

Turkish Foreign Policy and Religion: Field Work Insights from Kosovo¹

Abstract

Turkey's foreign policy in the Balkans has never been invariable, but it has changed over AKP's years since 2002. Although the religious element has been emphasized in rhetoric intensively, there are domestic political reasons behind using religion as a channel to transmit messages. The paper sheds light on one aspect of this in Kosovo, when it comes to Turkish state actors' intentions using the loophole created by secular state institutions in Kosovo. Firstly, with the financial assistance provided to women in Kosovo, the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyamet) replaces the Islamic Community as the "interpreter of Islam", and assures an income for the female preachers. Secondly, spreading books among Imams gives Diyanet the opportunity to find its way to almost all mosques in Kosovo. In addition to that, the Ambassador of Turkey is there at key Diyanet events conveying a political message besides the religious one: stay away from Gülenist circles. This is an example of the political-religious manifestation of Turkish foreign policy.

Explanatory note

The current presentation is embedded in a PhD project that is focused on the role of religion in Turkish foreign policy in Kosovo and Serbia, and positions religion's role in Turkish foreign policy among the other elements, such as business and political engagement. The goal of the PhD research is to challenge the widespread argument that Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans is about the revival of the Ottoman Empire. By doing so, the dissertation will not neglect the religious presence, but it will explore the reasons why it is strongly emphasized in Turkey's rhetoric, and will answer the following research question: *How does religion play into the foreign policy of Turkey in Kosovo and Serbia?*

In my current presentation I will not focus on Serbia because there is no empirical data collected yet, but I will present a few dimensions of Turkish presence in Kosovo based on my exploratory field work done in February 2019. The project is in an initial phase, thus the research question cannot be answered yet, but the presentation will point out a few emerging patterns of Turkish related presence in Kosovo.

1. Introduction: Decomposing the term "Turkey" in foreign policy

When it comes to discuss International Relations, IR scholars often make the mistake of personification of countries, and they describe entire countries, among them Turkey, as a monolithic actor. Thus, to avoid this, the first part of the paper will introduce three periods of

¹ The piece is an extended version of my speech that I will deliver at the ASN World Convention in New York on 3rd May 2019. This version does not contain citations at all places, and in its current form only serves to inform the panel participants about the research under process.

Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans, and it will be pointed out that Turkish presence in the region since 2002 has not been homogenous, but it has changed according to domestic political considerations in Turkey. Secondly, narrowing the scope to Kosovo, it will be exemplified that Turkish foreign policy is not a monolithic entity either, but it is comprised of a number of levels with different actors pursuing often contrasting interests.

The second part of the paper puts the religious aspect of Turkish foreign policy in Kosovo under scrutiny. To challenge the widespread argument that Turkey is only about bringing back Islam and revive Ottoman sentiments in the region, based on data collected on field-work it is pointed out that Turkey's intensive use of Islamic rhetoric is only the surface, but in reality it is a channel to transmit political messages to a potentially loyal support base in Kosovo.

1.1. Three periods of Turkish presence in the Balkans under AKP's rule²

The first period of the Justice and Development Party's (AKP) rule from 2002 to 2009 began with the AKP's clear desire to reduce the influence of the Kemalist establishment in Turkey³, which tendency began during the cold war already⁴. The efforts of the party won international support because of AKP's reform efforts to accelerate Turkey's EU accession process. In this period Turkish foreign policy saw itself as an integral member of the "Western alliance", which was well reflected in diplomatic approach to the Balkans as well.⁵

Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans after 2002 was in sync with that of the Western alliance and was marked by Ankara's support for the EU and NATO integration of the countries in the region. After the Yugoslav wars Turkey coordinated its policies with the United States of America (US), and developed good relations with the governments in Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. Ankara in the 2000s provided military training and diplomatic assistance to Macedonia, and took a significant role in post-conflict initiatives through the UN, NATO and OSCE.⁶

The second remarkable period was hallmarked by the ex-Foreign Minister and Prime Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu's growing influence on Turkish foreign policy from 2009 onwards. Davutoğlu believed that if Turkey wished to emerge as a global power, it would be essential to complement its Western orientation with a stronger presence in the Middle East and the Balkans. He deemed

² The classification is based on: Asli Aydintaşbaş, From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans? ECFR Policy Brief March 2019. In: https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans.pdf (Accessed on 24.04.2019)

³ Kerem Öktem, Turkey since 1989: Angry Nation, London: Zed Books, 2011 pp. 122-157.

⁴ Dimitar Bechev, Turkey's Policy in the Balkans: More than Neo-Ottomanism, Istituto Per Gli Studi Di Politica Internazionale. Commentary, 12 April, 2019, In: <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/turkeys-policy-balkans-more-neo-ottomanism-22835> (25.04.2019)

⁵ Asli Aydintaşbaş, From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans? ECFR Policy Brief March, 2019, p.8. In: https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans.pdf (Accessed on 24.04.2019)

⁶ Ibid: pp.7-8.

that the Kemalist Turkey was wrong in its negative judgement of the Ottoman legacy, and that Turkey should exert its “soft power” in the ex-Ottoman territories to fulfil its destiny⁷.

Davutoğlu in his book the “*Strategic Depth*” focused on Bosniaks and Albanians, the two majority Muslim populations of the Balkans. However, when he became foreign minister he developed closer relations with Serbia and Macedonia as well. Still, during this period the AKP put great emphasis on activities of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA), and opened the Yunus Emre Institutes in Albania, Bosnia, Serbia, Kosovo and Macedonia.

The results of the focus on ex-Ottoman territories as a potential fertile ground for Turkish soft power were not straightforwardly positive. On one hand it generated positive sentiments among the elite, and in general raised Turkey's reputation. On the other hand although Turkey was influential on a political level when it comes to mediation, but failed to increase its cultural outreach outside of the Muslim communities⁸. Davutoğlu neglected that the frequent references to Ottoman past as a success story might go down negatively in the region, where people have ambivalent feelings about the hundreds of years of Ottoman times⁹.

The beginning of the third phase of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans can be dated to Davutoğlu's dismissal in 2016. Since then, the focus is rather on economic ties, and the period is marked by Erdogan's direct engagement through personal relations with Balkans leaders. Erdogan's ties to Aleksandr Vucic, Hashim Thaci, Bakir Izetbegovic and Edi Rama form the backbone of the newest phase of Turkish engagement¹⁰.

The close relationship to those leaders in the region is mutually beneficial. The personal level interaction serves as top level diplomatic channel to both Erdoğan and the Balkans leaders. At the same time the policy reflects Erdoğan's supremacy as the most significant leader in the region. The Turkish president enjoys respect in the Balkans that he does not get in the European Union (EU), and in exchange he provides the regional leaders VIP-treatment and high-level access in Turkey. Through this leader-to-leader diplomacy the Balkans leaders are leveraged against the EU, since they can prove that their countries are not left without alternatives in a stalled EU integration process.

Turkey still relies on its soft power tools in the Balkans, but they are less amplified in the discourse directed to the international audience than in the period before 2016. TIKA is active with the

⁷ Ibid: p.9.

⁸ Alida Vračić, Turkey's role in the Western Balkans. SWP Research Paper. Berlin: Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik -SWP- Deutsches Institut für Internationale Politik und Sicherheit, 2016, p.30. In: https://www.ssoar.info/ssoar/bitstream/handle/document/50173/ssoar-2016-vracic-Turkeys_role_in_the_Western.pdf?sequence=1 (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

⁹ Asli Aydintaşbaş, From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans? ECFR Policy Brief March 2019, p.9. In: https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans.pdf (Accessed on 24.04.2019)

¹⁰ Interview 1, Investigative journalist

Ottoman-era mosque reconstructions and development work, which is a constant theme of political speeches and government media that is addressed to the domestic electorate. Through those efforts AKP wants to present itself as the representative of the mighty, benevolent Turkey reminiscent of their interpretation of Ottoman times. The difference between the Davutoğlu's period, and the post 2016 times is that recently the primary targets are the AKP supporters in Turkey, and not the population of the Balkans countries¹¹.

1.2. The different levels of Turkish engagement in Kosovo

The foreign policy of Turkey is often described as “Islamic”¹², and also the rhetoric of Erdoğan presupposes a strong Islamic presence in it. However, the Turkish engagement with Kosovo is multifaceted, and there are at least four dimensions of keeping the Balkans on the radar of different Turkey related state or not state linked institutions, among which we can find religious, semi-religious and non-religious ones. This classification is abstract, and in reality the distinction is not one hundred percent possible. All of those institutions and businesses to a certain extent gravitate around the lobbying power¹³ and financial abundance¹⁴ of the core of Turkish foreign policy in the region, the Embassy and the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet). Nonetheless, decomposing this structure of actors is essential to understand the aims of different actors with different interests from Turkey, which is more than spreading of Islam, and reviving Ottoman sentiments in Kosovo.

The first dimension is the religious, in which Diyanet is the flagship of Turkish state institutions. Turkey sends five imams per year to the Turkish community in Kosovo during Ramadan, who are spread in different cities. Also, there are 20-25 Imams of the Islamic Community in Turkey on further training, and Diyanet is involved with financing the salaries of around 10-15 woman preachers, who would otherwise do their jobs on a voluntary basis¹⁵. In addition to that, there is an agreement between Diyanet and Kosovar institutions¹⁶ to build the city-mosque of Pristina in Ottoman style, but there is no information yet published about the beginning of construction works¹⁷.

¹¹ Asli Aydıntaşbaş, From Myth to Reality: How to Understand Turkey's Role in the Western Balkans? ECFR Policy Brief March 2019, p.18-19. In: https://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/from_myth_to_reality_how_to_understand_turkeys_role_in_the_western_balkans.pdf (Accessed on 24.04.2019)

¹² For instance see: Lerna K. Yanik, Bringing the Empire Back. The Gradual Discovery of the Ottoman Empire in Turkish Foreign Policy. In *Die Welt des Islams* 56 (3-4), 2016, pp. 466–488

¹³ For private businesses the lobbying power of the Turkish Embassy in the respective country is an important asset

¹⁴ Ahval, Turkey's top religious body receives 34 pct boost to 2019 budget amid cuts to ministries. 13 October, 2018 In: <https://ahvalnews.com/diyanet/turkeys-top-religious-body-receives-34-pct-boost-2019-budget-amid-cuts-ministries> (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

¹⁵ Interview 2, Main Adviser to the Grand Mufti of Kosovo

¹⁶ The Islamic Community of Kosovo, the city of Pristina and the government of Kosovo

¹⁷ The Guardian, Turkey's gift of a mosque sparks fears of 'neo-Ottomanism' in Kosovo. 2 January, 2019, In: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/jan/02/turkey-is-kosovo-controversy-over-balkan-states-new-central-mosque> (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

Secondly, there are the semi-religious state related organizations such as the Maarif Foundation, and TIKA. In 2018, Turkey's supreme court ratified a decision to transfer all Gulen-linked schools in Turkey to Maarif schools, which provide regular curricula with around 20-25% focused on religious, Turkish and Arabic language education¹⁸. Kosovo has Maarif schools in Pristina and Prizren and altogether provide places to 780 students from kindergarten to high school levels¹⁹. The other institution fitting in this dimension is TIKA that is active in the renovation of Ottoman era mosques but also in official development aid, which covers agricultural and educational assistance²⁰. So far TIKA has renovated seven mosques in Kosovo, and there was one other mosque in South Mitrovica renovated with Turkish assistance, but that financial aid stemmed from the diaspora and not from any state institution of Turkey²¹.

Among the officially not religiously affiliated state institutions there is the Embassy and the Yunus Emre Institute. Although they are namely not affiliated with Islam, the Turkish Ambassador is often present at Diyanet events, and the Yunus Emre Institute also had a cooperation with the Islamic Community of Kosovo in the publication of epigraphs²². The Ambassador uses those events to present Turkey on the "right side" of Islam, and to transmit their prevailing political message, which is currently the purge against Gülenist circles in Kosovo²³

As the last dimension, there are the non-state institutions, such as the Gülen movement and the private businesses who rely on either the Turkish Chamber of Commerce, or Erdogan's personal "leader to leader diplomacy". Turkey is always among the three most significant trading partners and investors in Kosovo, but Ankara's economic influence cannot be compared to that of the EU's. The Gülen related structures since 2013-2016 operate separately from state institutions. The Embassy is deeply engaged with spreading their alleged truth about the dangers of the Gülen movement in the Balkans, and the Maarif Foundation is ready to take over all of their institutions.

This spectrum of actors paints the picture of an interrelated structure, among whom we find many with political, economic and religious goals. The different players with varying interest constitute the entirety of Turkish presence in Kosovo, and in the following part the scope will be narrowed down to the religious realm, with the Diyanet and the Embassy in focus.

¹⁸ Maarif Foundation, New Jersey Curriculum, 2019, In: <https://nj.maarifschool.org/page/110-curriculum-45> (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

¹⁹ Maarif Foundation, Kosovo – About us, In: <http://www.maarifkosova.org/about-us> (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

²⁰ Balkan Insight, Turkey Funds Renovation Projects in Kosovo, 4 July, 2018 In: <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/07/04/turkey-continues-supporting-projects-in-kosovo-through-tika-07-03-2018/> (Accessed: 25.04.2019)

²¹ Interview 2, Main Adviser to the Grand Mufti of Kosovo

²² *ibid*

²³ The information is based on the author's personal impression when visiting events organized by Diyanet and attended by the Ambassador of Turkey in Pristina.

2. The secular state institutions and religion in Kosovo

In February 2018 I went on a three weeks long exploratory field work to Kosovo, to research Turkish and Kosovar actors involved in the religious, political and economic levels of Turkish engagement. In the following, I will present how the secular Kosovar state opens a loophole for Turkey to be present in the religious realm, and how Turkish state institutions such as the Diyanet and the Embassy capitalize on this opportunity through supporting women and the Islamic Community in Kosovo.

According to the Constitution of Kosovo, religion is clearly separated from the state. Thus, Kosovo's Muslims carry out their religious activities through independent private institutions. Kosovo has a total of 810 mosques, and Islamic religious communities in Kosovo are funded voluntarily by their believers and followers. Following the war around 218 mosques were rebuilt, and 300 new ones were built. However, even with that number the demand for new mosques of the majority Sunni Muslim population accounting for around 90% of Kosovar society cannot be satisfied²⁴.

Before the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Islamic Community of Kosovo (ICK) was registered with the legal authorities in Belgrade. Since then all religious institutions in Kosovo operate without a clear legal background because the law on organizing religious communities in Kosovo has not been approved yet. As result of the unsettled state of religion, currently the state refers to Islam, Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy as traditionally present religions²⁵.

The low number of mosques and the vague legal background have created an antagonism between the actors around the ICK and the Kosovar state. When academics close to the ICK talked about the Kosovar state, some of them tended to refer to the institution as “communist” or “corrupt”. The reasons for that are their dissatisfaction with the support provided to the ICK, and that the critiques are prone to equate between socialist times when religion was oppressed, and today when officially no religion is prioritized over the other. Thus, when I talked to the Faculty of Islamic Studies or the ICK I always had to take into consideration that there was a clear disaccord between the Kosovar state and them, which opened doors for Turkey to enter the scene with religiously related assistance. This assistance has a number of manifestations, out of which two will be presented in the following: the first is engaging with women who feel discriminated inside the Islamic Community, and secondly, engaging with the Islamic Community of Kosovo who feel side-lined in the Kosovar state building process.

²⁴ Xhabir Hamiti, *Islam in Kosovo – The Current State of Affairs and the Way Ahead*, Euxenios (23), 2017. pp. 38-42.

²⁵ Interview 3, Academic from the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Kosovo (Kosovo 1 document)

3. Diyanet and women preachers

Perceiving the need for assistance and the opportunity to exert influence the Diyanet appeared as a funder of women preachers in Kosovo. After the war the number of mosques decreased and the women who had gone to pray there realized that even the spaces that had been designed for females were occupied by men²⁶. My research participant from the Faculty of Islamic Studies, which is an educational institution tied to the ICK, worked a lot on establishing a women's department in the entirely male dominated religious institution, the ICK. She emphasized that the Kosovar legislation enforcing gender equality has not been implemented at the Islamic Community yet, and the women preachers under the women's department educating women to Islamic studies were doing their job on a voluntary basis. This is the loophole that the Diyanet reacted upon and decided to give a salary of around €250-500 per month to 10-15 women²⁷. The support given is not significant for Diyanet, which is an institution with around 120 000 employees²⁸, but in the small Kosovo with its close to 2 million inhabitants the 10-15 women can have an outreach to around 1000 people through their local communities where they preach, and through their families.

My research participants from the ICK and the Faculty of Islamic Studies did not question Turkey's intentions with the women. They were continuously referring to this practice of having female preachers in mosques as an old Ottoman tradition, which is called back to life in Kosovo recently. They see Turkey's intention as Ankara's will to eradicate prejudice against Islam. At this point it is important to note and realize my position as a researcher in this interview context. My research participants were trying to convince me, the researcher from a Western European university, that Turkey's efforts via the support are merely to improve the negative judgement of Islam in Kosovo, so that people do not think about it as something radical. From a few interviews I cannot judge whether they truly believe it or not, but there are some consequences of Diyanet's meddling in Kosovo's religious life, which they neglected as result of the positive lenses through which they looked at the phenomena.

The ICK related research participants tend to forget that through those activities many women learn to better defend traditional Islamic values as a result of closer study of Islamic texts. Through these activities Turkey benefits in two aspects: they win the support of many women because they establish their incomes with the subsidy, and through the preachers Turkey presents itself as an actor of goodwill in the Kosovar society. This might make the bed for their political activities when it comes to the purge against Gülenist circles, and promoting economic investments. In addition, since the gender equality law has not been implemented at the ICK yet, for the women in need of support, the Diyanet acts as replacing the ICK.

²⁶ ibid

²⁷ Interview 3, Academic from the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Kosovo

²⁸ Source needed

4. Diyanet, the Embassy and the Islamic Community of Kosovo: A political message in religious clothing

Diyanet is active not only among women, but in general providing assistance to the ICK as well. I participated in an event co-organized by the ICK and the Diyanet in the Swiss Diamond Hotel in Pristina. The event was dedicated to the book “Understanding Islam”, which according to the speakers was said to be the best Hadith collection in Turkish these days, and was translated by Diyanet to Albanian. The event began with a speech given by the Ambassador of Turkey to Kosovo, Çağrı Sakar, as he raised Kosovars’ attention to the difference between “good Islam” that they can understand deeper from the book, and “bad Islam” spread by Gülen related structures in Kosovo. Ambassador Çağrı Sakar announced that 700 books will be distributed among the Imams in Kosovo, which means that almost all mosques in the country would get one sample. When it was announced, everyone was applauding in the room which was filled mainly by imams and affiliates of the ICK, and one could see honest smiles on faces of the attendees around. With little investments such as this book event Turkey can replace parts of the services of the Kosovar state provided to the ICK and for its pious people. Subsequently, the Ambassador repeated that Turkey had to spread the “good Islam” versus the “wrong Islam” spread by the Gülen movement, and warned Kosovars to be careful so that a coup does not happen in their country, and assured them if anything happens Turkey was ready to help.

We should not forget that this political message was announced by the Ambassador of Turkey, the representative of the Turkish state in Kosovo and not by the Diyanet. It is indicative that it was announced at a religious event and reveals that Turkey through Diyanet uses the religious realm to transmit political messages besides the religious support. Even without explicitly stating but they expect the local Muslim community to be grateful to Turkey, and not only to Diyanet. It is a perfect example of Turkish foreign policy’s religious-political manifestation, where the religious message is conveyed by a political actor, dressed up in religious clothing.

5. Conclusion

Turkish foreign policy since 2002 has become more religious in rhetoric, but the audience and the substance has changed over time. At the beginning the Balkans was not in the focus, and with Davutoğlu’s appearance in 2009 finding the listening ears of Muslims of the region became the goal. Since the dismissal of Davutoğlu, the primary target with emphasizing Islam and the Balkans is winning the Turkish electorate’s heart, but there are also political goals behind this strategy.

The paper sheds light on one aspect of the religious rhetoric of Turkish foreign policy, when it comes to Turkish state actors’ intentions of operating using the loophole created by the secular state institutions in Kosovo. The antagonism between the secular state and the ICK are stemming from the processes of the breakup of Yugoslavia because the legal background of religious communities is not settled yet, and the state does not provide any type of support to the ICK. In

addition to that, inside the ICK the gender equality law has not been implemented yet, which makes women feel side-lined in the community.

Realizing this opportunity, Diyanet entered the religious scene in Kosovo providing assistance to to the ICK in general and women in particular. Firstly, with the financial assistance provided to women in Kosovo, the Diyanet replaces the Islamic Community as the “interpreter of Islam”, and also assures an income for the female preachers. With this support the funded women can make their living in Kosovo, and with their outreach can spread the goodwill of Turkey, and the Islam of Ankara’s interpretation.

Secondly, spreading books among Imams gives Diyanet the opportunity to find its way to almost all mosques in Kosovo. In addition to that, Diyanet’s events are often attended by the Ambassador of Turkey who encourages the pious people of Kosovo to follow the “good Islam” instead of the “bad Islam” promoted by Gülenist circles. This is an example of the political-religious manifestation of Turkish foreign policy, which reveals that the religious tone is undoubtedly there, but it is also used as a channel to transmit political messages, this time directed against the Gülenist groups.

To conclude, we saw that both circles in Kosovo, the religious women and the ICK, are in need of someone to rely on: be it an employer for the women, or be it a supporting institution for the Islamic Community. They feel offended by the state that is secular, and they look at Turkish institutions as someone giving a helping hand in difficult times. In effect, Turkey plays the role of the ICK for women, and for the ICK Turkey plays the role of the state instead of Kosovo, and uses its good image in those circles to find listening ears and potentially a loyal support base for the purge against Gülenist circles.