

## Contemporary Dynamics in Croatian-Turkish Relations (1992-2022)

### Hırvatistan-Türkiye İlişkilerinde Güncel Dinamikler (1992-2022)

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#### ABSTRACT

This study examines contemporary relations between Croatia and Turkey, focusing on developments since the independence of the Republic of Croatia in 1991. It adopts a historical perspective, recognizing the significance of early interactions between Croats and Turks, although the precise historical context of these encounters remains challenging to ascertain due to limited written records. The analysis is structured into three main chapters, each drawing upon existing literature. Initially, it investigates the interactions between Turkey and Croatia following Croatia's international recognition process. Special attention is paid to Turkey's efforts to mediate the Bosniak-Croat conflict during the Bosnian War. Moving into the new millennium, the study examines the evolution of the relationship between Turkey and Croatia following Croatia's accession to NATO. It explores the internal and external factors that influenced the divergent paths taken by both countries in their negotiations for European Union accession. Finally, the study provides an overview of various aspects of contemporary relations between Croatia and Turkey. Beyond political ties, these encompass growing economic exchanges, cultural collaborations, educational initiatives, as well as cooperation through multilateral platforms, illustrating the multifaceted nature of this bilateral relationship.

**Keywords:** Croatia, Turkey, Bilateral Relations, European Union

#### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, 1991 yılında Hırvatistan Cumhuriyeti'nin bağımsızlığını kazanmasından bu yana Hırvatistan ve Türkiye arasındaki güncel ikili ilişkilere odaklanarak gelişmeleri incelemektedir. Tarihsel bir bakış açısı benimseyen bu çalışma, Hırvatlar ve Türkler arasındaki erken dönem etkileşimlerin önemini kabul etmekle birlikte, sınırlı yazılı kayıtlar nedeniyle bu karşılaşmaların kesin tarihsel bağlamını tespit etmenin zor olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Analiz, her biri mevcut literatüre dayanan üç ana bölüme ayrılmıştır. İlk olarak, Hırvatistan'ın uluslararası tanınma sürecini takiben Türkiye ve Hırvatistan arasındaki etkileşimler incelenmekte, Bosna Savaşı sırasında Türkiye'nin Boşnak-Hırvat çatışmasında arabuluculuk yapma çabalarına özel önem verilmektedir. Yeni milenyumuna girerken, çalışma, Hırvatistan'ın NATO'ya katılımının ardından Türkiye ve Hırvatistan arasındaki ilişkilerin gelişimini incelemekte, her iki ülkenin Avrupa

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Birliđi'ne katılım müzakerelerinde izledikleri farklı yolları etkileyen iç ve dış faktörleri arařtırmaktadır. Son olarak, Hırvatistan ve Türkiye arasındaki güncel ilişkilerin çeřitli yönlerine genel bir bakış sunulmaktadır. Siyasi bağların ötesinde, bu ikili ilişkinin çok yönlü doğasını gösteren ve gittikçe artan ticaret hacmi, kültürel faaliyetler, eğitim girişimleri ve çok taraflı platformlardaki iş birliđini kapsamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Hırvatistan, Türkiye, İkili İlişkiler, Avrupa Birliđi

## 1. Introduction

A detailed observation and analysis of contemporary Croatian-Turkish relations would be incomplete without taking historical continuity into account. In order to understand the underlying elements of Croatian-Turkish relations, it is necessary to examine Turks' contacts with Croats throughout history and the impact of these contacts on Croats. The friendly bilateral relations, which began in the early 1990s and have lasted for more than 30 years, go back much further. However, since these relations developed within the framework of the policies implemented by the Ottoman Empire in the Balkans, they should be analyzed within the framework of the Balkans policies. In this context, it's crucial to highlight that the Ottoman Empire identified more as a European state prior to being considered a Middle Eastern or Asian state.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, many countries have refrained from identifying themselves as a “Balkan countries” due to the negative perception that the concept of the Balkans evokes.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in the use of the terms “Balkan” and “Balkan peninsula” it should be clearly emphasized whether the term has a geographical or historical meaning. Croatian politicians and political scientists argue that Croatia, in the context of contemporary geopolitics and international relations, should not be associated with the Balkans and especially with the Western Balkans.<sup>3</sup> While the official state policy of any country should not be confused with the ideas and opinions of geographers, historians and other experts who have tried to define the Balkans, the concept of the Balkans is a matter of debate in a wide range of academic circles. French researcher André Blanc considers the Balkans to be a “problem” rather than a region,<sup>4</sup> while Greek geopolitical expert Georges Prévélakis argues that, rather than a region, it is a “concept”.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most relevant of all is Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans*, a book that quickly sparked interest both in the former Yugoslav states and, to this day, continues to see new editions being published. Anyway, this study acknowledges the fact that Croatia is a Southeastern European country but does not ignore its connections with the Western Balkan countries, especially in terms of analyzing relations with Turkey.

It is not known how and under what circumstances the first relations between Croats and Turks were established, nor is it known exactly when these relations began. Especially considering the turbulent developments in the Middle Ages and the nomadic backgrounds of both races, it seems unlikely that clear information about the first contacts between the two peoples could be found without any written evidence. However, it can be concluded that Croats

1 Sumer Fahrettin, “Turkey, a Special EU Neighbour Patiently Awaiting a ‘Promised Marriage’”, *EuroTimes*, No:7 (2009), 124.

2 Among the European countries, there are North Macedonia and Bulgaria, which willingly define themselves as “Balkan countries”.

3 Mirela Slukan Altuč, “Hrvatska kao Zapadni Balkan – Geografska stvarnost ili nametnuti identitet”, *Društvena istraživanja: časopis za opća društvena pitanja*, C.XX, No:2 (2011), 402.

4 Aude Rapatout, “Regards Sur Les Balkans: Une histoire en palimpseste”, *Hypothèses*, No:1. (2006), 238.

5 Georges Prévélakis, *Les Balkans: Cultures et géopolitique* (Paris: Nathan, 1994), 17.

and Turks had relations long before the Ottoman period, especially through some words that have passed into South Slavic languages and are thought to have come from Turkish. For example, *balvan* (Old Slavic \*bъlvanъ ← one of the Turkic languages? Avaric ≈ balaban), *ban* (Avaric bajan: army head ← Turkish; \*bāj: rich ← Persian), *biljeg* (← \*bělěgъ (rus. belěg) ← Avaric), *kovčeg* (stsl. kovъčegъ ← Avarish ≈ Mongolian qagurčag); *šašlik* (Russian šašlyk ← Turkish ≈ Tatar šyšlyk ≈ Tatar šyš: shish), *klobuk* (Old Slavic \*klobukъ ← Turkish ≈ Crimean Tatar kalpak: kapa), *toljaga* (Old Slavic \*tojaga ← Turkish; Uyghur tajak: dir), and *šaran* (Old Slavic šarъ: renk ← Turkish) from Old Turkic are just some of the examples.<sup>6</sup> The fact that these words exist today in many Slavic languages, including Croatian, is a clear indication of how strong the contacts between languages were.<sup>7</sup>

With the beginning of Ottoman rule, particularly in Bosnia, new contacts along the Croatian-Bosnian border led to about a centuries-long interaction between the two cultures and civilizations. Although it is not possible to speak clearly about the raids of the Ottoman army on the territory of the Croatian-Hungarian Kingdom, of which Croatia had been a part since 1102, it is known that the first Ottoman raids were not systematic.<sup>8</sup> The presence of the Ottoman Empire in Bosnia since the 15<sup>th</sup> century and the fear of the Ottomans in Croatia, which was seen as the “Bulwark of Christendom” (Latin: *Antemurale Christianitatis*) in the eyes of Western states, closely affected the Croatian literature of the period and left indelible traces in cultural codes. When talking about the Ottoman influence on the countries in Southeastern Europe, it should be considered that some parts of Croatia were under Ottoman rule for 173 years (1526-1699), Bosnia-Herzegovina for 396 years (1482-1878) and Serbia for 440 years (1389-1829).<sup>9</sup> Croatia was directly affected by Ottoman activities in the region. In particular, the population of the Ottoman-influenced areas fled to safer areas. For example, the first examples of people leaving Bosnia and fleeing to the Dubrovnik region can be found as early as 1386.<sup>10</sup> Such mass migrations have led to “entirely new ethnic and cultural configurations where three major religious traditions clash simultaneously, often intermingling in the same space”.<sup>11</sup>

Although the contacts between Croats and the Ottoman Empire had a great impact on different aspects of society in terms of culture, gastronomy, music, literature and many other aspects, two important developments with long-term consequences should be emphasized.

6 For etymology cf. *Hrvatski enciklopedijski rječnik*, Ed. Ljiljana Jojić ve Ranko Matasović (Zagreb: Novi Liber, 2002).

7 On the progress of the Cumans or Kipchaks in the Balkans during the pre-Ottoman period, cf. Ahmet Gokmel, “Balkanlarda Osmanlı Öncesi Kuman/Kıpçak Türkleri”, *Journal of Universal History Studies (JUHS)*, No:3., (2020), p. 99-111.

8 Borislav Grgin, “The Ottoman influences on Croatia in the second half of the fifteenth century”, *Povijesni prilozi*, No:23 (2002), 88.

9 Carl Brown, *İmparatorluk Mirası: Balkanlar’da ve Ortadoğu’da Osmanlı Damgası*, translated by Gül Çağalı Güven (İstanbul: İletişim, 2000), 9-10.

10 Emil Heršak, “Panoptikum migracija – Hrvati, hrvatski prostor i Evropa”, *Migracijske i etničke teme*, IX, No:3-4 (1993), 246.

11 Heršak, “Panoptikum”, 246.

Namely, Croatia's modern border with Bosnia is the product of interaction with the Ottoman Empire and the Treaty of Passarowitz of 1718, which regulated the Venetian-Ottoman border, recognizing the old Croatian border at the confluence of the Danube and Sava, with Zemun as the eastern border point.<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, it is important to emphasize the importance of the idea that the Ottoman withdrawal from Croatian territory caused fundamental changes in Croatian national identity. Nenad Moačanin, one of the most important figures in Croatian historiography on Ottoman history, points out that the Ottomans' departure from Croatian territory was as important as their arrival in the region, and emphasizes that the processes initiated by the Ottoman Empire had an impact on the ethnic and cultural identity of the Croats, as well as on the distribution of territory.<sup>13</sup> Turkish writers also agree that the Ottoman influence on the formation of Croatian national consciousness is indisputable.<sup>14</sup> Especially in oral (folk) literature, the interaction between the Ottomans and the Croats is portrayed as if it were only a history of wars and battles. Based on this narrative, historiographers of Southeastern European countries also commonly underestimate the complexity of these relations.<sup>15</sup>

Until Croatia declared independence, its relations with Turkey were closely tied to the official policies of the states to which Croatia belonged. The most striking example of possible cooperation was seen in post-World War I Turkey. In order to protect itself from threats from more powerful countries, Turkey maintained friendly relations with neighboring countries and tried to ensure its security by signing non-aggression treaties.<sup>16</sup> In 1933, one year after the Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality was signed with Yugoslavia, the Balkan Pact was established between Turkey, Greece, Romania and Yugoslavia. According to the founding charter of the Pact, the countries "assured each other's borders and confirmed that they would consult each other on their actions in the Balkans."<sup>17</sup> However, although the then Turkish Foreign Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu tried to revive the Balkan Pact in 1939, the problems in the member countries made this attempt unsuccessful.<sup>18</sup> Yet, in accordance with the confidential accords delineated within the annex of the Balkan Pact, in the event of an aggression directed towards any member state, it was stipulated that the remaining member states would be construed as having become parties to the conflict.<sup>19</sup>

Although relations between Turkey and Croatia were overshadowed by relations with Yugoslavia and above all, Serbia from the early 20th century until the 1990s, when Yugoslavia dissolved, Croatia has always been aware of Turkey's strategic importance throughout history.

12 Drago Roksandić, "Posavska krajina/Granica od 1718. do 1739. godine", *Ekonomska i ekohistorija*, III, No:3 (2007), 65.

13 Nenad Moačanin, "Croatico-Turcica: pregled povijesne interakcije", *Hrvatska revija*, XV, No:2. (2015), 12.

14 Burhan Erdoğan, "Galtung Üçgeni ve Hırvatistan Bağımsızlığı", (Online), access date: 10 December 2022, 5.

15 Vjieran Kursar, *Croatian Levantines in Ottoman Istanbul* (Istanbul: The ISIS Press, 2021), 16.

16 Zehra Önder, *II. Dünya Savaşı'nda Türk Dış Politikası* (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2010), 308.

17 Nezihe Selcen Korkmazcan, *İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türk Diplomasisi* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Yayınları, 2021), 21.

18 Önder, *II. Dünya Savaşı'nda Türk Dış Politikası*, 55.

19 Korkmazcan, *İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türk Diplomasisi*, 21.

For example, in the early 1940s, the so-called Independent State of Croatia (NDH), a puppet state known for its closeness to Nazi ideology and Hitler, approached Turkey during World War II and attempted to have its independence recognized.<sup>20</sup> Despite their negative ideological connotations, these diplomatic efforts were the first official attempts to establish relations between Croatia and Turkey. However, Turkey did not abandon the strategy of “active neutrality” that it continued to pursue during the war and acted distant and controlled towards new state formations.

## 2. Croatian War of Independence and Post-War Period (1992-1999)

Of course, it is impossible to simplify the reasons for the breakup of Yugoslavia, but more than thirty years later, there is still no consensus among historians and political scientists as to what directly or indirectly caused its breakup. Taking into account the research on this issue, it is possible to talk about internal and external conditions that led to the breakup. When we talk about external, i.e. international circumstances, the following stand out: The end of the Cold War, the collapse of socialist systems in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the establishment of the European Community (EC), the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent emergence of new independent states.<sup>21</sup> As for internal problems, there are many more and it is difficult to clarify exactly which of them influenced the disintegration process and to what extent, but it is possible to say that weak democratization, subordination of political rights and political actions to the rules and interests of the ruling party, one-party rule, party supremacy over constitutions, socialist self-government, inefficient state apparatus, increasing foreign debt and complex international relations come to the fore.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Croatian historians generally agree that the idea of a Greater Serbia was among the reasons for the breakup.<sup>23</sup>

The first concrete step in the realization of Croatia’s independence was the elections to the Parliament of the Socialist Republic of Croatia in 1990. These elections went down in history as the first multi-party elections in Croatia, with the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), led by Franjo Tuđman, winning 205 of the 365 seats in the parliament, an absolute majority.<sup>24</sup> When discussing the importance of Franjo Tuđman, Turkish authors underline that he “stood out as the most important and leading figure of Croatian nationalism”.<sup>25</sup> On the other hand, General Janko Bobetko, former Chief of the General Staff of Croatia, who gave a lecture at

20 NDH, which was recognized by Italy, Germany and Japan immediately after its establishment, hoped to strengthen its position in the international community by gaining recognition from as many countries as possible. Aware of its limited power and its great influence on the Axis Powers, especially Germany, the NDH sought to position itself more firmly in the ongoing war. There is no doubt that Croatians have foreseen that one of the most effective ways of this positioning is to be recognized by Turkey.

21 Božidar Javorović, “Raspad Jugoslavije i sigurnost u Evropi”, *Politička misao: časopis za politologiju*, XXXI, No:1 (1994), 99.

22 Javorović, “Raspad Jugoslavije i sigurnost u Evropi”, 99-100.

23 Javorović, “Raspad Jugoslavije i sigurnost u Evropi”, 100.

24 Tanil Bora, *Milliyetçiliğin provokasyonu* (İstanbul: Birikim Yayınları, 2. Print, 1995), 160.

25 Bora, *Milliyetçiliğin provokasyonu*, 131.

the Turkish Military Academy on December 4, 1995, compared Tuđman to Atatürk and said, “Both nations had visionary leaders who achieved their main goal in international relations and clearly defined their national objectives”.<sup>26</sup> In the process that followed, the new constitution of Croatia, known as the “Christmas Constitution”, was adopted in December 1990 and Serbs were stripped of their “constituent nation” status and given minority status instead.<sup>27</sup>

On May 19, 1991, a referendum on the independence of the Republic of Croatia was held, in which approximately 93% of the 3 million voters voted for the independence and sovereignty of Croatia, and the Croatian Parliament, respecting the directly expressed will of the citizens, adopted on June 25, 1991 the Constitutional Decision on the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Croatia.<sup>28</sup> On October 8, 1991, Croatia severed its (state-legal) ties with the other republics within Yugoslavia and then officially and legally became an independent and sovereign state. However, in accordance with agreements with the European Commission (EC), on July 7, 1991, Croatia adopted a mandatory three-month moratorium on all activities related to the implementation of the decisions on sovereignty, autonomy and independence.<sup>29</sup> While some authors consider the moratorium as “the EC’s first success” and “the first real example of institutional cooperation”, it is emphasized that the three-month period gave the Yugoslav People’s Army (JNA) space to deploy Serbian troops in Slovenia and Croatia.<sup>30</sup> However, analysts analyzing the developments of the period agree that the situation in Croatia was different from that in Slovenia. The main reason is that the Serbian community, which the Milošević government in Serbia was trying to annex to Serbia, was located in part of Croatia.<sup>31</sup> The bombing of the Croatian government building on the day the international moratorium ended was a clear indication that the Serbian leadership, backed by the JNA, did not support a peaceful solution to the Yugoslav crisis.<sup>32</sup>

In order to increase international recognition, in August 1991, the then Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Zvonimir Šeparović, together with his deputy, Vinko Kandžija, received Ali Mesut Orsa, Consul General of Turkey in Zagreb, with whom he “shared the latest developments

26 *Hrvatistan Eski Genelkurmay Başkanı Gen. Janko Bobetko'nun Harp Akademileri'nde Verdiği Konferans (04 Aralık 1995)* (İstanbul: Harp Akademileri Basım Evi, 1995), 3.

27 Hakan Demir, “1991-2015 yılları arasında Hırvatistan siyasal yaşamı”, *Soğuk Savaş Sonrasında Balkanlar (1990-2015)* (Ankara: Nobel Akademik Yayıncılık, Ed. İbrahim Kamil, 2. print, 2021), 224.

28 Ana Hiljevac Tuković & Dražen Živić, “Hrvatske i njezina međunarodna i diplomatska afirmacija: između protivljenja i odobravanja”, *Pilar — Časopis za društvene i humanističke studije*, XVI, No:31 (2021), 124.

29 Tuković & Živić, “Hrvatske i njezina međunarodna i diplomatska afirmacija”, 128.

30 Ezeli Azarkan, “Slovenya, Hırvatistan ve Bosna-Hersek Devletlerinin tanınmasında siyaset ve hukukun etkisi”, *Dicle Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi*, XXI, No:35 (2016), 43-44.

31 Azarkan, “Slovenya, Hırvatistan ve Bosna-Hersek Devletlerinin tanınmasında siyaset ve hukukun etkisi”, 74.

32 Tuković & Živić, “Hrvatske i njezina međunarodna i diplomatska afirmacija”, 129.

on the situation in Croatia.”<sup>33</sup> On the occasion of the meeting, the strengthening of cooperation between the two countries was also emphasized.<sup>34</sup> Thus, although Croatia had just declared its independence and was not yet a country recognized by Turkey, the first diplomatic contacts were made through the Consulate General in Zagreb. On the other hand, active communication between the Turkish and Yugoslav authorities continued. As a matter of fact, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Safa Giray visited Yugoslav Federal Foreign Minister Budimir Lončar on August 28-29, 1991.<sup>35</sup>

One of the best assessments trying to explain to the Croatian public what Turkey’s position is in relation to the developments in the region was written by Pjer Šimunović.<sup>36</sup> “The strong crescent is on Croatia’s side”, emphasizing that Turkey emerged from the Cold War as a “reliable ally of the West” and an “example for Muslim nations”.<sup>37</sup> Emphasizing Turkey’s role and importance in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the author reminded that Turgut Özal was an “anticommunist” and pointed out that Turkey’s interest in the Balkans should be evaluated in terms of its relations with Greece and its potential to prevent Russia from expanding its sphere of influence to the Adriatic Sea.<sup>38</sup>

The visit of Croatian Foreign Minister Dr. Zvonimir Šeparović to Turkey in January 1992 brought relations between the two countries to a new level. The Foreign Minister of Croatia, a country not yet recognized in the international community, was received in Turkey by then President Turgut Özal, Prime Minister Süleyman Demirel and Foreign Minister Hikmet Çetin.<sup>39</sup> The reception of Šeparović at the highest level is a clear indication and harbinger of Turkey’s next move. During the talks in Ankara, the Turkish side expressed its deep concern about the

33 The diplomatic representation, which has been operating as the Consulate General of the Republic of Turkey in Zagreb since 1969, was elevated to the level of an embassy after the establishment of diplomatic relations. The following served as consul general during this period: Emin Şerif Küçükkuş (1969-1973), Sakıp Çoruk (1973-1975), Zübeyir Aker (1975-1977), Baba Ordemir (1977-1978), Cengiz Sebükcebe (1978-1982), Feridun Rua (1982-1986), Aziz Yakan (1986-1990) and Ali Mesut Orsa (1990-1993). Following the establishment of diplomatic relations, the Consulate General of Turkey in Zagreb was elevated to the level of Embassy. Those who have served as ambassadors since April 1993 are: Yüksel Söylemez (1993-1995), Daryal Batıbay (1995-1998), Selahattin Alpar (1998-2001), Ufuk Tevfik Okyayüz (2001-2004), Fatma Dicle Kopuz (2004-2008), Umur Apaydın (2008-2010), Burak Özügergin (2010-2014), Ahmet Tuta (2014-2016), Mustafa Babür Hızlan (2017-2022), Yavuz Selim Kıran (2022-2023). So far ambassadors at the Croatian Embassy in Ankara are: Hidajet Biščević (1993-1996), Ivica Tomić (1996-2000), Amir Muharemi (2001-2005), Gordan Bakota (2005-2010), Dražen Hrastić (2011-2015), Željko Kuprešak (2015-2017), Hrvoje Cvitanović (2018-...). In addition, due to the importance and location of Istanbul, the Consulate General of Croatia in Istanbul was opened in 1995. Consuls general so far are: Luka Meštrović (1999-2002), Kamilo Vrana (2002-2004), Damir Perinčić (2004-2010), Amir Muharemi (2010-2014), Ivan Mirković (2014-2018), Ivana Zerec (2018- ...). Croatia also has two honorary consuls in Turkey: Candan Çorbacıoğlu in Izmir (since 2005) and Fettah Tamince in Antalya (since 2010).

34 M. I., “Šeparović razgovarao s M. Orsom”, *Večernji list* (Aug 16, 1991), 3.

35 Dışişleri Bakanlığı 1991 Tarihçesi (Ankara: Dışişleri Eğitim Merkezi, 1992), 48.

36 Considering the extent of his knowledge, the analyzes and predictions made by the journalist in question are quite important. He is currently Croatia’s Ambassador to the United States.

37 Pjer Šimunović, “Moćni Polumjesec uz Hrvatsku”, *Večernji list*, (Nov 26, 1991), 16.

38 Pjer Šimunović, “Moćni Polumjesec uz Hrvatsku”, 16.

39 A. Babić, “Priznavanje Hrvatske za Tursku je pitanje dana: Turska zabrinuta zbog BiH”, *Večernji list*, (Jan 11, 1992), n.p.



situation developing in the former Yugoslavia and expressed a special interest in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Macedonia, including the possibility of sending assistance to help Bosnia and Herzegovina exercise its sovereignty.<sup>40</sup> The Croatian side emphasized that they “lived under communist Serbian persecution for 45 years” and that the war also led to a refugee crisis.<sup>41</sup> Considering the changing conjuncture in Central Asia with the dissolution of the Soviet Union—but also keeping in mind Turkey’s role in NATO and in the Islamic world—Croatian foreign minister Šeparović stated that “Turkey’s recognition of our country is of very special importance for us”.<sup>42</sup> The first news about Turkey’s potential active role in the conflict was shared with the public in January 1992. However, Turkey was not invited to the peacekeeping force to be organized by the United Nations (UN) because it was neighboring Yugoslavia.<sup>43</sup>

Turkey officially recognized Croatia on February 6, 1992. Unlike the EC countries, Turkey recognized not only Slovenia and Croatia, but also Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, becoming the second country to recognize all four breakaway countries of Yugoslavia.<sup>44</sup> Turkey’s recognition of the newly established states is an indication that Milošević did not get what he wanted from his visit to Ankara at the end of January.<sup>45</sup> With the recognition decision of the Council of Ministers, the decision to simultaneously recognize the countries that declared independence from Yugoslavia “in line with a previous decision in principle” was implemented.<sup>46</sup> Minister of State and Government Spokesperson Akın Gönen stated that diplomatic relations with the newly recognized countries would be conducted “as in the past” through the embassy in Belgrade, and that separate protocols would be signed with the four countries that were recognized.<sup>47</sup>

Bosnia and Herzegovina has always been on the agenda of high-level meetings between Croatian and Turkish officials and a top agenda item in the Croatian-Bosniak conflict, which the Turkish side has tried to stop through mediation. The importance of the events in the region for Ankara can be summarized in the following sentence uttered by Süleyman Demirel in July 1994: “In the last 2.5 years, especially because of Bosnia-Herzegovina, we have been dealing with this region as much as with Turkey’s personal affairs.”<sup>48</sup> Evaluating Bosniak-Croat relations, Demirel also made the following statements: “The right thing for Bosniaks to do is to unite with Croats.”<sup>49</sup> The phenomenon of Turkey’s mediation and the international community’s sometimes favorable view of Turkey’s involvement in international problems can be likened to its role as a mediator in the current Russia-Ukraine war.

40 Babić, “Priznavanje Hrvatske za Tursku je pitanje dana”, n.p.

41 “Hırvat bakan Türkiye’de”, *Cumhuriyet* (Jan 10, 1992), 11.

42 “Hırvat bakan Türkiye’de”, 11.

43 Barçın Yinanç, “Türkiye, BM gücüne davet edilmeyecek”, *Milliyet*, (Jan 13, 1992), 9.

44 “Makedonya’yı tanıdık”, *Sabah*, (Feb 7, 1992), 13.

45 Uzgel İlhan: “Balkanlarla İlişkiler”, *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, (İstanbul: İletişim, Ed. Baskın Oran, 2020, 17. Print), 491.

46 “4 Yugoslav cumhuriyeti tanıdı”, *Cumhuriyet*, (Feb 7, 1992), 10.

47 “Slovenya, Makedonya, Hırvatistan ve Bosna-Hersek’in bağımsızlığı tanıyor”, *Milliyet*, (Feb 7, 1992), 13.

48 Hülûsi Turgut, *Avrasya ve Demirel* (İstanbul: ABC Basın Ajansı, II. Cilt, 2002), 330.

49 Turgut, *Avrasya ve Demirel*, 331.

Speaking about the beginning of Croatian-Turkish relations, Hidajet Biščević, the first Croatian Ambassador to Ankara, described the emergence of the idea of Turkey as an ally in his memoirs, which were published in a book. According to him, Croatia also kept in mind the fact that Turkey was an American ally in NATO and its Ottoman heritage. Biščević says that Tuđman's meeting with Özal, which was also his first major state visit, took place "on the basis of the political analysis and historical-psychological basis".<sup>50</sup>

Turkey's role was crucial in the war in Bosnia and above all in the resolution of the conflict between Croats and Bosniaks. Turkey recognized Serbia as an occupier relatively early on and then President Özal publicly declared Milošević and the Serbian government as war criminals. Turkey has made economic and diplomatic efforts to stop the conflict in Southeast Europe. This effort was primarily aimed at strengthening its trade relations with various organizations in the region, but also its willingness to participate in the reconstruction of infrastructure after the end of the war is clearly visible. Turkey's relations with the United States at the time can also be interpreted in this context. Having similar views on the war in Bosnia, Turkey and the United States agreed not only on military operations but also on diplomatic activities and organizing cooperation.<sup>51</sup> Having a similar perspective to Europe, Turkey advocated for a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Bosnia.

For Turkey, the defense of stability in Southeastern Europe was very important for both commercial and political reasons in order to get closer to other parts of Europe. While these issues led Turkey to actively participate in conflict resolution, the process had both positive and negative consequences. First, Yugoslavia started to support the terrorist organization PKK in reaction to the Turkish stance in Bosnia. In addition, there were disagreements with countries such as Britain, France and Russia, which did not agree with Turkey on some issues regarding the solution of the problems in the Balkans.<sup>52</sup>

Tuđman's last visit to Turkey and his last meeting with Demirel took place in March 1999. On the first day of the visit, Tuđman was awarded Turkey's highest state decoration (awarded to foreigners) and an honorary doctorate from Ankara University.<sup>53</sup> Evaluating the bilateral relations within the scope of the visit, Demirel attracted the attention of public opinion in Croatia by using the phrase "Turkey is Tuđman's second homeland".<sup>54</sup> President Tuđman of Croatia died on December 10, 1999. The only head of state at his funeral was Suleyman Demirel, President of Turkey.<sup>55</sup> Croatian media considered that "world statesmen did not

50 Hido Biščević, *Diplomacija za stolom* (Zagreb: EPH Media, 2013), 208.

51 İlhan Uzgel, "ABD ve NATO'yla İlişkiler", *Türk Dış Politikası: Kurtuluş Savaşından Bugüne Olgular, Belgeler, Yorumlar*, (İstanbul: İletişim, Ed. Baskın Oran, 17. Baskı, 2020), 275.

52 Uzgel, "Balkanlarla İlişkiler", 499-500.

53 "Tuđman'a doktora unvanı", *Cumhuriyet*, (Feb 12, 1999), 5.

54 Denis Romac, "Demirel: Turska, druga Tuđmanova domovina", *Novi list*, (Feb 11, 1999), 2.

55 "Demirel se poklonio Tuđmanu", *Večernji list*, (Dec 14, 1999), 4.

like Tuđman<sup>56</sup> and declared Demirel “the star of Tuđman’s funeral”.<sup>57</sup> Turkish newspapers, on the other hand, reported that Tuđman’s funeral was “attended only by Turkish President Demirel”.<sup>58</sup> Demirel, who paid his respects in front of Tuđman’s body, signed the book of condolence and wrote the following “My dear friend Tuđman has rendered very important services in ensuring peace and stability in the region. He made joint efforts in the development of relations between Croatia and Turkey.”<sup>59</sup>

It is still not easy to explain the trust that Demirel and Tuđman had in each other. Their friendship, which began in 1992, has continued over the years with continuous and regular mutual visits. The two Presidents met three times in Croatia (1994, 1995, 1997) and three times in Turkey (1993, 1996, 1999). Demirel also visited Croatia again in 1999 and 2000. As a result, very good relations were established between the two countries thanks to the friendly relations of the two presidents. It is possible to say that Tuđman appreciated Demirel’s political experience and Demirel appreciated Tuđman’s influence in the region. The two presidents, and above all two friends, had mutual trust, understood each other on many levels and respected each other’s views. Demirel’s attendance at Tuđman’s funeral as the only head of state is engraved in Croatian collective memory and is a recurring theme in their daily politics.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. The EU journey and the road to alliance in NATO (2000-2012)

The 2000s brought significant changes in the domestic politics of both Croatia and Turkey. Turkey was rocked by devastating earthquakes in August and November 1999, which killed tens of thousands of people and dealt a heavy economic blow to the country. Some analysts consider that the arrival in Ankara of US President Bill Clinton, who addressed the Turkish Grand National Assembly in 1999, “opened a new chapter in Western relations with Turkey”.<sup>61</sup> Changes have also occurred in the field of human rights, and “shifts in the modality of solving certain problems that signal a kind of reversal” have also been noticed.<sup>62</sup> When it came to the harmonization of the penal code, one of the main conditions for Turkey’s accession to the EU, the death penalty was replaced by life imprisonment. At that time, it is possible to say that “the political will in Turkey had the support of the whole country to reach the necessary parameters for the EU”.<sup>63</sup> In Turkey, the new millennium was marked by the coming to power

56 “Svjetski državnici nisu voljeli Tuđmana”, *Večernji list*, (Dec 15, 1999), 15.

57 Z. Bajt, “Turski predsjednik Demirel glavna zvijezda na Tuđmanovom pogrebu”, *Novi list*, (13 Dec, 1999), 2.

58 “Zagreb Tucman’ı uğurladı”, *Cumhuriyet*, (Dec 14, 1999), 8.

59 “Zagreb Tucman’ı uğurladı”, 8.

60 Current Croatian President Milanović has emphasized this more than once, for example “Turski predsjednik otpratio Tuđmana na vječni počinak: “To se ne zaboravlja!” Milanović sipao zahvale turskom prijatelju”, (Sep 8 2022, online), [www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/turski-predsjednik-otpratio-tudmana-na-vjecni-pocinak-to-se-ne-zaboravlja-milanovic-sipao-zahvale-turskom-prijatelju-2021307/](http://www.dnevno.hr/vijesti/turski-predsjednik-otpratio-tudmana-na-vjecni-pocinak-to-se-ne-zaboravlja-milanovic-sipao-zahvale-turskom-prijatelju-2021307/), access date: Dec 19, 2022.

61 Antonelo Biagini, *Povijest moderne Turske*, translated by Šenol Selimović & Nella Popović (Zagreb: Srednja Europa, 2012), 166-167.

62 Biagini, *Povijest moderne Turske*, 175.

63 Biagini, *Povijest moderne Turske*, 177.

of the AK Party, which “not only managed to stay in power for a very long time, but also fundamentally changed Turkish society and the political order”.<sup>64</sup> Not content with this, the new government has initiated the process of change by reforming the Kemalist bureaucratic-intellectual-judicial-military order that had ruled Turkey for decades.<sup>65</sup>

The most comprehensive overview of Turkey published in Croatia is a monograph on the Middle East, written by lecturers at the Faculty of Political Science in Zagreb. Dejan Jović, the author of the chapter on Turkey, first provides a brief historical overview of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the subsequent construction of the Turkish identity, which would become the official identity of the post-Ottoman republic.<sup>66</sup> “Kemalism as a doctrine and a cult”, Jović discusses the process of the creation of the Turkish nation and the relationship between the conception of civic nationalism and ethnic and religious elements, and points out the paradox of Kemalism’s promotion of secularism while at the same time welcoming Muslims from the Balkans. In conclusion, Jović concludes that Atatürk was “a defensive realist in foreign policy and a radical (revolutionary) constructivist in domestic and identity politics”.<sup>67</sup> Discussing post-Cold War Turkish politics, the author argues that Özal “was the first to introduce neo-Ottoman elements into Turkish foreign policy,” advocating a move away from the Kemalist policy of passivity and isolationism, and therefore acting in alliance with the United States, as well as taking part in the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Jović describes the post-2002 period in Turkey as an “earthquake” and argues that with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power, there have been changes at both domestic and foreign political levels. According to Jović, “the biggest domestic political problem of the Erdoğan administration is linked to the resistance of secular, especially military-intelligence structures, which remain loyal to Kemalism and consider [Erdoğan’s] policies dangerous for Turkey”.<sup>68</sup>

When it comes to Turkish foreign policy, Jović generally refers to Ahmet Davutoğlu’s book “Strategic Depth” and focuses on his strategy towards the Balkans. Jović also cites Davutoğlu’s thoughts on the importance of the Balkans as a region of primary interest, as well as his criticism of the definition of the Balkans and the Middle East through a Eurocentric prism. On the other hand, Turkey’s economic, political and security interests in the Balkans, especially in the regions inhabited by Bosniaks and Albanians, are emphasized.<sup>69</sup> In conclusion, Jović points out that during the AKP years, Turkey has gained many foreign policy opponents, while on the other hand, “it has achieved tremendous economic success, which has increased its influence in international politics”. The author argues that “Turkey has undoubtedly become

64 Maurus Reinkowski, *Geschichte der Türkei: Von Atatürk bis zur Gegenwart*, (München: C.H. Beck, 2021), 317.

65 Reinkowski, *Geschichte der Türkei*, 317.

66 Dejan Jović, “Turska”, *Bliski istok: politika i povijest*, Ed. Mirjana Kasapović, (Zagreb: Političke analize, 2016), 354-355.

67 Jović, “Turska”, 357-359.

68 Jović, “Turska”, 363-364.

69 Jović, “Turska”, 367.

an important regional power” and predicts that its power will increase further in the coming decades, thanks to its growing population.<sup>70</sup>

Another book on Turkey that has attracted the attention of the Croatian public is “Turkey” written by Amir Muharemi. Muharemi, who previously served as Croatian Ambassador in Ankara and Consul General in Istanbul, provides an overview of the history of the Ottoman Empire, the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, and domestic and foreign political events. Although the book cannot be characterized as a scholarly work due to inconsistencies in citation, it is a valuable contribution to the study of Turkey in Croatia due to the large amount of comprehensive information from various fields. In the chapter on post-2000 Turkey, Muharemi characterizes the AKP Party’s rise to power as a “glorious victory” and calls it “Turkey’s most stable period of government in decades”.<sup>71</sup> Likewise, the author argues that the new government “took very conciliatory decisions, taking care not to cause unnecessary conflicts”; in the same period, inflation was brought down, growth and employment were achieved, and “a climate of climate and prosperity that had not existed for many years” was created.<sup>72</sup>

On the other hand, Croatia started an accelerated democratization process in the early 2000s. It is possible to say that the resolution of the problems highlighted by the international community had a major impact on the changes in society. First of all, analysts emphasize that the definition of national identity, the consolidation of national borders, as well as the overthrow of the HDZ, which had been in power since Croatia’s independence, contributed to this.<sup>73</sup> Lasting changes on the domestic and external political front were only made possible by the death of President Tuđman in December 1999, followed by parliamentary and presidential elections in 2000. A coalition government of social democrats and liberals, formed in these elections, took a different approach to issues such as the economy, the functioning of state administration, civil liberties and the rule of law. One of the major changes was the constitutional reform, which transferred most presidential powers from the president to parliament and the prime minister. Shortly afterwards, Croatia became a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and signed an association agreement with the EU. Based on the definition of Croatia’s position in the Balkans, “the official discourse initiated and used immediately after the 2000 elections can be seen as an attempt to move Croatia to another geographical region in order to consolidate its non-Balkan identity.”<sup>74</sup> For a long time, it was debated whether Croatia belonged to Central Europe, the Mediterranean or the Balkans, but after the change of power, it was tried to be defined outside of all the geographical constructs mentioned so far. At that time, it is possible to say that their anti-European rhetoric was equated with their pro-Balkan rhetoric. Therefore,

70 Jović, “Turska”, 371.

71 Amir Muharemi, *Turska: uvod u povijest, unutarnju i vanjsku politiku* (Zagreb: Novi liber, 2012), 157.

72 Muharemi, *Turska*, 158.

73 Siniša Kušić, *Zwischen Euphorie und Ernüchterung – Kroatien auf dem Weg in die EU* (Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Bern, Bruxelles, New York: Oxford, 2007), 65.

74 Nataša Zambelli, “Između Balkana i Zapada: problem hrvatskog identiteta nakon Tuđmana i diskurzivna rekonstrukcija regije”, *Politička misao*, No:1 (2010), 61.

the European Union (EU) was positioned as a phenomenon that “automatically excludes the Balkan option from Croatia’s future”, leading to the dichotomy of West (EU) and East (Balkans).<sup>75</sup>

Croatia’s foreign policy priorities in the first decade after Tuđman’s death were respect and adoption of globalization standards as a prerequisite for integration into the EU and NATO; building relations with strategically important countries, maintaining good relations with the Criminal Court in The Hague; building quality relations with neighboring countries and countries of the region.<sup>76</sup>

An important milestone that brought Turkey and Croatia back together was the process of EU integration. The fact that the EU today has 27 members and that other countries want to join clearly shows that it is an attractive community. The candidate countries that have opened negotiations in the context of enlargement are Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. In addition, candidate status in 2022 has been granted to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Moldova and Ukraine, and in 2023 to Georgia. Kosovo has applied but has not yet been granted candidate status. Turkey, which has a long history of EU experience, has a special place in the history of the EU. Given the current conjuncture, the future of the Turkey-EU membership process is likely to remain uncertain. Although Turkey has adopted the criteria imposed by the EU (notably the Copenhagen Criteria) at various levels, it is still waiting in the entry queue as the candidate country with the longest waiting list for EU membership.<sup>77</sup> After Turkey’s candidacy was accepted at the Helsinki Summit in December 1999, relations revived in the 2000s. By the end of 2004, Turkey had fulfilled the political criteria and Brussels announced the start of negotiations.

The new era in Turkey-EU relations started with the Intergovernmental Conference in Luxembourg on October 3, 2005—the same day as Croatia—where Turkey’s accession negotiations began. Based on this decision, a negotiating framework was adopted and screening was initiated. After the end of the screening meetings in 2006, the European Commission prepared reports for each chapter. In this context, Chapter 25 (Science and Research) was opened and provisionally closed in June 2006. However, a development soon took place which slowed down progress: Turkey refused to open its sea ports and airspace to Cyprus (Turkey recognizes the Greek Cypriot side as the Greek Administration of Southern Cyprus, not the Republic of Cyprus) and the EU argued that Turkey should do so as the new EU accession states were included in the existing Customs Union through an additional protocol.<sup>78</sup> As a result, the EU Council suspended negotiations on eight chapters in 2006. With 16 of the 33 chapters open and one closed, Turkey’s EU negotiations are frozen. After two years without the opening of new chapters, working groups were established in 2012 and 2013 for eight chapters under the *Positive Agenda*, designed to focus on the common interests of the EU and Turkey.

75 Nataša Zambelli, “Između Balkana i Zapada”, 65.

76 Franjo Turek, “Priroitet vanjske politike Republike Hrvatske”, *Politička misao*, No:2, (2001), 195.

77 Bedrudin Brljavac, “Turkey Entering the European Union through the Balkan Doors: In the Style of a Great Power?”, *Polemos: časopis za interdisciplinarna istraživanja rata i mira*, XIV, No: 27 (2011), 97.

78 Sumer Fahrettin, “Turkey, a Special EU Neighbour Patiently Awaiting a ‘Promised Marriage’”, 127.

On the other hand, since the break-up of Yugoslavia, Croatia's insistence on being a European and Western country has made accession to the EU the most important long-term goal of Croatian foreign policy. Relations with the EU were established on January 15, 1992, when most member states recognized Croatia's independence. However, the intensification of relations took place after the change of government in 1999 and the first important step was the opening of negotiations on the Stabilization and Association Agreement signed at the Zagreb Summit on November 24, 2000. Then, in February 2003, Croatia applied for membership of the EU and within eleven months the European Commission gave a positive opinion on Croatia's membership application. In June 2004, the European Council granted Croatia candidate status and in February 2005, the Stabilization and Association Agreement entered into force. On October 3, 2005, accession negotiations officially started. An analytical review of legislative harmonization started shortly afterwards and concluded positively in February 2008 when the Council of the EU adopted the Accession Partnership with Croatia. In 2011, at the end of the accession negotiations, the European Parliament gave its approval for accession, so on December 9, 2011, Croatia signed the Treaty on the Accession of the Republic of Croatia to the EU. Soon after, on January 22, 2012, a referendum on accession was held, the results of which were approved by the Croatian Parliament shortly afterwards, and Croatia joined the EU on July 1, 2013.<sup>79</sup>

Turkey and Croatia's joint action on the EU was important during the accession negotiations, when the two countries worked together on the implementation of the European *acquis*, and has not lost its importance since Croatia joined the EU. EU integration provides opportunities for Turkey and Croatia to engage in regional cooperation within the EU framework and strengthen ties with other member states. Neoliberalism, which emphasizes the potential for cooperation on issues such as infrastructure development, energy security and cross-border trade leading to mutual benefits and increased regional stability, is a useful tool for understanding the relations of the two countries that are the subject of this thesis. The Directorate for European Union Affairs within the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintains active contacts with the representatives of the member states. Croatia continues to emphasize its full support for Turkey's accession to the EU, and joint cooperation in this context can be assessed in the context of the use of European funds. Numerous projects can be implemented, in particular in the areas of local government, defense, culture and education.

#### **4. Friendly relations on the way forward (2013-present)**

The last decade has shown that the current global order is not stable. Since 2013, there have been significant political changes on the global stage and the world has changed. While it is difficult to enumerate all of these changes—for the sake of understanding events in the

79 "Kronologija važnijih datuma u procesu pristupanja Hrvatske Europskoj uniji", Hrvatski sabor, (Online), [www.sabor.hr/hr/europski-poslovi/sabor-u-procesu-pristupanja-eu-u/kronologije/kronologija-vaznijih-datuma-u-procesu](http://www.sabor.hr/hr/europski-poslovi/sabor-u-procesu-pristupanja-eu-u/kronologije/kronologija-vaznijih-datuma-u-procesu), access date: Jan 16, 2023.

region – it is important to emphasize the rise of nationalism and populism. In many countries, anti-globalization and anti-immigrant sentiments are on the rise as well. Europe has been greatly affected by the conflict in Syria and the refugee crisis triggered by it; the influx of Syrian refugees has resulted in a redefinition of political discourse around concepts such as migration, security and humanitarian aid. In addition, the ongoing conflict and violence in the Middle East and North Africa, tensions and political instability between major powers such as the US, China and Russia have continued to escalate, with Russia’s war against Ukraine in February 2022. Rising global temperatures, increases in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, and the impacts of climate change are on the agenda of the international community.

By joining the EU, Croatia strengthened its status in the region and started to decisively support other countries of Southeast Europe in their European integration. After years of stagnation, Bosnia, one of the main topics of the Turkish-Croatian dialogue, has again become an important strategic issue in Croatian foreign policy. For a long time, Croatia insisted on changes in the electoral law in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while Turkey’s position was that foreign countries should not decide on changes in Bosnia. Tensions in Croatia’s relations with Bosnia were also caused by the construction of the Pelješac Bridge, but this did not affect Croatian-Turkish relations. When it comes to Croatia’s foreign policy in recent years, the 3SI initiative—an important foreign policy initiative realized during the presidency of Kolinda Grabar Kitarović—has a special place. The 3SI, also known as the Baltic-Adriatic-Black Sea Initiative, aims to promote development among 12 member states, including Austria, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovenia and Croatia. The importance of a strong foreign policy for Croatia cannot be overstated, as it helps shape the nation’s role in the world and promotes Croatia’s interests both at home and abroad. The Implementation Program of the Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs is therefore a key document in determining the priorities and direction of Croatian foreign policy. One of the main priorities set in the program is the development of bilateral and multilateral partnerships aimed at strengthening diplomatic and economic ties with other countries.<sup>80</sup> In addition, the program emphasizes the importance of promoting the rule of law and the protection of human rights, as well as supporting sustainable development and humanitarian efforts. The program also recognizes the need to unite the homeland with the Croatian diaspora and to defend the rights of Croats living in other neighboring countries, in particular Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>81</sup>

Analysts agree that 2013 was an important turning point for Turkey, as it was for Croatia. Some authors speak of a break with the “old Turkey” and consider 2013 as a “decisive turning point”: The protests in Gezi Park and their suppression influenced the change in the social climate; open and violent clashes between the ruling AKP and the Gülen movement

80 *Provedbeni program Ministarstva vanjskih i europskih poslova za razdoblje 2021. - 2024. godine*, (Zagreb: MVEP, 2021), 4.

81 *Provedbeni program Ministarstva vanjskih i europskih poslova*, 8.



took place; predictions of far-reaching consequences of the Arab Spring gained momentum<sup>82</sup> and the course of these events began to influence the foreign policy situation.<sup>83</sup> According to a recent scholarly article on Turkey published in Croatia, Turkey's dissatisfaction with the current world order has become clearer than ever in recent years. The paper emphasizes that Ankara believes that the global power of the United States is slowly declining, mainly due to the strengthening of China and Russian revisionism.<sup>84</sup> In this context, Turkey sometimes acts as an independent actor, ignoring allies in multilateral organizations such as NATO.<sup>85</sup> The fact that Croatia's accession to the EU was in many respects a *turning point* in the truest sense of the term is also evident in the dilemmas it posed, particularly with regard to foreign policy issues. The most important of these issues is the extent to which Croatia's politics is tied to the EU's common policy. From a broader perspective, the question can be posed as follows: "Should each member state have a separate foreign policy?" or "Is it necessary for them to incorporate their national interests into the framework of a common European foreign policy?"<sup>86</sup>

In short, Turkish foreign policy has undergone a strategic reorientation away from the European and Western axis. Thus, Turkey has tried and continues to try to build strong relations with a wide range of countries and maintain multilateralism, especially in the context of the UN and other international organizations. According to the official website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the main characteristics of the country's foreign policy approach are "entrepreneurial and humanitarian."<sup>87</sup> The entrepreneurial characteristic is implemented through a rich and widespread representation network of 257 diplomatic missions. Turkey ranks fifth among the countries with the highest number of diplomatic missions in the world.<sup>88</sup> Entered its centenary year, Turkey strives to raise the standards of peace and prosperity at home while contributing to the realization of common goals by serving humanity in its region.<sup>89</sup>

It is a fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina still represents an important aspect of Croatian-Turkish relations. Turkey has been a vocal advocate of preserving the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, while at the same time encouraging the development of relations between Croatia and Bosnia. In recent years, Turkey has been involved in several initiatives aimed at enhancing economic cooperation between the two countries, including joint trade

82 Reinkowski, *Geschichte der Türkei*, 342-343.

83 Atilla Eralp, Asuman Göksel, Jakob Lindgaard, "Political Changes in Turkey and the Future of Turkey-EU Relations: From Convergence to Conflict?", FEUTURE (2017), [feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/D2.3\\_FEUTURE\\_Online\\_Paper\\_No.\\_12.pdf](http://feuture.uni-koeln.de/sites/feuture/pdf/D2.3_FEUTURE_Online_Paper_No._12.pdf), 12, access date: Jan 17, 2023.

84 Marin Vrkić, "Turska – ni zapad ni istok?", *Strategos: Znanstveni časopis Hrvatskog vojnog učilišta "Dr. Franjo Tuđman"*, V, No:1 (2021), 94.

85 Vrkić, "Turska – ni zapad ni istok?", 94

86 Dejan Jović, "Hrvatska vanjska politika pred izazovima članstva u Europskoj Uniji", *Politička misao*, XXXVIII, No:2 (2011), 14.

87 "Türkiye'nin Girişimci ve İnsani Dış Politikası", *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı*, (Online), access date: Feb 11, 2023.

88 "Türkiye'nin Girişimci ve İnsani Dış Politikası"

89 "Türkiye'nin Girişimci ve İnsani Dış Politikası"

and investment projects. The protection and promotion of the constitutional rights of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the main pillar of Croatia's foreign policy towards the neighboring country.<sup>90</sup> The Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs recognizes the need to provide support and raise awareness of the difficulties faced by Croats in achieving their full political, social and economic rights guaranteed by the constitution. But the relationship between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia stems not only from a proximity with more than 1,000 km of common border, but also from their common commitment to *the Dayton Agreement*. As one of the co-signatories of this agreement, Croatia has a constitutional obligation to protect the rights and interests of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, recognized as a constituent people.<sup>91</sup>

However, the fact that Croatia and Turkey, two allied and friendly countries, do not always agree on issues such as the electoral law in Bosnia does not raise new questions but rather encourages them to seek a constructive solution. The joint statement issued on the occasion of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries also expressed "the belief that the two countries will play an important role in ensuring lasting peace and stability".<sup>92</sup>

When it comes to relations between the two countries, another issue that has occupied the agenda in the last few years is the construction of the Pelješac Bridge, which the Bosnian side finds controversial.<sup>93</sup> Despite Bosnia's strong support from Turkey, Ankara—contrary to expectations—did not oppose the construction of the bridge. A review of recent newspaper articles published in Turkey after the inauguration of the Pelješac Bridge reveals that the bridge inauguration did not arouse special interest in the media. Perhaps contrary to expectations, the Pelješac Bridge was never a topic of discussion in Turkish public opinion, and the opening of the bridge was covered only in the form of short news articles.

Economic relations between the two countries reflect the level of development of bilateral cooperation in a very vivid and tangible way. The promotion of trade and the liberalization of the global order encourage countries to engage more actively in international trade, which, in turn, increases the volume of trade in economic terms.<sup>94</sup> The good political relations between Croatia and Turkey also contribute to the development of economic relations between the two countries. The volume of trade between the two countries has been increasing in recent years, focusing on exports in areas such as machinery, electronics and chemical products. Official sources from both countries often emphasize the importance of expanding the scope of trade

90 *Provedbeni program Ministarstva vanjskih i europskih poslova*, 14.

91 Sandro Knezović ve Nani Klepo, *Croatian Foreign Policy in 3D*, (Zagreb: Hanns-Seidel-Stiftung, 2017), 9.

92 "Türkiye Cumhuriyeti ile Hırvatistan Cumhuriyeti Arasında Diplomatik İlişkilerin Tesisinin 30. Yıldönümü Hakkında Ortak Açıklama", Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Dışişleri Bakanlığı, Aug 26, 2022, (Online), access date: Feb 2, 2023.

93 Neum is interesting in historical context as a city that the Republic of Dubrovnik willingly gave to the Ottoman Empire after the *Treaty of Karlowitz* in order to create a buffer zone to prevent possible attacks by Venice. However, considering that the bridge is not given much coverage in the media, there does not seem to be much connecting Neum to Turkey - apart from this historical footnote.

94 Ahmet Gökgöz, Ahmet Selçuk Dizkırıcı & Büşra Gezikel, "Analysis of international trade between Turkey and Croatia", *Poslovna izvrsnost*, X, No:2 (2016), 155.

cooperation. During President Erdoğan's recent visit to Croatia, the short-term target was set at \$1 billion and the medium-term target at \$2 billion.<sup>95</sup> One of the indicators of mutual interest in strengthening economic cooperation is the organization of two business forums in four months. Turkish companies are involved in major projects in Croatia. The largest of these is the reconstruction of the second line and railway on the *Križevci-Koprivnica-state border* section. The project, co-financed by the EU and worth approximately €322 million excluding VAT, is being carried out by *Cengiz İnşaat*, a Turkish company. In addition to 42 kilometers of modern two-track railway, the project includes the reconstruction of 9 stations and stops, 7 bridges, 2 viaducts, 21 underpasses and overpasses.<sup>96</sup>

In addition to the construction sector, the two countries are also developing economic cooperation in the energy sector. The advantages of bilateral cooperation in the field of energy and energy resources include the ability to share resources, technology and expertise, as well as the potential for greater access to energy markets. Looking at energy cooperation between Turkey and Croatia, both have a growing interest in renewable energy, in particular wind and solar energy development. There have been efforts to increase cooperation in this area, including exchange of information and technology and joint renewable energy projects. A prominent example of Turkish investment in Croatia is the geothermal power plant opened by the Turkish company *MB Holding* (BLT) near Bjelovar. With a gross capacity of 16.5 MW, it is the first of its kind in Croatia and was inaugurated at the end of 2019 as Europe's largest geothermal power plant with dual ORC technology.<sup>97</sup> In terms of energy cooperation, in August 2020, the concession for the Legrad-1 exploration area in Međimurje was granted to *Terra Energy Generation Company*, owned by *Soyak Holding*, marking the entry of another Turkish company into the Croatian energy market.

Another important area of cooperation is the financial sector. The most striking example of Turkish investment in the Croatian banking sector is *Kentbank*, a major financial institution in the Croatian banking sector. The bank was first established in Slavonski Brod in 1998 as *Štedionica Brod* and was later acquired by *Eksen Holding*, a subsidiary of the *Süzer Group*. The *Süzer Group*, which has diverse interests such as land development, construction, energy and the tourism sector, focused on the growth and expansion of the bank. Following the acquisition, the bank underwent a successful capitalization process that facilitated its growth and expansion. *Kentbank* has established a strong presence in the Croatian banking sector with

95 Marija Brnić, "Turci se žele uključiti u obnovu, robna razmjena doseći će milijardu dolara", *Poslovni dnevnik*, Jan 17, 2023, (Online), [www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/turci-se-zele-ukljuciti-u-obnovu-robna-razmjena-doseci-ce-milijardu-dolara-4371982](http://www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/turci-se-zele-ukljuciti-u-obnovu-robna-razmjena-doseci-ce-milijardu-dolara-4371982), access date: Feb 11, 2023.

96 "U Vladi potpisan Ugovor za pružnu dionicu Križevci-Koprivnica-državna granica vrijedan 2 milijarde i 418 milijuna kuna", *Vlada Republike Hrvatske*, Mar 12, 2020, (Online), <https://vlada.gov.hr/vijesti/u-vladi-potpisan-ugovor-za-pruznu-dionicu-krizevci-koprivnica-drzavna-granica-vrijedan-2-milijarde-i-418-milijuna-kuna/28976>, access date: Feb 11 2023.

97 Hasan Duran & Marko Šapina, "Enerji İş Birliği Potansiyeli Açısından Türkiye-Hırvatistan İlişkileri", *IJAR*, VII: No: 14 (2022), 32.

16 branches and over a thousand ATMs across Croatia. In addition, the Turkish investment company *Doğuş Group* has made and continues to make significant investments in the Croatian tourism sector. The Group has been involved in several projects, including the *D-Marin* marina chain, as well as *Villa Dubrovnik* in Šibenik and the *D Resort Šibenik* hotel. However, for reasons that are still not publicly disclosed, the group has sold these properties. Although the fact that *the Doğuş Group* has invested a total of EUR 250 million in Croatia in seven years has led to speculation<sup>98</sup> in September 2022 it was announced that the *Doğuş Group* will not withdraw its investments, but will instead continue to grow its presence in Croatia.<sup>99</sup> Currently, the group's largest project in Croatia is *Hotel Maraska*, which is under construction with a residential complex with a total investment of around EUR 120 million.<sup>100</sup> All ground handling services (passenger, cargo and aircraft reception) at Zagreb Airport have been taken over by *Havaş*, a Turkish company, as of February 10, 2022. Thus, Zagreb Airport became the 31st airport where *Havaş* provides ground handling services with approximately 500 employees and 176 vehicles.<sup>101</sup>

Economically, Turkey and Croatia have established trade and investment ties that reflect the principles of neoliberalism. Both countries have actively participated in regional economic integration initiatives such as Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) and South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), which aim to promote trade liberalization and through bilateral initiatives, having signed several agreements to promote investment and business exchanges and increase trade volumes.

## 5. Conclusion

Relations between the two countries today are regulated by 57 bilateral treaties, agreements and protocols signed since August 26, 1992.<sup>102</sup> The two countries are active political partners in various diplomatic and political initiatives and do not have any problems between them, which enables cooperation in the fields of economy, culture and education and paves the

98 Marija Crnjak, "Uz Villu Dubrovnik, turski Dogus je mirovincima prodao i ovaj luksuzni hotel u Šibeniku", *Poslovni dnevnik*, Aug 13 2021 (Online), [www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/uz-villu-dubrovnik-turski-dogus-je-mirovincima-prodao-i-ovaj-luksuzni-hotel-u-sibeniku-4301128](http://www.poslovni.hr/hrvatska/uz-villu-dubrovnik-turski-dogus-je-mirovincima-prodao-i-ovaj-luksuzni-hotel-u-sibeniku-4301128), access date: Feb 12, 2023.

99 Željka Laslavić, "Burak Baykan (Doğuş grupa): Gradimo prve brendirane stanove u Hrvatskoj", *Lider*, Sep 8, 2022, (Online), [lidermedia.hr/tvrtke-i-trzista/burak-baykan-dogus-grupa-gradimo-prve-brendirane-standove-u-hrvatskoj-144887](http://lidermedia.hr/tvrtke-i-trzista/burak-baykan-dogus-grupa-gradimo-prve-brendirane-standove-u-hrvatskoj-144887), access date: Feb 12, 2023.

100 Kerim Ülker, "Doğuş, Hırvatistan'daki 202 yıllık binayı otel olarak açıyor", *Dünya*, Jan 25 2023, (Online), [www.dunya.com/kose-yazisi/dogus-hrvatistandaki-202-yillik-binayi-otel-olarak-aciyor/683795](http://www.dunya.com/kose-yazisi/dogus-hrvatistandaki-202-yillik-binayi-otel-olarak-aciyor/683795), access date: Feb 12, 2023.

101 Nikola Sućec, "Turski div Havaş preuzeo sve zemaljske usluge u zagrebačkoj zračnoj luci", *Tportal*, Feb 14, 2022, (Online), [www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/turski-div-havas-preuzeo-sve-zemaljske-usluge-u-zagrebackoj-zracnoj-luci-20220214](http://www.tportal.hr/biznis/clanak/turski-div-havas-preuzeo-sve-zemaljske-usluge-u-zagrebackoj-zracnoj-luci-20220214), access date: Feb 12 2023.

102 "Popis međunarodnih ugovora i međunarodnih akata sklopljenih između Republike Hrvatske i Republike Turske", Ministarstvo vanjskih i europskih poslova Republike Hrvatske, (Online), [mvp.gov.hr/vanjska-politika/bilateralni-odnosi/pregled-dvostranih-medjunarodnih-ugovora-republike-hrvatske-po-drzavama/21905?country=140](http://mvp.gov.hr/vanjska-politika/bilateralni-odnosi/pregled-dvostranih-medjunarodnih-ugovora-republike-hrvatske-po-drzavama/21905?country=140), access date: Feb 11, 2023.

way for investments. In recent years, relations between Turkey and Croatia have improved, especially in the fields of tourism and trade. Institutionally, Turkey and Croatia are members of various international organizations such as the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), reflecting a commitment to multilateralism, cooperation and peaceful settlement of disputes. Moreover, both countries attach importance to diplomatic dialogue and conduct mutual high-level visits, reflecting their efforts to maintain a positive bilateral relationship. Both countries' emphasis on multilateral structures can be interpreted in terms of neoliberal theory, which emphasizes the role of diplomatic communication and negotiation in managing conflicts and building trust between states. Organizations such as those mentioned above provide platforms for cooperation and coordination on a range of issues such as security, economic development and cultural exchange, and by actively participating in these forums, Croatia and Turkey demonstrate their willingness to work with other states and contribute to joint efforts. It should be noted, however, that neoliberal theory does not guarantee harmonious relations or the absence of conflicts between member states. While membership in these organizations demonstrates a shared commitment to cooperation, it does not eliminate potential disagreements or power dynamics.<sup>103</sup>

Established more than 30 years ago, friendly relations have been successfully continuing and developing at the highest levels in politics, parliament, defense and security. Although the internal and external political conditions in both countries have changed in many ways since the establishment of relations, bilateral ties are stable and free of any serious problems. With Croatia's accession to NATO (and Turkey's strong support), the two countries became allies in NATO and have characterized themselves as guarantors of peace and stability in the Southeast European region, particularly in Bosnia- Herzegovina. Croatia's accession to the EU and the freezing of Turkey's negotiations did not pose problems for Turkish-Croatian relations. Simultaneously, European criticism of Turkey has not affected bilateral state-to-state relations. When making predictions on how relations will develop in the future, it is possible to say that there could be additional growth in trade volume, as both sides agree that the potential for economic cooperation is underutilized. The possible liberalization of the visa system as a result of a common policy at the EU decision level could boost tourism and encourage small and medium investors to invest. In conclusion, the current perspectives of Croatia-Turkey relations are influenced by a number of complex factors but are based on very solid foundations. To ensure the continued development and stability of this relationship, it is important that both countries maintain open channels of communication and address their concerns through dialogue and cooperation.

Since Croatia is serious about not being considered part of the Balkans and Turkey is situated on the border between East and West, there is no clear consensus on the geographical definition

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103 Subir Sinha, "Neoliberalism and Civil Society: Project and Possibilities", *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*, Ed. Alfredo Saad-Filho & Deborah Johnston (London: Pluto Press, 2005), 163.

in either country. The lack of a definitive answer and public pressure to find and clearly define it, whatever that answer may be, will continue to burden Croats and Turks for a long time to come. Additionally, both countries face identity issues that are prone to exploitation. From a structural perspective, bilateral relations between Turkey and Croatia can be interpreted as a product of shared identities, norms and social interactions. These interactions are shaped not only by material interests but also by perceptions, beliefs, and historical experiences. In terms of shared identities—and moreover, shared identity conflicts—it is possible to say that Turkey and Croatia both have complex historical backgrounds and cultural ties. Constructivism argues that these shared historical experiences and cultural elements contribute to the formation of common identities and can influence bilateral relations. Yet, when looking at the relations between the two countries that are the subject of the study, one should not overlook all the indicators compared, as well as perhaps the factors mentioned in this paragraph. Because cultural and identity similarities are also crucial for the functionality of their cooperation.

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