

Brief n. 5/December 2022

## Turkey's role in the Western Balkans, between cooperation and competition with the European Union

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The tour of the Western Balkans, which took Turkish Head of State Recep Tayyip Erdoğan to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Croatia, ended on the 8<sup>th</sup> of September. The trip was part of the meticulous work of strengthening bilateral ties with the Balkan countries, which has been carried out by the Turkish government since the founding of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) under the ideological impulse of former Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu<sup>1 2</sup>. These bilateral cooperation activities in recent decades have been applied in various fields, from economics to culture to education, shifting the focus also outside the Muslim-majority countries of the region - such as Serbia - in a precisely structured *Soft Power* programme<sup>3</sup>. This is evidenced, for instance, by the flourishing of the Turkish Yunus Emre State Cultural Centres in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, as well as the establishment of specific scholarships for students from the Western Balkans. Kosovar students, for instance, are among the top 10 nationalities in Turkish universities<sup>4</sup>. In addition to its cultural and economic commitment, Turkey has shown tireless political commitment, seeking to act as a *super partes* mediator in the numerous ethnic conflicts within the countries of the region<sup>5</sup>. This is demonstrated by President Erdoğan, who, during the press conference at the end of the September meeting with the tripartite presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, declared his full support for the stability of the country and the proper conduct of the national elections on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of October, and called on the Muslim, Serbian, and Croat components to come to an agreement to preserve the country's territorial integrity<sup>6</sup>. In Serbia, the Turkish leader was also conciliatory, hoping that the recent agreements between Belgrade and Pristina would lead to diplomatic stability between the two countries<sup>7</sup>.

### **The reasons for the success of Turkish projection in the Balkans: between cultural-historical ties and personal charisma**

Due to its strategic position making the Western Balkans “the Turkish gateway to the European Union”<sup>8</sup>, the region has always played a key role in Ankara's foreign policy agenda. Already part of the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans became part of the strategic interests of the newly formed

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<sup>1</sup> CeSPI, Insight No. 12/May 2021, “Turkey's Foreign Policy Toward the Balkans: Past, Present and Prospect for Future”, M. Ali.

<sup>2</sup> CeSPI, Insight No. 195/October 2022, Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale “Il ruolo degli attori globali nei Balcani Occidentali: proiezione e strumenti tra livello tattico e strategico”, D. D'Urso.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> CeSPI, Insight No. 8/April 2020, “Migration for education: gli studenti internazionali negli istituti di istruzione superiore in Turchia”, V. Giannotta, A. Ianni.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/erdogan-nella-regione-dei-balconi-per-rafforzare-ulteriormente-la-presenza-turca/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/il-presidente-turco-erdogan-conclude-a-zagabria-limportante-tour-nei-balconi/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://it.euronews.com/2022/09/07/la-stabilita-dei-balconi-muove-la-diplomazia-del-bosforo-erdogan-in-visita-in-serbia>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/erdogan-nella-regione-dei-balconi-per-rafforzare-ulteriormente-la-presenza-turca/>

Turkish Republic at the turn of the two world wars, with the establishment of the Balkan Entente, which was intended to protect the region from possible military attacks and political interference from the West, first, and the Soviet Union, later<sup>9</sup>. Being able to count on a shared historical and cultural past and on the support of the Turkish-Muslim communities in the region, Turkey started a massive investment and trade programme, with exports of \$2.9 billion and imports of \$700 million in 2020<sup>10</sup>, while total investments in 2016 amounted to \$3 billion, with the launch of the construction project of the new motorway connecting Belgrade and Pristina<sup>11</sup>. This political activism has led experts to divide between those who speak of Turkish “neo-Ottomanism” - who see Erdoğan as a charismatic leader capable of restoring Turkey’s former prestige by extending his sphere of influence into regions historically under Ottoman rule - and those who speak of a foreign policy based on economic pragmatism<sup>12</sup>. Pragmatism that is quite successful in the countries towards which it is directed. Following the meeting in Serbia, President Aleksandar Vučić emphasised Turkey’s “constructive role in maintaining regional stability”, extolling the progress made by the country under AKP leadership<sup>13</sup>. During the meeting, the willingness to increase trade between the two countries from the current value of \$2.5 billion to a value of \$5 billion also emerged<sup>14</sup>. Milorad Dodik, a Serbian member of the tripartite presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, seems to be of the same opinion. During a press conference after the September meeting, he described Erdoğan as “one of the few true international leaders”, emphasising the difference with Western leaders<sup>15</sup>. This difference is expressed, Dodik explained, in the “lack of conditionality” of Turkish development aid - whereas the packages usually given by the EU are often conditional on the implementation of social and democratic reforms necessary for entry into the European family.

### **Relations with the West**

For his part, the Turkish leader emphasises the aforementioned “difference with the West”, while maintaining an “equidistant” international political line in institutional terms. Although he adheres to the international sanctions against Russia, he describes Western policy towards Moscow as “provocative”; although he does not set himself up as an explicit supporter of military action, he considers Western military support provided to Ukraine to be “inadequate” compared to Turkish

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<sup>9</sup> For a more in-depth look at the history of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, please refer to Insight No. 12/May 2021, “Turkey’s Foreign Policy Toward the Balkans: Past, Present and Prospect for Future”, M. Ali.

<sup>10</sup> <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/tur#yearly-trade>

<sup>11</sup> <https://it.euronews.com/2022/09/07/la-stabilita-dei-balceni-muove-la-diplomazia-del-bosforo-erdogan-in-visita-in-serbia>

<sup>12</sup> <https://aspeniaonline.it/gli-obiettivi-e-i-limiti-della-spinta-turca-nei-balceni-occidentali/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.trt.net.tr/italiano/turkiye-4/2022/09/08/vucic-e-molto-importante-il-ruolo-costruttivo-della-turkiye-1877281>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/erdogan-rilancia-la-cooperazione-economica-con-la-serbia-obiettivo-5-miliardi-di-dollari-di-intercambio/>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.agenzianova.com/news/erdogan-nella-regione-dei-balceni-per-rafforzare-ulteriormente-la-presenza-turca/>

military support - whose Bayraktar TB2 drones constitute the main Ukrainian military force<sup>16</sup>. The fact that the Turkish President chose precisely the trip to the Western Balkans to make this criticism suggests that the ultimate goal is not so much to take a firm stance against Russia, but rather to provide the countries in the region, at a time when the accession process itself is in the international spotlight, with a political alternative to the Union. On the other hand, Erdoğan has already proved to be a “privileged interlocutor” for Moscow, having played, together with NATO, a leading role in the negotiations that led to the July 2022 grain agreement - which allowed Ukraine to export goods blocked in the port of Odessa - and having averted a further crisis in November of the same year, following which Ukraine provided Russia with further assurances that it would refrain from using the grain corridors for military purposes<sup>17 18</sup>.

Faced with a difficult relationship with the European Union, Turkey’s accession negotiations have been *de facto* frozen since 2016, and in July 2022 the European Parliament declared that it “does not wish to resume accession negotiations” due to Ankara’s gradual estrangement from European values and the unresolved Cyprus issue<sup>19</sup>. However, Turkey’s participation in the first summit of the European Political Community held in Prague on the 6<sup>th</sup> of October confirms, on the one hand, how much the country is a strategic player with which Europe is obliged to interface, and, on the other, how much Europe is a fundamental interlocutor for Turkey itself, in a sort of love-hate, competition-cooperation relationship, especially on security and migration issues.<sup>20</sup>

Since the controversial “Refugee Agreement” of 2016, in fact, Ankara has always used illegal migratory flows as a “blackmail weapon” to make its demands be heard by the EU leadership, like a tap to be “opened and closed” at its own discretion, with often critical results for the EU. This was the case, for example, with the migration crisis of 2020, generated by Turkey’s decision to let thousands of migrants cross the border into Greece in an attempt to push Brussels to provide support for the management of the 4 million Syrians located in Turkey<sup>21</sup>. Turkey, in fact, has often accused the EU of continuous delays and defaults in the payment of the 6 billion euros planned for the management of Syrian migrants on Turkish soil. In 2017, the number of Syrians present in the country exceeded 4 million, while reception-related expenses incurred by the Turkish government amounted to more than 40 billion euros<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> CeSPI, Brief No. 44/March 2022, “Con il sostegno di La Turchia e la crisi ucraina: tra equilibrismi e alleanze” V. Giannotta.

<sup>17</sup> <https://it.euronews.com/2022/11/02/mosca-conferma-rientriamo-nellaccordo-su-grano>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/07/22/news/ucraina\\_russia\\_firma\\_accordo\\_grano\\_turchia\\_onu-358808615/](https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2022/07/22/news/ucraina_russia_firma_accordo_grano_turchia_onu-358808615/)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/it/press-room/20220603IPR32136/turchia-sempre-piu-lontana-dai-valori-e-dagli-standard-ue>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/it/meetings/international-summit/2022/10/06/>

<sup>21</sup> CeSPI, Brief No. 24/January 2021, “Con il sostegno di Turchia-Unione Europea: l’inizio di una nuova era?” V. Giannotta.

<sup>22</sup> CeSPI, “L’Accordo UE-Turchia sui migranti 5 anni dopo”, V. Giannotta.

## Conclusions

However, despite Ankara's cultural and political commitment in the region, it is still difficult to speak of a "dominating influence" capable of constituting a real "threat" to the European political and cultural model. Another particularly slippery slope for Turkish *soft power* is the issue of the Gülen schools in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo, although they have been outlawed by the Turkish government, which would like them to be closed immediately<sup>23</sup>. The response of individual countries to Ankara's request is different: while Albania officially closed the Gülen schools present in its country in 2020<sup>24</sup>, the arrest and forced extradition of six Turkish citizens affiliated with the incriminated institutes and residing in Kosovo provoked a strong reaction of indignation from the government in Pristina<sup>25</sup>. The closure or otherwise of the schools has also caused worrying internal rifts in Bosnia and Herzegovina - where the main Bosnian party, the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), historically close to Turkey, has supported Ankara's request in conflict with Bosna Sema, the educational organisation under which the Gülen institutes operate - as well as in North Macedonia - where rifts have occurred within the governmental cadres themselves on the issue<sup>26 27</sup>.

Notwithstanding this consideration, the revival of the Turkish role in the framework of the Russian-Ukrainian war places Europe in front of a strategic choice between two distinct values: the stability of the Western Balkans and the power policy of the European Union. In the coming months, it will be crucial for Brussels to decide whether to strive for stability (hence for a cooperative approach) - and consequently unite its mediation efforts in the region with those of Turkey, setting aside the tensions underlying relations between Ankara and Brussels - or for political competition (hence for an individualist approach), relaunching the role of the European Union as the only real alternative to the future positioning of the Western Balkans, while excluding possible coordination in future interventions with its Turkish ally.

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<sup>23</sup> CeSPI, Insight No. 195/October 2022, Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale "Il ruolo degli attori globali nei Balcani Occidentali: proiezione e strumenti tra livello tattico e strategico", D. D'Urso

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.balcanicaucaso.org/aree/Albania/Albania-Edi-Rama-chiude-tre-scuole-guleniste>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-kosovo/six-turks-arrested-in-kosovo-over-gulen-links-extradited-to-turkey-anadolu-idUSKBN1H51JL>

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.eastjournal.net/archives/75654>

<sup>27</sup> <https://balkaninsight.com/2016/07/26/gulen-schools-fight-provokes-new-tensions-in-bosnia-07-26-2016/>