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Turkey and the Balkans: bringing the Europeanisation/De-Europeanisation nexus into question

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ABSTRACT

This article is about the main framework and the rationale of the special issue, which deals with Turkey's increasing ethno-religious, pragmatic and complicated involvement and activism in the Balkans since 2002, under the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP). The main focus of the Issue is how the intersectionality between domestic and foreign policy has played an important role in Turkey's recent relations with the Balkan countries and how the Europeanization process influences this relationality. The overall claim is that religion, ethnicity and kin politics as indispensable components of identity politics, have the capacity to transform Turkey's foreign policy attitudes as well as the orientations of the Balkan countries and the impact of the processes of Europeanization and de-Europeanization on the relationship between Turkey and the Balkans needs to be included into the analysis.

Since the early 2000s, the motto, 'Turkey is back in the Balkans' (Bechev 2012), has found resonance in academic scholarship as well as in Turkish public opinion, which underlined contemporary Turkey's increasing influence in the Balkans and the social, cultural, economic and political repercussions of this influence (Anastasakis 2020; Noutcheva and Aydın-Düzgit 2012; Tanasković 2012). In this vein, it has been claimed that the AKP (Justice and Development Party-*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*) governments' policies and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's political strategies regarding the Balkans have long been energized by Turkey's desire to re-establish political, economic, religious and cultural hegemony in the region, through various neo-imperialist and neo-colonial projects and to foresee the revitalization of the Ottoman multi-sided legacy (Somun 2011; Yavuz 2020). On the other hand, it is also argued, Turkey and the Balkans have

reached the peak point of their mutually beneficial relations, economic enlargement and pro-active utilization of the transnational state apparatus on the part of Turkey (Ekinci 2014; Mitrovic 2014).

Beyond these general issues, the literature on Turkey-Balkan relations is rich and multi-dimensional. In this regard, while some argue that overdoes use of religion, identity, and common past has been creating some limits in Turkey's activism in the Balkans (Targański 2017), others argue that the broader shift in Turkish domestic and foreign policy under the AKP from a realist-secular orientation to an ambiguous coercive Sunni Islamic one has made Turkey and ambivalent actor in the Balkans (Öztürk 2021a). This means that the component of Turkey's 'ethno-nationalist religion-oriented foreign policy' (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018) deserves extra attention not only because it is a central factor that has been under-researched, but also because Turkey getting involved in other Balkans countries' public spheres via religious institutions is a sensitive issue and consistently garners a variety of reactions in the independent Balkan countries. The picture gets even more complicated when the problematic Europeanization process of the Balkan countries, as well as Turkey's tumultuous EU accession process and the debates on 'de-Europeanisation' trends within Turkish politics, are added to the analysis (Öztürk and Gözaydın 2018). In this respect, it has been claimed that against the background of deteriorating EU–Turkey relations and EU's multiple crises, Turkey has been attempting to use its soft power to consolidate its influence in the Western Balkans and fill a power vacuum left by the EU in the region (Dursun-Özkanca 2019). On the contrary, the EU dimension has been claimed by some to complement Turkey's activism in the Balkans (Demirtaş 2015). Similarly, the prospect of EU-Turkey engagement in the Western Balkans in terms of foreign policy had also been scrutinized in an attempt to uncover the cooperation and conflict potential between the two (Saatçioğlu 2019). Nevertheless, these analyses focus on either the EU's or Turkey's foreign policy perspectives and need to be complemented by insights from the countries in the region.

In this respect, the main claim of this special issue is that Turkey's activism in the Western Balkans does not emerge as an alternative to or as a complementary of the Europeanization process in the region but needs to be analysed independently and through a multidimensional lens. Moreover, it is obligatory to understand how these processes unfold at the domestic level in the Balkans. This article aims to introduce the general contours of the processes of Turkey's activism and the Europeanization trends in the Western Balkans and set the ground for understanding how these processes speak to the foreign policy and domestic politics prospects in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Serbia, Greece and Romania as well as addressing how bilateral relations between Turkey and these countries are shaped by the Europeanization/de-Europeanization processes in the region.

Turkey's impact in the Balkans

It is evident that under the AKP rule, Turkey's rapid political transformation has thus been formative in multiple dimensions. After AKP came to power in 2002, scholars have noted Turkey's more active, culturally and ideologically driven foreign policy, primarily in its immediate region, but also at a global scale (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016: Alpan 2016: Baser and Erdi Ozturk 2017). Particularly after the first decade of the new

Millennium, the instrumentalization of the very subjective understanding of Turkish history, culture and Sunni Islam under the influence of former Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary Ahmet Davutoğlu and his foreign-policy doctrine of strategic depth (Özkan 2014) has been the motivating force behind this shift. The novelty of Davutoğlu's perspective is its definition of Turkey as a state neither at the periphery of Europe nor at the periphery of the Middle East. Rather, Turkey sits (as it did in Ottoman times) prominently at the crossroads of the two continents and is thus a pivotal country due to its unique geographical, historical and cultural links with both regions. Furthermore, he focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilizations, particularly the West, and asserts that the differences between Western and Muslim paradigms cause an obstacle for the study of contemporary Islam as a subject in social sciences, especially in international politics. With such a mindset, the AKP has shifted Turkey's foreign policy by defining itself as the inheritor of the longstanding Ottoman cultural tradition, alongside its Sunni priorities and attempts to influence the former Ottoman territories more assertively.

As a result of the mostly domestic policy-oriented transformation of Turkey, the country has been experiencing a series of new foreign policy practices which rests on four inter-related parameters that pertain to the distinct priorities of the elements of the ruling power: militarization, Islam, civilization and power, and these manifest itself as de-Europeanization (Öztürk 2021b; Bulut and Hacıoğlu 2021; Adar and Toygür 2020). In other words, Turkey has been resorting to military force to an unprecedented degree, reflecting Sunni Islam in its foreign affairs in a multi-faceted manner, expressing itself in power terms and, moreover, viewing itself as superior and unique in terms of civilization. Indeed, all of these transformations have been affecting Turkey and the Balkan relations, which this special issue also aims to scrutinize.

Europeanization/de-Europeanization nexus in the Balkans

The process of Europeanization has been experienced and internalized at different degrees and paces in the Balkans.[1] Greece has been an EU member in 1981 and has been one of the first countries where European integration became an anchor for democratization (Cavallaro and Kornetis 2019). The EU integration also became the primary source of democratic consolidation and domestic reforms in Romania and Bulgaria (though at a slow pace and with a quality highly criticized by the EU) ever since their turbulent transition to democracy in the early 1990s (Papadimitriou and Gateva 2009). The EU has also been an important game-changer in the Western Balkans, at least since the early 2000s. The Balkan enlargement, announced at the 2003 EU Thessaloniki Summit, gave the concrete EU membership perspective to Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia and then Yugoslavia.[2] Currently, in terms of the EU terminology, Western Balkans consist of four candidate states (Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Albania) and two potential candidates (Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina).

Against the background of the economic and financial turbulence of the last decade and the recent crises of the European Union (EU), such as migration crisis, Brexit, the limited effectiveness of the EU enlargement and the rising tide of populism, the notion of so-called, 'de-Europeanisation' has entered the agendas of the EU studies for the last ten

years or so as an *explanan* for the 'deterioration of the quality of integration or more simply as "it is worse than it was"' (Domaradzki 2019, 221) for the candidate states as well as the member states. 'De-Europeanisation' is broadly defined as 'the loss or weakening of the EU/Europe as a normative/political context and as a reference point in domestic settings and national public debates' (Aydın-Düzgit and Kaliber 2016, 6). Although the growing scepticism and indifference towards Europe, and even a turning away from European project in many spheres of politics and society, would not necessarily indicate a fully-fledged de-Europeanization (Alpan 2016, 16), the prospect of the European project in the Balkans in its broader sense needs to be examined carefully.

Despite having a rather unproblematic relationship with the European integration, Greece inhibits a lot of prejudices that consider Europeanization as a sign of alienation and moving away from traditional Greek and Orthodox values. Some still equate the concept of 'Europeanisation' with the old concept of 'foreign protection' and even 'capitulation' and, for this reason, reject it (Tsardanidis 2015, 63–64). These considerations have been strengthened even more after the economic crisis and the increase of the recession and unemployment. The 2008 Eurozone crisis added further fuel to the 'how Europe hits home' debate by focusing in particular on a possible reverse trend in that process, through delegitimizing any progress achieved in terms of the Europeanization process and affecting in negative terms the way Greeks feel about the EU (Stavridis et al. 2015, 24–33). The entry into government in January 2015 of an anti-austerity coalition of SYRIZA and ANEL opened a new period in the Greek crisis. Greece's antagonistic negotiation with the Eurozone culminated in a referendum in June 2015, where more than 60% of Greeks rejected austerity despite the explicit threat of eviction from the Eurozone. All in all, scrutiny of the EU impact and Greece's dependence on Europe had been fiercely criticized during this period (Chryssogelos 2019, 614). During this period, amelioration of relations with Russia and shifting energy policy (Greece's participation in the Turkish stream pipeline project rather than South Stream) has even been shown to indicate the de-Europeanization trend (Chryssogelos 2019, 615).

Bulgaria and Romania are rather late-comers to the European integration, where Europeanization became the main engine of post-communist transition starting from the 1990s, culminating in full EU membership of these two countries in 2007. A large part of EU studies dealing with Bulgaria and Romania's EU accession process have pointed out the weakness of anti-corruption policies, deficiencies in the use of the rule of law or backsliding in democratic practices in these two EU member states (Buzogány 2021; Ganev 2013; Gateva 2013; Gherghina and Soare 2016; Spendzharova and Anna Vachudova 2012). Indeed, the EC progress reports 'repeatedly criticized Bulgaria and Romania's endemic corruption, the weak judiciary, the incompetent administrations, the widespread criminal networks, and the trafficking' (Dempsey 2012). For instance, in Romania, one of the latest European Commission progress reports on the 'Cooperation Verification Mechanism'[3] noted that 'the entry into force of the amended justice laws, the pressure on judicial independence in general and on the National Anti-Corruption Directorate in particular, and other steps undermining the fight against corruption have reversed or called into question the irreversibility of progress' (European Commission 2018a). Starting from the late 1990s, EU officials, as well as political actors in Europe, have voiced many doubts about the sustainability of the conditionality-

induced impact of the EU on the South Eastern European states, arguing that EU transformative leverage will evaporate once membership is granted (Buzogány 2021, 185).

The return of identity politics in these two countries also influenced the prospects of Europeanization. The single-issue politics that defined the accession phase have returned under the guise of identity politics in the post-accession phase, allowing voters to easily ascertain their preferences in an uncertain political landscape. Issues that once were recipes for political success – fighting corruption, guaranteeing welfare, addressing environmental concerns, catering for the regional or ethnic cleavages, and tackling immigration – eased the arrival of parties mobilizing around markers of identity (Agarin, 2020, 155).

The course of Europeanization in the Western Balkans, which went hand-in-hand with the process of state-building, has also been complex and uneasy from the start. Consolidated statehood has emerged as the fundamental prerequisite for Europeanization, which most states of the region still lack (Denti 2014). For Börzel, 'limited statehood is the main impediment for the Western Balkans on their road to Brussels' since it 'affects both the capacity and the willingness of countries to conform to the EU's expectations for domestic change' (Börzel 2013, 174).

The pace of Europeanization in the region is not very coherent and expeditious either. No significant momentum in the EU accession has emerged after the Thessaloniki Summit for a long time. The renewed attention on the region came in February 2018 when *the European Commission* published the Commission's new enlargement strategy offering a 'credible enlargement perspective' to the Western Balkan countries, stating that Western Balkans' entry into the EU is in the Union's very own interest, from a political, economic and security perspective, as it would lead to a united Europe based on common values (European Commission 2018b). The announcement of the strategy has been followed by the May 2018 EU-Western Balkans Summit where the European Commission president Juncker declared that Serbia and Montenegro could be ready to join the EU as early as 2025 (European Council 2018). June 2018 European Council meeting signalled that the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania were not to be launched, despite positive advice by the Commission and a preliminary agreement to resolve the Macedonia name dispute (Council of the EU 2018). In the 2020 'Work Programme', the Commission committed itself to 'putting forward ways to enhance the accession process' (European Commission 2020a) and set out the obligations which need to be undertaken by both sides if accession is going to be a viable proposition (European Commission 2020b). Despite this seeming re-engagement with enlargement, the EU is far too concerned with internal crises and convulsions which bring into question the very future of the 'European project' itself – or at least the existing version – for it to envisage early acceptance of new members to the club (Economides 2020, 1).

Another important point regarding the Western Balkan states' Europeanization process has been the EU's intense reliance on the elites. Since the early 2000s, the EU actively influenced the domestic politics of the Western Balkan states, putting pressure on local elites to comply with certain designated criteria as a part of the EU conditionality (Anastasakis 2008, 365). This sometimes meant the EU's support for the region's authoritarian leaders to maintain regional stability against the legacy of the wars of Yugoslavia's dissolution (Economides 2020, 7; Bieber and Kmezić 2017).

Against this background, it would be fair to argue that in the Western Balkan countries, a Europeanization fatigue has emerged, and experts question the EU's real objectives, asking whether the European Commission and the EU Member States really strive for reform or, given other challenges at hand, have for the time being settled for the status quo (Zweers 2019, 3; Kmezić 2019, 90). The creeping nationalization of the EU enlargement where EU member states instrumentalize enlargement for domestic political gains, and national agendas hold the process hostage also raises questions about the credibility of the EU commitments towards aspirant states. The politicization of the EU enlargement is also a new dimension added to the picture (Zweers 2019, 5).

One problem also emerges in terms of the elites. Starting from the 2000s, the strength of reformist elites emerged as the most crucial factor determining the success of EU conditionality strategy in the Western Balkans (Elbasani 2013). Nevertheless, the current situation shows us that the Europeanization process in the region may have vested too much attention on elites rather than paying attention to bottom-up and grassroots movements (Dzihic and Schmidt 2021).

With this background in mind, this special issue mainly focuses on the key power relations of the Turkish Republic and its impact on the relations between different Balkan countries against the background of the EU accession process. This special issue also aims to offer a forum for academics, think-tankers, experts and journalists from the Balkans to assess various aspects of Turkey's influence in the region from a critical perspective and the country's particular relationship with individual individuals Balkan countries. In this regard, it scrutinizes four main questions; 1) What factors determine Turkey's scope of activity in the case of each country? 2) How do local actors and public opinion respond to Turkey's newly-emerging activism in the Balkan region? 3) What is the role of Turkey in the region, and how has it shifted since the beginning of the 2000s? 4) How does the Europeanization/de-Europeanization nexus work at the domestic level in each country?

The contributions to this issue

Against this background, the contributions in this Special Issue tackle various country cases in the Balkans in terms of their relation to Turkey against the backdrop of the ascent of the process of de-Europeanization of Turkey and the Western Balkans. Departing from the argument that Turkey is rather an internal player in the Balkans rather than an external player like China and Russia, the paper by Bechev contends that Turkish foreign policy is not posing a frontal challenge to the EU and NATO. Instead, it benefits from its close relationship and membership in the two institutions and the West in general. The paper also argues that the de-Europeanization trends in Turkey and the Balkans are parallel processes due to the EU having lost its leverage over domestic politics and institutions compared to the 2000s.

Also focusing on Turkey's regional power in the Balkans, Demirtaş elaborates on the use of health diplomacy by the country during the CoViD-19 pandemic. Employing a constructivist perspective, the core aim is to assess how Turkish decision-makers have reconstructed a 'regional power' identity for the country during this period. The paper shows that pandemics provide an opportunity for regional powers to exert their influence in competition with other actors, displaying a 'great country' image, just like the AKP did during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Similarly, Alpan and Öztürk's article focuses on Turkish foreign policy with respect to its impact in the Balkans. The article argues that Turkey's 'soft power' foreign policy perspective that had been prevalent in the 2000s within the context of the incumbent AKP's 'zero problems with neighbours' policy and the EU accession process has remained intact in the Balkans in the 2010s although it had been replaced by the de-Europeanization process and been intensely securitized in the 2010s at a general scale. Against this background, the article examines the normative, material and personalized aspects of Turkey's soft power in the Balkans through interviews conducted with political and social elites in Turkey and the Balkans.

On a different note, Zankina's article elaborates on Turkish-Bulgarian relations and the way in which they influence domestic politics in both countries, as well as at the EU level. In this respect, Zankina's central argument is that to understand current dynamics in bilateral relations, we need to focus on Turkey-EU relations and Bulgaria's impact on this relation and domestic politics in Turkey and Bulgaria. The article also presents a thorough discussion on how we need to adopt a long-term perspective to understand the role that Turkey takes on in the region as well as the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria rather than solely focusing on recent political dynamics and political actors.

The focus of the study by Christofis, on the other hand, is the relations between Turkey and Greece and the rising tensions between the two since 2016 due to the developments revolving around the Aegean Sea, Cyprus and the refugee crisis. Underlining that Greece presents a 'deviation' to the rest of the Balkan countries in the sense that it is already an EU and NATO member with a more stable economy and democracy than some of the other countries in the Balkan region, the article explores the factors that determine recently Turkey's scope of activity towards Greece against the background of the EU accession in the Balkans and Turkey. By locating the relations into a historical perspective, the article argues that Greek–Turkish relations would run smoothly within an EU framework that will mediate and provide a basic list of principles and conditions.

Serbia and the country's relations with Turkey is the focus of Pacariz's paper. Her paper investigates the relationship between regime type and foreign policy by focusing on the Serbian-Turkish relationship between 2009 and 2018. By engaging with a conceptual debate on the sources of authoritarian power concerning the convergence between domestic and foreign policy and the impact of foreign direct investment (FDI) in hybrid regimes on the consolidation of incumbent power, the paper argues that while Turkish FDI are of smaller financial worth than investments of EU actors, they are highly valuable in qualitatively portraying the complexity of political power. This, according to Pacariz, shows the embeddedness of informal mechanisms throughout formal institutions, the fusion of economic and political authorities, and the personalization of political power in Serbia.

The article by Huskić and Büyük aims to assess Turkey's influence in Bosnia and Herzegovina through expert interviews, which show that the de-Europeanization process characterizes Turkish domestic and foreign policies at the moment is affecting the bilateral relations between Turkey and BiH negatively. By the same token, according to the authors, Turkey could become a reliable partner if it were to return to democratic values and its support for BiH and the Balkan countries in the field of Euro-Atlantic cooperation.

On a different note, the Kosovar case is at the focus of Hoti, Bashota and Sejdiu. After providing a historical account of Turkey's approach towards the dissolution of Yugoslavia during the 1990s, with a particular focus on Kosovo. The study explores the

shift of the Turkish foreign policy in Erdoğan's era and Ankara's relations with Kosovo. The analysis by the authors provides a general overview of the factors and dynamics that underlie the relations between Kosovo and Turkey against the background of the EU accession, paying particular attention to Turkey's growing activism in Kosovo and its perception in the latter. The main argument here is similar to the previous country case studies: Kosovo considers Turkey as a strategic partner, but whose relevance is associated with its Euro-Atlantic orientation and political and economic potential.

Last but not least, the article by Lazăr and Butnaru-Troncotă assesses the bilateral relations between Turkey and Romania between 2008 and 2020 by elaborating on the main diplomatic interactions between the two governments in line with the context of significant regional events and Turkey's new foreign policy identity. Turkey, according to the authors, is still relevant as an economic partner and NATO ally for Romania at the Black Sea, whilst displaying de-Europeanization in its foreign policy and assuming a regional role.

Notes

1. In terms of EU's enlargement process, we could even talk about three different groups of countries within the Balkans: Southern Europe (Greece), South East Europe (Bulgaria and Romania) and Western Balkans.
2. At the time, Yugoslavia consisted of Serbia (including Kosovo) and Montenegro.
3. When they joined the EU in 2007, Romania and Bulgaria still had progress to make in the fields of judicial reform, corruption and (for Bulgaria) organized crime. The Commission set up the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) as a transitional measure to assist the two countries to remedy these shortcomings (*European Commission*, 2021).

Disclosure statement

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