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Introduction

Re-Mapping Turkish Power and Religious Policies in the Western Balkans

Kerem Öktem
Professor of Politics and International Relations at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and a Senior Research Associate of the Orient-Institut Istanbul
Kerem.oktem@unive.it

Lura Pollozhani
Post-doctoral Researcher, Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz
lura.pollozhani@uni-graz.at

Turkey's presence in the Balkans has attracted sustained scholarly scrutiny since its (re-) emergence in the conflict-laden 1990s. This attention – particularly pronounced among European observers – stems not so much from the scale of Turkey's engagement (other countries like Germany, Austria, Switzerland, or Russia have larger economic or political footprints in the region) but from its perceived "anomalous" character within dominant regional (and European) narratives. Across the Balkans, nation-building projects have long conceptualised the Ottoman Empire, and by extension its principal successor state, the Republic of Turkey, as the (Near) "East" from which emerging nations were expected to distance themselves in their pursuit of Europeanness. This same notion of "nesting Orientalism" also structured Turkey's perceptions of and relations with both Europe and its eastern neighbours for much of the century following the founding of the Republic in 1923 before being partly displaced by a less Europe-centred and more Asia-oriented Islamist worldview under the AKP government.[1] From the formation of modern Christian Balkan states to the ethnic cleansing of Muslim populations – including the expulsion of several hundred thousand Bulgarian Turks from Bulgaria during the so-called "Great Excursion" (Goljamata ekskurzija) under Todor Zhivkov in 1989 – violence and exclusion were repeatedly justified through the claim that national territory had to be cleansed of Muslims or "Turks" in order to complete the process of Europeanization.

Turkey's contemporary presence – now increasingly visible through large-scale infrastructure projects, religious institutions, and grand mosques – thus unfolds within a historically layered and deeply contested symbolic terrain. At the same time, both the nature of this presence and its reception have changed, as Turkey itself has undergone profound political, cultural, and institutional transformations. The shifting configurations of Turkish engagement in Southeast Europe, together with the region's varied responses of accommodation, negotiation, and rejection, form the central concern of this main focus, which brings together contributions originally presented at a workshop organised at the Orient-Institut Istanbul in collaboration with the Südosteuropa-Gesellschaft in June 2025 in Istanbul.

1 Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," Slavic Review 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–31; Piro Rexhepi, *White Enclosures: Racial Capitalism and Coloniality along the Balkan Route* (Duke University Press, 2023).

The contributions collected here propose a shift away from viewing Turkey's presence in Southeast Europe primarily through the lenses of soft power or neo-Ottoman revivalism. Instead, they advance a set of complementary approaches that foreground materiality, infrastructure, institutional practice, and symbolic world-making. Central to this reframing is the concept of an *imperial gaze*, understood not primarily as a claim to territorial control but as a mode of seeing and ordering space through which Ankara's political and religious elites imagine, aestheticise, and render legible a hierarchically structured civilisational geography. This gaze operates through monumental religious architecture, heritage restoration, bureaucratic standardisation, and ceremonial performance, flattening historical complexity while producing powerful symbols of continuity and belonging.

Taken together, these contributions make three broader interventions while also revealing important analytical tensions. *First*, the main focus advances a processual and infrastructural understanding of religious power, treating mosques, infrastructures, and heritage sites not as static outcomes of projects elaborated elsewhere but as evolving arenas of negotiation, contestation, and meaning-making. Across the contributions, however, there are differing assessments of where analytical weight should lie: some foreground symbolic projection and imperial imagination, while others emphasise bureaucratic routines, institutional constraints, or the strategic calculations of state actors. These differences point to the need to analyse religious infrastructure simultaneously as symbol, institution, and political economy.

Second, the contributions complicate prevailing narratives of Turkish dominance by foregrounding limits, frictions, and local agency, yet they do so from distinct vantage points. While some articles stress the performative and affective power of Turkish interventions – particularly in post-conflict or highly visible urban contexts – others underline resistance, gatekeeping, and ontological security as sources of institutional resilience that constrain external influence. The resulting picture is not one of linear expansion or uniform reception, but of uneven and contingent engagements shaped by local religious fields, regime configurations, and historical sedimentations. The focus on different processes and practices highlights this further by also showing the shortcomings and limits of empire in a contemporary context, how its grandiosity inhibits agency, efficacy, and ultimately, outcomes.

Third, the main focus of this issue invites a rethinking of empire itself, not (or not exclusively) as a coherent project or strategy, but as a set of imagined geographies materialised through selective infrastructures and aesthetic choices. Here, too, the contributions diverge in emphasis: some interpret imperial imaginaries primarily as elite-driven symbolic projects with limited local traction, while others show how such imaginaries may acquire durability through popular mobilization, bureaucratic embedding, infrastructural persistence, or geopolitical realignment. Rather than resolving these tensions, the main focus treats them as analytically productive, suggesting that the study of religion, infrastructure, and power in Southeast Europe – and Turkey's presence therein – must remain attentive to the disjunctures between imagination and practice, projection and reception, and ambition and constraint. In doing so, it contributes to wider debates on religion, infrastructure, and power beyond the case of Turkey and beyond Southeast Europe, offering analytical tools that travel to other contexts in which middle powers seek influence through the built environment, institutional expansion, infrastructural presence, and cultural narratives rather than through formal domination – and in which grand designs often falter. These dynamics, finally, are not confined to Turkey or to middle powers alone but also converge with the European Union's own imperial gaze, marked by persistent disjunctures between grand normative imagination and political reality, not least the realpolitik that continues to defer accession for much of Southeast Europe.

Analyse

Nathalie Clayer

Diverse Stakes, Actors, Times, Spaces, and Materialities

The Construction of Mosques in Southeast Europe and the Case of (Interwar) Albania

Abstract

Diverse Stakes, Actors, Times, Spaces, and Materialities: The Construction of Mosques in Southeast Europe and the Case of (Interwar) Albania

This paper investigates the building process of mosques in Albania during the interwar period in three cities: Durrës, Sarandë, and Tirana. The comparison shows that the dynamics that contributed to the construction of these new places of worship were diverse and processual. Diverse stakes, actors, temporalities, spaces, and materialities form a useful matrix in order to study the building of mosques as processes and to understand the religious, social, political, and economic dimensions underlying them. This article also shows how such an analytical framework could be useful concerning the present time, even if transnational dimensions are more important today.

Nathalie Clayer
is Senior Researcher at the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) and professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), both in Paris.

Contact: *clayer@ehess.fr*
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The construction of places of worship in Turkey and Southeast Europe has been a significant phenomenon since the beginning of the 21st century that deserves to be studied. In particular, the construction of mosques merits close analysis, often involving Turkish actors – related to politics, religion, and business. A few years ago, I participated in a workshop at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales on the foundation of places of worship of all faiths and from different periods. I presented a study on the construction of mosques in Albania between the two world wars. Indeed, the context of the period examined was very different from that of today: the region was emerging from a long period of war and military occupations that had lasted from the Balkan Wars to the post-First World War period. Forged on Ottoman territories lost during the Balkan Wars, the Albanian state, recognised in 1913 by the Great Powers, began to truly take shape at the end of the First World War, even though its sovereignty remained contested by Italy, as well as by neighbouring Greece and Yugoslavia. Here I summarize that study before showing how a comparative approach can give us some clues for the study of the building of mosques today.

The Building of Mosques in Albania, 1920–1939[1]

At least a dozen comparatively large mosques were built in Albania in the years 1920–1930. During the same period, few if any mosques were built in other Balkan regions, where Muslims, though admittedly in the minority, were as populous as in Albania, such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The only new large mosque to be built in the first half of the twentieth century was in Zagreb, erected during the Second World War under the Croat Ustaša regime.[2] In Turkey, another Muslim majority country in the region which had also emerged from the Ottoman Empire, the 1920s and 1930s were no more conducive to the building of new places of Muslim worship. On the contrary, restrictions were imposed on the building of mosques under Atatürk's leadership, and some of them were converted for secular usage.[3] The most symbolic of these was the transformation of Aya Sofya – initially the church of Santa Sophia, then during the Ottoman period one of the most prestigious places of Muslim worship in Istanbul – into a museum in the 1930s.[4]

Why and how were mosques built in Albania at this period, when the country had been declared "secular", like Turkey, and was furthermore going through an acute economic crisis? What were the issues at stake? Before trying to answer these questions by analyzing some specific cases of mosque-building in Durrës, Sarandë, and Tirana, we must first go over some aspects of the religious and political context.

The relationship between Islam and state-building in Albania was profoundly marked by internal and external contact. Muslims lived alongside non-Muslims, of varying numbers depending on the regions: mainly Orthodox Christians in the centre and southern parts of the country (representing about 20% of the Albanian population) and Catholics in the northern regions (about 10% of the population). Additionally, the country and its Muslim majority were in contact with states of Christian majority (Greece, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and Italy). Turkey, a Muslim-majority country, did not have any shared borders with

1 Nathalie Clayer, "Construction de mosquées en Albanie, 1920–1939 [The building of mosques in Albania, 1920–1939]," *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, no. 151 (2010): 91–105.
2 Zlatko Hasanbegović, *Muslimani u Zagrebu 1878–1945: Doba utemeljenja [Muslims in Zagreb 1878–1945: The Foundation Period]* (Institut društvenih znanosti Ivo Pilar, 2007).
3 Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic Political Identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003).
4 Gülrü Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium," eds. Robert Mark and Ahmet Cakmak, *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present* (Cambridge University Press, 1982), 195–225.

Albania. Yet this Muslim majority in Albania posed a problem of legitimacy towards Christians in the country; that, in any case, was the sentiment of Albanian politicians and intellectuals, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Some (especially non-Muslims) did not refrain from saying that Albanian Muslims should return to the religion of their ancestors, Islam being associated with former Ottoman domination. This Muslim majority also posed a problem vis-à-vis neighbouring countries, for the perception at that time was that a Muslim sovereign country lacked legitimacy in Europe. Lastly, it posed a problem for certain Muslim intellectuals and local administrators who took up the Eurocentric idea that Islam was an obstacle to progress and civilization, as mentioned in the first chapter of my study.[5]

After the First World War, the policy of the leaders of the also Albanian state, recently recognized by the international community, thus closely resembled the policy pursued by Turkey. The state was proclaimed as being without official religion, secular (*afetar* in Albanian). But closer examination reveals this laicity to be different from that of France (on which it was modelled) at the period. Instead, it was fairly close to the nineteenth-century concordat system in France, characterized by an a-religious state, equality between recognized religions and the policing of religion, to adopt Jean-Marie Mayeur's analysis in "La question laïque".[6] This amounted to a desire to exert supervision over "churches" (i.e., state-recognized religious institutions), with the state to intervene in the "administration" of cults, "churches" to be inserted within the life of the nation, and a recognition of religion's social utility.[7] Nevertheless, there was extensive resistance to centralization and top-down reforms, and the autonomy of local actors and their capacity to fashion institutions was far from negligible. How did the question of building places of Muslim worshippers transpire in this context? Who were the protagonists? And what were the issues involved?

Building or Closing Mosques?

Non-systematic investigation of the archives held by the Islamic Community and by the Ministry of the Interior shows that in the 1920s the Albanian Muslim population frequently requested not the construction of mosques, but rather the restitution of those occupied by the army, and this continued until well after the First World War. Other requests expressed the need for places of worship when mosques had been destroyed during the conflicts and periods of occupation, which was particularly the case during the Greek occupation of southern Albania. There were also requests to build mosques to replace those that had fallen into ruins, particularly due to the loss of the charitable endowments (*vakfs*) attached to them and which, in the wake of the redrawing of borders instigated by the Great Powers, now lay outside the national territory. Lastly, the Muslim faithful called for new places of worship to replace certain mosques destroyed in the 1920s by the local Albanian authorities implementing urban development plans.

For the Islamic religious authorities, the issue of places of worship was equally sensitive. On several occasions, they instructed their regional branches to draw up surveys and establish checks. It was a matter of counting how many mosques there were and ascertaining their

5 See also Nathalie Clayer, "Adapting Islam to Europe: The Albanian example", in *Islam und Muslime in (Südost)Europa im Kontext von Transformation und EU-Erweiterung*, eds. Christian Voß und Jordanka Telbizova-Sack (Verlag Otto Sagner, 2010), 53–69; Enis Sulstarova, *Arratisje nga Lindja: Orientalizmi shqiptar nga Naimi te Kadareja [The escape from the East: Albanian Orientalism from Naim to Kadare]* (Pika pa sipërfaqe, ³2013).

6 Jean-Marie Mayeur, *La Question laïque: xixe-xxe siècle [The issue of laicity, 19–20th centuries]* (Fayard, 1997).

7 Ibid.

state of repair. In certain regions in the south of the country, local muftis relayed requests from the Muslim population. In one case, the mufti himself suggested building a mosque to win over parts of the population associated with the Bektashi brotherhood.[8] The wishes of certain Muslim groups thus apparently overlapped with those of the religious authorities, with both calling for a denser network of mosques in the country – without any real initiative being taken to build them, particularly due to financial constraints.

Nevertheless, towards the end of the 1920s, another tendency emerged within the central Islamic authorities. In February 1927, a debate was launched by the director-general of *vakfs*, Salih Vuçiterni, an influential figure in Islamic institutions who was close to the political authorities. This debate was about the reforms needed to improve the situation of Albanian Muslims, "surrounded by peoples of culture". In particular, Vuçiterni suggested doing away with local *medreses* (religious schools) to focus efforts on one or two religious teaching establishments in the country. He additionally suggested closing those mosques he deemed "useless". He did not specify what he meant by this term, but certain documents indicate that the Albanian government pushed the Islamic Community to close mosques with low attendance or in a poor state of repair, for example, in town centres where there were already other mosques.[9] For Salih Vuçiterni and some of his colleagues, these recommendations about mosques and *medreses* were a matter of adapting Islam to Europe and hence resisting pressure from local and foreign Christians. The way to do so was through education and rationalization, both in the interpretation of texts and the organization of the Community.[10]

Yet over the following years, several mosques were built on Albanian territory and presented as the main achievement of the directorate of the Islamic Community. This was notably the case of the mosques in Durrës, Sarandë, and Tirana. Who exactly were their promoters, and for what purposes?

The Mosque in Durrës: Re-establishing the Prestige of Islam by Symbolizing Islamic Reform

The person behind the building of the mosque in Durrës, the largest port in the country, only about 25 miles from the capital, was none other than Salih Vuçiterni.[11] A few months after explaining that "useless" mosques needed to be closed, Vuçiterni asked the directorate of the Islamic Community for a large mosque to be built in Durrës, capable of holding the town's entire population. It was to be a mosque with a *kubbe*, a dome, and two minarets, hence a prestigious building. Vuçiterni put forward two arguments: first, Durrës was destined to become the Albanian state's main port; second, it was the future point of entry and exit to the outside world. It was thus a matter of giving a certain image of Islam and Albanian Muslims to those arriving from Europe. Additionally, for Salih Vuçiterni, it was a

8 See Arkivi Qendror i Shtetit (AQSh) [Central State Archives], Tirana, collection 882 (Muslim Community), year 1923, file 74; year 1924, file 85; year 1926, file 14; year 1931, files 105 and 117; F. 152 (Ministry of the Interior), year 1923, file 377, folio 2–4; year 1925, file 59; year 1930, file 459, folio 73. In the 1930s, requests to build mosques were also made by groups of immigrants from Kosovo who settled in the villages of central Albania (cf. AQSh, F. 882, year 1935, file 58).

9 The purpose was to reduce the Islamic Community's budget deficit. See AQSh, F. 155 (Ministry of Justice), year 1929, fileVIII-105, folios 17–18, and year 1932, file VIII-227, folio 3. The number of mosques was reduced drastically from 120 to 58.

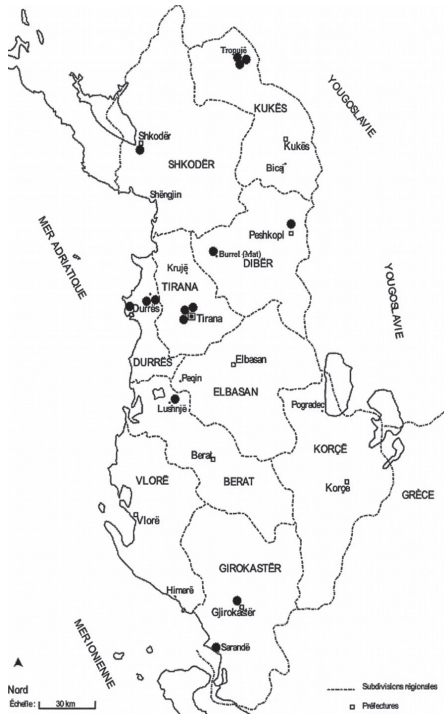
10 Salih Vuçiterni, "Deklaratë mbi nevojën e reformave [Declaration on the need for reforms]," *Zani i naltë* [The Supreme Voice] 4, No. 7IV/7 (February 1927): 193–207.

11 See AQSh, F. 882, year 1928, file 44, folio 14.

matter of defending the dignity of Muslims given the great churches recently built by other communities in the town. The place of worship was to provide a way of restoring the prestige of the local Muslim community in the eyes of Christians who had erected places of worship perceived as "grand" and "modern". Because the mosque was to be able to hold "all the Muslims in the town", it was thus a matter of endowing the local community with another dimension, with Islam no longer operating at the level of the neighbourhood but at the scale of the town, region, and nation.

Work on this mosque only began in 1931, at a time when the Islamic Community had just been reorganized under the auspices of King Zog and the Albanian government. Besides, it had been decided that the new building was to bear the name of the king, proving it was now associated with the national scale and its sovereign. Additionally, the future place of worship was closely associated with the idea of reforming Islam. The laying of the first stone was the opportunity for various groups to voice their desire to reform Islam, as symbolized by this building.

Figure 1: **New Mosques Built in Albania in the 1920s and 1930s**



Source and copyright: Nathalie Clayer

Thus, reform-minded Muslim administrators, grouped around the *Besa* newspaper in a partially secret society that guided government action, used an article about the event as a pretext to assert the need for reform. The newspaper's editors believed that reform entailed not imitating but being imitated, that it was necessary to adapt to the modern spirit of the time, despite the difficulties, and, lastly, that it was because the country lay at the heart of Europe that it had to conduct liberal reforms in the social, mental, and legislative arenas so as to attain civilization.[12] The ceremony to mark the launching of building works also provided an occasion for a Muslim youth representative to call on the Islamic religious institutions to reform dogma. But this was a step too far for these institutions, which, while being in favour of reforms symbolized by the future mosque, ruled out altering dogma.[13]

In addition to the idea of reform, the mosque in Durrës was associated with that of modernity. When the building was almost complete, the head of the Albanian Islamic Community hastened to signal, for example, in his yearly report to the government, that he had authorized the demolition of the restaurant in front of the stairs to replace it with a shop described as "modern".[14] It should be pointed out that the style of this mosque, completed in

12 Besa, August 11, 1931, 2.

13 Haki Sharofi, "Rinija kërkon Reforma Dogmatike? Feja Islame s'âsht Dogmatike [Young people are asking for reforms to dogma? The Islamic religion is not dogmatic]," *Zani i naltë*, VI/1, September 1931, 32–36.

14 AQSh, F. 882, year 1937, file 1, report from Behxhet Shapati on the activity of the Islamic Community, May 1, 1937.

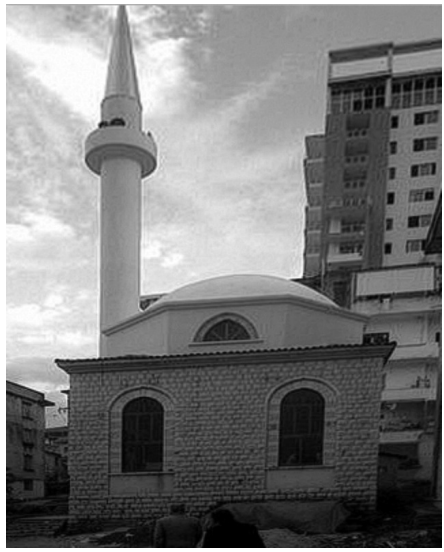
The Durrës mosque ("Xhamia e madhe e Durresit, vitet 40", 1940, Arkiva Digjitale Shqiptare, accessed 18 November 2025, https://adsh.al/s/adsh/item/23243)

1938, is resolutely "modern", not least in being made of concrete, and contrasts with that of mosques built during the Ottoman period, as may be seen from the photo below. For the leaders of the Islamic Community, the government, administrators, and Muslim youth, the building was intended both to signal to foreign visitors Albania's sovereignty under Zog, to anchor Islam within the town's public space, and to reassert the prestige of Islam as a reformed and modern faith in the eyes of Europe and the local Christian population.

Sarandë: Symbolizing the Albanian Nation and the Sovereignty of Albanian Territory vis-à-vis Greece

A mosque was also built in another port further south on the Adriatic coast, in Sarandë, not far from the border with Greece. This was a more modest building than the previous one, but no less symbolic, even if initially it was built simply to meet the needs of the Muslim faithful. In this case, it was the local Muslim population, which as of 1922 called for the building of a mosque or, apparently more exactly, the possibility of using a barrack as a mosque. As barracks were state property at the time, the grand mufti forwarded this request to the prime minister. The argument the grand mufti used to back this request related to contact between the religious communities. He explained that the local Orthodox population had a church to pray in, whereas the Muslims, who (according to him) were more numerous, had no place of worship in this small port of a few hundred inhabitants. Despite an unfavourable report from the interim prefect, who thought it was not worth the Albanian state spending money or ridding itself of a barrack for a mosque that would only be used by a handful of Muslims and which further risked provoking reactions from Greece, the issue was discussed by the cabinet on 13 December 1922. It was decided to provision-

ally authorize the use of one of the buildings as a place of prayer while waiting for a resolution to the barrack issue.[15]



The Sarandë mosque (Photo and copyright N. Clayer)

By this time, the Albanian government was already seeking to "Albanianize" the small port on the Greek border facing Corfu to erase its Greek character, stemming from the presence of a Greek and/or Greek-speaking population in the town and surrounding area, and to counter the danger of expansionism by the Greek state. The Albanian authorities thus put in place a policy to settle Muslim Albanian refugees from Greece, facilitating the installation of Muslim Albanian shopkeepers and businessmen, especially from Gjirokastër.[16] The opening of a place of Muslim worship, albeit provisional, was to be part of this attempt to place the town within a "Muslim" and "Albanian" presence, since Greekness tended to coincide with the presence of Orthodox Christians. This sometimes ran into reluctance from certain local administrators, as in the case of the interim prefect.

A few years later, the issue was taken up again. In 1927–28, a local committee based around a famous *shaykh* (Muslim mystic spiritual leader) among the Muslim refugees in the region called for the construction of a real mosque. The Albanian state gave a plot of land while in parallel offering a plot to the Catholic Community in another region of the country to treat the communities equally.[17] But it was only in the second half of the 1930s that the project was realized. Probably for financial reasons, building only started in 1936, at a time when Albanian sovereignty needed to assert itself and when religion was viewed as a way of confronting the spread of communism.[18] This building was partly financed with a donation by King Zog's sister; hence, as in Durrës, building the mosque was associated with the new ruling family. Shortly after, the town was also renamed Zogaj, based on the sovereign's name, as part of the campaign to Albanianize place names. The town was thus doubly associated with the dynasty, via its name and via the mosque's benefactors. The presence of the mosque was thus clearly part of the marking of space in the face of the Italian threat, while also being a response to Greek demands associated with Orthodoxy.

That, at least, is how the other side viewed things, judging by a text published by the Vorioepirote club in Athens and Piraeus, that is, a club of Orthodox Christian émigrés from northern Epirus, in other words, southern Albania, seeking to defend their rights before the Albanian state. In this text, these southern Albanian Christians react, *inter alia,* to the Albanianization of northern Epirus, asking in concrete terms: "who is going to prevent Turco-Albanians from building an imposing mosque in Sarandë, where there are no Mus-

15 AQSh, collection 152 (Ministry of the Interior), year 1924, file 398, folio 4, report from the interim prefect, Gjirokastër, July 1, 1922; f. 8, letter from the grand mufti to the minister, Tirana, October 22, 1924 (in fact indicating that no building had been handed over to the Muslims for prayer, contrary to the Cabinet decision).

16 AQSh, F. 152, year 1921, file 41.

17 AQSh, F. 882, year 1928, file 28.

18 AQSh, F. 882, year 1937, file 1, report from Behxhet Shapati.

lims?"[19] To them, the mosque was a clear symbol of the Islamization, hence Albanianization, of northern Epirus, as conducted by a government that did not hesitate to evoke Turkish times and places, as did certain high-ranking Catholic clergy.

In this region, the issue surrounding the building or renovation of Orthodox churches was also closely connected to Albanian state-building, as conducted in the face of Greek Orthodox demands. For the government and circles supporting the creation of an Autocephalous Orthodox Church of Albania, it was a matter of symbolizing this new national church via an architectural style considered to be "Albanian" and not "foreign", by excluding the use of writings in the Greek alphabet, and by shunning light blue, perceived as the Greek national color.[20]

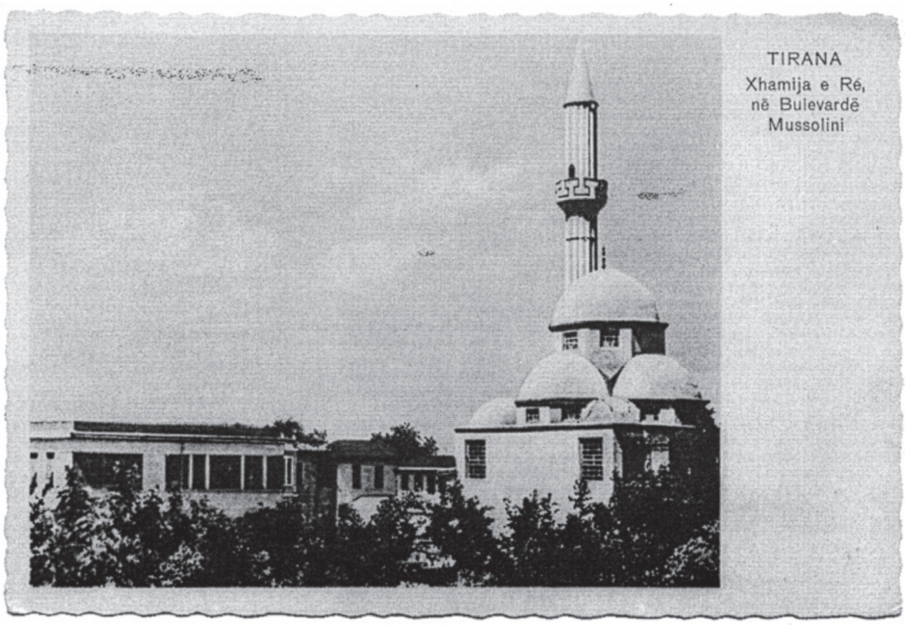
Marking Space in the New Capital Tirana: Individual Initiatives and the Prestige of Islamic Institutions

The introduction of this policy – to mark a reformed Islam and sovereignty and to assert this to Europe, neighbouring states, and local Christians by constructing places of Muslim worship seems to have been delayed, probably due to financial reasons. Evidence of this is the delay between the decision to build these mosques in around 1928 and their completion ten or so years later at a time when an internal and external political emergency was crystallizing. The case of Tirana, only designated as the new capital in the 1920s, shows how several new mosques or restorations of old buildings of Muslim worship were in fact paid for by the faithful, something that did not prevent religious institutions from using these initiatives to legitimize a reformed Islam or indeed advance their own legitimization.

The population of Tirana grew significantly due to its new political and administrative role – from 16,000 inhabitants in 1927 to 25,000 in 1938. In this context, three or four mosques were built or rebuilt in the early 1930s, thanks to the inhabitants of several districts. Yet Islamic institutions, which did not have the means to launch such work themselves, seem to have seized on these initiatives by individuals and local groups. The journal published by the Community included articles about the inauguration of new buildings.[21] Its editors congratulated the committees behind these initiatives and applauded their religious sentiment. The religious leaders in the capital emphasized one of the mosques in particular, built in a "modern style" on a new boulevard in the capital. This was a way of underlining how the material modernization of the city necessarily included a religious component. A photo of the new mosque was published in the *Besa* newspaper mentioned earlier,[22] despite its hardly ever having any photo illustrations. It was thus intended to symbolize the reformed and modern Islam promoted by the newspaper in its reports on the future mosque in Durrës.

The columns of the Islamic Community journal included frequent appeals to the faithful. To this end, examples were given of donations, together with assurances insisting that God would reward donors.[23] It was a matter of the prestige of Islam in the country, but also of

19 AQSh, collection 195 (Ministry of Education), year 1937, file 22.
20 See for example AQSh, F. 152, year 1930, file 187, folio 49, 51, 61.
21 Zani i naltë [The supreme voice] 8, no. 3–4 (November-December 1932): 483–85; 8, no. 12 (August 1933): 742–748.
22 Besa, no. 623 (August 9, 1933): 3.
23 Zani i naltë 9, no. 1 (September 1933): 32; 9, no. 2–3 (October-November 1933): 76–77; 10, no. 5 (May 1935): 159–160.



The Tirana "new mosque" (Tirana në kartolina deri në vitin '44, Igli, n.d., 89)

the prestige of religious institutions. Reports from the head of the Islamic Community to the government systematically emphasized progress in building places of worship as proof of the Community's actions.[24] In June 1938, an anonymous article was published in the journal to exhort the population to donate towards financing the building of a great modern mosque in the centre, to be used for major ceremonies in the capital. The old mosque of Sulejman Pasha was deemed too small and ill-suited to present needs. There was not enough room for "religious and national" ceremonies. The author of this article considered this made a "poor impression" on people.[25] In other words, the prestige of Islam in public opinion depended on it. Still, no such mosque was built in Tirana, unlike in Shkodër (in the north), where the local religious authorities and Muslim population made sufficient efforts to build a large mosque, completed under Italian occupation.[26]

Conclusion: Marking Space in Multiple Ways

The comparison of these case studies showed that the dynamics that had contributed to the construction of these new places of worship were diverse: they involved different actors, whose motives could have been varied, opposing, or combining in a deliberate or unintentional manner; this was also reflected in the justifications and discourses used to legitimize them. The actors included leaders of official Islamic institutions, believers acting

24 AQSh, F. 882, year 1932, file 2, report from Behxhet Shapati, May 1, 1933; year 1938, file no. 4, report dated May 1, 1938.

25 "Kryeqyteti ka nevojë për nji Xhami të madhe e moderne [The capital needs a large modern mosque]," *Zani i naltë* 8, no. 6 (June 1938): 178–179.

26 Hamdi Bushati, *Shkodra dhe motet [Shkodra through times]* vol. 1 (Rozafat, 1998), 125–127. See also AQSh, F. 882, year 1937, file 1, report from Behxhet Shapati.

The Shkodër mosque (Hamdi Bushati, Shkodra dhe motet, v. 1, Rozafat, 1998, 125)

as leaders, benefactors,[27] or in groups, the king and his family, the government, regional administrators, political groups, and an Islamic youth association. The sources do not refer to construction contractors. Foreigners (in this case Europeans or Greeks) and non-Muslims also appeared as target groups of symbolic and political messaging. Thus, the needs of believers, the legitimacy of the Albanian state in Europe (despite the Muslim majority), the question of the prestige of Muslims and their religious institutions vis-à-vis the non-Muslim population, the national issue vis-à-vis Greece, and the fabrication of the legitimacy of the king and the dynasty were all intertwined. An analysis of public and private discourse highlights arguments about the compatibility of Islam with modernity and European identity, the idea of Albanianization and de-Hellenisation of the southern border regions, and the dignity and prestige (institutional, community, and personal) that accompanied the issue of establishing these new places of worship at different times and in different arenas.

These projects were generally long-term undertakings – several years passed between the request or idea, its acceptance, planning and changes, and its completion – and took place in different time frames: throughout the post-war period, the settlement of refugees, the formation of the state, the establishment of the monarchy, in relations with neighbouring countries, during urban development processes in the capital Tirana, but also in Durrës and Sarandë, the consolidation or transformation of religious institutions, individual trajectories, and others. In a recent case study, in a very different context concerning the construction of mosques in the Netherlands today, the social scientist Oskar Verkaaik emphasises the need to introduce the temporal factor and to study the construction process, including the planning and design phase during which numerous negotiations take place between groups of actors, allies or opponents, and a particular sentiment develops.[28] He shows how this allows us to grasp the complex interrelationship between emotions, materiality, and politics that such a project, which is bound to bring about changes in urban, religious, and social practices as well as the transformation of the landscape, induces in a processual manner.

The spatial dimension also played an important role in the Albania of the first half of the 20th century, and this at different scales: the city was becoming more important than the neighbourhood, even if spaces such as barracks, private property, or religious spaces were also important for certain actors. Furthermore, the specific characteristics of each city were decisive: Tirana, as the capital, and Sarandë and Durrës, as ports, were also gateways to the Albanian national space from or to international spaces.

27 In the case of the new mosque in Tirana, the initiator was Dinë Hoxha, a kind of *éminence grise* of King Zog, whose land was used for the construction of the building. See Halil Rama, Shaqir Skarra and Sakip Cami (eds.), *Dinë Hoxha një filozof popullor në oborrin mbretëror [Dinë Hoxha, a popular philosopher at the Royal Court]* (Emal, 2008).

28 Oskar Verkaaik, "The Anticipated Mosque: The Political Affect of a Planned Building," *City & Society* 32, no. 1 (2020): 118–136.

Finally, in terms of materiality, questions of size and style were central, but so were the materials used (stone, concrete, etc.). Size, in particular, became an issue when it was not a question of designing a place of worship for a local community or neighbourhood but for a city or even a nation. The question of architectural style and the materials used was at the centre of the debate, as were elements of the image that the buildings were supposed to convey.

Diverse stakes, actors, temporalities, spaces, and materialities thus form a useful matrix in order to study the building of mosques as processes and to understand the religious, social, political, and economic dimensions underlying them. To finish, I would like to show how such an analytical framework could be useful concerning the present time. Today's context is different from that in Albania between the two world wars, not least because of the involvement of Turkish actors, for whom there was no equivalent in the 1930s. Concerning the actors, we must therefore also take into account a transnational dimension, without neglecting the various local / regional / national actors. Let us take a quick look at the example of the iconic Namazgjah Mosque (Xhamia e Namazgjasë) in Tirana,[29] inaugurated with great pomp and ceremony by Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in October 2024. This achievement should be seen in the context of the impressive activity of Turkish actors involved in the construction of multiple places of worship in Turkey and the Balkans, but also in various countries on several continents. But is this achievement only the deed of Turkish actors? The answer is negative, especially if we consider the project as a multidimensional process.

Epilog: The Contemporary Example of the Namazgjah Mosque in Tirana

According to the account of Dorian Demetja,[30] a senior member of the Albanian Islamic Community, the project began already in 1992–1993, after the fall of the communist regime and end of the ban on religion of 1967.[31] However, at that time, when the municipality agreed to the construction of the new building, Kuwaiti donors and entrepreneurs were involved. For reasons unknown to us, work stopped in September 1994. Albania then experienced a period of economic crisis and quasi-civil war between 1996 and 1998. A few years later, Edi Rama won the municipal elections in October 2000, and in 2001, his administration launched a project on the chosen site – the historic open-air prayer site, Namazgjah, in Tirana – that was then a project of a park, not of a mosque. It was much later, in 2011, that Edi Rama launched an architectural competition for an alternative mosque / cultural center project in another location behind the Palace of Culture. The winner was a Danish firm proposing a highly futuristic design. However, after becoming Prime Minister in place of his rival Sali Berisha, Edi Rama gave his approval in September 2014 for a new project for the construction of a mosque on the Namazgjah site designed by Islamic institutions in 2013.

Two new dimensions then emerged. On the one hand, the project required the expropriation of adjacent land belonging to private actors: the prominent Kruja family. On the other, Turkish business, political, and religious figures entered the scene, as can be seen at the

29 See the pictures on the front cover and on page 23.

30 Dorian Demetja, "Xhamia e Namazgjasë dhe rrugëtimi për ndërtimin e saj [The Namazgah Mosque and the trajectory of its building]," *Zani i naltë,* 2023.

31 Demetja traces the project even back to 1938, linking post-communist dynamics to projects from before and during the Second World War. Some even trace the project back to the creation of Albania in 1912, when the state was not yet fully formed and Tirana was not the capital.

groundbreaking ceremony in May 2015, attended by the presidents of Albania and Turkey (Bujar Nishani and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan) and the heads of Islamic institutions (Skënder Bruçaj and Mehmet Görmez), with the company Hassa Architecture (Hassa Mimarlık), which regularly works for the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), being responsible for the construction. However, between 2017 and 2019, construction was halted against the backdrop of Erdoğan's war against the Gülen movement, since the Albanian government was reluctant to cooperate in its elimination. It seems that it was the extradition of a Gülenist in 2020[32] and, above all, the closure of the college run by Gülenists in Tirana in 2023 that finally broke the deadlock, allowing the work to be completed and the building to be inaugurated in October 2024, while cooperation resumed.

This short description shows the importance of considering the entire process, which has taken no less than 32 years, and the validity of the matrix imagined from the comparative study of mosque building in Interwar Albania. While Turkish actors have taken centre stage in recent years, they are only one group among many others – Albanian and non-Albanian – and they themselves are diverse, as illustrated by the reverberations of the disagreement between Erdoğan and Fethullah Gülen over the project's completion. Beyond issues relating to Turkey's soft power vis-à-vis Albania, which are clearly evident in the juxtaposition of the political dimensions of Erdoğan's visits – signing of economic and military cooperation agreements – with his participation in the inaugurations, other issues have also come to the fore over the years. These include intra-Albanian political competition between Edi Rama and Sali Berisha, whether in the form of a confrontation between the Tirana municipality and the government or between the government and the political opposition.

There is also the question of the marking of space and the prestige of the Islamic community vis-à-vis other religious communities that have long since acquired imposing places of worship in the centre of the capital – St Paul's Catholic Cathedral (2001) and the Orthodox Cathedral of the Resurrection of Christ (2014). The process was shaped by tensions within the official Islamic religious institutions as well. In these tensions or negotiations, issues related to space and materiality must be scrutinized, as they have been the subject of numerous debates, traces of which can be found on the internet. These issues ranged from choices concerning the integration into the urban space, land ownership, and ecology (green spaces) to architectural style – resolutely futuristic in the Danish project or traditional / Balkan /Ottoman / Albanian according to assessments of the Hassa Mimarlık project – but also construction techniques and materials, dimensions (it will be the largest mosque in Southeast Europe when it opens), financing, ancillary functions – museum of religious coexistence, meeting and conference rooms – and even the question of the management and administration of the new building. With this last issue, the process to be studied may even extend beyond the completion of the work.[33]

32 www.ecoi.net/en/document/2048623.html?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

33 See for example: https://top-channel.tv/2013/05/11/xhamia-e-namazgjase-projekti-30-milione-euro/; https://durreslajm.al/xhamia-e-namazgjase-pronaret-u-prish-pakti-lubonja-kkt-ta-pezulloje/; www.de/zeen.com/2011/05/05/cultural-centre-in-tirana-by-big/; www.youtube.com/watch?v=qoyKwmKq_ZM; https://shqiptarja.com/lajm/flasin-pronaret-e-tokes-pa-kullat-br-nuk-ka-as-xhami-te-namazgjase; www.panorama.com.al/rama-jep-lejen-per-xhamine-e-madhe-zoti-e-beri-te-veten/; www.reporter.al/2024/10/10/nje-ceremoni-politike-ndikimi-i-turqise-per-kontrollin-e-xhamise-se-madhe-te-tiranes/; www.droni.al/2018/01/04/erdogan-kunder-gylen-beteje-mes-dy-grupeve-ne-komunitetin-mysliman-te-shqiperise/.

Analyse

Kerem Öktem

Turkey's Imperial Gaze on the Balkans
Grand Mosques as Restorative Nostalgia

Abstract
Turkey's Imperial Gaze on the Balkans: Grand Mosques as Restorative Nostalgia
Since the early 1990s, Turkey has been a significant actor in the Western Balkans, but only since the late 2010s has this presence taken the form of highly visible symbolic architectural interventions. Focusing on the central mosque projects in Tirana and Prishtina, this article conceptualises them as material expressions of a Turkish imperial gaze rooted in a domestic project to re-sacralise and dominate urban space. Drawing on qualitative analysis of architectural forms, institutional arrangements, and local contestation, it argues that these mosques have different situated functions: for Ankara, they represent symbols of empire; within Turkey, they operate as instruments of domination; while locally, they acquire more pragmatic and relational meanings. The article theorises this disjuncture as nested imperialism, through which a middle power projects symbolic authority into a hierarchically subordinated region, primarily sustaining a self-referential imperial imagination for Turkish elites and domestic audiences.

Kerem Öktem
is Professor of Politics and International Relations at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and a Senior Research Associate of the Orient-Institut Istanbul, a research institute of the Max Weber Foundation. Prior to joining Ca' Foscari, he was Founding Professor of Turkish Studies at the Centre for Southeast European Studies at the University of Graz. An alumnus of the University of Oxford, his current research focuses on the autocratisation of Turkey's cultural and foreign policy fields.

Contact: *Kerem.oktem@unive.it*
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Turkey has been a constant presence in the Balkans since at least the early 1990s, despite the major remaking of the political field in Turkey since then. Except for the Gülen movement – which played a central role in Turkey's religiously inflected foreign policy until the mid-2010s and operated a highly efficient network of schools and cultural institutions across the region – the overall matrix of Turkish interests, foreign policy goals, and involved actors has remained surprisingly consistent. Perspectives on Turkey's role in the Balkans have likewise remained relatively stable save for the turbulent years shaped by Ankara's fallout with the Gülen movement.

In Europe, Turkey's presence and its foreign-policy-relevant actors were generally viewed as a stabilising and balancing force in the Western Balkans and a moderating influence on the region's Muslim communities. At the same time, neo-imperialist statements evoking the notion of an Islamic imperial space – by then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2016 ("Anatolia belongs to you, our brothers and sisters! And we are sure that Sarajevo is ours!")[1] and by Prime Minister and later President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan ("My brothers and sisters, not only Turkey has won today; Baghdad, Islamabad, Kabul, Beirut, Sarajevo, and Skopje have also won.")[2] – provoked dismay, especially in Serbia but also among secular and nationally-oriented elites in countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, or Albania. Following the military coup attempt of July 2016 and the subsequent witch hunt against members of the Gülen movement, Turkey became a net exporter of autocratic political practices and religious division, as it pressured friendly governments in the Balkans to support its anti-Gülen policies. A decade on, however, by 2026, Turkey has managed to re-establish itself as a pole of relative stability, with more limited financial capacities but also with fewer open challenges to its presence.

Throughout the 2000s, Turkey's investments and activities had been of a less visible, infrastructural sort, with the emphasis on the purchase of electric grids, mobile phone networks, or the operation of schools and religious charities. In the 2010s, airports and motorways were built by Turkish companies,[3] but in popular imagination, both in the Balkans and in Turkey, these remained above all technical infrastructures. The same could be said, to a lesser extent, for the hundreds of historical mosques reconstructed and rebuilt by the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the Diyanet Foundation, as these were local structures – if already linked to the Ottoman empire and Turkey – that continued to be seen as local despite Turkish participation.

A crucial turning point that indicates a qualitative change from less visible infrastructures to unmissable superstructures is the arrival of Turkish grand mosques in the Western Balkans, and particularly in Albania and Kosovo, in the 2020s. They give material, visual, and sonic presence to what I call a Turkish "imperial gaze" that has been building up over the last decades and through projects in many parts of the world, but whose effects are particularly noticeable in the Balkans. By "imperial gaze" I mean a certain way of seeing the world from Ankara and Istanbul – a way of "seeing like a state" as formulated by James Scott;[4] that is, the imagining of an imperial geography through layers of restorative nostal-

1 Kerem Öktem, "Turkey's Moment in The World: Davutoğlu and Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey's Foreign Policy," in *A Hundred Years of Republican Turkey: A History in a Hundred Fragments*, eds. Alp Yenen and Erik Jan Zürcher (Leiden University Press, 2023), 474.

2 Translated from Erdoğan's acceptance speech following the Presidential Elections of August 2014, one of many speeches of this kind, AK Parti, August 11, 2014.

3 Fatma Aslı Kelkitli, "Turkey and the Western Balkans during the AKP Period," *Avrasya Etüdleri* 44, no 2 (2013): 89–110.

4 James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (Yale University Press, 1998).

Tirana Central Mosque (Xhamia e Namazgjasë, i.e. the Mosque of the Prayer field). Photo by the author, 5 May 2025

gia,[5] an awareness of history shaped by Turkish TV series on the Ottoman Empire, and an urge to overcome the stigma of self-diagnosed humiliation by the West through a challenge to western power structures (of which, of course, Turkey continues to be a member).[6] This gaze is, by definition, reductionist: it looks out to the world in search of signs that confirm Turkey's greatness, whether in the form of existing historical legacies or of mosques and other structures financed and realised by Turkey-related actors. The imperial gaze of Turkey's current Islamist elites seeks measures of Turkish greatness whose very symbols they are in the process of generating.

Unlike in Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, or the United States – where there is either no indigenous Islamic architecture or where the local architectural idioms are unconnected to the language of Ottoman imperial architecture – the new mosques in the Balkans draw on the architectural syntax of an already existing Ottoman legacy. In South Africa, for example, where there is no history of engagement with the Ottoman Empire, a Turkish-built mosque does not evoke recollections of an imperial past and is more likely to be read as a more contemporary Turkish claim to influence. At the same time, in much of sub-Saharan Africa, Turkish mosques are inserted into cityscapes shaped by nineteenth-century neo-Gothic European colonial churches, with which they now compete for visibility and symbolic presence. In the Balkans, by contrast, Turkish mosques reconnect to an already existing imperial past. One could therefore argue – by extension of the well-known religious studies scholar Milica Bakić-Hayden's concept of *nesting Orientalisms*[7] – that Turkey's imperial gaze

5 Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001).
6 Ayşe Zarakol, *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).
7 Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–31.

in the Balkans exemplifies a form of "nested imperialism," where Turkey, itself a middle power dependent on the United States and the West, projects power into a region positioned relatively lower (than Turkey) within a hierarchically ordered civilisational imaginary.

In this paper, I seek to examine the origins of this imperial gaze through an examination of Turkey's mosque-building policy in the Balkans, the place of these grand mosques in Turkey's foreign policy, and their effects in the places where they are built, with a particular focus on the Tirana Central Mosque (Xhamia e Namazgjasë in Albanian, Namazgâh Camii in Turkish, i.e., the Mosque of the Prayer Field) in Albania and the Prishtina Central Mosque in Kosovo, whose construction was ongoing at the time of writing. I will approach these questions by examining how the mosque-building drive is rooted in a domestic policy of Islamist Urbanism with mosque-building at its symbolic core, examining how this programme informs the politics of Turkish mosque-building in the Balkans, and discussing what political functions these projects play on different levels – from the citizens of Tirana and Prishtina to conservative decision-makers in Ankara and religious charities in Istanbul.

Islamist Urbanism and the Re-Sacralisation of Turkey's Cities

Over the last decade in power, and especially since the still not fully understood coup attempt of 2016, the AKP's (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party) Islamist project of domination eventually solidified into a highly volatile yet dynamic arrangement of political and economic structures: at the heart of this project is the synthesis of authoritarian neoliberalism, neopatrimonialism, and clientelism with all its structural incentives for corruption and nepotism. Construction businesses, a growing military-industrial complex, and extractive industries are the locomotives of economic growth. The privatisation of public services is accompanied by their partial replacement by religious charities, the informalisation of politics, and the widespread promotion of Islamist conservatism by state actors.[8] The historical juncture that crystallized this arrangement was the 2017 constitutional referendum – executed under state of emergency provisions – and the ensuing change from a parliamentary democracy to a hyper-Presidential regime without checks and balances.[9]

The architectural "grand projects", which reflect this juncture and which architectural historian Bülent Batuman calls "Islamist Urbanism"[10] are highly programmatic and relevant for our analysis: grand mosques like the Çamlıca mosque – situated on a commanding hilltop on Istanbul's Anatolian side – or the new mosque in Istanbul's cosmopolitan Taksim Square dominate the city's silhouette while they create urban spaces that are sacralised by the buildings themselves but also by the increased presence of worshippers and the soundscapes of the *ezan* (call to prayer). Large administrative buildings and representative structures like the Presidential complex in Ankara – complementing a palace of over a thousand rooms with a large park, the "Mosque of the Nation", the "Library of the Nation" modelled on the Library of Congress, and a museum commemorating the 15 July 2016 military coup

8 Görkem Altınörs and Ümit Akçay, "Authoritarian neoliberalism, crisis, and consolidation: The political economy of regime change in Turkey," *Globalizations* 19, no. 7 (2022): 1029–1053.

9 Kerem Öktem and Karabekir Akkoyunlu, „Exit from democracy: Illiberal governance in Turkey and beyond," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 469–480.

10 Bülent Batuman, *New Islamist Architecture and Urbanism: Negotiating Nation and Islam through Built Environment in Turkey* (Routledge 2018).

attempt – create an alternative iconography of power challenging the symbols of early Kemalist and hence largely German and Austrian-inflected modernity.[11]

This larger building drive is complemented by hundreds of large mosques, new government buildings in Ankara and all over Turkey – governor's offices, police stations, universities, schools – built in an eclectic historicising style that draws on Seljuk and Ottoman architectural traditions. Newly built "Gardens of the Nation" seek to bring a *sacred moment* to large green spaces by adding mosques and prayer rooms to what are ultimately secular urban structures. This, in a nutshell, is what President Erdoğan defined – in contradistinction to the early Kemalist republic – as the central goal for the republic's architectural program after 2017: to create "cities with mosques, ezan, and spirit."[12] It is both part of a new wave of nation-building[13] and, as we shall see, discursive "empire-building."

While the "cities with mosques" framework is a project of state-led domination, it is also a multi-faceted social and economic space of opportunities, where multiple actors and interests intersect, where money is made and redistributed, and where favours are given and received, often in opaque and informal ways. The grand mosques are not financed and built by state agencies but by large companies close to the AKP government, who often repay favours extended to them earlier in the form of state tenders. Some projects, especially those abroad, are financed and built by the Diyanet Foundation, a non-profit foundation related to the Presidency of Religious Affairs, which collects donations from mosque-goers and wealthy businessmen yet acts in unison with state interests and Diyanet goals.[14] The ecosystem of mosque projects also extends to architectural bureaus, building companies, and design offices that work closely with the Diyanet Foundation.

Together, they contribute to the broader project of a "re-sacralisation"[15] of Turkey's urban landscapes and are increasingly involved in state-driven grand mosque projects on university campuses, in suburban neighbourhoods, and in provincial cities such as the mining town in Zonguldak, whose massive new mosque on the shores of the Black Sea closely resembles the architectural features of Tirana's mosque. At border crossings – including international airports – mosques now symbolically mark the boundaries between the "lands of Islam" and those of Christendom, while such structures are conspicuously absent at crossings into Muslim-majority countries such as Iran, Iraq, or Syria. Without exception, and independently of their architectural style, they mimic in size and representational claim what used to be called Sultans' mosques (Selatin Camii), that is, imperial mosques with more than two minarets, financed not by the state, but with war spoils or the private holdings of the Sultan and leading members of his household, including the sultan's mother and his chief consort.[16]

11 Esra Akcan, *Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, and the Modern House* (Duke University Press 2021); Sibel Bozdoğan, *Modernism and Nation Building* (University of Washington Press, 2001).

12 "Melike Hatun Camii Dualarla İbadete Açıldı [Melike Hatun Mosque opened with prayers]," Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, October 27, 2017.

13 Umut Uzer, "Mosque Construction as Nation-Building: The case of Turkey," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 15, no. 4 (2024): 427–444.

14 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria," *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 3 (2018): 1–25.

15 Kerem Öktem, "Architectures of domination? The sacralisation of modernity and the limits of Neo-Ottoman Islamism," in *Neo-Ottoman Imaginaries in Contemporary Turkey: Gendered Discourses, Agencies, and Visions,* eds. Catharina Raudvere and Petek Onur (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 125–153.

16 Gülrü Necipoğlu, "Anatolia and the Ottoman Legacy," in *The Mosque,* eds. Martin Frishman and Hassan-Uddin Khan (Thames and Hudson, 1994).

Zonguldak mosque. Photo by the author, 2023

Throughout the early Kemalist republic, mosques in Turkey were relegated to symbolic marginalisation: though most of them continued to serve as houses of prayer, the call to prayer was subdued and delivered in Turkish, and no new mosques were built until the late 1940s.[17] Kemalist modernity imagined its cityscapes without mosques. The current response to this programme is, as we have already seen, the exact opposite: mosques have now become omnipresent and taken on multiple layers of symbolism that go well beyond that of religious piety. In today's Turkey, mosques have come to represent a new, religiously framed Islamist modernity, rooted in Islamist readings of the Ottoman empire as the pinnacle of Islamic civilisation and Turkish statecraft. The architectural idiom through which this multi-layered symbolism is expressed is not surprisingly the high-imperial architecture of Mimar Sinan of the 16th century, when the Ottoman empire was approaching its political, military and cultural zenith. With some notable exceptions like the Taksim Mosque, the most representative mosque projects of the last decade were built in this style and chosen by President Erdoğan himself:

"When important symbolic projects are at stake, big projects, the ones that are associated in one way or another with the President, they all come in front of him. And the Reis [leader] looks at them and says: '[w]e should have a mosque with a large dome in the Ottoman-Seljuk style.' He will say this, whether it's the Çamlıca mosque or the central Mosque in Tirana. The dome is a must; Mimar Sinan is a must."[18]

17 Melek Kutlu Divleli, *Camisini arayan metropol: Yeni Camiler ve Aktörleri [A metropole in search of its mosque: New mosques and their actors]* (Pınar Yayınları, 2021).

18 Interview with Halil Ibrahim Düzenli, Vice-Dean of Samsun University's Faculty of Architecture, January 9, 2023.

High-imperial Ottoman mosque architecture by Mimar Sinan: The Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul's Fatih district (1550–1567). Photo by wikipedia, https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

The quote is telling in that it not only gives an insight into the hierarchical decision-making processes of the Erdoğan era but also unveils Islamist geo-spatial imaginations in which both Tirana and Istanbul share the same imagined geography.

Turkey's "Cities with Mosques" in the Balkans

Neither the political economy of Islamist domination nor the Islamist urbanism of the "cities with mosques, *ezan*, and spirit" can be easily exported or translated into actionable foreign policy points. I would argue, however, that grand mosque projects are nevertheless defining for Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans and beyond for two sets of reasons: they create opportunity structures for a wide range of actors from Turkey and the recipient countries, and they play a major role in the concretisation of the imagined imperial geographies mentioned earlier.

Large mosque projects create opportunity structures for multiple Turkish and local actors. In Turkey, Muslims donate great amounts of money to religious charity projects. A significant share of these moneys is donated to the Diyanet Foundation, which is a leading actor in the construction of mosques in Turkey and abroad. From construction companies like KOMAŞ İnşaat – closely associated with the Diyanet Foundation – to local subcontractors, from architectural offices like Hassa Mimarlik in charge of the Central Mosque in Tirana to several interior design bureaus, these projects create job and income opportunities. They also provide political benefits on several levels: for the AKP government, their groundbreaking and inauguration ceremonies are important political events that mark Turkish leadership, power, benevolence, and religious leadership. Whether in Turkey – the most lavish inauguration ceremony was that of Istanbul's Çamlıca Mosque in May 2019, attended

Istanbul's Çamlıca Mosque. Photo by the author, 2020

by several foreign dignitaries, including the then President of Albania, Ilir Meta[19] – or abroad, these events are stages for elaborate political choreographies. The Tirana mosque project allowed Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama to deliver on a long-standing promise to the city's Muslims for an adequate prayer space, whose absence required worshippers to perform their Bayram prayers on Skanderbeg Square.[20] They also create opportunities for cash-strapped local Islamic communities in Albania and Kosovo, who lack the capacities to undertake such large-scale projects by themselves, to signal that they can provide for their community.[21]

Contestation and Functions of Large Mosques

The same projects, however, also elicit contestation both in Turkey and beyond: outside narrow AKP power circles, there is a general sense in Turkey that these mosque projects are not really justified on religious terms and that the funds invested could be better used elsewhere. Yet with Turkey's democratic space severely curtailed, this critique is not at the heart of oppositional politics. In both Albania and Kosovo, however, the mosque projects were discussed antagonistically and created contestations on several intersecting axes ranging from the symbolical and political to the aesthetic. In both Tirana and Prishtina, secular Muslims as well as Christians voiced concerns over the heightened visibility and audibility of Islam in what are understood to be secular republics seeking membership in the European Union. Turkey's lead role in the mosque project was met

19 "Büyük Çamlıca Camii Dualarla Açıldı [Great Çamlıca Mosque opened with prayers]," Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, May 3, 2019.
20 Interview with a former senior officer at the KMSh, December 3, 2023.
21 Ibid.

Prishtina Mosque and Cathedral. Photo by the author, 2025

with a sense of aversion against Erdoğan's imperial intentions. Finally, and again in both cases, initial architectural competitions delivered hypermodern structures developed by local architects that could easily have been interpreted to represent a future-oriented Islam free from the contested history of the Ottoman empire.[22] The projects that came to be realised in their stead did the exact opposite by symbolically re-establishing the frame of Islam in Albania and Kosovo (and more generally in the Balkans) as resolutely Ottoman and Turkish.[23] In their historicist aesthetics, the new mosques also follow the earlier Catholic cathedrals built in the 2000s in Prishtina and in the 1930s in Tirana in Romanesque-Revival style.

The new mosque in Tirana also embodies a notable rupture in the Turkish religious field and its impact in the Balkans. The inauguration was delayed by several years due to the AKP's fallout with the Gülen movement and its classification of the Islamic Community (Komuniteti Musliman i Shqipërisë, KMSh) as pro-Gülen. It was only in 2024 that Erdoğan gave the go-ahead, after a compromise was found that saw the Community appoint a new leader in 2024.

A different context emerges in Kosovo, where more than 250 mosques were destroyed by Serb forces and the post-war years were marked by large-scale reconstruction of mosques. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) was a major actor in the reconstruction of Ottoman structures in Prizren and Prishtina, while an Istanbul municipality

22 See Nathalie Clayer's paper in this issue.

23 The KMSh pushed for a more contemporary design, but the Diyanet Foundation did not accept any alterations. Not to jeopardise the realisation of the project, the KMSh did not pursue the issue further and instead insisted on the independence from Ankara of the mosque's governance. (Interview with a former senior member of the KMSh, December 3, 2023).

Inside the Xhamia e Namazgjasë. Photo by the author, 2025

realised the building of a new mosque in Mitrovica. Despite this comprehensive building programme, downtown Prishtina lacked a large central mosque capable of accommodating large congregations during major religious festivities. As in Tirana, there existed a tangible need for prayer space among practising Muslims, but also opposition, especially from nationalist quarters concerned about the symbolic messages such a large structure would convey to Europe. This debate is especially striking given that a large Catholic cathedral was constructed in 2007 without opposition despite the Catholic community's relatively minor share of 2–3 percent of Kosovo's overall population.[24]

What appears to be at stake, therefore, is a form of symbolic competition between religious projects, extending beyond architecture to broader civilisational frames. The so-called "return movement" – that seeks to convert Kosovar Muslims to what it presents as the original religion of Albanians – has intensified secular fears of new societal divisions in what has been a fragile polity.[25] In this context, the church is cast as a marker of a desired European future, while the Ottoman mosques of Prishtina's barely notable old town are framed as reminders of a rejected, non-European past. Such sentiments surface repeatedly in everyday encounters, as one interlocutor suggests: "Many people are becoming Christians. Sometimes, I also think of converting. In my mahalle [neighbourhood], in the old town are all the old mosques, and there is so much social control. Islam is the reason for all our major problems. I sometimes go to the church. It is nice there. It gives you a European feel."[26]

This civilisational narrative reaches its most explicit articulation in a response to an Instagram debate on the Prishtina mosque by a user with the telling username "Balkanski Inat": "This is what Gjergj Kastrioti Skanderbeg was fighting against."[27] The project for Prishtina's new mosque appears to respond to these rejectionist framings by situating the building outside the confines of "Ottoman" Prishtina and instead placing it in the Yugoslav-era neighbourhood of Dardania. Located only a few blocks away from the Catholic Cathedral, the mosque competes with the former in terms of representativity and visibility while surpassing it both in scale – of capacity and monumentality with prayer space for up to 7,000 worshippers[28] – and in scope – of symbolic ambition and functional reach.[29]

In Tirana, as well as in mosque construction projects more generally, the contestations and public debates usually die down after their inaugurations. With several cafes, a Turkish res-

24 "Turkey's gift of a mosque sparks fears of 'neo-Ottomanism' in Kosovo," The Guardian, January 2, 2019.
25 "A Move Toward Christianity Stirs in a Muslim Land", The New York Times, January 4, 2025.
26 Interview with a young man from Prishtina, who studied and worked in Turkey for ten years, July 9, 2025.
27 The username "Balkanski Inat" translates roughly as "Balkan Stubbornness," kos.data.
28 "Kosova Camii," Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı.
29 A project of Prishtina mayor Përparim Rama proposes a public square connecting the mosque and the cathedral, reporteri.net, September 22, 2025.

taurant advertising "halal food" in the street-level base of the building – rarely visibly announced in Albanian restaurants – and its alluring rose garden, it has become an unmissable part of the city's silhouette and a tourist destination in its own right. It also serves as a source of pride and magnet for the city's practising Muslims, located as it is across from the headquarters of the Muslim community and in direct vicinity of the much smaller Albanian parliament. For many, the new mosque re-establishes a balance between the Muslim community and the Catholic and Orthodox communities, who built comparably large temples already in the 2000s.[30] For others, it is an alien element that endangers Albania's European aspirations: "Albanians look to perëndim, to the West, not to the East. That's why people don't like the new mosque. There are calls to prayer five times a day, there is too much traffic, there is no need for this."[31]

The "Muslim Home" and the Turkish Imperial Gaze

Despite the debates on the mosques in Tirana and Prishtina and their moderately transformative impact on these cities, I believe that the most important foreign-policy-relevant effect of these large structures pertains to Turkish Islamists in general and to AKP foreign policy elites in particular, for whom these are more than symbolic expressions of temporal power. The grand mosques are the concretisations of an imagined imperial space that stretches outward from Turkey and, true to imperial imaginations, has no clear boundaries. It reaches well beyond the Balkans into parts of Western Europe, extends to Central Asia and Africa, and reaches the United States. In the eyes of AKP leaders, the mosques create a geography of legibility and intimacy through the common symbols of neo-Imperial architecture, through rituals of Islam, the presence of religious foundations, and ideally the presence of some Turkish speakers. The involvement of President Erdoğan and other AKP grandees in the groundbreaking and opening ceremonies adds another layer of relevance. In the Balkans, the imperial past and the neo-imperial present reinforce each other: here the local religious-architectural idiom is Ottoman, while the new mosques are also rooted in Ottoman models.

This imperial gaze is, by definition, misleading, as it flattens out a vast geography and a long and complex history. The billboard of the construction site of the central mosque in Kosovo, for instance, shows a rendering of the finished building not in front of the panorama of Prishtina but rather takes as background a suburb of Istanbul. This gaze, hence, allows AKP elites and members of the public in Turkey to experience the world through this self-referential imperial framework. At the inauguration of the Çamlıca Mosque, which now effectively dominates an important part of Istanbul's skyline, President Erdoğan demonstrated this larger framework: "Our places of worship were constructed in grandeur and magnificence because [in this way] they add meaning to the cities in which they rise. Wherever there is a dome, a minaret, wherever our *ezan* blend into the firmament, without doubt, that place is a Muslim home."[32]

Seen from Ankara's new presidential palace, Tirana is now imagined as a Muslim home. This is not an empirical reality but a discursive and restorative construction of nostalgia. Restorative nostalgia mobilises mythic origins, unbroken continuity, and the fantasy of an "authentic" past; it aims to rebuild a lost (Muslim) home with little regard for what else has

30 Interview with a former senior official of the KMSh, December 3, 2023.
31 Interview with a shop owner in Tirana in the mosque's neighbourhood, November 27, 2025.
32 Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, "Büyük Çamlıca Camii Dualarla Açıldı [Great Çamlıca Mosque opened with prayers]."

happened in those lands ever since. In the AKP's vision, Ottoman sacred architecture becomes evidence of the authentic continuity of Ottoman Turkish presences. This framing primarily appeals to AKP elites who interpret a complex region through these reductionist categories and to segments of the Turkish public drawn to an unambiguous civilisational narrative. Beyond these constituencies, however, the new Turkish grand mosques function in highly differentiated ways, producing multiple meanings and effects in the local contexts in which they appear. Yet, unlike the original Ottoman mosques – which were embedded in an actual imperial apparatus – contemporary structures are the architectural concretisation of an *imperial gaze*, a discursive imagination that creates but a semblance of empire.

Analyse

Elif Becan

Neo- or Post-Ottoman?

Rethinking Turkey's Presence in the Balkans Through the "Children of the Conquerors"

Abstract

Neo- or Post-Ottoman? Rethinking Turkey's Presence in the Balkans Through the "Children of the Conquerors"

This essay discusses the analytical utility of "neo-Ottomanism" by tracing the historical roots of Turkish influence in the Balkans. Drawing on archival sources, it explores the evolving meaning of *evlad-ı fatihan* (children of the conquerors), which was once a term of descent and has now become a strategic discourse in kin-state policy. I argue that Turkey's engagement in the Balkans is not a recent phenomenon but a pragmatic continuum of Cold War-era frameworks, exemplified not only by post-imperial migrations but also by the creation of specific public institutions. I suggest that frameworks dating back to the 1950s predate today's cultural diplomacy and investment strategies. In this context, "neo-Ottomanism" may be better understood not as a rupture but as an adaptation to evolving geopolitical contexts.

Elif Becan
is an Associate Professor of Turkish Studies at the University of Strasbourg. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Galatasaray University and a master's degree in History from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS). She earned her PhD in Political Studies from EHESS in 2021. Her research focuses on migration and nationality in the post-Ottoman space and is situated at the intersection of the socio-history of the state and international political sociology.

Contact: *ebecan@unistra.fr*
The article was completed in December 2025.

In 2021, I published a research article in the journal Balkanologie that examined the label *evlad-ı fatihan* ("children of the conquerors").[1] The term *evlad-ı fatihan* has been used, at least since the late 1990s, by Balkan homeland associations (göçmen dernekleri) in Turkey. The term itself dates back to the thirteenth century, when it originally referred to nomadic military groups in Rumelia. Over time, and particularly from the nineteenth century onward, *evlad-ı fatihan* came to denote Muslim defenders of the Ottoman legacy. The concept has re-emerged in the 1990s within the discourse of these associations. In contemporary Turkey, *evlad-ı fatihan* as a label is predominantly employed by Muslim men of Balkan origin, regardless of formal membership in homeland associations, to assert a regional, ethnic, and religious affiliation. The term constitutes a powerful discursive resource, as it frames Balkan immigrants to Turkey not as immigrants but as rightful returnees, descendants of Ottoman conquerors "returning" to Asia Minor. Therefore, it carries both nationalist and post-imperial connotations and is mobilized to claim social and political belonging within Turkish society.

The article was based on sociological fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2015 across several homeland associations in Istanbul. My observations and interviews indicated that the use of the label was not universal among Balkan communities. Rather, it was primarily adopted by those associations that emphasized Ottoman heritage and Islam as a marker of belonging. However, by the time the aforementioned article was completed in 2020, *evlad-ı fatihan* appeared to have evolved beyond an individual or associational discourse and to have gone through a change of scale. Accordingly, I argue in my conclusion that the growing prominence of this label could be linked to the AKP's neo-Ottomanist discourse and foreign policy orientation.

The Contemporary Evolution of *evlad-ı fatihan*

Since 2020, *evlad-ı fatihan* has become an explicitly politicized term. It is now employed across party lines to mobilize voters of Balkan origin in Turkey and to promote narratives aligned with Turkey's domestic and foreign policy objectives. Moreover, the concept has expanded semantically to refer not only to Balkan-origin populations within Turkey but also to the Balkans as a geography. The Turkish government, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in particular, has increasingly appropriated the term in both foreign and domestic political discourse. For instance, five days before the presidential election of 28 May 2023, Erdoğan posted the following message on social media:

"[…] Throughout history, Turkey has been a land of trust and refuge for every brother and sister who fell into hardship: Circassian, Tatar, Gagauz, Albanian, Pomak, Bosniak, Turkmen, Ahıska Turk, Uzbek, and Uyghur. With the motto 'wherever we have a citizen or kin, we are there,' we never left any of our brothers alone from Rumelia to the Caucasus. We reunited with all the countries with which we share a common history, language, faith, and culture. […] With TİKA and our General Directorate of Foundations, we revived ancestral heritage and restored our martyrdom sites. […] When floods struck Bosnia and Herzegovina and earthquakes hit Albania, we were the first to stand by our brothers and sisters. As a result of these efforts, we have continued without interruption for 21 years; after a century-long

1 Elif Becan, "Evlad-ı fatihan: Marking Conformability of Balkan Immigrants in Turkey," *Balkanologie. Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires* [online] 16, no. 1 (2021).

longing, we won the hearts of the evlad-ı fatihan. God willing, after May 28 [2023] we will continue to safeguard the legacy entrusted to us by the late Alija [Izetbegović]."[2]

Erdoğan's statement demonstrates the transformation of *evlad-ı fatihan* from a micro-level marker into a state-level political and ideological category. This rhetoric, which invokes "brothers and sisters" and shared faith and culture, aims to position Turkey as both protector and heir to an imperial legacy. This posture is reinforced through references to institutions such as the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) and the General Directorate of Foundations (Vakıflar Genel Müdürlüğü), which are presented as keepers of "ancestral heritage." The reference to *evlad-ı fatihan* confirms the concept's reconfiguration as a category of electoral mobilization as it is used as an appeal linking Balkan Muslim populations (in Turkey and in the Balkans) to the ruling party's political campaign. In this context, the label *evlad-ı fatihan*, even if it was a vernacular claim, indeed became an instrument of international and domestic political imaginary.

However, does this shift necessarily imply that the discourse should be categorized as "neo-Ottomanist"? Several keynotes and discussions held during the CEST Summer School 2023 in Venice, which addressed Turkish power projections in the Balkans through institutions and discourses implicitly or explicitly promoting Islam and Turkishness,[3] compelled me to reconsider my previous conclusions. The term "neo-Ottomanism" itself is neither analytically stable nor uniformly defined within the scholarly literature. It is not a native category,[4] and no political actor openly claims it as a policy framework. Rather, it functions primarily as an exogenous label mobilized by journalists, political commentators, and in the academic sphere.[5]

Some authors trace its intellectual genealogy to the liberal-conservative turn of the 1980s under President Turgut Özal.[6] Others attribute the articulation of a neo-Ottoman vision to Islamism.[7] The term was popularized with Ahmet Davutoğlu, particularly during his tenure as foreign minister in the AKP governments between 2009 and 2014. Yet Davutoğlu himself explicitly rejected this characterization and stated, "I am not a neo-Ottoman."[8] The concept's origins therefore remain ambiguous. The late historian Kemal Karpat, for instance, suggests that the term was first employed by Greek intellectuals in the aftermath of Turkey's 1974 intervention in Cyprus, although he does not identify a specific primary source.[9] The absence of a clear genealogy raises questions about the analytical coherence of the concept itself. It is applied simultaneously to Turkey's presumably renewed engagement with former Ottoman territories, but also to domestic politics, to the rise of Islamic conservatism and forms of pan-Turkism after 1980s, especially under the AKP. Then there is

2 Translated from X, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (@RTErdogan) Official Account, Published May 23, 2023, accessed May 11, 2025.

3 CEST Summer School 2023, Venice, August 6 and 14. Convened by Kerem Öktem (Ca' Foscari) and Elise Massicard (CNRS/CERI SciencesPo), Turkey and/in the Balkans: Turkish power projections, transnational Islam, and social linkages.

4 Hakan Yavuz, "Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision," *Die Welt des Islams* 56, no. 3–4 (2016): 444–457.

5 Editor's note: See also Dirk Tröndle, "Neo-Osmanismus: Fiktion einer revisionistischen Außenpolitik oder politischer Kampfbegriff? Versuch einer Begriffsgenese," *SOM* 64, no. 1 (2024): 49–61.

6 Same, "The motives behind the AKP's foreign policy: Neo-Ottomanism and strategic autonomy," *Turkish Studies* 23, no. 5 (2022): 665.

7 Soner Çagaptay, "The AKP's Foreign Policy: The Misnomer of 'Neo-Ottomanism'," *The Washington Institute: Policy Analysis*, April 24, 2009.

8 Ahmed Davutoğlu, "I'm Not a Neo-Ottoman," interview by Altin Raxhimni, *BalkanInsight*, April 26, 2011.

9 Kemal Karpat, "Civil Rights of Muslims of the Balkans," in: Same, *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History: Selected Articles and Essays* (Brill, 2002), 524.

also the added effect of televised Turkish telenovelas exported to the Middle East, the Balkans, and beyond.[10] The term is hence used as a broad framework for analyzing Turkey's ambition to position itself as a regional power, and as a tool of soft power.

Yet precisely because it encompasses such a wide range of phenomena, neo-Ottomanism becomes a jack-of-all-trades. As a result, its analytical usefulness might be more and more questionable. In the case of *evlad-ı fatihan*, the question therefore becomes whether its politicization and scaling-up necessarily qualify it as neo-Ottoman discourse. Is it accurate to interpret *evlad-ı fatihan* and similar endogenous terms exclusively through this framework, or does such an interpretation risk overlooking their specific political trajectories? Moreover, is this discourse really new and inherently tied to the AKP era, or is it a part of older state practices and discursive repertoires?

This essay does not aim to answer these questions but to treat them as entry points to open a discussion. It first situates today's discourse within the Cold War era kin-state policies and the institutional landscape preceding the AKP. It then discusses the post-2000s reconfiguration of this repertoire through state institutions such as TİKA and the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and proposes a post-Ottoman reading of what is commonly labeled as Neo-Ottomanism. The main argument is that migration regimes and welcoming policies, combined with homeland associations, may have played a central role in shaping these frameworks.

Kin-State Institutional Practices and Narratives

As noted earlier, *evlad-ı fatihan* (children of conquerors) evokes descent from Ottoman-era military settlers in the Balkans. Although none of my interviewees declared that they were genealogically connected to these groups, this mobilized this discourse to talk about their migration as circular: from Anatolia to the Balkans and back to the "motherland." Within the discourse of Balkan homeland associations and Turkish state institutions, this narrative corresponds to what the historian Adriana Cupcea conceptualizes as a form of kin-state policy in her study of Turkish engagement in Dobruja, Romania. Cupcea shows that the Turkish state explicitly distinguishes between citizens who have emigrated to Western countries and populations categorized as "related communities" (akraba topluluklar), defined through shared religion, imperial history, and cultural heritage.[11] This distinction is institutionalized through the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), which operates under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and coordinates with state agencies such as the Diyanet, TİKA, and the Yunus Emre Institute. As Cupcea emphasizes, these institutions are tasked with strengthening Turkey's international image and sustaining political influence abroad.

In this context, *evlad-ı fatihan* could be understood as a label through which imagined affiliations are translated into institutional practice. It does not invoke imperial sovereignty but constructs a soft power tool grounded in historical linkages, which enables cultural diplomacy but also development aid or religious services, which are presented as obligations toward "related communities." Current practices may thus be seen as a transaction or as a form of remittance. Instead of migrants sending resources to the home country, the Turkish

10 Senem B. Çevik, "Turkish historical television series: public broadcasting of neo-Ottoman illusions," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 19, no. 2 (2019): 227–242.

11 Adriana Cupcea, "Turkey's Kin State Policy in the Balkans: The Muslim Community from Dobruja," *Contemporary Southeastern Europe* 7, no. 1 (2020): 50.

state directs material, cultural, and institutional support toward migrant-origin communities in the Balkans, where Muslim and/or Turkish-speaking communities still live, such as in North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Romania. This takes the form of mosque construction, cemetery restoration, educational projects, and diplomatic engagement. All these policies are enfolded with discourses on kinship but also historical obligation.

Although these policies are traced to the 1990s, and especially to the creation of TİKA following the collapse of the USSR, they actually have a much longer trajectory. Since the 1950s, Turkey has maintained an institutionalized apparatus for engaging Balkan populations through kinship and heritage. A notable example is the "Fifth Department" (5. Daire) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which consisted of four bureaus. They were responsible respectively for:

- Turkish minorities abroad (Muhtelif Memleketlerdeki Türk azınlıkları);
- Turkish properties and religious foundations abroad (Muhtelif Memleketlerdeki Türk emlâkı ve vakıfları);
- Cultural assets of Turkish minorities (Hariçdeki Türk azınlıklarının kültür varlığı); and
- Countering "subversive activities" against the Turkish Republic (Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ne karşı yıkıcı faaliyetlerle mücadele).[12]

The department was created in the context of Cold War geopolitics and was tasked with monitoring Turkish communities in socialist countries in the Balkans and Central Asia, while also overseeing the status of Ottoman-era heritage sites.[13]

Early institutionalization of such policies can be exemplified with a bilateral agreement signed between Turkey and Yugoslavia in the mid-1950s, for instance, which concerned the protection of Ottoman cultural property alongside other nationalized real estate of legal entities or emigrants.[14] Thus, long before the AKP or the emergence of the term "neo-Ottomanism," Turkey was already investing in heritage preservation, cultural diplomacy, and bilateral arrangements enveloped through shared history and kinship. It is also worth noting that Turkey is the only country that, throughout the Cold War, welcomed large-scale migration from both the Balkans and Central Asia, and hence from socialist states. During the 1950s and 1960s, however, these initiatives were not linked to imperial nostalgia but to navigating the political constraints vis-à-vis socialist regimes while maintaining influence over Muslim and Turkish-speaking populations.

This raises a question: was Turkey's engagement in the Balkans during the Cold War primarily shaped by alignment with Western geopolitical interests? And if so, is what is now labeled "neo-Ottomanism" a reconfiguration of Cold War-era strategies adapted to a post-bipolar world, or is it a fundamentally new ideological project? It is unclear whether certain dynamics were direct products of the Cold War or developments that simply

12 "Dışişleri Bakanlığı Merkez Teşkilatı" [Central Organization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs] in *Dışişleri Bakanlığı Yıllığı [Ministry of Foreign Affairs Yearbook] (1964 – 1965)*, 32–Ç [sic.].

13 İlker Aytürk, "The Flagship Institution of Cold War Turcology: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü [Turkish Culture Research Institute], 1961 – 1980," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* [Online], no. 24 (2017): § 38.

14 BCA (Republican State Archives, Ankara) 30.18.1.2/141.101.15: *Türk vatandaşlarına ait olup Yugoslav Hükümeti tarafından millileştirilen gayrimenkullere ait yapılan anlaşma ile eki protokolün imzası için Hariciye Vekaletine yetki verilmesi [Authorization of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to sign the agreement and the attached protocol regarding immovable properties belonging to Turkish nationals and nationalized by the Government of Yugoslavia]* (November 29, 1955).

unfolded during that period.[15] However, before the institutional expansion represented by TİKA and the Diyanet had occurred, Balkan homeland associations constituted one of the infrastructures of Turkey's regional engagement and anti-communist mobilization. Established between 1946 and 1950 with explicit financial and political support from the state, these associations were initially welfare intermediaries for migrants excluded from public assistance schemes. In the mid-1950s, they quickly evolved into interest groups that articulated social claims (such as recognition of pensions and diplomas), spread anti-communist discourse, and proposed themselves as mediators between Turkey and socialist states in the Balkans. Their integration into state diplomacy dates to a protocol signed in 1956 between Turkey and Yugoslavia to compensate migrants whose property had been nationalized between 1946 and 1948, and by the creation in 1962 of the Commission of "Estimation and Distribution" (Takdir ve Tevzi Komisyonu), which institutionalized cooperation between homeland associations and multiple ministries.[16] The associations explicitly mobilized kinship between Turkey and the Balkans in their discourses and participated in Turkey's Cold War strategic framework, which predates by several decades contemporary forms of kin-state policy.

These associations further reinforced state discourse through their narratives. In their written demands to ministries and to deputies in the 1950s and 1960s, but also in their magazines published after the 1960s, they explicitly articulated attachment to Turkey by insisting on a "return to the homeland" and being members of a "long-lasting Empire."[17] They did not challenge the state-defined "Turkishness" of immigrants, but they reiterated it. In this context, the state's delegation of social responsibilities to homeland associations resulted in the production and internalization of a post-Ottoman discourse. This may suggest that what is now called a "neo-Ottoman" imaginary may be the reactivation of an older narrative cultivated in part within state-supported migrant networks. The appropriation of *evlad-ı fatihan* as a denomination on the state level does not operate as a narrative of imperial resurgence but rather as a technology that links migration memory and current influence ambitions. It legitimizes Turkish presence in the Balkans as the "return" of kin rather than the return of empire.

New Post-Ottoman Imaginaries

This transformation is also periodized in the work of the political scientist Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu on Turkey-Balkan relations. She identifies 1991 as a major turning point and shows how, during the Cold War, the Turkish state increasingly relied on a language of religious solidarity, particularly under the Democratic Party government.[18] Anti-communism and alignment with the United States indeed reshaped the state's approach to Balkan Muslims, who were no longer categorized as minorities to protect, but as religious kin in need of rescue from "atheist regimes."[19] Baklacıoğlu argues that after the collapse of socialist

15 Justine Faure and Mario del Pero, "La guerre froide globale [The Global Cold War]," *Mondes* 18, no. 2 (2020): 9–30.

16 "Türk vatandaşlarına aidolup Yugoslav Federatif Halk Cumhuriyetince millîleştirilmiş bulunan mal, hak ve menfaatlerin tasfiyesi hakkında Kanun [Law Concerning the Liquidation of Property, Rights, and Interests Belonging to Turkish Nationals and Nationalized by the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia], no. 1135," *Official Gazette* no. 131612 (March 29, 1969).

17 See Göçmenlere Yardım Derneği Merkez Yönetim Kurulu'nun hükümetten talebi [The request of the Central Executive Board of the Association for Aid to Migrants to the government] *BCA* 30.10.0.0/123.788.7 (November 15, 1956).

18 Nurcan Özgür Baklacıoğlu, "Between neo-Ottomanist kin policy in the Balkans and Transnational Kin Economics in the EU," *Journal on Ethnopolitics and Minority Issues in Europe* 14, no. 3 (2015): 56.

19 Ibid.

regimes, this kin policy was reformulated and took the form of a cultural bridge discourse promoting cooperation, accompanied also by mobilization of legal innovations, such as dual citizenship put in place in the early 1980s, which enabled renewed economic, political, and electoral exchanges across borders. Contemporary kin-state policies may then be seen as reconfigurations responding to geopolitical contexts, within which *evlad-ı fatihan* emerges as a lucrative narrative of belonging.

It may be more accurate to describe what is often labeled as "Neo-Ottomanism" as simply post-Ottomanism, that is, the continuation of imperial imaginaries and infrastructures after empire. Institutions such as TİKA and the Diyanet, along with affiliated networks, work through political and socio-economic ties that predate the AKP period. They rely on migration routes, religious and historical narratives, and institutional infrastructures. The discourse of *evlad-ı fatihan* becomes a gateway within this institutional ecology as a resource that translates the existing presence of Turkey in the Balkans into a contemporary language of kinship. It helps to create a discourse within which state-led development and humanitarian programs can be interpreted as the fulfillment of historical, moral, and even familial obligations, and not as a foreign intervention. *Evlad-ı fatihan* may hence express a post-imperial mode of political imagination.

The historian Özgür Türesay similarly situates Turkish foreign policy since the 1990s within a longer historical trajectory shaped by the Ottoman Empire's encounter with Western imperialisms and by the geopolitical transformations following the end of the bipolar international order.[20] As the sole administrative and main financial successor state to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is not structured as a conventional nation-state and remains marked by its imperial past. Türesay argues that the political tensions visible since the 2000s reflect the reactivation of this imperial inheritance within a changing global environment, and Turkey's regional engagement expresses a search for autonomy in a multipolar world. These conditions might show why Ottoman references have remained politically productive within Turkey and why it continues to feed international engagement modalities of Turkey. In this perspective, the discourse of *evlad-ı fatihan* appears as a vocabulary through which state institutions and migrant networks articulate connection and influence in the Balkans.

Conclusion

Is the label *evlad-ı fatihan* an extension of kin-state policy? Is it an expression of post-Ottoman memory? Or has it become part of a geopolitical language shaped by global competition? I think that these questions invite further inquiry into the evolving role of Balkan homeland associations in post-1991 Turkey. They are visibly integrated in transnational municipal, economic, and entrepreneurial networks (especially in cities such as Istanbul, Ankara, and Bursa), and these organizations now aim to operate as intermediaries linking Turkish entrepreneurs with actors in the Balkans. The creation of BalkanTürksiad (Association of Balkan and Rumelian Businesspeople and Industrialists / Balkan Rumeli Sanayicileri ve İş İnsanları Derneği) in 2011 might also shed a light on this shift toward economic networking and brokerage. How have homeland associations evolved into instruments of economic diplomacy and informal foreign relations? How are narratives of kinship and return repurposed today to legitimate investment and partnership? It appears that Ottoman

20 Özgür Türesay, "Un impérialisme non colonial: Le cas ottoman [A non-colonial imperialism: The Ottoman case]," in *Histoire contemporaine des impérialismes (XIXe–XXIe siècles)*, ed. Nicolas Beaupré and Florian Louis (PUF, forthcoming 2026).

references remain politically useful to the Turkish state not because empire is being revived, but because its political and social infrastructures endure until today, especially through migration ties. This dynamic could be examined as "neo-Ottoman," "post-Ottoman," or something else entirely.

Analyse

Chiara Maritato

Between Realities and Representations
The Expansion of the Diyanet's Religious Services Abroad

Abstract
Between Realities and Representations: The Expansion of the Diyanet's Religious Services Abroad
In the past two decades, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) has evolved from a domestic religious bureaucracy into a global actor. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Turkey, Europe, and the Middle East between 2013 and 2022, as well as an analysis of Diyanet regulations and activity reports, this article explores how bureaucratization has both enhanced and limited the Diyanet's international mission. Shifting the analytical focus from soft power to bureaucratic rationalization, it argues that the expansion of religious services abroad is a double-edged process: while enhancing Turkey's global visibility and institutional coherence, it also fosters rigidity, routine, and symbolic performance. The article contextualizes the Diyanet's transnational operations within the framework of state–religion relations and Weberian bureaucratization. It contends that standardized procedures, hierarchical reporting, and short-term appointments allow for rapid and wide diffusion, but they often weaken local legitimacy and engagement, particularly within long-established diaspora communities.

Dr Chiara Maritato
is Senior Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Turin, Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, where she teaches Comparative Politics. She has been visiting researcher at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS) at the University of California San Diego, and the European Institute at Istanbul Bilgi University. She has authored a monograph and has published in various academic journals. Her research interests include EU mobility management, transnational religious actors and diaspora communities, religion, and gender issues in contemporary Turkey.

Contact: *chiara.maritato@unito.it*
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Introduction

The Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, hereinafter Diyanet) has functioned as a transnational state apparatus since the 1970s when imams were sent to Turkish-origin communities in Europe. Since the early 2000s, the institution underwent a bureaucratic expansion which mirrors the broader dynamics of what Bank and Karadag have termed the "Ankara Moment," highlighting Turkey's aspiration to assert itself as a prominent regional and global power.[1] The scale of this expansion is striking when considering Diyanet. By 2024, it employed 143,133 personnel and managed a budget of 2.4 billion USD. Moreover, the Diyanet's presence, which covered 102 countries in 2017, expanded to 130 countries by 2021[2] with hundreds of contracted personnel sent abroad each year – 565 in 2024 alone.[3]

These numbers, bringing the total to more than 2,000 persons stationed abroad annually should be attentively scrutinized as they refer to personnel directly employed by Ankara to serve abroad for a limited period of time. However, local personnel are also involved in the management of mosques and religious activities, and preachers from Turkey are hosted for seminars online or over a few days, making complex the definition of exact numbers. Furthermore, the perspective from which data are observed changes a lot: when divided between the total number of countries in which the Diyanet is present, the number of Diyanet personnel in a single foreign country is not great. Viewed from Ankara, however, where all countries and the workforce abroad are seen as flags on the world map, a different reality, resembling an expansionist *grandeur,* is produced. This article stems from the discrepancy between reality and its representation.

The plethora of state and para-state agencies, *in primis* the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), committed to projecting Turkey as an emerging power in the Global South, a defender of Muslim communities, and a promoter of South–South cooperation, is substantial and has been the subject of extensive research.[4] Twenty years on from the start of this period of overextension, it remains an open question whether the Diyanet is still in an expansionist phase or entering a post-expansion phase characterized by organizational saturation. What does an expansion of religious services reveal about Turkey's ambitions of a global posture? What are the challenges of sustaining such a vast bureaucratic apparatus?

So far, scholarly attention has mostly focused on the recipients of Turkey's international mission such as diaspora and kin communities. Research has emphasized the Diyanet's commitment to conveying state narratives and acting as a malleable tool for foreign policy, cultural diplomacy and soft power, as well as diaspora building.[5] Taking the bureaucratization process rather than soft power as the primary lens of analysis, this article contributes to a nuanced understanding of how the bureaucratic reorganization

1 André Bank and Roy Karadag, "The 'Ankara Moment': The Politics of Turkey's Regional Power in the Middle East, 2007 – 11," *Third World Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2013): 287 – 304.

2 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Faaliyet Raporu [Annual Activity Report] 2024* (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, 2025).

3 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı 2025 Performans Programı* (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, 2025), 22.

4 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria," *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 3 (2018): 624 – 48; Yohanan Benhaïm and Kerem Öktem, "The Rise and Fall of Turkey's Soft Power Discourse: Discourse in Foreign Policy under Davutoğlu and Erdoğan," *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey (ejts)*, no. 21 (December 2015).

5 Chiara Maritato, "Pastors of a Dispersed Flock: Diyanet Officers and Turkey's Art of Governing Its Diaspora," *Italian Political Science Review / Rivista Italiana Di Scienza Politica* 51, no. 3 (2021): 321 – 38; Senem B. Çevik, "Reassessing Turkey's Soft Power: The Rules of Attraction," *Alternatives* 44, no. 1 (2019): 50 – 71; Öztürk and Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool".

has enabled the Diyanet to operate effectively as a transnational actor and the limits of such bureaucratic overstretch.[6] The article contends that, on the one hand, the bureaucratization of religious services abroad has been a driving force of the Diyanet's international mission. As for the Demiurge in Plato's philosophy that shapes and orders the reality without founding it *ex nihilo*,[7] the international religious services had a demiurgic effect as they succeeded in shaping a new development and a new vocation underpinning Turkey's grip for international affairs.

However, this bureaucratic overstretch may also contribute to the de-ideologization of practices, rendering them into powerless rituals performed by an enormous bureaucracy. This bureaucratization encompasses several dimensions. Firstly, it involves the assignment of personnel abroad according to clearly defined categories of countries: Western countries hosting Turkish diaspora populations, regions with kin communities such as the Turkic republics and the Balkans, and countries with broader Muslim populations in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Secondly, staff deployment is timebound, usually spanning one to three years, and is subject to close supervision by advisory offices (Din Hizmetleri Müşavirliği) and Attachés for Religious Services (Din Hizmetleri Ataşeliği) which are based in embassies and consulates.

Thirdly, religious officers' activities are standardized and codified, extending beyond sermons and Qur'anic instruction to include counseling, sociocultural guidance, and systematic reporting to Ankara. This top-down control creates a highly coordinated, yet potentially rigid, organizational structure. Services are repeated as ritualized practices and codified procedures that are evident in various local communities. As emerged during fieldwork, not only are the activities replicated in Austria, Sweden, and Italy with very few differences, but also Diyanet personnel are holding seminars abroad in different countries on the same topics.[8]

After presenting the theoretical and methodological premises, the article analysis alights on a) the institutionalization codified in Law No. 6002 (2010), which assigned the General Directorate of Foreign Relations the explicit mandate to deliver regular, coordinated, and professionally managed religious services to Turks, kin communities and co-religionists living abroad, and b) how a decisive move towards systematic bureaucratization brings tension between institutional representations of an expanding bureaucratic apparatus and the lived realities of such a global mission.

Approaches and Methodological Premises to the Diyanet's Religious Services Abroad

The inclusion of religious personnel within the state bureaucracy dates back to the Ottoman Empire and has been a defining feature since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923.[9] According to the social scientist Seyfettin Erşahin, the Republican concept of a religion implied that all religious affairs should be mastered by specialised people trained

6 Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (Harper Collins Publishers, 1989).

7 Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Hackett Pub Co Inc, 2000), 13–35.

8 Chiara Maritato, "Addressing the Blurred Edges of Turkey's Diaspora and Religious Policy: Diyanet Women Preachers Sent to Europe," *ejts*, no. 27 (December 2018).

9 Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

by the state and subject to state appointment and control.[10] The Republican ideology embraced sociologist Emile Durkheim's theory of labour division and professionalisation in order to complete the bureaucratisation of religious officials, who became state employees. The establishment of the Presidency of Religious Affairs in 1924 was part of a broader attempt to bureaucratise religious officials and overcome the Turkish state's anxieties and uncertainties in consolidating and extending its sovereign power through a vast bureaucratic apparatus. In this respect, sociologist Max Weber's[11] definition of bureaucratic power and the manner in which officials are appointed is clarificatory. According to Weber, bureaucratic power is characterised by competences derived from rules, laws, and administrative directives; hierarchy among the offices; documents (records) kept in copies by an apparatus of officials; specialisation of competence; and general rules known by the officials.

The bureaucratization and professionalization of religious affairs served both the early Republic's attempt to tame and control religion and the achievement of political objectives. Sunni Islam, administered by the Diyanet, was shaped as a moralising tool in the 1950s, and a unifying force for society in the 1980s and 1990s. Over the past two decades of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the religious bureaucracy has once again become functional within the system, with religious officers being granted new legitimacy and a prominent status in society. The last reorganisation of the Diyanet's structure in July 2010, by the means of Act No. 6002 paved the way for a new centrality. According to professor of law and politics İştar Gözaydın,[12] the Act legally shapes the organisation's structure requiring a reconfiguration of the department. The bill also affects religious officials' career opportunities: preachers and imams may become "senior" or "head" depending on merit and examination.[13] Access to the Diyanet's upper cadres requires at least ten years of academic lecturing, which theologian Ejder Okumuş describes as the emergence of an "academic religiosity".[14]

The increase in personnel,[15] from 71,693 in 2004 to 143,133 in 2024, also marks a change in terms of the education level and gender composition.[16] The new profile of religious officers answers the need to fulfil new duties and responsibilities and is thus functional for the expansion of religious services in terms of scope and scale. Moreover, the term "religious services" has been stretched to include "counselling", "guidance", and "sociocultural religious activities" reaching beyond the space of the mosque to hospitals, schools, orphanages, dormitories, and detention centers.[17] Since the early 2000s, this holistic approach to religious services has spread to Turkish-origin communities living abroad through the deployment of religious officers and religious activities.

10 Seyfettin Erşahin, "The Ottoman Foundation of the Turkish Republic's Diyanet: Ziya Gokalp's Diyanet Ishları Nazâratı [Ministry of Religious Affairs]," *The Muslim World* 98, no. 2–3 (2008): 182–98.

11 Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (University of California Press, 1978), 956–959.

12 Burçin Belge, "Prof. Gözaydın: Diyanet'te Yeniden Yapılandırma İçin Müzakere Şart [Prof. Gözaydın: Negotiations are Essential for Restructuring the Directorate of Religious Affairs]," BİANET, December 28, 2010; Iştar Gözaydın, *Religion, Politics and Society in Modern Turkey: 1808–2023* (Edinburgh University Press, 2024).

13 Thijl Sunier et al., *The Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs in a Changing Environment* (VU University Amsterdam and Utrecht University, 2011), 48.

14 Ejder Okumuş, "Turkey-Religiosity and the PRA," *The Muslim World* 98, vol. 2–3 (2008): 345–62.

15 Diyanet statistics online.

16 The number of female personnel increased from 2,696 in 2004 to 30,614 in 2024 (Author's elaboration from Diyanet Annual statistics and Activity Reports).

17 Chiara Maritato, "Expanding Religion and Islamic Morality in Turkey: The Role of the Diyanet's Women Preachers," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 13, no. 2 (2018): 43–60.

Although the Diyanet has sent religious officers to Europe for the occasion of Ramadan and religious feasts since 1971, it was during the 1980s that the activities of these officers abroad became more consistent.[18] In 1984, the Diyanet's General Directorate for Foreign Relations (Diş Ilişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü) was established and the Diyanet emerged as an official interlocutor in Europe, where it runs the majority of local Turkish mosques[19] and manages religious services through the network of the Counsellor's Office for Religious Services (Din Hizmetleri Müşavirliği), which opened in Germany in 1978, and the Attaché for Religious Services (Din Hizmetleri Ataşeliği), which are located in Turkish embassies and consulates in Europe, the USA, and Australia.

This level of international engagement has attracted the attention of scholars in both Turkey and EU countries,[20] emphasising how the official regulations governing male personnel (imams and preachers) "exported" by the Diyanet have evolved and are being reinforced through a proliferation of religious, social, and cultural activities since the 1980s. While the Diyanet had personnel in 29 countries in 2013, with attachés and councillors of religious affairs working within the consulates and the embassies of the Republic of Turkey, by 2021 the institution was providing services in 130 countries.

This article draws on extensive ethnographic research into the bureaucratization and professionalization of Diyanet religious officers in Turkey and abroad, conducted between 2013 and 2022.[21] It also relies on the analysis of official documents, annual activity reports and the regulations of the General Directorate of Foreign Relations (Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü) and the Department of International Education and Guidance (Yurt Dışı Eğitim ve Rehberlik Daire Başkanlığı) as well as interviews with religious officers and community representatives in Sweden, Austria, Italy, and Lebanon conducted between 2018 and 2024. The interviews were conducted in Turkish and all participants' names were anonymized. Taking a close look at religious practices abroad contributes to critically assessing Turkey's international ambitions and geopolitical projections and the use of religion as a foreign policy tool.

The Diyanet's Transnational Mission: A Bureaucratic Expansion

To understand how the Diyanet has become one of the most influential institutional representatives of Islam in Europe and beyond, overseeing the majority of Turkish mosques, it is essential to analyse the nature and political implications of its activities. This requires an examination of the various levels at which power operates in the processes of constructing, legitimizing, recognizing, and empowering targeted Muslim communities. As in the 1980s, the Diyanet is actively involved in controlling transnational political opposition, shaping policy discourse and influencing the formation of collective identities among diaspora communities. At the same time, initiatives aimed at building relations with other Muslim-majority countries, as well as perceptions of the Diyanet's policies among Turkish and non-Turkish Muslim groups, illustrate significant shifts in the institution's orientation.

18 https://disiliskiler.diyanet.gov.tr/sayfa/53/tanitim.
19 Thijl Sunier and Nico Landman, *Transnational Turkish Islam* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 46–56.
20 Zana Çitak, "The Institutionalization of Islam in Europe and the Diyanet: The Case of Austria," *Ortadoğu Etütleri* 5, no 1 (2013): 167–82; Maritato, "Pastors of a Dispersed Flock".
21 Chiara Maritato, "From Sit-Ins to Bureaucratic Seats: Absorbing Pious Women into Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2022): 923–942.

The Diyanet's international mission has expanded far beyond providing religious services to Turkish communities abroad. It now exercises a form of governance that integrates elements of social care and disciplinary control, closely aligning with philosopher Michel Foucault's concept of pastoral power.[22] While religious officers deployed overseas were previously primarily responsible for officiating rituals and religious festivities, they now also provide spiritual guidance, moral counselling, and community mediation in everyday life. This rearticulation of the pastoral function largely serves to consolidate loyalty to the Turkish state, particularly among women and younger generations. Since the early 2000s, the Diyanet's international growth has been dramatic both quantitatively and organizationally. This growth has also been closely linked to Turkey's foreign policy objective of creating a coordinated apparatus of global influence, in which religion functions as a means of building relations, promoting cooperation, and enhancing Turkey's image as a protector of Muslim communities.[23]

The establishment of the General Directorate of Foreign Relations (Law No. 6002, 2010) formalized the deployment of religious officers abroad and the management of overseas religious activities, introducing standardized procedures that transformed a previous network of offices assisting Turkey-originated communities living abroad. This highly centralized structure reflects a hierarchical definition and distribution of duties according to the countries in which religious services are provided. Officers are assigned to three categories of countries: 1. countries with significant populations of Turkish citizens and their descendants, primarily in Western Europe, 2. countries with affiliated or "kin communities," such as Turkic republics, the Balkans, and the Caucasus, and 3. countries with Muslim populations other than Turkish citizens and kin, including regions of the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In 2013, the Diyanet Regulations on the "Personnel to be Permanently Assigned to the Overseas Organization of the Presidency of Religious Affairs" and "Coordination of Religious Services Abroad" have defined the appointment of male and female staff abroad, as well as the coordination of all activities under the supervision of the Counsellor's Office for Religious Services (Din Hizmetleri Müşavirliği) and Attachés for Religious Services (Din Hizmetleri Ataşeliği), which are integrated into Turkish embassies and consulates.[24]

The same regulations clarify that religious officers are employed for periods of one to three years, and, as well as delivering sermons, reciting the Qur'an and holding seminars, they are asked to "conduct studies on individual and social behaviour arising from the religious, national, moral, social and cultural structure of the region in which the mosque is located, and to inform the attaché or coordinator office in writing".[25] By 2021, 52 advisory offices and 38 attachés offices were active abroad. In addition to religious services, religious education, meetings, and theology programs were fostered with a budget of 46 million Turkish Lira (ca. 900,000 €) allocated to overseas offices in 2020. The number of training programs abroad also increased from 160 in 2019 to 1,778 in 2023.[26]

22 Maritato, "Pastors of a Dispersed Flock".

23 Same, "Turkey as the 'Liberator' of Muslims in Europe: The Circulation of Islamophobia as a Political Remittance," *Partecipazione e Conflitto* 15, no. 2 (2022): 444–65.

24 *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yurt Dışı Din Hizmetleri Koordinatörlükleri Hakkında Karar [Decision on the Presidency of Religious Affairs Overseas Religious Services Coordination Offices]* (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, 2013); *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yurt Dışı Teşkilatına Sürekli Görevle Atanacak Personel Hakkında Yönetmelik [Regulation on Personnel to be Permanently Assigned to the Overseas Organization of the Presidency of Religious Affairs]* (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, 2013).

25 Ibid.

26 See: "Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı yurt dışında da büyüyor [The Presidency of Religious Affairs is expanding abroad]," Deutsche Welle, September 27, 2021.

Religious officers are then asked to send reports on activities, including the number of people reached, to the Ankara General Department. Officers' responsibilities extend beyond traditional religious functions and allow centralized oversight of activities and standardization of religious practices.[27] This hierarchical procedure, which includes continuous controls from Ankara, has been confirmed by preachers interviewed in Austria and Sweden. It is also consistent with the practices observed in local and provincial Mufti offices in Turkey, where regular inspections and reporting are conducted between the Ankara headquarters and local offices.

Standardization through ready-made offices has enabled the rapid diffusion of the Diyanet's religious services abroad, fostering the perception among external and competing actors, such as religious transnational movements, that the Diyanet is a powerful international actor. This mammoth bureaucratic body relies on its offices and attachés abroad, as well as its multiple communication channels, including YouTube, social media, and websites, which contribute to the dissemination of religious activities and the inauguration ceremonies for mosques, Qur'an schools, and guidance bureaus outside Turkey. These practices result thus as a material order made by a demiurgic power able to shape the idea of "Turkey as a global actor" and project such an image with a wide reach outside Turkey.

Religious Services Abroad: Limits and Challenges of a Bureaucratic Overstretch

This image largely reflects two decades of Turkey's foreign policy ambitions, marking a continuum between domestic and international affairs. The Diyanet's services have been standardized and institutionalized replicating a profound transformation that has taken place in Turkey. Examples include the opening of "Religious Counselling and Guidance Offices" (Irşad ve Rehberlik Bürolari) and "Family Offices" in European cities modelled on those established in Turkey in the early 2000s.[28] On a similar note, Diyanet publications used by religious officers for Qur'an exegesis, teaching, and sermons have been translated into various languages, to reach communities abroad. The text "My Morality" (Ahlãkım), which is used to teach the basic principles of the Islamic faith to young people is an example of this diffusion of standard practices and procedures *(see figure 1 on the next page).*

While this hierarchical and standardized approach contributed to creating a self-fulfilling international image, the bureaucratization of religious services also enhanced the perception among both staff and recipients of these services that they were trapped in a top-down mechanism with no say in the matter. Fieldwork in Europe and in the Middle East has highlighted two operational tensions. Firstly, the Diyanet's expansion has caused local communities to become detached, as they perceive the activities as heteronomous and predetermined. Secondly, religious officers struggle to establish stable relations with local communities due to temporary assignments and rigid hierarchical procedures. Top-down procedures have not encouraged horizontal regional cooperation and coordination among officers. Conversely, imams and preachers sent abroad referred to Ankara's remote control of activities, yearly programs and sermon topics as a kind of guideline that both marks the boundaries of their intervention and promotes a standardization of practices.[29]

27 Ibid.
28 Diyanet, *Guidance and Counselling Offices: Standardization Guidelines 2017–2024.*
29 Conversations with Diyanet preacher in ATIB Mosque in Vienna Brigittenau, November 29, 2017.

Fig. 1: **The Diyanet Religious Textbook "Ahlākım" Translated into Different Languages**

Source: Diyanet online publications.[30]

30 Diyanet Online Publications, https://dijital.diyanet.gov.tr.

During fieldwork conducted in the Lebanese city of Tripoli in 2022, the leader of Lübnan'da Türkmenler Derneği (Lebanese Turkmens Association) lamented that TİKA's restoration of the old Sufi shrine Al Takiya Al Mawlawiya was "Turkey's priority, not our priority", as they needed an office and a meeting hall more urgently.[31] Similar tensions also emerged during conversations with Diyanet officers sent to European countries. A preacher in Stockholm emphasized how she was perceived as "alien" when she first arrived in well-established diaspora communities and introduced her pre-planned program of activities. Gaining the trust of people when none were showing up in the mosques was frustrating for the preachers,[32] even though they could count on a powerful apparatus promoting their activities, including the network of embassies and consulates. Religious attaches in Turkish embassies coordinate the activities of Diyanet imams and preachers with the aim of reaching as many people as possible.

However, as religious officers are in charge for a limited period, the engagement with the local community is often based on the implementation of specific projects in formats that are replicated year after year. Furthermore, the direct link between Diyanet officers and diplomatic personnel complicates the relationship with diaspora or kin communities, as mosques and training activities appear to be spaces that support the Turkish government. Nevertheless, the plethora of activities and training courses offered through mosques abroad has not proved to be sufficient in terms of audience numbers. In the Diyanet's "2024–2028 Strategic plan" the intent to reach a larger public is stressed as a goal to engage 11,850,000 individuals through mosques and training services abroad by 2028, compared to 1,850,000 individuals in 2024.[33] Achieving this goal within four years seems unrealistic, as it would require a significant increase in the workforce and a substantial increase in activity levels. However, using online seminars more frequently and enhancing local branches could significantly increase public participation.

While a widespread bureaucracy ensures standardization, control, and institutional visibility, it is also exposed to local scepticism, disengagement, and the risk of symbolic, rather than substantive, influence. These "traps" reflect the inherent tension between centralized authority and grassroots religious engagement in transnational settings. The bureaucratization of the Diyanet's religious services abroad exemplifies a dual dynamic: it enables rapid expansion, consistency, and visibility, but it also creates structural rigidity that may limit genuine community engagement. Routine services reproduced like carbon copies risk transforming Islam into a symbolic instrument of social integration that perpetuates and represents a determined social order.[34]

Conclusions

Since the early 2000s, the internationalization of the Diyanet has encapsulated the paradoxes of a global bureaucracy, representing both an institutional expansion and the potential limitations of bureaucratic rationalization in transnational religious governance. Its global expansion has created a robust religious administrative apparatus

31 Conversation with the President of Lebanese Turkmens Association [Lübnan'da Türkmenler Derneği], Tripoli, June 12, 2022.
32 Conversation with Diyanet preacher, Stockholm Tensta Diyanet mosque, June 10, 2017.
33 Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, *2024–2028 Stratejik Plan* (Diyanet Işleri Başkanlığı, 2024), 16.
34 Pierre Bourdieu and John B. Thompson, *Language and Symbolic Power* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 166.

reflecting Turkey's ambition to moral, cultural, and political influence beyond its borders. However, the same bureaucratic mechanisms that facilitate this global presence could transform the institution's mission into the standardized performance of religious diplomacy, where efficiency and uniformity take precedence over local engagement and responsiveness. By categorizing religious services within standardized bureaucratic structures and exercising top-down control, the Diyanet has succeeded in expanding in a rapid timeframe. While the codification of procedures, hierarchies, and reporting systems has made the institution's overseas activities more coherent, this has been achieved at the expense of flexibility and genuine local engagement. Fieldwork research emphasizes how religious officers often encounter challenges regarding their legitimacy and acceptance within the communities they serve. They are often perceived as distant emissaries of Ankara rather than as locally embedded spiritual leaders. The temporary nature of their appointments and the dominance of centralized supervision further constrain the development of meaningful local relationships.

The bureaucratization of the Diyanet's international mission thus reveals a dual dynamic. On one level, it reflects the successful institutionalization of religion as a governing instrument to be combined with an ambitious foreign policy. On another level, however, it exposes the fragility of such a project when bureaucratic formality outweighs participatory substance. The very tools that enhance the state's capacity for global religious governance – standardization, control and hierarchical reporting – also generate distance, inertia, and symbolic repetition. In this sense, the Diyanet's global expansion can be understood as both a symptom of and a test for Turkey's evolving statecraft and the instruments employed to attain an international posture. Using religion as a foreign policy tool through a highly bureaucratic system indeed tests the tool's ability to be embedded locally. The institution's ability to maintain legitimacy and relevance abroad depends on its capacity to prevent bureaucratic rationalization from becoming increasingly performative – an emblem of state presence rather than an effective conduit of religious meaning.

Analyse

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

Beyond Soft Power

Islam and Turkey's Religious Statecraft in the Balkans

Abstract

Beyond Soft Power: Islam and Turkey's Religious Statecraft in the Balkans

This article interrogates Turkey's transnational religious engagement in the Balkans, showing how Islamic networks, institutions, and discourses have been strategically woven into its wider foreign policy repertoire. It argues that religion now functions as a flexible yet contested instrument of Turkish statecraft, enabling the government to project influence, perform cultural affinity, and sustain strategic linkages in a region historically tied to the Ottoman polity. Drawing on literatures on soft power, political transnationalism, and state-led religion, the article advances a mechanism-based framework – signalling socialisation and legitimation – to explain when and how religious initiatives translate into durable policy influence. Comparative case studies from Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia demonstrate that effectiveness hinges on institutional credibility, lawful embedding, and local elite brokerage.

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk
is a multidisciplinary social scientist working across public policy, social policy, political science, and International Relations, bringing a Global South lens and deep expertise in Turkey, the Balkans, and the Middle East. His award-winning research explains how power and legitimacy are built and contested, linking domestic governance to foreign policy and security. He has authored/edited eight books and 40+ peer-reviewed outputs, serves as Series Editor at Edinburgh University Press, holds ISA leadership roles, and engages policy and media such as UN, ELIAMEP, RUSI, BBC, CNN, and France 24.

Contact: *aerdiozturk@gmail.com*
The article was completed in February 2026.

Introduction

Over the past two decades, religion has moved from the margins to the very centre of Turkey's external projection. Under the AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi / Justice and Development Party), the blurred boundary between mosque and state at home has been exported abroad, with the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) elevated from a domestic bureaucracy to a transnational instrument. Via religious attachés, mosque construction, relief work and education, the Diyanet now sits at the heart of Turkey's religious soft power.[1] Nowhere is this more evident than in the Balkans – a region that combines a shared Ottoman legacy, overlapping cultural affinities, and enduring Muslim communities within plural political contexts.

Religion has long played a latent role in Turkish identity formation,[2] yet its integration into statecraft represents a significant departure from the staunchly secular, security-oriented diplomacy that characterised the early Republican and Cold War periods. The AKP's incorporation of Islamic idioms and cultural references into diplomatic practice aligns with what Öztürk has called "transnational religion-making": the mobilisation of religious networks and institutions for political legitimation and soft-power projection.[3] This evolving paradigm challenges the conventional separation between domestic and foreign policy, showing instead how religious governance mechanisms can be externalised to serve geopolitical aims. While proponents frame these policies as efforts toward mutual understanding and cultural diplomacy, critics interpret them as symptoms of neo-Ottoman revisionism,[4] blurring the line between cultural engagement and strategic influence.[5]

The Balkans function both as laboratory and litmus test for this new phase of Turkish statecraft. Sitting at the hinge of Europe and the Middle East, the region concentrates post-conflict societies, fragile democracies, and overlapping influence from the EU, US, China, Russia, and Central Asia. Here Turkey's religious, humanitarian, and educational initiatives – through signalling, socialisation, and legitimation – determine whether its outreach crystallises into durable influence or evaporates as fleeting symbolism. Yet the success of Turkey's religious engagement in the Balkans remains uneven. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, collaboration with the Islamic Community enjoys institutional depth and historical resonance but is marked by competition between the Diyanet and the Rijaset, which sees itself as the representative of all Bosnian – and more broadly, Balkan – Muslims. Periodic rivalry and misunderstandings over leadership have only recently settled into a fragile *primus inter pares* modus vivendi. In Kosovo and North Macedonia, religious initiatives broadly complement political and developmental ties, whereas in Serbia and Albania competing EU and Gulf influences, together with strong secular sensitivities, constrain Ankara's room to manoeuvre. Overall, the article argues that Turkey's hybrid, norm-laden but strategic use of religion is effective only where institutional credibility and local legitimacy align.

1 Kerem Öktem, "New Islamic actors after the Wahhabi intermezzo: Turkey's return to the Muslim Balkans," (Paper, European Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2010): 2–57; Aras Bulent and Zulkarnain Mohammed, "The Turkish government scholarship program as a soft power tool," *Turkish Studies* 20, no. 3 (2019): 421–441.

2 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Islamic political identity in Turkey* (Oxford University Press, 2003).

3 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Identity, Nostalgia and Religion: Making Sense of Turkey and the Balkan Relations in the Twenty-first Century," *International Journal of Religion* 4, no. 1 (2023): 49–65.

4 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the empire: The politics of neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford University Press, 2020).

5 Göktürk Tüysüzoğlu, "Strategic depth: A neo-Ottomanist interpretation of Turkish Eurasianism," *Mediterranean Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (2014): 85–104.

Institutional and Historical Background

The modern Turkish state has managed religion through a paradoxical model: formally secular yet never fully separating state and faith. Instead, it institutionalised Islam via the Diyanet (1924), which replaced the Şeyhülislamlık (the Sultan's chief religious authority) and functioned as a bureaucratic mechanism to standardise, supervise, and domesticate religion within the parameters of Kemalist modernity.[6] In this sense, the institution represented what the late sociologist Şerif Mardin described as the "centre-periphery" dynamic: religion was not expelled from public life but relocated under the strict guardianship of the state's central authority.[7] Throughout the Cold War, this statist configuration of religion ensured the regime's ideological coherence while containing potential challenges from Islamist or sectarian movements. Yet, Turkey's *laïcité* diverged from Western secularism in that it did not result in a neutral separation between religion and politics. Rather, it produced a "passive secularism" – a state-dominated religiosity that sought to control rather than exclude faith.[8] The Diyanet embodied this model by providing a standardised, Sunni-Hanafi interpretation of Islam and by integrating religious functionaries into the civil service. This model created a unique political theology of the Turkish Republic, one that fused bureaucratic rationality with spiritual authority.

The arrival of the AKP in 2002 marked a fundamental transformation in this relationship. Under the AKP, the Diyanet was reimagined as a vehicle for moral legitimation and geopolitical projection. The institution's budget expanded nearly tenfold between 2002 and 2020, and its mandate broadened beyond mosque management to encompass education, family counselling, humanitarian assistance, and international cooperation. This evolution represented not the dismantling of secular control, but its inversion: the Diyanet remained a state instrument, yet its ideological content shifted toward the religious ethos of the ruling elite.[9] Religion was no longer a threat to be contained but a resource to be mobilised – an essential pillar of the AKP's statecraft both at home and abroad.[10]

In this transnational expansion, the Balkans have occupied a particularly strategic place. Historically bound to the Ottoman world through religion, language, and trade, the region constitutes "the emotional geography" of Turkish foreign policy – a symbolic frontier where identity, history, and power intersect.[11] The Balkans serve as both a site of memory and a stage for influence: the restoration of Ottoman heritage sites, the funding of Islamic education, and the construction of new mosques (notably in Tirana, Prishtina, and Skopje) function as acts of cultural diplomacy and moral reclamation. These activities are often coordinated through the Diyanet and its affiliated NGOs, such as the Türkiye Diyanet Foundation (TDV) and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA).

Turkey's religious engagement in the Balkans rests on two main rationales. First, the region's shared Ottoman-Islamic heritage and enduring socio-cultural ties make it a receptive environment for Turkish religious diplomacy. Second, the Balkans provide a relatively

6 İştar Gözaydin, "Religion, politics, and the politics of religion in Turkey," in *Religion, politics, and Turkey's EU Accession*, eds. Dietrich Jung and Catharina Raudvere (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2008), 159–176.
7 Şerif Mardin, "Center-periphery relations: A key to Turkish politics?", *Daedalus* (1973): 169–190.
8 Ahmet T. Kuru, "Passive and assertive secularism: Historical conditions, ideological struggles, and state policies toward religion," *World Politics* 59, no. 4 (2007): 568–594.
9 Ceren Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey: From the Birth of the Republic to the AKP* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).
10 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish foreign policy tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria," *Politics and Religion* 11, no. 3 (2018): 624–648.
11 Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the empire*.

safe European arena in which Turkey can project soft power and perform its hybrid identity as both European and Muslim. Yet this outreach is uneven and contingent on host-state contexts. Bosnia's Islamic Community offers a natural institutional partner; Kosovo and North Macedonia largely welcome Diyanet support; whereas in Serbia and Montenegro, where Islam is a smaller, sensitive minority, Turkish activism is constrained and sometimes viewed with suspicion.

From a theoretical perspective, this evolution illustrates how institutional design mediates the relationship between religion and foreign policy. As Lord contends, the Diyanet exemplifies an "embedded theocracy" – a system in which the state retains control over religious authority while simultaneously outsourcing moral legitimacy to it.[12] This hybrid model enables flexibility: Turkey can present itself as a secular democracy to Western audiences while projecting a culturally Islamic identity in Muslim-majority regions. The Balkans, situated between these normative worlds, become an ideal testing ground for this dual discourse. The Diyanet's activities here function as both a continuity of historical memory and an experiment in post-secular diplomacy – one where religion operates as a *performative* expression of national identity within global politics. The Diyanet's institutionalisation of religion and its extension into the Balkans illustrate the adaptability of Turkish statecraft. The region's symbolic and cultural proximity makes it a key arena where Turkey reconciles republican legacies with neo-Islamic ambitions: Islam becomes both bridge and instrument, expressing a secular state's enduring reliance on faith-based governance.

Mechanisms of Religious Influence

Religious engagement rarely proceeds via formal treaties or coercion; instead, it works through symbolic, institutional, and normative channels that convert cultural affinity into political leverage. This article identifies three such mechanisms – signalling, socialisation, and legitimation – showing how, in the Balkans, Turkey's religious outreach under the AKP generates uneven but enduring forms of influence. *The first mechanism*, signalling, refers to the communicative dimension of religious diplomacy. International politics is constituted by the exchange of social signals that convey identity and intent.[13] Through mosque openings, Ottoman heritage commemorations and high-level visits, Turkey deploys symbolic gestures that signal solidarity and historical continuity. These acts speak outward to Muslim communities in Bosnia, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, and inward to an AKP electorate that imagines Turkey as Islam's protective centre, succeeding only when locals read them as authentic rather than hegemonic.

The second mechanism, socialisation, involves the institutional embedding of cooperation. Drawing on the notion of "communities of practice,"[14] socialisation refers to the process through which repeated interaction produces shared understandings and norms. Turkey's use of the Diyanet, TİKA, and NGOs such as the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı (The Turkish Diyanet Foundation) operationalises socialisation by building durable ties with religious elites, schools, and humanitarian organisations. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, sustained cooperation with the Islamic Community has normalised joint work in religious education, relief, and heritage, turning one-off gestures into routinised collaboration and creating mutual dependen-

12 Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*.
13 Alexander Wendt, "Constructing international politics," *International security* 20, no. 1 (1995): 71–81; Nicholas Greenwood Onuf, "Constructivism," in *World of our making*, ed. N. G. Onuf, (Routledge, 2012), 35–65.
14 Jason Hughes, Nick Jewson and Lorna Unwin, eds., *Communities of practice* (Routledge, 2006).

cies that survive political change. Yet socialisation is not neutral: exporting Diyanet's Sunni-Hanafi orthodoxy, advances "religious harmonisation" that can sideline heterodox or local traditions.[15] In the Balkans this dual dynamic – simultaneous inclusion and standardisation – surfaces in disputes over curricula, mosque governance, and clerical appointments.

The third mechanism, legitimation, pertains to the moral and political recognition that consolidates influence. Legitimacy is relational – it arises when power is accepted as rightful rather than imposed.[16] In Turkey's religious diplomacy, legitimation emerges when host societies perceive cooperation as reciprocal and beneficial. This perception is shaped not only by outcomes – such as scholarships, humanitarian aid, or infrastructure – but also by the alignment of values and expectations. When Ankara's initiatives resonate with local priorities, as in post-war reconstruction efforts in Bosnia or pandemic relief in Kosovo, they produce moral capital that outlasts government terms. Conversely, when projects appear to privilege Turkey's image over local agency, legitimacy erodes, constraining long-term influence.

Country Case Studies

Turkey's religious engagement in the Balkans emerges from the interplay of identity politics, institutional partnerships, and rival geopolitical narratives. While the Diyanet supplies the bureaucratic backbone, local reception varies sharply. The cases of Bosnia, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Albania, and Serbia show how signalling, socialisation and legitimation combine differently, generating distinct patterns of influence.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Institutional Convergence and Historical Affinity

Among all Balkan states, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the most receptive terrain for Turkey's religious diplomacy. The relationship is grounded in a powerful combination of historical memory, shared religious identity, and institutional symmetry. The Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Islamska Zajednica), with its well-established hierarchy and autonomy, serves as a structurally compatible partner for the Diyanet. This alignment allows religious diplomacy to operate through formalised channels rather than ad hoc networks. From a theoretical standpoint, Bosnia exemplifies a "community of practice."[17] Through sustained cooperation – scholar exchanges, imam training, humanitarian aid, and heritage restoration – the Diyanet and the Islamska Zajednica have institutionalised shared practices of religious education and social service. Projects such as the Ferhadija Mosque reconstruction and the Gazi Husrev-beg Library restoration symbolised Turkey as both benefactor and moral custodian, projecting a form of benevolence distinct from Western or Gulf actors. In Bosnia, legitimacy largely stems from the fit between Turkey's solidarity discourse and local post-war reconstruction narratives, reinforced by partnerships with the Islamic Faculty in Sarajevo and the Bosnian Islamic Relief Agency that deliver tangible outcomes. Yet credibility depends on local ownership: the Islamska Zajednica remains autonomous and at times resists theological harmonisation to preserve Bosnia's Sufi- and modernist-influenced traditions. Even so, shared Ottoman memory and convergent interests make Bosnia the Diyanet's most institutionalised and effective case of influence.

15 Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*.

16 Ian Hurd, "Breaking and making norms: American revisionism and crises of legitimacy," *International Politics* 44, no. 2 (2007): 194–213.

17 Emanuel Adler, "Seizing the middle ground: Constructivism in world politics", *European Journal of International Relations* 3, no. 3 (1997): 319–363.

North Macedonia and Kosovo: Constructing Legitimacy in Fragmented Polities

In North Macedonia and Kosovo, Turkey's religious diplomacy unfolds in fragmented and politically sensitive environments. Both states have complex ethno-religious mosaics and delicate power-sharing arrangements that render overt religious engagement politically charged, yet also create openings for symbolic diplomacy. In such settings, Turkey's role as cultural and spiritual patron offers recognition to Muslim communities seeking empowerment within contested nation-building processes. In North Macedonia, the Diyanet's partnership with the Islamic Religious Community (IRC) has focused on restoring Ottoman-era mosques, supporting Qur'an schools, and providing theological training. The restoration of the Mustafa Pasha Mosque in Skopje, largely financed by Turkey, is emblematic: it signals cultural continuity and moral solidarity with Albanian and Turkish Muslim minorities. However, internal divisions within the IRC – particularly between Turkish-speaking ulema close to Turkish and Albanian clergy seeking greater autonomy – complicate socialisation. This tension illustrates that transnational religious influence frequently collides with intra-Muslim pluralism and local claims to authority.[18]

Kosovo provides a more fertile ground for deeper engagement. Following independence in 2008, the new state required both material and symbolic support to consolidate legitimacy. Turkey's early recognition and subsequent humanitarian initiatives created goodwill that the Diyanet has since leveraged. Through the Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, Ankara has funded numerous mosque reconstructions, such as the Molla Veseli Mosque in Prizren, and offered scholarships for Kosovar theology students to study in Turkey. These practices institutionalise ties between clerical elites and foster a sense of religious kinship, reinforcing Turkey's image as a reliable ally. Yet, religious soft power is never politically neutral. Kosovo's secular constitution and its balancing act between Western sponsorship and Islamic identity generate a dual legitimacy structure. While Diyanet activities enhance Turkey's visibility at the communal level, they prompt scrutiny among European partners wary of "neo-Ottomanism," embodying the ambivalence of affinity.

Albania: Pragmatic Engagement amid Competing Influences

Albania occupies a distinctive place in Turkey's Balkan strategy. As Europe's first Muslim-majority state to institutionalise secularism, it represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the ruling powers in Turkey. The Diyanet operates within a plural religious field shaped by the Muslim Community of Albania (Komuniteti Mysliman Shqiptar), the Bektashi order and the lingering legacies of communist atheism. Here, Turkey's initiatives – mosque construction, clerical training, educational support – enter an already crowded arena of Gulf-funded NGOs, Saudi charities, and EU cultural programmes. The Namazgah Mosque project in Tirana, launched in 2015 and designed as the largest mosque in the Balkans, epitomises signalling in this competitive environment. It functions simultaneously as a marker of religious revival and a showcase of Turkish architectural modernity. Its scale and visibility assert Turkey's presence against both Arab and European competitors, projecting Turkey as a primary interlocutor for "European Islam."

Yet, the effectiveness of state-led religiosity depends on its compatibility with domestic secular norms. In Albania, where the state enforces religious neutrality and prioritises EU integration, overtly political expressions of Islam are discouraged. Turkey therefore leans more on socialisation than on rhetoric. Diyanet scholarships for Albanian students, imam exchanges, and outreach to the Bektashi World Headquarters exemplify a pragmatic

18 Lord, *Religious Politics in Turkey*.

adaptation to a plural and tightly regulated environment. By engaging both Sunni and Bektashi actors, Turkey performs a careful balancing act across confessional lines.

Even so, competition from Gulf states and the EU constrains Turkey's hegemonic ambitions. Gulf actors often offer greater financial incentives, while EU programmes align with Albania's pro-European aspirations. As a result, Diyanet influence is more transactional than transformative – sustained by economic links and cultural affinity yet bounded by Albania's secular orientation. Still, by anchoring itself in the infrastructure of Islamic education and welfare, Turkey secures a durable, if limited, foothold in a crowded field.

Serbia and the Sandžak Region: Limits of Influence in Contested Sovereignty

Serbia arguably presents the most challenging terrain for Turkey's religious engagement. The dominance of Serbian Orthodoxy and a powerful historical memory of Ottoman rule create a deeply ambivalent context for Islamic initiatives. The Diyanet's activities are largely confined to the Sandžak region, a predominantly Muslim area straddling southern Serbia and northern Montenegro, and are officially framed as humanitarian and cultural rather than political. Yet, legitimacy hinges less on declared intent than on perception: within Serbian nationalist discourse, even modest cooperation with Muslim institutions can be read as geopolitical intrusion.

Turkey's main counterpart in Sandžak, the Islamic Community in Serbia (IZS), has been riven by leadership struggles between Belgrade- and Sarajevo-oriented factions. Ankara's attempts to mediate underscore how fragile socialisation becomes in divided institutional fields. Projects in mosque restoration and theological training routinely face bureaucratic hurdles and public suspicion; the renovation of the Altun-Alem Mosque in Novi Pazar was delayed amid accusations of Turkish political designs.

This sensitivity is amplified by Serbia's wider balancing between the EU, Russia, and China. Russian Orthodox and state-linked cultural actors promote alternative civilisational narratives that cast Turkey as an outsider, blunting its signalling efforts. Still, Turkish vocational schemes and crisis aid sustain limited channels of contact. Influence, however, remains episodic and elite-dependent, lacking the institutional depth visible in Bosnia or Kosovo. The Sandžak case thus underlines a broader point: religious engagement requires not only shared faith but permissive political structures; where sovereignty anxieties and politicised pluralism dominate, socialisation falters and legitimacy remains elusive.

Synthesis: Patterns and Contradictions

Across these cases, a clear pattern emerges: Turkey's religious diplomacy thrives where institutional partners are strong, historical affinities are positive, and local regimes provide political space for engagement. Where these conditions are absent – such as in Serbia – religious initiatives encounter structural resistance. The comparative evidence thus supports constructivist accounts of influence as contingent on shared meanings rather than material asymmetries. Bosnia and Kosovo illustrate successful alignment of signalling, socialisation, and legitimation, producing sustainable partnerships. North Macedonia and Albania display partial convergence: effective signalling but fragile institutionalisation due to internal pluralism or external competition. Serbia represents the extreme case of signalling failure, where religion's symbolic capital is outweighed by geopolitical distrust.

Theoretically, these cases affirm that religious diplomacy operates through relational legitimacy – it succeeds when religious narratives are co-constructed rather than imposed. Faith-based engagement must resonate with local moral orders to be politically durable.

The Diyanet's Balkan experience thus reveals both the potential and the paradox of post-secular statecraft: religion can create bridges of solidarity, but only when mediated through mutual recognition and institutional compatibility.

Conclusion: Rethinking Religion as Statecraft

In Turkey's Balkan policy, religion is not a decorative add-on to foreign policy; it is part of the grammar through which influence is made intelligible and emotionally persuasive. The Diyanet's transnational activism illustrates a constructivist dynamic in which identities and interests are co-produced, with "Ottoman–Islamic heritage" mobilised as norm entrepreneurship: Turkey positions itself as the moral custodian of Balkan Islam and, in doing so, seeks leverage and the authority to define belonging. Religious symbols become diplomatic capital – soft power in Joseph Nye's sense, but historically charged and dependent on reciprocal recognition, not mere admiration. This is a post-secular mode of statecraft that reframes Islam as a civilisational language compatible with governance and humanitarianism, fusing *hizmet* (service) and *kardeşlik* (brotherhood) into a hybrid rationality that blends technocratic delivery with theological ethics. Yet the same model reveals its limits: state-managed religiosity may generate influence, but it rarely travels as pluralism. Exported through the Diyanet's Sunni–Hanafi template, institutional capacity can harden into bureaucratic orthodoxy, marginalising local traditions and provoking resistance where religious autonomy is strongly claimed.

Empirically, religious statecraft works only when three mechanisms – signalling, socialisation, and legitimation – reinforce each other. Bosnia and Kosovo show this synergy: symbolic gestures are matched by institutional partnerships and reciprocal recognition, embedding Turkey's narrative in durable networks rather than one-off performances. When one mechanism breaks, coherence collapses and policy slips into episodic symbolism. Faith-based diplomacy also carries ethical stakes, blurring conviction and interest, yet it can foster trust when religion operates as a shared interpretive framework rather than an ideology of dominance. Turkey's post-war engagement in Bosnia and pandemic relief in Kosovo suggest it can support reconciliation and capacity-building when grounded in reciprocity and respect for local agency, not paternalism.

The Balkan case therefore captures the dual character of contemporary statecraft: strategic yet affective, instrumental yet moral. Religion can serve as connective tissue between national identity and transnational legitimacy, but its impact remains contingent on negotiation and context. The Diyanet's shift from domestic regulator to transnational actor signals a wider transformation of sovereignty – toward normative governance and post-secular legitimacy. To rethink religion as statecraft is to move beyond secular–sacred and hard–soft binaries and treat religion as a relational infrastructure through which meaning, authority, and community are made in global politics.

Analyse

Amir Duranović

Restoring Heritage, Rebuilding Influence

Turkey's Role in Post-War Mosque Reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract

Restoring Heritage, Rebuilding Influence: Turkey's Role in Post-War Mosque Reconstruction in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This paper explores the role of the Republic of Turkey in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina, with particular emphasis on the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage. While Turkish involvement spans various sectors – the focus is placed on its cultural and religious engagement through mosque reconstruction. The study investigates key domestic and Turkish stakeholders who have shaped these restoration efforts, paying close attention to the motivations, collaborations, and power dynamics at play. Special emphasis is placed on the rebuilding of mosques destroyed during the 1992–1995 war, but also the accompanying changes in narratives and the revision of history.

Amir Duranović, Ph.D.
is Associate Professor at the University of Sarajevo, Department of History, specializing in modern and contemporary history. Author of three books and four edited volumes, he has lectured internationally and collaborates on regional and global projects.

Contact: *amir.duranovic@ff.unsa.ba*
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Following the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the violent conflicts of the 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) emerged as a fragmented post-war society in search of cultural and religious restoration and geopolitical reorientation. In this context, the Republic of Turkey intends to reassert itself as a key regional actor, deploying a form of soft power rooted in shared Ottoman-Islamic heritage, as argued by Kerem Öktem.[1] Turkey's multifaceted engagement in post-war BiH spans politics, economics, education, and infrastructure, yet its most emblematic role lies in the restoration of Ottoman cultural heritage. My main argument is that the ceremonial openings of restored historical sites reveal a deliberate performative dimension, where cultural diplomacy is enacted through ritualized displays of solidarity and historical continuity. Such practices underscore Turkey's strategic use of soft power to reframe Bosniak cultural history, embedding Ottoman-Islamic heritage within contemporary narratives of identity and belonging. Ultimately, these efforts illuminate how heritage restoration becomes a vehicle for diplomacy, shaping collective memory and reasserting Turkey's influence in the Balkans.

During the war (1992–1995), in addition to the immense human toll, the cultural heritage of Bosnia suffered irreparable damage. At the very outset of the conflict, in Sarajevo, the National Library and the Oriental Institute were set ablaze, resulting in the destruction of countless Ottoman and other manuscripts and archival materials of historical significance. In territories occupied and controlled by Bosnian Serb forces, mosques and other religious structures were systematically targeted and destroyed. Over the course of the war, the Bosnian Serb Army demolished 534 mosques, while the Bosnian Croat forces were responsible for the destruction of 80 mosques. Furthermore, more than 700 properties belonging to the Islamic Community of BiH were either razed or severely damaged.[2] In Banja Luka alone, 16 mosques were destroyed. Among them were the Ferhadija and Arnaudija mosques, both of which had been listed as protected monuments by UNESCO.[3] Architecturally, the 16th century Ferhadija Mosque ranked among the three most significant mosques in BiH, alongside the Gazi Husrev-bey Mosque in Sarajevo and the Alaca Mosque in Foča – of the latter two of which, notably, only the Gazi Husrev-bey Mosque in Sarajevo survived the war without being fully destroyed despite having been heavily shelled. Furthermore, the world-renowned Old Bridge in Mostar was also destroyed in 1993.[4]

Since the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in 1995, Bosnia and Herzegovina has undergone a complex and multifaceted process of post-war reconstruction, marked by efforts to rebuild infrastructure, facilitate the return of displaced persons, revive political institutions, and prosecute war crimes. Building upon the broader framework of international engagement in BiH post-war recovery, it is essential to highlight the distinctive role played by the Republic of Turkey over the past two decades. While numerous global actors contributed to reconstruction and stabilization, Turkey has emerged as a multifaceted partner – actively involved in security arrangements, economic investment, educational cooperation, cultural exchange, and the revitalization of tourism. The London Conference of December 1995 established the Peace Implementation Council (PIC) to oversee the Dayton Peace Agreement, uniting 55 countries and organizations to support BiH through aid, EUFOR troops, and operational involvement. On the PIC Steering Board, Turkey represents the Organisation of the Islamic Conference alongside major powers such as Canada, France,

1 See for example the contribution of Kerem Öktem in this issue.
2 Muharem Omerdić, *Prilozi izučavanju genocida nad Bošnjacima [Contributions to the Study of the Genocide against Bosniaks] (1992–1995)* (El-Kalem, 1999), 476.
3 Ibid, 15.
4 Zilha Mastalić Košuta, "Mostarski mostovi u ratu s akcentom na rušenje Starog mosta [Mostar's Bridges during the War with Emphasis on the Destruction of the Old Bridge]," *Slovo o Mostaru*, no. 5 (2022): 315–339.

Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK, the US, the EU Presidency (later the EU External Action Service), and the European Commission. Notably, Russia withdrew from Steering Board meetings in July 2021 and suspended financial contributions to the Office of the High Representative in February 2022.[5] Russia's formal withdrawal should be interpreted not only as a procedural step within the PIC framework but also as part of the wider dynamics of U.S.–Russia relations in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, where competing geopolitical interests continue to shape regional stability, as the withdrawal coincides with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Turkey's involvement, however, has been both strategic and symbolic, reflecting historical ties and contemporary diplomatic priorities and stands out in the domain of cultural heritage restoration. Unlike some other actors in the Balkans who have focused on constructing entirely new facilities, Turkey has prioritized the meticulous reconstruction of war-damaged historical and religious monuments. This approach has been particularly visible in BiH, where the emphasis on preserving architectural authenticity and historical continuity has reinforced local identity and memory. The restoration of Ottoman-era mosques, tekkes, bridges, and libraries – often in partnership with local institutions – underscores Turkey's commitment to cultural diplomacy and its unique position within the landscape of post-conflict reconstruction.

Turkey's engagement in BiH extends beyond cultural diplomacy, and while the European Union remains the country's dominant economic partner, Turkey's strategic projects – from highway construction to the revival of key manufacturing enterprises – illustrate its bid to weave Bosnia into broader regional supply chains and long-term development trajectories. Yet this approach is frequently contested by other regional actors who view Ankara's growing presence as a challenge to their own influence, and by local political debates and activist circles that question the implications of Turkey's economic and cultural footprint for Bosnia's sovereignty and identity.

Frequent debates surrounding the scope of Turkish investments in BiH are often framed within broader geopolitical dynamics, prompting Turkish ambassadors in Sarajevo to repeatedly emphasize the nature of Turkey's engagement – one that should not be narrowly reduced to cultural diplomacy or the restoration of religious monuments as derived from an analysis of public statements and interviews given by two distinguished Turkish ambassadors to Sarajevo, Cihad Erginay and Haldun Koç,[6] who through their articulate advocacy have outlined Turkey's strategic objectives in BiH, encompassing immediate developmental priorities and long-term regional aspirations. In the words of former ambassador Erginay, Turkey is "recognizing the centrality of Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal stability and external security to its future, and with the objective of expediting accession to the European Union (EU) and NATO, the country [Turkey] consistently seeks to provide a constructive contribution – whether by supporting initiatives undertaken domestically or by aligning with measures advanced under the auspices of NATO and the EU."[7] Such insights offer broader understanding of Turkey's multifaceted presence in BiH. Business forums illustrate pragmatic economic cooperation, while cultural initiatives – such as support for film

5 For details see: Peace Implementation Council – Office of the High Representative, n.d., accessed Noe vember 15, 2025.

6 "Turski ambasador: BiH je jedan od najvažnijih partnera na Balkanu [Turkish Ambassador: Bosnia and Herzegovina is One of the Most Important Partners in the Balkans]," Klix.ba, February 1, 2015; "Ambasaо dor Turske Haldun Koc: Brojke najbolje govore koliko je BiH posebna za Tursku [Turkish Ambassador Haldun Koç: Numbers Best Show how Special Bosnia and Herzegovina is for Turkey]," Klix.ba, October 18, 2017.

7 Klix.ba, "Turski ambasador."

festivals, book fairs, and heritage restoration – reflect broader patterns of soft power and educational collaboration.

Institutions like TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Diyanet, and the Yunus Emre Cultural Center, as well as the International University of Sarajevo, serve as platforms for academic and cultural interaction. Tourism, facilitated by increased flight connections, further strengthens people-to-people ties and regional mobility. Projects such as "*In the Footsteps of Evliya Çelebi*," named after a famous Ottoman travelogue writer, highlight how Turkish-linked institutions contribute to cultural tourism and heritage promotion, situating Bosnia within wider narratives of Ottoman legacy while also opening space for local reinterpretations and debate.[8] Scholarship on Southeast Europe and BiH has articulated critical perspectives on Turkey's involvement in the reconstruction of Ottoman heritage. These studies suggest that such initiatives function not merely as cultural preservation but as instruments of cultural diplomacy and soft power, with the discourse of "shared heritage" often marginalizing the plurality of historical narratives. At the same time, critical historiography emphasizes that heritage reconstruction ought to be guided by locally defined priorities and pluralist frameworks, rather than external narratives aligned with Turkey's strategic interests.[9]

The sponsorships supporting the implementation of projects such as "*In the Footsteps of Evliya Çelebi"* reflect a broader picture of Turkish actors actively engaged in BiH. Particularly noteworthy is the accompanying interactive map,[10] which highlights the various sites where Turkish institutions have been involved in different phases of reconstruction – whether schools, reading rooms, libraries, mosques, madrasas, bridges, or any other structure of significant cultural value to BiH. In this context, several restoration projects stand out, including the Sokollu Mehmed Paşa Bridge in Višegrad, the Alaca Mosque in Foča, the Ferhadija and Arnaudija Mosques in Banja Luka, the Sinan-Bey Mosque in Čajniče, the Alaca Mosque in Travnik, the Kızlar-Ağa Mosque in Mrkonjić Grad, noticeably almost all within the entity of Republika Srpska – since the majority of Muslim cultural and historical heritage in the mentioned territory had been completely destroyed, as well as other landmarks such as the Ottoman old bridge in Konjic (destroyed during World War II) and, interestingly, the birthplace of Alija Izetbegović in Bosanski Šamac.[11]

In conclusion, it can be stated that nearly all projects supported by Turkey have primarily been linked to the restoration of structures damaged during the war (1992–1995). This marks a significant distinction from certain other Turkish mosque construction initiatives across the Balkans. Nevertheless, it is important to note that Turkey has also partially supported the construction of new buildings, such as the headquarters of the Islamic Community in BiH in Sarajevo and the Kayseri Mosque in Goražde – both serving institutional purposes – meaning that they operate within the framework of the institutions of the Islamic Community, rather than outside the official structures governing the religious life of Bosnian Muslims. These two examples also diverge from the general tendency of Turkish involvement in the construction of Islamic buildings in BiH. The vast majority consist of reconstructions of war-damaged structures, whereas the abovementioned two represent new constructions. Yet their integration into the framework of the Islamic Community

8 Eyliyanın Izinde Bosna, accessed October 5, 2025.
9 Edin Hajdarpašić, "Out of the Ruins of the Ottoman Empire: Reflections on the Ottoman Legacy in South-Eastern Europe," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 5 (September 2008): 715–734.
10 Eyliyanın Izinde Bosna.
11 "Evliya Çelebi'nin İzinde Bosna-Hersek'te Osmanlı Eserleri [In the footsteps of Evliya Çelebi: Ottoman buildings in Bosnia and Herzegovina]," Eyliyanin Izinde Bosna, 2024.

demonstrates that, in these cases, there can be no discussion of establishing alternative institutions, but rather of supporting the existing Islamic Community.

Turkish-sponsored cultural initiatives reintroduced Ottoman aesthetics and narratives into the public sphere, often in collaboration with local Islamic communities in the Balkans. While welcomed by many, these efforts also sparked debates over cultural ownership, historical interpretation, and the politics of memory. Turkey's engagement in the Balkans has prompted varied scholarly interpretations, underscoring the need to approach such developments through multiple analytical perspectives. While some accounts emphasize religious diplomacy and heritage reconstruction, others highlight strategic and geopolitical dimensions. The edited volume "Turkey's Return to the Western Balkans: Policies of Religious and Cultural Diplomacy" highlights ongoing debates about how neo-Ottomanism is interpreted in the region. While Turkey's cultural and religious engagement is often viewed as a form of constructive outreach, other perspectives suggest that it may also be seen as a more assertive form of influence.12 Eldar Sarajlić draws attention to the limits of universal acceptance of Turkish-sponsored religious revival, pointing to local contestations and ongoing debates over cultural ownership that continue to shape the scholarship.13 These perspectives highlight the necessity of a more nuanced and pluralistic analysis – one that recognizes both the symbolic appeal and the contested reception of Turkey's presence in the region. Rather than privileging a singular narrative, such an approach allows for a deeper understanding of how religious, cultural, and political dynamics intersect in postwar Balkan societies.

Re-Writing History?

Turkey's neo-Ottomanist foreign policy in the Balkans, as described by M. Hakan Yavuz, uses cultural diplomacy and soft power to promote a selective memory of the Ottoman past – emphasizing tolerance and shared heritage while downplaying imperial domination – in order to reshape historiographies, project identity, and expand influence against competing nationalist and Western narratives.[14] Some other critics contend that these Turkish policies reflect a projection of Turkey's domestic identity agenda onto the regional, Balkan stage.[15] From a constructivist perspective, Turkey strategically invokes themes of historical justice and anti-colonialism to legitimize its growing regional influence.[16] Central to this approach is the politics of memory, which underpins the country's historical revisionism. In "*Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism,*" Yavuz examines how Turkish society selectively revives the Ottoman past as a counter-narrative to the secular present. Yet local resistance signals scepticism toward Turkey's motives, often perceived as covert expansionism. These frictions underscore the geopolitical significance of competing historical narratives in the region. Ultimately, Turkey's revisionist strategy functions as a contested instrument of influence, intertwining soft power with symbolic politics. While its

12 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Ina Merdjanova, eds., *Turkey's Return to the Western Balkans: Policies of Religious and Cultural Diplomacy* (Springer, 2023).

13 Eldar Sarajlić, "The Return of the Consuls: Islamic Networks and Foreign Policy Perspectives in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 11, no. 2 (1 June 2011): 173–190.

14 M. Hakan Yavuz, *Nostalgia for the Empire: The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism* (Oxford Academic Press, 2024), 18ff.

15 Janko Bekić, "Revisionism as a characteristic of authoritarian ex-empires: A case study of Turkish neo-Ottomanism (1990–2020)," *Međunarodne studije*, no 1 (2021): 127–144.

16 Iulia-Alexandra Oprea, "Turkey's Engagement in South Eastern Europe: Changing Religious Actors, Policies and Identity," in *Turkish Cultural Legacy in the Balkans: From Empire to the Republic of Turkey*, eds. Delia Roxana Cornea, Metin Omer and Emanuel Plopeanu (Editura – MEGA, 2023), 287–300.

imprint on Balkan historiographies is still under discussion both in Turkey and the Balkan states, it still remains a source of further debate and resistance.

Given the above, and particularly in recognition of examples that underscore Turkey's substantial role in the restoration of war-damaged Ottoman heritage over the past two decades in BiH, it is both reasonable and necessary to ask to what extent such influence seeks to shape alternative historical narratives within the Bosnian context. While a comprehensive analysis would require far more space than is available here, it is nonetheless worthwhile to draw attention to a compelling event that aligns with the trajectory of the preceding discussion. In what follows, I aim to demonstrate how a single case can illuminate emerging tendencies – or deliberate efforts – that may be interpreted as a form of revisionist engagement with Bosniak historical consciousness, caught between two imperial legacies: the Ottoman and the Habsburg.

In "*The End of Ottoman Rule in Bosnia*," Hannes Grandits explores the complex interplay of imperial and local actors during the turbulent transition from Ottoman to Austro-Hungarian control between 1875 and 1878. A particularly poignant case is that of Mufti Karabeg of Mostar, whose assassination in 1878 symbolized the violent ruptures within Bosnian Muslim society. Grandits situates Karabeg's death within the broader context of local resistance to Austro-Hungarian occupation, emphasizing how religious leaders like Karabeg were caught between loyalty to Ottoman authority and the pressures of emerging imperial realignments.[17] Grandits argues that Karabeg's murder was not merely a political act but a reflection of deep anxieties over identity, sovereignty, and communal leadership in a moment of imperial collapse. The author cautions against interpreting such events through nationalist lenses, instead advocating for a nuanced understanding of local rationalities.[18] Ultimately, Karabeg's fate exemplifies the tragic entanglement of religious authority and imperial politics at the end of Ottoman Bosnia.

The Haci Bali Mosque in Mostar, originally constructed in 1612, and the grave of the former Mufti Karabeg were restored and officially opened in spring 2025, as reported by Preporod, a newspaper belonging to the Islamic Community media network.[19] Its foundations were rediscovered during archaeological excavations conducted in 2010. The reconstruction of the mosque, along with the restoration of the nearby Opijač Tekke, was carried out with the support of the General Directorate of Foundations of the Republic of Turkey, with works executed by a Turkish company in collaboration with local companies from Mostar. Sinan Aksu, Director of the General Directorate of Foundations of the Republic of Turkey, emphasized that the preservation of these *waqf* (endowment) properties as "the trust of our ancestors, signifies the revival of the fundamental spirit of our civilization. All these efforts represent a profound expression of our respect for the spiritual values of our Bosnian brothers and sisters."[20] He also conveyed greetings from the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

17 Hannes Grandits, *Kraj osmanske vladavine u Bosni: Suprotstavljena djelovanja i imperijalna prisvajanja [The End of Ottoman Rule in Bosnia: Conflicting Agencies and Imperial Appropriations]* (UMHIS, 2023), 357, 382–383.

18 Ibid, 382.

19 "Uz Hadži Balinu džamiju, obnovljeni nišani i mezar glasovitog mostarskog muftije Mustafe Sidki Karabega [Restored Tombstones and the Grave of the Renowned Mostar Mufti Mustafa Sidki Karabeg, Next to Hadži Bali Mosque]," Preporod.info, accessed 5 October 5, 2025.

20 mursel, "Svečano u Mostaru: Obnovljena Opijačeva tekija, Hadži Balina džamija i nišani muftije Karabega [Ceremony in Mostar: Opijač Tekke, Hadži Bali Mosque and Tombstones of Mufti Karabeg Restored]," bosna.hr, April 26, 2025.

Mostar, April 2025, Mufti Karabeg Grave Tombstone.
From left to right: Mufti Salem Dedović, Sinan Aksu, former mufti Seid Smajkić, deputy Grand Mufti Enes Ljevaković. Photo: MINA, Preporod.info

The discourse surrounding the reconstruction of Ottoman heritage sites is strikingly framed in terms of shared ownership and collective legacy. Turkish officials consistently describe restored mosques and tekkes as "our" or "common" heritage, thereby embedding Bosnia's cultural memory within a broader Ottoman-Islamic civilizational narrative. This rhetorical strategy not only reinforces Turkey's soft power agenda but also shapes the symbolic politics of belonging and historical legitimacy in front of Bosnian counterparts. Still, it is not logistical support and greetings from President Erdoğan that matter in this regard – it was the speech of incumbent Mufti of Mostar, Salem Dedović, whose praise for Mufti Karabeg might spark further debates about collective remembrance and history among Bosnian Muslims.

Namely, Mustafa Sidki Karabeg emerges from this commemorative speech as a "towering figure of religious scholarship, moral integrity, and unwavering loyalty."[21] Characterized as a "mufti-warrior" and "honourable martyr", his legacy is inscribed not only on a restored *ulema* headstone but also in the collective memory of a community shaped by his intellectual and spiritual leadership. Appointed as Mostar's mufti at the remarkably young age of twenty-five in the mid-19th century, his acceptance of the role marked the beginning of a "life devoted to justice and Sharia", as described by Dedović. His scholarly credentials were affirmed by the highest authorities in Istanbul, yet he declined prestigious offers to remain in the imperial capital, choosing instead to serve "on the frontier of Islam in Herzegovina."[22] The reference is an important element of the discourse, as it situates the mufti's choice within a broader civilizational narrative of borderlands. By emphasizing the frontier, the speech underscores both the vulnerability and the symbolic importance of communities living at the edges of empire, where loyalty and sacrifice were seen as safeguarding the

21 Salem-ef. Dedović, "Obraćanje muftije Dedovića nad mezarom muftije i muderrisa Mustafe Sidki efendije Karabega [Address by Mufti Dedović at the tomb of Mufti and Muderris Mustafa Sidki Efendi Karabeg]," Muftijstvo Mostarsko, April 17, 2025.

22 Ibid.

Mostar, April 2025, Opening Ceremony, Haci Bali Mosque and Opijač Tekke.
From left to right: Mufti Salem Dedović, Senaid Zaimović, deputy Grand Mufti Enes Ljevaković, Sinan Aksu.
Photo: MINA, preporod.info

faith and the homeland. This framing not only elevates the mufti's personal devotion but also highlights how frontier populations were historically cast as guardians of Islam, bearing the burden of defence and continuity in contested spaces.

Through this narrative, he is elevated to a paradigmatic figure whose life exemplifies the highest ideals of loyalty, intellectual rigor, and spiritual courage. None of the aforementioned points are, in themselves, either contentious or problematic. The locus of debate arises primarily in the examination of both semi-official and official memory cultures within the Bosniak discourse from 1878 to the present, wherein figures other than Karabeg, individuals who actively resisted both the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires, and the Berlin Treaty articles regarding Bosnia, have been elevated, and continue to be celebrated, as heroic exemplars. Specifically, the resistance movement of 1878, understood as a fundamentally Bosniak-Muslim uprising against Austro-Hungarian occupation from the summer to early autumn of that year (even though up until the 1990s, Orthodox and Jewish, and to a lesser extent Catholic support for anti-Austro-Hungarian occupation was frequently interpreted within historiographical discourse as a form of collective "Bosnian-Herzegovinian" undertaking),[23] has been consistently emphasized in subsequent historiography, history textbooks, and commemorative practices as one of the pivotal sites of Bosniak self-reflection and contemporary identity formation.

Conversely, in the case of the restoration of the mosque and tomb in Mostar, commendations for the "wise conduct of Mufti Karabeg" come not from any individual, but from the

23 Rade Petrović, "Pokret otpora u Bosni i Hercegovini protiv austrougarske okupacije 1878. godine (prema izvještajima Talijanskog konzulata u Sarajevu) [The Resistance Movement in Bosnia and Herzegovina Against Austro-Hungarian Occupation in 1878 (According to Reports of the Italian Consulate in Sarajevo)]," in *Međunarodni naučni skup povodom 100-godišnjice ustanaka u Bosni i Hercegovini, drugim balkanskim zemljama i istočnoj krizi 1875–1878. godine, tom II [International Scientific Conference on the 100th Anniversary of the Uprisings in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Other Balkan Countries and the Eastern Crisis 1875–1878, vol. II]*" (Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 1977), 343–73.

Mostar, April 2025, Opening Ceremony, Haci Bali Mosque and Opijač Tekke. From left to right: Ćazim Hadžimejlić, Senaid Zaimović, Sinan Aksu, mufti Salem Dedović, deputy Grand Mufti Enes Ljevaković, Edhem Bičakčić. Photo: MINA, preporod.info

current mufti, a representative of the Islamic Community whose work actively shapes contemporary dynamics and the culture of memory. The context in which this praise appears further contributes to a different understanding of potential new directions in the reinterpreted view of the past. Karabeg's loyalty to the *caliph*, the *empire*, and the *homeland* emphasizes elements that together may be understood as a desirable narrative within a broader strategy of historical revision. The restoration of the Haci Bali mosque in Mostar, as well as the grave site of Mufti Karabeg, was supported by institutions of the Republic of Turkey and local Bosnian actors. The public address concerning Karabeg, delivered before Bosniak and Turkish officials, may also be interpreted as part of a broader strategy aimed at re-reading and reinterpreting the past.

Conclusion

Turkey's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina spans a wide spectrum. This multifaceted involvement reflects not only historical ties but also a deliberate regional strategy that positions the country as a focal point of Turkey's Balkan outreach. Unlike in other parts of the region, Turkey's approach in BiH has emphasized the reconstruction of war-damaged Ottoman-era monuments rather than the construction of entirely new religious structures. This approach reflects an effort to undo the ramifications of the war crimes constituted by the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage. Such efforts have contributed to the preservation of local identity and historical continuity, resonating deeply with post-conflict communities.

In the regional context, Turkey's presence is increasingly viewed as a stabilizing force, offering alternative models of cooperation and development. However, this role is not without its geopolitical implications. The European Union and several of its member states have occasionally interpreted Turkey's expanding influence as competitive, particularly in domains traditionally dominated by EU-led initiatives. BiH's unique historical and religious

landscape makes it especially receptive to Turkey's soft power, which blends cultural affinity with pragmatic diplomacy. Turkish-sponsored projects often operate in spaces where EU engagement remains limited or bureaucratically constrained. As a result, Turkey's role – though occasionally contested – has been mostly constructive, helping to fill gaps and foster resilience in Bosnia's fragile post-war society. Yet its active presence also underscores the need for a critical assessment of how Turkey's policies and ambitions interact with those of other external, but also local actors, reminding us that the future of the Western Balkans is shaped not only by cooperation but also by competing agendas.

Analyse

László Szerencsés

Einfluss ohne Kontrolle
Die Türkei und die Islamischen Gemeinden in Serbien

Abstract
Influence without Control: Turkey and Islamic Communities in Serbia
This article examines the limitations of Turkey's transnational authoritarianism in Serbia, with a focus on the country's Islamic communities. It argues that despite strong political ties between Ankara and Belgrade, Turkey failed to co-opt the dominant Muslim institution in Serbia between 2016 and 2021. The article demonstrates that the success of co-optation depends upon the targeted community's internal cohesion and its access to external support. The study finds that the Serbian political elites enabled selective repression aligned with Turkish interests. Yet the Novi Pazar-based Mešihat, embedded in Bosniak and Middle Eastern networks, resisted Ankara's influence. By contrast, the Belgrade-based Rijaset, lacking similar resources and legitimacy, became a willing partner. The article contributes to debates on transnational authoritarianism by highlighting the role of elite religious gatekeepers and the protective effect of ontological security (identity stability) in resisting foreign control.

László Szerencsés
ist Politikwissenschaftler und Postdoktorand am Institut für Türkeistudien der Stockholm Universität. Er promovierte im PhD-Programm Law and Politics an der Universität Graz mit einem Schwerpunkt auf der türkischen Außenpolitik in den Westbalkanländern, wofür er 2025 den Dissertationspreis der Fritz und Helga Exner-Stiftung erhielt. 2023–2024 war er Mercator-IPC Fellow am Istanbul Policy Center der Sabancı-Universität. Seine Forschung verbindet internationale Beziehungen, Autoritarismusforschung und Regionalstudien.

Kontakt: *laszlo.szerencses@su.se*
Der Beitrag wurde fertig gestellt im Januar 2026.

Im Jahr 2018 setzte die türkische Botschaft in Belgrad den Stadtrat von Novi Pazar im Süden Serbiens unter Druck, einen lokalen Beamten wegen angeblicher Verbindungen zur Gülen-Bewegung von seinem Posten zu entfernen. Der Vorgang steht exemplarisch für die Bemühungen der Türkei, seit dem gescheiterten Putschversuch von 2016 Personen im Ausland zu verfolgen, die sie mit der Gülen-Bewegung und damit mit den vermeintlichen Verantwortlichen des Putschversuchs in Verbindung bringt. Während Länder mit funktionsfähigen demokratischen Institutionen solche Interventionen in der Regel abwiesen oder rechtsstaatlich neutralisierten, kooperierten in Serbien politische Entscheidungstragende und staatliche Institutionen mit der Türkei. Gleichzeitig scheiterte die Türkei letztlich daran, die führende islamische Organisation des Landes mit Sitz in Novi Pazar zu vereinnahmen. Dies verdeutlicht, dass Ankaras Einfluss auf der politischen Ebene wirksam war, während er im religiösen Bereich nur partiell durchdrang.

Seit dem Amtsantritt der Partei für Gerechtigkeit und Entwicklung (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, AKP) im Jahr 2002 hat die Türkei ihren Einfluss unter sunnitischen Muslim:innen auf dem westlichen Balkan erheblich ausgebaut.[1] Nach dem gescheiterten Putschversuch von 2016, den die türkische Regierung dem muslimischen Netzwerk der Gülen-Bewegung zuschrieb, wurde dieses Engagement deutlich offensiver. Das Präsidium für Religionsangelegenheiten (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, kurz Diyanet) und die türkischen Botschaften begannen, über ihre allgemeine Unterstützung für lokale Muslim:innen hinaus, gezielt Gemeinschaften im Ausland ins Visier zu nehmen, denen eine Nähe zur Gülen-Bewegung zugeschrieben wurde.[2] Während manche islamischen Gemeinschaften kooperierten, regte sich in Bosnien und Herzegowina sowie Serbien Widerstand.

Warum ist es der Türkei nicht gelungen, die muslimischen Eliten Serbiens zu kooptieren? Die Türkei wird in der öffentlichen Debatte häufig als nahezu allmächtiger Regionalakteur beschrieben, der seinen Einfluss in Südosteuropa mühelos ausweitet.[3] Der Fall Serbien zeigt jedoch, dass dieser Einfluss dort an Grenzen stößt, wo lokal verankerte religiöse Institutionen über von der Türkei unabhängige Ressourcen, internationale Unterstützung und eine gefestigte Identität verfügen. Diese Grenzen des türkischen Einflusses lassen sich im Rahmen eines breiteren Phänomens verstehen, das in der Forschung als transnationaler Autoritarismus beschrieben wird, also als Versuche autoritärer Staaten, Bevölkerungsgruppen im Ausland zu kontrollieren.[4] Häufig treten die Türkei und die Eliten eines Gaststaates dabei in eine Patron-Klient-Beziehung ein, in der beiden Seiten besondere Vorteile zugesagt und gewährt werden, zum Beispiel die Schließung der Gülen-Schulen in Serbien im Gegenzug für türkische Investitionen.[5] Diese Form der Kooptation funktioniert am besten, wenn die politische Elite eines Gastlandes stark zentralisiert ist.[6] Der vorliegende Beitrag differenziert zwischen politischen und religiösen Eliten. Zugleich wird die ontologische Sicherheit – verstanden als stabile und anerkannte kollektive Identität – der muslimischen

1 Kerem Öktem, „Global Diyanet and Multiple Networks: Turkey's New Presence in the Balkans", *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 1, Nr. 1 (2012): 27–58.
2 Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, *Religion, Identity and Power: Turkey and the Balkans in the Twenty-First Century* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021); László Szerencsés, „Inclusion and Repression in Turkey's Diaspora Policies in Kosovo as a Tool of Loyalty Building in Religious Circles", *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 21, Nr. 2 (2021): 188–208.
3 Zia Weise, „Turkey's Balkan comeback", POLITICO, 15. Mai 2018.
4 Marlies Glasius, *Authoritarian Practices in a Global Age* (Oxford University Press, 2023).
5 Christopher P. Carney, „International patron-client relationships: A conceptual framework", *Studies in Comparative International Development* 24, Nr. 2 (1989): 42–55.
6 Jakob Tolstrup, „When can external actors influence democratization? Leverage, linkages, and gatekeeper elites", *Democratization* 20, Nr. 4 (2013): 716–42.

Religionsinstitutionen Serbiens als zentraler Faktor eingeführt, der kollektive Widerstandsfähigkeit ermöglicht.[7]

Die islamische Organisationsstruktur Serbiens ist seit 1993 institutionell gespalten. Dominant ist die in Novi Pazar angesiedelte Gemeinschaft, die organisatorisch mit der Islamischen Gemeinschaft in Bosnien und Herzegowina (Rijaset Islamske zajednice Bosne i Hercegovine, IZ BiH) verbunden ist. Sie stützt sich auf spirituelle und finanzielle Unterstützung aus Sarajevo, auf die bosniakische Diaspora und auf Spenden aus dem Nahen Osten, und reduziert dadurch ihre Abhängigkeit von Ankara. Demgegenüber steht eine kleinere, in Belgrad verankerte Institution, die der Türkei nähersteht und engere Beziehungen zum serbischen Staat pflegt. Obwohl ihr tatsächlicher Zugang auf Gläubige begrenzt ist, hilft sie Ankara bei der Überwachung von Gülen-nahen Akteur:innen und dient als diskursives Instrument, um eine Führungsrolle der Türkei gegenüber muslimischen Gläubigen in der Region zu signalisieren. Für das serbische Regime wiederum ist sie nützlich, um innerhalb Serbiens die Autorität der Sarajevo-gebundenen Organisation zu schwächen.

Die empirische Grundlage dieser Arbeit beruht auf qualitativem Material aus Primär- und Sekundärquellen, das vom Autor im Rahmen von sieben Monaten Feldforschung in der Türkei und vier Monaten in Serbien zwischen 2020 und 2021 erhoben wurde. Auf dieser Grundlage wird analysiert, warum die türkische Einflussnahme im religiösen Feld selbst bei weitgehender Übereinstimmung der Regimetypen auf politischer Ebene nur begrenzt erfolgreich war.

Der Kontext des türkischen Engagements auf dem Balkan

Seit dem Machtantritt der AKP im Jahr 2002 hat die Türkei ihre Präsenz auf dem westlichen Balkan deutlich erweitert. Anfangs wurde die Förderung lokaler muslimischer Gemeinschaften und Regierungen in den EU-Integrationsrahmen eingebettet und damit außenpolitisch legitimiert.[8] Im Verlauf der 2000er Jahre wurden die Diasporainstitutionen neu ausgerichtet, um eine religiös-kulturelle Gemeinschaft zu konstruieren, die über ethnische Zugehörigkeit hinausreicht und die Türkei als symbolisches Zentrum einer islamischen Zivilisationsgemeinschaft inszeniert.[9] Nichtstaatliche Partner spielten früh eine zentrale Rolle. Die Gülen-Bewegung, seit den 1990ern in der Region präsent, bot der AKP eine Infrastruktur zur Reichweitenvergrößerung und erlaubte es, das eher zögerliche, säkular geprägte Außenministerium zu umgehen.[10] Nach dem Putschversuch von 2016 zerbrach dieses Bündnis. Die religiöse Soft-Power der Türkei blieb bestehen, wurde jedoch durch Druck auf Partner überlagert, Gülen-nahe Institutionen zu schließen und Mitglieder auszuliefern.

Die Diyanet, eine staatliche Religionsbehörde, die seit der Gründung der Republik das religiöse Leben der sunnitischen Gläubigen in der Türkei organisiert, avancierte zum zentralen staatlichen Vehikel. Zwischen 2002 und 2013 wuchsen Budget und Personal erheblich. Die Behörde wurde zum Schlüsselwerkzeug innenpolitischer Umgestaltung der Gesellschaft

7 Nina C. Krickel-Choi, „State Personhood and Ontological Security as a Framework of Existence: Moving beyond Identity, Discovering Sovereignty", *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 37, Nr. 1 (2024): 3–21.

8 Dimitar Bechev, „Turkey in the Balkans: Taking a Broader View", *Insight Turkey* 14, Nr. 1 (2012): 131–46.

9 Ihsan Yilmaz und Nicholas Morieson, „Civilizational Populism in Domestic and Foreign Policy: The Case of Turkey", *Religions* 14, Nr. 5 (2023): 631.

10 Günther Seufert, „Überdehnt sich die Bewegung von Fethullah Gülen? Eine türkische Religionsgemeinde als nationaler und internationaler Akteur", *SWP Studie*, Nr. 2 (Dezember 2013): 14.

und außenpolitischer Diasporasteuerung. Nach 2016 übernahm sie explizit die Funktion, Diasporagemeinden zu überwachen und eigene Narrative zur Deutung des Putsches zu verbreiten.[11]

Dem Balkan kommt dabei aufgrund seiner geografischen und kulturellen Nähe besondere Aufmerksamkeit zu. Schätzungen zufolge haben etwa 30 Prozent der türkischen Bevölkerung familiäre Wurzeln in der Region.[12] Für viele muslimische Gläubige in den Balkanländern, insbesondere die bosniakische Volksgruppe in Serbien, fungiert die Türkei als symbolisches „Mutterland". Diese Rolle wurde durch familiäre Bindungen sowie die begrenzte Fähigkeit Bosnien und Herzegowinas, als Schutzmacht der bosniakischen Gemeinschaft in Serbien zu agieren, und die intensivierte türkische Diasporapolitik begünstigt. Gleichzeitig wurden die Grenzen der autoritären Diasporapolitik Ankaras sichtbar. Serbien gab dem Druck nach und schloss Gülen-affiliierte Schulen, doch andere Länder – wie Bosnien und Kosovo – verweigerten dies unter Verweis auf Rechtsstaat und Politikfolgen. Innerhalb muslimischer Gemeinschaften zeigte sich ein heterogenes Bild. Schwächere Organisationen, wie beispielsweise in Nordmazedonien und Kosovo, blieben eher im Orbit der Diyanet. Das IZ BiH als regionale Schlüsselinstitution hingegen bewahrte Skepsis gegenüber Ankaras Führungsanspruch und verteidigte seine Unabhängigkeit.[13]

Regimetyp-Konvergenz und Elitenkooptation

Die Türkei traf in Serbien auf ein kooperationsbereites Umfeld. Obwohl Serbien Anfang der 2000er formal demokratisiert wurde, blieben Akteursnetzwerke und gewaltsame Praktiken aus der Milošević-Ära wirksam. Nach Jahren demokratischen Rückschritts bewertete Freedom House im Jahr 2022 Serbien nur noch als „teilweise frei" und die Türkei als „nicht frei".[14] Während andere Staaten der Region, etwa Kosovo oder Bosnien und Herzegowina, ebenfalls nur als „teilweise frei" gelten, sind ihre politischen Systeme zu dezentral organisiert, um Gatekeeper-Eliten mit derart weitreichender Macht hervorzubringen, dass sie die Wünsche der Türkei unmittelbar umsetzen könnten. Ankaras intransparente, persönlichkeitszentrierte Außenpolitik traf jedoch in Serbiens stark konzentriertem, hierarchisch geprägtem Machtgefüge auf fruchtbaren Boden.

Die 2010er Jahre waren von der Monopolisierung politischer Macht in den Händen von Aleksandar Vučić und der Serbischen Fortschrittspartei (Srpska napredna stranka, SNS) geprägt. Vučić, vormals Informationsminister unter Milošević und Mitbegründer einer rechtsextremen Partei, wurde 2012 Vizepremier, 2014 Premier und 2017 Präsident. Nach außen als proeuropäischer Reformer auftretend, zentralisierte er de facto die Macht und marginalisierte die Opposition.[15] Die SNS baute breite Koalitionen auf, einschließlich kleiner Parteien, die allein kaum die Fünf-Prozent-Hürde überwunden hätten, zog sie in Abhängigkeit und etablierte sich damit als einziger Gatekeeper für externe Akteure.[16] Für

11 Bahar Baser und Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, „Positive and Negative Diaspora Governance in Context: From Public Diplomacy to Transnational Authoritarianism", *Middle East Critique* 29, Nr. 3 (2020): 319–334.
12 Dimitar Bechev, „Turkey's Policy in the Balkans: Continuity and Change in the Erdoğan Era", *SOM* 59, Nr. 05–06 (2019): 37.
13 Adnan Huskić und Hamdi Fırat Büyük, „Measuring Turkey's Contemporary Influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Myth and Reality", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies (SEEBSS)* 22, Nr. 1 (2022): 127.
14 Freedom House, „Countries and Territories", 2025.
15 Antonino Castaldo, „Back to Competitive Authoritarianism? Democratic Backsliding in Vučić's Serbia", *Europe-Asia Studies* 72, Nr. 10 (2020): 1617–38.
16 Claudia Laštro und Florian Bieber, „The Performance of Opposition Parties in Competitive Authoritarian Regimes: Three Case Studies from the Western Balkans", *European Political Science* 20, Nr. 4 (2021): 620–21.

Ankara besonders wichtig wurde der serbische Politiker bosniakischer Volkszugehörigkeit, Rasim Ljajić, dessen Pragmatismus und Vertrautheit mit islamischer Kultur ihn zum Mittler machten.

Nach Erdoğans Rede in Prizren im Oktober 2013, in der er postulierte, „Kosovo ist Türkei, die Türkei ist Kosovo", erreichten die türkisch-serbischen Beziehungen einen diplomatischen Tiefpunkt. Nach dem Vorfall intensivierte Belgrad die Investitionsanreize für ausländische Firmen, woraufhin türkische Unternehmen begannen, auf dem serbischen Markt Fuß zu fassen.[17] Zwar blieben türkische Investitionen im Ranking eher im Mittelfeld,[18] doch ihre flexiblen Geschäftsmodi harmonierten mit Serbiens klientelistischen Praktiken. Prominent ist die 2014 auf persönliche Vermittlung des türkischen Botschafters erfolgte Ansiedlung des Textilunternehmens Jeanci in Westserbien, die zwar wirtschaftlich bescheiden (120 Arbeitsplätze), politisch und symbolisch aber wichtig war. Vučić inszenierte die Eröffnung als Beleg, dass seine Regierung Investitionen in strukturschwache Regionen lenken könne. Diese Rhetorik pflegte er auch gegenüber der EU, China und den Vereinigten Arabischen Emiraten.

Die Elitenkooptation eröffnete den Weg für repressive Maßnahmen. 2018 wurde ein bosniakischer Funktionsträger des Stadtrats von Novi Pazar auf Drängen des türkischen Botschafters versetzt, weil er angeblich trotz ausdrücklichem Verbots Kontakte zu Gülen-nahen NGOs pflegte. Der Mann, offiziell zuständig für internationale Beziehungen, war eine inoffizielle Schlüsselfigur der Beziehungen der Stadt zu staatlichen und zivilgesellschaftlichen Akteuren in der Türkei.[19] Dass die Intervention griff, lag nicht an türkischem Druck allein. Novi Pazars Rathaus wurde von Ljajićs Partei dominiert, eingebettet in die nationale SNS-Hegemonie. Das unterstreicht, dass transnationale Repression im Gastland nur gelingt, wenn kooperative politische Eliten sie ermöglichen.

Machtzersplitterung unter Serbiens muslimischen Eliten

Auf der Ebene der religiösen Organisationen stießen die türkischen Kooptationsversuche auf Hindernisse, da das religiöse Feld gespalten war. Laut Volkszählung von 2022 leben in Serbien 278.212 Muslim:innen (ca. 4 %).[20] Rund 132.000 Bosniakinnen und Bosniaken, die sich überwiegend als muslimisch verstehen, leben in Novi Pazar, Tutin und Sjenica, den wichtigsten Städten der Region Sandžak.[21] Institutionell ist das Feld zwischen zwei rivalisierenden Gemeinschaften geteilt. Nach dem Zerfall Jugoslawiens 1992 entstand eine Spaltung innerhalb der muslimischen Gemeinschaft über die Frage, ob sie sich in religiöser und nationaler Hinsicht an Sarajevo oder an Belgrad orientieren sollte. Daher gründeten lokale Muslime und Musliminnen 1993 eine der Islamischen Gemeinschaft in Bosnien und Herzegowina (Islamska Zajednica u Bosni i Hercegovini, IZ BiH) angeschlossene Organisation mit Sitz in Novi Pazar. Ihr Leiter, Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, wurde später zu einem zentralen politischen Akteur des Sandžaks. 1994 wurde in Belgrad die Islamische Gemeinschaft Serbiens unter der Leitung des Mufti Hamdija Jusufspahić gegründet. Diese Gemeinschaft galt im Sandžak als Instrument des damaligen Präsidenten Slobodan Milošević.[22]

17 Interview des Autors mit einem türkischen Diplomaten, Belgrad, 4. Juni 2021.
18 Sabina Pačariz, „Foreign direct investment (FDI) as indicator of regime type: Contemporary Serbian – Turkish relations", *SEEBSS* 22, Nr. 1 (2022): 110.
19 Interview des Autors mit einem serbischen Bürger, Stadtrat Novi Pazar, Novi Pazar, 3. Juni 2021.
20 Mother tongue, religion and ethnic affiliation, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022.
21 Ethnicity. Data by municipalities and cities, Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2023.
22 Kenneth Morrison und Elizabeth Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2014), 182.

Um die religiöse Repräsentation zu zentralisieren, verlangte das Religionsgesetz von 2006 die Registrierung je einer repräsentativen Institution pro Religionsgemeinschaft. Der serbische Staat zielte darauf ab, die Islamische Gemeinschaft Serbiens neu zu organisieren, um Belgrad anstelle von Novi Pazar oder Sarajevo als geistiges Zentrum der muslimischen Gläubigen Serbiens zu etablieren. Im Jahr 2007 erhob die Belgrader Organisation ihren Status zum Rijaset der Islamischen Gemeinschaft Serbiens (Rijaset Islamske zajednice Srbije, IZS). Es war eine bewusste Statusangleichung an das Rijaset der IZ BiH.[23] Dies ist bedeutsam, weil das „Rijaset" in der hierarchischen Struktur der IZ BiH die oberste Ebene bildet. Geführt wird die Struktur vom Reisu-l-Ulema. Darunter ist das Amt des Muftis angesiedelt, das, in mehreren Ausprägungen, die Mešihats verwaltet, die autonomen territorialen Einheiten des Rijaset. Als Reaktion darauf gründeten Zukorlić und seine Anhänger 2007 in Novi Pazar das Mešihat der Islamischen Gemeinschaft in Serbien (Mešihat Islamske zajednice u Srbiji, IZuS) als eigene islamische Gemeinschaft (siehe *Tabelle 1*).[24]

Offiziell beruft sich Serbien auf seine säkulare Verfassung und erklärt, in diesen innerreligiösen Streit nicht eingreifen zu können. In der Praxis jedoch bevorzugen staatliche Stellen seit Jahren die in Belgrad ansässige Gemeinschaft IZS, während das in Novi Pazar ansässige IZuS weitgehend ausgeschlossen bleibt.[25] Sowohl das IZS als auch das IZuS werden stark von bosniakischen politischen Parteien beeinflusst, die von exklusivistischen ethnonationalen Vorstellungen geleitet sind und über die islamischen Gemeinschaften ihre politische Dominanz unter der muslimischen Bevölkerung Serbiens festigen wollen. Beide Organisationen beanspruchen Exklusivität. Beobachtungen vor Ort und übereinstimmende lokale Einschätzungen deuten jedoch auf eine Mehrheitsunterstützung für das IZuS hin, insbesondere im Sandžak, wo sich der Großteil der rund 250 Moscheen Serbiens befindet.

Tabelle 1: **Überblick über muslimische Religionsorganisationen in Serbien**

Institution	Sitz	Orientierung	Kurzbeschreibung
Rijaset Islamske zajednice Srbije (IZS)	Belgrad	De facto unterstützt vom serbischen Staat	Beansprucht die Vertretung aller muslimischen Gläubigen Serbiens, steht jedoch in enger Beziehung zu staatlichen Stellen; ist für türkische Akteure leichter zugänglich
Mešihat Islamske zajednice u Srbiji (IZuS)	Novi Pazar	Teil der Islamischen Gemeinschaft von Bosnien und Herzegowina	Stärker in der Bevölkerung des Sandžaks verwurzelt, verfügt über eigene Bildungs- und Finanzstrukturen sowie Unterstützung aus der Diaspora; skeptisch gegenüber türkischer Einflussnahme
Rijaset Islamske zajednice Bosne i Hercegovine (IZ BiH)	Sarajevo	Oberste religiöse Autorität für Bosniak:innen – auch in Kroatien, Serbien (IZuS) und Slowenien aktiv	Übt religiöse Aufsicht über die Gemeinschaft in Novi Pazar aus; wichtige Quelle symbolischer und institutioneller Legitimität für das IZuS

Quelle: László Szerencsés

Zwischen 2009 und 2014 versuchte die Türkei, zwischen den beiden Gemeinschaften zu vermitteln. Die Diyanet schlug ein Einheitsmodell mit Sitz in Novi Pazar vor, ohne den domi-

23 Morrison und Roberts, *The Sandžak: A History*, 184.
24 Jahja Muhasilović, *Turkey's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak (2002–2017)* (Union of Turkish World Municipalities / TDBB, 2020), 157.
25 Ivan Ejub Kostić, „Serbia", in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Bd. 7, Hg. Oliver Scharbrodt u. a. (Brill, 2016), 503.

nanten Mufti Zukorlić, was jedoch keine Seite akzeptierte.[26] Ankaras Balanceakt zwischen dem strategischen Staatsinteresse an guten Beziehungen zu Belgrad und dem religiös-kulturellen Interesse, die IZ BiH einzubinden, scheiterte. Das beschädigte die Beziehungen der Türkei zum IZuS, stärkte jedoch die Nähe zum Belgrader IZS.

Das Mešihat in Novi Pazar: Exklusion einer ontologisch gesicherten Gemeinschaft

Die Resilienz des IZuS gründet wesentlich auf Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, der die Institution in den 1990ern stärkte und später nationale politische Sichtbarkeit erlangte. 2012 gründete er eine Partei, die seit 2017 Partei für Gerechtigkeit und Versöhnung (Stranka pravde i pomirenja, SPP) heißt. 2016 koalierte er trotz enger Bindung an Sarajevo mit Vučićs SNS und zog mit zwei Abgeordneten ins Parlament ein. Seine Nähe zur SNS mag widersprüchlich wirken, doch im Sandžak gelten gute Beziehungen nach Belgrad als Schlüssel, um staatliche Mittel in die Region zu lenken. Zwischen 2020 und 2021 war er Vizepräsident der Nationalversammlung und in 2021 verstarb er überraschend. Die politische Kooptation band ihn, verlieh ihm aber zugleich Anerkennung als führende Stimme der Bosniak:innen in Serbien.

Seit dem gescheiterten Einigungsversuch mit der Belgrader Institution sind die Beziehungen zwischen der Diyanet und IZuS in Novi Pazar belastet. Mufti Dudić, der Nachfolger von Zukorlić, distanzierte sich grundsätzlich von der Diyanet:

„Die Diyanet unterstützt nur islamische Gemeinschaften auf dem Balkan, die ihr untergeordnet sind. Ich halte das für den falschen Weg. Wir sind eine Gemeinschaft mit langer Tradition. […] Es wäre viel einfacher mit Spenden aus der Türkei oder der arabischen Welt. Aber Unabhängigkeit und Autonomie haben einen hohen Preis."[27]

Bei näherer Betrachtung hebt Mufti Dudić vor allem die Fähigkeit der IZuS hervor, unabhängig von externen Akteuren zu funktionieren. Entscheidend für die ontologische Sicherheit des IZuS ist die spirituelle Verankerung in Sarajevo. Das IZ BiH verfügt über historische Kontinuität und Netzwerke aus Jugoslawischer Zeit, in der die Zugehörigkeit zur Bewegung der Blockfreien Staaten, den religiösen Austausch mit muslimischen Regionen erleichterte. Vor den 1980er Jahren begünstigte die türkische Innenpolitik die religiöse Ausbildung noch nicht in gleichem Maße, während die islamische Gemeinschaft Jugoslawiens bereits teilweise Nahost-orientiert war. Viele religiöse Eliten der Region studierten seit den 1960er Jahren in der arabischen Welt, zum Beispiel in Ägypten, Libyen, Irak, Kuwait und Saudi-Arabien. Zukorlić selbst schloss 1993 sein Studium in Algerien ab. Die im Jahr 1977 gegründete Islamische Fakultät in Sarajevo gewann Reputation durch diese Beziehungen.[28] Für das IZuS fungiert Sarajevo als transnationaler Referenzpunkt, der Ankaras Handlungsspielräume einschränkt.

Daraus entstanden Spendernetzwerke, auf die Sarajevo (und mittelbar auch das IZuS in Novi Pazar) bis heute zurückgreifen kann. Neben der Diaspora, unter anderem in Österreich und Frankreich,[29] finanzieren auch Organisationen aus den Golfstaaten und saudische Organisationen Moscheebauten und -restaurierungen. Zwei jüngere Projekte in Sjenica verdeutlichen diese Entwicklung. Erstens eröffnete 2025 das Islamische Zentrum Insan (Der Mensch) mit einer angeschlossenen Moschee, errichtet von der kuwaitischen

26 Jahja Muhasilović, „Turkey's Faith-based Diplomacy in the Balkans", *Rising Powers Quarterly* 3, Nr. 3 (2018): 77.

27 Interview des Autors mit Mufti Mevlud ef. Dudić, Mešihat, Novi Pazar, 1. Dezember 2020.

28 Štěpán Macháček, „European Islam' and Islamic Education in Bosnia-Herzegovina", *Südosteuropa* 55, Nr. 4 (2007): 401.

29 Ivan Ejub Kostić, „Serbia", *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Bd. 15, Hg. Ahmet Alibašić u. a. (Brill, 2024), 543.

Stiftung Insan und feierlich eingeweiht unter Präsenz kuwaitischer Delegationen und Flaggen.[30] Ein offizieller Instagram-Beitrag von Insan belegt, dass die Stiftung eigene Fundraising-Aktivitäten zur Finanzierung des Projekts in Sjenica durchführte.[31] Zweitens errichtete die kuwaitische Stiftung Iyha Turas zwischen 2020 und 2023 auf einem Grundstück des IZuS das Kuwaitische Islamische Kulturzentrum sowie die weiterführende Ghazi Isa Bey-Mädchenschule. Beide Projekte erfolgten in Abstimmung mit der kuwaitischen Botschaft in Belgrad und IZuS-Vorsitzender Dudić bestätigte öffentlich die Kooperation.[32] Diese Entwicklung trug zu einer religiösen Differenzierung zwischen den beiden Gemeinschaften bei. Obwohl die Spaltung zwischen IZS und IZuS ursprünglich politisch war, treten inzwischen auch religiöse Unterschiede hervor. Das IZS folgt dem von der türkischen Diyanet geförderten traditionalistischen Ansatz, während das Novi Pazarer IZuS stärker vom Islam der Golfstaaten beeinflusst ist. Die enge Verbindung zeigt sich auch in regelmäßigen Besuchen saudischer Koranrezitatoren (qari), die während des Ramadans besondere Abendgebete in Novi Pazar leiten.[33]

Zur Stärkung ihrer Autonomie unterhält das IZuS zudem ein eigenes Bildungssystem. Die präsente Gülen-Infrastruktur in Serbien war vergleichsweise klein und bestand aus einer Schule in Belgrad, einem Kulturzentrum in Novi Sad und zwei Vereinen in Novi Pazar.[34] Es ist schwer zu sagen, ob das Bestehen des Schulnetzwerks der einzige Grund dafür war, dass sich die Gülen-Bewegung im Sandžak nur begrenzt ausbreitete. Sicher ist jedoch, dass das IZuS und Zukorlić, anders als in Nachbarländern wie Kosovo oder Albanien, eine eigene Infrastruktur aufbauten und somit die Gülen-Schulen überflüssig machten.[35] In 2002 gründete Zukorlić die Internationale Universität Novi Pazar als erste Universität im Sandžak. Medresen, die religiösen Schulen zur Ausbildung von Imamen und Kindergärten, wurden besser ausgestattet und personell stärker aufgestellt als staatliche Einrichtungen.[36] Die Finanzierung stammte aus der im Krieg der 1990er entstandenen bosniakischen Unternehmerklasse, der Diaspora und Geldgebenden aus dem Nahen Osten. Das Eigenangebot minderte die Attraktivität externer Netzwerke wie der Gülen-Bewegung und der Diyanet, und erschwerte damit deren Eintritt.

Das Rijaset in Belgrad: Inklusion einer ontologisch unsicheren Gemeinschaft

Da die türkische Regierung über das Novi Pazarer IZuS keine Führungsrolle unter der muslimischen Bevölkerung Serbiens erlangen konnte, nutzt sie ihre engen Beziehungen zum serbischen Staat als indirekten Zugang zum religiösen Feld. Das IZS entstand 1994 als Belgrader Gegeninstitution zur Sarajevo-gebundenen Gemeinschaft. Sulejman Ugljanin, eine einflussreiche Figur der bosniakischen Politik im Sandžak und zeitweise im türkischen Exil (1993–1996), war zunächst dem IZuS verbunden, entwickelte sich später jedoch zur treibenden Kraft hinter der Belgrader IZS. Nach seiner Rückkehr 1996 verlor er schrittweise Einfluss an Zukorlić, der das Novi Pazarer IZuS konsolidierte. Ugljanins Partei der Demokratischen Aktion des Sandžaks (Stranka demokratske akcije Sandžaka, SDA S), büßte regional an

30 „Svečano Otvorena Džamija ‚Alija Ibn Ebi Talib' i IC ‚Insan' u Sjenici [Feierliche Eröffnung der Moschee ‚Alija Ibn Ebi Talib' und des Islamischen Zentrums ‚Insan' in Sjenica]", SandžakPress, 29. Juni 2025.

31 Insan_kwt, „The Serbia Islamic Center", Instagram, 28. August 2022.

32 [Auf Arabisch; „Iyha Turas vollendet Schulbau und eröffnet Kulturzentrum in Serbien"], Alanba, 1. Oktob ber 2025; [Auf Arabisch; „Iyha Turas plant den Bau des kuwaitischen Islamischen Zentrums in Serbien"], Alanba 26. Juli 2020; [Auf Arabisch; „Kuwaitische Wohltätigkeitsprojekte zur Unterstützung der Muslime in Serbien und Montenegro"], Mugtama, 19. September 2023.

33 Ivan Ejub Kostić, „Serbia", in *Yearbook of Muslims in Europe*, Bd. 12, Hg. Egdūnas Račius u.a. (Brill, 2020), 584.

34 „FETÖ'nün Batı Balkanlar'daki yapılanması [Das Netzwerk der FETÖ im westlichen Balkan]", Anadolu Ajansı, 1. Januar 2016.

35 Interview des Autors mit Mufti Mevlud ef. Dudić.

36 Muhasilović, *Turkey's Soft Power and Public Diplomacy in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Sandžak*, 151.

Bedeutung ein, und ihre Bindung an die bosnische SDA lockerte sich nach deren Säkularisierung ab 2001.[37] In Belgrad schwand Ugljanins Gewicht und er suchte externe Patronage, um wieder an Einfluss zu gewinnen.

Ugljanin hoffte, mit der Unterstützung des Belgrader IZS als staatlich anerkanntem geistlichen Zentrum und durch den passenden externen Akteur die Infrastruktur des Novi Pazarer IZuS zu übernehmen und so die politische Macht von Zukorlić zurückgewinnen zu können. Die Türkei bot sich als Patron an auch, weil ein Durchgriff auf das IZuS misslang und Ugljanin über türkische Diasporakontakte verfügte. Die Türkei erwies sich als nützlicher Akteur, da die Mehrheit der Bosniak:innen, auch die Gläubigen in den Moscheen des IZuS, Ankara gegenüber wohlgesinnt ist. Zugleich fehlte dem Belgrader IZS eigene materielle und institutionelle Stärke, weswegen es Legitimation von außen suchte.

Ein markanter Moment war 2019 die Verleihung der Menšura an Senad Halitović, Mufti des Sandžak-Zweigs des Rijaset, durch die Diyanet.[38] Historisch handelt es sich um ein osmanisches Ernennungsdiplom. Heute hat es keine formale Rechtswirkung, verleiht aber symbolische Autorisierung. Bei der Zeremonie wurden bosnische und türkische religiöse Lieder gesungen; der türkische Religionsattaché verlas eine Botschaft des Diyanet-Präsidenten Ali Erbaş. Der damalige Rijaset-Leiter Sead Nasufović betonte in einem Interview: „Die Menšura zu erhalten bedeutet, dass wir eine vollkommen legitime Organisation sind. So einfach ist das."[39]

Das Belgrader IZS strebt die externe Anerkennung aus der Türkei an und differenziert sich in seiner Selbstpräsentation klar vom Novi Pazarer IZuS. Vor Ort in 2021 bot sich ein deutlicher Kontrast: Das IZuS verfügte über einen sichtbaren Campus mit einer Medresa sowie einem Muftibüro, und Symbole arabischen Einflusses waren erkennbar. Im Gegensatz dazu war das Novi-Pazar-Büro des IZS klein und kaum erkennbar. In Räumen und Publikationen dominierte türkische Symbolik, wie türkische Flaggen und Logos der Diyanet. Seitdem wurde in 2022 das neue Verwaltungsgebäude des Belgrader IZS in Novi Pazar in Anwesenheit eines Vertreters der türkischen Diyanet eröffnet. Das Gebäude befindet sich gegenüber dem 2020 eröffneten Generalkonsulat der Türkei.

Zugleich instrumentalisiert Belgrad die Türkei zu innenpolitischen Zwecken. Serbiens Gatekeeper-Eliten profitieren von Erdoğans Präsenz, da seine Popularität im Sandžak Präsident Vučić hilft, Akzeptanz unter der bosniakischen Bevölkerung zu gewinnen und den Einfluss Sarajevos zu begrenzen. Auch das Belgrader IZS trägt zu Vučićs Legitimation bei: Sein ehemaliger Mufti, Muhamed Jusufspahić – erster serbischer Botschafter in Saudi-Arabien – bezeichnete sich offen als „serbischer Patriot" und betonte die Unabhängigkeit der serbischen Muslim:innen von Ankara und Sarajevo.[40] Sein Bruder, Mustafa Jusufspahić, dient als oberster Militärimam Serbiens. 2017 ließ sich Vučić in Novi Pazar an der Seite Erdoğans feiern – ein kalkulierter Versuch, trotz der islamfeindlichen Rhetorik der 1990er Jahre Anerkennung bei der bosniakischen Bevölkerung zu erlangen.

Auch wenn das Belgrader IZS dem Novi Pazarer IZuS an Popularität nicht überlegen war, erwies es sich als eine nützliche, von der Türkei beeinflusste und kooptierte Gruppe lokaler

37 Ebd., 152.
38 „Sancak'ın yeni müftüsü Senad Halitovic oldu [Senad Halitović ist neuer Mufti des Sandžak]", Anadolu Ajansı, 1. Januar 2019.
39 Interview des Autors mit Reis Sead ef. Nasufović, Rijaset, Novi Pazar, 31. Mai 2021.
40 „Jusufspahić: Ja pričam srpskim jezikom i jesam srpski patriota [Jusufspahić: Ich spreche die serbische Sprache und bin ein serbischer Patriot]", SandzakPress, 20. Oktober 2014.

Eliten. Das IZS liefert Ankara auch konkrete Gefälligkeiten. Auf die Frage nach dem Umgang mit der Gülen-Bewegung erklärte Reis Nasufović: „Ich habe mit einigen FETO-Vertretern in Belgrad gesprochen und ihnen gesagt, dass ich sie hier nicht sehen möchte."[41] Die Personen, die Reis Nasufović in den Moscheen des IZS nicht zuließ, waren türkische Staatsangehörige, die nach dem Putschversuch 2016 geflohen waren und einen Gebetsort suchten. Dies zeigt, dass das IZS, trotz begrenzter Ressourcen, die Erwartungen des externen Akteurs erfüllt, von dem es seine Legitimität als verlängerter Arm der Türkei bezieht.

Schlussfolgerungen

Der Beitrag zeigt, warum der transnationale Autoritarismus der Türkei in Serbien nur partiell erfolgreich war: Auf staatlicher Ebene erleichterte die Konvergenz der Regimetypen sowie die Zentralisierung politischer Gatekeeper den Zugriff auf Individuen und öffnete Räume für Repression und Kooptation. Auf Ebene der Religionsgemeinschaften stieß die Türkei jedoch auf resiliente Strukturen: Das Novi Pazerer IZuS ist durch symbolische Anerkennung (IZ BiH), materielle Ressourcen (Diaspora, Nahost) und institutionelle Infrastruktur (Bildungsnetzwerke) ontologisch gesichert. Diese Kombination ermöglichte Resistenz gegenüber externer Vereinnahmung. Das Belgrader IZS hingegen ist ontologisch unsicher: Geringe Ressourcen, abhängige Legitimation und enge Bindung an den Staat und die Diyanet machten sie empfänglich für Kooptation. Für Ankara ist es ein Instrument, um einen Führungsanspruch zu inszenieren, ohne damit die tatsächlichen Strukturen islamischen Lebens in Serbien zu dominieren. Für Belgrad ist es ein nützliches Gegengewicht zu Sarajevo, das die Steuerung eines sensiblen religiösen Feldes erleichtert.

Der Beitrag macht zudem deutlich, dass der Erfolg grenzüberschreitender autoritärer Einflussnahme nicht allein von der Nähe der Regimetypen abhängt, sondern auch davon, über welche Vermittelnde und Institutionen ein Akteur verfügt. Politische Eliten können Kooperation ermöglichen, doch religiöse Akteure folgen häufig einer eigenen Logik, die aus ihrem Selbstverständnis, ihren Ressourcen und internationalen Bindungen abgeleitet wird. Damit zeigt der Fall Serbien, dass selbst unter autoritären Bedingungen religiöse Institutionen über eigene Schutzmechanismen verfügen können, wenn ihre Identität nach außen anerkannt und materiell abgesichert ist. Künftige Forschung sollte deshalb eingehender untersuchen, wie lokale Strukturen, Netzwerke und historische Erfahrungen autoritäre Einflussstrategien von Staaten wie der Türkei abfedern oder umleiten können.

41 Interview des Autors mit Reis Sead ef. Nasufović.

Analyse

Lura Pollozhani

Rebranding Turkey from Soft to Economic Power and Security Provider

Abstract
Rebranding Turkey from Soft to Economic Power and Security Provider
This paper remarks upon a shift in perspective on the role of Turkey in the Western Balkans. It takes as a center the agency of the Western Balkans in the debate, not as a region to which things happen, but also a region within which things are happening. The article explores how the influence of Turkey has shifted from that of a soft power to an economic power and security partner and provider in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Looking at recent polls in the region and research done under the REUNIR project on the perception of external actors, Turkey emerges as a trusted partner. However, the countries of the region have also been changing, partly due to the prolonged EU enlargement process, and partly due to domestic shifts, marking a region which is open to autocratic tendencies, and as such, sees Turkey and its leadership as partners due to a similar way of looking at world politics. Thus, this article offers a new perspective as an initial step towards recognizing an important shift in perception and relations.

Lura Pollozhani
is post-doctoral researcher at the Centre for Southeast European Studies, University of Graz.

Contact: *lura.pollozhani@uni-graz.at*
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Introduction

The Western Balkans and Turkey have a long history indeed. Whether that of imperial Ottoman subjugation or neo-Ottoman fascination, the relationship between the two continues to be one of rivalry and friendship, with various repercussions for the domestic politics of the region. The Western Balkans have considerably changed over the past two decades. Nearly all of the Western Balkan six (WB6, consisting of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia), except for Kosovo, are EU candidate states, yet all of the countries have struggled with democratic consolidation. Semi authoritarian regimes have governed or continue to govern in North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia,[1] while Bosnia and Herzegovina struggles with post-war institution and state building. Throughout this journey, Turkey has been a present actor, albeit with varying degrees of influence. Turkey's influence in democratizing the Western Balkans was first crystallized by heightened cooperation with Ahmet Davutoğlu's policy of "Zero problems with neighbors" whilst he served as Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey from 2009 and later as prime minister as well (2014–2016).[2] After Davutoğlu's departure, the relationship between Turkey and the region has held, but not without changes reflecting both the events in the region, the foreign policy of Turkey and the domestic developments therein, and global geopolitical shifts, which will all be explored in this article.

With regard to the relations of Turkey and the Western Balkans, much research hinges on religion as a starting point, and on the neo-imperial (under various names) approach of Turkey towards the region. In this paper I aim to explore a shift in approaching these relations which also considers the political and societal development of the Western Balkans in response to contemporary geopolitical shifts. *First*, this paper explores one key proximity which has defined the last two decades of cooperation between Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans: relations of sameness. Namely, I explore how one indicator which explains the relationship between actors is not religion, but rather the personal relationships between leaders, particularly illiberal leaders or strongmen. This is not only showcased in the good relations that President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has had with illiberal leaders like President Aleksandar Vučić in Serbia and then Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Nikola Gruevski, and strongmen such as Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania. The relationships that these leaders develop are due to a similar worldview, or state view, whereby they are even willing to forego institutional mechanisms in supporting cooperation. *Secondly*, there is another aspect of proximity, that of Erdoğan as a steward of conservatism, which is a widely supported worldview in the countries of the Western Balkans, particularly among youth. As a result, Erdoğan is seen favorably, and cooperation with him is thus not politically costly. *Lastly*, Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans are all affected by geopolitical shifts which then inform the relations and perceptions that they have between each other. These three factors are not presented as a substitute of the explanatory power of religious proximity, rather as factors which reveal more nuance and get us closer to understanding the relations between the two.

The data in this article reflects research on the relations with Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans through articles written in magazines in English and local languages, survey data collected by the International Republican Institute, as well as the Friedrich-

1 Florian Bieber, *Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans* (Springer, 2020).

2 Kerem Öktem, "Turkey's Moment in the World: Davutoğlu and Neo-Ottomanism in Turkey's Foreign Policy," in *A Hundred Years of Republican Turkey: A History in a Hundred Fragments* by Alp Yenen and Erik-Jan Zürcher (Leiden University Press, 2023).

Ebert-Stiftung (FES). In addition, I will use data collected as part of the REUNIR project[3] on EU foreign policy in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Partnership countries. There is also data on foreign direct investments (FDIs) gathered by national statistics offices and the national banks of the relevant countries. All this data is factored in to reveal the nuances of the relationship that Turkey has with the region, as well as developments within the region itself.

Relations of Sameness

My first argument here is that while religion is an important tie that has been used by Turkey to strengthen partnerships in the region, the tie that has proved strongest is that of another sameness – autocracy. Namely, Turkey under Erdoğan has used religion to achieve political goals, and so have various leaders of the Western Balkans. The political scientists Bilge Yabancı and Dane Taleski have shown how religion is used by populist leaders in order to strengthen their grip on power.[4] Yabancı and Taleski analyse two different executive leaders, Erdoğan and Gruevski, and two different religions, Islam and Orthodox Christianity, yet the methods of using religion as an additional tool of legitimation are shared. In addition to being populist, both Erdoğan and Gruevski used similar methods to solidify their autocratic governance of undermining the system of checks and balances designed to balance their power, by using religion to legitimate their claims. Political scientists and analysts, Cengiz Günay and Vedran Džihić, too, note how parties in Turkey, North Macedonia and Serbia have consolidated their authoritarian tendencies by using religiously toned populist narratives[5] in the absence of any strong ideological foundations, a combination which is not exclusive to Turkey and the Western Balkans region but is also used by contemporary conservative forces in other contexts, including the US.

In terms of defining the proximity between Turkey and different countries in the Western Balkans, Erdoğan's visits to the region are a revealing indicator. Erdoğan has visited the countries of the Western Balkans 22 times in total, with most visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina (eight in total), followed by Albania and Serbia with five visits each.[6] State visits are important symbols as well as indicators of the closeness of the relations between countries, which is why they deserve close inspection. Rather than suggesting religious proximity, the visits can be argued to show another proximity entirely, that of leaders with illiberal tendencies. While the visits to Bosnia and Herzegovina certainly carry religious overtones, one can ask why North Macedonia and Kosovo, which have comparatively larger Muslim populations than Albania and Serbia, got only one and two visits respectively. Of note is the fact that Erdoğan visited North Macedonia only once in 2011 under the VMRO DPMNE government of Gruevski. Erdoğan's last visits in the region were in Albania and in Serbia in 2024. The former included the inauguration of the Namazgjah Mosque in Tirana whereas the

3 The data used for this report is based on Work Package Six of the REUNIR project which explores the perceptions of elites and citizens from the Western Balkans on external actors including the EU and Turkey, among others. The publications can be accessed here: https://reunir-horizon.eu/reunir-publicaations/

4 Bilge Yabanci and Dane Taleski, "Co-opting religion: How ruling populists in Turkey and Macedonia sacralise the majority," in *Religion and the Rise of Populism* by Daniel Nilsson DeHanas and Marat Shterin (Routledge 2020).

5 Cengiz Günay and Vedran Džihić, "Decoding the authoritarian code: Exercising 'legitimate' power politics through the ruling parties in Turkey, Macedonia and Serbia," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016).

6 The visits to the Western Balkans were researched with the help of ChatGPT 5.2 and were cross-referenced by the author for their veracity.

latter was a two-day state visit. The same countries were also visited in 2022 (along with BiH), leading one analyst to call them the "Bromance" visits.[7]

It is also worth following the money, particularly foreign direct investments. Turkey is the second largest single country that invests in the region, following Switzerland, in regional data for 2023.[8] The wording the Austrian National Bank uses is that "Turkish investments are determined by geographical and religious proximity",[9] taking this proximity as a given, when religious proximity is not a factor in three countries, Montenegro, Serbia and partly North Macedonia. If we look at the two countries that Erdoğan has visited most often in the last few years, Albania and Serbia,[10] one a Muslim majority country and the other a country with only a small Muslim minority, we can see that religious proximity, while present, is not a defining factor. Albania is currently a key beneficiary of Turkish investments as shown by the foreign direct investments where Turkey was the leading investor in the country.[11] The Namazgjah mosque was a 30 million EUR investment, and on Erdoğan's visit in Tirana he promised more cooperation and has already donated military drones to the country.[12] In Serbia, Turkey also invests, particularly in factories. It must be noted that the larger investments in Serbia can also be related to the subventions it offers for investments, as well as its size in terms of population and territory. As experts have noted, Turkey is more linked economically to Serbia than to Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite the strong religious link with the latter.[13]

These investments in Serbia stand in stark contrast to the image of Erdoğan and Turkey as protectors of Muslims in the region, as Serbia is the country that is perceived to be a threat by all Muslim majority countries in the region, namely Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[14] While cooperation with Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina does not constitute a mutually exclusive cooperation, it has served to harm the legitimacy of Turkey as a "friend" in Bosnia and Herzegovina where some experts believe that Turkey economically favors Serbia.[15] However, these investments are not taken without a critical perspective. Some experts in Albania worry that Turkish investments circumvent transparency standards but at the same time validate them as pragmatic and efficient.[16] However, as far as the investments go, the religious factor is not the only or consistent explanation. A stronger factor in the investments in both countries could be the size of the countries and their economic potential, as well as the long-standing relationships with the leaders, Vučić and Rama, who stand second only to Erdoğan in terms of longevity in power. Researcher and policy analyst Gentiola Madhi has shown the lengths that both Rama and Erdoğan have

7 Marta Szpala, "Bromance. Turkey's activity in the Western Balkans," Centre for Eastern Studies, November 22, 2022.
8 Tamás Ginter and Antje Hildebrandt, "Foreign investors in the Western Balkans: Have China and Russia crowded out the EU?" Austrian National Bank, February 12, 2025.
9 Ibid.
10 The data for these two countries are easier to find for comparison purposes as not all countries offer the same amount or type of data.
11 An Overview of Albania's Economic Development Indicators 2024, Albania Investment Council.
12 Claudia Mende, "Turkey ramps up political influence in the Western Balkans," Deutsche Welle, June 7, 2025.
13 Predrag Petrović, "Serbia," in *Perceptions of external influences in the Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood countries*, edited by Lura Pollozhani and Florian Bieber, REUNIR Working Paper 12 (Deliverable 6.3) (June 2025), 165.
14 Western Balkans Regional Poll, International Republican Institute (IRI), September 11, 2025; Western Balkans Regional Poll, IRI, March 2024.
15 Omer Karabeg, "Zašto Erdoğan u Srbiji gradi fabrike, a u BiH džamije? [Warum baut Erdoğan in Serbien Fabriken und in BiH Moscheen?)]," Radio Free Europe, November 10, 2024.
16 Besjana Kuçi, "Albania," in *Perceptions of external influences* by Pollozhani and Bieber, 203.

shown in cultivating their relationship to the press and in their dealings with each other, often foregoing institutional procedures in fulfilling grand gestures for one another.[17]

At this point it is worth mentioning that I am not dispelling the myth of sameness of religion, rather noting other layers of sameness. When it comes to religion, the building of mosques has indeed been a direct investment but also a showing of power in physical space. Whether it be the construction of the Namazgjah Mosque in the middle of Tirana, or the mosque in the centre of Prishtina,[18] among many other cities Turkey, through the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), is ever present. However, the building of mosques is not the only influence that Turkey plays. As we can see, its presence in the region is very diverse and dependent on the views of its leader, and its interlocutors in the Western Balkans.

Erdoğan as a Steward of Conservative Worldviews

An additional factor in the conundrum of relations is Erdoğan's popularity in polls across the region, including countries with smaller Muslim communities, such as Serbia or Montenegro. In the recent polls by the International Republican Institute (IRI), Erdoğan is a leading figure, while Turkey, although not enjoying the same popularity as its leader in the polls, is still a trusted ally. In the assessment for 2025,[19] Erdoğan has the highest favorability rating in three countries: Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and North Macedonia.[20] In Serbia, when Joe Biden was US-President, Erdoğan was the third most favorable figure, whereas in 2025 he has been overtaken by President Donald Trump (in the company of the Russian and Chinese Presidents, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping), while Erdoğan is fourth, although there has been no significant decrease in percentage.[21] In terms of the favorability of Turkey, it is in the top six of the list across the country polls, being perceived as most favorable in North Macedonia.[22]

However, this data does not only reveal the favorability of Erdoğan, it also shows the high favorability of Putin and Xi Jinping, with Biden ranking first only in Kosovo and Montenegro in the 2024 poll,[23] while Trump is not the most favorable in any country in 2025. Most notably, Putin is at the top of the list in Serbia, while Xi Jinping heads the 2025 list in Montenegro, for the first time in any of the countries of the region in any of the polling years (2022, 2024, 2025).[24] This data gains further nuance when we consider other polls in the region. Notably, the FES conducted an extensive youth study in the region (including Turkey) and it was found that nearly half of the young people prefer strong leaders even while they adhere to democratic values.[25] The data on youth however must be placed in further context, namely, that most young people in the region have only experienced strongmen leaders who have successfully maintained power, such as Erdoğan, Vučić, Rama, and until his fall from governing grace, the former Montenegrin President Milo Đukanović. Therefore,

17 Gentiola Madhi, "Our Brother Erdoğan: From Official to Personal Relations of Political Leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President," Prague Security Studies Institute, 2021.
18 See Öktem and Clayer within this issue.
19 IRI, Western Balkans Regional Poll, 2025.
20 The 2025 assessment of IRI is missing data on Albania. If we factor in data from 2024, Erdoğan was also the most favored leader in Albania.
21 IRI, Western Balkans Regional Poll, 2025.
22 Ibid.
23 IRI, Western Balkans Regional Poll, 2024.
24 IRI, Western Balkans Regional Poll, 2025.
25 Youth Study SEE 2024/2025 – Independent but concerned, FES, 2025.

there is a preference for strongmen, because strongmen are what is known best, but also because they are seen as providing some level of certainty or security. This also supports the conclusion that there is a general preference for conservative values in the region, which increases the support for conservative figures such as Erdoğan. Importantly, this also makes cooperation with Erdoğan easier when it comes to the decisions that Western Balkan leaders have to consider, since cooperation with him and with Turkey is not seen unfavorably and thus will not affect votes, which are a key currency even for increasingly illiberal strongmen in semi-authoritarian contexts, where they still abide by some rules of democracy, such as elections.

Geopolitical Shifts

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine has reshaped Europe's security architecture, with significant implications for the Western Balkans and Turkey. Whereas Turkey has sought to expand its middle power status in being a mediator of sorts as well as a supplier of weapons to Ukraine, the Western Balkans have sought to find their own space, with most of the countries of the region aligning with EU sanctions, except for Serbia (and Turkey who continues to be a partner to Russia). Another element that has come to the fore is the importance of security, defense, and NATO. Three countries of the Western Balkans are NATO members: Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia; the three others are not. The war in Ukraine has made the need for membership and partnership acute. There has been a noticeable shift in perceptions of external actors by experts and citizens in the Western Balkans. Namely, the perception of Turkey, which at times has been seen as malign, or at the very least as worrisome due to its use of religion and religious institutions in relations with the region, has now changed to that of a security partner.[26] This is noticeable in the NATO member states, but it is most notable in the non-members such as Kosovo, which also mention Turkey as an important partner explicitly due to the security vulnerability.

Experts in the region largely see Turkey as influencing the region economically, militarily, and through its so-called soft power which is seen by experts as a combination of cultural and religious influence.[27] In Kosovo, Turkey is seen as a strategic power and a security provider which are both welcomed aspects, while its soft power via cultural and religious institutions is questioned in terms of the values that it instils.[28] Namely, Turkey's investments in mosques are often commented upon by analysts and experts as a way to influence a more secular country. Despite such reservations, Kosovo recently purchased attack Skydagger drones from Turkey in addition to the Bayraktar drones that it had purchased in 2023. Both drones are manufactured by the same company, Bayraktar, which is owned by Erdoğan's son-in-law.[29] The same Bayraktar drones were also purchased by Bosnia and Herzegovina.[30] The defense cooperation between Turkey and both these countries is being perceived with critical eyes in Serbia[31] –even though cooperation in terms of security is not entirely new – as Turkey was one of the few countries to go against the embargo in provid-

26 Pollozhani and Bieber, *Perceptions of external influences*, 203.
27 Ibid.
28 Jeta Loshaj, "Kosovo," in *Perceptions of external influences*, edited by Pollozhani and Bieber, 80.
29 Hamdi Firat Büyük and Perparim Isufi, "Kosovo Drone Deal Part of Turkish 'Political Project' in the Balkans," BalkanInsight, October 14, 2025.
30 Azem Kurtic and Hamdi Firat Büyük, "Half-Price Bayraktars: Bosnia Buys Turkish Drones, Eyes Own Production," BalkanInsight, September 25, 2024.
31 Petrović, "Serbia."

ing weapons to Bosnia and Herzegovina during the 1990s war.[32] In Montenegro, Turkey is seen as the most visibly growing foreign actor in the country due to business and immigration, while it is also seen as a constructive force within the NATO alliance.[33] In North Macedonia, too, Turkey is seen as the most active military partner.[34] However, both in Albania and in Montenegro there are concerns regarding the lack of transparency of Turkish investments. Furthermore, there is concern that Turkeys increasing business through economic power will give it increasing leverage in the countries of the region, while it is unclear what this leverage would be or how it would be used.

These highlights from the opinions of regional experts show important shifts. While the presence of soft power remains a constant, there is a growing perception of Turkey as an economic and military partner, which has decreased criticism of religious influence. In fact, Turkey is mentioned as a key partner in defeating radical Islam in both Kosovo and in Montenegro. This shift is important for several reasons. On the one hand, it shows the normalization of the effect of the re-construction of old and construction of new mosques in the region. Namely, while there is still critique of TİKA's role, mostly because it is perceived in relation to the building of mosques, the agency has been present in the region for over a decade, and its influence through mosques but mainly its investments in educational and social infrastructure have become "normalized" due to the real need that exists for investments in the region. Secondly, the precedence of security in the geopolitical sphere has changed the spectrum through which partnerships are evaluated, and now Turkey is a NATO partner for some and a security provider for others. While apprehensions are still maintained in the field of cultural and religious influence, and the lack of transparency regarding investments makes some experts uneasy, it seems that Turkey is there to stay, and its presence is in fact growing and becoming more embedded via immigration.

Conclusion

Turkey's influence in the Western Balkans is shaped by many factors, but a pattern emerges that is not so much shaped by religion but by authoritarian personalities. This article has particularly focused on the figure of Erdoğan himself as a central engineer, and his counterparts in the region. The reason why Erdoğan is at the centre is not only due to methodological considerations which revolve around the influence of Turkey in the region, it also speaks to a larger symbolism of Erdoğan both as steward of conservative values, but also as an economic player with clear vested interests, such as economic interests in the case of the Bayraktar drones. Furthermore, considering how long he has been in power, he has been able to develop relationships with other leaders who have enjoyed long tenures of power, such as Rama and Vučić. Lastly, the focus on Erdoğan is important because his power is personalized power, which is very much a style that is emulated by other leaders in the region, thus speaking to other forms of sameness.

Turkey's involvement with the Western Balkans in the last three decades has also led to some important shifts. Whereas its engagement started as both that of a mediator (who was somewhat overshadowed due to the involvement of the US and EU in the early state building of post Yugoslav states) and soft power influencing the cultural and religious landscape, it has become an increasingly present and more importantly with regard to

32 Alida Vračić, *Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans* (Working Paper, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, 2016).
33 Ranković, "Montenegro."
34 Pejić Nikić, "North Macedonia."

perceptions, visible, economic and military partner. The economic interests in the region are seen as both beneficial and potentially risky. While Turkey's influence in these economies is for the most part seen positively, experts are concerned that economic presence also buys leverage. For now, the leverage has yet to gain clarity, however some fears are assuaged by the fact that Turkey is a NATO member and, in that sense, still aligned with Western actors and other NATO member states in the region.

What the different aspects discussed in this article have shown is that there is no one-size-fits-all policy. Turkey plays different games with different actors, showing that religious proximity cannot explain the logic of engagement on the ground when it comes to investments and to security policy/issues. The proximity of personal relations between leaders is an important aspect to consider, as is shown not only through the cases of Albania and Serbia, which are the most prominently cited within this article, but to other illiberal leaders in their time of tenure. The second aspect is the similarity in terms of style of leadership in the perception of citizens. Namely, Erdoğan has support and enjoys favorability among citizens in the region due to a general support for strongmen and conservative values of which he is seen as a steward. This role lends him legitimacy and makes him a favorable actor for Western Balkan leaders to interact with without affecting their electorates unfavorably. Lastly, global geopolitical shifts also affect the policies and perceptions of Turkey and the countries of the Western Balkans, both with each other and with other actors. These shifts highlight different aspects, decreasing the focus on culture and religion as an area of perceived cooperation and highlighting the areas of security and economic development as shaping the logic behind relations. While no single aspect explains the complex relations between actors and between states, the proximity of leaders and of leadership styles as relations of sameness, governance values, and geopolitical shifts offer more nuance in assessing the role of Turkey in the Western Balkans while also highlighting the agency of domestic actors.

■ *End of Main Focus* ■