

TURKEY'S CORONA DIPLOMACY IN THE BALKANS

IDLIR LIKA

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**SETA | SİYASET, EKONOMİ VE TOPLUM ARAŞTIRMALARI VAKFI
FOUNDATION FOR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH**

Nenehatun Cd. No: 66 GOP Çankaya 06700 Ankara TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 312 551 21 00 | Faks: +90 312 551 21 90

www.setav.org | info@setav.org | @setavakfi

SETA | İstanbul

Defterdar Mh. Savaklar Cd. Ayvansaray Kavşağı No: 41-43

Eyüpsultan İstanbul TÜRKİYE

Tel: +90 212 395 11 00 | Faks: +90 212 395 11 11

SETA | Washington D.C.

1025 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 410

Washington D.C., 20036 USA

Tel: 202-223-9885 | Faks: 202-223-6099

www.setadc.org | info@setadc.org | @setadc

SETA | Berlin

Französische Straße 12, 10117 Berlin GERMANY

Tel: +49 30 20188466

SETA | Brussels

Avenue des Arts 27, 1000 Brussels BELGIUM

Tel: +3226520486

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Idlir Lika

Idlir Lika is a scholar of comparative politics of ethnicity and nationalism, with a regional focus on Balkan/Southeast European countries. He received a BSc in International Relations from the Middle East Technical University, and an MA in International Relations from Bilkent University. In January 2020, he received a PhD in Political Science from Koç University with the thesis "Nationhood Cleavages and Ethnic Conflict: A Comparative Analysis of Post-communist Bulgaria, Montenegro, and North Macedonia." His research has been published in leading area studies journals such as *Mediterranean Politics*. He co-authored the policy report "Bulgaristan Türklerinin Kültürel, Ekonomik, ve Siyasi Sorunları, Talepleri, Çözüm Önerileri" (Bulgarian Turks' Cultural, Economic, and Political Problems, Demands, Policy Recommendations, 2020).

SUMMARY

The analysis examines Turkey's recent soft power push in the Balkans through delivering coronavirus aid and discusses Turkey's broader foreign policy goals in the region.

The Balkans were one of the primary targets of Turkey's global campaign to deliver medical supplies to aid countries in their fight against the novel coronavirus Covid-19. Seeing China, Russia, and the EU deploy aid to the region, Turkey is also using the Covid-19 supplies to reconfirm its influential role in the Balkans. This recent activism represents a continuation of Turkey's regional soft power campaign throughout the past decade that has mainly been built on mosque construction, restoration of Ottoman era buildings, support for local religious institutions, and extensive social and aid operations. However, Turkey's recent activism is very important for another reason also. The Balkans can be the basis for mending EU-Turkey ties and for rebuilding the relationship between the two actors that has been fraught with problems due to the multiple crises in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the continuous refugee waves. Now that the Balkans are mired in the soft power competition between the EU, China, and Russia due to the pandemic, Turkey can be a key EU ally in keeping the whole region on the Euro-Atlantic track, in preventing further authoritarianism/democratic backsliding, and in fighting corruption and ensuring the rule of law in the Balkan countries. Since Ankara's strategic interests in the region largely conform to those of Brussels, the two actors can be expected to work more close-

ly in the post-pandemic period. Turkey should also take up an active role in the post-pandemic economic recovery of the region. The analysis concludes by analyzing Turkey's resurgent ties with the local Muslim communities in the Balkans (Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks) and emphasizes Turkey's contribution to regional peace and stability.

INTRODUCTION

Turkey has emerged as a model both in its fight against the novel coronavirus Covid-19 domestically, and in its efforts to supply medical aid to countries around the world in their anti-Covid struggle.¹ As of April 27, 2020, Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu declared that Turkey had received aid requests from over 100 nations, and had delivered aid, medical supplies, and protective equipment to at least 57 countries in five different continents, including the countries worst hit by the virus, namely the U.S., UK, Italy, and Spain.² The Balkans, with which Turkey has deep cultural, historical, and religious links, were one of the primary targets of Ankara's global campaign to shore up the efforts against the pandemic. Turkey first delivered medical supplies to neighboring Bulgaria upon the request of the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov on March 11, 2020.³ One month later, on April 8, 2020,

Turkish military aircraft landed in five different Balkan capitals to deliver much-needed medical supplies to Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and North Macedonia.⁴ Lastly, on May 12, 2020, Turkey delivered supplies to Albania and to North Macedonia for the second time.⁵ It is interesting to note that Turkish medical aid to all Balkan countries arrived in boxes captioned “Ümitsizliğin ardında nice ümitler var... Karanlığın ardında nice güneşler var” (After hopelessness, there is so much hope and after darkness, there are much brighter suns), a quote from the famous 13th-century Turkish poet Mevlana Jalaluddin al-Rumi.⁶ This is clearly indicative of the fact that, seeing China, Russia, and the EU deploy aid to the region, Turkey is also using the Covid-19 supplies to reconfirm its influential role in the Balkans.

The importance of Turkey's recent activism in this vulnerable European region cannot be overstated. The Balkans can be the basis for mending EU-Turkey ties and for rebuilding the relationship between the two actors that has been fraught with problems due to the multiple crises in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the continuous refugee waves.⁷ The Balkans have the potential of becoming the new basis for a EU-Turkey rapprochement for two main

1. Hüseyin Alptekin, “Veriler Işığında COVID-19 Salgınıyla Mücadelede Model Ülke Türkiye”, *Sabah*, April 18, 2020, <https://www.sabah.com.tr/perspektif/yazarlar/huseyin-alptekin/2020/04/18/veriler-isinginda-covid-19-salginıyla-mucadelede-model-ulke-turkiye> (Access date: May 12, 2020).

2. Jeyhun Aliyev, “Turkey Sent Aid to at Least 57 Countries to Fight Virus”, Anadolu Agency, April 27, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/latest-on-coronavirus-outbreak/turkey-sent-aid-to-at-least-57-countries-to-fight-virus/1820195> (Access date: May 12, 2020).

3. “Türkiye'den Bulgaristan'a 'Corona Virüsü' Desteği”, *Milliyet*, March 11, 2020. <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/dunya/turkiyeden-bulgaristanana-corona-virusu-destegi-6163584> (Access date: May 12, 2020).

4. “Turkey Sends Medical Aid to Five Balkan Countries”, *Hürriyet Daily News*, April 8, 2020. <https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkey-sends-medical-aid-to-five-balkan-countries-153673> (Access date: May 12, 2020).

5. Muhammed Boztepe, “Türkiye'den Arnavutluk ve Kuzey Makedonya'ya Tibbi Yardım”, Anadolu Ajansı, May 12, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/turkiyeden-arnavutluk-ve-kuzey-makedonya-tibbi-yardim/1837512> (Access date: May 17, 2020).

6. “Türkiye Balkan Ülkelerine Tibbi Yardım Gönderdi”, Anadolu Ajansı, April 8, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/turkiye-balkan-ulkelerine-tibbi-yardim-gonderdi/1796624> (Access date: May 12, 2020).

7. Analyzing developments on a global scale, Gönül Tol and Dimitar Bechev argue that Turkey's corona diplomacy can only have limited effects in curing Turkey's foreign policy isolation. See Gönül Tol and Dimitar Bechev, “Can Corona Diplomacy Cure Turkey's Foreign Policy Isolation?”, Middle East Institute, April 29, 2020. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/can-corona-diplomacy-cure-turkeys-foreign-policy-isolation> (Access date: May 16, 2020).

TABLE 1. COVID-19 MEDICAL SUPPLIES SENT BY TURKEY TO BALKAN COUNTRIES (MARCH-MAY 2020)

Country	Type of Medical Supply			
	# Protective Masks	# Protective Suits	# Protective Goggles	# Covid-19 Test Kits
Albania	75,000	2,000	2,000	
Bosnia and Herzegovina	50,000	1,000		1,000
Bulgaria	50,000	1,000	1,000	
Kosovo	50,000	1,000		1,000
Montenegro	50,000	1,000		1,000
North Macedonia (2 times)	125,000	3,000	2,000	1,000
Serbia	100,000	2,000		1,500
TOTAL	500,000	11,000	5,000	5,500

Sources : <https://www.trtworld.com/turkey/turkey-sends-aid-to-nearly-30-countries-in-fight-against-covid-19-35290>; <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/turkiyeden-arnavutluk-ve-kuzey-makedonyaya-tibbi-yardim/1837512>; <https://www.trt.net.tr/shqip/balkani/2020/04/08/ne-mal-te-zi-mberriti-sot-donacioni-i-presidentit-erdogan-1393786>; <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/dunya/turkiyeden-bulgaristana-corona-virus-destegi-6163584>; <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/koronavirus/turkiye-balkan-ulkelerine-tibbi-yardim-gonderdi/1796624>

reasons. First, they are the European region with which Turkey has the strongest and deepest historical and religious ties, hence Turkey's ability to project soft power in Europe is at its highest level in the Balkans. Second, and perhaps more important, Turkey and the EU largely share the same strategic goals toward the Balkans, namely keeping the whole region on the Euro-Atlantic track and minimizing the influence of rival powers such as Russia and China; reversing the regional trend toward authoritarianism/democratic backsliding; and fighting corruption and ensuring the rule of law. Moreover, now that the world is widely expected to enter a period of deep economic recession due to the Covid-19 pandemic, both Turkey and the EU will have a shared incentive in taking up a primary role in the post-pandemic economic recovery of the Balkans, so as to decrease the region's external dependence on China. All in all, all the aforementioned shared goals indicate that the Balkans can be the new basis for rebuilding the EU-Turkey relationship. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan

has already hinted at such a possibility. In the message he published on May 9, 2020, marking Europe/Schuman Day, Erdoğan stated,

We must make good use of the opportunities these tough days will present in order to revitalize the Turkey-EU relations. I hope that the EU, which has assumed a discriminative and exclusionist attitude towards our country on various issues to this date, has now understood that we are all on the same boat.⁸

TURKEY'S SOFT POWER PUSH IN THE BALKANS

Turkey's recent soft power push in the Balkans through corona diplomacy hardly represents a new trend. Ankara has taken special care in developing strong relations with Balkan countries since the end of the Cold War, but it has

8. Davut Demircan, "Turkish President Congratulates EU on Europe Day", Anadolu Agency, May 9, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-president-congratulates-eu-on-europe-day/1834914> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

become an influential player in regional politics only throughout the successive AKP administrations (2003-present). To give some examples, back in 2009-2010, Ankara aimed to become the key mediator in Bosnia by sponsoring the formation of a three-way mechanism with Belgrade and Sarajevo.⁹ Turkey has been one of the main sponsors for the international recognition of Kosovo's independence at the UN and other international fora, and has unequivocally supported the EU and NATO integration of all regional countries. Back in 2004, Ankara ratified Bulgaria's NATO accession treaty despite many demands coming from representatives of the Turkish minority there that Ankara should make its approval contingent on the improvement of the ethno-linguistic rights of the Bulgarian Turks.¹⁰ More recently, Turkey has taken a staunch line against Russian involvement in the Balkans by backing Montenegro's and North Macedonia's NATO membership and by fully supporting North Macedonia's controversial Prespa Agreement (June 17, 2018) with Greece that ended the nearly three-decade-old name dispute between the two neighbors.¹¹

These facts notwithstanding, Turkey's soft power push throughout the Balkans is mainly built on its resurgent ties with local Muslim communities, namely Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks. These three are the major and the most

politically significant Muslim communities, but Turkey's image carries a lot of prestige among the smaller Muslim groups in the Balkans as well, namely the Pomak, Torbeshi, and Muslim Roma/Gypsies. Indeed, many of the Muslim Roma living in Bulgaria and Greece are monolingual Turkish speakers and proudly self-identify as Turks. The current author, in his participant observation in Stolipinovo, Europe's largest Roma neighborhood, in the Bulgarian city of Plovdiv in April 2019 witnessed not only a very high level of Turkish self-awareness, but also a very high level of rhetorical support for President Erdoğan as well.

Successive AKP administrations have progressively expanded a regional soft power campaign that is built on mosque construction, restoration of Ottoman era buildings, support for local religious institutions, and extensive social and aid operations. To give some examples, for almost three decades (1990-2019), the Turkish Diyanet Foundation (TDV) has been the only source of funding for the Office of Grand Mufti (*Müslümanlar Diyaneti Başmüfütülüğü*) in Bulgaria, and its network of three Imam Hatip High Schools (in the cities of Momchilgrad, Ruse, and Shumen) and the Sofia High Islamic Institute.¹² More recently on December 2018, President Erdoğan used his good relations with the ruling GERB government in Sofia to push a major religious law through the Bulgarian parliament that for the first time secured direct funding from the Bulgarian government to the Office of Grand Mufti (three million euros annually).¹³ Moving to Albania, the Turkish Diyanet is cur-

9. Dimitar Bechev, "Erdoğan in the Balkans: A Neo-Ottoman Quest?" *Al Jazeera*, October 11, 2017. <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/erdogan-balkans-neo-ottoman-quest-171011094904064.html> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

10. Author's interview with Ahmed Yusein, former parliamentarian of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (1997-2008) and current deputy leader of DOST (Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity, and Tolerance). November 10, 2018, Sofia, Bulgaria.

11. "Macedonian FM: Prespa Agreement Is 'Too Big to Fail'", *Anadolu Agency*, January 19, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/macedonian-fm-prespa-agreement-is-too-big-to-fail/1368937> (Access date: May 14, 2020); Sibel Morrow, "Turkish Foreign Minister to Visit Montenegro on Tuesday", *Anadolu Agency*, February 10, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/europe/turkish-foreign-minister-to-visit-montenegro-on-tuesday/1729263> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

12. Şener Aktürk and İdlir Lika, "The Puzzle of Turkish Minority Representation, Nationhood Cleavage, and Politics of Recognition in Bulgaria, Greece, and North Macedonia", *Mediterranean Politics* (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2020.1750269>, p. 15.

13. Hüseyin Alptekin, İdlir Lika, Merve Dilek Dağdelen, and Viktorya Erdoğan. *Bulgaristan Türklerinin Kültürel, Ekonomik, ve Siyasi Sorunları, Talepleri, Çözüm Önerileri*. (Istanbul: SETA, 2020), pp. 55-57.

rently near to completing the construction of the Great Mosque of Tirana that will be by far the largest in all the Balkans, and whose Ottoman style make it distinct from all other architecture in the Albanian capital.¹⁴

Turkey was also the first country that sent substantial relief supplies to Albania in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in Durres on November 26, 2020, and engaged TOKI (Housing Development Administration of the Republic of Turkey) in building 500 residential houses for those affected by the earthquake.¹⁵

Critics of the ruling government in Ankara do not approve of such policies and argue that Turkey is using religion as a foreign policy tool and even as a tool for interfering in the domestic politics of certain Balkan countries. For instance, Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri argue that since 2010 the AKP has been using its funding for Muslim religious institutions in Bulgaria to provoke a split within the dominant Turkish party there, namely the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (DPS), and found a new Turkish party, Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity, and Tolerance (DOST) in April 2016.¹⁶ Likewise, critics allege that the new ethnic Albanian party, BESA Movement, founded in North Macedonia in November 2014, is connected to the ruling government in Ankara, although BESA officials have denied such allegations.¹⁷ Yet, such criti-

cal voices are clearly biased and their opposition - and perhaps even hatred - toward the ruling government in Ankara leads them to make unsubstantiated claims.

TURKEY AS THE EUROPEAN UNION'S ALLY IN CONTAINING CHINA AND RUSSIA, AND IN FIGHTING AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE BALKANS

Against what the critics argue, Turkey's foreign policy toward the Balkans has been consistent and always been guided by clear objectives: achieving regional stability through the Euro-Atlantic integration and successful democratization of the Balkan countries. Ankara's recent activism through corona diplomacy represents only the continuation of such a consistent foreign policy. Now that the Balkans are mired in the soft power competition between the EU, China, and Russia due to the pandemic,¹⁸ Brussels needs more than ever to harness Ankara's established image as a responsible regional actor to decrease the appeal of rival powers (i.e. China and Russia). To be sure, top EU officials have long sounded the alarm about China's increasing infrastructural investments in the Balkans and warned that China's "combination of capitalism and political dictatorship" could be quite appealing to leaders in the vulnerable European periphery.¹⁹ Now that the EU core (Italy, France, Germany) is it-

14. John M. Beck, "Turkey's Global Soft-Power Push Is Built on Mosques", *The Atlantic*, June 1, 2019. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/06/turkey-builds-mosques-abroad-global-soft-power/590449/> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

15. Dzihat Aliju, "Türkiye ile Arnavutluk Arasında '500 Konut İnşası' Protokolü İmzalandı", *Anadolu Agency*, January 11, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/turkiye/turkiye-ile-arnavutluk-arasinda-500-konut-insasi-protokolu-izmlandii/1699566> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

16. Ahmet Erdi Öztürk and Semiha Sözeri, "Diyanet as a Turkish Foreign Policy Tool: Evidence from the Netherlands and Bulgaria", *Politics and Religion*, Vol. 11, No. 3, (March 2018), pp. 641-643.

17. Sinisa Jakov Marusic, "New Macedonia Albanian Party Denies Erdogan Link", *Balkan Insight*, November 24, 2014. <https://balkaninsight.com/2014/11/24/new-albanian-party-in-macedonia-denies-erdogan-connection/> (Access date: May 14, 2020).

18. Dimitar Bechev, "COVID-19 in the Western Balkans", *Atlantic Council*, April 3, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/covid-19-in-the-western-balkans/> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

19. Ryan Heath and Andrew Gray, "Beware Chinese Trojan Horses in the Balkans, EU Warns", *Politico*, April 19, 2019. <https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

self in disarray and the fragile Balkan economies are already looking for external patrons for the post-pandemic recovery, the “Chinese model” may be more appealing than ever. For instance, Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic lambasted the EU for its slow and clumsy response to the pandemic and instead praised China for its assistance, considering it to be Serbia’s only ally in the fight against the coronavirus.²⁰ In a show of public praise, the Serbian capital Belgrade was filled with billboards thanking “Brother Xi” for the assistance sent by Beijing to Serbia.

The example of Serbia might be somewhat worrisome since it is the largest post-Yugoslav republic and the only regional country (together with Bosnia and Kosovo) that is not a NATO member. Equally important, Serbia is the only Balkan country that has signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement with China (back in 2009) and officially is a part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative.²¹ There is no doubt that China’s economic presence in Serbia is on the rise but it is still low and limited when compared to that of the EU. Indeed, China accounted for only 9.6 percent of Serbia’s total imports and 1.8 percent of its total exports in 2019, while the corresponding figures for the EU were a staggering 58 and 67 percent respectively. Likewise, China accounted for only 20 percent of total net Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) in Serbia for the period 2010-2019, whereas the EU’s contribution was 71 percent of the total net FDI.²² Hence, looking at the figures for the largest Balkan country

and the one actually closest to China, one could infer that the EU will likely continue to be the only game in town for the Balkan countries in the post-pandemic period.

The most serious concern instead is that opportunistic local leaders will try to flirt with China (and possibly also with Russia) to increase their leverage in relation to Brussels and thus provide excuses for ignoring the rampant authoritarianism, corruption, and state capture characterizing many Balkan countries. As aptly put by Nathalie Tocci, “The risk is not that the Western Balkans will sail off to a Chinese El Dorado. It’s that the region will sink - socially, economically, democratically - under the weight of the epidemic and the realities it has exposed.”²³ It is here that Turkey’s role as a potential EU ally in fighting authoritarianism and corruption in the Balkans could come into play. Brussels needs to harness Ankara’s established image as a responsible regional actor to preserve order in the post-pandemic Balkans. Thus, as stated in the introduction, the Balkans can be the basis for rebuilding the EU-Turkey relationship.

Coming to Russia, there is no doubt that the Balkans are not part of Moscow’s geopolitical priorities. There exists well-established empirical evidence that Russia in the Balkans is merely an opportunistic actor, looking for leverage/bargaining chips it could then use in its strategic competition with the EU and the U.S. elsewhere.²⁴ Now with the fall of the oil prices due to the pandemic, a petro-state like Russia will likely minimize to the utmost extent its involvement in the Balkans. In the post-pandemic period, Moscow will likely suffice itself with what it is best

20. Shaun Walker, “Coronavirus Diplomacy: How Russia, China, and EU Vie to Win Over Serbia”, *The Guardian*, April 13, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/13/coronavirus-diplomacy-how-russia-china-and-eu-vie-to-win-over-serbia> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

21. Strahinja Subotic and Milos Janjic, “What Have We Learned from the COVID-19 Crisis in Terms of Sino-Serbian Relations?”, *European Policy Centre Policy Brief*, April 2020. <https://cep.org.rs/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/What-have-we-learned-from-the-COVID-19-crisis-in-terms-of-Sino-Serbian-relations.pdf> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

22. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

23. Nathalie Tocci, “The Western Balkans Belong with Europe”, *Politico*, May 7, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/the-western-balkans-croatia-serbia-kosovo-belong-with-europe-european-union/> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

24. Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia’s Influence in Southeast Europe*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

at doing, namely spreading disinformation.²⁵ This is also dangerous and Turkey has frequently become a target of Moscow's malicious disinformation campaigns in the Balkans. To give just a recent example, on April 19, 2020, in the midst of the corona outbreak, Russia's prestigious state-controlled newspaper *Izvestia* published an article where it alleged that Turkey and Albania have recently signed a secret agreement for settling 30,000 Syrian refugees in southern Albania along the border with Greece. Under the provocative title "Albania and Turkey Unite against Greece" the article further alleged that the aim of the secret agreement was to transform southern Albania's religious demography from Orthodox Christian to a Muslim majority.²⁶ Likewise, a very recent report published by NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence found that Russia, though its main state-sponsored media outlet in the Balkans, *Sputnik Srbija*, generates countless disinformation narratives that, among others, lambast the West for wanting to create a "Great Albania" in the Balkans and lament that Turkey and Bosnia are good friends.²⁷ In order to limit the influence of Russia's propaganda efforts, Turkey and the EU have a shared strategic interest in fostering media pluralism and furthering democratic practices in the Balkan countries. This is a reason why in the post-pandemic period the two actors can be expected to work more closely in the region.

25. Dimitar Bechev, "Russia's Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans", Atlantic Council, December 20, 2019. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/russia-strategic-interests-and-tools-of-influence-in-the-western-balkans/> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

26. Shaban Murati, "Virus Diversionist Anti-Shqiptar [Anti-Albanian Diversionist Virus]", *Dita*, April 24, 2020. http://www.gazetadita.al/ngamoska-nje-virus-diversionist-antishqiptar/?fbclid=IwAR1bsCDAoFjXDH46VqwDkAERjGeilj59N4Q6T0JD_m0e180A9i1QHqvbem4 (Access date: May 15, 2020).

27. Atlantic Council of Montenegro, "Russia's Narratives Toward the Western Balkans: Analysis of Sputnik Srbija", *NATO STRATCOM Centre of Excellence*, April 2020. <https://www.stratcomcoe.org/russias-narratives-toward-western-balkans-analysis-sputnik-srbija> (Access date: May 15, 2020).

TURKEY'S PARTNERSHIP WITH LOCAL ACTORS IN THE BALKANS

In general, Turkey has built good relations with all the Balkan countries through supporting the region's Euro-Atlantic integration and through its resurgent ties with local Muslim communities. The two components of Turkey's foreign policy toward the Balkans are actually closely interrelated and complement each other. Indeed, the main local Muslim communities in the Balkans, namely the Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks, have consistently been the most ardent supporters of the Euro-Atlantic integration of the region because they see it as the best way to protect their ethnic and religious rights in the Orthodox Christian, Slavic-majority societies they live in. These local Muslim communities still perceive the Orthodox Slavs and Russia (as their historical foreign patron) as the main threat and thus have turned to the West (the U.S. and EU) to afford them protection. Given that the West is also eager to have local allies to counter Russian involvement in the region, this has built a strong Western-Muslim partnership in the Balkans throughout the past three decades. Needless to say, the local Muslim communities see and expect Turkey to be a Western ally and to complement the West's role in the Balkans. Turkey, on its part, until now has met these expectations as it has strongly supported the Euro-Atlantic integration of all the regional countries. Indeed, by 2020 all Balkan countries, with the exception of the problematic trio (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia), have become full NATO members and most recently, the members of the European Council agreed to open negotiations on EU membership with Albania and North Macedonia.²⁸

28. Şerife Çetin "AB Ülkeleri Arnavutluk ve Kuzey Makedonya ile Müzakerelere Başlanması İçin Anlaştı", Anadolu Agency, March 24, 2020. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/dunya/ab-ulkeleri-arnavutluk-ve-kuzey-makedonya-ile-muzakerelere-baslanmasi-icin-anlasti/1777687> (Access date: May 16, 2020).

Although the West, in particular the EU, is clearly the only game in town in the Balkans, there are still a few problematic local power holders and Turkey should be cautious in its relations with them. Currently, the three main local actors that frequently employ anti-Western rhetoric and openly flirt with Russia are Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, President of Republika Srpska Milorad Dodik, and the opposition center-right party in North Macedonia VMRO-DPMNE. Turkey does not have much to do with the latter two, but the remarkable improvement of its ties with Serbia in recent years is not received well in certain local Muslim circles. For instance, the current author, during his fieldwork in North Macedonia in February 2019, was told by many religious conservative Muslim Albanians that they felt uneasy about Turkey's recent good relations with Belgrade. It is especially remarkable that Ankara is on good terms with President Aleksandar Vucic, who during the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s was a deputy in the ultranationalist Serbian Radical Party and even served for a period as Slobodan Milosevic's minister of information.

However, the improvement of Turkey's ties with Serbia is primarily driven by an economic logic and has nothing to do with Belgrade's strategic ties with Russia. Indeed, in the past three years, President Erdoğan has made two official visits to Belgrade (October 2017 and October 2019), signing a total of 21 trade agreements and aiming to push the annual trade turnover between the two countries to 5 billion dollars in the long term.²⁹ This is understandable since, being the largest ex-Yugoslav republic, Serbia is Turkey's most important market in the former Yugoslav space. Moreover, during his latest visit in October

2019, President Erdoğan organized the "Trilateral Summit Turkey-Serbia-Bosnia Herzegovina",³⁰ the three-way regional mediation mechanism that had not been held since 2013.

Turkey has built good relations with all the Balkan countries through supporting the region's Euro-Atlantic integration and through its resurgent ties with local Muslim communities

CONCLUSION

The Balkans, with which Turkey has deep cultural, historical, and religious links, were one of the primary targets of Ankara's global campaign to deliver medical supplies to aid countries in their fight against the novel coronavirus Covid-19. Seeing China, Russia, and the EU deploy aid to the region, Turkey is also using the Covid-19 supplies to reconfirm its influential role in the Balkans. This recent activism represents a continuation of Turkey's regional soft power campaign which throughout the past decade has mainly focused on mosque construction, restoration of Ottoman era buildings, support for local religious institutions, and extensive social and aid operations. However, Turkey's recent activism is very important for another reason as well. The Balkans can be the basis for mending EU-Turkey ties and for rebuilding the relationship between the two actors that has been fraught with problems due to the multiple crises in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the continuous refugee waves. Now that the Balkans are mired in the soft power competition between the EU, China, and Russia due to the pandemic, Turkey can be a key EU ally in keeping the whole region on the Euro-Atlantic track, in

29. Kayhan Gül, "Türkiye-Sırbistan İlişkilerinde Yeni Dönem", Anadolu Agency, October 9, 2019. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/analiz/turkiye-sirbistan-iliskilerinde-yeni-donem/1606589> (Access date: May 16, 2020).

30. Ibid.

preventing further authoritarianism/democratic backsliding, and in fighting corruption and ensuring the rule of law in the Balkan countries. Turkey and the EU also have a joint interest in fostering media pluralism in the region to counter Russia's malicious disinformation campaigns. Hence, since Ankara's strategic interests in the region largely conform to those of Brussels, the two actors can be expected to work more closely in the post-pandemic period.

Turkey's foreign policy toward the Balkans has always been consistent and been guided by clear objectives: achieving regional stability through the Euro-Atlantic integration and the successful democratization of the Balkan coun-

tries. Ankara's resurgent ties with local Muslim communities (Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks) complements its strong support for the region's Euro-Atlantic integration because Balkan Muslims view the West as the best way to protect their ethnic and religious rights in the Orthodox Christian, Slavic-majority societies they live in. On the other hand, the remarkable improvement of Turkey's ties with Serbia in recent years does not deviate from Turkey's traditional foreign policy goals. Ankara's partnership with Belgrade aims to contribute to regional peace, stability, and economic development. Engaging with Serbia rather than excluding it is the strategy that will pay off in the long term.

TURKEY'S CORONA DIPLOMACY IN THE BALKANS

IDLIR LIKA

SETA | ANALYSIS

The Balkans were one of the primary targets of Turkey's global campaign to deliver medical supplies to aid countries in their fight against the novel coronavirus Covid-19. Seeing China, Russia, and the EU deploy aid to the region, Turkey is also using the Covid-19 supplies to reconfirm its influential role in the Balkans. This recent activism represents a continuation of Turkey's regional soft power campaign throughout the past decade that has mainly been built on mosque construction, restoration of Ottoman era buildings, support for local religious institutions, and extensive social and aid operations. However, Turkey's recent activism is very important for another reason also. The Balkans can be the basis for mending EU-Turkey ties and for rebuilding the relationship between the two actors that has been fraught with problems due to the multiple crises in Syria, Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the continuous refugee waves. Now that the Balkans are mired in the soft power competition between the EU, China, and Russia due to the pandemic, Turkey can be a key EU ally in keeping the whole region on the Euro-Atlantic track, in preventing further authoritarianism/democratic backsliding, and in fighting corruption and ensuring the rule of law in the Balkan countries. Since Ankara's strategic interests in the region largely conform to those of Brussels, the two actors can be expected to work more closely in the post-pandemic period. Turkey should also take up an active role in the post-pandemic economic recovery of the region. The analysis concludes by analyzing Turkey's resurgent ties with the local Muslim communities in the Balkans (Albanians, Bosniacs, and Turks) and emphasizes Turkey's contribution to regional peace and stability.

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