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Regaining the influence:
Turkish cooperation initiatives in the Balkans

Introduction

It should be indisputable that formulation of term “soft power” was one of the breakthrough moments in the history of political science and international relations. As a result, the description of the global order after the end of the Cold War has become more comprehensive at several levels and thus much closer to reality. The phrase was used for the first time in the 1980s by the American political scientist, Joseph Nye, as a response to the serious limitations of classical realism, one of the leading theoretical perspectives of international relations in that period. In the analysis of political processes, representatives of the realistic approach focused their attention primarily on studying the military capabilities and ways of exerting economic pressure of individual states in order to build a prominent position in the international system. However, along with dynamically accelerating globalization, which had an integrating effect on the actions of states in the international arena, the model for explaining complex mechanisms by referring only to geostrategic and economic factors has become insufficient¹. Accordingly, Joseph Nye introduced the concept of soft power, which in its basic version implied the state's ability to implement its policy through non-forceful

¹ J. Nye, *Soft Power*, “Foreign Policy”, 1990, no. 80, pp. 167–170.

measures. The key factor in this approach is that other participants of the international system respect the values and culture of a given country, and aspire to achieve a similar level of political, economic or social development. Over the years, the definition of "soft power" has been refined with further elements and dimensions, but in a general sense this term is associated with the capacity to positively influence others².

The main objective of this article is an attempt to answer the research question regarding the role of the Balkans in contemporary Turkish politics. Since the Justice and Development Party (tur. *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) won parliamentary elections in November 2002, Turkey's foreign policy has been conducted under the framework of the doctrine of "strategic depth". In the opinions of the AKP politicians, one of the main tasks of Turkish diplomacy is to regain influence within the boundaries of former Ottoman Empire. From this perspective, Turkey's unique geographical location, imperial legacy, and cultural richness creates favorable conditions for such political expansion. In the first part of this text, a brief historical overview of Turkish-Balkan relations is presented to shed some light on origins of Turkey's current engagement in the region. Subsequently, the concept of Turkish soft power is characterized in reference to both Joseph Nye's theoretical assumptions, as well as the political practise of the AKP government. The third part of the article introduces government institutions and agencies whose aim is to promote Turkey among the Balkan countries. As part of this paper, special attention has been given to three of these: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. *Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı* – TİKA), Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (tur. *Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı* – YTB), the Yunus Emre Institute (tur. *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü* – YEE). An analysis of selected activities of the above-mentioned organizations was a key part of this research. In regard to previous findings, this article concludes with an assessment of Turkish cooperation initiatives in the Balkans and attempts to determine the future direction of AKP government's involvement in the region.

Within this paper three research hypotheses were formulated:

H₁ – Republic of Turkey's cultural initiatives in the Balkans are perceived as a substantial development opportunity by both Muslim and non-Muslim states;

² W. Lewandowski, *Soft Power jako narzędzie geopolityki. Znaczenie kultury popularnej*, [in:] *Polityka zagraniczna państw Europy Środkowej i Wschodniej na przełomie XX i XXI wieku. Ujęcie geopolityczne*, ed. J. Tymanowski, Wydział Dziennikarstwa i Nauk Politycznych UW, Warszawa 2005, pp. 61–65.

H₂ – creation of an effective mechanism for coordinating the activities of various organizations and agencies has significantly facilitated the projection of Turkish soft power in the Balkans;

H₃ – the protracted internal crisis within the European Union may increase Turkey's chances to gain a dominant position in the Balkans.

The theoretical structure of this text is based on the image theory in international relations that originates from Kalevi Holsti's international roles theory. According to its basic assumptions, image theory examines the foreign policies of individual states in relation to the images created by politicians. Similarly, political perceptions are often shaped by social mood and preferences of the voters³. Due to the fact that these two elements are in constant relationship, it is possible to draw conclusions about determinants and directions of the diplomatic activities of a given state. One method by which this research objective can be achieved is an analysis of factors shaping political discourse⁴.

The principal question of image theory concerns the essence of components constructing perception. As explained by Kenneth Boulding, the key factor affecting the image is message, i.e. the official statements of decision-makers. Any activity of a state in the international arena can be employed as a useful tool to create positive image that, in turn, can lead into an increase of its regional position⁵. On the other hand, the external perception, i.e. the international system, the opinions of other participants and stereotypes of a given state, influence the general image as well. Consequently, external images are fundamental sources of information for politicians, since on their basis specific policies are created or designed to strengthen the legitimacy of their originators (an issue of effectiveness). Moreover, images also determine the entire scope of activity of a given state in the international system, defining its capabilities and limitations with respect to other participants⁶. In the context of political practise, the media plays an important role, as it ensures communication between the elites through public opinion. Therefore, from the decision-makers' perspective, the proper reception of images and perceptions can considerably facilitate the process of

³ M. G. Alexander, S. Levin, P. Henry, *Image theory, social identity, and social dominance: Structural characteristics and individual motives underlying international images*, "Political Psychology", 2005, no. 26 (1), pp. 27–45.

⁴ R. K. Herrmann, J. F. Voss, T. Schooler, J. Ciarrochi, *Images in International Relations: An Experimental Test of Cognitive Schemata*, "International Studies Quarterly", 1997, no. 3 (41), pp. 405–414.

⁵ K. Boulding, "National Images and International Systems," "Conflict Resolution Quarterly", 1959, no. 3 (2), p. 10.

⁶ A. Niemann, Ch. Bretherton, *EU external policy at the crossroads: The challenge of actor-ness and effectiveness*, "International Relations", 2013, no. 3 (27), p. 265.

pursuing policies that are widely accepted by society⁷. Among researchers who substantially contributed to the development of image theory in international relations, the following names should be mentioned: Michele G. Alexander, Natalia Chaban, Richard K. Herrmann, Robert Jervis, Tuuli-Marja Kleiner, Sonia Lucarelli, Xiuli Wang. Considering that international affairs literature has put the main emphasis on describing roles and images of the European Union and United States of America, this research paper seeks to test assumptions of image theory on the example of the Republic of Turkey and its relations with the Balkan states.

In order to identify the most significant initiatives and decisions related to Turkey's policy towards the Balkans in the context of political and cultural cooperation, a wide range of original Turkish sources (academic publications, public reports, policy briefs, etc.) have been studied. Detailed analysis of interviews and official statements of prominent Turkish politicians is also a crucial part of the paper. The source analysis focuses on determining the impact of the Turkish-Balkans relations on Turkey's contemporary foreign policy. In accordance with above-mentioned explanations, this research is based on a qualitative research methodology. Due to the key role of written materials in this study, source criticism was chosen as the primal research method. In the case of presidential and governmental documentation, political discourse analysis was employed. Moreover, the process of modifying Turkey's strategy towards the Balkan states was examined by historical method, foreign policy analysis, process tracking method and comparative analysis⁸.

Historical background

The Balkan Peninsula has been an area of Turkish expansion almost from the very establishment of the Ottoman state that was founded in western Anatolia at the turn of the 13th and 14th centuries by Osman Gazi. In 1352, the army led by Sultan Orhan, the son of Osman, defeated the combined Serbian-Bulgarian forces near Demotika in Thrace, which resulted in the capture of first lodgements on European soil by the Turks⁹. Two years later, troops commanded by Süleyman Pasha conquered the strategically important city of Gallipoli, which

⁷ S. Lucarelli, *Seen from the Outside: The State of the Art on the External Image of the EU*, "Journal of European Integration", 2013, no. 1 (36), pp. 10–14.

⁸ A. Klotz, D. Prakash, *Qualitative Methods in International Relations: A Pluralist Guide*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2008, pp. 75–116.

⁹ S. J. Shaw, *Historia Imperium Osmańskiego i Republiki Tureckiej. Tom I (1280–1808)*, Wydawnictwo Akademickie Dialog, Warszawa 2012, p. 43.

lies at the mouth of the Dardanelles to the Sea of Marmara. As a consequence of this conquest, the Ottoman Turks strengthened their position on the European shore of the strait, from where they regularly attacked lands in the interior of the Balkan Peninsula. Taking advantage of their military power, by the end of fourteenth century, the Ottomans seized the Christian principalities of Serbia and Bulgaria, as well as Wallachia and the territories of present-day Albania and Macedonia¹⁰. Simultaneously, the Ottoman Turks also gradually took over the domains belonging previously to the Byzantine Empire. The culmination point of this process was the siege of Constantinople, which finally collapsed under Turkish pressure on 29 May 1453¹¹. After this triumph, the imperial period of the Ottoman state began. Over the next century and a half, the sultanate systematically expanded its borders, becoming one of the most powerful empires of medieval Europe. In the following decades after the capture of Constantinople, the Turks conquered nearly the entire Balkan Peninsula and most of the islands on the surrounding seas¹².

However, at the turn of the 16th and 17th centuries the slow decline of the Ottoman Empire ensued, which was reflected in its territorial losses. The reasons for this situation include weakening of the sultan's power, as a result of which governors of several provinces gained broad independence, and the lack of necessary internal reforms, on the basis of which the inefficient socio-political system of the Empire could have been transformed¹³. Although the Balkan Peninsula was one of the regions in which the Ottoman Turks maintained strong influence for a relatively long time, eventually, aspirations for independence emerged there as well.

The rise of nationalism in Europe at that time was a consequence of social changes initiated by events related to the French Revolution. After a series of rebellions and anti-Turkish uprisings that occurred in the Balkans in the first half of the 19th century, the Ottoman Empire lost Greece and was forced to grant autonomy to the Serbs. In the aftermath of further defeats on the Balkan front, the unconditional independence of Romania, Serbia and Montenegro, as well as the autonomy of Bulgaria were recognized by the Treaty of Berlin in

¹⁰ N. Çelik, *Black Sea and the Balkans under Ottoman Rule*, "Karadeniz Araştırmaları", 2010, no. 6 (24), pp. 11–18.

¹¹ F. Babinger, *Mehmed the Conqueror and His Time*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1992, pp. 88–93.

¹² İ. Bostan, *Fatih Sultan Mehmed ve Osmanlı Denizciliği*, [in:] *Türk Denizcilik Tarihi (I)*, eds. İ. Bostan, S. Özbaran, Deniz Basımevi Müdürlüğü, İstanbul 2009, pp. 86–94.

¹³ B. Kodaman, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Çağdaşlaşma Sorunları*, "Selçuk Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi", 2005, no. 18, pp. 151–152.

1878¹⁴. Three decades later, Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina, which only increased the already high level of tensions in the region. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 had unfavourable outcome for the Turks, who struggled to maintain their possessions in the Balkans. The weakened empire was no longer able to successfully defend its borders, losing its last lands on the Balkan Peninsula (Macedonia, Albania and Thrace)¹⁵. Ultimately, the Ottoman Empire fell apart as a result of the defeat of the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) during the First World War. The victorious Allied (Entente) powers (Great Britain, France, Italy and Japan) then divided the sultanate into several semi-sovereign states and zones of influence, granting the Turks only the central part of Anatolia. As a consequence, the Turkish War of Independence broke out in 1919, leading to the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in October 1923. According to the provisions of the Treaty of Lausanne, which was signed by Turkish authorities in the same year, Turkey received a small portion of land in the south-eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula (East Thrace), representing only 3 percent of the total area of the country. However, the remnant of the former splendor of the Ottoman Empire is the Turkish minority that, although its population is gradually decreasing, lives in most Balkan states to the present day¹⁶. This is the basic factor favoring the implementation of Turkish soft power in this region.

The conception of Turkish soft power

According to the original idea of Joseph Nye, there are three main sources of soft power: culture, political values and foreign policy. As explained by the author of this scheme, the cultural factor consists of two components: high culture (e.g. literature, education system, technological advancement) and popular culture (e.g. music, cinematography, television programs). Each of the above-mentioned aspects enables the shaping of the perception of recipients, which in turn affects the creation of an attractive image with regard to the source state on a regional

¹⁴ M. Karabulut, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda 19. Yüzyılda Değişim Süreci, Sosyal Ve Kültürel Durum*, "Mecmua Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi", 2016, no. 1 (2), p. 64.

¹⁵ S. Yıldırım, *Balkan Savaşları ve Sonrasındaki Göçlerin Türkiye Nüfusuna Etkileri*, "Cumhuriyet Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi", 2012, no. 8 (16), pp. 78–79.

¹⁶ C. Sancaktar, *Balkanlar'da Türk ve Müslüman Milletler: 19. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Milliyetçiliğe Karşı Varoluş Mücadelesi*, "Balkan ve Yakın Doğu Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi", 2019, no. 1 (5), pp. 13–18.

or global stage¹⁷. Another source of soft power is derived from political values. These are the most important link in the whole conception. In this context, a state should establish a fixed set of rules and norms by which it would be able to present its national interests in a positive way, thus encouraging other participants of the international system to voluntarily adopt their values. This is connected with Joseph Nye's assumption according to which the actual strength of the state is demonstrated by the popularity of its ideological system.

Political values remain in close relation to the last source of soft power, which is foreign policy¹⁸. The convergence of standards at the ideological level with specific activities in the international arena significantly facilitates the implementation of diplomatic goals. Due to the huge impact of foreign policy on determining the international status of a state, soft power is also reliant on central authorities acting appropriately. In his conception, Joseph Nye gave priority to political values based on culture, whereas foreign policy serves as a tool for transmission and execution of state intentions in the global sphere¹⁹.

Several scientific bodies have conducted professional research on the role of soft power in contemporary international relations. Among these one should mention the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. This entity publishes an annual ranking of thirty countries that employ their soft power most effectively. The "Soft Power 30 Index" includes factors such as technological advancement, innovativeness of enterprises, standards of education, cultural wealth and quality of governance. In recent years, Turkey has advanced three times into this group – in 2015, it ranked 28th, two years later 30th and last year 29th²⁰. The latest editions of the ranking are dominated by European countries, especially Great Britain, France and Germany²¹.

Since the Justice and Development Party (tur. *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) won parliamentary elections in November 2002, the new Turkish government has recognised soft power as a key element in its political strategy. In this context, the main objective of AKP's foreign policy is a gradual regaining of influence in regions that had once were within the boundaries of the Ottoman

¹⁷ C. Özel, *Yumuşak Güce Bütünsel Bakış*, "Güvenlik Bilimleri Dergisi", 2018, no. 1 (7), pp. 7–8.

¹⁸ L. Lin, L. Hongtao, *Joseph Nye's Soft Power Theory and Its Revelation Towards Ideological and Political Education*, "Humanities and Social Sciences", 2017, no. 2 (5), pp. 70–71.

¹⁹ U. Yapıcı, *Yumuşak Güç Ölçülebilir mi?*, "Uluslararası İlişkiler", 2015, no. 12 (47), pp. 10–11.

²⁰ USC Center on Public Diplomacy, <https://softpower30.com/country/turkey/>, "Turkey – Soft Power 30", accessed in: 18.01.2020.

²¹ J. McClory, *The Soft Power 30: A Global Ranking of Soft Power 2018*, "USC Center on Public Diplomacy", <https://softpower30.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/The-Soft-Power-30-Report-2018.pdf>, 2018, accessed in: 18.01.2020.

Empire. By properly understanding the changing dynamics of international processes on the threshold of the 21st century, the AKP government led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has developed a comprehensive diplomatic action plan based on the mechanisms of positive impact within Turkey's near abroad. During the conceptualization of Turkish foreign policy doctrine of the AKP era, the authorities employed assumptions of the "strategic depth" conception. This concept was brought to light in 2001, by Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu²². Accordingly, the Republic of Turkey's primal goal is to strive to stabilize the tense situation in neighboring regions by utilizing the entire catalogue of measures and tools related to Joseph Nye's soft power theory. Consequently, the Turkish government focused on issues relevant and important for improving the level of security in this part of the world. Among the specific tasks of AKP diplomacy, the following examples should be mentioned: promoting the Turkish model of Muslim democracy, assuming the role of mediator in regional conflicts, engaging in activities of international organizations, and offering social and cultural support to the countries concerned²³. The ultimate effect of this strategy was supposed to be that Turkey would obtain the status of a regional leader, which would allow remodeling the international order and limiting the global dominance of the United States and the European Union. Ahmet Davutoğlu himself supervised the proper execution of the AKP foreign policy doctrine, first as an adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan (2003–2009), then the Minister of Foreign Affairs (2009–2014), and finally the head of government (2014–2016)²⁴.

Despite initial successes in implementing the vision of "strategic depth", over time, it became apparent that many essential components of the doctrine had been based on too idealistic premises. The attempt to maintain positive relations with all states in the region turned out to be particularly damaging to Turkey's image, as a result of which many allies have lost confidence in Turkish diplomacy. Seeking to overcome this unfavourable trend, Turkish government opted for more explicit rhetoric, concentrating on cooperation with Sunni organizations whose worldview coincided with the AKP's ideology. However, the shift in foreign policy had the opposite effect to what was intended, which resulted

²² C. Saraçoğlu, *AKP, Milliyetçilik ve Dış Politika: Bir Milliyetçilik Doktrini Olarak Stratejik Derinlik*, "Alternatif Politika", 2013, no. 1 (5), pp. 57–59.

²³ Y. Avcı, *Türk Dış Politikasının Stratejik Derinlik Revizyonunda Balkanlar*, "BEU İzdüşüm Dergisi", 2017, no. 2 (2), pp. 106–110.

²⁴ B. H. Tarcan, H. Akgüller, K. Işık, *Ahmet Davutoğlu Dönemi Türk Dış Politikası*, "Econder Uluslararası Akademik Dergi", 2018, no. 2 (2), pp. 252–257.

in Turkey's diplomatic defeat during the Arab Spring²⁵. Due to the failure of his vision, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu resigned in May 2016. Since then, Turkish regional strategy has been significantly modified, eventually adopting a more pragmatic shape. As a consequence of these corrections and rearrangements, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan became the main decision-making center determining the direction of Turkey's future international involvement. Nevertheless, soft power remained a substantial factor in the plans for Turkish political expansion in the region.

Turkey's soft power is based on culture, history, and geography²⁶. From Ankara's perspective, the imperial heritage of modern Turkey unites all regions that were once ruled by the Ottoman sultans, which enables a reference to shared experiences and the possibility to build multi-level cooperation. In the geopolitical narrative of the Justice and Development Party, Turkey is considered as a core state in new regional system because of its statehood tradition, political values, and unique model of Islamic democracy. As explained by the AKP government, public diplomacy has been a pillar of Turkey's soft power for almost two decades, which significantly facilitates incorporation of Turkish patterns by international community²⁷.

Turkey's public diplomacy activities in the Balkans

In accordance with the AKP regional strategy, public diplomacy activities are conducted within two main frameworks: governmental and civic (i.e. specialised agencies, non-governmental organizations, research centres, media). During its nearly twenty years in power, the Justice and Development Party has substantially expanded and strengthened the institutional system of public diplomacy. Among organizations whose task is to promote Turkish soft power at home and abroad the following ones should be noted: Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (tur. *Türkiye İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı – TİKA*), Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (tur. *Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı – YTB*), Investment Support and Promotion

²⁵ G. Tüysüzoğlu, *Milenyum Sonrası Türk Dış Politikası: Yeni Osmanlıcılık ve Türk Avrasyacılığı Ekseninde İnşa Edilen Bir Pragmatizm*, "Alternatif Politika", 2013, no. 3 (5), pp. 309–311.

²⁶ B. Süssler, *Turkey: An Emerging Middle Power in a Changing World?*, "LSE Ideas: Strategic Update", <http://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSE-IDEAS-Turkey-Middle-Power.pdf>, 2019, accessed in: 19.01.2020.

²⁷ U. Ünal, *Ülke Markalaması Üzerinden Kamu Diplomasisi Ve Türkiye Analizi*, "Türk Asya Stratejik Araştırmalar Merkezi Yayınları", http://www.tasam.org/Files/Icerik/File/TASAM_MAKALE_pdf_6a434e5f-0571-4f33-9fc2-e63207aa9938.pdf, 2017, accessed in: 19.01.2020.

Agency of Turkey (ISPAT), the Yunus Emre Institute (tur. *Yunus Emre Enstitüsü – YEE*), Turkish Radio and Television (tur. *Türkiye Radyo ve Televizyonu – TRT*)²⁸. Thus, the originators of the Turkish version of soft power almost directly related its assumptions to the classic paradigm developed by Joseph Nye, constructing their conception on a complementary triad of culture, political values, and foreign policy.

An analysis of Turkey's worldwide activities indicates that a distinguishing feature of the Turkish cooperation model is its exceptional focus on the cultural aspect. As has already been mentioned, Turkish soft power reached its peak at the end of the first decade of the 21st century when the Republic of Turkey could indeed be considered a regional leader. However, subsequent events connected with its tense internal situation and increasingly confrontational foreign policy has led to a noticeable deterioration in Turkey's international image²⁹.

In the regional strategy of the Justice and Development Party, the Balkan Peninsula was a key area for potential political expansion. Turkey had strong historical and cultural, as well as (to a lesser extent) social and economic ties with the countries in this region. Moreover, as held by Turkish foreign policy makers, at the beginning of the 21st century no world power is in control of the Balkans. Under these circumstances, the AKP began practical implementation of Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision within the Balkan Peninsula. Taking advantage of the geopolitical void that resulted from the collapse of Yugoslavia, the Turkish government aimed at improving the level of security and stability in the region³⁰.

Initially, due to active diplomacy and significant financial support, Ankara managed to develop positive relations with countries inhabited by both Muslims (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Christians (Serbia, Macedonia). However, Turkey's growing involvement in the Balkans, also manifested in ambitions for expanding political influence, has led to the emergence of accusations of Turkish imperialism. As a result, some Balkan states have limited their participation in the AKP initiatives, criticizing Turkish diplomacy's excessive emphasis on the Ottoman past of the region. Representatives of the Justice and

²⁸ E. Eren, *Sivil Toplumun Dış Politika İnşasındaki Rolü: Türk Kamu Diplomasisi Örneği*, "Ekonomi, Politika & Finans Araştırmaları Dergisi", 2017, no. 1 (2), pp. 41–42.

²⁹ S. M. Torelli, *The Rise and Fall of the Turkish Model for the Middle East*, [in:] *Turkey's Relations with the Middle East: Political Encounters after the Arab Spring*, eds. H. Işıksal, O. Göksel, Springer, New York 2018, pp. 59–61.

³⁰ Y. Avcı, *op. cit.*, pp. 110–113.

Development Party reject these allegations, and point out the entire catalogue of benefits resulting from in-depth cooperation between Turkey and the Balkans³¹.

In the early period of the AKP's rule, Ahmet Davutoğlu, who served then as special adviser to Prime Minister Erdoğan, was a frequent visitor in the Balkan states. During his diplomatic visits, Professor Davutoğlu presented a plan for multilateral cooperation that included intensive contacts at governmental, business and social levels. The ultimate goal of these actions was to purportedly raise the standards of living in the region and ensure stable economic growth for all Balkan countries³².

Despite submitting an attractive political offer, the Turkish proposal was not received positively since the authorities of the Balkan states chose instead to integrate with the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Furthermore, the Russian Federation also began to gain more influence in the region during this period. In competition with such powerful rivals, Turkey was doomed to failure. As a result, the AKP withdrew from pursuing its political interests in the Balkan Peninsula, shifting attention to the Middle East and North Africa. Thus, for more than a decade now, Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans has been based primarily on the socio-cultural dimension, which is appreciated particularly by the Muslim community. Development of economic partnership is another important aspect of Turkish activity in the region³³.

The next subsections will introduce the most notable organizations which are ensuring the projection of Turkish soft power in the Balkans.

1. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency

Among Turkish government institutions and organizations that are currently operating in the Balkans, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) plays the key role. TİKA was founded in 1992 and its initial task was to strengthen the ties connecting Turkey with Turkic states established after the dissolution of the USSR (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan). In this context, the agency has developed a number of projects and

³¹ A. N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *Balkanlar'da YTB Ve TİKA'nın Türk Kamu Diplomasisi Kurumları Olarak Faaliyetleri Ve Türkiye'nin Bölgedeki Yumuşak Gücüne Etkileri*, "Finans Ekonomi ve Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi", 2017, no. 2 (2), pp. 118–119.

³² Y. Avcı, *op. cit.*, pp. 112–115.

³³ G. Telatar, *Ak Parti'nin Düzen Kurucu Dış Politika Söylemi Ve Ortadoğu*, "Alternatif Politika", 2015, no. 3 (7), pp. 496–497.

initiatives seeking to demonstrate the cultural unity of the Turkic world³⁴. In the following years, TİKA's scope of activity has been expanded to other regions of Turkish interest. However, during the rule of the Justice and Development Party the agency's structure was reorganized, as a result of which TİKA has become the basic tool for implementing Turkish soft power in the international arena. Currently, offices of the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency are located in fifty-nine countries on five continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, North America, South America). The agency itself coordinates or co-funds several thousand projects in various areas³⁵.

The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency has been present within the Balkan Peninsula since the late 1990s and provides there a vast catalogue of activities, including health service, administrative assistance, education support, cultural cooperation and restoration of historical legacy. Recently, the last of the aforementioned initiatives has been in particular intensively developed. Every year, approximately 2 percent of the agency's total budget (which amounted to around 4 billion USD in 2018) is allocated exclusively to renovation of Ottoman heritage in the Balkan states³⁶. According to representatives of TİKA's management, each project has been conducted in agreement with local authorities, which brings tangible benefits to both parties concerned. Indeed, reconstruction of historical monuments has had a positive impact on the tourism sector in the Balkans, which in turn has brought improvements in the general well-being and prosperity of local society. From the Justice and Development Party's perspective, the socio-cultural presence in the region bolsters Turkish soft power³⁷. As evidenced by published reports, between 2008 and 2016, TİKA has restored forty-seven historical buildings including mosques, castles, palaces, madrasas, places of worship, fountains and baths. Moreover, renovation works continue for more than twenty projects, while almost forty others are in preparatory phase³⁸.

Among Ottoman monuments that has been restored by TİKA in the Balkans, the following projects (completed and ongoing) are worth mentioning:

³⁴ E. Poyraz, M. Dinçer, *Küreselleşen Dünyada Türkiye'nin Kamu Diplomasisi Faaliyetleri*, "Intermedia International e-Journal", 2016, no. 1 (3), p. 43.

³⁵ Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/tr>, "Kurumsal", accessed in: 21.01.2020.

³⁶ Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, <https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2019/Faaliyet%20Raporu%202018/TikaFaaliyetWeb.pdf>, "Faaliyet Raporu 2018", 2019, accessed in: 21.01.2020.

³⁷ A. N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–127.

³⁸ Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı, https://www.tika.gov.tr/upload/2018/BALKANLAR/ikinci_balkan_bulusmasi_kitap.pdf, "Balkanlar – TİKA", 2018, accessed in: 21.01.2020.

- Albania: Ethem Bey Mosque in Tirana, Old Madrasa in Vlorë, Ottoman Fortress in Gjirokastrë;
- Bosnia and Herzegovina: Ferhadija Mosque in Banja Luka, Kovači Muslim Cemetery in Sarajevo, Ottoman Bridges in Mostar, Konjic and Visegrad;
- Bulgaria: Banya Bashi Mosque in Sofia, Mirza Said Pasha Mosque in Ruse;
- Kosovo: Carshia Mosque in Pristina, Sultan Mehmet Mosque in Prizren, Gazi Ali Bey Hamam in Vuçitër;
- North Macedonia: Mustafa Pasha Mosque in Skopje, Military School in Bitola, Harabati Baba Tekke in Tetovo;
- Montenegro: Osmangic Mosque in Podgorica, Huseyn Pasha Mosque in Pljevlja, Clock Tower in Podgorica;
- Serbia: Tomb of Damat Ali Pasha in Belgrade, Valide Sultan Mosque in Sjenica, Ottoman Fortress in Ram.

It should be also noted that with regard to some of the renovation projects presented above, TİKA is the only institution involved in conservation works, while in the case of others, the agency acts as one of several organizations coordinating the restoration process. In order to eventually reject recurrent allegations of applying Turkey's imperial ideology in the Balkans, TİKA is also renovating several Christian monuments. A great example of this fact is financial support for the restoration of Sacred Heart of Jesus Roman Catholic Cathedral in Sarajevo and St. George Orthodox Church in Kumanovo (North Macedonia). The only country in the region that has not been participating in cultural projects coordinated by TİKA is Greece, which results from historical enmities between Athens and Ankara. Although approximately four thousand structures built during the Ottoman Empire reign have remained in Greece until today, the Greek authorities refuse to include them into Turkish renovation program³⁹.

2. Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities

Another Turkish government organization involved in the Balkans is Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (tur. YTB). This institution was founded in 2010 and has been attached directly to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the Republic of Turkey. Compared to Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, its range of activity is noticeably narrower as the main task of YTB is to coordinate various types of programs dedicated to Turks liv-

³⁹ İ. Özgürlüğü, *AB üyesi Yunanistan'ın başkenti Atina'da cami inşası yıllardır sürüncemede*, "Batı Raporu", <https://batiraporu.com/inanc-ozgurugu/ab-uyesi-yunanistanin-baskenti-atinada-cami-insasi-yillardir-suruncemede/>, 2017, accessed in: 21.01.2020.

ing abroad, as well as to liaison with representatives of the so-called related communities (i.e. Turkic ethnic groups). One of the basic reasons for creation of Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities was AKP's intention to fully utilize the potential of the Turkish diaspora (broadly defined) around the world. Thus, the government decided to establish an institutional structure that is based on shared historical memory and cultural ties⁴⁰.

The Balkan Peninsula is one of regions where YTB has been operating most dynamically. The institution provides in the region cultural exchange and educational programs for students. In addition, it organizes conferences, symposia and seminars that are aimed at building friendly relations between Turkey and the Balkan nation-states. According to data published by YTB, the organization's involvement in the region has been steadily increasing year by year, especially in countries with a large Turkish population⁴¹.

The implementation of the socio-cultural aspect of Turkish soft power has been conducted through a plethora of programs and projects managed by Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities. For instance, as part of the "Evliya Çelebi Youth Bridges Program", hundreds of children and adolescents of Turkish origin have had an opportunity to visit the land of their ancestors. Moreover, in 2016 YTB has launched the "Balkan Youth School Project" during which students from eight Balkan countries learn about Turkish culture, art, and history. A similar objective inspired the foundation of the "Idea Art Workshop Activities in the Balkans Program" which was organized a year earlier. In addition, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities cooperates with a number of local public benefit organizations, creating favourable conditions for improving the level of teaching and education in the Balkans⁴².

Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities is also involved in analytical activities. In 2015, together with the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (tur. *Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı – SETA*), YTB organized a conference in Ankara that was attended by members of think tanks from several Balkan countries (Albania, Serbia, Greece, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Croatia). The purpose of this meeting was to establish a platform for public debate on the most serious problems and

⁴⁰ K. E. Yıldırım, A. Yıldırım, *Türkiye'nin Yumuşak Güç Sembollerinden Türk İşbirliği Koordinasyon Ajansı ve Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı'na Genel Bakış*, "Karadeniz Uluslararası Bilimsel Dergi", 2017, no. 33 (33), p. 209.

⁴¹ Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, <https://www.ytb.gov.tr/kurumsal/stratejik-plan>, "Stratejik Planı", 2019, accessed in: 23.01.2020.

⁴² A. N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 119–122.

challenges that the region is facing in recent times⁴³. A few months later, the “Balkan Think Tank Workshop” in Kosovo took place. In this, delegates from leading scientific centres from Turkey and the Balkans debated the possible ways of strengthening and developing mutual cooperation in areas such as: the economy, culture, science, society, etc.⁴⁴.

Another dimension of Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities’ engagement in the Balkans is diplomatic activity. As part of the “Foreign Ministry Diplomatic Academy Program”, YTB offers professional courses and internships at Turkish embassies and consulates in the Muslim-majority Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo). The representatives of the organization also remain in constant dialogue with diplomats from the aforementioned states, the purpose of which is to strengthen bilateral relations and to ensure formation of a coordinated response mechanism in the case of unforeseen events. Thus, YTB has been slowly becoming an institution that, by effectively coordinating a wide range of programs and projects to deepen the Turkish-Balkan partnership, in the future may contribute to increasing Turkey’s political influence in the Muslim part of the Balkan Peninsula⁴⁵.

3. Yunus Emre Institute

The last institution to be presented as part of this research is the Yunus Emre Institute (tur. YEE). Established in 2009 by the AKP government as a specialized unit of the Yunus Emre Foundation, the institute aims to promote Turkish history, culture, art and language. YEE has been performing its tasks through Turkish cultural centres located in approximately forty countries on five continents (Europe, Asia, Africa, North America and Australia). The most important activities offered by the institute include: Turkish language courses, organization of cultural events and art exhibitions, as well as supporting scientific research⁴⁶.

As in the case of TİKA and YTB, the region to which the Yunus Emre Institute pays special attention is the Balkan Peninsula. In accordance with the decisions of the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, YEE began its expansion

⁴³ Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, https://ytbweb1.blob.core.windows.net/files/resimler/activity_reports/2015-faaliyet-raporu.pdf, “Faaliyet Raporu”, 2016, accessed in: 23.01.2020.

⁴⁴ A. N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

⁴⁵ H. Tabak, *Political Intermediaries and Turkey’s State-to-Society Diplomacy in the Balkans*, “Marmara Üniversitesi Siyasal Bilimler Dergisi”, 2018, no. 1 (6), pp. 89–90.

⁴⁶ Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, https://www.yee.org.tr/sites/default/files/2023_vizyonu.pdf, “2023 Vizyonu”, 2015, accessed in: 24.01.2020.

outside Turkey's borders in 2009 when the first centre of the institute was opened in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁴⁷. This is the fact that perfectly explains the crucial role of Balkans in the AKP's foreign policy. Providing a broad catalogue of programs and projects for multidimensional social and cultural cooperation, Turkish cultural centres are currently located in eight Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania and Serbia. In some of the above-mentioned states, apart from the main office, there are local branches (e.g. Sarajevo, Mostar, and Fojnica in Bosnia, Tirana and Shkoder in Albania, Bucharest and Constanta in Romania)⁴⁸.

The activities of the Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans can be divided into two basic sections: education and culture. First and foremost, YEE is a leading institution for the teaching of the Turkish language, which, in the views of AKP politicians, should achieve in the future the status of global language (taking into account the number of users of Turkic languages). The Yunus Emre Institute's qualified staffs of teachers and lecturers conduct language courses for foreigners, ending with a Turkish proficiency exam. Furthermore, in collaboration with other organizations, the institute organizes cyclical summer schools in Turkey during which students learn the language, as well as Turkish culture, history and customs⁴⁹. In this context, one of the most notable YEE's programs in the field of education is the "Turcology Project". This offers a comprehensive model for learning the Turkish language. Under this program, scholarships and grants are provided, which is a vital incentive to students from the Balkan states. Among other projects executed in recent years by the Yunus Emre Institute in the Balkans, it is worth mentioning programs such as: "Turkish Elective Foreign Language", "Rebuilding the Cultural Heritage in the Balkans", "Revival of the Traditional Turkish Hand Crafts in the Balkans", "100 Turkey Library Project", "100 Turkey Book Translation Project", and "Joint Painting Exhibitions"⁵⁰.

As a result of the activity of the Yunus Emre Institute, the popularity of the Turkish language in the Balkans has been constantly growing. This is especially evident in the Muslim countries of the region. Here, students have often chosen Turkish as their preferred foreign language. According to data published at the

⁴⁷ M. Ekşi, *AK Parti Döneminde Türkiye'nin Balkanlarda Kamu-Kültürel Diplomasi Aracılığıyla Toplumsal-Kültürel Etkinliğini Artırma Politikası*, "I. Uluslararası Sosyal Bilimler Araştırmaları Kongresi", 2015, no. 1, p. 722.

⁴⁸ M. Ekşi, M. S. Erol, *The Rise and Fall Of Turkish Soft Power and Public Diplomacy*, "Akademik Bakış", 2018, no. 11 (23), p. 31.

⁴⁹ Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, https://www.yee.org.tr/sites/default/files/yayin/2017-2018_stratejik_plan_21.12.2017.pdf, "2017-2018 Stratejik Planı", 2017, accessed in: 24.01.2020.

⁵⁰ M. Ekşi, M. S. Erol, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

end of 2019, in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone as many as 20,000 people have benefited from the Turkish education system since the establishment of the first cultural centre in Sarajevo in 2009⁵¹. As language is an essential element of culture, the indisputable success of YEE's educational programs in the Balkans may indicate that at least some nations of the region are gradually adopting Turkish patterns.

At present, it is difficult to predict how the development of Turkish educational and cultural offer would affect Turkey's relations with the Balkan states. From the perspective of the AKP politicians, the key challenge will be to attract non-Muslim countries to participate more actively in Turkish initiatives⁵².

Conclusion

As part of this research it has been demonstrated by which methods the Turkish authorities have been implementing assumptions of soft power theory in their political practice towards the Balkans. Having at its disposal well-organized and successively expanded institutional structure, the AKP for several years has been conducting a great number of diverse projects and programs in the field of culture, art, education, architecture, etc. The common motive of all these initiatives is the intention to gain more influence in the region, which proves the significant positioning of the Balkan Peninsula in the foreign policy of the Justice and Development Party. Due to the aforementioned problems of Turkish diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa, it is likely that the role of the Balkans in AKP regional strategy will grow rapidly in the near future. Plans for Turkey's political expansion in the Balkans may be facilitated especially if the internal crisis in the European Union persists. Moreover, the lack of a coherent strategy regarding EU enlargement in the Western Balkans (e.g. failure to open accession negotiations with Albania and North Macedonia in October 2019) might soon have substantial impact on the geopolitical situation of this region⁵³. It cannot be ruled out that the recently observed divisions within the

⁵¹ T. Canbolat, *Institute expands Turkish language education in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, "Daily Sabah", <https://www.dailysabah.com/turkey/2019/12/20/institute-expands-turkish-language-education-in-bosnia-herzegovina>, 2019, accessed in: 24.01.2020.

⁵² H. Eşki Uğuz, R. Saygılı, *Turkish Public Diplomacy in The Balkans: The Power of Soft Power*, "Inquiry: Sarajevo Journal of Social Sciences", 2017, no. 1 (3), pp. 147–149.

⁵³ B. Huszka, *The power of perspective: Why EU membership still matters in the Western Balkans*, "European Council on Foreign Relations", https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_power_of_perspective_why_eu_membership_still_matters_in_western_balkans, 2020, accessed in: 25.01.2020.

EU would impede or even temporarily halt the European integration process. Under such conditions, incorporation of new members into the EU structures would not be possible for a long time, which would certainly induce all Balkan states to seek cooperation with other relevant actors in the region. Turkey, which already has an established position on the Balkan Peninsula, could then take this opportunity to expand its sphere of influence by further dimensions (e.g. economic, political, military).

Referring to the adopted theoretical framework of the image theory, it should be noted that Republic of Turkey creates its international image emphasizing the cultural and historical ties that connect all regions that were once parts of the Ottoman Empire. Turkey's perception as a powerful actor on the international arena, which constantly highlights its imperial past, results from strong martyr-ological tendencies in Turkish society. Political elites have correctly interpreted these moods, hence the AKP's narrative focuses on the idea of building a regional community based on shared values, the source of which is the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. As it has been illustrated by the above examples, Turkish engagement in recent years has been favourably received by the Balkan states, therefore the image of Turkey has been enhanced internationally.

Considering the overall range of AKP actions and initiatives in the Balkans, Turkish cultural activities are particularly well perceived. For obvious reasons, TİKA, YTB, and YEE projects are addressed predominantly to the Muslim communities of Bosnia, Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, but, nowadays, entire Balkan states have been increasingly benefiting from cultural support programs implemented by Turkey⁵⁴. Learning from past experiences, the Turks have already become aware that presenting the Ottoman past as so-called "peninsular golden age" had been a mistake, since the vast majority of Balkan states recognize the centuries of sultans' rule as a time of slavery and persecution. Fortunately, the AKP withdrew relatively quickly from its controversial rhetoric that indeed could have been considered as a manifestation of imperialism. The change in Turkish approach is evidenced by the aforementioned reconstruction of Christian monuments, which builds trust between Turkey and non-Muslim countries⁵⁵.

This research proves that the basic goal of President Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party is simply to preserve historical heritage from the Ottoman period for future generations. In addition, Turkey's cultural efforts in the Balkans have also a very practical aspect, i.e. development of tourism, which is an essential economic sector for all Balkan countries. Ultimately, there should

⁵⁴ A. N. Yılmaz, G. Kılıçoğlu, *op. cit.*, pp. 123–125.

⁵⁵ Y. Avcı, *op. cit.*, pp. 121–122.

be no doubt that the legacy of the region needs urgent renovation. In such circumstances, an actual source of funding for extensive conservation works falls into the background. After years of fruitful collaboration, during which hundreds of monuments have been renovated, Balkan state authorities appear to be no longer afraid of initiatives promoted by the Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency – provided their scope is limited to the cultural dimension⁵⁶. Similarly, educational and social support offered by the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities and Yunus Emre Institute has been helping the Balkan countries to undergo systemic transformation and to implement necessary internal reforms. At the same time, Turkey's engagement in the Balkans plays an extremely significant role in domestic policy. By cultivating the Ottoman legacy of the region, the AKP demonstrates to Turkish citizens that the Republic of Turkey, as an important actor in the international arena, cares for its imperial past⁵⁷.

According to critics of Turkey's presence in the Balkans, the real intention of the Justice and Development Party is an islamization of the region, as the basic form of TİKA's activity is renovation of mosques. Other opponents of Ankara's growing influence within the boundaries of former Ottoman Empire claim that the AKP's regional involvement is aimed at radicalizing Muslim communities and then harnessing tensions in the Balkan Peninsula to pursue its own political goals⁵⁸. So far none of these critical opinions have been confirmed. Representatives of Turkish diplomacy categorically and unequivocally deny these kinds of accusations, emphasizing the multifaceted support provided to all Balkan communities, and not only to religiously related ones. In addition, recent estimates show that the level of Muslim radicalism in the Balkans is slowly but steadily decreasing⁵⁹.

It would seem that the AKP politicians understand that in competition with the EU, USA, and Russia, the Republic of Turkey has no great chance to expand its political influence throughout the entire Balkan Peninsula. The degree of Turkish potential in the region is still insufficient, since renovation and educational projects alone will not allow Ankara to achieve international power

⁵⁶ Z. Weise, *Turkey's Balkan comeback*, "Politico", <https://www.politico.eu/article/turkey-western-balkans-comeback-european-union-recep-tayyip-erdogan/>, 2018, accessed in: 22.01.2020

⁵⁷ E. Efeğil, *AK Parti Hükümetinin Orta Doğu Politikası ve ABD Yönetimi ile Batılı Uzmanların Eleştirileri*, "Akademik Bakış", 2017, no. 9 (18), pp. 53–55.

⁵⁸ J. Bugajski, *Is Turkey Destabilizing Balkans?*, "CEPA Europe's Edge", 2018, accessed in: 22.01.2020.

⁵⁹ D. Gibas-Krzak, *Terrorism in the Balkans. Genesis – types – prognoses*, "Internal Security Review", 2018, no. 10 (19), pp. 332–333.

status⁶⁰. Despite the aforementioned remarks, Turkish cultural initiatives in the Balkans must be considered a success, as among all manifestations of Turkish soft power in neighboring regions, the Ottoman heritage restoration program has brought the most benefits to the Turks. An extremely important element of the strategy of renovating Turkish heritage in the Balkans is the possibility of transmitting an intangible asset (culture) into a material effect (architecture). Thus, old Ottoman monuments renewed by TİKA gain much greater significance in local awareness than ordinary buildings. This peculiar reification of power may contribute to Turkey's actual retrieval of lasting influence in the Balkan countries.

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⁶⁰ M. Zivanovic, *West Exaggerates Turkish Influence in Balkans, Report says*, “Balkan Insight”, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/03/13/westexaggerates-turkish-influence-in-balkans-report-says>, 2019, accessed in: 22.01.2020.

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Abstract: The aim of this article is to assess the effectiveness of actions taken by Turkish authorities in the 21st century which have been intended to strengthen multi-faceted cooperation with the Balkan states. Since the Justice and Development Party came to power in Turkey in 2002, one of the main tasks of its foreign policy has been an attempt to regain influence in the area of former Ottoman Empire. Turkish geographical location, imperial past, and rich culture created favorable conditions for such political expansion. In order to promote Turkey among the neighboring countries special institutions and agencies are involved (e.g. Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency, Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities, the Yunus Emre Institute). An analysis of selected activities of the above-mentioned organizations was a key part of this research.

Keywords: Republic of Turkey, Balkan states, Justice and Development Party, regional cooperation initiatives

Odzyskując wpływ: tureckie inicjatywy współpracy kulturowej na Bałkanach

Streszczenie: Celem niniejszego artykułu jest ocena efektywności podejmowanych przez tureckie władze w XXI wieku działań, które miały skutkować wzmocnieniem wieloaspektowej współpracy z państwami bałkańskimi. Odkąd Partia Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju przejęła rządy w 2002 roku, jednym z głównych zadań jej polityki zagranicznej była próba odzyskania wpływów na terenie dawnego Imperium Osmańskiego. Położenie geograficzne, dziedzictwo historyczne oraz bogactwo kulturowe Turcji stwarzały dogodne warunki do takiej ekspansji politycznej. W procesie promocji Republiki Turcji wśród sąsiednich państw zaangażowane są wyspecjalizowane instytucje i agencje (np. Turecka Agencja Współpracy i Koordynacji, Prezydencja dla Turków Za Granicą oraz Pokrewnych Społeczności, Instytut Yunusa Emre). Analiza wybranych działań wymienionych wyżej organizacji stanowi kluczowy element pracy.

Słowa kluczowe: Republika Turcji, państwa bałkańskie, Partia Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju, inicjatywy współpracy regionalnej