

Enhancing the Image: Turkish Public Diplomacy Organisations in the Western Balkans¹

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Abstract

The main scientific objective of this paper is to analyse and assess activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the Western Balkans. Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in 2002, Turkey has been gradually increasing its involvement in neighbouring regions. In this context, the government-controlled institutions, tasked with promoting Turkish political values abroad, have been providing support to traditional diplomatic services. In relations with the Western Balkans, Turkey's aim is to enhance mutual cooperation based on shared historical, religious and cultural ties. Given the multifaceted nature of the Turkish political model, the role of public diplomacy in foreign policy doctrine of the AKP has been systematically growing in recent years.

Adopting a comprehensive research perspective, this paper explores the relationship between Turkey and the Western Balkans, using activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations as a reference point. In order to identify key aspects related to actions of certain institutions that promote Turkey's soft power in the region, a broad range of primary sources and literature on the subject have been reviewed. This paper employs qualitative research methods and attempts to

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answer the research question regarding the effectiveness of image-building initiatives undertaken by Turkey through its public diplomacy organisations.

Keywords: *Turkey, Western Balkans, Justice and Development Party, public diplomacy, regional cooperation*

Introduction

Since 2002, Turkey has been led by the Justice and Development Party (tur. *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP), which is rooted in the right-wing political spectrum. In contrast to its Western-oriented predecessors, the AKP has adopted a much more multifaceted and active foreign policy model. In this regard, the Turkish government sought to strengthen the state's international position by making significant improvements to relations with other neighbouring regions (e.g. the Middle East, North Africa, South Caucasus) (Wasilewski, 2023, pp. 120–129). The term “Western Balkans”, which in political science is most often used to denote states such as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, also figured prominently in the AKP's political strategy. Due to robust historical, cultural and (to a certain extent) religious affinities, this region has been identified by the authorities in Ankara as a potential area of cooperation. Capitalising on the EU's erratic approach to enlargement policy, Turkey has endeavoured to portray itself as a nation committed to stabilisation and sustainable development of this region (Türbedar, 2011, pp. 140–144). In addition to conventional diplomatic services, an extensive public diplomacy apparatus functions in the Western Balkans to support politicians in achieving Turkish foreign policy goals. Citing the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, these institutions engage in a variety of initiatives at different levels (ranging from intergovernmental to municipal) to facilitate promotion of Turkey's soft power in the region (Ağır, 2022, pp. 43–44). The decision was taken to select the Western Balkans as the subject of this study, given that it was one of the first foreign regions in which the AKP began to implement its political vision.

The primary scientific objective of this paper is to analyse and evaluate activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the six Western Balkan states between 2002 and 2022, a period that almost exactly corresponds to five full election cycles in Turkey. It was decided to adopt such a broad timeframe with a view to enabling thorough exploration of diplomatic endeavours of the authorities in Ankara with respect to a pivotal region encompassed by Turkish foreign policy strategy. Following an introductory section, which also comprises methodological remarks, the main assumptions of theoretical framework are presented. The image theory was developed in the 1990s by Richard K. Herrmann, and was subsequently refined by scholars such as Michele G. Alexander, Natalia

Chaban and Ole Elgström (Wrangle & Bengtsson, 2019, pp. 450–452). It is important to note that image theory has not been extensively utilised in analyses of Turkey's relations with other states. The subsequent section discusses the core tenets of the AKP's foreign policy doctrine (divided into three distinct periods). Implementation of this doctrine in the Western Balkans will be outlined in chronological order. This is followed by a depiction of the concept of public diplomacy, with reference to its version created by the authorities in Ankara. The next section is of particular relevance as it examines activities of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the region. Four key institutions that provide support to the AKP government in execution of its foreign policy have been selected for this purpose: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı*, TİKA), Yunus Emre Institute (tur. *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü*, YEE), Directorate of Religious Affairs (tur. *Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*, DİB), and Turkish Maarif Foundation (tur. *Türkiye Maarif Vakfı*, TMV). Based on literature review and document analysis, it was determined that these organisations represent the foremost entities (in terms of structures, staff, funds, etc.) that promote Turkish soft power in the Western Balkans, and hence their activities in the region constitute the most pertinent analytical material for this study. The final section of the paper evaluates Turkey's public diplomacy initiatives in the region to date and offers some recommendations for improving Turkish political strategy towards the Western Balkans. When assessing the effectiveness of actions undertaken by aforementioned organisations, particular attention was paid to examining basic indicators of their involvement in the region (e.g. number of field branches established, number of projects completed), as well as social reception of Turkey's public diplomacy institutions and perception of Turkish initiatives. For the purposes of this analysis, it was also vital to consider potential political implications for Turkey resulting from its enhanced presence in the Western Balkans.

The theoretical perspective adopted for this study guided the selection of the primary research methods, which were content analysis and comparative analysis. The research encompassed a range of other methods, including political discourse analysis, factor analysis, process tracing method and foreign policy analysis. This paper is embedded in qualitative methodology and seeks to answer the following research question: what is the effectiveness of image-building initiatives undertaken by Turkey through its public diplomacy organisations? In order to achieve this objective, an exhaustive review of relevant literature (monographs, collective works, academic journal articles) was conducted. In addition, a number of public diplomacy activity reports were examined. The latter can be recognised as primary sources (as well as policy statements used to a much lesser extent). The analysis of contemporary events was facilitated by utilisation of internet materials, predominantly comprising newspaper articles and news agency releases. The triangulation method was used in order to verify their credibility.

Theoretical framework

Image theory in international relations is the concept of analysing foreign policy based on images of a state created by its political elites. Given the interconnected nature of these perceptions, it is possible to make inferences about determinants and directions of a state's international activity. In this context, the key research task is to investigate factors that shape political discourse. A fundamental issue on which image theorists have focused since the late 1950s concerned the essence of elements that construct perception (Rusi, 1988, pp. 30–33). Kenneth E. Boulding was among the first scholars to draw attention to the significant role of image for political science theories. In examining various dimensions regarding interstate relations, he listed several aspects that were particularly important in the image formation process (e.g. enmity and friendliness, strength and weakness). In this perspective, policies enacted by a state are contingent upon perceptions of the decision-makers, who frequently possess an incomplete understanding of the relevant information (Boulding, 1959, pp. 121–129).

Theoretical model of image in international relations was developed by Richard K. Herrmann. His study posits that a state's international image consists of three primary components: political perception, relative strength, and cultural status. As Herrmann elucidated, perceived opportunity or threat evokes specific emotions which, in conjunction with perception of strength and culture, engenders a particular image of a state. In certain circumstances, this may facilitate decision-making in the realm of foreign policy. Therefore, image theory in international relations places emphasis on analysing the internal perceptions of a given state (Herrmann, 2003, pp. 293–303). A noteworthy endeavour to incorporate an additional category into image theory was undertaken by Paul R. Brewer's research team. The scholars aimed to measure the impact of international trust on public opinion. As a result, it was ascertained that this factor also influenced relations between states, thereby affecting their perceptions of each other (Brewer et. al, 2004, pp. 94–106). Subsequent advancements in image theory were furthered by the research conducted by Michele G. Alexander and her colleagues. The researchers' contribution to the expansion of the state of knowledge on international images was to enrich the theoretical model with the category of social identity. It was also determined that perceptions are a product of two distinct factors: structural elements and individual components. Furthermore, the scholars contended that modification at the perceptual level was indeed feasible, thereby underscoring the pivotal role of socio-cultural determinants in the image creation process (Alexander et. al., 2005, pp. 35–44).

While the correlation between internal and external perceptions of the entire image of a state was already identified by Robert Jervis in the 1970s, this area was later subject of in-depth research by Natalia Chaban and Ole Elgström. The scholars discovered a close relationship between external perceptions, legitimacy and political effectiveness. Consequently, it has been proved that these perceptions can serve as a crucial source of information for policy-makers, as specific laws have been developed on their basis (in addition to enhancing social legitimacy of politicians in power). Furthermore, researchers have posited that images affect the overall degree of state activity in the international system, determining its capabilities and limitations in comparison to others (Elgström & Chaban, 2015, pp. 21–30). In an intriguing methodological exposition on image theory, Xiufang Li and Naren Chitty elucidated the critical function of media in transmission of images within the global context. It has been demonstrated that the mass media possess a considerable impact on the general perception of a state through presentation of positive or negative information about them. The researchers emphasised that studies of international images should pay greater attention to analyses of media messages, which consist of several interrelated dimensions (i.e. political, economic, military, cultural, religious) (Li & Chitty, 2009, pp. 3–8).

A seminal piece of recent scholarship on this subject was published in 2020 by Xiuli Wang. In her book, she focused on activities of Chinese public diplomacy, which is a key tool for the authorities in Beijing in creating a positive image of China. The scholar expounded that contemporary international relations are characterised by salience of perception-related issues for states that harbour aspirations of becoming superpowers. As Wang asserts, Chinese public diplomacy is also intended to exert influence on policy decisions in countries that are of particular significance to China. Nevertheless, despite the fact that the authorities in Beijing have modified and updated Chinese foreign policy doctrine over the past two decades, their endeavours to enhance China's international reputation have not yet produced the anticipated outcomes (Wang, 2020, pp. 47–109).

Western Balkans in AKP's foreign policy

Following its electoral success in November 2002, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) adopted the strategic depth doctrine as a foundational principle in forming Turkish foreign policy. The originator of this concept was Ahmet Davutoğlu, one of the closest associates of former Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. From 2009 to 2014, Davutoğlu served as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and then for a further two years as head of government. According to his political vision, Turkey's overarching goal at the dawn of the 21st century was to achieve the status of a regional power in international relations (Özgöker & Ataman, 2013, pp.

70–72). As Davutoğlu contended, active and flexible diplomacy (in both traditional and public forms) should be recognised as the primary tool for promoting the Turkish model of democracy based on Islamic values. Consequently, Turkey was expected to create an image of a state that was responsible for its Muslim-majority neighbouring countries (Tüfekçi, 2017, pp. 152–158). Opposing the entrenched perception of “secular Turkey”, Ahmet Davutoğlu referred to religion and tradition as fundamental factors in the shaping of Turkish national identity. Importantly, the idea of strategic depth was not only applied to the Turkish population, but also to Muslim communities worldwide, particularly those residing in territories that formerly constituted part of the Ottoman Empire (Imai, 2018, pp. 95–101).

After 2002, the AKP government successively implemented theoretical assumptions of strategic depth doctrine. Originating from an Islamist-conservative background, ruling party politicians endorsed views that utilisation of allusions to Turkey’s imperial past could serve to bolster its international standing. In the rhetoric of the AKP leader and then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, the strengthening of relations with neighbours could result in Turkey becoming a core state in the post-Cold War geopolitical order (Gunter, 2024, pp. 14–16). Western Balkans were among the first regions where the AKP government sought to implement Ahmet Davutoğlu’s conceptual framework. In the early 2000s, Turkish diplomacy correctly identified local expectations and focused on issues related to ensuring stability and security. In consequence of its dynamic foreign policy at that time, Turkey succeeded in establishing relatively positive contacts with both Muslim (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) and Christian-majority countries (Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro) (Ağır & Arman, 2016, pp. 151–156). Nevertheless, an overemphasis on the Ottoman past of the Western Balkans, as well as unexpected challenges in other regions (notably the Middle East), have resulted in Turkey’s regional potential not being fully realised. Despite the AKP government’s achievements in improving Turkey’s reputation and fostering economic and socio-cultural relations with the Western Balkans, these accomplishments have yet to translate into tangible political influence (Dursun-Özkanca, 2023, pp. 136–137).

In retrospect, adoption of strategic depth doctrine was instrumental in consolidating Turkey’s regional position. However, Turkish foreign policy-makers have erred in applying a uniform rhetoric to the region, disregarding the internal political contexts of individual countries. Against this background, it is noteworthy that the Western Balkans is arguably the most heterogeneous area among the regions covered by the AKP political strategy (Ekinci, 2015, pp. 382–389). It is important to mention that the presence of the European Union (with every state in the region aspiring to EU membership) and activities of the Russian Federation (especially in Serbia) served as additional impediments to the Turkish plan for political expansion. A significant external power in the Western

Balkans is also China, whose role (particularly in international trade) has been progressively increasing (Teokarević, 2023, pp. 186–188). Therefore, the Turkish model of regional cooperation should ensure establishment of positive relations with as many countries as possible, while being attractive enough to be a viable alternative to EU initiatives and actions of Russia and China. In recent years, a fundamental aspect of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans has been the substantial provision of socio-cultural, religious and educational support for local Muslims. Nevertheless, the AKP government has sought to cultivate an image of Turkey as a reliable partner, demonstrating a commitment to development of the entire region (e.g. through investments by Turkish companies) (Dursun-Özkanca, 2019, pp. 42–59).

Turkish foreign policy under the AKP is usually divided into three distinct stages. Despite the lack of a universally applicable periodisation, the majority of scholars concur that following its electoral victory in 2002, the AKP pursued the course set by preceding administrations in their endeavours to secure Turkey's accession to the European Union. In this initial phase, the Turkish government's primary objective (as articulated by representatives of the ruling party) was to establish a comprehensive integration with the EU institutional framework (Kirişci, 2005, pp. 87–98). In the Western Balkans, this approach was reflected in an attempt to strengthen multi-level regional cooperation ahead of the expected admission to the Community. On the one hand, the authorities in Ankara expressed their readiness to successively implement pro-democratic reforms, thereby bringing the Turkish political system in line with EU standards. On the other hand, they presented Turkey as a state responsible for stabilising its immediate geographical environment. The proposed variety of economic and socio-cultural initiatives for the Western Balkan states were intended to serve this purpose (Yavuz, 2009, pp. 217–228).

As the AKP consolidated its power (and in the face of increasing difficulties in the EU accession negotiations), the then-Prime Minister Erdoğan decided to modify the model of Turkish foreign policy. In 2009, he appointed his advisor Ahmet Davutoğlu as Minister of Foreign Affairs. This step signified commencement of the second phase in the AKP regime (frequently referred to as neo-Ottoman or neo-imperial), which was distinguished by prioritisation of the socio-cultural dimensions of the strategic depth concept (Kamalı, 2018, pp. 39–43). Having secured direct control over Turkish diplomacy, Davutoğlu redirected his efforts towards regaining influence in territories of the former Ottoman Empire, employing a more extensive use of religious references (e.g. calls for renewal of a unified Muslim community in the Western Balkans). Although the notion of neo-Ottomanism was not explicitly invoked by Davutoğlu, several politicians, experts and scholars identified the AKP's strategy at that time with a political trend initiated back in the 1980s by Prime Minister Turgut Özal (Gülbay,

2023, pp. 261–267). One of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s most significant contributions to Turkish foreign policy was his inspiration for the establishment of several new public diplomacy organisations. These entities provided Turkey with additional tools to exert influence over neighbouring regions. Nevertheless, the failure of strategic depth doctrine can be attributed to inability to respond adequately to a dynamically changing geopolitical situation (e.g. the “Arab Spring”). Consequently, Turkey’s regional position underwent a substantial weakening during the mid-2010s (Çandar, 2021, pp. 43–64).

The third phase of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans began in 2016 following the demotion of Ahmet Davutoğlu within the AKP. Henceforth, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who had assumed the presidency two years earlier, became a politician who determined directions of Turkey’s international activity. In the context of a deteriorating internal security situation, the President’s primary focus was on domestic policies, with a strategic decision to limit Turkey’s diplomatic engagement at the regional level. It is evident that Erdoğan’s approach to international politics has undergone a shift towards a more pragmatic stance, in light of recognition that the original form of strategic depth concept was too ambitious to implement (Başkan & Özpek, 2024, pp. 110–118). In regard to the Western Balkans, Turkish foreign policy under President Erdoğan has arguably maintained the majority of its similarities with the preceding period. Admittedly, Turkey has recently placed greater emphasis on economic cooperation, while socio-cultural initiatives have been marginalised. Nevertheless, at the local level, Turkish public diplomacy organisations have persisted in undertaking tasks in domains such as culture, arts and education (Cihangir-Tetik, 2021, pp. 251–258).

Public diplomacy and its Turkish model

The term “public diplomacy” was coined in 1965 by diplomat Edmund A. Gullion, who defined it as a strategy for improving formulation and implementation of a state’s foreign policy by influencing public opinion through non-traditional diplomatic channels, including culture, education, media and sport (Pigman, 2010, pp. 121–122). In this context, public diplomacy fosters creation of a positive perception of a state in the international arena, thereby enabling its authorities to achieve their policy objectives without the need to commit large resources and incur significant costs. In the contemporary geopolitical landscape, public diplomacy has emerged as a pivotal element of states’ foreign policy frameworks (Sevin, 2017, pp. 19–28). From the perspective of citizens, the primary benefit of public diplomacy in comparison with traditional forms is its enhanced accessibility. Whilst professional diplomatic undertakings pertain to a restricted cadre of senior government officials, ramifications of public diplomacy have the capacity to be

experienced by the general populace. Consequently, its reach is also much greater, as is its transparency (Pamment, 2013, pp. 20–31). Furthermore, the advent of novel information and communication technologies has enabled dissemination of political narratives to key audiences with unprecedented rapidity, far surpassing the rate at which such messages were transmitted a few decades ago (Yigit, 2023, pp. 116–118). Nevertheless, it is important to note that public diplomacy should always be subordinated to traditional diplomatic services, thus executing the overall foreign policy strategy of a state (Hocking, 2005, pp. 35–41).

The operating model of public diplomacy is predicated on the concept of soft power. This term was introduced in the late 1980s by Joseph S. Nye, who defined it as the ability of a state to mould preferences and attitudes of others by appealing to its own values and ideals, without the use of coercion or military force. According to Nye, voluntary acceptance of foreign (external) solutions depends on an intertwining of three fundamental elements that make up a state's soft power capacity: cultural status, political values and foreign policy (Nye, 2023, pp. 12–16). In the aftermath of the Cold War, soft power has emerged as a central element in contemporary international relations, holding equal significance to military and economic factors. Against this background, public diplomacy can be recognised as a soft power-based modern trend in foreign policy, whereby a state's socio-cultural resources are employed to formulate political initiatives targeting international public opinion (Davis-Cross, 2013, pp. 5–10). As argued by Joseph Nye, this specific modality of public diplomacy can be regarded as a valuable instrument for strengthening a nation's image, contingent upon the fulfilment of the aforementioned preconditions (Nye, 2008, pp. 94–101).

An important part of public diplomacy is its cultural subcategory, as evidenced by the number of international cultural agreements concluded in recent years. It is acknowledged that culture exerts a unifying influence on political relations, and as a result national governments are cooperating in this field, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Furthermore, given the inherent nature of cultural diplomacy, it can contribute to maintenance of open channels of diplomatic communication, even in the event of a significant deterioration in interstate relations (Higgott, 2020, pp. 22–27). As a sensitive aspect of culture, religion has for centuries been considered one of the most serious conflict-generating triggers in human history. Currently, however, certain public diplomacy organisations are leveraging references to belief systems in order to expand the scope of their activities. A comprehensive understanding of the role of religious conditioning in formation of national identity is hence essential for these institutions to access a more extensive array of resources, thereby strengthening the probability of attaining specific political goals (Marshall & Farr, 2009, pp. 198–204). In this respect, Turkey under the AKP has become a state that has been relatively successful in using religion in its foreign policy. A number of factors (e.g. traditional practices associated with

Muslim heritage, religious worldview of the majority of citizens) contributed to the authorities in Ankara's success in promoting the Turkish model of moderate Islam beyond the country's borders (Öztürk, 2023, pp. 86–92).

As a fundamental objective of public diplomacy is to create a positive image, perception-related issues have the capacity to influence policy actions. Therefore, image management efforts are becoming an integral part of modern political strategies. Hence, gaining control over external perceptions provides an advantage over other actors in the international system. Accordingly, the basic function of public diplomacy, which pertains to active and multi-level influence on foreign public opinion, is also fulfilled (Melissen, 2005, pp. 16–23). It needs to be further clarified that a state's international image consists of two distinct components: internal (images crafted by its political elites and citizens) and external (perceptions of that state held by the global community). It is important to note that a single state may possess multiple distinct perceptions of itself, contingent on its particular domain of engagement (e.g. military, economic, political, or cultural). Nevertheless, its collective image should maintain a high degree of stability (Meng, 2020, pp. 7–15).

In the case of Turkey, endeavours to establish a distinctive national image can be traced back to the 1920s, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his associates initiated a project of profound political transformation with the overarching objective of establishing a modern, secular state. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, emergent elites sought to forge alliances with Western Europe and the USA. Consequently, a series of measures were implemented in order to alter the perception of Turks in the West (Tekin, 2021, pp. 61–68). In the face of the collapse of the bipolar system, the authorities in Ankara were compelled to redefine assumptions of Turkish foreign policy and to seek new means of executing diplomatic tasks. The 1990s thus saw establishment of the first typical public diplomacy organisations in the history of Turkey. However, these institutions played a rather secondary political role until the end of the 20th century. Conversely, under the AKP government, Turkish public diplomacy has flourished. Organisations founded during this period have been exploiting Turkey's soft power, which derives from both the country's unique geographical location and its rich cultural heritage (Purtaş, 2013, pp. 7–10). According to İbrahim Kalın, who was responsible for conceptualising and coordinating public diplomacy projects in the AKP government, Turkey, as an aspiring regional power, employs various diplomatic tools to pursue an expansive and active foreign policy (Kalın, 2012, pp. 9–14).

As reflected in views of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the AKP government resolved to utilise a considerably more extensive range of instruments and measures within the domain of foreign policy. The point of reference for units constituting Turkish public diplomacy remained the Ottoman heritage. However, efforts to promote

various initiatives in this regard have multiplied (Anaz & Özşahin, 2015, pp. 501–512). At the turn of 2000s and 2010s, two new institutions (the Yunus Emre Institute and the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities) were established, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency underwent a thorough reorganisation of its operational profile (including an official name change), and some transnational activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (e.g. renovation of mosques) were incorporated into public diplomacy. Day-to-day actions of the latter two organisations received incomparably more funding than in the previous period, and their field staff was also significantly expanded (Göksu, 2023, pp. 854–857). After Ahmet Davutoğlu left the post of Prime Minister in 2016, the party leadership opted for a systematic transition in Turkey’s strategy towards neighbouring regions, replacing diplomatic endeavours aimed at reviving a regional community founded on historical affinities with a more pragmatic approach centred on cultivation of economic relations. Nevertheless, as it has been asserted by some scholars, despite a discernible shift in emphasis, the AKP’s contemporary foreign policy in the Western Balkans has, in essence, sustained continuity with respect to the Davutoğlu period (Öztürk & Akgönül, 2019, pp. 233–236). The government in Ankara has also established another important public diplomacy institution (the Turkish Maarif Foundation) with the remit of educational cooperation. It is acknowledged that AKP politicians had long recognised education as a significant tool of influence, yet prior Turkish initiatives in this domain had lacked adequate coordination, particularly due to the overlap in competencies (Vuksanović & Hercigonja, 2023, pp. 14–16).

Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

Before the AKP assumed power in Turkey, the sole pertinent organisation of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans was the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA). Admittedly, representatives of the Directorate of Religious Affairs were also present in the region, yet at the time activities of this institution were not officially integrated into public diplomacy (Donelli, 2019, pp. 11–12). TİKA was established in 1992 as the Turkish Cooperation and Development Administration (tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Kalkınma İdaresi Başkanlığı*) with the aim of coordinating multi-level development support for Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus that had declared independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union (i.e. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan). The institution’s task was to facilitate collaborative projects in domains such as industry, agriculture, infrastructure, healthcare, education and tourism (Özkan & Demirtepe, 2012, pp. 647–654). Subsequently, TİKA extended its reach into the Balkans, opening coordination offices in Bosnia

and Herzegovina in 1995 and in Albania in 1996. In the early 2000s, the AKP government successively strengthened existing field branches (both in terms of transferred funds and delegated personnel) as well as sought permission to launch the organisation's activities in other countries in the region. Following the successful conclusion of negotiations, new TİKA offices were established in Kosovo (2004), Macedonia (2005), Montenegro (2007) and Serbia (2009) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2018).

Among numerous infrastructural and developmental projects inaugurated in the early 2000s in the Western Balkans, TİKA's programme for preservation of the Ottoman historical and cultural heritage deserves special recognition. By offering complex support to local authorities for reconstruction of a number of monuments, Turkey presented itself, on the one hand, as a state responsible for prosperity of the Western Balkans and, on the other hand, aware of its imperial past (Karagül, 2013, pp. 92–98). According to the researchers, restoration projects initiated in that time contributed to an immediate enhancement in perception of Turks in the region. Balkan Muslims in particular appreciated Turkish efforts as the vast majority of TİKA's reconstruction work included mosques, tombs and other Islamic places of worship (e.g. Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror Mosque in Durrës, tomb of Sultan Murad I in Pristina, Mustafa Pasha Mosque in Skopje). Moreover, a considerable proportion of initiatives started during that period continued in subsequent years (Kardaş & Erdağ, 2012, pp. 173–177). An important socio-cultural initiative implemented by TİKA in the first decade of the 21st century in the Western Balkans was also the Turkology Project (tur. *Türkoloji Projesi*) which offered Turkish language courses for students from the region. Decision to initiate cooperation with local universities was indicative of the AKP's comprehensive approach to foreign policy (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2005). The Turks understood that increased involvement in the Western Balkans would soon lead to a demand for educated Turkish-speaking staff. In order to maximise the number of beneficiaries, language courses were organised both at the Turkology departments in selected Balkan universities (e.g. Tirana, Sarajevo) and at TİKA offices (Çelik, 2021, pp. 112–113).

An analysis of annual reports indicates that during the second of the aforementioned phases in Turkish foreign policy (2009–2016), TİKA's activity in the region was at its highest. At that time, the agency implemented more than 2,000 different projects in the Western Balkans for a total amount exceeding 350 million euro. According to the data, the Balkan region received nearly 30 percent of Turkey's total foreign development assistance during the period under review. This represented the largest share of spending compared to the other regions where TİKA was present (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2017b). Tracing the agency's activities in the 2010s, it can be observed that its operational model gradually shifted from providing typical development and humanitarian aid to

a more comprehensive effort to build institutional capacity and stimulate social growth in countries with historical and cultural ties to Turkey (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2016a). In the Western Balkans, the Ottoman heritage restoration programme had the greatest effect on the public perception. From the early 2010s, TİKA's activities expanded beyond renovation of historic mosques to encompass construction of new ones, thereby signifying the growing role of religion in Turkish public diplomacy (Tabak, 2017, pp. 96–98). Furthermore, the agency's operational profile underwent significant alterations. Previously, TİKA's actions were only prompted by consultations with local community representatives, but later Turks became increasingly proactive in proposing specific initiatives. However, Turkey's excessive involvement contrary to expectations of the Western Balkan societies could have raised doubts about Turkish intentions (Kočan & Arbeiter, 2019, pp. 181–188). Aware of these risks, AKP politicians repeatedly asserted that the primary objective of TİKA's operations in the region was to strengthen Turkey's relations with all Western Balkan states, irrespective of their ethnic or religious composition (Kurtuluş, 2020, pp. 217–218).

Document analysis demonstrates that between 2009 and 2016, TİKA was most active in Bosnia and Herzegovina. As part of the Ottoman heritage restoration programme, Turks renovated several notable mosques, including the Emperor's Mosque in Sarajevo and Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2016b). In the domain of education, the agency successfully completed construction of modern university buildings in Mostar, Tuzla and Bihać. Within the framework of the "Turkology Project", its representatives established cooperation with the university in Zenica (Çelik, 2021, p. 113). In Albania, the primary areas of focus for TİKA have been education (provision of educational materials), healthcare (renovation of hospitals, transfer of medical equipment), infrastructure and protection of cultural heritage (mainly Ottoman-era mosques, e.g. Naziresha Mosque in Elbasan and Iljaz Mirahori Mosque in Korçë) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2015a). As asserted by the then-ambassador to Kosovo Kuvilçim Kılıç, TİKA had completed around 600 various development projects in the country, totalling nearly 85 million euro. In reference to the alleged neo-imperialist tendencies attributed to the AKP, Kılıç emphasised that only a limited number of Muslim sites in Kosovo had been renovated under the scope of the Ottoman heritage restoration programme (Kosovaport, 2018). In addition, TİKA provided Kosovo with comprehensive development support in the areas of healthcare and agriculture (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2015b).

In the case of Macedonia, the agency demonstrated primary interest in domains of education (e.g. school construction programme inaugurated in 2013) and restoration of cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire (e.g. Hüseyin Shah Mosque in Skopje, Chulu Baba Teke Sufi complex in Kičevo). The organisation's motivations for undertaking these actions were articulated as being driven by

aspiration to promote tourism sector (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2017b). Moreover, TİKA initiated a series of activities aimed at fostering a deeper understanding of the Turkish language in Macedonia (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2018). In Montenegro, Turkish development assistance was directed towards the northeastern part of the country inhabited by the Muslim minority (e.g. various projects on healthcare and agriculture). Additionally, a number of initiatives were undertaken under the Ottoman heritage restoration programme, including Osmanagić Mosque in Podgorica and Nizam Mosque in Tuzi (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2012). In accordance with a bilateral agreement that came into effect in 2009, the majority of Turkish aid to Serbia was transferred to the Muslim-majority Sandžak region in the form of educational and medical assistance. Furthermore, TİKA presented a series of projects for the restoration of sites representing Ottoman heritage in Serbia (e.g. Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica, tomb of Damat Ali Pasha in Belgrade) (Todorović, 2021, pp. 151–152).

After 2016, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency continued to be the primary organisation responsible for Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans. According to reports, financial resources allocated by TİKA to the Balkan countries in 2022 alone amounted to more than 160 million Turkish lira (approximately 8 million euro). This considerable budgetary spending was made in the context of Turkey's ongoing severe economic crisis, which had persisted for several years (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2022a). During this period, the agency's most significant undertakings encompassed domains such as education, agriculture, labour activation, administrative assistance, humanitarian aid, and, following the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, countering its repercussions. As a case in point, Turkish involvement in Albania may be cited as an illustration of the provision of comprehensive support to those affected by the earthquake which struck the northwestern part of the country in November 2019. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, TİKA personnel distributed aid packages to approximately 4,000 individuals. Concurrently, a project was initiated to reconstruct 500 residences for disadvantaged households (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2019). In Bosnia and Herzegovina, TİKA has contributed to reduction of the unemployment rate by establishing a network of vocational training centres specialising in manufacturing industries (e.g. in Gradačac in 2018). In the healthcare sector, the agency has comprehensively renovated several medical facilities (e.g. provincial hospital in Goražde, haematology clinic at the University of Sarajevo) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2020). Cooperation in this field was also observed in Kosovo, where TİKA completed construction of a new intensive care unit at Pristina University Hospital and provided funding for modern equipment for a rehabilitation centre for children with disabilities in Prizren (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2021). The agency's leading

initiative in North Macedonia was the school construction programme, under which more than 40 educational facilities were constructed. Furthermore, TİKA has been conducting training campaigns on vocational activation in rural areas (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2020). In Montenegro, the agency's personnel concentrated on providing assistance to local Muslim community, while in Serbia, TİKA's operations encompassed provision of medical care assistance, including transfer of hospital equipment (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2021). The Ottoman heritage restoration programme in the Western Balkans also continued, with notable examples including: Emperor's Mosque in Foča (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Hüseyin Pasha Mosque in Pljevlja (Montenegro), Ali Pasha Mosque in Ohrid (North Macedonia), and Imperial Mosque in Berat (Albania) (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, 2022b).

Yunus Emre Institute

In 2007, the Turkish parliament adopted a resolution to establish the Yunus Emre Foundation, an entity dedicated to promotion of Turkey's culture, arts, literature and language on an international level. As envisaged by legislators, the foundation's activities were also conceived to contribute to creation of a positive image of Turkey through cultural exchange mechanisms (Ünalı, 2019, pp. 146–147). Two years later, the Yunus Emre Institute (YEE) was inaugurated and assumed responsibilities previously entrusted to the foundation. Operating under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the institute took over the supervision of the “Turkology Project”. Concurrently, the Turkish government initiated negotiations concerning establishment of the first Turkish cultural centres in neighbouring countries (Sevin, 2017, p. 146). In accordance with political directives, YEE's local branches were expected to primarily organise Turkish language learning courses for foreigners, but also to host various cultural and artistic events to popularise Turkey (e.g. music concerts, film screenings, painting exhibitions, literary meetings). These activities served the mission of presenting Turkey in a positive light to the international public, which referred directly to the model of Turkish public diplomacy (Ekşi, 2015, pp. 351–358).

The first two cultural centres of the Yunus Emre Institute were established in 2009 in Sarajevo and in Tirana, thus demonstrating the key role of the Western Balkans in the AKP's political strategy. Moreover, from 2010 to 2015, the institute opened new branches in Skopje, Pristina, Prizren, Fojnica, Peja, Shkodër, Mostar, Podgorica and Belgrade (Sancak, 2022, pp. 61–62). As of the mid-2010s, 15 of the 54 Turkish cultural centres in 43 countries were located on the Balkan Peninsula. In addition to the offices previously mentioned, the Balkan department of YEE also administered branches of the institute in Romania (Constanta and

Bucharest), Moldova (Komrat) and Croatia (Zagreb). Accordingly, centers based in the Western Balkans accounted for more than 20 percent of all foreign units of the Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2016). The “Turkology Project” was YEE’s seminal initiative in the field of education. Within the scope of this programme, scholarships and grants were awarded, thus serving as a significant incentive for students to start learning Turkish. Among other educational projects implemented by YEE in the Western Balkans, it is noteworthy to mention programmes that were designed to foster socio-cultural cooperation, such as “Reconstruction of Cultural Heritage in the Balkans” or “Revival of Traditional Turkish Crafts in the Balkans” (Ekşi & Erol, 2018, pp. 32–33).

As demonstrated in the data contained within annual reports published by the Yunus Emre Institute, approximately 30 percent of the total number of language course participants originate from the Balkan region. In 2009, when the first Turkish cultural centre was opened in Sarajevo, it had 235 individuals enrolled to learn Turkish. Following the inauguration of language courses at offices in Tirana and Skopje, this number increased almost twofold by the end of 2010 (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2014). In 2016, the institute’s language courses were attended by over 3,000 people from the Western Balkans (almost one-third of all students in YEE). This outcome serves to confirm the relative success of the programme in the region (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2016). In the AKP’s model of public diplomacy, development of linguistic contacts was identified as a key factor in enhancement of socio-cultural ties. Consequently, demand for learning Turkish in the Western Balkan states was met with a high level of enthusiasm by the authorities in Ankara. By promoting cultural projects, Turkey drew on the potential of Turkish soft power on an additional level, thus seeking to influence Western Balkan communities with new tools and methods (Ekşi, 2017, pp. 198–201). Furthermore, a significant segment of the region’s population regarded the prospect of pursuing professional Turkish language education as a vital opportunity to secure employment in institutions and enterprises established by Turks in the Western Balkans during that period. Concurrently, a large number of local students enrolled in YEE courses with the intention of subsequently continuing their education at universities in Turkey (Demirkaya & Çelik, 2021, pp. 145–146).

Opponents of Turkish political expansion in the region pointed out that 8 of 15 field branches of the Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans were opened in Muslim-majority countries (three each in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, two in Albania). This was interpreted as indicative of the neo-Ottoman orientation of the authorities in Ankara, particularly in light of Ahmet Davutoğlu’s conceptualisation of strategic depth, which distinguished Bosniaks and Albanians as Turkey’s primary regional allies (Öztürk, 2021, pp. 151–154). However, it should be noted that, according to declarations made by representatives of the Yunus Emre Institute, the AKP government planned to gradually expand the scope of Turkish cultural

diplomacy, thus reaching new audiences (Anadolu Ajansı, 2017). An examination of YEE's annual reports reveals that in the post-Davutoğlu period, out of 84 Turkish cultural centres operating in 63 countries worldwide, the branches located in the Western Balkans emerged as the most dynamic entities. Despite the lack of new office openings in the region after 2016, approximately 30 percent of the total number of Yunus Emre Institute projects were executed within the confines overseen by the Balkan department. The 2022 data indicates that approximately 20,000 individuals enrolled in language courses and specialised seminars (e.g. business Turkish, academic Turkish), marking a substantial increase since 2016 (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2022).

Directorate of Religious Affairs

Implementation of the religious dimension of Turkish public diplomacy is the main responsibility of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (DİB; commonly referred to as the Diyanet). Founded in 1924, it initially operated only in Turkey and had a narrow remit (e.g. supervision of Muslim places of worship). Over time, the authorities in Ankara recognised the potential of Diyanet to serve as a political instrument, which provided the rationale for strengthening its position within the state apparatus (Kara, 2000, pp. 43–46). General Directorate of Foreign Affairs (tur. *Dış İlişkiler Genel Müdürlüğü*) was established under DİB in 1971 to coordinate religious support for the Turkish minority in Western Europe. In launching its international activities, Diyanet's primary goal was to promote a moderate interpretation of Islam among labour migrants from Turkey, thereby counteracting propagation of more radical ideologies such as Salafism and Wahhabism (Burgess, 2020, pp. 96–97). In the late 1980s, Turkish politicians initiated talks for creating local representations of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in the Central Asian republics of the USSR, as well as in the Balkans. However, these proposals were rejected (Balçı, 2018, pp. 43–45). Circumstances changed after the emergence of a number of independent states in the former Eastern Bloc, thereby enabling resumption of bilateral contacts concerning the Diyanet's involvement in provision of religious assistance to Muslims (Yurtbilir, 2021, pp. 137–138). Following protracted negotiations, the terms of reference and operational modalities for the institution's personnel in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, and Macedonia) and in Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have been determined. Similar to arrangements made two decades earlier with several Western European states (e.g. Germany, Austria, Switzerland, the Netherlands), Diyanet officers were given the status of foreign religious consultants, which formally sanctioned their activities in both regions. Local political elites decided to conclude agreements with the

Turkish government also due to their willingness to stop the Islamist radicalisation (Bano, 2018, pp. 276–278).

After AKP came to power in Turkey, there has been a systematic growth in the importance of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in both domestic and foreign policy. Following a comprehensive reorganisation of its internal structures in 2010, the institution has been conducting its international activities as an official representative of the state authorities and through its field branches. It can thus be argued that DİB has become an integral part of Turkish public diplomacy (Tabak & Bozkurt, 2022, pp. 117–121). By highlighting the role of the Directorate of Religious Affairs in shaping foreign policy, the authorities in Ankara aimed to align Turkish profile more closely with traditions and values associated with Islamic culture (Yılmaz & Albayrak, 2022, pp. 94–105). According to the 2016 data, there were 106 different types of units responsible for provision of religion-related services (advisory offices, religious attashats, coordination departments) in Turkey's embassies and consulates general in 61 countries around the world. In the case of the Balkans, Diyanet did not have a branch only in Slovenia (Muhasilović, 2018, pp. 70–71). Significant examples of the Directorate's activities in the Western Balkans included deployment of Turkish state-employed imams to serve in local mosques, provision of religious education, allocation of scholarships to Muslim clerics, translation of the Quran and other Islamic texts into Balkan languages. Moreover, from 2007 onwards, the Diyanet initiated meetings with representatives of local Muslim communities to discuss topics such as Islamic extremism, cooperation between Quranic schools and inter-religious dialogue (Özkan, 2015, pp. 147–149). In the area of public diplomacy, the Directorate's contribution to restoration of historic mosques was of crucial importance for Turkey. In this regard, Diyanet collaborated closely with the Ministry of Culture and TİKA (Öztürk, 2021, pp. 154–156). Since DİB lacked the authority to undertake investment of new religious facilities independently, a series of partnership agreements were concluded between Muslim communities in Turkey and in the Balkans. In accordance with the project inaugurated in 2015, the Turkish government committed to securing financial resources for construction of mosques in 66 locations across the region (e.g. Prizren, Ulcinj, Goražde). This number constituted one-third of the total works launched at the time, providing further evidence of Turkish regional engagement (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2016).

In general, Turkey's efforts to foster enhanced collaboration within the religious domain were met with a favourable reception in the Western Balkans. Notwithstanding occasional conflicts of interest and administrative discrepancies, the Directorate of Religious Affairs successfully cultivated productive relations with most of the major Islamic communities in the region, thereby reinforcing Turkey's legitimacy as a state capable of proffering its own solutions to religious matters (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 54–57). Expectations of many Balkan Muslims,

who anticipated increased Turkish involvement in the region, also worked in the Turks' favour. Consequently, incorporation of Diyanet's international activities within the framework of the AKP political strategy towards the Western Balkans was regarded as a logical outcome. Concurrently, as part of public diplomacy since the 2010s, the Directorate of Religious Affairs gained the capacity to influence new areas (education, culture), thus confirming its prominent position among transnational Muslim organisations (Merdjanova, 2013, pp. 78–81).

Following the gradual shift in the AKP's foreign policy model post-2016, newly appointed chairman of Diyanet, Ali Erbaş, has attempted to refrain from overt interference in the internal affairs of Muslim communities in the Western Balkans. Instead, he has prioritised intensification of personal contacts with local leaders (e.g. Husein Kavazović of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Naim Ternava of Kosovo or Rifat Fejzić of Montenegro) to exert an indirect influence on their decision-making (Öztürk & Baser, 2022, p. 709). According to some scholars, the Turks thus sought to counter repeated allegations that they were exploiting religion for political purposes (Koppa, 2020, pp. 252–255). It is also noteworthy that the detailed provisions of intergovernmental agreements concluded in the 1990s rendered prohibition of Diyanet's field branches a highly complicated legal undertaking. Therefore, the institution's personnel in the Western Balkans were not subject to restrictions on their activities. Nevertheless, their extra-religious actions have been closely monitored by local authorities (Israeli & Dimitrovska, 2021, pp. 275–279). Despite Diyanet's leadership declaring its intentions to construct a network of mosques in the region, the project has confronted significant financial and administrative challenges in recent years. None of the key investments were completed on time and there were serious delays in many cases (e.g. Skopje, Pristina, Bijelo Polje in Montenegro) (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2020). Mosques in Tirana and in Olovo (a town near Sarajevo) were eventually opened to the public in the autumn of 2024 (both five years behind schedule). This can be interpreted as a failure on Turkey's part, given that the Turks had previously assured their regional partners that the needs of Balkan Muslims would be met promptly. Nevertheless, AKP politicians still assert that the project of mosque construction in the Western Balkans will continue (İletişim Başkanlığı, 2024).

Turkish Maarif Foundation

The Turkish Maarif Foundation (TMV) is one of the most recent Turkish public diplomacy organisations to operate in the Western Balkans. The institution commenced its activities in 2016, shortly after a proposal to create a special unit under the Ministry of National Education was presented to parliament. According to the legislators' intention, the newly constituted administrative body

was to be entrusted with exclusive authority to establish and manage educational facilities located beyond the national borders, acting on behalf of the authorities in Ankara (Paçaoğlu, 2020, pp. 56–57). Although AKP politicians insisted that the TMV was designed to improve Turkey’s soft power capacity in the domain of education, a significant motivation behind its creation was to assume control of the Gülen Movement’s educational institutions dispersed across several regions of the world. This objective became particularly evident immediately after the failed coup in July 2016, when Turkish diplomacy urged certain states to prohibit Gülenist schools and to transfer their properties to administration of the Turkish Maarif Foundation (Öztürk, 2020, pp. 41–42). As reported by TMV President Birol Akgün, the institution’s staff contacted representatives of more than 70 countries on this matter, with the vast majority responding positively to the Turks’ requests (Çelik & Akgün, 2023, pp. 142–144). Consequently, the Maarif Foundation has expanded its reach significantly in a relatively brief period, emerging as a substantial foreign policy instrument for the AKP. According to ruling party politicians, establishment of TMV has clearly strengthened Turkish public diplomacy apparatus, and provided Turkey with an additional channel to promote its own values (Çelik, 2023, pp. 131–138).

The rapid development of the Turkish Maarif Foundation’s field structures indicated the importance the AKP attached to education. As demonstrated by statistics at the end of 2022, TMV administered 443 facilities in 51 countries around the world, with 51,000 students at various educational levels. In addition to nurseries, kindergartens, schools and universities, the institution oversaw sports centres, dormitories, libraries and laboratories, and published education-related content (handbooks, primers, audiovisual materials) (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2022a). In 2022, TMV possessed 27 branches in the Western Balkans (8 in Kosovo, 5 each in Albania, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4 in North Macedonia), which was recognised as a disappointment given the region’s role in AKP foreign policy. Furthermore, in spite of protracted negotiations, the Turks have thus far been unsuccessful in obtaining approval to initiate operations in Montenegro (Ekinci, 2023, pp. 308–309). The first branch of the Turkish Maarif Foundation in the Western Balkans was established in early 2017 in Kosovo. Two primary education centres were located in Pristina and Prizren, while an educational and training complex was constructed in Lipjan (Telegrafi, 2017). In the following year, TMV obtained a controlling interest in the University of New York in Tirana, which subsequently became one of the largest international universities in the entire Balkans (Daily Sabah, 2019). As reported by TMV executives, the foundation had initially intended to procure additional higher education institutions in the region. Although these plans have not yet been realised, it should nevertheless be noted that the Maarif Foundation has managed to enter into close cooperation with several other private universities in the

Western Balkans (e.g. Sarajevo International University, International Balkan University in Skopje, State University of Tetovo) (Anadolu Ajansı, 2021).

Cultural and educational events constituted an important facet of TMV's endeavours in the region. In 2019, the multi-day "Balkan Education Workshop" was held at the Maarif Complex in Tetovo, North Macedonia. As part of the training programme, Turkish educators were tasked with familiarising their Western Balkan counterparts with modern teaching methods (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2021). In 2022, the "International Symposium on Turkish Language Teaching and Turkology in the Balkans" was hosted at the University of New York in Tirana. The main objective of the conference, which was attended by over a hundred academics from Turkey and the countries of the region, was to discuss novel methods of research on the collective heritage of the Western Balkans pertaining to the Ottoman era. As reported by TMV staff, dissemination of Turkish historical and cultural legacy through educational initiatives has been identified as a contributing factor to enhancement of Turkey's positive international image (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2022b).

Nevertheless, the Turkish Maarif Foundation's reliance on political decisions of the authorities in Ankara has given rise to mounting public resistance in the Western Balkans. For instance, endeavours to assume control of Gülen Movement institutions that had a well-established presence in the region (e.g. Mehmet Akif school networks in Albania and Kosovo, Yahya Kemal College in North Macedonia, Burch International University in Sarajevo) were met with protests (Novaković, 2019, pp. 25–27). In Albania, it was also suggested that separate curricula in TMV-run institutions could potentially constitute a violation of the national education system, as according to the prevailing legislation, educational institutions (aside from Quranic schools) should remain secular in principle (Lami, 2019, pp. 14–16). A degree of scepticism regarding the Turkish Maarif Foundation's execution of the AKP's political agenda has also been observed in other Western Balkan countries. Consequently, the institution's growth in the region has been constrained in recent years (Demir, 2024, pp. 51–52). Notable exception to this trend was seen in Serbia, where several TVM complexes, including kindergartens and primary schools, were constructed between 2022 and 2024 in Belgrade, Novi Pazar and Sjenica (Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, 2024).

Conclusion

As outlined in the section on non-traditional forms of diplomatic activity, pursuit of foreign policy objectives in the contemporary international arena requires utilisation of multifaceted approaches. Therefore, it is no longer sufficient to maintain positive relations solely at the political level. Public diplomacy is

recognised as a fundamental instrument for influencing foreign society, thereby ensuring communication between the authorities of one state and citizens of another (Rhee et. al., 2024, pp. 685–690). According to researchers, the Turkish strategy in this regard has arguably taken the most comprehensive form in the Western Balkans, where institutions such as TİKA, the Yunus Emre Institute, the Turkish Maarif Foundation and Diyanet have conducted a plethora of initiatives for social, educational, economic, cultural and religious cooperation (Atcı, 2022, pp. 552–561).

The present study provides substantial evidence to support the claim that public diplomacy organisations have played an essential role in Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans since the early 2000s. As demonstrated above, the authorities in Ankara have been leveraging soft power attributes to a considerable extent, capitalising on historical and socio-cultural ties that bind Turkey to each country of the region. The AKP has employed a well-organised and progressively expanding institutional structure of public diplomacy over the course of two decades to pursue a diverse array of projects and programmes in various domains. These initiatives have been designed to enhance Turkey's political impact in the Western Balkans, a region of paramount importance to the AKP (Çevik, 2019, pp. 56–65). However, when considering the overall perception of Turkish activities in the context of public diplomacy, it is apparent that social reception of Turkey in the Western Balkans varies from country to country, a discrepancy that can be attributed to the radical differences in the historical experiences of each nation. In general, Turks are perceived rather positively in the region's Muslim-majority states, while in those where Christians make up the majority of the population the impression of Turkey is quite ambivalent. Consequently, it is not possible to assert that Turkish political strategy has been wholly effective and successful, nor that the narrative disseminated by the AKP government and its institutions has been particularly appealing to any country in the Western Balkans (Avdić-Küsmüş, 2022, pp. 184–186).

During the period under review, the primary organisation of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans was TİKA. An analysis of the agency's activity reports indicates that between 2002 and 2022, approximately 4,000 projects were executed in the six countries of the region, with a cumulative expenditure exceeding 800 million euro. The scope of TİKA's involvement encompassed several sectors, including education, agriculture and animal husbandry, healthcare, restoration of historical heritage, infrastructure, and administrative support. With regard to the number of initiatives completed, the Western Balkan states should be ranked as follows: North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (approx. 1,000 projects each), Kosovo (approx. 700 projects), Albania (approx. 600 projects), Montenegro (approx. 400 projects) and Serbia (approx. 300 projects). Another important Turkish public diplomacy organisation in the region was the Yunus

Emre Institute, notable for its cultural activities. According to official figures, approximately 30 percent of the institute's projects were undertaken in the Western Balkans. Furthermore, Turkish language courses have proven to be a source of significant interest for local citizens (Ibishi, 2024, pp. 947–948). Despite its status as one of the most recent public diplomacy organisations in Turkey, the Turkish Maarif Foundation has achieved relative success in the Western Balkans. Within a few years, the Turks had managed to create a network of Turkish educational establishments in the region (also by assuming control of some facilities previously owned by the Gülen Movement). However, actions of TMV have lately begun to attract controversy due to its subordination to the AKP. An outstanding institution of Turkish public diplomacy in the Western Balkans is the Directorate of Religious Affairs, responsible for implementing the religious dimension of the AKP's foreign policy doctrine. In this respect, Diyanet's tasks include provision of theological scholarships, promotion of the Hanafi model of Islam, organisation of gatherings of Muslim communities, dissemination of religious publications and construction of mosques (Sancak, 2022, pp. 60–63).

Critics of Turkish public diplomacy activities in the Western Balkans have directed various complaints against the Turkish government (i.e. propagation of political Islam, perpetuation of hegemonic discourse, infiltration of opposition to the AKP). In this particular context, the most significant allegations have been made against TİKA, Diyanet and the Turkish Maarif Foundation (Couteau, 2023, pp. 20–25). In addition to financial intransparency, TİKA has been accused of aligning itself with the AKP's ideological agenda by renovating Islamic historical sites. Provision of grants and subsidies to several local Muslim associations operating in the Western Balkans was also cited to support these claims (Tonge, 2024, pp. 248–250). The Directorate of Religious Affairs, whose activities are no longer confined only to the religious sphere, has too been the subject of similar complaints for an extended period. It has been observed by some scholars that Diyanet's interferences in the internal affairs of Balkan Muslim communities are not perceived positively, as the Turks often seek to impose their own position instead of offering a compromise solution (Henne & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 8–11). While advisory and mediation initiatives of Diyanet may be deemed permissible, it is highly improbable that any major Muslim community in the Western Balkans would acquiesce to any form of subjugation to Turkey (Kostić, 2016, p. 509). Concerns regarding the Turkish Maarif Foundation primarily relate to its apparent disregard for principles enshrined within educational legislation of the host countries and its alleged intentions to introduce alternative curricula. Despite the lack of concrete evidence to substantiate claims that the institution is being utilised by the AKP government as a vehicle for Islamisation, uncertainties surrounding the TMV's genuine objectives have led to a stagnation in development of its local structures in the Western Balkans (except for Serbia) in recent years (Demir, 2024, pp. 52–54).

It is important to note that Turkish politicians and diplomats have repeatedly dismissed allegations of activities incompatible with the standards of public diplomacy. Nevertheless, the AKP's communication strategy in this regard appears inadequate, and the Turks do not endeavour to dispel emerging suspicions, which consequently adversely affects perception of Turkey in the region. It is recommended that representatives of public diplomacy organisations direct greater attention towards informing the Western Balkan public about less controversial areas of Turkish engagement (e.g. labour activation, technology transfer, infrastructure development, support to the healthcare sector) (Avdić-Küsmüş, 2022, pp. 181–199). It is also of the utmost importance to enhance the level of transparency (e.g. by incorporating comprehensive financial statements within the annual reports). Furthermore, experts have identified some concerning shortcomings of the public diplomacy model created by the AKP. These include, for instance, insufficient coordination of activities, incongruity between the scope of several programmes and the target audience, and subordination of multiple initiatives to the political interests of the ruling party. Against this background, there is a risk that the credibility of Turkish public diplomacy organisations in the Western Balkans will be irreparably compromised, which could have a detrimental effect on Turkey's regional image (Ali, 2022, pp. 261–262).

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