



GLOBAL TRANSITIONS SERIES



Turkey's Presence in the Western Balkans

Achieving Cooperation and Sustainable Peace
in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Spyros A. Sofos



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH



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Author: Spyros Sofos

Series Editor: Mateja Peter

Managing Editor: Mia Foale

PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform
School of Law, Old College, The University of Edinburgh
South Bridge, Edinburgh EH8 9YL

Tel. +44 (0)131 651 4566

Fax. +44 (0)131 650 2005

E-mail: peacerep@ed.ac.uk

PeaceRep.org

Twitter: @Peace_Rep_

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About the author:

Spyros A. Sofos is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Global Humanities at Simon Fraser University, Canada. He has published widely on MENA and South-eastern European politics, populism, human rights, conflict, and polarisation in these regions. His books include *Turkish Politics* and *'The People' Mass Mobilisation and Populism* (Edinburgh UP 2022), *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks* (Palgrave 2013) and *Tormented by History: Nationalism in Greece and Turkey* (Hurst and Oxford University Press 2008). He edits #RethinkingPopulism.

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Key Findings

- ▶ Turkey's historical relations with the Balkans, dating back to the Ottoman Empire, have been instrumental in the development of diplomatic and economic ties with the regions. They have also, however, posed limitations on its ability to engage with all actors concerned.
- ▶ The Muslims of Balkan origin, who form a significant part of Turkey's population, have generated various civil and economic links between Turkey and the Balkan societies.
- ▶ Turkey's focus on the European, former Ottoman space has evolved over time due to various domestic, regional, and global developments.
- ▶ The disintegration of former Yugoslavia and the establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina has created opportunities for Turkey to become a significant party in peacebuilding processes, leveraging and strengthening its historical ties with the Bosniak Muslims.
- ▶ To understand the geopolitics of the region it is important to understand the role of the EU, Russia, and Turkey and their complex interactions. Important here is Turkey's stalled EU accession process, which has been translated into a transactional and competitive relationship between Turkey and its EU partners, and has the potential of undermining the interests of Western actors in the Western Balkans.
- ▶ Turkey's Balkan policy has evolved over time from one focused on multilateral, constructive engagement to a more authoritarian, personalistic and transactional engagement.

Recommendations

- ▶ Turkey's historical and cultural ties with the Balkan nations (and with the Bosniak community) and Ankara's current role as a member of the PIC framework on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference makes policy coordination with Turkey an important priority for Western actors involved in the stabilisation and peacebuilding efforts in Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- ▶ Attention should be paid to the evolving relationship between Ankara and Moscow as the latter has been adopting disruptive policies conducive to the fragmentation of the region and of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Devising strategies to encourage Turkey to participate actively and constructively in the current multilateral peace and stabilisation framework is of paramount importance.
- ▶ Developments in Turkey's domestic political landscape are most likely to have an impact on the direction of Ankara's foreign policy and development engagements in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, redesigning the UK's and, more broadly, the Western approach towards Turkey and opening dialogue with conciliatory forces from across the polarised political spectrum that can pave the way to a more sustainable and stable route to democratisation, is important for Ankara's durable and constructive engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey's historical ties with the Balkans date back centuries, as the Ottoman Empire established its dominance over much of the region in the 1400s and left an indelible mark in its cultures and societies. Today, Muslims of Balkan origins make up a significant part of Turkey's population and have played a role in establishing civil society and economic links between Turkey and the societies of the region, and in sensitising policymakers to developments in Southeastern Europe. Ankara's focus on the European former Ottoman space has evolved over time in response to domestic, regional, and global developments such as the end of the Cold War, the violent disintegration of former Yugoslavia, the economic transformation during the tenure of Turgut Özal, the reconfiguration of the political system since the ascendance of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), and its foreign policy implications. The protracted conflict and, eventually precarious peace that followed the establishment of Bosnia and Herzegovina, one of the states that emerged as the Yugoslav Federation disintegrated in the 1990s, prompted the international community to develop mechanisms and relationships with the main parties involved: Bosniak Muslims, Bosnian Serbs and Croats, and Serbia and Croatia.

To understand Turkey's foreign policy, peacebuilding, and development engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina in this context, it is important to consider several interrelated factors:

- ▶ The Ottoman past of the region, which has been a source of social affinity and of interest in Turkey's Balkan neighbours and has been mobilised in various neo-Ottomanist visions.
- ▶ The changing international dynamics during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century which have shaped the opportunity structures available to Turkey during its forays in the Balkans, and the extent and depth of its engagement.
- ▶ The related relationships between Turkey, the EU and Russia, three of the most active international actors in the region, and their respective geopolitical visions of the Balkans.
- ▶ The reconfigurations of the domestic political landscape and the way that this has been translated into Turkey's regional and Bosnian policy.

Introduction

Turkey's historical ties with the Balkans date back centuries, as the region constituted part of the Ottoman Empire for nearly 500 years. The Empire left a lasting imprint on the Balkans' culture, history, and religious identity. The emergence of independent nation states in Southeastern Europe during the nineteenth and twentieth century set in motion waves of migration, as Balkan Muslims relocated to the shrinking Ottoman territory, and later to the Republic of Turkey; this migration has also affected the relationship of Turkey and the former Balkan provinces of its imperial predecessor. This historical connection to the region may have been significant in directing Ankara's energies and focus on its European former Ottoman space but, is not solely sufficient in accounting for the evolution and content of Turkey's regional engagement. Indeed, one needs to turn their attention to domestic and international dynamics during the late twentieth and early twenty-first century to understand how Turkey's interest in the Balkans was impacted, and how the latter informed Ankara's regional and peacebuilding policy.

Among the Balkan states, Bosnia-Herzegovina, a successor state of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, has been an important element of Turkish engagement in the region. Turkish interest in Bosnia-Herzegovina was informed by the post-Yugoslav state's Ottoman past, the religious affinity Turkish citizens had with a plurality of its population, and the large number of Turkish citizens of Bosnian origin. An additional factor that influenced the form, extent and intensity of Ankara's engagement in Bosnia was the war that devastated the multi-ethnic republic after its declaration of sovereignty and independence in 1991 and 1992 respectively, and the ethnic cleansing of Bosnian Muslims (also referred to as Bosniaks) that was perpetrated by Serbian militias (Sofos, 1996a), as well as by their Croat counterparts, albeit to a lesser extent (Shrader, 2003).

The end of global bipolarism and the increasing fragmentation of the international order has impacted Ankara's Bosnian policies. Its original caution and emphasis on the maintenance of the status quo gave way to a more engaged presence, initially through the country's commitment to multilateral efforts of peacebuilding, including its participation in military or hybrid stabilisation and peacebuilding missions, and in the Steering Board of the multinational Peace Implementation Council working under the chairmanship of the High Representative as the executive arm of the PIC.

However, as domestic and international developments contributed to the authoritarian transformation of Turkish politics and to the emergence of new illiberal actors in the fractured international landscape, Ankara's involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina was eventually characterised by a preference for bilateral transactions and relationships, and a weakening of its constructive participation and influence in multilateral contexts.

This paper draws on a review of the relevant literature and available primary sources, and six interviews with two current diplomats, two Ministry of Foreign Affairs officials, one retired Turkish Armed Forces officer, conducted between November 2021 and November 2023, and one academic foreign policy commentator. The paper seeks to map Turkey's multifaceted engagement in Bosnia (and the Western Balkans, where this impacts Bosnia) and trace its evolution over the past three decades. More specifically, the paper attempts to shed light on, and contextualise continuities and discontinuities in Ankara's humanitarian, development, commercial and cultural diplomacy associated with its peacebuilding activities in Bosnia and examine the ways Turkey's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina/the Western Balkans, contributes to, or diverges from, the BiH peace process and transition.

In what follows I address the emergence of Turkey as an ambitious regional and global actor, focusing on its first steps into peacebuilding in the Western Balkans. I then turn my attention to Turkey's foreign policy reorientation, including understanding of peacebuilding and its activities in Bosnia-Herzegovina over the past 15 years. I then provide an overview of the underlying trends and characteristics of the second phase of Ankara's peacebuilding engagement. Finally, I explore how Turkey's peacebuilding strategy and activities over the past 15 years impact the country's place in the regional and global system, namely its alliances and partnerships, and the effectiveness of its interventions. Building upon this, I offer suggestions for further consideration.

Background: Turkey Discovers the Balkans

Prior to the 1990s, Turkey was an internally focused regional actor, concentrating on its nation-building, territorial unity, and national modernisation. The invasion of Cyprus in 1974, driven by rising tensions between Greek and Turkish nationalists, was a significant but rare diversion from its typical foreign policy. Turkey's only other conflict resolution initiative – facilitating talks between Iran and Iraq in the 1980s – did not represent a change in Ankara's foreign policy; it was primarily driven by security concerns, due to shared borders and significant Kurdish populations with its two neighbours.

In the 1990s, Turkish governments became more proactive in the region, due to both domestic and international changes. The end of the Cold War, the collapse of communist regimes, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia gave rise to new geopolitical and economic realities. Turkic republics of the Soviet Union and "kin" Muslim communities in the Balkans (Poulton, 1997; 2008) were navigating the post-communist international order, and Turkey became a focal point of interest (Sofos, 1996b). In Turkey itself, the economic liberalisation under Prime Minister and later President Turgut Özal made Ankara more receptive to these developments and their potential opportunities. Özal's neoliberal policies also shifted Turkey's political and economic model, strengthening civil society. Citizens of Balkan origins, including those of Bosnian ancestry (which, according to research commissioned in 2008 by the National Security Council of Turkey (Milli Güvenlik Kurulu), were in the region of 2 million – see *Milliyet*, 2008), were able to increase Ankara's awareness of transformations and conflicts in their countries of origin (İnalçık, 2010). This shift, and Ankara's attention towards regions including former Ottoman territories, marked the first wave of Neo-Ottomanism (Murinson, 2009; Yavuz, 2020), a reconceptualisation of the Ottoman past legitimising Turkey's active role in regional and international systems. Turkey's peacebuilding interest, significantly shaped by identity and history, was amplified in response to the Balkan conflicts which impacted the Balkan Muslims. This connection prompted an exceptional mobilisation of civil society around the provision of humanitarian support, and facilitated the creation of non-governmental peacebuilding initiatives and humanitarian assistance infrastructure, and eventually guided the evolution of Turkey's state peacebuilding policies.

Ankara's foreign policy evolved to encompass emerging interests in Turkic Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Balkans. Successive governments used nation-building, development, and peacebuilding strategies in these regions to boost Turkey's global stature. This was part of a vision to transform Turkey from a peripheral Euro-Atlantic partner to a significant regional and global player. To this end, in the Balkans, Ankara initially emphasised its post-Ottoman roots and ambition to become a notable regional and European actor in its interactions with regional and international systems. This was evident in Turkey's participation in UN and NATO-backed peacekeeping efforts in the Balkans, and later, more significant activities regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina in the Western Balkans.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia deeply impacted Bosnia and Herzegovina. Arguably the most diverse republic with a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional population and political parties, Bosnia and Herzegovina is drawn along 'ethnic' lines rather than ideology, seeking to consolidate an 'ethnicised' Bosnia-Herzegovina with sovereignty favouring 'constituent nations', not its citizens (Sofos, 1996b). Bosnia's 1991 sovereignty declaration and 1992 independence, escalated into a war which led to Bosnian-Serbian militias controlling large areas with the tacit support of the Serbian government (Sofos, 1996b; Malcolm, 2002). The Croatian Democratic Community (HDZ) also attempted to control Herzegovina and parts of central Bosnia, escalating the conflict. The war's brutality drew international attention, leading to the deployment of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). However, UNPROFOR's inability to fulfil its mission and renewed Serbian provocations – including the massacre of the male population of the safe area of Srebrenica (Honig, 2007) – led to NATO's "Operation Deliberate Force" in 1995, and to UNPROFOR's more combative role alongside NATO forces (James & Shear, 1996). This intervention led to the Dayton Agreement in 1995, resulting in a decentralised state consisting of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Republika Srpska.

Turkey's Bosnian Involvement

Humanitarian Response

The war against the Bosniak Muslims struck a chord in Turkey. The atrocities of the Serbs earned them the moniker "Serbian butchers" in public discourse, while protests against Serbian aggression were organised in Istanbul and Ankara.

This wave of sympathy and indignation was not immediately translated into a strategy or response from the ministerial corridors of Çankaya. Instead, civil society mobilised to provide humanitarian aid. The Islamist Welfare Party (Refah Partisi) used its welfare provision infrastructure to collect and channel aid to Bosnia. At the same time, volunteers who defied the Serbian siege of Sarajevo to deliver aid established İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri ve İnsani Yardım Vakfı, (The Foundation for Human Rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief – IHH) in 1995, to support Bosniak communities and war victims (IHH, n.d.). But even beyond the Islamist milieu, other civil society groups and networks mobilised to extend tangible support to Bosnia's Muslims in the form of financial and humanitarian aid and volunteers, while some individuals joined the Bosniak forces (Hunter, 2016, pp. 163–4). The government, not yet accustomed to acting as a humanitarian donor or as an international development actor, deferred to the initiatives of civil society institutions.

Political Engagement

Instead, Ankara restricted itself to conventional diplomacy and action within multilateral diplomatic and military contexts (Kut, 1998; 2002). After initially advocating for the preservation of Yugoslavia's territorial integrity – Turkey originally supported the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) efforts for a peaceful resolution of the situation – events on the ground forced Ankara to shift its focus towards diplomatic efforts to support the rights and safety of Muslim populations in the Balkans, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, who were the victims of Serbian (and to a lesser extent Croatian) aggression and ethnic cleansing. Turkey thus called for the recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina's sovereignty, and for international action to support its territorial integrity, including military engagement (Hunter, 2016). Turkey's support of the implementation of the 1995 Dayton Agreement and active participation in international efforts to maintain peace and stability in Bosnia, focused primarily on diplomatic initiatives within a multilateral international context for the coming decade, almost invariably in unison with the United States, NATO, and the EU.

In addition to this contribution, Turkey played an active role in the conclusion and implementation of the "General Framework Agreement for Peace (GFAP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina". In this context, Ankara assumed a seat in the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), an international body established at the London Peace Implementation Conference in December 1995 and charged with implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement and the oversight of the peace process.

Military Response

These political initiatives were complemented by Ankara's willingness to commit military forces on the ground to support the international peacebuilding and stabilisation effort. Thus the Turkish Armed Forces actively participated in UNPROFOR from 1992 to 1995 and in NATO/IFOR and later, Stabilisation Force (SFOR) operations from 1995 to 2004, in addition to their EU-run successor, EUFOR ALTHEA ([European Union Rule of Law Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, n.d.](#)), committing military contingents and F-16 aircraft (Republic of Turkey MFA). It is important to note that the mainly military character of Turkey's presence in Bosnia-Herzegovina from the early 1990s to date has extended to operations of civilian character, such as meetings with key local leaders and occasional negotiations with parties involved in disputes in the areas of responsibility of the Turkish contingents (mainly in the regions of the Zenica, Zavidovići, Travnik, Jablanica and Livno). Such activities facilitated interactions between different ethnic and confessional communities and engendered instances of cooperation (Interview with Retired Turkish Army Col., 2023).

Turkey's commitment to supporting multilateral interventions and the institutions they engender has been a constant in Ankara's engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina since its initial involvement in the conflict. It has the second largest troop contingent among the 21 nations who provide soldiers to EUFOR Operation Althea, and Turkish personnel hold key positions within EUFOR. Turkey has assumed responsibility for the largest number of the Liaison Observation Teams (LOT) in the country, engaging with authorities and local populations.

Turkey's Peacebuilding Toolkit Expands: 2005 to the Present

Although this initial pattern of cooperation between Turkey, NATO, and the EU of ensuring stability and managing conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina has endured the test of domestic and international change, Turkey's peacebuilding engagement writ large in Bosnia-Herzegovina was to change in the first decade of the twentieth century as the emergence of the conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP) brought about the overhaul of the Turkish political system and, in due course, led to the reconfiguration of Turkey's foreign and peacebuilding policy.

During the AKP's first term in office, Ahmet Davutoğlu, then-foreign policy advisor to the Prime Minister, reshaped the contours of Turkish policy abroad. He acknowledged peacebuilding as a means for Turkey's transformation into an emerging power. In his book *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu* (2001), Davutoğlu translated the diffuse Ottoman nostalgia of the time into a geopolitical doctrine. He argued that Turkey's geographical location and historical background provided it with a "strategic depth" that required a multidimensional foreign policy approach. Aligned with this doctrine, Turkey's "near abroad" referred to the regions that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, including the Western Balkans, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Davutoğlu justified this shift by relating it to Turkey's EU accession process, perceiving Ankara's involvement in the Balkans as necessary for promoting its chances with the EU (Öniş and Yılmaz, 2009). Turkey's new foreign and peacebuilding policy direction aimed to position the country as a bridge between the European Union, and, more broadly the West, and the former Ottoman lands of Southeastern Europe (Kilinc, 2009) whilst also upgrading Turkey's position in the regional and international arena.

Turkey's foreign policy and peacebuilding involvement underwent a rapid change due to international, regional, and internal challenges. In the five years post-AKP's rise to power, Turkey's EU bid and democratisation stalled, and its economy stagnated. Attempts by armed forces and the Constitutional Court to restrict Prime Minister Erdoğan's powers and the 2013 Gezi protests led to a shift towards a more authoritarian domestic strategy (Sofos, 2018). International developments provided opportunities for Turkey to revise its foreign policy, responding to changing power dynamics and fortifying the AKP against domestic threats. These changes marked a move away from AKP's earlier cautious approach to a more strategic approach in domestic and international affairs.

Foreign policy and peacebuilding achievements gained importance, bolstering the AKP's power but also coinciding with rising tension and Turkey's increasing revisionist tendency (Duran, 2013; Öniş, 2015; Sofos, 2022; Tziarras, 2022).

To this end, while continuing to participate in the multilateral frameworks in place (such as the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) mission to Bosnia-Herzegovina), and often upgrading its contribution (interview with Turkish diplomat, 2022), Ankara explored additional avenues for cooperation with Bosnia and other Western Balkan governments. Regarding Bosnia-Herzegovina, Turkey deployed mechanisms of humanitarian aid and infrastructure development which, in contrast to earlier humanitarian mobilisations, have been more centralised or state controlled. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) has been extremely active in Bosnia, engaging in a considerable number of infrastructure development projects, aimed to improve agriculture and water management. Other TİKA projects included the construction of schools, hospitals, and other community facilities and numerous historical restoration projects (information provided by TİKA and compiled by the author).

Other agencies such as the Presidency of Religious Affairs (DiYANET), the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Maarif Foundation, as well as private entrepreneurs close to President Erdoğan, have been working in the areas of cultural diplomacy and education. Turkey has invested in establishing educational institutions, such as the International University of Sarajevo and the Ottoman Archives in Sarajevo, "with the aim of fostering greater understanding and cooperation between the two nations" (Turkish Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.(b)). Furthermore, numerous cultural exchange programs, artistic collaborations, and joint heritage preservation initiatives have been funded to strengthen cultural bonds between Turkey and Bosnia.

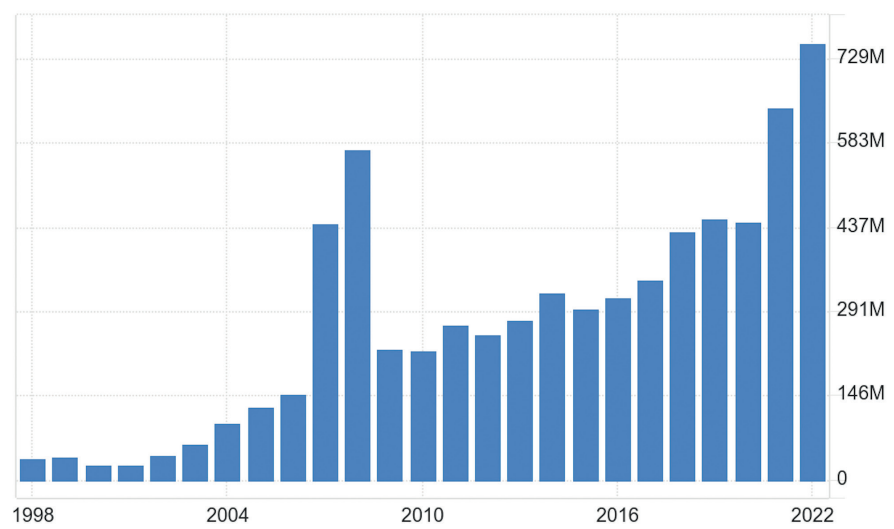
Regarding state-sponsored humanitarian engagement, the work of Turkish NGOs, and religious groups which have opened offices in Sarajevo and are active largely in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina are also notable. These include the Anadolu Youth Association (AGD), the IHH, Semerkand, and the Turkish Red Crescent: all organisations that are under the indirect control of the government or of circles within the ruling party. In a conversation with a Turkish diplomat (Interview, 2023) I was told that, in addition to their humanitarian role, these organisations have been supporting Ankara's effort to create a Turcophile elite by employing Bosniaks who have often been educated in Turkey, or in Turkish institutions in Bosnia.

Although OECD data suggest that Bosnia and Herzegovina is the biggest recipient of Turkish foreign aid in the Balkans (OECD, 2016), the reality in the fields of technical assistance and investment is much more complex.

As far as Turkey's technical and economic support is concerned, although Ankara's own EU accession bid has not shown any significant movement for over a decade, Turkey has claimed that it provides technical assistance to support Bosnia's route to EU candidate status (Turkish Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.(b)). Whatever technical assistance Ankara has been providing, it fails to acknowledge the particular political context in Bosnia. Although Bosnian political elites ostensibly support Bosnia's EU accession process, they have little to show in terms of progress since the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement in 2008.

Economically, Turkish investment and trade increased year after year from 2010 onwards, with exports to Bosnia soaring from \$224m in 2010 to just over \$755m in 2022 (interview with Turkish diplomats, 2022 and 2023; [UN Comtrade Database, 2023](#)). The two countries signed a Free Trade Agreement in 2015, which has led to increased bilateral trade and investment flows (Turkish Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.(b)). Turkish companies have undertaken infrastructure projects in Bosnia, including the construction of highways and energy facilities (Turkish Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.(b)). Turkey is Bosnia's tenth-largest investor, with foreign direct investments in Bosnia rising from a mere US\$34 million at the end of 2005 to approximately US\$210 million at the end of 2016, while Turkey's total inward FDI to Bosnia and Herzegovina from 2009 to 2019, accounted for 60 percent of total foreign direct investment inflows to the Balkan countries (Ekinci, 2018). Nevertheless, the adverse investment environment of Bosnia has discouraged substantial Turkish capital inflows in contrast to neighbouring Serbia where Turkish businesses have been investing heavily.

Figure 1: Turkey Exports to Bosnia and Herzegovina 1998-2022



Source: [Comtrade Data](#)

Local Responses to Ankara's Engagement

These developments are indeed impressive, but they do not provide the full picture. Local commentators have been critical of Turkey's lack of commitment to enabling Bosnia's development. During a visit by President Erdoğan to Sarajevo in 2018, former grand mufti Mustafa Cerić questioned the quality of Turkey's relationship with Bosnia Herzegovina: "We have two direct flights between Istanbul and Sarajevo every day, but they are operated by Turkish corporations and our airline went bankrupt. Why can't Turkey rent two Boeings, train our pilots, and let Bosnia and Herzegovina operate this line?" (Rašidagić and Hesova, 2020). Here, Cerić effectively points out the disconnect between Turkish aid and investment and the actual needs of Bosnian society. A somewhat relevant argument to Cerić's is made by Alida Vračić, with reference to the soft power initiatives of Turkish agencies such as TİKA, DİYANET, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Maarif Foundation. As Vračić (2014) suggests

What Bosnia needs most at this stage are actions that can help improve its economy and further its EU integration. ... So far, BiH's attempt to rely on friendly relations with Turkey to prosper economically is clearly not working. Expecting sentiment to prevail and bring prosperity to the country has become a Bosnian tradition – one of victimization and charity – stemming largely from the war and post-war reconstruction efforts in BiH.

Without underestimating the importance of cultural restoration and preservation, such a remark identifies a chronic problem in Turkey's interactions with Bosnia-Herzegovina: the lack of equilibrium or of 'voice' on the Bosnian side. As Vračić argues, Bosnia-Herzegovina remains mostly passive and maintains its role of a 'special case' country, nurturing this image within its borders and internationally. A conversation with a Turkish diplomat (Interview, 2022) confirms this disconnect: "we expect Bosnians to be grateful for our aid and investments although these do not bring food on the table" and "employing Turkish workers in infrastructure and construction projects, preferring to import building materials instead of sourcing them from local industries starves the Bosnians instead of benefiting them".

Turkey's activities in Bosnia also need to be understood in the context of the post Dayton Agreement atmosphere, and the consociational system this introduced. Critics have pointed out that the Agreement institutionalised and entrenched the ethnic divides of the young state and, although it froze the conflict, it failed to set in motion a peacebuilding process or bring about an economic ascent, despite the influx of millions of dollars. Poor coordination between international actors, a lack of consideration for local capacity (Kell, 2015), and a paralysing precarious negative peace (Berdal et al., 2012) rendered Bosnia unable to capitalise on and shape the contours of trade and inward investment. Turkey's activities, aside from being resistant to 'hearing' Bosnian voices and taking account of local needs, contribute to the further entrenchment of the current ethnic divides. Turkish agencies have a visibly preferential relationship with the Bosniak community and have made little effort to make inroads in parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina inhabited by Serbs or Croats. While Turkish officials present Turkey's activities in Bosnia as geared towards demolishing the walls that divide Bosnians, Vračić paints a different, bleaker picture: "The Yunus Emre Cultural Center opened three offices in BiH, none of which is located in Republika Srpska. Out of twenty-five branch offices of the Turkish Ziraat Bank in BiH, only one is located in Republika Srpska (in the capital Banja Luka) ... Finally, no large-scale production investment has been made in Republika Srpska. To date, majority of the activities organized by Turkey have been taking place in Federation BiH and are generally more welcomed in this Bosnian entity" (Vračić, 2014).

This close relationship between Turkey and the Bosniak community, however flawed, has not been conducive to reconciliation among the different communities of Bosnia Herzegovina. The Serbs and Croats consider Turkey at best an actor that has no interest in them, and at worst one that has the potential to undermine the balance of power in the Federation. Turkey's perceived bias towards the Bosniaks and its support for Bosnia's unity and central government has strained its relations with Republika Srpska. Ankara's recognition of the Bosnian genocide committed by Bosnian Serb forces during the war, and its active participation in the Srebrenica commemoration events, have been particularly sensitive issues for Republika Srpska.

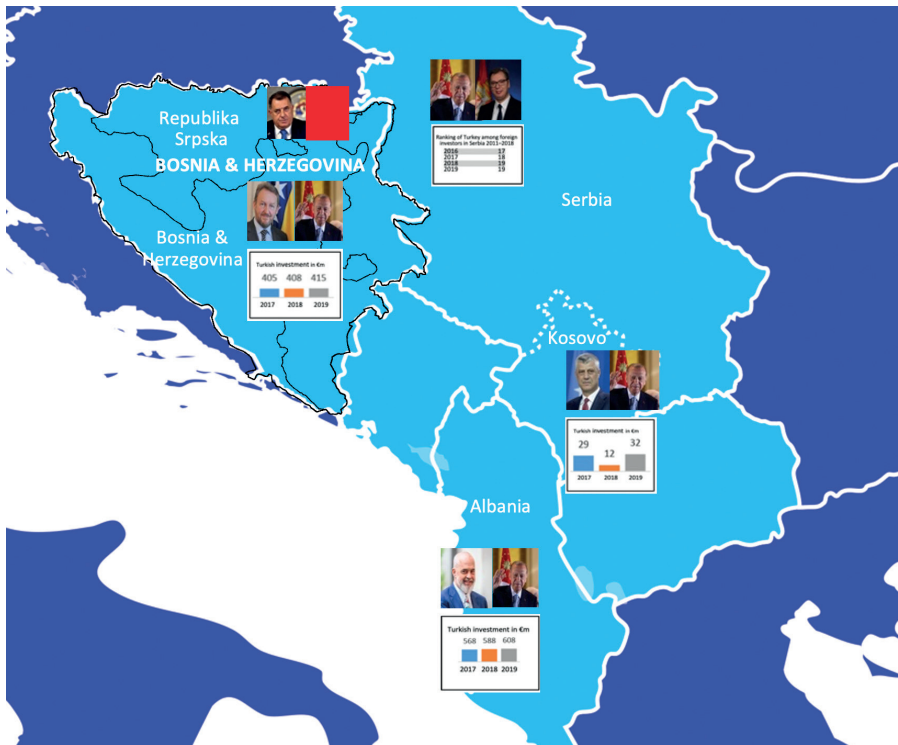
But even beyond Bosnia's borders, concerns have been raised about Turkey's influence in Bosnia, and its potential of undermining the sovereignty of individual Balkan states. Ankara has also, in its PIC Steering Board member capacity, frustrated Republika Srpska's official aspiration to exercise its "right to self-determination" once the oversight over Bosnian institutions exercised by the internationally appointed High Representative expires, by co-signing a Steering Board statement condemning such a move in 2019 ([Tulun, 2021](#)). Turkey's divergence, not only from Republika Srpska, but also from Russia, which has been seeking to assume the role of its patron power and fragment Bosnia Herzegovina, led Republika Srpska's president Milorad Dodik to repeatedly criticise Ankara's perceived bias against the Bosnian Serbs.

Bilateral and Transactional Politics

Indeed, whereas Turkey has found a *modus vivendi* with Russia in the Caucasus (Sofos, 2023), and Syria and Libya (Sofos, 2022) through what I have described as 'managed competition', it has seemed reluctant to emulate this relationship in the Balkans (including engaging meaningfully with Republika Srpska). One interviewee attributes this reluctance, not to Turkey's current commitment to the integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, or to its Western partners, but to its sense of vulnerability inherent in further Russian penetration in the Balkans (interview with Turkish diplomat 2022).

Over the past five years Turkey has developed a less institutionalised style of Balkan policy which interviewees (interviews with diplomats 2022; 2023) argue is serving the interests of President Erdoğan and leading circles within the AKP. After the introduction of Turkey's highly centralised and personalised presidential system, the Turkish Balkan and Bosnian policy has become more personalistic, authoritarian, non-reflexive, and increasingly more centred on the persona of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his personal ties to Bosnian and Western Balkan political leaders, including Serbia's President Aleksandar Vučić, Bakir Izetbegović (the leader of Bosnia's largest political party) Albania's Prime Minister Edi Rama, and Hashim Thaçi, the former President of Kosovo. Erdoğan's high-profile visit to Sarajevo in September 2022 constituted a show of support for Izetbegović and his Party of Democratic Action (SDA) ahead of the general elections in October 2022. Both politicians have participated in each other's campaigns and attended family celebrations, such as their children's wedding ceremonies. Aydıntaşbaş has coined the term "diplomacy of turning up", to convey the performative and transactional character of such interactions, as well as their shallowness and volatility which overshadows the importance and effectiveness of institutional links (Aydıntaşbaş, 2019). These leaders share with Erdoğan an autocratic style of governance which allows for more flexibility and favours a transactional approach to politics away from the public eye, and facilitates reaching non-transparent agreements. As such relationships yield results that cannot be achieved through the multilateral politics promoted by Turkey's Western partners, Ankara has been increasingly more focused on bypassing the international mechanisms it had hitherto supported.

Figure 2: Turkey's Relations with the Western Balkans – Personalistic Ties & Direct Investment



Source: Data from the Albanian Institute of Statistics, December 2020, the Central Bank of Bosnia & Herzegovina (CBBH), December 2020, the Kosovo Agency of Statistics 2019 and the National Statistics Agency of the Republic of Serbia 2019.

Illiberal Balkan Policy or a Mixed Bag? An Assessment

Turkey's interest in the Balkans and, particularly Bosnia-Herzegovina, has often been seen as the first wave of Neo-Ottomanism: a particular type of revaluation of the Ottoman past, providing legitimisation to Turkey's (re)insertion in the regional and international systems as a proactive and significant actor. Ankara's involvement in the Western Balkans, however, is mainly driven by its own political and economic interests and lacks the mechanisms that can involve grassroots voices and provide a degree of reflexivity in this 'post-Ottoman space'.

Turkey's Bosnian foreign policy and peacebuilding strategy have drawn on both 'liberal' and 'illiberal', authoritarian and personalistic toolkits. This strategy is increasingly characterised by use of non-inclusive methods. Despite references to inclusivity by Turkish officials, Turkey's activities, apart from being resistant to 'hearing' Bosnian voices and taking account of local needs, contribute to the further entrenchment of ethnic divides. Turkey's close relationship with the Bosniak community leadership and, in particular, with SDA's leader Bakir Izetbegović, undermines its impartiality in peacebuilding efforts.

Turkey's preferred mode of engagement in the region has shifted over the past decade from an emphasis on participation in multilateral initiatives to a more mixed involvement of both multilateral and bilateral frameworks and processes.

The personalistic style of politics favoured by Erdoğan is one that has permeated other illiberal fora such as that of the Astana process bringing together Russia's president Putin, Iran's President Raisi and himself. One notable similarity among both President Erdoğan and the leaders of the West Balkan countries is their increasing scepticism towards the European Union. However, it should be noted that Ankara's peacebuilding policy in the Balkans broadly aligns with the interests of its Western partners even in the current moment of tension and competition with some of its Western allies. Turkey's Western partners see the enlargement of the EU and NATO in the region as a way to promote stability, prevent conflicts, and enhance free trade mechanisms. Despite their reservations about the EU, Erdoğan and the West Balkan leaders share a common goal of supporting these broader objectives pursued by the Western countries. Democratic consolidation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, however, is not an objective in Ankara's Bosnian policy, as the current government is more interested in opaque politics that yield favourable outcomes for Turkey and its elite interlocutors.

As long as the EU does not offer a viable membership route to the countries of the Western Balkans and to Bosnia and Herzegovina in particular, Turkey's authoritarian and personalistic approach will present a palatable offering to Balkan authoritarian elites and undermine the democratic prospects of the region and Western regional interests.

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University of Edinburgh, School of Law, Old College,
South Bridge, EH8 9YL

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