoğan (2014-2022).

### **Political relations**

In the period of the presidency of A. Vučić political relations between Serbia and Türkiye might be described as very intense, as seen in the large number of exchange visits at the highest level. President Erdogan visited Serbia three times (in 2017, 2019 and 2022) during Vučić's presidency, and was acting in four areas: high-level political dialogue, where the Turkish side was acting as a mediator; security and stability dialogue; economic cooperation, and strengthening cultural bonds. The visit of President Erdogan in October 2017 resulted in signing a Joint Political Declaration on the establishment of the High Council for Cooperation between

the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Türkiye, the aim of which was to lift the relationship between the two countries to an even higher level.

Within the framework of the High Cooperation Council, a second meeting was held in the Republic of Serbia in October 2019, timed to coincide with the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Serbia. Mutual relations were assessed by the Turkish side as special and friendly. R. T. Erdogan sees Serbia as a neighbouring country, despite the lack of common borders, and Türkiye as a part of the Balkans that contributes to the prosperity and stability of the whole region. The meeting was also focused on Turkish investments in Serbia and the improvement of mutual security and defence. The parties signed a military cooperation agreement and Serbia mentioned buying some equipment and weapons, and cooperation in the technology field in order to strengthen Serbia's defence capacity. The cooperation continued and in 2022 the Serbian leader announced the purchase of Turkish Bayraktar drones in 2023.

The third official meeting with President Erdogan and officials took place when the Serbian President visited Ankara on 18 January 2022. President Erdoğan and the Serbian President signed four different agreements between the two countries: an "Education Cooperation Agreement", a "Memorandum of Understanding Concerning Cooperation in Tourism", the "Joint Cinematographic Production Agreement" and the "Framework Agreement concerning Cooperation between Serbian Preservation of Cultural Monuments Institute and Tourism Ministry Directorate General

for Cultural Values and Museums”<sup>2</sup>. Undoubtedly, another presidential visit of R. T. Erdogan to Belgrade in September 2022 helped to strengthen the relationship between the two countries and promote cooperation by signing seven agreements in areas such as economy, industry and technology, including the protocol that allows citizens of both countries to travel without a passport. He also took part in the summit of the Open Balkan Initiative in Belgrade, which is an economic and political idea of Albania, North Macedonia and Serbia.

In the regional dimension, Türkiye is involved in the South East Europe Cooperation Process (SEECP) and is a founding member of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the operational arm of SEECP, through which it is involved in regional projects. In the political dimension, on the initiative of Türkiye, tripartite consultation mechanisms<sup>3</sup> started in the period of 2010-2013. The meetings the *Istanbul Declaration* and *Ankara Summit Declaration* had a goal that a tripartite process would strengthen dialogue between the three countries and contributes to regional stability and cooperation in the Balkan region. Moreover, the accession process was underlined, as well as mutual encouragement and support for integration with the European Union. Particular attention was paid to economic, cultural, educational, scientific, energy, infrastructure, transport, sports and tourism cooperation<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of National Education, *Türkiye and Serbia signed education cooperation agreement*, <https://www.meb.gov.tr/turkiye-and-serbia-signed-education-cooperation-agreement/haber/25084/en> [2.03.2023].

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Türkiye, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Relations with the Balkan Region...*

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Türkiye is seen as a regional negotiator through various strategies, but Serbia is also perceived as a key country for peace and stability in the Balkans, chairing tripartite meetings with Serbia, Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina to resolve issues between BiH and its neighbours. Both the appointment of the Bosnian Ambassador in Belgrade and the apology of the Serbian parliament in 2010 for the massacre in Srebrenica, in the opinion of K. Öktem, were the result of diplomacy led by Ahmet Davutoğlu<sup>5</sup>. Türkiye was an advocate of Serbia's and Croatia's commitment to resolving the political crisis. It is also a continuation of trilateral cooperation in the region between the presidents of Croatia, Serbia and BiH with the president of Türkiye<sup>6</sup>. In 2022 A. Vučić, the Serbian president also visited Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>7</sup> and Croatia, which is an expression of Serbia's perception as a stabilizer in the Western Balkans, e.g. in the context of the tense internal situation in BiH resulting from the different approaches of the three constitutive nations (Serbs, Bosniaks and Croats) to a functional BiH. Erdogan's visit also took place before the general elections in BiH, which could have been important in the context of Serbia's influence on the leader of Republika Srpska, M. Dodik, who from time to time raised the thorny issue of RS's secession from BiH. While the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is more interested in relations with the EU, Republika Srpska

<sup>5</sup> K. Öktem, *Angry Nation. Turkey Since 1989*, Zed Books – Fernwood Publishing, London 2011, p. 172.

<sup>6</sup> M. Mulalić, *Prospects for Trilateral Relations between Turkey, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina*, "Insight Turkey" 2019, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 129-130.

<sup>7</sup> See: A. Domachowska, A. Jagiello-Szostak, K. Smoleń, *Türkiye in the Balkans: the role, position and bilateral relations (part 1)*, "Policy Paper" 2022, no. 10, pp. 37-54.

is leaning towards Serbian and Russian relations. Cordial Turkish relations with BiH and Serbia are also a bone of contention between Türkiye and Russia in their policy towards the region. Türkiye supports Western Balkan (WB) states on their path to the EU and NATO, whereas Russia treats the WB countries' cooperation with the West as a threat to their interests in the region.

After the *Istanbul* and *Ankara Summits* the Trilateral Trade Committee was established and the "Declaration on Economic and Trade Cooperation" was signed to improve trilateral economic relations which continues today. A presidential tripartite meeting was to be held in Sarajevo in 2014 but was postponed until 2018. The meeting was related to, among other things, Türkiye's open support of Kosovo, whose independence is not recognized by Serbia, and to Türkiye's domestic affairs. Despite the disagreement between Serbia and Türkiye over the status of Kosovo, both countries maintain good relations in other areas.

Türkiye was one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence in 2008. Turkish president Erdogan many times stressed that Serbian-Kosovo relations are important to Türkiye, who supported both sides during negotiations. The war between Russia and Ukraine has increased the need to further stabilise the Western Balkans, including the strained relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Thus, the 2022 visit of the Turkish President acted as a mediator and focused on the diplomatic crisis over the Serbian-Kosovan refusal to recognise each other's vehicles licence plates and identity documents. The Turkish side also sees a positive development of Serbian-Kosovo relations through negotiations, under the auspices of the European Union.

Additionally, Türkiye currently takes part in the NATO operation KFOR in Kosovo with 350 military personnel<sup>8</sup>, the fourth largest contingent after Italy, USA and Hungary.

In the face of the Russian-Ukrainian war, Türkiye and Serbia share similar views related to the policy of balance between Russia and Ukraine. A comparable policy of Serbia and Türkiye towards Russia was manifested, among others, by not supporting Western sanctions against Russia, and neither country suspended Russia-Serbia and Russia-Türkiye air connections. Both the Serbian and Turkish leaderships have kept channels of communication open with the Russian government, and it seems that Serbia, Türkiye and Russia have come to an agreement to give up short-term relative advantages in exchange for long-term benefits of cooperation in the geopolitical game (such as cheaper gas supplies for Serbia, despite Serbia's humanitarian aid to Ukraine, or the possibility of grain transport via Türkiye from Ukraine despite the delivery of Bayraktar drones from Türkiye)<sup>9</sup>.

## **Economic relations**

Serbia and Türkiye signed a free trade agreement in 2009, which has helped to boost trade and investment between the two countries. Another instrument was the Turkish Serbian Business Association which was founded in 2016 in Belgrade as a private, non-governmental, non-profit organization of

<sup>8</sup> NATO, Kosovo Force, *Contributing nations*, <https://jfcnaples.nato.int/kfor/about-us/welcome-to-kfor/contributing-nations> [14.02.2023].

<sup>9</sup> The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *Serbia to donate humanitarian aid for endangered population in Ukraine*, 5 May 2022, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/188572/serbia-to-donate-humanitarian-aid-for-endangered-population-in-ukraine.php> [20.02.2023].



Turkish and Serbian businesspeople in Serbia. Moreover, tripartite meetings at the level of economy and trade ministries and ministries of foreign affairs were held regularly. In 2017-2018, a series of bilateral meetings between the presidents of Türkiye, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina took place, during which Serbia strongly emphasized securing the interests of Republika Srpska within BiH. Infrastructure issues were also agreed between Serbia and BiH, with financial support from Türkiye. Subsequently, the tripartite relationship gradually led to the lifting of visas for the citizens of Serbia, Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina, which undoubtedly made travel easier<sup>10</sup>.

Serbia and Türkiye are currently working on several joint projects in the areas of energy and infrastructure. One such flagship project is the construction of the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway, which is expected to enhance trade and economic cooperation between Serbia and BiH. Another issue is energy security, treated by Serbia as a key priority because Serbia is one of Europe's most Russian energy-dependent countries. But Türkiye is also a key supplier of natural gas to Serbia. As a result of close cooperation with Russia, at the end of May 2022 the general principles of a new natural gas import contract were agreed. During a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in Belgrade in June 2022, A. Vučić indicated that Serbia intends to continue energy cooperation with Türkiye, especially in the TurkStream gas pipeline project, which connects Russia with Europe via Türkiye. Supplies are carried via this pipeline and its onshore branch, Balkan Stream. Despite such favourable

<sup>10</sup> M. Mulalić, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-130.

contract conditions, Serbia does not overlook the possibility of diversifying its sources and is increasingly interested in obtaining natural gas from Azerbaijan via Türkiye<sup>11</sup>. Vučić was present at the inauguration of the Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline Project (TANAP) in June 2018. Also, both Serbia and Türkiye are investing in renewable energy, focusing on wind, solar power, hydro power and research. Examples of Turkish wind farms in Serbia in Vojvodina include those in Kovačica, Malibunar and Kula.

In terms of trade, Türkiye is one of Serbia's most important economic partners. According to the National Bank of Serbia (NBS) records (in the period 2010-2021) Türkiye is in twenty-first place among largest foreign investors<sup>12</sup>. A significant inflow of investments from Türkiye has intensified in recent years, as the textile sector has become a priority for Turkish investors, focusing on automotive, construction and mechanical industries, banking and tourism. Some of the major Turkish companies operating in Serbia include Bambi, Beko and Tiryaki Agro. In 2021 the total trade exchange between Serbia and Türkiye recorded a growth of 31.2%, compared to 2020, and amounted to 1.73 billion euros. The growth occurred solely thanks to the increase in imports from Türkiye by 43.8%, as exports recorded a drop of 8.7%<sup>13</sup>. But still at the beginning of 2023 the major foreign export trade partners were: Germany, Hungary, Italy, BiH and

<sup>11</sup> M. Paszkowski, *Serbia szuka alternatywnych do Rosji dostawców gazu ziemnego*, "Komentarze IES" 2022, no. 173(661), <https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/serbia-szuka-alternatywnych-do-rosji-dostawcow-gazu-ziemnego/> [20.02.2023].

<sup>12</sup> Republika Srbija, Ministarstvo Spoljnih Poslova, *Bilateralni odnosi: Turska*, <https://mfa.gov.rs/lat/spoljna-politika/bilateralna-saradnja/turska> [10.02.2023].

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

China, and in import – China, Germany, the Russian Federation, Italy and Hungary<sup>14</sup>. There are currently 3,300 Turkish companies operating in Serbia, of which 21 are factories. Turkish companies in Serbia employ around 10,000 workers (among others in Vranje, Leskovac, Krupanj, Mali Zvornik, Šabac, and Loznica). According to the Turkish side the potential for improving cooperation exists also in the areas of health, energy, the IT sector and tourism<sup>15</sup>.

### **Socio-cultural relations**

During the period of 2017-2022 both states deepened their cooperation in the sectors of culture, education and tourism. There are many links between Serbia and Türkiye, including a shared history and culture relating to the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman Empire was present in Serbia for nearly 500 years, and left a significant impact on the region in cuisine, music, loanwords in the Serbian language, and architecture. Many Ottoman-era buildings can still be seen in Serbia, mainly in the south, such as the Bajrakli Mosque in Belgrade and the clock tower in Novi Pazar, which cultural monuments enjoy state protection. To protect this Turkish and Ottoman heritage, institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) are engaged in mutual projects or provide the renewal, reconstruction or building of mosques, monuments or cultural centres. It should be noted that this cooperation is perceived both as

<sup>14</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, *External trade*, for January 2023, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-US/> [12.03.2023].

<sup>15</sup> Republika Srbija, The Government of the Republic of Serbia, *Serbia open to new Turkish investments*, 7 September 2022, <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/en/193690/serbia-open-to-new-turkish-investments.php> [2.03.2023].

a Turkish-Ottoman agenda and as an aid to bringing these countries closer together<sup>16</sup>. TİKA's projects helped to renovate the 5<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman castle the Ram Fortress, the Sultan Valida Mosque in Sjenica, the Mehmed Pasha Sokolović Fountain and Little Steps in Kalemegdan<sup>17</sup> which are all significant tourist attractions. Moreover, TİKA has implemented development aid in fields such as health (constructing, repairing and renovating hospitals and health clinics) and agriculture. Examples include the renovation of the intensive care unit within the Belgrade Dragiša Misović Hospital, a reconstruction and equipment donation to the Gynaecology and Obstetrics Department of the Novi Pazar Hospital<sup>18</sup>. During the Covid-19 pandemic the city of Novi Pazar received protective and medical equipment from Türkiye<sup>19</sup>.

In terms of education, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEI), which aims to promote Turkish culture and language, was opened in Belgrade in 2015. The popularity of the Turkish language in Serbia is due to growing business relations, but also Turkish television series are popular in Serbia. The aim is also to establish a YEI in Novi Pazar, the main city of the

<sup>16</sup> M. Todorović, *TİKA's Heritage Restoration Projects: Examples of Foreign Aid or Proof of Neo-Ottomanism?*, "Insight Turkey", 21 September 2021, pp. 141-156, <https://www.insightturkey.com/articles/tikas-heritage-restoration-projects-examples-of-foreign-aid-or-proof-of-neo-ottomanism> [2.03.2023].

<sup>17</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *TİKA. Annual Report 2019*, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/publication/2019/TIKAFaaliyet2019ENGWebKapakli.pdf> [14.02.2023].

<sup>18</sup> Ž. Milošević, *Mr. Mehmet Bayrak, Director of TİKA-Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency in Belgrade: Development Cooperation between Turkey and Serbia*, 22 May 2017, <https://www.diplomacyandcommerce.rs/> [10.02.2023].

<sup>19</sup> M. T. Öztürk, *Serbia to receive medical coronavirus aid from Turkey*, 29 June 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/serbia-to-receive-medical-coronavirus-aid-from-turkey/1894094> [20.02.2023]; Republic of Serbia, Ministry of Defence, *Serbia receives assistance from Turkey*, 8 April 2020, <https://www.mod.gov.rs> [21.02.2023].

Sanjak region and cultural centre of Bosniaks in Serbia<sup>20</sup>. For Türkiye, Sanjak is a region of great historical importance. The creation of the Turkish consulate general in Novi Pazar in April 2021 was an expression of very good relations between the two countries. Additionally, educational Turkish institutions of the Maarif Foundation are located in Serbia, such as kindergartens in Belgrade and Novi Pazar and primary schools in Belgrade<sup>21</sup>.

In terms of ethnic and cultural dimension for Türkiye, the Western Balkans are important too because ethnic Albanians (inhabiting Albania, Kosovo, Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Croatia) and Bosniaks (inhabiting BiH, Serbia, Montenegro, Kosovo, Türkiye) are treated by Türkiye as “traditional” support for Turkish policy in the Balkans. Following A. Davutoğlu doctrine, he pointed out that the Bosniaks and Albanians have the status of “the key to the Balkans” and are the sphere of influence in this region. That is why Türkiye, through tripartite mediation and striving for stability, is trying to maintain a “balance” so that there is no escalation of tensions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo, and Serbs and Bosniaks in BiH<sup>22</sup>.

In terms of tourism, Türkiye is a popular destination for Serbians, while Turkish tourists have also been visiting Serbia in increasing numbers. An example of strengthening cooperation in the tourism sector was in 2019, when the

<sup>20</sup> E. Basaran, *Common history and culture: More Serbians learn Turkish with Yunus Emre Institute in Belgrade*, “Daily Sabah”, 8 June 2016, <https://www.dailysabah.com/balkans/2016/06/08/common-history-and-culture-more-serbians-learn-turkish-with-yunus-emre-institute-in-belgrade> [12.02.2023].

<sup>21</sup> Maarif Okullari/Maarif Schools, <https://rs.maarifschools.org> [9.02.2023].

<sup>22</sup> K. Öktem, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

two countries signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Tourism", which aimed to enhance tourism flows and promote tourism products. This helped to boost economic ties between the two countries and create new business opportunities in the tourism sector. The number of Turkish tourists visiting Serbia has been increasing in recent years. According to the Serbian Statistical Office, there were 107,695 Turkish tourists in Serbia in 2019, who were in third place after tourists from China and BiH. In 2020 and 2021 Turkish tourists were in fourth and sixth place respectively. But the highest number of Turkish tourists was reached in 2022, with 125,602 visitors, just behind Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>23</sup>. In return, the number of Serbian tourists to Türkiye has constantly grown from 2017 (except for 2020 and Covid-19) and in 2022, over 350,000 Serbs<sup>24</sup> visited Türkiye, one of the top destinations for Serbian tourists.

## Conclusion

The relationship between Serbia and Türkiye is perceived as positive and characterized by cooperation and mutual respect. In terms of political relations Türkiye and Serbia maintain friendly relations and perceive themselves as the backbone of stability in the region of the Western Balkans. The economic relationship between them is strong and has the potential for further growth in the future. Economic engagement is seen by the Turkish side more as an "economic mission" in Serbia and raising Turkish investments there.

<sup>23</sup> Statistical Office of the Republik of Serbia, *Tourist turnover – December 2017-2022*, <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2023/PdfE/G20231005.pdf> [13.02.2023].

<sup>24</sup> Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, *Border statistics 2017-2022*, <https://www.ktb.gov.tr/EN-249299/yearly-bulletins.html> [13.02.2023].

Increased diplomatic relations between Serbia and Türkiye during the rule of President Vučić are visible, among others, in economic results as well as in the interests of tourists from both countries. In the spheres of *soft power*, education aid and protection of cultural heritage, the engagement of Türkiye is mainly seen in the regions inhabited by Muslim communities such as Sanjak of Novi Pazar, where many Bosniaks live.

Two visions of Türkiye's goals in Serbia clash. On the one hand, the Turkish engagement is seen either as the willingness to renew the ties from the Ottoman period, or simple Turkish expansionism. In the first perception, the doctrine does not place Türkiye in the context of a conflict with the West, but sees it more as a bridge between the Muslim and Western worlds. In the economic sphere, the perception of "emerging Türkiye"<sup>25</sup> and Turkish investments are appreciated in areas where this perception dominates. Türkiye is building business relations and its priority is to establish stability and peace in its neighbourhood, which is most realistic through the accession of the Western Balkans countries to NATO and the European Union, while simultaneously achieving greater economic growth and stability. At the same time the US and EU see Türkiye as an ally in the Balkans.

The second perception is the fear of "Neo-Ottomanism" by those concerned about the presence of Türkiye, and they prefer to establish economic cooperation with Western

<sup>25</sup> E. Nuroğlu, H. H. Nuroğlu, *Türkiye and Germany in the Balkans: Competing with Each Other?*, "Insight Turkey" 2019, vol. 21, no. 2, <https://www.insightTürkiye.com/articles/Türkiye-and-germany-in-the-balkans-competing-with-each-other> [12.10.2022].

countries<sup>26</sup>. This second concept, seeing foreign policy based on the concepts of Neo-Ottomanism as geographical and political influence of Türkiye<sup>27</sup> or as D. Tanasković defines Neo-Ottomanism as an ideological amalgam of Islamism, "Turkishness" and Ottoman imperialism<sup>28</sup>. The expansionist view does undermine trust in Türkiye, not only in Serbia itself but also in the international arena.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> M. Mitrović, *Turkish Foreign Policy Towards the Balkans, The influence of traditional determinants on Davutoğlu's conception of Turkey-Balkan*, Hu-berlin.de, 24 March 2014, <https://edoc.hu-berlin.de/handle/18452/3742> [17.09.2022].

<sup>28</sup> Д. Танасковић, *Неоосманизам. Доктрина и спољнополитичка пракса. Повратак Турске на Балкан*, Службени Гласник 2010, p. 19.







## **The Turkish minority in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Knotty issues**

### **Introduction**

The period when the Balkan lands belonged to the Ottoman Empire was of fundamental importance for the Empire and the people living there. Moreover, it impacts Türkiye's contemporary relations with the Balkan states, in which historical and cultural issues play a critical role. This is due, among other things, to a different interpretation of the shared past and the fact that traces of Turkish rule are still visible in the form of numerous Ottoman monuments or the existence of Muslim minorities, including Turkish, in the Balkans. The latter is a significant element in modern Türkiye's policy towards the countries of the region. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria is a specific case in this context because of its size, national activity and the fact that it operates in a country that was under Turkish rule for a very long time and where power is viewed negatively. It poses

a challenge for Türkiye's foreign policy and its relations with its northern neighbour.

## **The Turkish minority in Bulgaria – origins and present state**

The genesis of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria dates to the beginning of the conquest of Bulgarian lands by the Ottoman Empire in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century. Their colonisation with people from the Empire, mainly from Anatolia and Asia Minor, continued throughout the period of Turkish rule, which changed the ethnic and religious structure of the Bulgarian lands. The latter was also influenced by the adoption of Islam by part of the Bulgarian population<sup>1</sup>. After Bulgaria had regained independence, previously dominant Turks became a minority. Some of them emigrated, further reducing the size of the Turkish community. By comparison, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Turks made up about a quarter of the Bulgarian population, while in 1910 they made up just over 10%. Migration did not stop in the inter-war period either<sup>2</sup>. In the first years after taking power, the communists pursued a relatively favourable policy toward Turks, but it changed relatively quickly. Gradually, opportunities for education in Turkish were restricted, Turks felt discriminated against in the labour market and access to services and public services, and forced collectivisation undercut their traditional

<sup>1</sup> S. Czarniecki, *Ewolucja polityki etnicznej Bułgarii na przykładzie mniejszości tureckiej w latach 1989-2020*, "Prace Instytutu Europy Środkowej" 2021, no. 8, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> T. Szyszlak, *The Ethnic Policy of Bulgaria*, [in:] H. Chałupczak, R. Zenderowski, W. Baluk (eds.), *Ethnic Policy in Contemporary East Central European Countries*, Lublin 2015, pp. 147-148; *Bulgaristan'daki Türk Nüfusunun Yıllara Göre Dağılımı*, <http://www.birdahaasla.org/documents/events/bulgaria/table.pdf> [12.06.2022].

forms of livelihood<sup>3</sup>. In the 1970s, the policy toward Turks became increasingly oppressive, reaching a peak in the following decade. In 1984, the policy of “Bulgarianisation” of the Turkish minority, aimed at eradicating Turkish identity, was launched<sup>4</sup>. All forms of the Turks’ socio-cultural activity were eliminated, and the fulfilment of religious needs was prevented. The public use of the Turkish language, reading and publishing in Turkish, Turkish-religious, and everyday traditions were banned. Mosques and Muslim cemeteries were destroyed. The most spectacular and well-known element of the “Bulgarian revival” was the change of the names and surnames of Turks to Bulgarian, carried out at the “voluntary request” of those concerned, with great brutality towards the resistant ones<sup>5</sup>. Not only were names and surnames of the living changed, but also inscriptions on gravestones and appearances in literature<sup>6</sup>.

The degeneration campaign ended in 1989 when Turks protested in defence of their identity. There were also demands to allow emigration to Türkiye, to which the communist authorities readily agreed. Emigration took the form of “tourist trips” for Turks; hence it went down in history under

<sup>3</sup> A. Parzymies, *Muzułmanie w Bułgarii*, [in:] eadem (ed.), *Muzułmanie w Europie*, Warszawa 2003, pp. 60-61; C. Dişbudak, S. Purkis, *Forced Migrants or Voluntary Exiles: Ethnic Turks of Bulgaria in Turkey*, p. 5, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269776147\\_Forcéd\\_Migrants\\_or\\_Voluntary\\_Exiles\\_Ethnic\\_Turks\\_of\\_Bulgaria\\_in\\_Turkey](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/269776147_Forcéd_Migrants_or_Voluntary_Exiles_Ethnic_Turks_of_Bulgaria_in_Turkey) [9.07.2022].

<sup>4</sup> Previously, the “Bulgarianisation” action was carried out against Pomaks and Muslim Roma/Gypsies. It aimed not only to “restore” their Bulgarian identity, but also to weaken the Turkish influence among them. J. Balkowski, *Kwestia romska w Bułgarii*, [in:] T. Szyszlak (ed.), *Kwestia romska w polityce państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej*, Wrocław 2011, pp. 98-99.

<sup>5</sup> M. Żmigrodzki, *Przeobrażenia polityczno-ustrojowe i Sąd Konstytucyjny w Bułgarii*, Lublin 1997, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup> J. Wódka, *Mniejszość turecka w Bułgarii a stosunki turecko-bułgarskie w okresie zimnej wojny*, “Dzieje Najnowsze” 2009, vol. 41, no. 2, p. 46.

the name *Grand Tour*. It is estimated that over 300,000 people left Bulgaria that way; however, some argue that it could have been 400,000, or even slightly over 460,000<sup>7</sup>. Apart from Turks, Pomaks and Roma emigrated as well. The emigration was not always voluntary. It brought with it the loss of a significant number of people and economic problems in the local and national dimensions. The crisis in the functioning of the state associated with the *Grand Tour* is today also counted among the reasons why Todor Zhivkov's team lost power. Over the subsequent several years, for various reasons some Turks re-emigrated; it is estimated that about one-third of those who had emigrated in 1989 later returned<sup>8</sup>.

With Bulgaria's democratisation, the situation for Turks improved. Those previously forced to change their names and surnames were allowed to revert to their original titles. Furthermore, the Turkish language returned to schools, numerous Turkish organisations and the political party Movement for Rights and Freedoms (*Hak ve Özgürlükler Hareketi/ Движение за права и свободи*, DPS), headed by Ahmed Dogan<sup>9</sup>, were founded. In the first parliamentary elections, the Movement obtained the result of allowing it to enter parliament. However, it could not officially present itself as a Turkish party since Bulgaria had introduced a constitutional ban on forming religious or ethnic groupings<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> S. Czarnecki, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> However, some of them later emigrated from Bulgaria. C. Dişbudak, S. Purkis, op. cit., pp. 4, 6-7.

<sup>9</sup> C. Yenigün, *Autochthon Turkish Existence in the Balkans*, p. 521, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278023076\\_Autochthon\\_Turkish\\_Existence\\_in\\_the\\_Balkans](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/278023076_Autochthon_Turkish_Existence_in_the_Balkans) [22.07.2022].

<sup>10</sup> *Konstytucja Republiki Bulgarii*, Article 11 (4), Warszawa 2012.

The economic changes that took place in the 1990s hit Turks hard. Problems with land restitution, the closure of state-owned enterprises, concentration of the Turkish minority in rural and peripheral areas, and others fostered a progressive process of social, economic and spatial marginalisation of Turks<sup>11</sup>.

According to the population census, Turks are the largest ethnic minority in Bulgaria, characterised by a high degree of territorial concentration. In 2011, there were 588,000 Turks in the south, near the border with Türkiye, and in the northeast. Most of them live in the districts of Kardzhali, Razgrad, Silistra, Shumen, and Targovishte<sup>12</sup>. Turks are not the only Muslims in Bulgaria. In addition to them, Slavic Pomaks and some Roma also follow Islam, and Bulgaria itself is the country with the highest percentage of Muslims in the religious structure of the European Union. Official statistics show that there are more than one million Muslims, comprising about 13% of the population<sup>13</sup>.

### **The Turkish minority in Turkish-Bulgarian relations before 1989**

When analysing post-war relations between Bulgaria and Türkiye, including the place of the Turkish minority issue in them, attention should be paid to several critical determinants. First, international developments. These relations were primarily determined by the membership of the two countries in military blocs that were hostile to each other.

<sup>11</sup> C. Dişbudak, S. Purkism, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> T. Szyszlak, op. cit., pp. 144-145.

<sup>13</sup> I. N. Telci, A. Yordanova Peneva, *Turkey and Saudi Arabia as Theo-political Actors in the Balkans*, "Insight Turkey" 2019, vol. 21, no. 2, p. 239.

As a member of the Warsaw Pact, Bulgaria was one of the closest satellite states to the Soviet Union. Türkiye joined the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) very quickly, in the 1950s. It was essential to the Alliance because of its geo-strategic position and the potential role it could play in the event of a conflict with the USSR. Türkiye's sensitive location and the threat of Soviet expansionism were fundamental determinants of its membership in NATO. All that, combined with the pull towards the West, as part of Kemal Atatürk's legacy, naturally encouraged cooperation with Western countries. The entanglement of Sofia and Ankara in a bipolar rivalry limited the importance of minority issues in bilateral relations<sup>14</sup>. Nonetheless, Bulgarian-Turkish relationships were not entirely subordinated to East-West rivalry, and their intensity changed not only with changes in relations between the rival blocs. Undoubtedly, one of their most significant determinants was Türkiye's international isolation after its intervention in Cyprus in the early 1970s and after the military coup in that country in the early 1980s<sup>15</sup>.

Another factor was that there was no Bulgarian minority in Türkiye. Consequently, one can speak of a noticeable asymmetry in the role of minority issues in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Bulgaria did not have to fear that the response to assimilation measures, even the most brutal, directed towards the Turkish minority would be the same policy of Türkiye towards the Bulgarian minority. On the other hand,

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<sup>14</sup> J. Wódka, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 30-31.

Türkiye was often forced to respond to Bulgarian actions for which it was not prepared<sup>16</sup>.

The conditions mentioned above influenced Bulgarian-Turkish relations during the Cold War period and the importance of the Turkish minority issue in them. However, it is worth emphasising that the minority issue significantly determined these relations due to the nature of the Turkish community – its numbers, distribution, and level of national consciousness. It was difficult to ignore the existence of such a lot of Turks, featured by a strong sense of identity and distinctiveness.

Turks' emigration from Bulgaria to Türkiye was another vital problem in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. It appeared after Bulgaria had regained its independence, becoming the subject of international regulation, and other developments in the region, led by armed conflicts, encouraged the intensity of the phenomenon. Also, after the collapse of the Empire, the documents regulating Bulgarian-Turkish relations included provisions on the Turkish minority, among others obliging the Bulgarian government to allow willing Turks to emigrate. Furthermore, after the Second World War, the countries signed migration agreements allowing the Turkish population to enter Türkiye and several waves of Turkish emigration from Bulgaria took place then<sup>17</sup>. Sofia considered them a tool for achieving both domestic and foreign policy goals.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>17</sup> M. Żmigrodzki, *Status prawny mniejszości narodowych w Bułgarii*, "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska" 1999, vol. 6, p. 408.



The emigration of the Turkish population in the early 1950s exemplifies the above matter. In the summer of 1950, the Bulgarian authorities, accusing Ankara of arousing anti-Bulgarian sentiment in the Turkish community, demanded that Türkiye take in 250,000 Turks living in north-eastern Bulgaria within three months. The fundamental aim was to remove them from those fertile areas destined for rapid collectivisation; on the other hand, it was a response to Türkiye's anti-Soviet policy, which then had adopted a decidedly pro-Western course. Eventually, in several waves between 1950 and 1951, Türkiye accepted about 155,000 Turks from Bulgaria. In turn, an agreement on "family reunification" was signed during the warming of Bulgarian-Turkish relations, coinciding with the *détente* along the East-West line. In effect, about 120,000-130,000 Turks from Bulgaria emigrated to Türkiye in the years 1968-1978<sup>18</sup>.

The already-mentioned isolation of Türkiye in the international arena emboldened the Bulgarian government to carry out the so-called national revival. It was one of the reasons for Ankara's lack of response to the brutal assimilation action first carried out against the Muslim Roma and Pomaks and then initiated against the Turkish population. Only the numerous protests of Turkish public opinion, as well as the publicising of the Bulgarian actions in the Turkish press, made the Ankara government react.

The government in Sofia undertook measures aimed at the re-Bulgarisation of the Turks, diverting the Bulgarians' attention from economic difficulties and "refreshing" communist ideology by "enriching" it with nationalist elements.

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<sup>18</sup> J. Wódka, *op. cit.*, pp. 42-43.

Meanwhile, Türkiye's passivity is explained by the mentioned isolation and its preoccupation with the growing Kurdish-Turkish conflict in the east of the country, where the Kurdistan Workers' Party became active<sup>19</sup>. Once again, the Turkish government was forced to react to Bulgaria's policy in the summer of 1989 and demanded the admission of thousands of Turks who had voluntarily or under duress left their homes. Their fate in Türkiye varied. Although the Turkish government took several measures to integrate newcomers and granted them citizenship without any obstacles, some of them later decided to return to Bulgaria, while others had problems integrating into their new environment. Many of those who arrived in Türkiye at that time maintain strong ties with Bulgaria to this day<sup>20</sup>.

### **The Turkish minority in Bulgaria and contemporary Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Key issues**

The collapse of the communist regime in Bulgaria and then the Soviet Union began a new period in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. Several factors influenced their formation. One of the most crucial ones was the presence of a significant Turkish minority in Bulgaria. The other ones were the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, i.e. in Bulgaria's immediate neighbourhood, which it viewed with concern, and the economic crisis it faced. The emergence of a vacuum associated with the collapse of the USSR was significant. It created space for the involvement of other, more powerful actors here, including Türkiye. After the Justice and Development

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 47, 48-49.

<sup>20</sup> C. Dişbudak, S. Purkism, op. cit., pp. 10, 12.

Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) came to power, political, energy, tourism, and counter-terrorism cooperation was deepened<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, relations with its southern neighbour, a member of the alliance, were fundamental for Bulgaria, which aspired to join NATO. The migration crisis also necessitated cooperation between Sofia and Ankara<sup>22</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that the Bulgarian authorities took an unequivocally negative stance towards the 2016 coup attempt in Türkiye and practised the extradition of Turks who sought asylum there while sheltering in Bulgaria afterwards<sup>23</sup>. The need to nullify the effects of the Bulgarian communists' religious policies was also vital. It was part of the state's democratisation and response to public expectations. In the case of Muslim communities, Bulgaria needed external help, turning its gaze toward Türkiye<sup>24</sup>. From the perspective of bilateral relations, the emergence of the concept of Neo-Ottomanism, and building Turkish *soft power* in Türkiye's foreign policy were essential. The Balkans played the leading role in these concepts. The presence of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, combined with its Ottoman past and geographical proximity, potentially made the country particularly important from the perspective of implementing the ideas of Neo-Ottomanism and developing Turkish *soft power*<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> A. E. Öztürk, *The ambivalent nature of the relations between Bulgaria and Turkey in the new millennium*, [in:] M. Hatay, Z. Tziarras (eds.), *Kinship and Diasporas in Turkish Foreign Policy: Examples from Europe, the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean*, Oslo 2019, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup> For more see: N. Sienko, *Bulgarian-Turkish relations in the context contemporary migration crisis*, "The Voice of Security Awareness" 2017, vol. 1, issue 2(2), pp. 31-42.

<sup>23</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., p. 12.

<sup>24</sup> I. N. Telci, A. Yordanova Peneva, op. cit., pp. 241, 243, 251.

<sup>25</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., p. 16.

## Changes in Türkiye's foreign policy

The 1990s saw a re-evaluation of Türkiye's foreign policy. When analysing it in the context of the situation of Turks in Bulgaria, Türkiye's commitment to securing their religious rights (see further) and the establishment of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA) in 1992 is worth mentioning. Although its activities were initially conceived as being primarily oriented towards Turkish communities living in the former USSR area, its development in the following decades intensified its activities in the Balkan area. However, the changes in Turkish foreign policy that followed the AKP and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's takeover of power are significant for relations between the Republic and the Balkan states. It is, first and foremost, about developing the concept of Neo-Ottomanism and applying *soft power* in foreign policy. The first envisaged increased interest in areas to which the Ottoman Empire had once extended. The other was based on the postulation of introducing *soft power* elements into foreign policy<sup>26</sup>. The AKP's seizure of power was followed by the development of institutions aimed at building Turkish *soft power*, such as the TİKA as mentioned earlier, and the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, Diyanet), as well as the creation of new institutions, including the Yunus Institute (*Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, YEE) and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, YTB).

<sup>26</sup> For more on *soft power* in Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government see: E. Szyszlak, *Selected instruments of Turkish soft power in Europe*, "Colloquium" 2021, vol. 4, pp. 719-733.

Furthermore, growing interest in the Turkish diaspora is noticeable in AKP's foreign policy. The interest of the Turks in Bulgaria is therefore not surprising. The importance of this Turkish community is all the more remarkable as it is the most numerous Turkish indigenous minority constituting part of the post-Ottoman legacy.

An official office of Türkiye's flagship organisation, TİKA, was not opened in Bulgaria despite the Turkish government's insistence. The government in Sofia justified its decision with the lack of demand for its support, arguing that Bulgaria, as an EU member state, draws on EU funds. TİKA remains active here, mainly supporting the renovation of the Ottoman-era monuments. The authorities in Sofia were also not keen to open an office of the Yunus Emre Institute<sup>27</sup>. It demonstrates the cautiousness with which the Bulgarian authorities approach the Turkish government's efforts to build Turkish *soft power*.

### **Securing the religious rights of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria**

One of the consequences of the ethnic and confessional policies of the communist authorities was the damage to Bulgarian Turks' religious life. In effect, the renewal of their religious life required external assistance. Given the strong ties of Bulgarian Muslims with Türkiye and its geographical proximity, Türkiye was the natural direction from which this help could come. The latter offered support to Muslim

<sup>27</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., p. 21; *Institut Yunus Emre*, <https://varsova.yee.org.tr/pl/content/institut-yunus-emre> [16.08.2022]; *Overseas offices*, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/en/oversea-soffices> [17.08.2022].

communities in the Balkans on three main levels: securing religious services, including sending clergy (imams), educational activities and publishing. For Türkiye, assisting Muslims in Bulgaria was part of helping the Turkish minority and was supposed to help preserve its identity and culture. For Bulgaria, Ankara's activities needed to be carried out in cooperation with the Bulgarian administration<sup>28</sup>. The Bulgarian government, recognising the importance of securing the development of the religious life of Muslims, agreed to Diyanet's activities on its territory. It is among the key Turkish organisations operating in Bulgaria<sup>29</sup>. Turkish entities working to secure the religious rights of Muslims, including the Turkish minority, also include TİKA and the Turkish Religious Foundation (*Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı*, TDV). Through those organisations, Türkiye engages in, among other things, the renovation and construction of mosques, support for Muslims during holidays, the establishment of theological schools, sending clergy, support for the publication of religious materials, and scholarship assistance. Türkiye's activity in this field was, in principle, accepted by the Bulgarian authorities, as evidenced, for example, by Prime Minister Boyko Borisov's statement in 2016 that it was not a problem for Bulgaria. The position was based on several considerations. Firstly, as already mentioned, the Bulgarian authorities agreed to take action; secondly, it was a genuine assistance to Muslim communities. Finally, thirdly, the interest in Bulgarian Muslims was also expressed by other countries and Muslim organisations, with Saudi Arabia in

<sup>28</sup> I. N. Telci, A. Yordanova Peneva, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>29</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., pp. 11, 15.

the lead. However, it was a dangerous alternative to Turkish involvement from the perspective of the authorities in Sofia as it was linked to the threat of radicalisation of Bulgarian followers of Islam<sup>30</sup>. From the second half of the last decade onwards, the Bulgarian government began to look closely at Türkiye's actions in favour of Bulgarian Muslims. Turkish clergy and other people associated with religious activities were expelled from the country. The danger of using religion instrumentally as an element of *soft power* and building Turkish influence began to be perceived in Türkiye's actions<sup>31</sup>.

### **Protection of the cultural heritage of the Turkish minority**

Protecting the cultural heritage of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria is part of the broader problem of preserving and safeguarding Ottoman/Turkish and Muslim heritage in the Balkans. The issue appears sensitive in Bulgaria, as in other countries in the region. It is justified by the negative perception of Ottoman rule in Bulgarian lands, resulting in the same attitude towards their cultural heritage. Meanwhile, Türkiye attaches great significance to protecting this heritage and undertakes increased activity for its preservation. In consequence, the matter poses a fundamental problem in Bulgarian-Turkish relations. It is also essential from the perspective of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria, as the preservation of this heritage is imperative for the conservation of the identity and culture of Bulgarian Turks.

<sup>30</sup> I. N. Telci, A. Yordanova Peneva, op. cit., pp. 244-249.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 245.

In the past, monuments of Muslim and Turkish culture were either deliberately destroyed or were of no interest and fell into disrepair. Some survived by changing their purpose, e.g. a mosque to a museum. Today, some are in good condition, while others are devastated or in a state requiring urgent intervention. The official website of the Bulgarian Grand Mufti lists 130 non-functional mosques, mostly abandoned<sup>32</sup>. The Turkish minority recognises access to education in their language and the extent to which it is used among the most significant problems. After 1989, Turks were again allowed to learn Turkish at all education levels. However, the issue of using Turkish is not limited to education. For Bulgarian Turks, the language is common in the private sphere, which is conducive to its preservation, as is the already-mentioned possibility of education in this language and the compact nature of their settlement. It is also favoured by the cultural influence of Türkiye, including the widespread availability and popularity of Turkish media and entertainment productions. Nonetheless, the issue of the usefulness of Turkish language skills in Bulgaria arises. Suppose education in Turkish, one way for Bulgarian Turks to retain their mother tongue, is unsupported by a good knowledge of the Bulgarian language; in this case, the possibility of getting a good education and then work is limited, as is the language spoken outside the area of residence of the Turkish population. The fact that the issue is important is evidenced by the survey conducted in Bulgaria

<sup>32</sup> M. Nikolova, *Local indifference to Ottoman heritage sites in the Balkans opens door to Turkey*, 14 February 2021, <https://emerging-europe.com/after-hours/local-indifference-to-ottoman-heritage-sites-in-the-balkans-opens-door-to-turkey/> [12.07.2022].



a few years ago, in which Turks indicated the inability to communicate in a language other than Bulgarian as one of their most critical problems<sup>33</sup>.

The Turkish government is taking steps to revitalise the Ottoman material cultural heritage in Bulgaria by renovating monuments and restoring them to their original function. Examples are the Ibrahim Pasha Mosque, in need of renovation, located in Razgrad and belonging to the greatest Turkish architectural monuments in the Balkans, and the mosque and traditional bathhouse in Plovdiv, which, although preserved in good condition, had functions inconsistent with their original purpose – a restaurant and a museum of modern art. The problem of the state of Ottoman monuments is constantly present during Turkish politicians' visits to Bulgaria, and their revitalisation is carried out in agreement with the Bulgarian government. In 2003, an agreement on the mutual restoration of monuments located on the other country's territory was signed. In Bulgaria, however, their revitalisation in a Muslim-populated area does not come without difficulties. Moreover, it is mainly enabled by the interest and resources of the Turkish government and the Turkish minority<sup>34</sup>. Türkiye also works to support the culture and language of the Turkish minority. It is also sometimes the cause of diplomatic crises. One such occurred, for example, in 2019, when, during the opening

<sup>33</sup> K. B. Stanek, *Tożsamość turecka – tożsamość bułgarska – tożsamość europejska*, [in:] K. Bieniek (ed.), *Republika Turcji. Polityka zagraniczna i wewnętrzna*, Kraków 2016, pp. 444–445, 449.

<sup>34</sup> *Ottoman-era mosque in Bulgaria set to undergo Turkish restoration*, 8 March 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/ottoman-era-mosque-in-bulgaria-set-to-undergo-turkish-restoration-128453> [10.07.2022]; M. Nikolova, op. cit.

of a Turkish car parts factory in Plovdiv, the then Turkish Ambassador, Hasan Ulusoy, in his speech, linked Turkish investments to the teaching of Turkish in Bulgarian schools, stating that the more people who speak Turkish, the more Turkish investments will be made in Bulgaria. In response, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign issued a statement stressing that that remark was unacceptable in the context of good neighbourly relations<sup>35</sup>.

### **The political activity of the Turkish minority in Sofia-Ankara relations**

After 1989, the Turkish minority manifested political activity primarily through the action of the above-mentioned DPS. Initially, its name was to be the Movement for Rights and Freedoms of Turks and Muslims in Bulgaria, but it was refused registration under this name<sup>36</sup>. The group's main objective was to defend the rights of ethnic, religious and cultural communities while dissociating itself from any illegal or separatist tangles. The movement could not officially define itself as an ethnic party due to the legal provisions in force, but the vast majority of its electorate has been Turks since the very first elections, and it has gained the most support in the areas inhabited by them. It also has grown more popular among some Pomaks and Roma. Besides, over the years, it has achieved the status of a relevant party. It has recorded successes in parliamentary, local and European

<sup>35</sup> „Oficjalnym językiem w Bułgarii jest bułgarski”. Turecki ambasador ma się tłumaczyć, 13 May 2019, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/ambasador-turcji-w-bulgarii-wezwany-na-dywanik-za-komentarze-o-jezyku-ra935208-2290841> [10.08.2022].

<sup>36</sup> F. Trupia, *Debating (Post) Coloniality in Southeast Europe. A Minority Oriented Perspective in Bulgaria*, „Acta Humana” 2021, no. 1, p. 98.

Parliament elections. It is considered one of the most stable elements on the Bulgarian political scene<sup>37</sup>, though it has been affected by problems and wrongdoings. The scandal involving the group, specifically its long-time leader Ahmed Dogan, which took place in 2020 and was linked to the fact that he had appropriated part of a public beach and used police officers for protection, was incidentally the impetus for the wave of protests that swept through Bulgaria. They protested against corruption and the appropriation of state institutions by politicians<sup>38</sup>. In the last presidential election, the DPS decided to field its own candidate for the first time. That was the party chairman Mustafa Karadayi. He eventually came third.

The political activity of the Turkish minority appears controversial in Bulgaria. The DPS has been pointed out as being a strictly ethnic party, representing ethnic Turks and a religious one – its electorate is Muslim, which conflicts with basic Bulgarian law. Therefore, attempts were made to ban the party, and it was also isolated in parliament in the initial period of its existence<sup>39</sup>. It has also come under attack, especially by far-right groups. In the 1990s, the DPS enjoyed the support of Turkish authorities and politicians. However, the situation changed after Erdoğan took power<sup>40</sup>. Mutual relations cooled at that time, and the Turkish

<sup>37</sup> E. Szyszlak, *Between Sofia and Ankara – the Turkish minority in contemporary Bulgaria*, "Yearbook of the Institute of East-Central Europe/Rocznik Instytutu Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej" 2018, vol. 16, issue 4, pp. 175-178.

<sup>38</sup> P. Oleksy, *Szanse na stabilność i nadzieje na zmiany*, "Komentarze IEŚ" 2021, no. 182(485), [https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bulgaria-szanse-na-stabilnosc-i-nadzieje-na-zmiany/\[10.03.2022\]](https://ies.lublin.pl/komentarze/bulgaria-szanse-na-stabilnosc-i-nadzieje-na-zmiany/[10.03.2022]).

<sup>39</sup> K. Bieniek, *Ruch Praw i Wolności – partia etnicznych Turków*, "Annales Universitatis Paedagogicae Cracoviensis. Studia Politologica" 2013, vol. 11, p. 13.

<sup>40</sup> S. Czarnecki, op. cit., p. 76.

government engaged in initiatives to establish a new Turkish party, an alternative to the Movement, in Bulgaria. Thus, the People's Party Freedom and Dignity (*Народна партия «Свобода и достойнство»*, NPSD), which was founded by Orhan Ismailov, and the Democrats for Responsibility party, established in 2015, Solidarity and Tolerance (*Демократи за отговорност, свобода и толерантност*, DOST), founded by Lútví Mestan, formerly head of the DPS, were established. Both parties arose following a split in the DPS but did not record electoral successes.

The political activity of Bulgarian Turks has repeatedly affected Bulgarian-Turkish relations and has aroused keen interest on the part of both Bulgarians and the authorities in Ankara. The former point out that the Turkish government uses minority groups for its own purposes, including interfering in the political life of Bulgaria. It does so, among other things, by consolidating its influence among Turkish politicians in Bulgaria. The authorities in Ankara present a different rhetoric, but at the same time are very active in their contacts with the political representatives of the Turkish minority, e.g. by articulating official support for specific minority groups or politicians, their visits to Ankara, and visits by representatives of the Turkish government during election campaigns in Bulgaria<sup>41</sup>. For example, when the NPSD appeared, it was reported to have received financial support from the Turkish government. During his visit to Bulgaria in 2010, Erdoğan met with its representatives while refusing to meet Ahmet Dogan. According to experts, this attitude symbolised the rift between

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<sup>41</sup> E. Szyszlak, *Between...*, pp. 178, 180-181.

the DPS and the Turkish government. The then-head of the Bulgarian government, Boyko Borisov, warned his Turkish counterpart against requests to interfere in the political life of the Turkish minority. However, the peak of accusations against the Turkish government of trying to influence the Bulgarian political scene was linked to the establishment of the DOST party. The new grouping was attributed with close ties to the AKP that ruled Türkiye, and its politicians appeared at the DOST founding congress and repeatedly met with politicians from the DOST<sup>42</sup>. Ankara was heavily involved in the pre-election campaign, exhorting and encouraging the Turkish minority and Bulgarian Turks now living in Türkiye (but holding dual citizenship) to vote for the DOST. Erdoğan was considered the inspiration behind the formation of the new grouping. The Turkish support for the party became one of the hottest topics of the campaign and was the reason for the deterioration of relations between Sofia and Ankara, as evidenced by, for example, the handing over of a protest note to the Turkish Ambassador and summoning the Bulgarian Ambassador to Ankara<sup>43</sup>. However, the DOST's result in the 2017 parliamentary elections was insufficient to exceed the electoral threshold, as it won only 2.9% of the votes. As Ahmet Erdi Öztürk indicates, there were many more discussions and diplomatic crises caused by the DOST than the number of votes it won. Furthermore, the creation of the DOST triggered a new discussion on Türkiye among the Turkish minority and in the political debate of the groups representing them.

<sup>42</sup> A. E. Öztürk, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> E. Szyszlak, *Between...*, pp. 180-181.

The constitutional referendum in Türkiye became a proxy for their position. The Mestan party expressed a stance in line with Erdoğan's intentions<sup>44</sup>, whereas the DPS criticised the Turkish president's policies and the changes to the Constitution he was pushing through<sup>45</sup>. In December 2020, the first signs of a warming relationship between Erdoğan and the DPS appeared quite unexpectedly. It continued in 2021 and was evident in the Turkish president's support for the Movement in the elections<sup>46</sup>. The DOST responded by withdrawing from participation in the election<sup>47</sup>. It is also worth mentioning that the events surrounding the rise of the DOST intensified concerns in Bulgaria about Türkiye's interference in political life and its internal situation<sup>48</sup>.

There was controversy ahead of the last presidential election in 2021, which was also the first involving a Turkish minority candidate. During the election campaign, he sought not only the votes of the electorate but also President Erdoğan's support while travelling to Ankara in June for this purpose. During a meeting with the parliamentary Speaker, he was said to have described Türkiye as his "motherland". However, the Turkish media later denied it had happened, reporting that there had been a translation error. His opponent and later election winner, Rumen Radev, attempting to discredit Karadayi's visit to Türkiye and his statement in

<sup>44</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., p. 25.

<sup>45</sup> E. Szyslak, *Between...*, p. 181.

<sup>46</sup> K. Nikolov, S. Trkanjec, *Turcja: Prezydent Erdoğan angażuje się w bułgarską politykę. Obiecuje zacieśnienie stosunków z Macedonią Północną*, 7 June 2021, <https://www.euractiv.pl/section/polityka-wewnetrzna-ue/news/turcja-bulgaria-balkany-unia-europejska-węgry-chiny-fudan-orban-czechy-tsue-snieznik/> [5.08.2022].

<sup>47</sup> S. Czarnecki, op. cit., pp. 77-78.

<sup>48</sup> A. E. Öztürk, op. cit., p. 26.

the campaign questioned the DPS chairman's loyalty to the Bulgarian homeland<sup>49</sup>.

An additional factor that favours the continued relevance of the political activity of the Turkish minority in Bulgaria in bilateral Bulgarian-Turkish relations is the fact that there is still a sizeable number of people living in Türkiye who hold both Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship. They have the right to vote in Bulgarian elections, both in their former homeland and at polling stations outside Bulgaria, including Türkiye. Politicians from the Turkish minority also seek their votes during election campaigns. The Turkish government, which is, in turn, poorly perceived in Bulgaria, attempts to influence these voters. For example, in 2017, one Turkish minister directly appealed to them to support the DOST party, which triggered the Bulgarian government's adverse reaction. On the other hand, the Turkish side alleged that the Bulgarian authorities made it difficult for their citizens of Turkish origin outside the country to vote, either by limiting the number of polling stations or by preventing them from reaching the polling stations in Bulgaria in time<sup>50</sup>.

The fact that the Bulgarian parliament lifted the voting restriction for the Bulgarian diaspora outside the European Union in spring 2021 strengthened the importance of the votes of Bulgarian citizens living in Türkiye. It was

<sup>49</sup> *Partia tureckiej mniejszości po raz pierwszy wystawiła kandydata na prezydenta Bułgarii*, tvn24, 11 October 2021, <https://tvn24.pl/swiat/bulgaria-partia-tureckiej-mniejszosci-wystawila-kandydata-na-prezydenta-5447457> [12.07.2022]; *Skandal wokół słów prezydenta o Krymie, spięcie z Turcją. Dokąd zmierza Bułgaria po wyborach?*, 28 November 2021, <https://polskieradio24.pl/5/1223/Artykul/2857647,Skandal-wokol-slow-prezydenta-o-Krymie-spięcie-z-Turcja-Dokad-zmierza-Bulgaria-po-wyborach> [8.08.2022].

<sup>50</sup> E. Szyszlak, *Between...*, p. 180; S. Czarniecki, op. cit., p. 75. Difficulties in reaching polling stations in Bulgaria are also caused by blockades on the Turkish-Bulgarian border organised by Bulgarian nationalists during the elections.

estimated that as many as 100,000 votes could be at stake, and in this situation, Türkiye's support for Turkish minority groups gains even more importance, as evidenced by the DPS mentioned above representatives' visit to Türkiye in June 2021<sup>51</sup>. In November 2021, protests were held in Sofia against Türkiye's attempts to interfere in the Bulgarian elections. At that time, the Turkish Ambassador was presented with the Bulgarian government's stance expressing disapproval of the attempts by Turkish politicians, Turkish media and émigré organisations to influence voters with Bulgarian citizenship living in Türkiye. In response, Türkiye summoned the Bulgarian Ambassador in Ankara and lodged a protest with him. At the heart of this crisis was the fear that the mobilisation of the Turkish diaspora could prevent Rumen Radev's re-election. Indeed, in the second round of elections, the DPS leader supported Anastas Gerdzhikov, the opponent of the incumbent president<sup>52</sup>.

Virtually every election involving representatives of the Turkish minority arouses emotions in Bulgaria. This is partly due to historical circumstances, which make Bulgarian voters sensitive to any attempts by Türkiye to interfere in Bulgaria's internal situation. For the latter, elections always provide such a potential opportunity, partly due to actual actions taken by the Turkish government and partly to the political opponents' exploitation of the topic.

<sup>51</sup> K. Nikolov, S. Trkanjec, op. cit.

<sup>52</sup> *Bulgarien fordert Türkei auf sich nicht in Wahlen einzumischen*, BNR, 18 November 2021, <https://bnr.bg/de/post/101559387/bulgarien-fordert-turkei-auf-sich-nicht-in-wahlen-einzumischen> [1.08.2022]; *Skandal wokół słów prezydenta o Krymie...*



## **Conclusion**

Bulgaria plays a fundamental role in Türkiye's foreign policy in the Balkans, and bilateral relations are intense and developing in many areas. The most critical matters include the problem of the Turkish minority in the country. On the one hand, it is related to the situation of Bulgarian Turks themselves and the multitude of problems to solve, while on the other hand, it concerns the Bulgarian and Turkish governments' attitude towards this minority. It is undoubtedly one of the more complex issues in mutual relations, and the political activity of the Bulgarian Turks is of tremendous significance in this context.



## **Türkiye's foreign policy towards Romania during the AKP era**

### **Introduction**

The end of the Cold War was a period of tremendous change in Turkish foreign policy. While since 1952 the country had been a NATO member and was deeply linked with the Western camp, and the end of the bipolar world order made the Republic of Türkiye not only reconsider its political goals in the international environment but also to create, maintain and sustain a relationship with several new states that suddenly appeared in Türkiye's neighbourhood in the Balkans. At the same time Türkiye needed to deal with several states which had rapidly undergone the transition process from communist regimes towards liberal democracies, i.e. Romania, Bulgaria and Albania.

The breakup of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia made Türkiye establish relations with new – and from that time on – independent states like Slovenia, Croatia, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. It is interesting

to observe that Türkiye immediately managed to establish cordial relations with most of the countries while those with Serbia remained tense due to several factors, as for instance Türkiye's stance towards the war in Bosnia and later Türkiye's involvement in the the Kosovo issue at the end of the 1990s. Undoubtedly, overall relations between the two states after Yugoslavia's dissolution were marked with periods of tension and rapprochement. On the contrary, the relations with non post-Yugoslavian countries like Romania, Bulgaria and Albania, from the very beginning after the end of the Cold War became close and cordial, although they currently differ in essence and intensity since the common ground of initial contacts remained varied – while Bulgaria hosts numerous and politically important Turkish minorities, and Albania is predominantly a Sunni-Islam country, Romania hosts limited Turk and Tatar minorities in the Dobruja region and only partially remains under Ottoman rule. On the other hand, Romania, the Black Sea neighbour, with its substantial population, growing economy and important market is an important state for Türkiye. The relations with this particular state became even more important, together with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) when the whole foreign policy of Türkiye had been transformed and a proactive stance towards the neighbouring regions of Türkiye, like the Balkans or the Middle East, became clearly visible.

The basic aim of this paper is to analyse bilateral relations of these two states and Turkish foreign policy towards Romania. The paper will trace an evolution of bilateral contacts while arguing that current positive relations have their source in the domestic area, both of Türkiye – ruled by the AKP since 2002 – and Romania, which is willing to increase

its economic fights with Türkiye and securitize the Black Sea region. Thus the two states share similar foreign policy goals; however, as it will be shown, with some reservations and ambivalence attributed to different fundamentals of overall foreign policy-making and domestic challenges.

This paper consists of four fundamental parts. The first one provides an historical background for analysing Turkish foreign policy towards Romania, and generally towards the Balkans. The second part refers to a general and brief overview of Türkiye's foreign policy and transformation of its principles and tools during the Justice and Development Party era. The third part describes how bilateral relations between Türkiye and Romania have evolved since 2002. Finally, in the last section the conclusions are presented.

### **Turkish-Romanian relations – historical overview**

Romania and Türkiye have deep-rooted links based on a five-century-long shared history. The Republic of Türkiye's predecessor – the Ottoman Empire – during its heyday managed to conquer the vast majority of the Balkans including Moldavia and Wallachia. In the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was no longer able to compete successfully with European powers, which also worked in favour of spreading nationalism among the inhabitants of the Balkans. The independence of Romania, formalized in 1877, was a consequence of this long-lasting process. Soon Romania was to expand its borders and the Ottoman Empire finally lost its control on the Balkans together with its losses in the Balkan Wars and Bucharest Treaty of 1913<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Ch. B. Jelavich, *History of The Balkans*, vol. 2: *Twentieth Century*, Cambridge 1983, p. 99.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War and creation of the Republic of Türkiye in 1923 opened a new chapter in the history of the Balkans, and bilateral relations. In the interwar period, the whole foreign policy of Türkiye remained subject to domestic activities of the Kemalist political regime – in other words Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his followers underlined the necessity of the country's domestic reconstruction instead of involving Türkiye in any daring and revisionist international proceedings, thus making the foreign policy of Türkiye rather passive and cautious. The anti-revisionist attitude of Türkiye had materialized in 1934 when the Balkan Pact was signed. The Pact has put together Türkiye and those Balkan countries which had expanded their territories in the aftermath of the First World War, i.e. Romania, Greece and Yugoslavia, and was directly against aspirations of revisionist states, mainly Italy and Bulgaria<sup>2</sup>. The Balkan pact was actually the main common platform bringing Türkiye and Romania together in the interwar period since the bilateral relations had not been the top-priority issue for Turkish policymakers. Even the 1933 Treaty of Friendship, Non-aggression, Arbitration and Conciliation between Romania and the Republic of Türkiye did not damage common relations and did not differ in essence from other international agreements made by Türkiye with plenty of other states in that period.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the two countries found themselves on opposite sides – during the Cold War period Romania was a part of the Communist bloc

<sup>2</sup> M. Türkeş, *The Balkan Pact and its immediate Implications for the Balkan States*, "Middle Eastern Studies" 1994, vol. 30, no. 1, p. 139.

whereas Türkiye soon became a crucial NATO member (after 1952 accession) and a permanent part of Western security structures. Thus bilateral relations between the two countries were reduced to official diplomatic relations with no real cooperation and contact. What is more, since the 1950s the Romanian government started to persecute the Turkish and Tatar minority of Dobruja and imposed a policy of compulsory assimilation, all the minority schools were closed and the government tried to decrease the influence of national cultures and religion<sup>3</sup>. Soon after the collapse of the communist regime, the minority issue focused the attention of Turkish governments since generally in that period the approach towards the Muslim communities in the Balkans started. It later reached its peak with AKP in power, since 2002, and is related with a paradigm shift in the overall foreign policy of Türkiye, as will be shown in the following section.

In the 1990s the Cold War period coexistence of the two states was replaced by an active bilateral relationship. Just in 1991 Türkiye and Romania signed the Treaty of Friendship, Good-neighbourliness and Cooperation<sup>4</sup>. Romania's pro-western stance and its will to join several international Western organizations was to be a response for the country's various international problems (Dobruja status with Russia, Hungarian minority in Romania) and domestic issues, a mainly devastated economy inherited from the communist era. From the very beginning, Türkiye became highly

<sup>3</sup> K. Karpat, *Studies on Turkish Politics and Society*, Leiden 2004, p. 659.

<sup>4</sup> *Romania and Turkey*, UN-iLibrary, December 2012, <https://www.un-ilibrary.org/content/books/97892105502605002-co06/read> [15.06.2022].

supportive in Romania's NATO accession process even with the demand of her incorporation in 1999, together with Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary<sup>5</sup>. In 1998 Romanian authorities, under Turkish pressure, labelled PKK as a terrorist organization which was a major improvement in bilateral relations. The same year two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement that provided a new impetus in economic contacts<sup>6</sup>. Both countries (together with Bulgaria) closely cooperated on combating terrorism, drugs and weapons smuggling, and illegal financial transactions (1999 Antalya Agreement), and since 1 January 2000 they imposed a zero percent tariff for industrial products<sup>7</sup>.

The 1990s bilateral relations of Türkiye and Romania don't differ much from Ankara's relations with other Balkan countries with which Türkiye started to cooperate, thus utilizing possibilities absent in the Cold War period. This was a general tendency of that time of Turkish foreign activities – Türkiye was freed from a dependent relationship on its Western allies on the one hand, on the other was carefully calibrating its opportunities in the post-Cold War environment around it.

The rise of pro-Islamic AKP in Türkiye at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century resulted in the complex transformation of Ankara's foreign policy in terms of both international aims and utilized tools, providing Turkish foreign policy

<sup>5</sup> B. Oran, *Türk Dış Politikası. Kurtuluş Savaşından bugüne olgular, belgeler, yorumlar*, İstanbul 2005, p. 507.

<sup>6</sup> *Free Trade Agreement between Turkey and Romania*, World Integrated Trade Solutions Archive, 1998, <https://wits.worldbank.org/GPTAD/PDF/archive/Romania-Turkey.pdf> [20.07.2022].

<sup>7</sup> B. Oran, *op. cit.*, p. 508.

with new dynamism which is also visible in Turkish-Romanian relations.

### **Turkish-Romanian relations in the AKP era**

The surprising electoral victory of AKP in 2002 paved the way for a transformation in Türkiye's foreign policy. With an accordance to Davutoğlu's strategic depth paradigm Türkiye started to increase her economic and diplomatic presence in the neighbouring areas. With the AKP in power, Türkiye became far more active in the Balkans, Middle East and Caucasus, and implemented new tools in foreign policy making, which had consequences for bilateral relations with several states, including Romania.

Since Romania is one of the biggest markets in Central and Eastern Europe, with a large population, it is the country with which Türkiye has the most economic relations in the Balkans. Significantly, Romania is a major trading partner for Türkiye in the Balkans, and together with her EU accession in 2007 the Turkish investments in Romania mean easier access to free trade markets within the EU.

Just after the collapse of the communist regime in Romania both countries signed several agreements covering bilateral trade relations, such as the Mutual Encouragement and Preservation of Investments Agreement (1991), the Tourism Cooperation Agreement (1991), Free Trade Agreement (1998), Customs Cooperation and Prevention, Investigation and Fight Against Custom Related Crime Agreement (2004), and the Commercial and Economic Cooperation Agreement (2006). When Romania joined the EU in 2007 these mutual trade agreements were dissolved and put into the scope of the Customs Union.



The trade volume between the two states increased significantly during the AKP era. While the Turkish foreign policy makers perceived trade as a tool aimed at strengthening Türkiye's international presence and position, benefiting largely from the spectacular growth of the Turkish economy in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one can observe a tremendous increase in bilateral trade exchange between Türkiye and Romania.

Although the background for the proper trade exchange was set up in the 1990s, it increased largely in the AKP era. In 2002, the value of Turkish exports to Romania was estimated at 560,431 million USD, whereas five years later, after JDP's first term in office, it reached 3.6 billion USD. In 2008, the result was even better, with 3.9 billion USD. In the following years it remained under 3 billion USD but again reached 3.1 billion USD in 2014. In 2019 the value of Turkish exports to Romania reached 4.07 billion USD and exceeded 5 billion (5.17 billion) USD in 2021<sup>8</sup>. Also one can observe a constant increase of Turkish imports from Romania: in 2002 its value was estimated at 656,561 million USD and reached 3.1 billion USD in 2007 and 3.5 billion USD in 2008. In 2014 the value was almost the same as the year before (3.5 billion USD) and decreased to under 3 billion USD in the following years. In 2021 it again exceeded this value and reached 3.4 billion USD thus making 2021 a record year for bilateral trade, with a total volume exceeding 8.5 billion USD. The main exporting goods for Türkiye are land vehicles and their parts, plastic products, iron, steel, cotton, paper

<sup>8</sup> All data from: *Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu*, 2022, <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Kategori/GetKategori?p=Dis-Ticaret-104> [15.08.2022].

and agricultural goods. From Romania Türkiye imports mainly: petroleum and oils, cars and their parts, chemical materials, rubber and furniture.

There are several Turkish business associations operating in Romania with a view to creating a positive climate for bilateral trade and investments, like the Romania-Türkiye Chamber of Trade and Industry, the Turkish Businessman Association and the Türkiye-Romania Work Council.

Türkiye is also one of the top foreign investors in Romania, with a current value of investment exceeding 7.5 billion USD. Approximately 16,000 Turkish companies are operating in Romania, and 5,000 remain active. There are two Turkish banks operating in Romania: Credit Europe and Garanti Bankası<sup>9</sup>. With JDP in power Türkiye managed to successfully raise the value of foreign direct investments to Romania significantly: from 222 million USD in 2004 to 1,029 billion USD in 2020<sup>10</sup>.

Growth in economic contacts between Türkiye and Romania is significant and resembles the countries' relations with other Balkan states – for the AKP trade is one of the major tools implemented in overall foreign policy-making. On the other hand, Romania, with its population of 19 million, relatively stable political climate, predictable legal system and EU membership, is a fertile ground for investment and reaching European markets.

Unlike in the communist period, minority status in no longer a sore point in bilateral relations. The presence of

<sup>9</sup> *Romanya ile ikili ilişkiler*, TCDB, 2022, <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye---romanya-siyasi-iliskileri-.tr.mfa> [16.08.2022].

<sup>10</sup> *Foreign Direct Investment*, Banca Nationala a Romaniei, 2022, <https://www.bnr.ro/PublicationDocuments.aspx?icid=14364> [10.09.2022].

Turkish and Tatar minorities in the region is an inescapable demographic heritage of Ottoman presence in the Balkans. Nowadays, they are concentrated in the two Romanian counties of Constanta and Tulcea, which comprise the Dobruja region in south-eastern Romania. The exact size of the Turkish minority is hard to estimate; according to 2011 census it was 27,698 and Tatars 20,282<sup>11</sup>. Romania was to conduct its next census in 2021, but it was postponed due to Covid-19; the full results are to be published in 2023. Currently, the population of Turkish and Tatar minorities is estimated to be around 70,000, and they fully enjoy their constitutional rights through the organizations they have established. In Romania, minority groups are represented in parliament, and Turks and Tatars have one seat each<sup>12</sup>.

It is interesting to observe that in the AKP era – and even afterwards – Islam became one of the main sources of Turkish *soft power* within the strategic depth paradigm, and is utilized as a power element of foreign policy by making Sunni Islam more visible. Thus the well-being of Turkish minorities is a constant concern of AKP's governments which have undertaken several measures to preserve it. At the same time, and this is the case of Romania, it contributes to the creation of Türkiye's positive image abroad.

There are basically three Turkish state actors which operate in the Dobruja region: the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*), the Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı*,

<sup>11</sup> *Romanian National Census Results*, 2011, <https://www.recensamantromania.ro/rpl-2011/rezultate-2011/> [10.09.2022].

<sup>12</sup> *Romanya ile ikili ilişkiler...*

TİKA) and the Turkish Cultural Institute Yunus Emre. Under the current constitutional structure of Türkiye, Diyanet is subordinated to the Presidency and is responsible for issues concerning administration of religious problems connected with faith, practice and moral principles, informing society with regards to Islamic religion and the administration of places of worship. It is the highest official authority organizing religious life and coordinating appointments of religious personnel<sup>13</sup>. With an enormous budget and its hierarchical organization Diyanet in the AKP era became an extremely significant religious global actor. In Dobruja, Diyanet's activities focus on refurbishing mosques, providing formal religious education, editing religious literature and cult personnel training.

The Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency is also operating in Romania, although actually its activities mainly focus on the Dobruja region. Originally TİKA was created in 1992 as an agency for development and support, with the initial role of focusing on the Central Asian states which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Its aim was to promote the Turkish experience in democracy building, the free market economy and establishing regional relations. Over time TİKA extended its presence in several regions like the Balkans, the Middle East, Caucasus and Africa. In 2011, as a result of our country's dynamic foreign policy initiatives and the driving force of major global and regional shifts, in order to increase the effectiveness of the development cooperation process, the organizational structure of

<sup>13</sup> J. T. Sunier, N. Landman, *The Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs in a changing Environment*, Amsterdam 2011, p. 32.

the Turkish Cooperation and Development Administration Directorate was reviewed and TİKA was restructured<sup>14</sup>. Currently the Agency has 62 offices in 60 countries and implements projects in 150 countries – TİKA carries out the task of being a cooperating mechanism for state institutions and organizations, universities, non-profit organizations, and the private sector. In addition, it functions as a platform for these actors to come together and it records the development aid carried out by Türkiye<sup>15</sup>. While initiating infrastructural and social projects TİKA remains the main donor of official Turkish development aid with impressive values raising significant amounts during the AKP's terms in office: 339 million USD in 2004, 3,591 million USD ten years later (2014) and 8,123 million USD in 2020<sup>16</sup>.

The agency's office in Bucharest was officially established in 2014. As an EU country with a stable economy TİKA's development aid to Romania is limited and narrow. What the Agency does is financing local projects based on the proposals of local partners, mainly in Dobruja, covering issues like education, health infrastructure, social life, national and Islamic holidays and the restoration of Ottoman mosques. The Agency performs its activities in cooperation with national state authorities and it has developed several projects with such institutions as the Romanian Ministry of Youth and Sports, the Ministry of Public Health, the Ministry of National Education and several state-owned universities.

<sup>14</sup> *TİKA Tarihçe*, 2022, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/tr/sayfa/tarihce-222> [20.08.2022].

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Türkiye Kalkınma Yardımları Raporu 2020*, TİKA, 2021, [https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/Pictures/Turkiye%20Kalk%C4%B1nma%20Yard%C4%B1mlar%C4%B1%202020\\_tr.pdf](https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/sayfa/Pictures/Turkiye%20Kalk%C4%B1nma%20Yard%C4%B1mlar%C4%B1%202020_tr.pdf), p. 15 [20.08.2022].

Such a strategy contributes to local development but also provides *soft power* capital for Ankara since these kinds of activities are also visible in the Romanians.

Established in 2007, the Turkish Cultural Institute Yunus Emre is another source of Turkish *soft power* operating in Romania, with branches in Bucharest and Constanta. Generally it is based on the Western model of institutes responsible for promoting national cultural values such as the Goethe Institute or the Adam Mickiewicz Institute. The mission of Yunus Emre is to promote the Turkish language, to protect cultural heritage and to propagate Turkish culture<sup>17</sup>. Romania is one of the few countries in the world where two branches of Yunus Emre operate with a view to targeting audiences of both ethnic Romanians and Turkish minorities in Dobruja, and the Institute remains a most successful cultural diplomacy tool of Türkiye.

Contemporary Romania is not only a trade partner for Türkiye nor is it simply the recipient of its *soft power*, but also maintains vigorous political and diplomatic relations with Ankara. The AKP's raise to power overlapped with Romania's deepening integration with Western structures: the country joined NATO in 2004 and the European Union in 2007. Türkiye has been highly supportive towards Romania's NATO accession and Romania continues to declare its support for Türkiye's EU membership. In December 2011 Türkiye and Romania raised their bilateral relations and signed a *Strategic Partnership Declaration*. Two years later the Action Plan on implementation of the Declaration was

<sup>17</sup> A. Kaya, *The Role of Common Cultural Heritage in External Promotion of Modern Turkey: Yunus Emre Cultural Centers*, Istanbul 2011, p. 11.

signed. The exchange of high-level visits reflects close and friendly relations between the two states and in 2021 the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of strategic partnership was widely celebrated in both countries.

Currently there are no open tensions in bilateral relations, and both countries have been cooperating closely in a number of regional organizations; however, the nature of geopolitical rivalries in the Black Sea basin has made this collaboration difficult or sometimes even impossible. Generally bilateral cooperation remains influenced by both countries' relations with Russia, including especially Turkish dependence on natural gas supplies. In the Black Sea basin Romania has been much more eager to see a stronger NATO with a primary role of the USA, while commitment to strategic alliance with this state remains a main feature of the Romanian strategic culture, and leads to a lower appreciation of partnerships with European powers like Germany or France. At the same time a deterioration of Türkiye-NATO and Türkiye-US relations and cooperation with Russia overshadows possibilities, and limits bilateral Turkish-Romanian initiatives, which remain basically declarative. Romania continues to be sceptical about the Turkish attitude towards the ongoing war in the Ukraine; while she perceives the conflict as an open threat to Black Sea security and raises questions about NATO's role, Ankara's policy towards Russia remains contradictory in many respects.

## **Conclusion**

Turkish foreign policy towards Romania in the AKP's era does not resemble that one of the 1990s. According to the strategic depth paradigm it has become far more active and

bilateral relations developed a new impetus. While utilizing the institutional background of the 1990s the AKP's governments expanded the two countries' trade contacts to unprecedented levels.

Turkish *soft power*, such an important tool of AKP's foreign policy-making, is also clearly visible in Romania, and performed by such institutions as Diyanet, TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute. Although the Turkish and Tatar minority in Dobruja remains its main recipient, the overall effect contributes to a greater visibility of the Turkish Republic abroad and a generally positive image.

Although the two countries share and underline similar foreign policy goals like security of the Black Sea region and try to cooperate on this issue, the results remain blurred and declarative, mainly due to different visions of foreign policy and international commitments.

The current foreign policy of Türkiye towards Romania greatly overlaps with a general pattern implemented elsewhere in the Balkans with growing economic contacts and the important role of *soft power*. On the other hand it fits the logic of contemporary Turkish foreign policy towards the European Union for instance; while Ankara has successfully lost its interest in joining the EU and the negotiations have been virtually suspended, Türkiye prefers to cooperate with individual EU states on the triangular mechanism base, such as the one implemented with Romania and Poland; however, the effectiveness of such tools remains doubtful despite high-level political declarations.







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The main goal of this paper is to analyse the current bilateral relations between Türkiye and Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria. While the main focus is on high-level political dialogue, political stability and security across the region, as well as growing economic contacts, soft power elements such as religious, historical, ethnic and cultural links with the Balkan states have a significant part to play too.

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