



## Turkey's soft power in the Balkans reaching its limits

TURKEY PROGRAMME

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### Summary

- Turkey's rising influence in the Balkans is directly linked to the stuck EU enlargement process, of which all Western Balkan countries are a part, but are currently placed by the EU in an undefined waiting room.
- The architect of Turkey's Balkan approach was Ahmet Davutoğlu. Therefore 2016 was a turning point, when Davutoğlu stepped down and foreign policy in the aftermath became more Erdoğan-centred and economy driven.
- Erdoğan's personalized policy approach is not limited to Muslim politicians, but the general rule of Turkey's bilateral relations in the region.
- Islamic brotherhoods and sects, especially the Gülen movement, became active in the Balkans long before the Turkish state institutions. Since 2004, state institutions like TİKA, Yunus Emre and Diyanet have become pillars of Turkey's soft power approach.
- Since the failed coup attempt in July 2016, the fight against the Gülen movement and its institutions in the Balkans have become a priority for Turkish diplomacy.
- Most Balkan governments resisted Turkish pressure to close-down Gülen-affiliated institutions or extradite members of the sect. As a consequence, Turkey's intelligence agency resorted in abducting Gülen members to Turkey.
- Economic relations, trade and investments increased with all Balkan countries, but from a very low starting point.
- Because soft power activities and increased economic cooperation have not led to the desired results, military and defense cooperation have gained prominence, as they would, in the mid- and long-term, create economic dependencies, through which more political pressure could be built.
- Turkey could help Balkan countries in the first wave of the pandemic with medical equipment, but couldn't help with vaccines, because it has not yet produced its own vaccines. Therefore, Russia and China could better raise their profile, the EU's stance was interpreted as "vaccine nationalism" and contributed to the already bad image of the EU.
- The future orientation of the Balkans will be largely determined in Brussels and EU capitals. A credible offer by the EU towards accession, would maybe decrease Turkey's direct influence there, but could lead to a group of new EU members, which could serve as Turkey's allies within the bloc.

## Introduction

*“Recent developments over the influence of third parties in the Balkans are directly linked to the stuck EU enlargement process, of which all Western Balkan countries are a part.”*

Since the 1990s, Turkey has been rediscovering the Balkans, which were largely ignored for the first seventy years of the Republic. This is in sharp contrast to the Ottoman Empire, which was to a significant part (also) a Balkan empire. The Ottomans ruled over much of what is now the Western Balkans for five centuries, a period, which left important traces and the biggest local Muslim population in Europe. Relations have been intensifying, especially under the reign of the AKP since 2002. For its first fourteen years in power, the central person to shape Turkey's foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoğlu, had a peculiar interest in the Balkans, especially in the Muslim communities, and tried to install Turkey as a mediator, donor, big brother and cultural magnet. Despite the focus in recent years on developments in Syria and the broader Middle East, the Balkans still play an important role in Turkey's new foreign policy of trying to become a regional power using a personalized foreign policy, soft power, economy and trade to gain more influence. However, Turkey needed to acknowledge that this approach has its limits, and the pandemic didn't help in boosting Turkey's image either, due to the lack of a Turkish vaccination program. A lesson that Turkey seems to draw from this experience, which is similar to what happened in the Middle East, is that soft power is just not enough to influence politics, as exemplified in the low response from Balkan leaders in terms of closing down Gülen-affiliated institutions or extradite members of the organization. That is why much more importance has been oriented towards an accelerated military and defense sector cooperation, which aims at creating long-term dependencies of Balkan countries, which then could be influenced more effectively.

## Stuck EU enlargement process = opportunities for new players

*“Western Balkan leaders could, if EU accession does not speed up, turn, for example, towards Turkey and away from the EU.”*

Recent developments over the influence of third parties in the Balkans are directly linked to the stuck EU enlargement process, of which all Western Balkan countries are a part. When Jean Claude Juncker declared on 15 July 2014 that the [“EU needs to take a break from enlargement”](#), it soon became evident that it would be a much longer break than the initially proposed 5 years. Several factors during the past 15 years diverted the EU's attention from the Western Balkans, from the financial crisis (2008), to refugees (2015) and recently Brexit and the East-Med. Bieber and Tzifakis therefore argue that “the West has increasingly followed a hands-off approach towards the Western Balkans ... it is the Euro-Atlantic allies rather than the Western Balkans that have been drifting away from their partnership” (Bieber/Tzifakis 2019: 9). For Alida Vračić this situation created a “power vacuum” (Vračić 2016: 5), which several other players have been trying to fill, Turkey being one of them. The other main competitors are Russia, China and the UAE.

For the Western Balkan leaders this means a “balancing act between EU accession ... quick and simple investments from China and the steady helping hands of Turkey and Russia” (Hake/ Radzyner 2019: 13). Western Balkan leaders could, if EU accession does not speed up, turn, for example, towards Turkey and away from the EU or, on the contrary, refrain from giving the EU the impression that they are close to Turkey (ibid.: 13-14).

*“If the EU were again more committed, making accession in a mid-term future credible, it would be much harder for outside powers to increase their political clout.”*

The EU has realized the possibility of the Balkans drifting away. In April 2018, [French president Macron said in the European Parliament](#): “I don't want a Balkans that turns toward Turkey or Russia, but I don't want a Europe that, functioning with difficulty at 28 and tomorrow as 27, would decide that we can continue to gallop off, to be tomorrow 30 or 32, with the same rules.” This “but” in the sentence, however, lays out the EU's dilemma. It wants the Balkan countries close, but it doesn't want them joining the EU any time soon. However, the status quo will play out in favor of other countries, Turkey

included, which don't ask for democratic standards. If the EU were again more committed, making accession in a mid-term future credible, it would be much harder for outside powers to increase their political clout.

*“Until the early 1990s, Turkey didn't show any particular interest in the Balkans, not even in the Muslim communities.”*

## Turkey rediscovering former Ottoman Lands

Until the early 1990s, Turkey didn't show any particular interest in the Balkans, not even in the Muslim communities. This changed with the war in the former Yugoslavia, where solidarity with Bosnian Muslims played an important role in raising awareness of the historic bonds between Turkey and the Balkans (populations).

*“The converting of emotions into concrete policies happened in the early 2000s.”*

The converting of emotions into concrete policies happened in the early 2000s. The architect of the AKP's foreign policy from the beginning in the early 2000s until 2016 was Ahmet Davutoğlu, who laid out his foreign policy vision in the book “Strategic Depth”, published in 2001. Davutoğlu deals with the Balkans exclusively in two chapters, which comprise roughly 35 pages. He stressed therein the importance and effective usage of religion in relations between Turkey and Balkan countries. “The basis of Turkey's political influence in the Balkans is the Ottoman remnants, the Muslim communities. [...] At first Turkey's natural allies are the two countries with Muslim majority [BiH and Albania]. The will to turn this common historic accumulation into a natural alliance has now emerged” (Davutoğlu 2001: 123). Without an active Balkan policy, Turkey would lose its influence to Greece and Russia, who would use their Orthodox and Orthodox Slavic affinities respectively. Back then, neither China nor Gulf countries were a significant factor.<sup>1</sup> The importance of the Balkans for Turkey was, at the time, also reflected in its diplomatic corps. During these years, as Öztürk and Akgönül argue, “some of the most active and promising diplomats of the Turkish Foreign Ministry were employed at the Turkish embassy in Serbia” (Öztürk/Akgönül 2020: 230).

*“For Turkey's Balkan policy, 2016 was a turning point. Davutoğlu stepped down as prime minister and, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, Turkey stepped up its efforts against the Gülen movement.”*

For Turkey's Balkan policy, 2016 was a turning point. Davutoğlu stepped down as prime minister and, in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt of 15 July 2016, Turkey stepped up its efforts against the Gülen movement, which was/is especially present and strong in the Balkan countries.

## Personalized foreign policy

With Davutoğlu leaving office, foreign policy became more Erdoğan-centred and economy-driven. Certainly this is also a consequence of the presidential system, in place since the summer of 2018, which places the president at the centre of all decision making. Personal ties to political leaders have replaced institutional links (see Aydıntaşbaş 2019: 14). Lami argued that “[Erdoğan's personal relations with Vucic \[Serbia\], Thaçi \[Kosovo\], Bosnian leader Bakir Izetbegovic, and Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama form the backbone of the newest phase of Turkey's outreach in the Western Balkans](#)”. The Muslim politicians in particular make their affection for Erdoğan public and follow a strategy of a “diplomacy of turning up”, as coined by Aydıntaşbaş. These leaders know that “Erdoğan wants the respect that he feels he does not receive from EU leaders” (Aydıntaşbaş: 16). When the new Istanbul airport was inaugurated in late 2018, no Western European politicians were present, but the leaders of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Bosnia and

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of Davutoğlu's Balkan ideas and policies see Think tank Popolari, A Political Romance: Relations between Turkey and Bosnia and Herzegovina, May 2014, [http://popolari.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/politicka\\_romansa\\_turska\\_bih\\_EN.pdf](http://popolari.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/politicka_romansa_turska_bih_EN.pdf), pages 21-24 in particular.

*“With Davutoğlu leaving office, foreign policy became more Erdoğan-centred and economy-driven.”*

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*“Erdoğan’s diplomatic activity has been most successful where least expected - in Serbia, a country long considered to have a highly negative view of Turkey.”*

*“Islamic brotherhoods and sects became active in the Balkans long before the state and its institutions became a major player in that field.”*

Herzegovina, Bulgaria and Serbia were. Whereas many Western political leaders and media have criticized Turkey’s authoritarian tendencies, these are not openly objected by Western Balkan leaders.

However, this personalized policy approach is not limited to the Muslim politicians. As Rasidagic and Hesova point out, “Erdoğan’s diplomatic activity has been most successful where least expected – in Serbia, a country long considered to have a highly negative view of Turkey – because the Prime Minister and then President of Turkey has strategically pursued personal relationships with every Serbian president since 2010.” (Rašidagić/Hesova 2020: 104). Besides economic pragmatism, both countries pursue a foreign policy that is as independent as possible, with broad-based relations to reduce dependencies. This policy practiced in both countries can be an additional driver of this unusual rapprochement.

### Soft power and its limits

Soft power played an important role in Davutoğlu’s strategy of intensifying relations. For Rašidagić/Hesova, Turkey focused its soft power strategy especially on Balkan Muslims and on four main areas: religious institutions, Islamic history, education, and media and popular culture (see *ibid.*: 105).

However, Islamic brotherhoods and sects became active in the Balkans long before the state and its institutions became a major player in that field. The Gülen movement had the greatest presence, already beginning to operate foundations, schools, dormitories in the 1990s and later also universities. The schools were a magnet for the local Muslim elites in particular and many leading politicians sent their children to one of these schools. The Turkish Islamic brotherhoods presented their religious understanding and traditions as somewhat similar and in harmony with local traditions, in contrast to other Muslim players like Saudi Arabia with a different tradition.

The state only started actively using its “religious diplomacy” some 10 years later. Since 2004, TİKA ([Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency](#)) has become an important soft power tool in the Western Balkans, financing the restoration of mainly religious Islamic buildings, giving Turkey’s efforts to preserve the Muslim heritage an unprecedented visibility. In 2007, the cultural [Yunus Emre Institute](#), offering Turkish classes for foreigners, was founded and quickly set up branches in the Balkans. However, so far, Turkish language classes have remained poorly attended (Aydıntaşbaş 2019: 18).

Until 2009, the Diyanet had a very limited influence on and role in the selection of scholarships for studies in Turkey. In 2009, the Diyanet was developed into “a centre of religious power and was made directly responsible to the prime minister” (Öktem 2012: 31). The Diyanet and its Foundation have further intensified their activities since 2012, but “only in North Macedonia and Albania Diyanet has [it] been represented on a consultancy level since the beginning of 2000s” (Öztürk/Akgönül 2020: 228). Alongside these state efforts, the AKP also engaged businesses close to the party in private educational entrepreneurship, resulting in the establishment of the International [University of Sarajevo](#) in 2004 and the [International Balkan University in Skopje](#) in 2006.

*“Turkish diplomats confirm that government directives instruct them to prioritise the pursuit of Gülenists in Western Balkans countries.”*

*“Since the Balkan governments didn’t cooperate as Turkey wished, especially concerning the extradition of Gülenists, Turkey’s intelligence agency MIT intensified its efforts to forcibly return Turkish citizens to Turkey.”*

*“...the reaction in Kosovo and other Balkan states is to “punish” those directly involved, but without endangering the good bilateral relations. International diplomatic support, trade and investments outweigh rule of law principles.”*

## Fight against Gülen since 2016 a priority

When the relations between the AKP and the Gülen movement turned sour in Turkey around 2011 and a war over power and influence started, this confrontation was quickly also exported abroad. However, only after the failed coup attempt, as Aydıntaşbaş wrote, “Turkish diplomats confirm that government directives instruct them to prioritise the pursuit of Gülenists in Western Balkans countries” (Aydıntaşbaş 2019: 9).

However, this fight had only limited success. Even if President Erdoğan argued that the Gülenists should be considered a terrorist organization, “the head of Islamic scholars, *ra’is al-ulame*, Husein Kavazovic, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina, declared that the Gülenist organizations should not be seen as a real threat, since the Gülenist schools in Bosnia operate under local laws” (Öztürk/Akgönül 2020: 235).

This confrontation also affected the relations on the ground with local Islamic communities, because according to Öztürk and Gözaydın, “Diyaret began to categorize the Islamic groups in the Western Balkans as either pro-Turkish state or pro-Gülenist” (Öztürk and Gözaydın, 2018). Those placed in the latter camp, such as the Muslim Community of Albania, had their financial support cut.

## Secret Service “kidnapping” Gülenists

Since the Balkan governments didn’t cooperate as Turkey wished, especially concerning the extradition of Gülenists, Turkey’s intelligence agency MIT intensified its efforts to forcibly return Turkish citizens to Turkey. In the Balkans, the most debated case was in Kosovo, where in March 2018 six Gülenists were taken to Turkey without the knowledge of then prime minister Haradinaj, who afterwards dismissed the interior minister and intelligence leadership. Relatives of the men described the deportation as a “[kidnapping](#).” As Colborne and Edwards argue, “[Turkey may not be a friend the Balkan state can afford to lose. Alongside being a strong advocate for its international recognition and eventual accession to the European Union and NATO, Turkey also has considerable economic clout there.](#)” It therefore seems as if the reaction in Kosovo and other Balkan states is to “punish” those directly involved, but without endangering the good bilateral relations. International diplomatic support, trade and investments outweigh rule of law principles. Globally, kidnapping Gülenists has become a widely used method. [The Turkish justice minister said in 2019 that 107 alleged Gülenists had been brought back to Turkey from abroad](#). This practice poses a dilemma for the Balkan governments participating in the EU membership negotiation process; either bow to Turkey in contravention of the law, because both for the closure of legally operating schools and the extradition of foreign citizens there is no locally acknowledged “crime”, or resist the pressure and thus antagonize Ankara. Notably, unlike in many Central Asian and African states, most Balkan governments have resisted Erdoğan’s pressure. This is a big disappointment for Turkey, especially from allies with very close personal bonds. Concerning the extraditions, [Nate Schenkan, Director of Research Strategy at Freedom House, argued](#) that “the message is that Turkey makes its own rules and will carve out its own space according to its own preferences no matter what international norms or laws might say — just like the great powers do.”

Since the main field of activity of the Gülen movement was its schools, Turkey is promoting the schools of the *Maarif* Foundation to take over the Gülen schools abroad.<sup>2</sup> Currently

<sup>2</sup> In 2018 Turkey’s supreme court ratified a decision to transfer all Gülen-linked schools in Turkey to *Maarif*.

*“...unlike in many Central Asian and African states, most Balkan governments have resisted Erdoğan’s pressure.”*

these number 340. However, the lion’s share of these schools are in Pakistan (77) and Afghanistan (46), followed by Mali with 21. In the Balkans there are [6 schools in Albania](#), [4 in Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), [8 in Kosovo](#), [5 in North Macedonia](#), [3 in Hungary](#), and [7 in Romania](#). Recently, [the budget of the Maarif Foundation was significantly increased](#) by presidential decree. Its annual budget is now 1.23 billion lira, or about 140 million euros. This money will come from the general budget of the Education Ministry.

As in other parts of the world, Turkish soap operas became popular throughout the Balkans.<sup>3</sup> Vračić counted that in BiH there were “2,235 minutes of programming on only one TV channel a week (which is exactly a day and a half every week of soap operas)” (Vračić 2016: 14). For Vračić the soap operas helped to improve the image of Turkey and the Turks, showing modern, hard-working, urban people.

*“Since the main field of activity of the Gülen movement was its schools, Turkey is promoting the schools of the Maarif Foundation to take over the Gülen schools abroad.”*

### Economy = Pragmatism

Even if the Western Balkan states are not particularly interesting from an economic perspective, with small populations and a low purchasing power, they have become a playing field for regional and global economic power houses. For some, the proximity to the EU is attractive, for others it is a transit for their raw materials or goods. Among these third players, Turkey has the clear “advantage of geographical proximity, which allows for a reduction in transportation costs, as well as an existing similarity in consumption habits” (Hake/Radzyner 2019: 6).

*“Contrary to the soft power efforts by Turkey, the economic relations follow “no clear cultural logic but are instead highly pragmatic”.”*

Contrary to the soft power efforts by Turkey, the economic relations follow “no clear cultural logic but are instead highly pragmatic” (Rašidagić/Hesova 2020: 114). Turkey has signed [free trade agreements with all Western Balkan countries](#). Economic pragmatism means that the main economic partners are not the Muslim majority states, but the EU members Romania, Greece and Bulgaria, which account for more than 80 percent of Turkish investment in the Balkans. This certainly also relates to the fact that these countries are the most developed economies and the biggest markets. Among the non-EU states, there are three main Turkish success stories in economic terms: Albania, Kosovo and Serbia, the latter being its largest trading partner in the Western Balkans since 2019. But this also means that in the other countries, Turkey is not (yet) a major trading partner. In BiH, which is the main recipient of “cultural investment” through TIKA, Turkey in 2020 only ranked [sixth among trading partners](#).

*“Economic pragmatism means that the main economic partners are not the Muslim majority states.”*

### Bilateral trade volume increased, but from a very low starting point

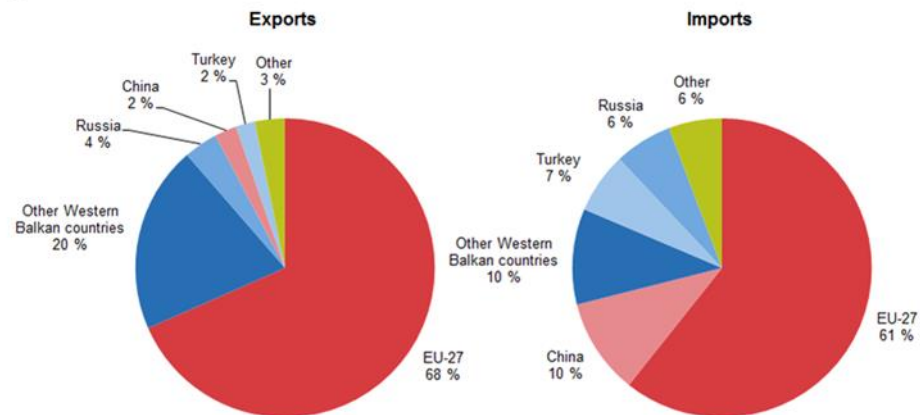
Overall trade has developed quickly, but from a very low starting point when the AKP took office. In 2002, trade between the Western Balkans and Turkey stood at about 435 million dollars; by 2016 this rose to 3 billion dollars and [in the first nine months of 2019, this jumped to almost 10 billion USD](#). [According to numbers of the Exporters Assembly \(TIM\)](#), in the first 10 months of 2020, 10.2 billion dollars in exports were realized to Albania, BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Greece. In 2019 this number was slightly more than 11 billion. The decline of 7.5 percent, according to TIM, was due to the pandemic. However, to two countries, Serbia and Kosovo, the exports even

<sup>3</sup> Long article about the businessman behind the export of Turkish soap operas: Benny Ziffer, The Jewish Businessman Wielding Turkey’s Soft Power on the World’s TV Screens, 31 March 2021, Haaretz, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium.MAGAZINE-the-jewish-businessman-wielding-turkey-s-soft-power-on-the-world-s-tv-screens-1.9670248>

increased during the pandemic, to Serbia by more than 5 percent to almost 800 million USD.

*“Overall trade has developed quickly, but from a very low starting point when the AKP took office.”*

**Main trade in goods partners of the Western Balkans, 2019**  
(%)



Source: Eurostat (online data code: Comext data code: DS-056697)

eurostat 

*“The difference with the non-EU economic competitors is that the EU attaches to it a strong conditionality.”*

In October 2020 the European Commission presented “[An Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans](#)”, offering “to spur a long term recovery – backed by a green and digital transition.” The Commission proposed mobilising up to 9 billion Euros of IPA III funding for the period 2021-2027 to support economic convergence with the EU. The difference with the non-EU economic competitors is that the EU attaches to it a strong conditionality, e.g. requiring a “strong commitment from the Western Balkans to implementing fundamental reforms” (page 2). Or, “boosting investment and economic growth will therefore only be possible if the Western Balkans firmly commit to and implement fundamental reforms in line with European values (page 4). That is, in a nutshell, the big difference with Turkey, China and Russia. If the Balkan countries esteem that what they could get from the EU is not worth the effort, then the weight of the authoritarian players will increase. Even then, their economic share will be small compared to the EU-27, as seen in the table, but these heightened economic relations could lead also to more political cooperation and long-term dependencies. Something the EU should try to avoid.

*“If the Balkan countries esteem that what they could get from the EU is not worth the effort, then the weight of the authoritarian players will increase.”*

### Military cooperation to create dependency: from soft to hard(er) power

The soft power activities and increased economic cooperation have not led to the desired results. This is another parallel to the Middle East, where in the early 2000s Turkey invested a lot in soft power, but saw its limits during the Arab Spring. Even with excellent personal relations with the political leadership, with increased economic relations, with cultural centres and restorations, language courses and half the population watching Turkish series, the leverage on political decisions remains very limited. For this reason, very recently, military and defense cooperation have gained prominence, as they would, in the mid- and long-term, create economic dependencies, through which more political pressure could be built.



*“The soft power activities and increased economic cooperation have not led to the desired results.”*

*“For military experts, Turkey has two advantages. It is not reluctant to share its technology and its products, e.g. drones are relatively cheap.”*

*“The pandemic hit the Balkans hard. The local health systems were ill-prepared to confront such a crisis, with a lack of specialized medical workers and equipment.”*

*“Serbia’s President Vucic said: “European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy-tale on paper.”*

In an article in late 2020, BIRN wrote that in 2019, [“Turkey recorded a 34.6 per cent increase in military exports to \\$2.74 billion. The country has set itself a target of \\$10 billion by 2023.”](#) For military experts, Turkey has two advantages. It is not reluctant to share its technology and its products, e.g. drones are relatively cheap and therefore more affordable for the less wealthy Balkan countries. These arms sales would complete the training of soldiers from Balkan countries, which has been ongoing since the 1990s and is especially developed with Albania and BiH. “Turkey has new ambitions in the Balkans for improving its defence cooperation ... Ankara wants to sell new weapons and sign several agreements with the countries in the region to create a dependency on its products.”

### The pandemic constituted a solidarity test, which the EU lost (so far)

The pandemic hit the Balkans hard. The local health systems were ill-prepared to confront such a crisis, with a lack of specialized medical workers and equipment. Since domestically it was impossible to produce the needed medical equipment, Balkan countries looked for help abroad, [“Yet at this crucial juncture, the EU limited its exports of medical equipment outside of the bloc.”](#) This was certainly due to the fact that this equipment was also scarce in the EU, but it left a sour taste with local political leaders, as [Serbia’s President Vucic said on 15 March 2020](#), when declaring a state of emergency: “European solidarity does not exist. That was a fairy-tale on paper. I have sent a special letter to the only ones who can help, and that is China.” And it was not only China which was ready to jump; in the early phase of the pandemic Russian, Hungarian, UAE and Turkish planes also arrived at airports throughout the Balkans, often welcomed with special ceremonies and well-covered in the local press. For Büyük [“aid-sending countries aim to gain increased public support by playing to a nationalist and imperial discourse that rests on the argument that they were powerful enough to help where the EU wasn’t.”](#) Later the EU also sent aid, but this help was much less appreciated and less celebrated than the other donations.

In the first wave of the pandemic, Turkey was quick to help out. Already [on 11 March 2020, the first medical aid was sent to Bulgaria](#). In April and May [medical supplies were sent to Albania, Serbia, BiH, Montenegro, Kosovo and North Macedonia](#).

With vaccination starting in late 2020 things changed, because the number of countries that can produce and send vaccines is much more limited than in relation to medical equipment. Whereas the EU’s position was interpreted as “vaccine nationalism”, China and Russia practiced “vaccine diplomacy.” Serbia, in particular, was willing to cooperate with anyone able to deliver vaccines, which resulted in vaccines from the EU, China and Russia. Russian and Chinese companies have also been more willing than their Western counterparts to strike licensing deals to partly or fully produce Covid-19 vaccines themselves. This, then, is not only short term aid: [“If you're becoming a manufacturer of a Chinese or Russian vaccine, that's a long term partnership.”](#) In February 2021, Serbia was given preliminary approval to start [manufacturing the Sputnik V vaccine as well, and has said production will begin in mid-May](#).

According to Dimitar Bechev, [“for China, it’s a golden opportunity to embarrass the EU and the West more broadly.”](#) For the Balkans, China is also the best option to tease the EU, as Vuksanovic from the Belgrade Center for Security Policy explained: [“It is also a way to provoke and leverage the EU to do more. The China factor is an important way to extract as much as you can from Beijing, but also to potentially motivate the Europeans to do more.”](#)

This has not happened so far. For Kristof Bender, Balkan expert at the European Stability Initiative, the EU's standing in the Balkans has suffered a further blow:

*“Whereas the EU's position was interpreted as ‘vaccine nationalism’, China and Russia practiced ‘vaccine diplomacy’.”*

“Including the Western Balkans in the EU vaccine rollout would have been a strong signal that the EU cares. The EU's own troubles in purchasing vaccines made this impossible. In the meantime, Serbia has purchased vaccines from Russia and China, and now boasts the highest vaccination rate in continental Europe. While every vaccination is good and helps saving lives, the fact that the EU could provide practically no help so far is a clear defeat for the EU. Its credibility and leverage in the region, already low due to the stalled EU accession process, has taken a further serious blow.”<sup>4</sup>

However, Turkey is not the main profiteer, as Alida Vračić argues:

*“According to Dimitar Bechev: “for China, it's a golden opportunity to embarrass the EU and the West more broadly.”*

“The pandemic has certainly put Turkey in the backseat in comparison with Russia and China, which offered free vaccination that has been organized in Belgrade. Turkey has been much less present.”<sup>5</sup>

On 20 April, the EU announced that the six non-EU Balkans countries will receive 651,000 vaccine doses between May and August. Austria's foreign minister Schallenberg, who will coordinate the EU vaccines, commented that [“As the European Union, we are sending out a clear signal that we are not just navel-gazing, that we are looking beyond the horizon, and that it is quite clear to us that we ourselves will only be safe when our closest neighbors are safe as well.”](#) If that's not too late and too little to improve the tattered image.

### Turkish vaccines on the way, but probably too late for the Balkans

*“Turkey could use these national vaccines for African and/or Asian countries which have not yet started their vaccination programs.”*

Turkey is in the backseat as it cannot offer its own vaccine diplomacy because it hasn't yet developed its own vaccine and started the process late. In mid-March 2021 there were 7 Turkish vaccination programs (and 10 drug programs). [The most advanced one, led by Kayseri's Erciyes University](#), started phase 1 in November 2020 and [phase 2 in February 2021, which ended on 9 April](#). At the end of April, the third phase began. But this also means that, at the earliest, the vaccine might reach the market in fall 2021, since [the fastest production so far lasted 11 months](#). By then, there could be more than 50 vaccines on the market (currently 4), since [in March 2021, there were 21 in phase 3 and 28 in phase 2](#). Without giving details on the how, a team at the [TÜBİTAK Marmara Research Centre states that it will have a vaccine on the market by June](#), even if the first phase was only planned to begin in March. Therefore this might be too late to have a big impact in the Western Balkans, with the EU also stepping in at a certain point when there will be an abundance of vaccines. However, Turkey could use these national vaccines for African and/or Asian countries which have not yet started their vaccination programs.

<sup>4</sup> E-mail answer to the author on 7 April 2021.

<sup>5</sup> E-mail answer to the author on 11 April 2021.

*“The lesson Turkey learnt from twenty years of intensive engagement is that soft power has its limits.”*

*“The future orientation of the non-EU Balkan countries will depend on third players, which disappointed the accession countries by placing them in an undefined waiting room.”*

## Conclusion

Over the past two decades Turkey's influence in the Balkans has increased on all fronts, from politics to the economy, culture to military cooperation. However, more influence doesn't mean it is a dominant player. With few exceptions, Turkey's economic standing, its influence on decision makers and cultural attractiveness, remain small. The pandemic has not helped Turkey to improve its standing. While the EU was late to help both with medical equipment and vaccines, the real profiteers were China and Russia, which managed to send their vaccines to the Balkans, while Turkey was too late in the production of its own vaccines. The lesson Turkey learnt from twenty years of intensive engagement is that soft power has its limits. Therefore, it is to be expected that policies creating mid- and long-term dependencies will continue, such as the defense cooperation already initiated.

The future orientation of the non-EU Balkan countries will depend on third players like China, Russia and Turkey, but much more on the EU, which disappointed the accession countries by placing them in an undefined waiting room. A credible offer by the EU would not only realign the Balkans closer to the EU and its standards, but also serve Turkey's long-term goal of having more allies, or at least non-hostile countries, within the EU.

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