The Ambivalence of Turkey's Soft Power in Southeast Europe

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Abstract

With the instrumentalisation of Islam via the state apparatuses in foreign policy, Sunni Islam has become both an instrument and a purpose of the repressive Justice and Development Party and Turkey has started to be one of the front runners of countries who are increasingly competing for using Islam as a foreign policy tool. This relatively new role of Turkey has created various diverging ideas among the host countries where Turkey is active. While some countries are rather content with Turkey's religiously fueled policies and humanitarian aid, and define Turkey as one of the most influential actors which can use religion as a soft power tool, others refuse to define Turkey's policies within the boundaries of religious soft power due to its extra-territorial authoritarian practices and instrumentalisation of religion for these. Under these circumstances, this study defines Turkey's religious soft power as an ambivalent one and scrutinises the reasons behind this ambiguity via exploring some country cases from Southeast Europe.

Keywords: *Southeast Europe; soft power; religion; foreign policy; Turkey.*

Introduction

Harvard's world-renowned political scientist Joseph Nye has continued to redefine the concept in line with changing global conditions. While maintaining that soft power is the ability of a state to persuade others to do what it wants without sanctions, force or coercion[1], in a 2012 article written for *Wall Street Journal* Nye discussed whether China will be a soft power in any fathomable way, and underlined that the motto *the best propaganda is not making propaganda* might very well be the new and most appealing aspect of soft power.[2] Nye has modified the concept of soft power multiple times, compared it with classical *hard power*, enriched it with the concepts of newly emerging *smart power* and *sharp power*, and yet he has never changed his perspective on propaganda and its smart use. On the contrary, he has emphasised it in a determined fashion (Nye, 2008; 2017). As a prolific and prominent scholar, Nye has mentioned the United States, Russia and China in the context of soft power. However, he has almost never taken Turkey, a country whose name has been identified with soft power, as a case study.

Although Turkey is lost in the shuffle in global academic discussions evoking the concept of soft power, it occupies centre stage in soft power debates in the context of Southeastern Europe and beyond, among Turkey originated and regional experts. These discussions are not constrained by

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[1] *See;* https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/capsule-review/2004-05-01/soft-power-means-success-world-politics.

[2] *See;* https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702304451104577389923098678842.

Nye's approach to propaganda and involve a range of perspectives. Furthermore, most of the scholarly and policy-oriented discussions on Turkey's position as a soft power, and the constituent components of such power, mostly stem from the strategic, tactical and identity-based changes that the country has recently undergone. In this regard, Turkey's influence on Southeast Europe, and the narratives and other political tools that it utilises, have been polarising both non-academic and scholarly inquiry. For example, the state-run news agency Anadolu Ajansı and the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi,* Justice and Development Party)-affiliated SETA (*Siyaset Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı*, Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research) employ valorising language on issues pertaining to Turkey's influence on the neighbouring countries and its cultural, religious and education-oriented activities in Southeast Europe. Both of the institutions portray Turkey as the region's soft power leader. In the research they undertake and the messages they share with the public, the key factors are Turkey's influential transnational apparatuses, including *Diyanet* (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı,* Presidency of Religious Affairs), TİKA (*Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), Yunus Emre Institute (*Yunus Emre Ensititüsü*) and YTB (*Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı*, Turks Abroad and Related Communities Presidency) alongside increasing foreign trade, direct and indirect investments, and various types of humanitarian aid activities. They also stress the protective leadership role, *vis-à-vis* the Turks and Muslims of Southeast Europe, played by Turkey's President and leader of the AKP, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

However, some studies conducted in the region reflect the presence of a fundamentally different perspective in Southeaster Europe and indicate that Turkey's influence is not always welcome. For instance, while Turkey built the largest mosque of Southeastern Europe in the Albanian capital Tirana as a reflection of that city's significance and historical importance, Albanian scholar Xemal Ahmeti submitted a report to the Albanian government entitled *Emancipating Albanian Culture from Turkish Effects*, in which he warned that Turkey-centric policies would harm Albanian secularism and the established culture of peaceful coexistence among various religious and ethnic groups. On the other side, some other studies from the mid or early AKP term bring Turkey to the fore as an antidote to Salafism and Wahhabism. Yet, Ahmeti underlines the risk of Albania being stuck between Salafism and Erdoğanism, as a new form of one-man oriented religiosity.[3] The influence of the Turkey-centred very controversial Gülen Movement, which has recently been targeted by Turkey (Watmough and Öztürk, 2018), cannot be ignored in the concerns voiced by Ahmeti. A similar approach was articulated by Herbert Raymond McMaster, former national security adviser to US president Donald Trump, who accused Turkey of spreading extreme Islamist ideologies around the World. Regarding Turkey's Southeast policies, McMaster declared that *we're seeing great involvement by Turkey [. . .] everywhere from western Africa to Southeast Asia [. . .] particularly the Balkans is an area of grave concern now*. While at first glance this claim seems a bit irrational, considering Turkey's commitment to NATO and the international order, it is clear that the idea of Turkey playing beyond a soft power role is also gaining ground among experts.

The issue of Turkey acting as a soft power and/or implementing soft power instruments in Southeast Europe is being discussed in academic circles as well. While some researchers maintain that Turkey, at least at the discursive level, has been moving away from being a soft power, others argue that because of its religious, cultural and economic activities, Turkey is still an effective soft

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[3] *See;* https://www.theglobalist.com/albania-balkans-recept-tayyip-erdogan-european-union/.

power in certain regions, such as particularly in Southeast Europe (Ekinci, 2018). Recent developments such as deterioration of Turkey's already flawed democracy (Baser and Öztürk, 2017), the struggle between the Gülen Movement and the AKP (Öztürk, 2019), pushing the boundaries with the aggressive employment of soft power tools (Demirtaş, 2017; Öztürk and Sözeri, 2018) and the dramatically paced alteration of foreign policy (Yavuz, 2016; Aydın-Düzgit, 2016) all necessitate the rethinking of Turkey's status as a soft power.

Furthermore, the very streets of Southeast Europe seem to reflect the ongoing debate. The field-work that I conducted in Macedonia, Albania, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo in different time periods between 2015 and 2018 revealed that Turkey is perceived in radically different ways, transcending ethnic and religious demarcations. People who could be expected to approve of Turkish policies, in Muslim-majority locations like the Old Bazaar (*Старачаршија*) of the North Macedonian capital Skopje or the Sandžak region of Serbia, instead reflect polarised views on Turkey. Erdoğan's last presidential election rally with the UETD (*Uluslararası Demokratlar Birliği*, Union of International Democrats) on 18 May 2018 in Sarajevo is a case in point. The UETD was founded in 2004 as a pro-AKP transnational apparatus and commenced its propaganda activities in Western European countries as the long arm of the party-state. In the 2018 presidential campaign period, since Erdoğan was not permitted to organise election rallies in Europe, the UETD organised its 6th Ordinary General Assembly in Sarajevo and invited Erdoğan as speaker. Even though then-president of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bakir Izetbegović, also attended the meeting, Erdoğan's emphasis on internal political struggles and accentuation of Ottoman–Islamic elements were not well received and were observed with concern by local intellectuals. Thus, even though it remains difficult to delineate which groups see Erdoğan's Turkey as a benign actor, one might argue that while the majority of Muslims see the New Turkey as a kind of guardian angel, other groups are evidencing some degree of apprehension.

Taking all the various approaches into account, it might fairly be argued that Turkey is not a purely effective and unarguable soft power in Southeast Europe, according to Nye's coining of the term. Yet, considering the transnational state apparatuses that the country runs and the image that it carries among the Muslim populations of the region, it may also be fairly claimed that Turkey displays strong elements of soft power. Setting aside the debates on whether or not Turkey's soft power capacity is increasing, this paper focuses on the historical presence of this capacity and the emerging possibility that it may be lost due to the excessive instrumentalisation of religion, transnationalisation of domestic debates, and deterioration in democratic credentials and economic performance. I argue that while Turkey has many soft power tools and much soft power potential, it has also many weak points within its current circumstances. Challenging the previous discussions on whether Turkey is a soft power or there is a discursive level of transformation into the Turkish soft power, I claim that Turkey is an *ambivalent soft power* particularly in the context of Southeast Europe.

To examine this argument, this study will evaluate the concept of soft power with its requirements and limits, and discuss the concepts of public diplomacy, nation branding and agent diplomacy, which are often juxtaposed with soft power. Then, it will scrutinise Turkey's ever-present capacity (Bechev, 2012) and the conditions that enable its rise as a soft power through the concepts of trauma, memory and longing. Finally, it will evaluate the changing roles played by the *New Turkey* in Southeast Europe through the lens of soft power and provide a future projection.

Soft power: Unstable definitions, limits and more

Whether academic or not, all but a handful of the most significant works (Mingjiang, 2008; Parmar, 2010) give, but cursory, reference to Nye in their examination of soft power, and do not engage in the debate on the concept of power more broadly. Even though most of the issues and subjects of social science and global politics are directly and indirectly related to power, past scholars tended to avoid defining it clearly – until Max Weber (into the second decade of the twentieth century), who took the concept of power as a central part of his sociological enterprise. Since Weber, to scrutinise the meaning of power has become one of the major issues among the world-renowned thinkers (Berenskoetter, 2007).

Yet, going beyond the classical power discussions and categorisations, Nye, alternatively, offers soft power as a more complicated concept and examines its building blocks. Nye sees soft power working through cultural, ideological and institutional factors, which he regards as potential elements to shape the contemporary World. According to him, if a state creates legitimacy around its soft power rather than its hard power, it faces less resistance to its policies at national and international levels. In the same vein, if the culture and the dominant ideology of a state is attractive to other people and states, it is able to implement its policies with ease. With such a perspective, Nye also argues that a state that respects human rights embraces the free market and distributes justice is seen as more important than many others with greater military and economic power. Yet, economic power and the smart use of the other elements of power could support soft power. The components of soft power, Nye posits, include:

a) Digital infrastructure and skills in digital diplomacy;

b) Attraction and global access to cultural outputs of the country**;**

c) Attractiveness in terms of economic model and business friendliness and innovation;

d) Power of the diplomatic network and contribution to global development and participation; and

e) Commitment to basic freedoms, human rights and democracy and the overall quality of political institutions (Nye, 2008; 2009).

Over time, intra-conceptual discussions on soft power evolved into debates on *sharp power* with the rise of countries that are economically, culturally and militarily strong yet weak in democratic credentials, such as China, Russia and India (Scott 2008). On the other hand, the *smart* instrumentalisation of cultural values through transnational apparatuses by relatively small and less populous countries like Sweden, Norway and New Zealand has brought another dimension to soft power discussions (Wilon, 2008; Gallarotti, 2015).

And then again, - directly related to the discussions on hard and soft power- the dramatic and rapid rise of democratic backsliding has directly influenced a great many countries, since the mid-1990s. The 2018 global report of Freedom House argues that 113 countries have moved backwards in the last twelve years in terms of free democracy and human rights. The same report claims that most of these countries can no longer be regarded as liberal democracies.[4] The existing literature

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[4] See; https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2018.

variously defines such democracies as *electoral authoritarianism* (Schedler, 2013), *semi-democracy* (Case, 1993), and *competitive authoritarian* (Levitsky and Way, 2010). The rich conceptualisations around democratic backsliding also indicate a fall in soft power, which essentially relies on having an established democracy and human rights. The new regimes that are cited within the conceptual pool of rising populism, new-right, new-authoritarianism and post-truth demonstrate a clear and rapid move back from liberal-democracy and create foreign policies based on ethnic-nationalist and religious elements (Sandal and Fox, 2013; Mandaville, 2003). Indeed all of these different elements are essential to understand the ambivalence of Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe, since the extra-ordinary instrumentalisation of religion under repressive policies is one of the most important aspects of Turkey's current power position in the region.

In addition to these, if we aim to scrutinise Turkey's religious-oriented policy transformation through Southeast Europe, it may be useful to introduce the thinking of Jeffrey Haynes on religion and soft power. In other words, I argue that Haynes' approach offers also one of the key arguments to understand Turkey's current ambiguous soft power situation. Haynes was the first scholar to speak about religion and soft power. He posited that religious soft power involves encouraging both followers and decision-makers to change behaviour because they are convinced of the appropriateness of a religious organisation's goals (Haynes, 2016, p. 28). In some places, religion-based soft power integrates with authoritarianism, hegemony and political understanding of religion due to the erroneous reading and instrumentalisation of religion (Haynes 2016). Yet, according to Haynes, in some other cases, religion transgresses the boundaries of soft power (Haynes, 2007, p. 33) and turns into a fragile element that harms international relations (Öztürk, 2018). Religion oriented policies overflow position and its fragility could be the key point to understand the ambivalence of Turkey's soft power in Southeast Europe.

Southeast Europe in the heart of Turkey: Nostalgia, hegemony and nascent soft power

The region played a central role in the Ottoman era and in the foundation of the Turkish Republic as well. In other words, both the rise of the colonialist and expansionist Ottomans (Todorova 1994, pp. 454-455) and their fall through the loss of territories (Yavuz and Blumi, 2013) may be seen through the lens of Southeast Europe – and so, accordingly, can the foundation of the Republic since most of its founding elite were from the former Ottoman territories. The perspective of the remaining Muslim population in the region on the Ottomans and on Turkey (Akgönül, 2008) further connects Turkey and the region and complicates the relations between the two.

The loss of Southeast Europe and further disconnection with the region with the foundation of a separate nation state created trauma for the founding elites of Turkey and the socio-political groups that were ethnically and culturally affiliated with the region. This trauma then facilitated the formation of longing for the region among these people. Against this backdrop, Turkey's presence in the region cannot be taken as a recent rise of activism; and as Bechev (2012) argues, Turkey has always been a presence in the region to varying degrees and according to the changes in its domestic political balance and choices in overall foreign policy. In this regard, in the early Republican period, joining the Western World was a priority (Müftüler-Bac, 1996, p. 53), and a pragmatic commitment to a stable international order, strict adherence to the law, and *a la Turca* secularism (in Turkish: *laiklik*) (Öztürk 2016) were determining factors of foreign policy (Yavuz, 1997, p. 23). Since the 1930s, Turkey has been establishing multidimensional relations with Southeast Europe and despite the emergence of problems with Bulgaria arising from forced population exchange in the 1940s

(Kirişçi, 1995, p. 65), from the 1950s to the mid-1980s, Turkey's approach remained grounded in security and balance-of-power. Turkey continued its political and economic relations with almost all the regional states in the period. It established good relations with Tito's Yugoslavia. Yet, as Sayarı (2000, p. 176) points out, the collaborations remained within the constraints of NATO, because as a member-state Turkey could not pursue independent policies towards the region during the Cold War period.

Turgut Özal (1983–1989 Prime Minister, 1989–1993 President), who came to power following the military *coup d'etat* of 1980, implemented many political changes and sought to establish a new approach based on the concept of *neo-Ottomanism*, referring to Turkey's Ottoman–Islamic–Turkic past and aspiration to regional domination (Yavuz, 1998, p. 23). Indeed, this approach manifested itself in Southeast Europe especially, in the aftermath of the Cold War, and Turkey started systematically viewing the region as an area of interest and involvement. Turkey played an active diplomatic role during the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, as well as in the subsequent peacekeeping operations (Uzgel, 1998, pp. 403-444). *Diyanet* and TİKA did not manage to establish themselves in the region during this period. Yet both of these institutions would later prove to be the major soft power tools of Turkey. One of the reasons for the initial failure was that Turkey did not have the resources to maintain ongoing economic support. Another reason was the unstable coalition governments that followed the Özal period. In this period, Turkish democracy deteriorated and the country did not have a stable and consistent strategy of foreign policy. Despite its efforts to exercise political, cultural, economic and religious influence on Southeast Europe, Turkey's domestic problems and instability– such as its economy and the perpetual indirect interventions of the military into civil politics – limited its success. Turkey of this period could, therefore, be defined as a *nascent soft power* (Öztürk, 2018, pp. 144-159).

Table 1: Different Approaches of Turkey to Southeast Europe Prior to the AKP

From the Early Republican Period to the Beginning of the 1980s	From Turgut Özal's Prime Ministry to the mid-1990s
• Nostalgia	• Nostalgia
• Security	• Economic and Cultural Influence
• Limited Humanitarian Aid	• Visible, but Limited Humanitarian Aid
• Protection of the International Order	• Protection of the International Order

As a final aspect of this historical summary, it is necessary to underline the Gülen Movement's position in the 1980s and 1990s, which is essential to an understanding of the current situation. Despite Turkey's catastrophic domestic politics, the initiatives of the Gülen Movement have not been negatively influenced by the instability in Turkey, and the Movement began to play an active role with the support of the Özal administration. At the beginning of the 1990s, they started opening schools, associations and media organs in Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and Serbia. The military intervention that came on February 28, 1997 tried to curb the influence of the Movement in the region, but had limited effect. Subsequent AKP governments in the 2000s made use of the ground that had been prepared by the Gülen Movement in the region (Öztürk and Sözeri, 2018; Öztürk and Gözaydın, 2018).

The AKP on the stage: The New Turkey?

The AKP period has witnessed an unprecedented wave of change in Turkey. Coming to power in 2002 as a single-party government against the pressures of the Turkish Armed Forces and bureaucratic tutelage, the AKP has changed both itself and the country at critical junctures. Different studies have depicted a radically different and self-conflicting AKP. While some argue that under AKP rule, at least in the first period, Turkey became an exemplary country which reconciles Islam with democracy (Tepe, 2005), other studies, specifically after 2011, have observed repressive tendencies (Baser and Öztürk, 2017). Framing Turkey's influence on Southeast Europe, under these diverse perspectives, perhaps requires a comprehensive and holistic study, one that can assess the changes in the country's domestic and foreign policy using an integrated approach, and evaluate the different periods of the AKP through both ruptures and continuity.

First of all, it should be acknowledged that the AKP's ascent is a cumulative result of the march to power of Islamic and conservative groups since the Young Ottomans of the late Ottoman era (Öztürk, 2019). Achieving control of power with an effective leadership, the support of the lower-middle class, and a pro-European Union discourse, the AKP followed non-confrontational policies to avoid the wrath of the Kemalist-secularist guardianship mechanism, that is to say the well-established bureaucratic tutelage of Turkey (Akkoyunlu, 2014). Fighting the indirect interventions of the military (i.e., the e-memorandum of 2007) and trying to push back against secularist mass protests (the Republican protests), AKP formed an unofficial coalition with various anti-tutelage groups. One of the biggest informal but visible coalition partners was the Gülen Movement, and in partnership they started implementing a more pro-active foreign policy in Southeast Europe and the the rest of the World. This coalition then reflected on domestic politics with the support of liberal intelligentsia.

In domestic politics the AKP, in unofficial coalition with the Gülen Movement, began publicly fighting the hostile bureaucratic structures with the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. However, the AKP–Gülen coalition became more assertive over time and started implementing more nationalist policies on the Kurdish issue. When Ahmet Davutoğlu, an ambitious yet less-than-realistic scholar of international politics, was appointed as minister of foreign affairs, Turkey started following bolder and more confident policies first in Southeast Europe and then in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and the West. At this point, it is important to note that even though the Gülen Movement and the AKP emerged from different traditions in Turkish political Islam and possessed different worldviews and organisational and political styles as well as completely different historical roots and theological traditions, their agendas coalesced along common interests in terms of foreign policy. Southeast Europe represents an important area for both the AKP and the Gülen Movement as a result of its significant Muslim and Turkish-speaking demographics and its potential for multilateral investment in areas such as trade and education. Therefore, the organisational capacity of the Gülen Movement acted in tandem with the transnational apparatuses of the AKP government in a manifestation of soft power. And, the political power and influence of the AKP helped the Gülen Movement to make critical contacts in host countries' corridors of bureaucracy. Indeed, to define all of the policy implementations of that period within the category of soft power would misrepresent what soft power entails, since most of the policies were based on the self-interest of the Gülen Movement and the AKP, rather than to create a Turkish soft power *per se*.

This open and outward line of policy started to deteriorate with the loss of momentum in the Turkish economy (Erkoç, 2019), rising authoritarianism in line with global developments (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016), the Arab uprisings' frightening effect on the leadership of the AKP and the Party's harsh reaction to the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013. This process of de-democratisation manifested through increasing authoritarianism in domestic politics and significant changes in foreign policy, especially in relation to the EU (Saatcioglu, 2016). While this process had a number of critical junctures, it may be fair to claim that the Gülen Movement–AKP war has affected it the most. After 2013, the unofficial coalition between the AKP and Gülenists that had been based on power-sharing turned into an all-out war, which altered the AKP's choices in both domestic and foreign policy. The crises that the AKP government faced, such as the 17–25 December corruption investigations and finally the July 15 coup attempt, made Erdoğan centralise power in his person (Irak and Ozturk, 2018). The regime change that came in 2017 and the requirement of winning more than 50% of the votes to gain power made Erdoğan shift towards nationalism and ally with the MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Action Party). This new coalition has set the core ideological backbone of today's Turkey: ethno-nationalist, repressive and Sunni Islamist. The emergence of what Erdoğan labels "the New Turkey" has changed Turkey's policies and its image in Southeast Europe.

Three phases of Turkey's soft power role in Southeast Europe[5]

The previous section of this study assessed the stages that Turkey has gone through during the AKP period, and there is a strong likelihood that Turkey is about to enter another period after the re-run Istanbul election in late June 2019. Yet, the situation does not render the same in foreign policy in general and as regards Southeast Europe specifically, for two reasons. The first is that, despite the well-known stipulation of classical constructivism that domestic political changes directly affect a country's foreign policy (Reus-Smith, 2005), the Turkish case has its historically formed differences. While some domestic changes have later been reflected in Turkey's foreign policy, for others, this has not happened (Bozdağlıoğlu, 2003). As summarised above, Turkey has been going through a hectic period since 2002 and some of this domestic change has not created a significant influence on foreign policy behaviours. Secondly, in the AKP period, Turkish foreign policy has formed and worked with coalitions with non-state actors, such as Sunni Islamic groups, at an unprecedented level. Even when the AKP's relations with these actors has changed domestically, the transmission of this change to foreign policy relates to domestic factors in the countries where these actors are present.

From this standpoint, while the soft power status of Turkey and of its soft power resources are affected by changes in domestic policy, this is not a direct and linear reflection. Based on the existing literature, the state reports of Turkey on the subject, and the fieldwork that I conducted, it would make sense to examine Turkey's varying influence on Southeast Europe in three phases: 2002–2010 as the *rise of soft power*; 2010–2016 as the *decline of soft power*, and post-2016 as *ambivalence of soft power*.

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[5] This part of the article is based largely on my field-work in various times between 2015-2018, and at the very beginning of 2019 which covers Southeast Europe and Turkey, and consists of approximately 130 interviews with experts, political actors, diplomats, scholars and journalists, as well as religious community leaders/representatives, and imams in terms of the general arguments of this study. This fieldwork, observation and interviews that include Muslim and non-Muslim, Turkish and non-Turkish interviewees, provides a rich body of information that could be utilized examine my suggestions on the complex relations between states, their identities, several soft power types and religion.

Rising soft power of the AKP's Turkey

Researchers on Turkey, who tend to focus on Turkey's relations with Southeast Europe and its emergence as a soft power in the region in the post-2002 period under the AKP and the Gülen Movement 'coalition', gravitate towards seeing this as an abrupt development. The interest of the AKP's founding elite in the region is mostly ignored or is reserved under the general historical interests of Turkey. When Erdoğan became the mayor of İstanbul in 1994, he and his close allies within the Welfare Party (*Refah Partisi*, WP) cadres started forming cultural and religious solidarity with Muslim-majority locations such as Gostivar in North Macedonia, Tuzla and Sarajevo in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Sandžak in Serbia. Furthermore, *Süleymancis*, Nurcu Movement and Aziz Mahmut Hüdai Community which are strong and prominent religious communities in Turkey, started making an appearance in the second half of the 1990s with the student housing, Quran courses they opened in the region, particularly in Albania, Macedonia and Kosovo. The Gülen Movement also started gaining influence with a school they founded in 1993, Mehmet Akif Kolegji in Macedonia, and the madrasas they took over in Albania. The Movement then continued by establishing education complexes in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Albania and Kosovo, business associations, dialogue institutions and the Zaman Newspaper with the support of the volunteer financial founders from various cities of Turkey.

It is fair to claim that Turkey moved beyond its well-established state-centric foreign policy and started forming structures that bring cultural and religious sensitivities to the fore and provide education services. So the increasing visibility of Turkey in Southeast Europe during the AKP period had a preceding formative period. Religious groups such as the Gülenists, *Süleymancis* and others had started their activities more than a decade before the AKP came to power. Yet, perceptions on the rising visibility of Turkey as an effective soft power, manifested through the AKP and non-state actors, have four major grounds.

The first is that under AKP rule, Turkey has increased the effectiveness of its democracy and Constitutional institutions primarily because of a pro-EU stance and associated reforms. The AKP commenced carrying out legal and administrative reforms to make itself permanent on the political stage – that is to say, to avoid the wrath of secularist bureaucracy in the country, to gain recognition by the international society, and eventually to achieve accession to the EU (Tocci, 2005). The reform process made the AKP and its undisputed leader, Erdoğan, the focus of popular attraction. As Nye points out, democratic developments and their possible export are the most important tools that states can use and Turkey, with reforms in hand, albeit with a relatively short legacy of democracy, started to exercise a larger political influence on Southeast European countries that aspired to maintain democracy in the face of religious differences.

Secondly, in this period Turkey started implementing changes in its foreign policy under the influence of Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served as the foreign policy advisor to Erdoğan and former Turkish President Abudullah Gül (2007-2014) and was then the foreign minister. However, the perspective that sees an increase in Turkey's soft power under Davutoğlu's influence (Aras, 2014; Kalın, 2012) deserves some degree of scepticism. It is a fact that Davutoğlu brought humanitarian aid to the forefront of Turkish foreign policy and emphasised Turkey as a pivotal country in its region and at a global scale (Davutoğlu, 2001; 2008). He also desired Turkey to represent its Ottoman heritage in cultural, ethnic and religious terms (Ozkan, 2014). Bringing culture and religious values to the fore, this political language created a positive influence on Muslim

communities in the region, yet was not welcomed by non-Muslim communities and the political elite. Davutoğlu, however, did have an undeniable influence on the rise of Turkey's soft power, at least for a limited time (Öztürk and Akgönül, 2019, p. 229).

Before looking at the third reason, it would be beneficial to scrutinise Davutuğlu's thinking on Turkish foreign policy and its strategy for Southeast Europe. The central claim of Davutoğlu's approach is that Turkey, as a result of its Ottoman past and its shared cultural identity and religion with both old Ottoman territories and the Islamic World, could utilise its geostrategic location to enhance its standing in the World. In this way, Turkey has the potential to be a pivotal state in global affairs. This represents a rebuttal of the secular and Western-oriented characteristics of classical Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu also offers an alternative worldview and definition by instrumentalising religion. He focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilisations, particularly the West, and asserts that the differences between Western and Muslim paradigms create an obstacle for the study of contemporary Islam as a subject of the social sciences, especially of international politics. Davutoğlu believes that governments in the Islamic World cannot derive their legitimacy from the same sources as Western states (such as elections and representative institutions), but instead must have a religious basis. He also notes that Turkey is a key part of Islamic civilisation and can resume its rightful place on the world stage only if it embraces leadership of the Islamic World, as it did when the Caliphate was based in İstanbul. He repeatedly drives forward the importance of nationalist ideas supported by glorification of the Ottoman period. Southeast Europe appears to be a suitable context in which to implement these foreign policy aims, since it is located within Turkey's geographical, cultural and economic realm of influence (Öztürk 2018, p 188-193). Furthermore, in one of Davutoğlu's articles (2008), he suggests that the region is in a new era comprising a period of restoration, cooperation and construction: restoration in the sense of restoring shared cultural, economic and political ties; cooperation in developing a new spirit of joint action; and construction as a way to both overcome the legacy of past decades and respond to the challenges of the new decades to come. At this point, suffice it to note that Davutoğlu's ideas were mostly welcomed by the Muslims of the region and could not be comprehensive.

Apart from the Davutoğlu effect, the third reason is the AKP's relatively more successful and comfortable period in foreign policy between 2002 and 2010, which is closely related to the atmosphere of global environment. Yet, some other factors, such as economic development and transnational apparatuses, played important roles in the context of Southeast Europe. The AKP showed a good economic performance between 2004 and 2010 mostly because of global economic recovery and AKP's consistent policies following the reforms made before it came to power (Öniş, 2012). This prosperity was reflected in Southeast Europe. In the period 2002–2010, the trade volume between Turkey and the region almost tripled. Turkey also started playing more active regional roles through Diyanet, TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute and YTB[6]. During this period, Turkey became publicly almost more visible on the ground than more prominent actors like EU countries, Russia and the United States. Diyanet has made agreements with the authorities of many Balkan countries, through the attaché offices it maintains in Turkish embassies and through the Diyanet Foundation, to train imams and provide other religious services. TİKA, along with the state-run construction company TOKİ, has constructed public buildings in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia

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[6] Even though YTB does not have any official representation it is very active through some external support to other transnational apparatuses.

and Kosovo. With the establishment of Yunus Emre Institutes in 2007, Turkey started contributing to the cultural activities of these countries. Even though all of the institutions have also been contributing to the region via aid in kind and it is therefore almost impossible to state the exact costs of such activities, the annual reports of these institutions indicate that countries of Southeast Europe have been receiving the largest sums of financial and other aid from Turkey after Somalia and some Northern African countries.

These were also the years when the compatibility of Islam and democracy was being discussed at a global level (Philpott, 2007), and the moderate Islamic movements and communities were acting more freely. The relationship between the AKP and the Gülen Movement started bearing fruit in Southeast Europe. As noted previously, representing a non-radical interpretation of Islam in the region since the late 1990s, the Gülen Movement has become very active in Kosovo, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Bulgaria and Serbia with three universities, 20 education institutions, eight madrasas, Zaman newspapers, and many civil society–business organisations. The activities of the Movement, in general, were at that time in line with the policy choices of the Turkish government. While none of these institutions received direct support from the Turkish government, they got respectful financial contributions from the AKP municipalities and pro-AKP holdings (Öztürk, 2018, p. 255).

All in all, with a growing economy, the reforms and democratisation that it carried out for the EU accession process and the activities of state and non-state actors in the region, Turkey rose as a soft power. Yet, it did not accomplish all the factors that Nye mentions in terms of fulfilment of soft power; for instance *digital infrastructure and skills in digital diplomacy – and indeed, well-functioning democratic norms*. Furthermore, it should also be emphasised that Turkey did not have sufficient time to fulfil these factors and establish itself as a permanent, solid and indisputable soft power because of its domestic political instabilities and its over-use of religious discourse and ethnic motives in its policies towards the region.

Declining soft power of Turkey

Turkey has historically been characterised by dynamic yet unstable domestic politics, and this was reflected in foreign policy in the AKP period. The change has been made clear in studies on Turkey and the discourses of political actors particularly concerning foreign policy, and is rendered more significant in the context of Turkey's relations with Southeast Europe. As pointed out by Nye and Haynes, the position of soft power relies on the perception of public opinion in other countries, and this requires the sustainable representation of the factors pertaining to soft power.

The Arab Spring, in foreign policy, and the AKP's struggle with the Kurds inside Turkey in domestic politics (Baser, 2017) facilitated the Erdoğan government's embrace of security-oriented conservative-nationalist discourse and policies. Erdoğan elevated himself to the position of a strongman in the absence of effective opposition (Keyman, 2014, p. 21). However, the public reaction evinced in the Gezi protests (Öztürk 2014) and the Gülen–AKP struggle started to reverse the rationalistic instrumentalisation of religion in foreign policy. This transformation highlighted the fact that the AKP's new understanding of foreign policy is anti-Western, Islamist, adventurist and ideological (Yavuz, 2016, p. 440). On top of the political instability, the economy started giving signals of weakening, and contributed greatly to the decline of Turkey's soft power (Öniş, 2019).

Although Turkey has maintained its activities through transnational state apparatuses like *Diyanet*, TİKA, Yunus Emre Institute and TOKİ, its accomplishments in basic freedoms, human rights, overall democratic credentials and constitutional resilience have been reversed, specifically after 2011. It now brings a smaller coefficient to the activities of these apparatuses. In this regard, two issues indicate the decline of Turkey's soft power in the region. The first is transnationalisation of the struggle or war between the AKP and the Gülen Movement. This is primarily important in the deterioration of Turkey's influence in the region, which has been the major battlefield between the two adversaries. Rather interestingly, the two structures that increased Turkey's soft power now seemed to be decreasing it. They ran propaganda campaigns against each other and this equated to the exportation of domestic conflicts abroad and a subsequent decline of soft power. The second point concerns centralisation and personalisation of power in the persona of Erdoğan, and his desired hegemony through the exploitation of ethno-religious values (Lancaster, 2014). The countries of Southeast Europe were the designated battlefield and became the testing grounds for this process, further deteriorating Turkey's soft power there.

The brutal war of propaganda between the AKP and the Gülenists violated Nye's proposal that propaganda must be performed seamlessly. Furthermore, Turkey's distancing from democratic values has been presented as a positive development by the propaganda machinery of the AKP and this does not seem to have paid off. With its weakening economy, Turkey has a much lower trade and investment volume than the EU and the US. Exportation of domestic problems also decreased the influence that Turkey had recently had. Yet, despite all such deterioration in its soft power, Turkey remains the most important country for the Muslim communities in the region, and for their elites.

The beginnings of ambivalence in Turkey's soft power

Several factors have been at play in the changes Turkey has gone through in its policies on Southeast Europe, and the perception of such changes in the eyes of local actors. The leading factor, perhaps, is the personalisation of power and the dramatically authoritarian drift of the country in less than a half decade. This change manifested in impulsive attitudes in Turkey's foreign policy that do not constitute feasible conditions for soft power practices. The coup attempt of July 15, 2016, allegedly devised and carried out by the Gülen Movement, created fundamental changes in Turkey's domestic and foreign policy. On the one hand, in domestic politics, Erdoğan had to share power with the MHP and the Euro-Asianist bureaucrats in military and judiciary circles. On the other hand, in foreign policy the AKP has started to use pro-Islamic and ethno-nationalist language at an unprecedented level. In other words, with radicalisation of the leadership and a hegemonic party, the state started to go through an ethno-nationalist Sunnification. It is hard to determine to what extent this has reflected on policy-making, and how much has remained in the realm of discursive management. The clear result, though, is that it has created changes in Turkey's Southeast Europe policies and made the situation more complicated.

Furthermore, as noted previously, the Gülen Movement has more established relations than the AKP with local socio-political actors in Southeast Europe. Until the early 2010s, its civil societal capacity had been regarded as a soft power tool of the Turkish state. Yet, especially after the July 15 coup attempt, the priority of the AKP government has become to curb the influence of the Gülen Movement and, if possible, to exterminate it. Alongside the deterioration in the country's democratic credentials and its weakening economy, the fight with the Gülen Movement has created

internal conflicts in the soft power capacity of Turkey. The most striking example of these conflicts took place in Albania. The biggest mosque of the region was built by TİKA and *Diyanet* and the opening ceremony was attended by the Turkish and Albanian presidents in May 2015. In the ceremony Erdoğan did not shake the hand of Skënder Bruçaj, the head mufti of Albania, because of his very close relations with the Gülenists, and openly demanded his removal along with the closure of institutions affiliated with the Gülen Movement. Eventually, the Turkish *Diyanet* cancelled the aid it had been providing to the Albanian *Diyanet* since the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium.

Similar situations can be seen in North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. For example, in North Macedonia, in Muslim-majority locations like Gostivari (*Гостивар*) and Tetova (*Тетово*) the activities of *Diyanet* and TİKA are very visible via mosque construction, the education of imams, scholarships and various activities aligned with particular religious, national and cultural days of both Turkey and the host countries. They are even more visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. So it would be fair to say that some soft power tools are still vibrant in the region but they are intensely instrumentalised. After the coup attempt of July 2016, these institutions openly target the Gülenists and this attitude is not welcomed by most of the local elite. The major reason behind this disaffection is the trajectory of recent events and the current discourse of the parties. Turkey has recently represented itself as inheriting and employing the region's Ottoman cultural heritage, which is not necessarily regarded as a positive thing in the social memory of the Balkans. In line with this, it has intensified its ethno-religious discourse and policies. Furthermore, Turkey intervenes in the relations that these countries have with the Gülen Movement, which is not acceptable in any definition of soft power since it is directly related to sovereignty. Albania reacted negatively to Turkey's policies after 2016 at the level of the Parliament and the Presidency. In Kosovo, the kidnapping by Turkish intelligence of six people affiliated with the Gülen Movement elevated regional concern to an unprecedented level.

In the scope of its fight with the Gülenists, Erdoğan's AKP established the Turkish Maarif Foundation in 2016. As much as the Foundation defines itself with a mission to serve as a gateway to the international educational arena whereby Turkey will contribute to enhancing cultural and civilisational interaction and paving the way to achieving common wellbeing, its ultimate and clear mission is to take over the educational institutions run by the Gülen Movement.[7] This is why it is difficult to classify this Foundation as a soft power tool and its success is highly questionable, since it can be successful only where Turkey is economically more powerful than the host country. Yet, North Macedonia sets an interesting example: the Gülenists have been active in the country with Yahya Kemal Colleges for over 20 years. Despite all the pressure Turkey has applied and the efforts the Maarif Foundation has expended, they have managed only to displace the general headquarters of these schools in Skopje and established five different individual schools.

Apart from Macedonia, the Foundation has started to build and/or take over some of the international schools in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo. Even though, it tried to open schools in Bulgaria and Slovenia, the local political elites did not give permission to the

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[7] In 2017's President of Maarif Foundation, Cem Zorlu underlined the importance of the region for their mission; *Türkiye Maarif Vakfı Yönetim Kurulu Başkanı Zorlu: Balkanlar Maarif Vakfı için Özel Öneme Sahip*, by Cihad Ali, Anadolu Ajansı, 6 June 2017, https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/turkiye-maarif-vakfi-yonetim-kurulu-baskani-zorlu-balkanlar-maarif-vakfi-icin-oneme-sahip/836142

activities of the foundation. In Montenegro, the negation process on school establishment is still an ongoing process between Turkish authorities and local political actors.

The changing policies and priorities of Turkey have caused its transnational apparatuses to transgress their boundaries as soft power tools. The most striking institution, in this regard, has been *Diyanet*, which is the most established in Western and Southeast Europe. On April 1, 2017, Germany launched an investigation into *Diyanet*. Prosecutors explored the possibility that some *Diyanet* imams in Germany had spied on members of the Gülen Movement. Germany was not an exception; Bulgaria, Serbia and Bosnia were included in the activities of *Diyanet*, as well as other Southeast European countries.[8] The transgression committed by *Diyanet*, which as an institution is expected to keep Wahhabi and Salafist Islam away from the continent of Europe, started to shadow its credibility as well as the reliability of Turkey. An employee of *Diyanet* was deported in 2017 with the accusation of meddling in the domestic politics of Bulgaria. Similarly, Uğur Emiroğlu, who was working as a social services attaché in the Turkish embassy of Bourgas, and Adem Yerinde, the former coordinator of Turkish *Diyanet* Foundation in Bulgaria, were deported with comparable accusations. The cases of deportation damaged the reputation of Turkey and of *Diyanet*.

Another negativity concerns the relations that TİKA and Yunus Emre Institute established in the region. Despite the fact that both these institutions work with Muslims and non-Muslims and run joint projects with various communities, the overwhelming perception in the region stipulates that they work exclusively with Muslims. One of the underlying reasons for this misperception is the increasing employment of religious elements in the discourses and activities of Turkish officials. Another reason is the AKP's enthusiasm to position various Islamic groups in the region to undermine the Gülen Movement in the sectors of education, health, culture and economic cooperation. The increasing visibility of Islamic communities, such as *Nurcu* and *Süleymanci* groups, creates the image that Turkey only focuses on Muslims since 2016.

Despite all the existing concerns, no country in Southeast Europe has cut off relations with transnational state apparatuses of Turkey completely. The main reason is the more pressing concern about the possible invasion of Arabic Islam, in the case of Turkey's complete withdrawal. All in all, Turkey still has a normative and positive influence on the Muslim and Turkish-speaking communities of the region. The overall deterioration of Turkish democracy, exportation of domestic problems to the region, distancing from the EU, excessive instrumentalisation of religion and intervention into the domestic affairs of Southeast European countries make it almost impossible to define Turkey as a soft power. Yet, with all its contributions in religious, cultural and economic fields and the financial aid that it provides, Turkey seems to be fulfilling the minimum requirements of a soft power, which justifies calling it an ambivalent actor.

Conclusion

After all these discussions, the questions that remain are, first, whether Turkey has been a foreign policy actor that carries the features of soft power? And second, is it possible to define Turkey as a soft power in its historical trajectory? Most researchers focus on the functioning of transnational apparatuses and the discourses that Turkish leaders employ, and underplay the factors put forward by Joseph Nye. Nye is clear about the issue: a country's capacity for soft power depends

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[8] *Does Turkey use 'spying imams' to assert its powers abroad?* by Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, The Conversation, 15 April 2017; https://theconversation.com/does-turkey-use-spying-imams-to-assert-its-powers-abroad-75643, last accessed 5 May 2019.

on its technological and information capabilities, the attractiveness of its culture, the success of its economic model, the quality of human and social capital and respect for democratic values. With its fragile economy, less-than-proactive foreign policy, deficits in technological capacity and excessive utilisation of ethno-religious values, Turkey's overall soft power capacity has certainly deteriorated.

It is obvious that Turkey has been through another domestic transformation period and creating new policy preferences regarding Southeast Europe without paying attention to their different characteristics, different demographical structures and historical relations with the Ottoman state.[9] Beyond that within these new policy preferences, Turkey has been instrumentalising religion more than previous times via its transnational apparatuses. This religion-based new policy of Turkey cannot simply be regarded as an element of soft power. It affects different actors in the region differently: some groups (mostly Muslims) are rather happy with Turkey's religiously fuelled approach, while some others are seriously concerned. This is one of the reasons why I prefer to define Turkey as an *ambiguous* actor who has not been mobilising its soft power resources efficiently. Even though, one might argue that, Turkey's religion-based new policy and activities could be defined within the scope of the concept of public diplomacy and/or soft power, this policy preference is multifaceted and has many problematic points, such as exportation of domestic conflicts, which are far beyond of positive policy methodology of soft power.

Furthermore, the religion-based transformation that Turkey is going through has seemingly created different outcomes in different countries and for different actors. The impact of Turkey's policy changes on Southeast European countries varied depending on their internal dynamics, international positions, economic development levels and demographic structures. Bulgaria, for example, as a member of the EU, does not permit any foreign organisation other than Diyanet and tries to limit Turkey's influence over its Turkish minority through *Diyanet*. The policies that Turkey defines as soft power do not get the same reaction from all groups and actors. Macedonia, for instance, with its relatively weak economy and assumed dependence on Turkey, opens up more space for Turkey's religion-oriented policies, with a reluctant acceptance. The Muslim elite of Macedonia uses the Turkish influence as a source of justification for their policies. The non-Muslim elite, however, is seriously concerned about the Islamic-oriented intervention of a third country. Albania, on the other hand, is totally different. The AKP can reach only some minor relatively small groups, and disturbs both majority of the Muslim and non-Muslim elites in this country. All of the Southeast European countries, however, present a common behaviour of avoiding confrontation with Turkey, mostly because of the investments that accompany the penetration and hegemony building policies of the AKP.

A comprehensive analysis of the Southeast Europe policies of Turkey shows that the new elite in Ankara tends to believe that Southeast Europe imaginary in the Turkish capital is shared by the countries and groups at the local level. This imaginary and the strategies involved are not unrelated to the transformation that Turkey has been going through. Turkey is building its new approach on the Ottoman legacy in a selective manner and sees some Muslims in the region as *more Ottoman*

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[9] The region is usually divided into two parts as the Eastern and Western in academic studies and research. This division, however, seems less-than-convincing in this geography of frequent overlaps and transitions in ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural ways. However, the nation building processes that started in the early 1990s created independent political units that focus on differences, by the very nature of the period. Turkey does not take these differences into consideration in its policies– an approach which seems to be the result of Turkey's historical role in the region, which meant that it saw the region as a whole.

than others and makes them its natural and historical interlocutors. This is why Turkey does not hesitate to intervene in domestic politics, creating a permanent influence through the elements of culture, language, religion and economics. To claim that Turkey's new policies are totally ineffective would contradict the findings of my personal field-work and readings. However, the effect is polarised. On the whole, Turkey has a Southeast Europe imaginary rather than a well-calculated and internally consistent Balkan policy. This imaginary magnifies policy makers' perceptions of Turkey's influence in the region and they believe most Muslims in the region see Turkey as a guardian. The much opposed concept of *clash of civilisations* put forward by Ahmet Davutoğlu and other minor architects of Turkish foreign policy seems to be internalised in an extreme paradox. Whether this is an old illusion or a hidden potential has yet to be seen. Another shortcoming of this imaginary is that it downgrades the other actors in the region, including; Austria, Russia, Germany and United States.

Under these circumstances, Turkey still deserves to be called an *ambivalent soft power* in this region. It also still provides financial and economic aid to these economies. Yet, in terms of economic power, Turkey cannot be compared with the EU, Russia and China. While these entities invest in manufacturing, Turkey invests in the banking sector and GSM services through companies that are close to the AKP government – or we may say to President Erdoğan. With its scholarship and exchange programmes Turkey attracts students, yet its overall performance in education and the relatively lower success rate of its universities render these programmes less than successful. Turkey is an academic destination for the study of theology. Furthermore, it is the most important country for the Muslims of the region; yet Turkey violates the criteria of soft power with its open propaganda. It utilises religion excessively, which serves only to hinder its influence in the region. Exportation of the conflict that the AKP has with the Gülen Movement, and the rather tense relations that it has developed with the EU and the US, qualify Turkey as a soft power that does not use its soft power capacity effectively.

Yet, Turkey can still increase its capacity. In order to do so, it should acknowledge that it cannot be a fundamental alternative for the countries of the region that aspire to be members of the EU. It should increase its democratic credentials and strengthen the constitutional institutions, and thereby boost the EU process. It should declare that it will not use its religious influence to provide guardianship for Muslims in a hegemonic way. On the contrary, it should promote religious freedom and peaceful coexistence both domestically and in the region. Supporting a specific religious group would harm a region that has suffered greatly from religious divisions and conflicts. Bringing its secular culture to the fore would differentiate Turkey from Wahhabi and Salafist powers that are also trying to exercise influence on the region. Turkey should also be careful in its emphasis on the common Ottoman heritage with the countries of the region, because this does not necessarily imply a peaceful and harmonious past, as envisaged by the AKP elite. Lastly, as noted previously, Turkey should not view the region as a single entity and should avoid implementing wholesale policies for the region. Rather, it should tailor specific policies for each country considering the sensitivity of historical, cultural, sociological and political dynamics in each context.

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