CHAPTER 2:
THE AMBIVALENT NATURE OF THE RELATIONS BETWEEN BULGARIA AND TURKEY IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Ahmet Erdi Öztürk

Introduction
Since the beginning of the new millennium, Turkey’s Presidency of Religious Affairs (the Diyanet) has been sending imams and appointing religious attachés (in Sofia and Burgas) to Bulgaria for two main reasons. The first is that since the very late 1990s the Diyanet has been financially supporting the Muslim community in the Republic of Bulgaria (Grand Mufti’s Office or the Bulgarian Chief Muftiate), the Muslim Denomination/Community and more than 1,000 mosques all over the country, and these imams and attachés have been coordinating these supportive activities. Secondly, according to Bulgaria’s 2011 population census, Muslims account for over 7 percent of the total population and most self-identify as ethnically Turkish or Pomak. Turkey has historically demonstrated a vested interest in promoting Turkish and Islamic identity and has traditionally overseen these Muslim minorities. Moreover, the appointed religious leaders also function as representatives of Turkey—as much as the Turkish diplomats (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018: 634-636). And while these imams and attachés have long been active in various regions and cities of Bulgaria, since roughly the beginning of 2016 their activities have begun to alarm the Bulgarian authorities who claim that such activities are inappropriate (i.e., to their religious and diplomatic status). As a result of these claims, Ugur Emiroğlu, the Diyanet attaché in Burgas, was deported in 2017, accused of


In 1924, the Diyanet was established as part of the state structure; its mandate is to implement all provisions that relate to the Islamic faith and worship in modern Turkey. It has undergone various changes according to political forces, beginning in the late 1940s when the Diyanet gradually took control over the Quran courses and endowments favored by political actors. After the re-establishment of the democratic order annihilated by the 1960 coup, the Diyanet gained prominence because the state employed it in its struggle against communism. Since the 1970s, the Diyanet has played an important role both in Turkey and abroad.
etto the domestic politics of Bulgaria.\textsuperscript{2} Indeed, this was a telling sign of the loss of confidence between two neighbouring countries.

Even though \textit{Diyanet} representatives have engaged in some questionable activities—which has for some time been a subject of dispute between the two countries—Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov have been “thick as thieves” since 2009. They have met frequently and discussed a number of important issues, including: how the two neighboring countries can deepen bilateral cooperation in the fields of economy, energy and tourism; and how they can work together on the problems of terrorism and the new mass immigration.\textsuperscript{3} Prime Minister Borissov supported the Turkish government against the bloody coup attempt in Turkey of 15 July 2016. This was an army-led coup against Erdoğan and his party, the AKP (Justice and Development Party, \textit{Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi}), which was successfully squelched, although not before 256 people died and 2,797 were wounded. Erdoğan, backed by other major political actors and media outlets, accused the Gülen Movement\textsuperscript{4} of being behind the coup attempt, and the following morning the Bulgarian government was one of the first countries to publicly condemn the uprising. Moreover, in August 2016 the Bulgarian government discretely extradited to Turkey Abdullah Büyük, a Gülenist Turkish businessman who had sought political asylum in Bulgaria. And while most Bulgarian NGOs and many political groups were outraged at this decision, Borissov underlined his support to Erdoğan in many ways.\textsuperscript{5}

Besides these Bulgaria-Turkey centric issues, Turkey’s Balkan policy under the AKP period is itself a subject of some dispute. On the one hand, some argue that Turkey’s new pro-active foreign policy towards the Balkans satisfies the cultural, financial and religious needs of the region’s people. Furthermore, these studies emphasize Erdoğan’s protective leadership vis-à-


\textsuperscript{4} The Gülen Movement, which was founded by Fethullah Gülen, has defined itself as an advocate of interfaith dialogue through civil society activities at a global level since the second half of 1990s. However, it is popularly believed to have a political face dedicated to expansion of its political and bureaucratic power and through obtaining and maintaining important positions within the state. Although in 1980 the Movement started to place its members in public institutions, their presence reached its peak during the Justice and Development Party (AKP) period when the Movement became the unofficial coalition partner of AKP governments. Furthermore, the Movement has expanded its activities abroad and worked in line with the AKP. Yet, through the political crises, such as the 17-25 December 2013 corruption scandal and the 15 July 2016 coup attempt, this unofficial coalition was dispersed. As a result, the government labeled the Gülen Movement as Fethullah Gülen Terror Organization (FETÖ). Therefore, in the aftermath of the coup attempt, the AKP government shut down all the civilian institutions of the Movement and tried to expand this abroad via its transnational institutions. Since then, southeast Europe has been a core battlefield between the two and this battle has been negatively affecting Turkey’s image in the region. Therefore, the study gives a special attention to the subject of the Gülen Movement. For details see: Watmough and Öztürk, 2018a.

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vis the Turks and Muslims of the Balkans (Aras 2009; Kalın 2011). On the other hand, there are those who argue that Turkey’s rapid illiberal turn (Baser and Öztürk 2017), and its pushing the boundaries via aggressive use of soft power tools and religion (Demirtas 2017) have been negatively affecting Turkey’s relationships with the Balkan countries and, indeed, with Bulgaria. Beyond these polarised ideas, some of the realpolitik claims are actually very controversial. For instance, one such complaint has been voiced by the former national security adviser to the US president Donald Trump, Herbert Raymond McMaster, who declared that ‘we’re seeing great involvement by Turkey [...] everywhere from western Africa to Southeast Asia [...] particularly the Balkans is an area of grave concern now.’6 Despite McMaster’s very controversial remarks, Turkey also has revealed its diplomatic involvement via religious tools. For instance, in early 2018, Erdoğan, together with Muslim and Orthodox religious leaders of Turkey and Bulgaria, reopened the centuries-old Bulgarian Orthodox Iron Church (Demir Kilise), also known as St. Stephen’s, in the historic Balat neighbourhood of Istanbul after a seven-year restoration project, and during the opening ceremony he noted his belief that different religions and cultures can peacefully coexist.7

This divergence of ideas (and even facts) regarding the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria indicates that these are both complicated and multi-dimensional; there are perforce many intrinsic variables based on Turkey’s ever-transforming domestic and foreign policies and the Bulgarian authorities’ subsequent reactions. In this regard, I prefer to define the relations between Turkey and Bulgaria as an ambivalent one with an ambiguous nature. This ambiguity is based on several dependent variables such as Turkey’s kin policy, how this policy is perceived by Bulgaria, and a number of other mutual realpolitik dynamics. Indeed, none of these variables are independent of the two countries’ historical relationship and Turkey’s Balkan policy.

Therefore, to examine the ambiguous nature of the relations, this article8 will first scrutinise Turkey’s presence and role in the Balkans (Bechev 2012) and Bulgaria from the beginning of the AKP period. Secondly, it will briefly clarify the historical and ideological forces behind the AKP’s Balkan and Bulgaria policies. Finally, it will elucidate the three key issues of the last two decades: a) increasing the Turkish investment as a service to the umma in Bulgaria; b) exportation of the domestic conflict; c) involving the Bulgarian political arena for the purpose of enlarging Turkey’s sphere of influence.

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8 This article is largely based on author’s fieldwork dating to 2017 and 2018 in Bulgaria. The fieldwork comprised 30 interviews with political actors, diplomats, scholars and journalists, as well as religious community leaders/representatives, and imams; the interviews were targeted to the general arguments of this study. This fieldwork, my observations and interviews, which included Muslim and non-Muslim, Turkish and non-Turkish interviewees, provide a rich body of information on the complex relations between Turkey and Bulgaria.
The Balkans and Bulgaria in the heart of Turkey

Halil İnalcık, a prominent historian of the Ottoman era, argues that what made the Ottoman state into an Empire was its expansion into the Balkans, as it fought for its ethnic and religious causes (İnalcık 2013: 3). İlber Ortaylı, another historian of the same era and a student of İnalcık, claims that the Ottomans were so heavily influenced by the Balkans that, in essence, the Ottoman state was a Balkan state (Ortaylı 2008). While both perspectives can be regarded as biased in favour of the Empire (Akgonul and Ozturk 2018), the importance of the Balkans and particularly Bulgaria, in both the rise (Wittek 2013) and the fall (Quataert 2005: 83-84) of the Ottomans cannot be ignored. Thus, the region played a central role in the Ottoman era and in the foundation of the Turkish Republic as well. In other words, both the rise of the colonialist and expansionist Ottomans (Todorova 1994: 454-455) and their fall through loss of territories (Yavuz and Blumi 2013) may be seen through the lens of the Balkans – and so, accordingly, can the foundation of the Republic, since most of its founding elite were from the former Ottoman territories. The perspective of the remaining Muslim population in the region on the Ottomans and on Turkey (Akgönül, 2008) further connects Turkey and the region and complicates relations between the two.

The loss of the Balkans, and further disconnection with the region via the establishment of a separate nation state, created trauma for the founding elites of Turkey and the socio-political groups that were ethnically and culturally affiliated with the region. This trauma then facilitated the formation of longing for the region among these people. Against this backdrop, Turkey’s presence in the region cannot be taken as a recent rise of activism; and as Bechev (2012) argues, Turkey has always been a presence in the region to varying degrees and according to the changes in its domestic political balance and the choices in its overall foreign policy. For instance, immediately subsequent to Bulgaria’s establishment as a state, Turkey tried to develop good relations with the country, while it also prioritized its border security against a possible coalition between Greece-Bulgaria and Italy. Furthermore, in the early Republican period, joining the Western world was a priority (Müftüler-Bac 1996: 53); thus, a pragmatic commitment to a stable international order, strict adherence to the law, and an a la Turca secularism (in Turkish: laiklik) (Öztürk 2016) were determining factors of the country’s foreign policy (Yavuz 1997: 23).

In these years, the first problem that beset Bulgaria and Turkey was the forced population exchange. The establishment of a Communist regime in Bulgaria in 1944 created a new situation for the Turks and other Muslims in the country. The new regime in Bulgaria began to implement policies aimed at transforming the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual and multi-religious structure. And although the Ankara governments declared their concerns in diplomatic ways, the Bulgarian government did nothing to improve the rights and living conditions of Turks and Muslims. These minority groups started to hold mass protests against the Bulgarian government. The Bulgarian government could not control the street protests and demanded that the Turkish government accept a total of 250,000 ethnic Turks. Because of its economic and structural problems Turkey only welcomed around 150,000 Bulgarian Turks who had
been forced to migrate. Despite the emergence of problems with Bulgaria arising from this forced population exchange in the 1940s (Kirişçi 1995: 65), from the 1950s to the mid-1980s Turkey’s approach remained grounded in security and balance of power.

Turgut Özal (1983–1989 Prime Minister, 1989–1993 President), who came to power following the military coup of 1980, implemented many political changes and sought to establish a new approach based on the concept of neo-Ottomanism, referring to Turkey’s Ottoman–Islamic–Turkic past and its aspiration to regional domination (Yavuz 1998: 23). Indeed, this approach manifested itself in the Balkans especially in the aftermath of the Cold War, and Turkey started systematically viewing the region as an area of interest and involvement. At the tail end of the Özal period, in the 1990s, three Balkan countries—Bulgaria, Macedonia and Albania—invited Turkey and the Diyanet into their states, outside official diplomatic lines. It was the Diyanet that was key, according to some senior staff in Bulgarian Grand Mufti Office, since during the late 1980s and early 1990s Özal himself had directly and indirectly supported Muslims and Turks against the repressive Bulgarian regime. Although there were some legal protections in place for religious and national identities during the Communist period (1946-1990), Bulgarian Muslims suffered due to the prohibition of mother-tongue education, Turkish names and Islamic practices. The harsh policies of the Bulgarian Communist regime coerced and punished the Turkish and Pomak Muslims of Bulgaria, who reiterated with small-scale rebellions against the government. Thereupon, in late 1989, Thodor Zhivkov, president of Bulgaria, called on the Turkish government to open its doors to Bulgarian Muslims. Turkey complied with the request and committed to taking 250,000 Bulgarian Turks from Edirne and Kıklareli. However, before too long, Özal put an end to this mass migration—as Ivanov argues—because Zhivkov’s officials replaced Turkish Bulgarians with thousands of gypsies, some of whom were criminals. But Özal did not stop there. He encouraged the Gülenists to change the situation, not only in Bulgaria, but also throughout rest of the Balkans.

It is important here to explain the Gülen Movement’s position in the 1980s and 1990s, as this knowledge is essential to understand the current situation. Despite Turkey’s catastrophic domestic politics in these two decades, the Gülen Movement was not negatively influenced by the instability in Turkey, and the Movement began to play an active role with the support of the Özal administration. In this regard, with the support of Özal, the Gülen Movement’s Bulgarian Association signed an official sponsorship agreement with the Grand Mufti’s Office and started to support the institution with money and human resources. They also tried to supply teachers for the Momchilgrad, Shumen and Ruse Imam Hatip high schools. Lastly, in the late 1990s they established the Bulgar-Turk Demokrasi Vakfı (Bulgarian-Turkish Democracy Foundation). At this point one might argue that the military intervention of 28 February 1997 aimed to curb the influence of the Movement in the region. It had a limited effect, however, and subsequent AKP governments (in the 2000s) made use of the ground that had been prepared by the Gülen Movement in the region (Öztürk and Sözeri 2018; Öztürk and Gözaydın 2018).
The New Turkey and Its New Foreign Policy

The AKP period has witnessed an unprecedented wave of change in Turkey. Coming to power in 2002 as a single-party government against the pressures of the Turkish Armed Forces and bureaucratic tutelage, the AKP has changed both itself and the country at critical junctures. Studies examining the AKP, however, diverge radically in their assessments of the party. While some argue that under AKP rule, at least initially, Turkey was exemplary in reconciling Islam with democracy (Dagi 2008), other studies, specifically after 2011, observed repressive tendencies (Taş 2015). Therefore, framing Turkey's influence in the Balkans and particularly Bulgaria requires a comprehensive and holistic study, one that can assess the changes in the country's domestic and foreign policies using an integrated approach, and one that is able to evaluate the AKP in light of both the ruptures and continuity that the party experienced in different periods.

First, it must be acknowledged that the AKP's ascent is the cumulative result of the march to power of Islamic and conservative groups since the Young Ottomans of the late Ottoman era (Öztürk 2019). In order to achieve power with an effective leadership, support of the lower-middle class and a pro-European Union discourse, the AKP followed non-confrontational policies to avoid problems with the Kemalist-secularist guardianship mechanism, i.e., the well-established bureaucratic tutelage of Turkey (Akkoyunlu 2014). Fighting the indirect interventions of the military (i.e., the e-memorandum of 2007) and the secularist mass protests (the Republican protests), the AKP formed an unofficial coalition with various anti-tutelage groups. One of their largest unofficial but visible coalition partners was the Gülen Movement, and together they began to implement a more pro-active foreign policy in southeast Europe and the rest of the world. This coalition then shifted its attention to domestic politics, and with the support of the liberal intelligentsia began publicly fighting the hostile bureaucratic structures with the Ergenekon and Sledgehammer cases. However, the AKP–Gülen coalition became more assertive over time, applying more nationalist policies vis-à-vis the Kurdish issue.

When Ahmet Davutoğlu, an ambitious yet less-than-realistic scholar of international politics, was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey followed bolder and more confident policies—first in the Balkans and then in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and the West. At this point, it is important to note that even though the Gülen Movement and the AKP emerged from different traditions and had different worldviews and organisational and political styles as well as completely different historical roots and theological traditions, their agendas coalesced along common interests in terms of foreign policy. The Balkan region represents an important area for both the AKP and the Gülen Movement because of its significant Muslim and Turkish-speaking demographics and its potential for multilateral investment in areas such as trade and education. Indeed, one focal point of this unofficial coalition was Bulgaria because of its Ottoman background and Turkish-speaking Muslim minority. In this regard, both in Bulgaria and in the rest of the Balkans the organisational capacity of the Gülen Movement acted in tandem with the transnational apparatuses of the AKP government in a manifestation of soft power. Moreover, the political power and influence
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of the AKP helped the Gülen Movement open some key doors in host countries’ corridors of bureaucracy (Wathmough and Ozturk 2018b). Indeed, to define all the policy implementations of that period within the category of soft power would misrepresent what soft power entails, since most of the policies were geared to the self-interest of the Gülen Movement and the AKP, rather than to create a Turkish soft power per se.

To understand the foreign policy mentality of the AKP, it is important now to explain Davutoğlu’s ideas. In his 2001 book, *Stratejik Derinlik* (Strategic Depth), he clarifies his central claims about the Balkan region: he believes that Turkey—because of its Ottoman past and its shared cultural identity and religion with both old Ottoman territories and the Islamic world—should utilise its geostrategic location to enhance its standing in the world. In this way, Turkey has the potential to be a pivotal state in global affairs. This represents a rebuttal of the secular and Western-oriented characteristics of classic Turkish foreign policy. Davutoğlu also offers an alternative worldview and definition of the Turkish state identity by instrumentalising religion. He focuses on the ontological difference between Islam and all other civilisations, particularly the West, and asserts that the differences between Western and Muslim paradigms create an obstacle for the study of contemporary Islam as a subject of the social sciences, especially international politics. Davutoğlu believes that governments in the Islamic world cannot derive their legitimacy from the same sources as Western states (such as elections and representative institutions), but instead must have a religious basis. He also notes that Turkey is a key part of Islamic civilisation and can resume its rightful place on the world stage only if it embraces leadership of the Islamic world, as it did when the Caliphate was based in Istanbul. He repeatedly drives forward the importance of nationalist ideas supported by glorification of the Ottoman period (Davutoğlu 2001).

The Balkan countries appear to be a suitable context in which to implement these foreign policy aims, since they are located within Turkey’s geographical, cultural and economic realm of influence (Öztürk 2018). Furthermore, he suggests (Davutoğlu 2008) that the Balkans is entering a new era, undergoing a period of restoration, cooperation and construction: restoration in the sense of restoring shared cultural, economic and political ties; cooperation in developing a new spirit of joint action; and construction as a way to both overcome the legacy of past decades and respond to the challenges of the new decades to come. At this point, suffice it to say that Davutoğlu’s ideas were welcomed primarily by the Muslims of the region; they were not accepted unilaterally.

Yet, it is hard to claim that Davutoğlu’s ideas are not widely accepted throughout the entire region. In my fieldwork, I realised that while most local experts and the elite were critical of Davutoğlu and his ethno-religious desires for the Balkans, the Turkish officials did not discuss these. On the contrary, most Turkish diplomats in Bulgaria noted that Davutoğlu’s ideas were in fact accepted by most “rational” Bulgarian scholars and political elites, and the Turkish Embassy in Sofia took the initiative of publishing a translation of the book—an interesting as well as a controversial decision. However, it is also important to note that it is almost impossible to find the book in any Bulgarian bookshop, since Bulgarians find Davutoğlu’s ideas hegemonic, Islamist and colonialist.
Apart from the “Davutoğlu effect,” which is also uncertain, Turkey’s foreign policy in the Balkans has also become rather ambiguous due to its domestic political transformations. At this point, we might suggest that Turkish-Balkan and Turkish-Bulgarian relations can be very easily understood through a constructivist perspective, i.e., the viewpoint that domestic political changes directly affect a country’s foreign policy (Klotz and Lynch 2007). Yet, in fact, Turkey has historically departed from this norm—while some domestic changes have been reflected in Turkey’s foreign policy, this has not always been the case (Bozdağlıoğlu 2008). We might argue that, after roughly 2013, the open and outward-reaching policy-line started to deteriorate; this was due to a sluggish Turkish economy, rising authoritarianism in line with global developments, and the Arab uprisings that frightened the AKP leadership and explains the party’s harsh reaction to the Gezi protests in the summer of 2013. This process of de-democratisation was manifested through increasing authoritarianism in domestic politics and significant changes in foreign policy, especially in relation to the EU. While this process had a number of critical junctures, it may be fair to claim that the “war” between the Gülen Movement and the AKP has affected it the most. After 2013, the unofficial coalition between the AKP and Gülenists that had been based on power-sharing turned into an all-out war, which altered AKP domestic and foreign policy. The crises that the AKP government faced, such as the 17–25 December corruption investigations and finally the July 15 coup attempt, led Erdoğan to centralise power in his person. The regime change that came in 2017 and the necessity of obtaining more than 50% of the votes made Erdoğan lean towards nationalism and ally with the MHP (Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi, Nationalist Action Party). This new coalition has become the core ideological backbone of Turkey: ethno-nationalist, repressive and Sunni Islamist. The emergence of what Erdoğan labels the New Turkey has changed Turkey’s policies and its image in Bulgaria.

Three Outcomes of the AKP Rule in Bulgaria
As I noted at the beginning of this article, Turkey’s transformation under AKP rule has produced three different consequences: a) increasing Turkish investment as a service to the umma in Bulgaria; b) exportation of the domestic conflict; c) involving the Bulgarian political arena for the purpose of enlarging Turkey’s sphere of influence.
Bulgaria’s Grand Mufti, Mustafa Hadji, in the course of my 2017 interview with him, noted that Turkey’s material and non-material support has been gradually increasing since the very beginning of 2006. Even though it is not quite enough, Turkey has been sending around two million Bulgarian levs every year in compliance with an official agreement with the Grand Mufti Office in Sofia. According to Hadji, they can also ask for additional material support from the Diyanet and the Turkish Diyanet Foundation. For example, during Eid periods, Turkey sends sacrificial lambs to Bulgarian Muslims. Even though at first glance this financial support would not seem a huge burden on Turkey’s Treasury, Turkey is a country where economic crises are fundamental determinants of the political situation, and thus even that kind of support could affect the country negatively. After a decade of economic failures and coalition governments, the AKP was perceived as a new hope with its promises of change (Öniş 2009: 409-432). The party initiated its economic policies on the basis of the established economic plan devised by the previous government and the IMF, which had two main aims: increasing the GDP and establishing a monetary policy with a target of price stability. The AKP governments, particularly between 2002 and 2008, addressed a number of the country’s chronic economic problems and created new and alternative sources for the Treasury.

Under a strict program, the Turkish economy overcame to a degree some entrenched difficulties, but the global economic turbulence of 2008 affected the Turkish economy negatively. The significant and consecutive political upheavals— the Gezi Protests, the 17–25 December Corruption Investigation Process, the struggle between the Gülen Movement and the AKP, the failed coup attempt and the long-lasting state of emergency— affected the economy negatively. In other words, the Turkish economy has not really improved since 2009, when the GDP per capita had reached around $10,500. Even though, according to 2017 economic indicators, Turkey’s GDP has grown more than 5 percent, the Turkish lira has been steadily plummeting since 2018 (Yeldan and Ünüvar 2016: 12) Therefore, under conditions of a backsliding of democracy and political tensions, the economy remains an issue of major debate in Turkish politics. Beyond that, the exchange rate has depreciated steadily since mid-2017. Intensified market pressures in August 2018 led to a further depreciation of around 30%, followed by a partial recovery thereafter.

Despite this economic background, and apart from the Diyanet under the AKP rule, Turkey has been investing a lot, particularly to Muslims of the Balkans, via transnational state apparatuses such as the TİKA⁹ and Yunus Emre Institutes,¹⁰ but the situation in Bulgaria is quite

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⁹ TİKA was established in 1992, as a statutory technical aid organization under the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Its remit was to provide assistance to the Turkic (Turkish speaking) Republics of Central Asia as they transitioned after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Especially since 2002, TİKA has increased its activity and visibility through projects of external development assistance that have reflected Turkey’s increasing commitment to an expansive foreign-policy orientation under the AKP.

¹⁰ The Yunus Emre Institute is a public body established in 2007 to encourage friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of Turkey and the wider world by promoting the Turkish language, history, and culture abroad. In this sense it is akin to the UK’s British Council and Germany’s worldwide network of Goethe Institutes. It provides a range of cultural relations programs and services, including the promotion of cultural exchange and partnership and the internationalization of education in Turkish language, culture, history, and art.
different. Even though, after the African countries, the Balkan Peninsula is the second most important target region for TİKA, and the Yunus Emre Institute is quite active in the region, Turkey has not succeeded in opening branch offices of TİKA and Yunus Emre in Bulgaria. However, TİKA has been supporting some renovation works in Bulgaria, e.g., it undertook the renovation of Banyabaşı Mosque (Баня баши джамия) between 2013 and 2014. TİKA’s limited scope of activities and the absence of a branch office in Bulgaria, where there are hundreds of Ottoman monuments, was one of the questions put to Süleyman Gökçe, the Turkish ambassador to Sofia. In response, in 2017, he explained that even though Turkey has been insisting on opening a TİKA office in Sofia, the Bulgarian administration thinks that because Bulgaria is an EU country, EU funds would be sufficient to support a number of renovation projects. Ambassador Gökçe also noted that the Bulgarian state is afraid that Bulgarians will react negatively to Turkish institutions, since most Bulgarian citizens think that Turkey’s institutions are political and detrimental to their interests.

In Bulgaria, apart from the Diyanet’s undersecretary, no Turkish state apparatus has an official presence, although upon demand and/or request by local actors, the Turkish government and municipalities might become involved in aid activities. In this way Turkey can be active in some areas even though the Bulgarian authorities do not allow any sort of official Turkish presence its state apparatuses. A senior official who worked at the Foreign Ministry of Bulgaria was asked about this situation in the first quarter of 2017:

We [the Bulgarian state] have two answers: one of them is very official while the other is less so, but both of them are correct. First of all, we do not need Turkey’s support directly, because we are a member of the European Union and get support from them if we need. Secondly, since 2007 or 2008 we realised that these Turkish institutions are highly political and they categorise people according to their religion and ethnicity. We do not want any more division in Bulgaria… but let me tell you that Davutoğlu wanted to open TİKA and Yunus Emre offices here [in Sofia] but we did not give an affirmative response to him, since we have some problems with Turkey’s agents here and these institutions might open new cases for us.

From this it may be inferred that the Bulgarian state does not perceive the activities of TİKA and Turkey’s other soft power instruments as structures that respect the boundaries of their official job descriptions. We might well ask then, why did the Bulgarian state accept the Diyanet’s activities in the late 1990s, but did not allow those of TİKA and the others in 2000? Mihail Ivano, a chief advisor to Zhelyu Zhelev, the first post-communist president of Bulgaria between 1990 and 1997, was one of the political actors who established the first protocol between the Diyanet and the Bulgarian Grand Mufti’s office. He told me that around twenty-five years ago they were comfortable with the Diyanet in Bulgaria, but now he saw that it was a mistake—the Diyanet is not a Turkish institution, it is Erdoğan’s political instrument; as a result the present political actors and bureaucrats do not make the mistake of inviting other pro-Erdoğanist political instruments to Bulgaria.
As noted previously, Bulgaria’s demographic structure makes it a different case from the other countries in the Balkans. The Bulgarian Muslims who are ethnically Turkish or Pomak or Roma constitute approximately 7% of the overall population and Turkey considers them in terms of kinship (soydaş), which is relatively different and even stronger than religious brotherhood. While around four hundred thousand Bulgarian citizens live in Turkey, six hundred thousand Bulgarian citizens have Turkish passports and the right to vote in general elections. Bulgarian Turks and Pomaks (and Roma) who have migrated to Turkey and clustered in big groups in Istanbul and neighboring cities (especially Bursa) are becoming an issue that unites domestic politics with foreign policy.

Turkey plays the role of motherland for most Bulgarian Muslims, and some argue that ‘We [the Bulgarian Muslims] know that the motherland [Turkey] is just over there, even if we never go.’ This makes better sense when considered in the light of the fact that in terms of its population the Bulgarian Turks constitute the largest extra-territorial ethno-linguistic Turkish minority, as an Ottoman residue. Therefore, while Turkey considers Bulgarian Muslims in terms of kinship, most Bulgarian Muslims see Turkey through the lens of motherland. All this considered it was not the Turkish state that initiated activities in Bulgaria first: it was the Gülen Movement first, and now it is the exportation of domestic conflicts focused on the AKP’s fight with the Gülen Movement. The AKP is trying to win the hearts and minds of the Bulgarian Muslims against the presence and established status of the Movement.

The representative of the Gülen Movement stated that in 1993, after the collapse of the Communist regime, they began their activities through the education institutions, signing sponsorship agreements with the Grand Mufti’s Office during the Grand Mufti Nedim Gencev times. The Movement then undertook the financial support of the Grand Mufti’s Office and took partial control of the Momchilgrad, Shumen, and Ruse Imam Hatip high schools. Alongside these supportive activities, they began to publish a weekly newspaper (Zaman) in both Turkish and Bulgarian, as well as a religious journal (Ümit); until 1998 they also operated the Bulgarian-Turkish Democracy Foundation. In 1998, in the aftermath of the 28 February 1997 post-modern military coup in Turkey, the activities of the Gülen Movement were stopped and/or frozen by the Bulgarian authorities in compliance with Turkish demands. The Diyanet took over the Movement's supportive role in the Grand Mufti’s Office and the Imam Hatip high schools. Yet, the relatively weak Turkish economy prohibited sustainable support and, de facto, the Gülen Movement reclaimed its former role. In this regard, the current Grand Mufti noted that: 'The Turkish Diyanet was incapable of supplying our demands until 2002, so we received the support of the Movement.'

After the “frozen period” of 1998—2002, the Gülen Movement initiated activities in various areas as the AKP came to power. They started running activities with the Grand Mufti’s Office and in 2010 a secretary general who had close ties to the Gülen Movement was appointed to the office. Additionally, between 2008 and 2013, members of the Movement were appointed to most of the critical positions in the Office of the Grand Mufti, although no official (in the
Office) could provide a satisfactory answer to how these appointments were made. In fact, it was the “unconventional and unofficial coalition” between the Movement and the AKP that provided these opportunities.

Beyond these activities, in 2011 the Gülen Movement managed to open two secondary and high school complexes under the name of *Drujba* (*dostluk* in Turkish, friendship in English). The larger of these two schools was established in the periphery of Sofia and had a 500-plus student capacity. The other school, located in Plovdiv where the majority of the population is comprised of Turkish and Pomak Muslims, was built as a boarding school with a capacity of 120 students. According to Mihaglev, even though the AKP government did not directly support the Gülen Movement in its activities in Bulgaria, the period between 2008 and 2013 can justly be called “the golden age” of the movement. The support of the Turkish Embassy played an important problem-solving role. The golden age however, ended right after the corruption investigations, which were publicly believed to have been carried out by members of the Gülen movement members into the state bureaucracy.

In my 2017 dated interview with Süleyman Gökçe, the Turkish Ambassador to Sofia, highlighted; ‘… our friends in Bulgaria have realised the danger quite late. There are still many activities of this dangerous Movement in many areas. Yet, the Bulgarian state has not understood the danger, in contravention to our suggestions…’ However, according the representative of the Gülen Movement, the *Diyanet* threatened the Grand Mufti’s Office via the embassy to cut off financial support if it maintained relations with the Movement. As a result, all the pro-Gülen staff were dismissed from the Grand Mufti’s Office and from the Momchilgrad, Shumen, and Ruse Imam Hatip high schools. All the staff of the Grand Mufti’s Office withdrew their children from the schools run by the Movement. This was a crucial point in terms of the exportation of domestic conflicts via state apparatuses and the instrumentalisation of religion.

It is clear that, until the 15 July 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the issue of the exportation of domestic conflicts was limited to the representatives of the Gülen Movement, Turkey’s Sofia Embassy, the *Diyanet* and the Muslim communities of Bulgaria. The cooperation of the Embassy and the *Diyanet* removed the Movement from religion-based management areas, indicating that Turkey preferred not to use the official diplomatic channels to reach its aim, but to instrumentalise the *Diyanet*.

However, the failed coup attempt and the subsequent Turkish measures led the Bulgarian authorities to change their ideas on the issue. Turkey’s Sofia Embassy, as an official representative of the country, has come to the fore and asked the Bulgarian state to take the initiative regarding the dangers posed by the Gülen Movement, which would be good for both Turkey and Bulgaria. On the night of the coup, Ambassador Gökçe took an open position against the coup attempt and the Bulgarian government held an emergency meeting regarding this issue on the day following the coup attempt. After the meeting with Gökçe, Bulgarian Prime Minister Boiko Borissov noted that; ‘We always supported observing the laws and constitution of any country. There is a way to topple governments and that is
through elections. Peace cannot be achieved through war and death\textsuperscript{11}. Under these circumstances, the Bulgarian government repatriated more than 70 Gülenists to Turkey, only two of whom had Bulgarian residence, the rest being individuals who had tried to escape from Turkey as illegal migrants. The Bulgarian state then began to actively repress the Gülen Movement, using its regulative role: e.g., as the representative of the Gülen Movement in Bulgaria noted, inspectors visited the Drujba School in late July on orders from the Bulgarian government, although they could find no basis for cancelling the school’s license.

Bulgaria’s political elites are finally convinced that the Turkish state has been involving itself in the Balkan region’s internal affairs, by supporting new political parties and dividing the existing parties, using their financial power, and promoting religious oriented ideals onto the transnational apparatuses. Süleyman Gökçe, the former Turkish ambassador in Sophia, focused on Turkey’s mediator role, arguing for Turkey’s normative duty towards Bulgarian Muslims and Turks. He believes that Bulgarian Turks, Bulgarian Muslims and the people of Turkey are “as close as two coats of paint”. Yet, he also confessed that the Bulgarian Muslims suffered before the establishment of democracy in Bulgaria and in those days, Turkey was not very forthcoming in its protection of the Muslims of Bulgaria. He further believes that Turkey is now much more willing to work for the needs of Muslims and Turkish Bulgarians. All these pressures and restrictions led the Muslim and Turkish Bulgarians to resist the Communist regime, but the Bulgarian state managed to reduce tensions by establishing the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (Движение за права и свободи, Нак ве Ö zgür lük ler Hareketi, НÖH), under the leadership of Ahmet Dogan (Ахмед Демир Доган) in 1990.

Although the HÖH was officially established in 1990, it is commonly believed that Ahmet Dogan had started to organize the party in the early 1980s. In 2007, the Bulgarian state revealed the list of secret service staff and paid agents during the Communist period; Dogan was listed among the paid agents of the Bulgarian State Committee for Security between 1974 and 1988. Dogan is also a social scientist whose PhD dissertation is entitled; ‘Philosophical Analysis of the Principle of Symmetry’, which was also the core ideological background of the HÖH.

While from the very outset of the HÖH, certain Muslim and Turkish luminaries, such as the former Grand Mufti, Nedim Gencev, tried to divide and create new political structures for Muslims and Bulgarian Turks, they were less than successful. Because the HOH represented all Bulgarian Muslims, the party managed to acquire a reasonable number of seats in the Bulgarian Parliament, as early as the first democratic elections. Between 2001 and 2009, the Party was not only part of the coalition governments, but it also controlled some ministries, including the Ministry of Agriculture. In 2009 the Bulgarian state gave voting rights to all its citizens in the diaspora, the majority of whom live in Turkey; the HÖH became the first party on the ballot outside Bulgaria. Moreover, since 2009 the Party has won a small number of seats in the European Parliament.

Despite the fact that the HÖH has a relatively successful election record, as well as a respectable acceptance rate among both Bulgarian Muslims and some non-Muslim Bulgarians, since 2010 some former party members and members of the parliament have aimed to establish a new political structure to counter the HÖH. Among them, the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity (Narodna Partiya Svoboda i Dostoynstvo) was founded in 2011 by Korman Ismailov, a former HOH member of parliament, but did not exceed the required 4% election threshold in 2013. During the establishment period of the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity, some news agencies claimed that the Party received direct financial support from Turkey and argued that Erdoğan’s October 2010 visit was evidence for this argument. In October 2010, Erdoğan paid a diplomatic visit to Sofia and met Korman Ismailov and other leading figures of the party but refused to meet Ahmet Doğan. Furthermore, in 2010, Boyko Borissov openly warned Erdoğan with these words: ‘No party intermediaries are necessary between Bulgaria and Turkey. I insist that our Turkish colleagues review their relations with certain circles in Bulgaria who present themselves as actors expressing the will of the Turkish state in Bulgaria.’

Although the People’s Party for Freedom and Dignity was never actually operative, it was the first sign of the division between the pro-Turkish HÖH and Turkey’s direct and indirect intervention in the Bulgarian domestic political arena. A number of leading figures within the HÖH began to argue that it had become Ahmet Dogan’s personal party and was losing its inclusionary vision. Thus, while Dogan was not happy about stepping down as party chair, because of the intense opposition he turned it over to Lütfi Mestan, in January 2013. Dogan then created a new position for himself: honorary president. Under Mestan’s chairmanship, a new discussion started within the party ranks: Turkey’s direct support to the HÖH under Mestan’s rule. A close political colleague of Lüfti Mestan felt that Dogan was responsible for these claims since he wanted to reclaim the chair. Therefore, such claims were related to internal party politics, not the country’s overall political stance. But other colleagues of Mestan argue that prior to his chairing the HÖH, the party had become an anti-AKP party. They also faulted this stance, since the HOH was a political party that claimed to support the rights of the Bulgarian Turks.

Despite the fact that Mestan managed to ride out these claims and much intimidation, in 2015 he was removed from his post by the central council and expelled from the party for what it considered an excessively pro-Turkish government stance following the downing of a Russian bomber jet by the Turkish Air force. In response he founded another pro-Turkish

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12 Bulgaria PM to Erdogan: No Ethnic Parties Needed as Mediators
https://www.novinite.com/articles/112559/Bulgaria+PM+to+Erdogan%3A+No+Ethnic+Parties+Needed+as+Mediators
last accessed 26 September 2019.

13 On 24 November 2015, a Turkish Air Force F-16 fighter jet shot down a Russian military aircraft near the Syria-Turkey border. According to the Turkish authorities the Russian aircraft was in Turkish airspace without permission, but the Russian Defence Ministry denied this claim and insisted that the aircraft was in Syrian airspace. Right after the issue Erdoğan pointed out that Turkey had the right to defend its airspace and Russian President Putin insisted that his country’s general claim was true. This issue created a diplomatic crisis between Russia and Turkey more than a year.
political party, Democrats for Responsibility, Solidarity and Tolerance (Демократи за отговорност, свобода и толерантност, DOST), and the claims about the direct influence of the Turkish AKP reached their peak point. A key reason for this perception was that in one of DOST’s propaganda films, the former Turkish ambassador, Süleyman Gökçe, appeared in a scene and spoke in favour of the DOST. Gökçe denied these claims in the interview conducted for this book, but the senior party official with whom another interview was conducted was quite sure about it. There are other claims regarding Turkey’s support to DOST; in fact, prior to the 2017 elections more serious claims emerged, asserting the instrumentalisation of the Diyanet and Diyanet imams as DOST was being established. And while DOST took only 2.9% of the votes in the 2017 general parliamentary elections (therefore won no seats because of 4% election threshold), the discussions and diplomatic crises that it created were much greater than its vote share.

On 21 February 2016, the Bulgarian press reported that Uğur Emiroğlu and three other Diyanet imams in Bulgaria had been declared ‘persona non grata’. According to the official declaration, Emiroğlu and the other imams’ activities were ‘incompatible with their diplomatic status’. According to the allegations, these Diyanet officials had been putting pressure on Bulgarian Muslims to support DOST. Furthermore, according to vogues in the Muslim houses of worship, Diyanet imams were asking for support for DOST. Even though Turkey’s role and the functions the Diyanet carried out during the establishment and promotion of DOST are uncertain, one issue is almost certain: the foundation of DOST led to new discussions on Turkey and religion by the two pro-Turkish Bulgarian parties. For instance, during the April 2017 Turkish constitutional referendum, the HöH openly supported the AKP’s opponent, proclaiming their support on its website. On the other hand, DOST supported the AKP stance throughout the referendum process. Regarding this issue, Hafizoglu openly declared that although as a political party they were not openly linked to the election campaign for Turkey’s referendum, it was no secret that they supported Erdoğan’s stance and believed that the new constitution would be an opportunity for a big and powerful Turkey which would be an achievement for them as well.

**Conclusion and policy recommendations**

It is clear that Turkey has been undergoing another period of domestic transformation and has been developing new policies that are preferential to Bulgaria. Moreover, Turkey has been more heavily instrumentalising religion via its transnational apparatuses. This new religion-based and aggressive policy, it seems, cannot simply be regarded as an element of soft power. But it has different repercussions for different actors in Bulgaria: some groups (mostly Muslims) are rather happy with Turkey’s religiously fuelled approach, while others are seriously concerned. This is one reason that I prefer to define Turkey as an ambivalent actor who has not been instrumentalising her soft power resources efficiently. Even though one might argue that Turkey’s new religion-based policy and new activities could be understood within the concept of public diplomacy and/or soft power, this policy preference is multi-
faceted and has many problematic points, such as exportation of domestic conflicts, which are too complex to be defined as any kind of positive policy methodology such as soft power.

A comprehensive analysis of Turkey’s policies vis-à-vis southeast Europe indicates that the new elite in Ankara tends to believe that their southeast Europe imaginary is shared by the relevant countries and groups at the local level. This imaginary and the resultant strategies are not unrelated to Turkey’s recent transformation, i.e., Turkey is building its new approach on the Ottoman legacy in a selective manner and sees some Muslims in the region as “more Ottoman” than others and thus considers them its natural and historical interlocutors. For this reason, Turkey does not hesitate to intervene in domestic politics, creating a permanent influence through the elements of culture, language, religion and economics. To claim that Turkey’s new policies are totally ineffective would contradict the findings of my personal fieldwork and readings. However, the effect is polarized. Overall, Turkey works with a southeast Europe imaginary rather than with a well-calculated and internally consistent Balkan policy. This imaginary magnifies policymakers’ perceptions of Turkey’s influence in the region; they believe that most Muslims in the region see Turkey as a guardian. The much-opposed concept of “clash of civilizations” put forward by Ahmet Davutoğlu and other minor architects of Turkish foreign policy seems to be internalized in an extreme paradox. It has yet to be seen whether this is an historical illusion, or a hidden potential. Another shortcoming of this imaginary is that it downgrades the other actors in the region, including Austria, Russia and Germany, as well as the United States.

Yet, Turkey can still increase its capacity. To this end, it must acknowledge that it cannot be a true alternative for the countries of the region that aspire to be members of the EU. Turkey needs to increase its democratic credentials and strengthen the constitutional institutions; this will help it come more in line with EU policies. It must not use its religious influence to provide guardianship for Muslims in a hegemonic way; on the contrary, it must promote religious freedom and peaceful coexistence both domestically and in the region. Supporting a specific religious group would harm a region that has suffered greatly from religious divisions and conflicts. Bringing its secular culture to the fore would differentiate Turkey from Wahhabi and Salafist powers that are also trying to exercise influence on the region. Turkey should also be careful in its emphasis on the common Ottoman heritage with the countries of the region, because this does not necessarily imply the peaceful and harmonious past that the AKP elite depicts. Lastly, as noted previously, Turkey must not view the Balkans as a single entity and implement wholesale policies in the region. Rather, it must tailor specific policies for each country considering the sensitivity of historical, cultural, sociological and political dynamics in each context.
The Ambivalent Nature of the Relations between Bulgaria and Turkey in the New Millennium

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