

THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP NETWORKS IN TURKEY–BALKAN RELATIONS IN THE AKP ERA

“Turkey is back!” Since the beginning of the 2000s, a considerable number of semi-academic and academic productions, echoing popular opinion, have been building around this theme with regard to the role of the Turkish Republic in the Balkan Peninsula and its social, cultural, economic, and religious ramifications. Yet one point is still not unpacked: Turkey’s policies towards Balkan countries based on President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s personal links with Balkan leaders. These personalized relations have actually constituted the real engine on the ground. In this article we scrutinize the leader-oriented relationship model functioning between Turkey and the Balkan countries. We argue that this model is mostly based on mutual interest and favoritism, often causing tensions in relations and making Turkey an ambivalent actor in the region.

Hamdi Fırat Büyük & Ahmet Erdi Öztürk*



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* Hamdi Fırat Büyük is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at the University of Sarajevo. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk is an Assistant Professor of Politics and International Relations at the London Metropolitan University.

"P resident Erdoğan was sent by God," said Bakir Izetbegović, a Bosniak member of the Bosnian Presidency at the time, in an election rally organized by the Bosnia branch of the Union of International Democrats (UID)¹ in Sarajevo on 20 May 2018. The UID was founded in 2004 and started its propaganda activities in Western European countries as the long arm of Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP). Since Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was not allowed to organize election rallies in Europe, the UID organized its Sixth Ordinary General Assembly in Sarajevo and invited Erdoğan as a speaker. During the meeting, which was accepted as a game changer for Bosnian and Turkish politics,² Erdoğan emphasized Turkey's internal political outlook and underlined the Ottoman-Islamic elements of Turkey's current foreign policy towards the Balkans. Even though these two issues are not welcomed by Balkan countries, Izetbegović could not stop singing Erdoğan's praises during this controversial visit. As might be surmised, there was in fact another story underlying Izetbegović's fawning statements. Izetbegović, the only son of Bosnia's founding President Alija Izetbegović, was paying his dues as Erdoğan's best man in the country. Izetbegović has long enjoyed Erdoğan's strong support to maintain and later to consolidate his power. President Erdoğan's policies towards Bosnia extend also to the Izetbegović family: Bakir Izetbegović's wife Sebija has assumed senior positions in the state and lately in the majority Bosniak party, Democratic Action Party (SDA), in the last party congress—where senior AKP officials were ready to show support.

Bakir Izetbegović employed the generous support of Turkey's state institutions in his different activities and campaigns, including the restoration of Bosnia's monuments, zero-interest loans from Ziraat Bank, and support from Anadolu Agency's Bosnian language service and other Turkey-funded media, such as *Stav* magazine and *Factor* website.³ Sebija Izetbegović also enjoyed Turkey's support in building her political career. For instance, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı* – TİKA) renovated and modernized the Sarajevo city hospital at a time when Sebija Izetbegović was sitting in the director's office, a post that was criticized by the public due to her husband's political influence.⁴

¹ "The lobby behind Turkey's prime minister," *Deutsche Welle*, 21 May 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/the-lobby-behind-turkeys-prime-minister/a-17652516>. The UID was formerly known as the UETD – Union of European Turkish Democrats.

² Hamdi Fırat Büyük and Srećko Latal, "Erdoğan's Bosnia rally may be key game-changer," *Balkan Insight*, 4 May 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/04/erdogan-s-bosnia-rally-may-be-key-game-changer-05-04-2018/>

³ Hamdi Fırat Büyük, "When a Turkish businessman becomes adviser to a Bosnian president," *Hurriyet Daily News*, 4 May 2015, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/when-a-turkish-businessman-becomes-adviser-to-a-bosnian-president-81901>

⁴ "Emine Erdoğan i Sebija Izetbegović otvorile Kliniku za hematologiju na KCUS-u," *Klix.ba*, 20 May 2018, <https://www.klix.ba/vijesti/bih/emine-erdogan-i-sebija-izetbegovic-otvorile-kliniku-za-hematologiju-na-kcus-u/180520039>

“Bakir Izetbegović is a great example of the selective policies employed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in building Turkey’s relations in the Balkans, but he is not the only such example.”

Bakir Izetbegović is a great example of the selective policies employed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in building Turkey’s relations in the Balkans, but he is not the only such example. Furthermore, the use of leadership-oriented relationship models and the effect of leaders on foreign policy are not unique to Turco-Balkan relations. At issue is state identity and foreign policy behavior. State identity is an artificial entity that can be constructed by history, culture, memory, values, experiences, individuals, guidance by political actors, and the institutional norms of the state. However, the leadership effect is exceptionally crucial as it occurs in Turco–Balkan relations. In this regard, Marc Lynch underlines that state identity might refer to the conceptions held by leaders.⁵ As Masahiro Matsumura notes, political leaders in most states directly shape state identity by touching upon the institutional structure and public opinion of the state’s citizens.⁶ There is in fact almost a consensus on the effect of political elites and influential leaders on state identity, and much of this literature has engaged with the various ways in which political elites, parties, and groups might transform existing state identities.⁷

Under these circumstances, given the importance of Erdoğan’s effective role in policy-making processes, we argue that even though Turkey’s policy towards the Balkans is mostly based on its domestic political transformations and the activities of Turkey-originated transnational state apparatuses, such as the Presidency of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*),⁸ leaders’ relations are also an important determinant that make Turkey an ambivalent actor in the region.

⁵ Marc Lynch, “Abandoning Iraq: Jordan’s alliances and the politics of state identity,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2-3 (1998), p. 349.

⁶ Masahiro Matsumura, “The Japanese state identity as a grand strategic imperative,” *St. Andrew’s University Law Review*, Vol. 12 (2008), pp. 53-6.

⁷ Konstantin Vössing, “Transforming public opinion about European integration: elite influence and its limits,” *European Union Politics*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2015), pp. 157-75; Rumelili Bahar and Jennifer Todd, “Paradoxes of identity change: integrating macro, meso, and micro research on identity in conflict processes,” *Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2018), pp. 3-18; Senem Aydın-Düzgüt, “Foreign policy and identity change: analysing perceptions of Europe among the Turkish public,” *Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2018), pp. 19-34; Jennifer Todd, “The politics of identity change and conflict: an agenda for research,” *Politics*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (2018), pp. 84-93.

⁸ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and İştah Gözaydın, “A frame for Turkey’s foreign policy via the Diyanet in the Balkans,” *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (2018), pp. 331-50.

League of Balkan Autocrats: Replication of Political Strategies

Even though initially there were some who looked askance at Erdoğan's leadership journey,⁹ he succeeded in gaining reputable credit with both great masses of people and pro-liberal socio-political intelligentsia in acknowledgement of positive economic developments, democratic gains for religiously sensitive groups and for Kurds, as well as counter-strategies against historical tutelage groups. Even though Erdoğan has established an electoral hegemony within the parliamentary democracy, he has not managed to transform the political culture of Turkey. In the first two terms of the AKP coming to power, the party devoted itself to dismantling the secularist-Kemalist guardianship mechanism in Turkey by means of an informal and unconventional relationship with the controversial Gülen Movement. The AKP, through its popular power, and members of the Gülen Movement in critical positions of the state bureaucracy, tried to suppress and pacify the secularist-Kemalist guardianship mechanisms via legal investigations and court cases. Their instrumentalization of the law and judicial processes caused apprehension among socio-political groups in the opposition. Furthermore, the unconventional relationship of the AKP with the Gülen Movement engendered a new ruling cadre out of power and interest-based collaboration rather than establishing the elements of a more liberal democratic ideology for Turkey. Yet this power and interest-based marriage of convenience did not last long, and the Movement and the Party fell out with each other in fatal ways.¹⁰

Turkey's rapid political transformation has thus been formative along multiple dimensions, with an impact on foreign policy. The instrumentalization of Turkish history, culture, and religion under the influence of Erdoğan's controlling mentality of management has become a core component of Turkish foreign policy in the second decade of the 2000s. In this regard, the AKP has shifted Turkey's foreign policy by defining itself as the inheritor of the long-standing Ottoman cultural tradition, alongside its Sunni priorities and its attempts to influence the former Ottoman territories more assertively. Beyond these points, one might argue that one core component of this new foreign policy is the personalization of the decision-making processes.¹¹ Using this approach, Erdoğan has started to establish a different network of relations with the Balkan leaders, compatible with the patrimonial nature of Turkey's current regime under the AKP rule.¹²

⁹ Jeffrey Haynes, "Politics, identity and religious nationalism in Turkey: from Atatürk to the AKP," *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2010), pp. 312-27.

¹⁰ Simon P. Watmough and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "From 'diaspora by design' to transnational political exile: the Gülen Movement in transition," *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2018), pp. 33-52.

¹¹ Hakan Yavuz and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkish secularism and Islam under the reign of Erdoğan," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 1 (2019), pp. 1-9.

¹² Fatih Çağatay Cengiz, "Proliferation of neopatrimonial domination in Turkey," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (2018), pp. 1-19.

“The instrumentalization of Turkish history, culture, and religion under the influence of Erdoğan’s controlling mentality of management has become a core component of Turkish foreign policy in the second decade of the 2000s.”

Under these circumstances, Erdoğan has established networks with other Balkan leaders who are encountering criticism for their increasingly authoritarian rule; for some of these leaders, Erdoğan is a role model.¹³ The official opening ceremonies of Erdoğan’s major infrastructure projects, his party congresses, his inauguration ceremonies, and even his children’s weddings always witness a high level of Balkan attendance.¹⁴ For instance, Bosniak leader Izetbegović and Albanian Premier Edi Rama were among witnesses of the wedding of Erdoğan’s daughter in 2016. Serbia’s strongman President Aleksandar Vučić is another Erdoğan best man. Even his sartorial style increasingly echoes that of President Erdoğan—he has joined the team of politicians who wear the Scots plaid jackets now identified with Erdoğan.¹⁵ Their similarities however extend far beyond their styling. Building their own media houses, demonizing opponents and critical media,¹⁶ using popular and nationalist discourse, establishing patrimonial networks within the state, undertaking “crazy” mega construction projects,¹⁷ and sliding towards Russia are only a few such parallels.

The international role of Turkey has been scrutinized in relation to the state’s use of religious soft power in order to win friends and influence people,¹⁸ yet Turkey’s religious soft power is both multifaceted and ambivalent, reflecting receiving countries’ regime codes, state identity, implementation models, and perception of foreign powers. Within this ambivalent and multi-layered schema, one might argue that Erdoğan

¹³ Benjamin Pargan, “Erdoğan a role model for ‘strongmen’ in the Balkans?” *Deutsche Welle*, 21 April 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/erdogan-a-role-model-for-strongmen-in-the-balkans/a-38540867>

¹⁴ “Balkan leaders flock to Erdoğan inauguration,” *Balkan Insight*, 9 July 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/09/balkan-leaders-flock-to-erdogan-inauguration-07-09-2018/>

¹⁵ “Балкански диктатори – Во исто одело на гласање,” *Pozitiv*, 17 April 2018, <https://pozitiv.mk/balkanski-diktatori-vo-isto-odelo-na-glasane/>

¹⁶ Natalia Zaba, “Serbia Tabloid Targets BIRN, Other Media, as ‘Mercenaries,’” *Balkan Insight*, 7 November 2016, <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/11/07/serbia-s-pro-government-tabloid-targets-journalists-as-foreign-mercenaries-11-07-2016/>

¹⁷ “Predsednik Posetio ‘Beograd Na Vodi’: Najveće Gradilište U Ovom Delu Evrope,” *Novosti*, 5 April 2019, <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovnna/ekonomija/aktuelno.239.html:787274-Predsednik-Srbije-Za-zaduzene-u-svajcarcima-uskoro-leks-specijalis-Obisao-radove-na-Beogradu-na-vodi>

¹⁸ Sabri Çiftçi and Güneş Murat Tezcür, “Soft power, religion, and anti-Americanism in the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (2016), pp. 374-94.

has been trying to create an influence on the global *umma*,¹⁹ for which the Balkans is a very critical area, with Serbia as the most vital point, but leader relations have a different impact. For instance, within a few years of Erdoğan's "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo" statement, after which Serbia left Turkey-sponsored talks between Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia, President Vučić hailed Erdoğan as the most popular state leader during a joint official visit to Serbia's Sandžak region in 2017. He even professed awareness that President Erdoğan is loved by Sandžak's Muslim Bosniak residents more than he himself is, even though he is their president. And he did not stop there. President Vučić, who has a nationalist background, called Ottoman Sultan Murad I a hero who lost his life in the Battle of Kosovo fighting the Serbian Kingdom and other Balkan noblemen.²⁰ In this way, President Vučić is allowing President Erdoğan to play his favorite game: being the leader of Muslims all over the globe, and one can be sure he is doing so for a purpose. Furthermore, Vučić has never said no to Erdoğan's demands even when extreme—to the extent of Serbia extraditing a Kurdish politician who was a Turkish citizen at the expense of violating its own and international law and standards.²¹

Indeed, economic interest has also been playing an important role between these two experienced political actors. As of 2019, Serbia is Turkey's largest trading partner in the Western Balkans. Moreover, Turkey's state and private institutions are also investing in strategic sectors within Serbia, such as banking, motorways, and energy. Previously stagnant trade relations between the two countries boomed especially after they signed a free trade agreement in 2009. In 2008, when Turkey and Serbia started to get closer, the annual trade volume between the two countries was only 340 million euros. By 2018, the annual figure had exceeded one billion euros, with great prospects for future increase.

Other forms of political replication concern the approach to opposition groups and figures. Particularly after the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the Erdoğan regime has started to employ extraterritorial repressive practices²² against Gülenists, members of Academics for Peace,²³ and other opposition groups. In terms of the Balkans, this

¹⁹ Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "Turkey: An Ambivalent Religious Soft Power," *Georgetown University, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs*, 6 June 2019, <https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/posts/turkey-an-ambivalent-religious-soft-power>

²⁰ "Вучић: У Србији нема јунака какав је био султан Мурат!" *Srbija Danas*, 12 October 2017, <https://www.srbijadanas.net/vucic-u-srbiji-nema-junaka-kakav-je-bio-sultan-murat-video/>

²¹ "Serbia extradites Kurdish activist to Turkey despite U.N. warning," *Reuters*, 26 December 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-serbia-turkey-activist/serbia-extradites-kurdish-activist-to-turkey-despite-u-n-warning-idUSKB-NIEK0YC>

²² Marlies Glasius, "Extraterritorial authoritarian practices: a framework," *Globalizations*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (2018), pp. 179-97.

²³ Bahar Baser, Samim Akgönül, and Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, "'Academics for Peace' in Turkey: a case of criminalising dissent and critical thought via counterterrorism policy," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2017), pp. 274-96.

mostly concerns the Gülenists, one of the oldest Turkey-originated Islamist groups in the region, and which Ankara finds responsible for the failed coup attempt in 2016, calling them a terrorist organization. Since then, Erdoğan’s government pushed Balkan countries to hand over suspected Gülenists and close down any institutions related to their network. Erdoğan’s hunt for his opponents also roped in another Balkan autocrat, President of Moldova Igor Dodon. In acknowledgement of his long-standing friendship with Erdoğan, the pro-Russian Dodon did not hesitate to extradite seven Gülenists to Turkey in police operations, in cooperation with the Turkish spy agency. A short time later, two water-cannon trucks were gifted to the Moldovan police by the Turkish government to disperse protestors who opposed Dodon’s regime.²⁴ The gifted water cannons — called *TOMA* in Turkish — gained notoriety for the role they played in the massive Gezi protests in 2013 against Erdoğan’s regime.

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The Other Side of the Coin: Turkey’s Policies Backfire

Particularly in the Balkans, Turkey’s new policy preferences and an eventual overdose of hegemonic tendencies have created division among the Balkan elites who have started to read “the new Turkey” as a new state with a new identity. Exportation of domestic conflicts, interfering in the internal affairs of host countries, and instrumentalization of Islam via Turkey’s transnational state apparatuses have been creating some uneasiness. Because of high leadership visibility, all of these reactions have started to become about Erdoğan himself. For instance, in Bosnia, the second most powerful Bosniak politician and media house owner (among other business interests), Fahrudin Radončić, is the most open critic of Erdoğan. On every possible occasion his daily *Avaz Newspaper* criticizes Erdoğan’s rule and his friendship with Izetbegović. The main motive behind this policy is not democratic but personal, since Erdoğan does not take account of any politician in the country except Izetbegović’s friends. According to our own sources in Sarajevo and Ankara, Radončić tried to meet with Turkish politicians before the elections in 2014 but was deliberately ignored by all.

²⁴ Madalin Necsutu, “Moldova confirms receiving water cannon ‘gifts’ from Turkey,” *Balkan Insight*, 25 October 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/10/25/moldovan-prime-minister-confirms-the-water-cannon-trucks-from-erdogan-10-25-2018/>

Another politician angry with Erdoğan is Kosovo's Premier Ramush Haradinaj. In 2018, the Turkish spy agency snatched six Gülenists in Kosovo with a series of operations in cooperation with Kosovo Police and Intel. However, the maneuver met with criticism from the Kosovan Premier who claimed that he was not informed of the move. The underlying reason was that Erdoğan had decided to work with his close associate Hashim Thaçi, President of Kosovo, who is a member of another party. Later, Kosovar Premier Haradinaj axed the interior minister, the police chief, and head of intelligence. Erdoğan was furious with Haradinaj and accused him of damaging Turkey-Kosovo relations. Furthermore, the operation was found illegal after an investigation conducted by a parliamentary commission.²⁵

These bold moves from Erdoğan's end have caused many reactions from local politicians and also from the public. Critics say the Balkan region has enough problems and ask why it needs Turkey's internal problems as well. However, the Erdoğan government went one step further in Macedonia. With great efforts, Turkey had built an image towards supporting the Balkans' Euro-Atlantic integration. North Macedonia had been the champion of Turkey's support, in particular regarding its ongoing name issue with Greece. As a result of its worsening democracy and rapprochement with Russia, Turkey's Western role was already under question, yet Ankara still threatened Skopje with not ratifying its NATO membership protocol unless Skopje handed over suspected Gülenists.²⁶ The threat was met with criticism from the new pro-Western Macedonian government which had overthrown Erdoğan's close associate, the pro-Russian former PM Nikola Gruevski, now a fugitive in Hungary, and solved the name crisis with Greece.²⁷ This not only damaged Turkey's role as a trusted ally, but also Turkey's image when it ratified the protocol a short time later despite its harsh demands.

Turkey: An Ambivalent Actor in the Balkans?

It is obvious that Turkey has been undergoing another domestic transformation period and has been creating new policy preferences vis-à-vis the Balkan countries without considering their different characteristics, demographical structures, and historical relations with Turkey. The impact of Turkey's policy changes on the countries in the Balkan region varies depending on their internal dynamics, international positions, economic development levels, and ethnic and religious structures. Within these transformations, Ankara's rift with the West, its deteriorating role in NATO,

²⁵ Blerta Begisholli, "Kosovo 'broke law' when deporting Turkish 'Gülenists'," *Balkan Insight*, 5 February 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/02/05/kosovo-broke-law-when-deporting-turkish-gulenists-02-05-2019/>

²⁶ "Ankara puts squeeze on Skopje," *Ekathimerini*, 18 April 2019, <http://www.ekathimerini.com/239661/article/ekathimerini/news/ankara-puts-squeeze-on-skopje>

²⁷ Ivan Nikolovski, "Strains Emerge in North Macedonia's Alliance With Turkey," *Balkan Insight*, 10 May 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/05/10/strains-emerge-in-north-macedonias-alliance-with-turkey/>

and its current rapprochement with Russia — as well as Erdoğan’s personal relations with Balkan autocrats and in particular with Serbia’s Vučić — cause confusion and uncertainty about Turkey’s agenda in the region.²⁸ In addition to Erdoğan’s personal relations, newly established parallel Turkish structures in the region, including lobby organizations and party offices, cause another source of confusion about Turkish foreign policy.²⁹ In a short-term outlook, these policies can be admired by a minority of politicians and groups who benefit from them, but this is a very limited direction, and not a promising one.

It should not be forgotten that Turkey built its important role in the Balkans through its support for the region’s Euro-Atlantic integration, strong economic and democratic institutions, and its significant soft power influence. If Turkey follows any route other than this, including personalization of its relations, it will definitely forfeit its role as a credible partner in the long run. If the shift in its state identity and interventions of hegemonic leadership continue, Turkey will become an ambivalent power with an unclear agenda. Furthermore, if even one of those with whom Erdoğan has established personal links should lose power, Turkey’s relations will suffer. Democratic values, Euro-Atlantic integration, and trade relations through institutions instead of individuals should be Turkey’s prime focus in the region, and Ankara must be able to sit and talk with every group and every politician without selecting and favoring certain ones, as it is happening now.

²⁸ Edin Subasic, “Nova geostrategija Balkana: Igra li Turska za Rusiju?,” *Al Jazeera Balkans*, 29 September 2019, <http://balkans.aljazeera.net/vijesti/nova-geostrategija-balkana-igra-li-turska-za-rusiju>

²⁹ Hamdi Fırat Büyük, “Bosnians query goals of new Turkish lobby group,” *Balkan Insight*, 23 February 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/02/23/bosnians-query-goals-of-new-turkish-lobby-group-02-23-2018/>