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Introduction: "Balkans in the Age of Turbulence: Political Issues and Trends"

Since the post-Cold War era, the Balkans has maintained its position as one of the most dynamic regions, characterized by intense power competition among global and regional actors, complex institutional integration efforts, identity-driven divisions, and deep-rooted historical legacies. On the one hand, the expanding influence and geopolitical rivalry of extra-regional powers, alongside the deepening engagement of regional actors, continue to reshape the region. On the other hand, the structural transformation driven by the European Union (EU) enlargement process and emerging security architectures is redefining the foreign policy orientation of the Balkan states. Rather than reducing the region's dynamics to a single analytical dimension, this special issue brings together seven original research articles and one comprehensive book review that examine the Balkans through a range of conceptual perspectives, including geopolitical competition, multi-sector connectivity, sui generis soft power, institutional deadlocks, normative enlargement politics, defense alignment, and the historical memory of state-building and migration.

Opening this special issue, Aslı Yiğit, in her study entitled "The Instrumentalization of Orthodoxy: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a Soft Power Tool in Serbia," examines how religious diplomacy has evolved into a hybrid geopolitical instrument. Focusing on Serbia, the author unpacks the ROC's "Russian World" ideology, its mechanisms of political support through Russia's veto power, and its influence on collective memory, demonstrating how religious statecraft plays a pivotal role in challenging the Euro-Atlantic order and shaping regional security.

Complementing this analysis of external influences, Selim Öztürk turns to another extra-regional actor in his article, "Dynamics of Israel's Relations with the Western Balkans." Examining the historical evolution of Israel's relations with Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the author demonstrates that, contrary to ideational or cultural explanations, these relationships have been shaped primarily by pragmatic realpolitik, security concerns, economic interests, and alignment with U.S. strategic priorities.

Shifting from external influences to regional statecraft, Dilek Kütük, in her article "Türkiye's Multi-Sector Connectivity Agenda in the Balkans," places the concept of connectivity at the center of her analysis as a tangible and multidimensional foreign policy instrument. Through an extensive analysis of transport, energy, and digital infrastructure initiatives, the author illustrates how Türkiye employs connectivity to secure market access, diversify supply routes, and sustain long-term engagement with Balkan actors.

Building on this sectoral perspective, Marıan Karagyozov advances the theoretical debate on Türkiye's sphere of influence in his article, "Türkiye as a Sui Generis Power Player in the Balkans." Arguing that conventional understandings of soft power fail to capture Ankara's operational reality fully, the author examines Türkiye's engagement through religion, media, and local political actors, proposing the concept of sui generis soft power to describe an intermediate form of influence that extends beyond attraction and persuasion without reaching the level of coercive hard power.

Turning to internal governance challenges, Muharem Shtavica, in his paper "Power-Sharing and Asymmetrical Autonomy: The Case of Kosovo's ASMM Deadlock in Light of the South Tyrol Autonomy Model," investigates the persistent impasse surrounding the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM), the principal bottleneck in the Kosovo–Serbia Normalization Process. Drawing upon theories of consociationalism and asymmetrical autonomy, the author conducts a comparative analysis with the South Tyrol autonomy model in Italy and proposes institutional pathways for reconciling national sovereignty with minority self-governance.

Connecting local governance challenges to the broader European normative framework, Neslihan Başak Ağaoğlu examines how regional political deadlocks are reflected in the European Union in her study, "European Parliament Debates on Serbia's Progress Reports: A Constructivist Analysis (2012–2024)." Applying a social constructivist approach to a corpus of 352 parliamentary speeches, the author identifies significant discursive shifts in the European Parliament's perception of Serbia, tracing its evolution from a "promising partner" (2012–2015) to an object of authoritarian criticism (2016–2021), and ultimately to a subject of a "geopolitical loyalty test" following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

Expanding the discussion of European security and policy alignment, N. Nevra Esentürk, in her article "European Security in Transition: Comparative Analysis of the Aspirant Western Balkan Countries' Alignment with the EU's Emerging Security Architecture," investigates how candidate countries in the Western Balkans are adapting to the EU's evolving defense and security framework after 2022. Drawing on the European Commission's country reports (2023–2025), the 2022 Strategic Compass, and the 2025 White Paper, the author evaluates candidate countries in terms of foreign policy alignment, formal Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) partnerships, participation in EU missions, and measures to counter hybrid threats, highlighting both the challenges and the strategic importance of integrating the Western Balkans into Europe's emerging security architecture.

Concluding this special issue, H. Vildan Kabasakal contributes a comprehensive review of Neriman Ersoy Hacısalihoğlu's Turkish-language book, Balkanlarda Asimilasyon ve Sürgün: Bulgaristan'da Türklere Yönelik Etnik Temizlik Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Göçler (Assimilation and Exile in the Balkans: Ethnic Cleansing Policies Against Turks in Bulgaria and Migrations to Türkiye) published by Efe Akademi Yayınları in 2026, which traces more than a century of forced migration and demographic engineering, from the 1877–1878 Ottoman–Russian War to the 1989 "Great Migration." The review argues that the systematic elimination of the Turkish and Muslim presence in Bulgaria constituted an integral strategy of modern nation-state building rather than a series of isolated historical episodes. By placing this long-term perspective on minority rights, statecraft, and human suffering alongside contemporary geopolitical analyses, the review provides valuable historical context for understanding collective memory and nation-building processes across the Balkans.

Through their original methodologies and rich theoretical, empirical, and historical contributions, the studies collected in this special issue offer a comprehensive resource for scholars and practitioners seeking to understand the Balkans at the intersection of external competition, regional statecraft, internal institutional governance, European security integration, and historical memory. We extend our sincere gratitude to all the contributing authors, reviewers, and book reviewers whose dedication made this special issue possible. We also express our deepest appreciation to Dr. Mehmet Uğur Ekinci for his invaluable academic guidance and contributions throughout the preparation of this special issue. We hope our readers will find this collection both insightful and stimulating.

Special Issue Editor

Prof. Zuhal MERT UZUNER

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Instrumentalization of Orthodoxy: The Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a Soft Power Tool in Serbia

Ortodoksluğun Araçsallaştırılması: Sırbistan'da Bir Yumuşak Güç Aracı Olarak Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi (ROK)

Aslı YİĞİT*

Abstract

This study examines how the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) functions as a hybrid geopolitical apparatus within Russia's soft power strategy, focusing exclusively on the Republic of Serbia. Historically, Russia's influence in the Balkans has shifted from traditional political means toward cultural and religious engagement, establishing the ROC as a critical soft power actor leveraging the "Russian World" ideology and Pan-Orthodox solidarity. The Church frames this effort by positioning Russia as an alternative civilization model based on traditional values, directly countering the perceived moral decline of Europe. Beyond its role as a vehicle for state interests, the article argues that the ROC also acts as a strategic partner pursuing its own ecclesiastical leadership. The article analyzes the evolution of church-state relations to frame the ROC's contemporary mission. The empirical analysis of Serbia reveals a multi-layered strategy designed to convert cultural ties into strategic advantage. First, the ROC leverages the structural constraint created by the NATO trauma (the 1999 bombing) to secure political support via UN Security Council veto support. Second, it provides the ideological foundation by aligning the Serbian Orthodox Church's canonical claims over Kosovo with Moscow's broader strategic challenge to the Euro-Atlantic order. Finally, the strategy is executed through a hybrid apparatus involving non-state proxies, including oligarchic finance and informal ties with nationalist paramilitary groups. Consequently, the ROC's activities in Serbia are not merely a religious matter but represent a sophisticated mechanism of religious statecraft. This strategy is of critical importance for Russia's multidimensional goals, such as challenging the rules-based Western order and regaining a sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe.

Keywords: ROC, Soft Power, Balkans, Serbia, Public Diplomacy

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Öz

Bu çalışma, Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin (ROK), Rusya'nın yumuşak güç stratejisi dâhilinde hibrit bir jeopolitik aygıt olarak nasıl işlev gördüğünü incelemekte ve özel olarak Sırbistan'a odaklanmaktadır. Tarihsel olarak, Rusya'nın Balkanlar'daki etkisi, geleneksel siyasal araçların ötesine geçerek kültürel ve dinî angajmanlarla derinleşmiş, bu durum ROK'u "Rus Dünyası" ideolojisini ve Pan-Ortodoks dayanışmasını kullanan kritik bir yumuşak güç aktörü olarak konumlandırmıştır. Kilise, bu çabayı Rusya'yı geleneksel değerlere dayanan alternatif bir medeniyet modeli olarak konumlandırarak ve Avrupa'da algılanan ahlaki çöküşe doğrudan karşı çıkarak çerçevelemektedir. Makale, Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin devlet çıkarlarının bir aracı olmasının ötesinde, kendi dini liderliğini sürdürmeye çalışan stratejik bir ortak olarak da hareket ettiğini savunmaktadır. Makale, ROK'un günümüzdeki misyonunu çerçevelemek amacıyla kilise-devlet ilişkilerinin evrimini analiz etmektedir. Sırbistan üzerine yapılan analiz, kültürel bağları stratejik bir zemine dönüştürmek üzere tasarlanmış çok katmanlı bir strateji ortaya koymaktadır. İlk olarak, ROK NATO travmasının (1999 bombardımanı) yarattığı yapısal kısıtlamayı fırsat bilerek, BM Güvenlik Konseyi'nde sağlanan veto desteği aracılığıyla siyasi destek sağlamaktadır. İkinci olarak, ROK, Sırp Ortodoks Kilisesi'nin Kosova üzerindeki kanonik iddialarını, Moskova'nın daha geniş bir Avro-Atlantik düzene yönelik stratejik meydan okumasıyla örtüştürerek ideolojik temeli sağlamaktadır. Son olarak, bu strateji, oligarşik finansman ve milliyetçi paramiliter gruplarla kurulan gayriresmî bağlar dâhil olmak üzere devlet dışı vekil aktörleri içeren hibrit bir aygıt aracılığıyla yürütülmektedir. Sonuç olarak, ROK'un Sırbistan'daki faaliyetleri yalnızca dini bir mesele değil, aynı zamanda sofistike bir dinî diplomasi ve nüfuz mekanizmasını temsil etmektedir. Bu strateji, Rusya'nın Batı'nın kurallarına dayalı düzene meydan okuma ve Güneydoğu Avrupa'da nüfuz alanını geri kazanma gibi çok boyutlu hedefleri için kritik öneme sahiptir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Rus Ortodoks Kilisesi, Yumuşak Güç, Balkanlar, Sırbistan, Kamu Diplomasisi

1. Introduction

Since the nineteenth century, Russia's sphere of influence in the Balkans has not been limited to military and economic means. It has also been profoundly shaped through deep engagement with cultural, historical, and religious mechanisms. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation strategically moved beyond traditional realist policies by systematically utilizing culturally based soft power elements. In this context, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has assumed the role of an effective cultural diplomacy actor in the post-Soviet space. While this strategy draws on Joseph Nye's foundational concept of soft power, defined as the capacity to achieve outcomes through attraction, the ROC acts as a strategic partner that co-constitutes this power through its own institutional ambitions. While this study utilizes the term "tool" to describe the ROC's function within Russia's foreign policy, it conceptualizes this "instrumentalization" as a reciprocal process in which the Church is an active strategic partner rather than a passive subordinate. This empirical focus is justified by the unique symbiotic relationship between the ROC and the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), which offers the most profound illustration of this strategic synergy in a region of critical importance. The article analyzes the evolution of church-state relations and the ROC's historical presence before assessing its contemporary role in supporting Kremlin policies.

The article's primary contribution lies in analyzing the multi-layered nature of the ROC's influence, which transcends conventional cultural diplomacy. To frame this analysis, the study

first establishes a theoretical framework, examining the concepts of soft power and religious soft power and defining the ROC's function within the context of religious statecraft. Subsequently, it traces the historical perspective of the ROC's instrumentalization, analyzing the evolution of church-state relations from the Tsarist era's Pan-Slavism and the Soviet period's control to today's institutional cooperation under the Russkiy Mir (Russian World) doctrine.

Following this foundation, the empirical analysis in Serbia reveals a multi-layered strategy designed to convert cultural ties into strategic advantages. First, it examines how the ROC exploits the geopolitical constraint imposed by the 1999 NATO bombing, which creates a permissive environment for Moscow's influence. This constraint is reinforced by Russia's provision of UN Security Council veto support, transforming shared religious identity into vital diplomatic leverage. The study then investigates the ROC's ideological apparatus, analyzing how it utilizes Orthodox solidarity and the Russkiy Mir discourse to integrate the Kosovo narrative with Moscow's foreign policy goals, promoting traditional values as a bulwark against the perceived moral decline of the West. Finally, the article details the operational deployment of this influence through a hybrid apparatus, revealing the ROC's deep links with non-state proxies, including the financial power of Russian oligarchs and the ideological spread facilitated by nationalist paramilitary groups on the ground.

By focusing on this complex nexus of strategic alignment, ideological convergence, and the instrumentalization of hybrid actors, this study supports the thesis that the ROC acts as a sophisticated geopolitical tool critical to Russia's long-term goal of regaining a sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe and challenging the wider post-Western order. This analysis sheds light on the increasing complexity of religious statecraft and the boundaries of soft power in post-conflict geopolitical competition.

2. Theoretical Framework: Religion as a Soft Power Instrument

The concept of power has been central to International Relations analysis since the time of Thucydides (Rothman, 2011, pp. 50–52). Joseph S. Nye introduced the term soft power, defining it as the capacity to achieve desired outcomes through attraction rather than coercion or payment (Nye, 2011, pp. 9–19; Blechman, 2004, pp. x, 6). In this relational definition, soft power relies on a state's cultural appeal, political ideals, and the perceived legitimacy of its foreign policy actions. If a state can legitimize its power in the eyes of others, it encounters less resistance to its objectives (Nye, 2011, pp. 14, 17).

Soft power is closely related to the ability to frame the agenda through co-optive tools like persuasion and positive attraction. Crucially, the effectiveness of soft power is often decentralized. Since much of it is generated by non-governmental actors, such as churches and civil society organizations, it cannot be fully controlled by governments. Nevertheless, state actions and policies can significantly strengthen or weaken these soft power resources (Blechman, 2004, pp. 10, 16–17).

2.1. Religious Soft Power as a Dynamic Force

Traditional International Relations theories, prioritizing rationality and material gain, long overlooked the role of religion. However, the post-Cold War era has revived interest in religion as a factor that contributes to the construction of actors' identities and interests, aligning better with theoretical approaches like Constructivism. Overlooking religion in foreign policy analysis may result in misdiagnosing issues and distancing global audiences (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 4–5).

Religious Soft Power is a more specific articulation of Nye's original concept, focusing on how actors utilize religion to generate attraction and legitimacy. Religious Soft Power stems from the ability of religious traditions to provide appeal and legitimacy through symbols, narratives, doctrines, and values (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 4–6). Far from being confined to the realm of "low politics" or cultural exchange, Religious Soft Power is increasingly relevant for critical security issues (Mandaville, 2023, p. 63).

Religious Soft Power analysis challenges several traditional International Relations assumptions. First, "Secularism Bias": it challenges the secular bias in International Relations by showing how states mobilize religion to pursue their global interests. Second, "Material vs. Ideational Dichotomy": Religious Soft Power studies reject the separation of religion as a purely ideational factor, focusing instead on how religion functions as a distinct instrument of power (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 37, 82). Third, "Post-Liberal World Order": focusing on Religious Soft Power supports the idea that the international order is moving beyond secular narratives like the "end of history," toward a post-liberal or post-Western order where religious soft power holds greater weight (Mandaville, 2023, p. 170).

2.2. State Strategy and the Russian Context

While early Religious Soft Power literature emphasized transnational religious movements, contemporary work focuses on the state's role in leveraging religious authority and symbols to serve geopolitical aims (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 19, 236).

States' use of transnational Religious Soft Power can be analyzed through key features. The first feature is "Institutional and Normative Capacity with Civilizational Affinity," which is the state's ability to manage and utilize religious institutions and authority (Mandaville, 2023, p. 274). A second key feature is "Sociopolitical Circumstances and Aims," meaning the specific goals underpinning the use of religious soft power (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 273–276).

The ROC serves as a prime example of a religious institution positioned by the Russian Federation as a primary soft power instrument to support its foreign policy, which advocates for traditional values and multipolarity (Sandal, 2016, pp. 287, 288). Furthermore, it is crucial to recognize that the ROC is not a mere passive instrument of the Kremlin but acts as a strategic partner within the traditional framework of Symphonia, which means the Byzantine-Slavic ideal of harmonious cooperation between church and state. While the state utilizes the ROC to project influence,

the Church simultaneously leverages state power to advance its own institutional prestige and its historical claim as the "Third Rome." This symbiotic relationship implies a co-constitutive process in which ecclesiastical interests often shape, rather than just follow, the ideological boundaries of Russian foreign policy (Antonov, 2020). It is essential to note that the ROC is not merely a passive subordinate to the Kremlin's directives. Instead, the relationship is co-constitutive, defined by a strategic partnership in which the Church leverages state power to advance its own institutional prestige. For the ROC, supporting the state's foreign policy is often a means to fulfill its long-standing ecclesiastical ambition of establishing Moscow as the primary center of global Orthodoxy, independent of the Russian state's immediate geopolitical needs. This collaborative framework between church and state is operationalized beyond national borders through transnational networks and religious communities. The efficacy of religious influence is achieved through these networks (Sandal, 2016, pp. 288–289). States can use these networks, often via diasporas, religious leaders, or institutions, to exert influence (Sandal, 2016, p. 290). This process occurs at multiple analytical levels, from the individual level (where shared beliefs shape perceptions of foreign policy) to the state/sub-state level (where local religious actors shape societal narratives), up to the international/transnational level (where states engage global communities through religious diplomatic relations) (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 122, 147, 290).

Ultimately, religion is a powerful soft power resource that deserves a central place in theoretical analysis (Mandaville, 2023, pp. 6–7). Although the state's instrumentalization of religion can be used for geopolitical ends, it poses a double-edged sword risk, potentially leading to manipulation or a loss of credibility due to internal contradictions (Mandaville, 2023, p. 236). The following case study on the ROC in Serbia examines how Russia leverages the ROC for its foreign policy objectives through the lens of this Religious Soft Power analysis.

3. The Historical Role of the ROC in the Balkans

3.1. From the Synodal System to Pan-Slavism: The Pre-20th Century Period

Prior to the eighteenth century, the ROC's influence on state affairs and political issues was significantly limited as a result of Tsar Peter I's strategy of distancing the church from politics and keeping it in a position that supported rather than directed state policies. In line with this, the patriarchate was abolished in 1721 and the Holy Synod was established. In this new structure, known as the synodal system, a figure close to the Tsar was appointed as ober-procurator (high representative of the church), and control over the church was transferred to this representative. The Synodal period in Russia continued until the 1917 revolution (Antonov, 2020, pp. 477–479; Gülseven, 2019).

In the eighteenth century, with the 1774 Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, Russia officially assumed the role of protector of the Orthodox population in the Balkans. By the nineteenth century, the influence of the ROC in the Balkans had taken on a more systematic character as a result of the

Russian Empire's Pan-Slavic policies. Pan-Slavism emerged as a movement advocating for the cultural and political unity of Slavic peoples, with Russia positioning itself as the natural center of this political union. Russia supported the Balkan Slavs in their struggles for independence against the Ottoman Empire, building the legitimacy of this support on Orthodox solidarity. Throughout the nineteenth century, Russia carried out intensive activities through diplomatic missions and instruments such as the Slavic Benevolent Committee with the aim of consolidating its political influence in the Balkans and bringing the Orthodox and Slavic population in the region under its political control. Following its defeat in the Crimean War of 1853, the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 further cemented Russia's role as protector of the Orthodox peoples of the Balkans. Following the war, Russian influence increased significantly in Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania, which had gained independence, and the ROC established close ties with the Orthodox churches in these states. However, with the rise of nationalist movements during this period, the Balkan nations began to lean toward establishing their own national churches. This development was not welcomed by Tsarist diplomacy (Gülseven, 2017, pp. 332–348).

3.2. The Transformation of the ROC in the Soviet Union

From the October Revolution to the end of the Cold War in 1991, a complex relationship structure was observed between the ROC and the Soviet communist regime. In the early years of the regime, the goal was to eliminate religion based on ideological principles (Lupinin, 2010, pp. 37–57). However, the severe suppression of the Church experienced during the interwar period radically changed with the outbreak of World War II. Stalin shifted from elimination efforts to strategic instrumentalization, aiming to mobilize patriotic sentiments and allow the Church to prove its loyalty by reopening closed institutions (Leustean, 2010, p. 33; Reese, 2014, p. 134).

This reorganization was formalized in 1943. On June 5, a secret decree brought religious institutions under the scope of Soviet foreign policy, and on September 5, Stalin appointed NKVD colonel Georgii Karpov to head the newly established Council for ROC Affairs (SDRPTs) (Kalkandjieva, 2015, p. 253; Reese, 2014, p. 141). Under this controlled framework, Stalin permitted a church council (sobor) to elect a new patriarch, while simultaneously using the ROC as a tool for expansion into Eastern Europe. The ultimate goal was to elevate the Moscow Patriarchate to a universal status to challenge the primacy of the Patriarchate of Constantinople and neutralize the Vatican's international influence, even providing financial subsidies to Eastern patriarchs by 1946 (Kalkandjieva, 2015, pp. 309–313; Vasileva, 1998).

After Stalin's death, concerns grew among the Church's religious leaders, and questions about the Church's future began to arise (Chumachenko et al., 2015, p. 136). During Nikita Khrushchev's leadership, especially after 1959, Soviet policy toward religion underwent further changes. During this period, the policy of purging religion gained momentum within the framework of de-Stalinization policies (Chumachenko et al., 2015, pp. 149, 165–166, 171–172). In response to Khrushchev's repressive policies, Russian nationalist elite groups became increasingly insular

throughout the 1970s, and a group from the church leadership began to form underground organizations in opposition to government policies. The "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organization Act," adopted on October 1, 1990, provided the Church with a clear legal and judicial status (Lupinin, 2010, pp. 37–57). The Glasnost and Perestroika reform policies implemented during the Gorbachev era also transformed policies toward the Orthodox churches. In 1986 and 1988, Gorbachev legitimized even the most dissident voices within the Church by holding open meetings with Patriarch Pimen, who had been operating underground during previous periods (Leustean, 2010, p. 6).

The states established after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 had to redesign their own state systems. As for the Church's reintegration into the system, the reforms implemented by Gorbachev in the 1980s to integrate the Church into the system were assimilated within the newly established states (Leustean, 2010, pp. 33–34).

3.3. Post-Cold War Identity Construction and the Crystallization of the Russkiy Mir Discourse

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Russian Federation experienced a profound ideological vacuum. The erosion of the collective identity, which had been previously anchored by communist doctrine, necessitated the urgent construction of a new national narrative. The increase in perceived Western threats throughout the 2000s, particularly the geopolitical shock triggered by Ukraine's Orange Revolution, prompted the Putin administration to prioritize this redefinition of Russian identity. The ROC emerged as a central component of this identity project, leveraged as a strategic tool to preserve and strengthen Russian influence in the former Soviet space and maximize its soft power potential (Simonova, 2014, pp. 21–26).

This strategic decision led the national identity project to crystallize around the concept of the Russkiy Mir (Russian World), which gained momentum in the 2000s, defined by the Russian language and the Orthodox faith. This modern ideological construction has deep historical roots in the Tsarist era. Historically, the state's emphasis on Russian nationalism and control over the church became prominent in the nineteenth century, particularly under Nicholas I. This was bureaucratically formalized in the tripartite ideology of "Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism" (Samoderzhaviye, Pravoslaviye, Narodnost). This framework established Russia as a unique model of civilization, a narrative built on solid foundations—distinct from the perceived social and religious "degeneration" of Europe (Riasanovsky, 1959, pp. 21, 73–74, 81; Udalov, 2006, pp. 73–81; Gülseven, 2019). This historical narrative is central to the modern Russkiy Mir soft power policy.

The ROC asserts that the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian peoples form a spiritually single nation and an inseparable whole (Mospat, 2019b). This religious-historical claim is mirrored by President Putin, who in 2019 stated that Russians and Ukrainians are a single nation, emphasizing their common history and Orthodox faith as the basis for the incorporation of present-day Ukrainian territories into Russia (Russkiy Mir, 2019b). Putin has repeatedly leveraged this

historical narrative, making systematic references to Orthodox values in his foreign policy discourse (Kremlin.ru, 2024b).

The resulting Russkiy Mir discourse serves a dual purpose. It legitimizes geopolitical claims concerning Ukraine while functioning as a vital instrument of soft power in the Balkans. To support this, Patriarch Kirill has utilized the concept of "Holy Rus" (Svyataya Rus') to provide the spiritual framework needed to strengthen ties with other Orthodox communities. In his 2024 book, *For Holy Russia: Patriotism and Faith*, Kirill explicitly confirms the Church's supportive role for state objectives, viewing patriotism and faith as inseparable and calling for the mobilization of all churches in coordination with Russia's political forces (Patriarchia, 2024b).

However, this spiritual mobilization is driven by more than just state-aligned goals. It is also a central part of the ROC's independent ecclesiastical strategy. This involves an intensifying rivalry with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople over leadership in the Orthodox world. While Constantinople holds the status of *primus inter pares*, the ROC uses its demographic and political weight to challenge this spiritual primacy (Curanović, 2007, pp. 302–303). This ecclesiastical "Cold War," which peaked with the 2018 schism over Ukrainian autocephaly, has transformed the Balkans into a primary front. For Moscow, maintaining a solid alliance with the SOC is therefore a survivalist necessity to prevent further isolation and to assert its leadership independent of the Kremlin's immediate policy (TheGuardian.com, 2018).

3.4. Civil Society and the Church in the Construction of Russian Identity

Following the implementation of glasnost policies during the Gorbachev era, civil society organizations began to emerge in Russia (Weigle & Butterfield, 1992, pp. 1–23; Remington, 1989). By the 2000s, the redefinition of Russian identity became a fundamental state policy. In 2007, President Putin officially established the "Russian World Foundation" (Fond Russkiy Mir), giving the project an institutional framework (Russkiy Mir, 2007a; Gülseven, 2019, pp. 39–41).

President Putin personally emphasized this project, frequently invoking the Russian World and Orthodox values in his foreign policy speeches since the 2000s (Kremlin.ru, 2007a). Notably, the ROC and Patriarch Kirill were positioned as the most crucial supporters of the Russkiy Mir Foundation (Bovt, 2017, p. 89; Bulekov, 2009, pp. 29–43). In 2004, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov confirmed this coordinated relationship, stressing that the government and the ROC cooperated to fulfill the foundation's mission. He further noted that the ROC significantly influenced civil society and was key to the diplomatic task of communicating with the diaspora (Mospat, 2006a; Gülseven, 2019, p. 44).

The project to instrumentalize the ROC in foreign policy received a formal institutional structure in 2003 with the creation of the Working Group on Interaction between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the ROC. This working group focused on issues related to the national interests of the Russian Federation. Following a 2007 meeting, Foreign Minister Lavrov underscored the

strategic alliance between the ROC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, asserting that Orthodox values formed the foundation of Russian culture and statehood (Mid.ru, 2007a).

The ROC's diplomatic mission is critical for establishing bilateral relations with Orthodox countries, as Russia emphasizes shared values and highlights the incompatibility of Western cultural codes with Orthodox values. The narrative that Western values pose a threat not only to Russia but to all Orthodox states has been consistently maintained by Russian bureaucratic circles since the 2000s. This strategic alignment allows the ROC to conduct vital diplomacy and diaspora policies in regions like the Balkans (Mospat, 2006a). As Putin stated in his interview with Tucker Carlson, the ROC emerges as an essential element in the foreign policy approach shaped around culture, history, and religion. Indeed, in the policies formed around the concept of the Russian World (Russkiy Mir), the ROC is observed to play a supportive role in the Russian government's policies (Kremlin.ru, 2024b).

4. Case Study: The ROC' Soft Power Mechanisms in Serbia

The ROC establishes its soft power strategy in the Balkans primarily through religious institutions and spiritual ties. By activating its existing historical ties with Orthodox churches in the region, it aims to create a basis for cooperation and a network of solidarity in line with Russia's geopolitical interests. Monasteries, churches, and religious educational institutions play an important role among the operational elements of this strategy, while the ROC also maintains direct communication with Balkan Orthodox communities through its own media outlets and digital platforms. These communication channels serve as platforms for legitimizing Russia's regional policies.

Orthodox Churches in the Balkan region are intertwined with national identity through their organic ties, conservative value systems, and nationalist rhetoric (Ramet, 2019, pp. 3, 12). Thanks to their capacity to define national identity and mobilize collective feelings of belonging, these churches fill social voids and become an effective power center in the political arena (Ramet, 2019, pp. 25, 33, 249, 251).

While various Orthodox churches across the Balkans benefit from the ROC's material and spiritual support, the SOC stands out due to its unique level of institutional and ideological proximity to Moscow. Rather than a one-directional flow of influence, this relationship is a strategic symbiosis in which the SOC acts with significant agency. The Serbian Church proactively cultivates ties with the ROC to secure a powerful ecclesiastical and diplomatic shield for its own interests. Specifically, by aligning with Moscow, the SOC gains a significant ally in safeguarding its canonical jurisdiction over Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia against potential autocephaly movements, challenges it perceives as existential threats supported by Western-aligned actors. Given this mutual dependency, this part of the study focuses specifically on the Serbian case to analyze how the ROC's presence serves both Russian foreign policy and the SOC's own institutional goals.

The historical ties between Serbia and Russia date back to the early Middle Ages, when both nations embraced Orthodox Christianity. From the fifteenth century onward, Russia emerged as an influential political and cultural power in the Orthodox Christian world, and its religious and cultural influence in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia, grew steadily. From the eighteenth century onward, Russia's strategy of systematically expanding its influence in the region became apparent, and in the nineteenth century, Western powers defined Serbia as Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Throughout history, Russia's diplomatic and political support has always been decisive when Serbia faced geopolitical crises. Russia's diplomatic support in Serbia's struggle for control over Kosovo is one concrete example of this (Djokich, 2020, p. 235).

Russia-Serbia relations are characterized by a unique quality shaped by Slavic identity, Orthodox faith, and historical-cultural ties, defined by the rhetoric of "brotherhood." Policy alignment is observed between the two countries even on controversial political issues. Russia uses the ROC as an element of soft power to develop its relations with Serbia, while trust in Russia among the Serbian public remains at a very high level (Zorić & Holzer, 2008, pp. 16–17). For example, according to the results of a public opinion poll conducted in Serbia in 2019, 88% of Serbs reject NATO membership, 44% do not want EU membership, 84% oppose economic sanctions against Russia, and 55% support the Open Balkans initiative, which Russia also supports (CEAS Survey, 2019). This confluence of emotional and political alignment constitutes a critical background for Serbia's foreign policy strategy, as the country's problematic historical relationship with the West creates a permissive environment for Moscow to sustain its influence.

4.1. Geopolitical and Strategic Alignment: The NATO-Imposed Constraint and Diplomatic Leverage

The discourse of brotherhood between Russia and Serbia and the high level of trust in Serbian public opinion impact Belgrade's maneuvering space in foreign policy. However, to better understand this unique relationship and the pro-Russian inclination in the public sphere, the geopolitical ground created by Serbia's problematic historical relationship with NATO and the West in general must be analyzed.

Indeed, Serbia's foreign policy is characterized by a deliberate "hedging" strategy or a state of non-alignment, aiming to maintain diplomatic flexibility by avoiding irreversible choices between competing global pressures (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 106). This approach is fundamentally rooted in Serbia's problematic historical relationship with NATO and the West in general (Jovic-Lazic, 2025, pp. 410–411). The roots of the conflict lie in the Yugoslav civil wars and, most significantly, in NATO's 1999 humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, which involved a 78-day bombing campaign targeting military objectives in the former Yugoslav Federation (Kutllovci et al., 2024, pp. 3–8, 115).

This military action, executed without UN Security Council approval, is perceived in Serbia as aggression and a violation of international law (Kutllovci et al., 2024, pp. 8, 115; Proroković, 2023, p. 189). This traumatic memory has created a structural constraint on alignment with the

West, leading to a deep negative perception in which most citizens view NATO as a force devoid of justice (Guzina, 2023, p. 1593; Jovic-Lazic, 2025, pp. 421–422). Reflecting this public opinion, Serbia has officially maintained a position of military neutrality since 2007 and openly rejected NATO membership (Kutllovci et al., 2024, pp. 4–5, 115). Polls consistently show that over 80% of the Serbian population opposes joining the Alliance, revealing that membership is a goal that is barely featured in national security strategies (Proroković, 2023, p. 186).

This strong and widespread anti-NATO opposition creates a primary opportunity for the Russian Federation to assert its influence in the Western Balkans. Russia, described as a "disruptive force," aims to keep Serbia out of Western alliances and maintain the current status quo. Moscow exploits this anti-Western sentiment not through coercion but by relying on strong soft power elements. Specifically, it solidifies the image of Russia as Serbia's sole ally by utilizing shared history, cultural ties, and the Orthodox Christian faith (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 116). Russia's engagement is motivated by pragmatic interests. It uses the Balkans as a stage to counter the West and to regain its status as a European and global power (Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 111). The narrative that Russia is Serbia's only ally, reinforced by the lasting trauma of the 1999 conflict, persists (Jovic-Lazic, 2025, p. 410).

This cultural and religious matrix is strategically utilized by Russia through tangible diplomatic instruments, most critically, by providing continuous veto support in the UN Security Council for Serbia's non-recognition position on Kosovo. This backing constitutes a vital political leverage that makes alignment with Moscow advantageous for Belgrade's fundamental national interest calculation, thereby sustaining Serbia's orientation toward Russia as a direct consequence of its problematic relationship with NATO and the West. Furthermore, significant political figures, such as former President Vojislav Koštunica, have historically privileged the SOC as the protector of the collective experience of the Serbian people and state, directly linking religious identity to national political continuity (Guzina, 2023, p. 1601). Russia actively nurtures these ties with the Orthodox Church and nationalist groups within Serbia.

The permissive environment created by this cultural and political matrix allows the ROC to instrumentalize the Kosovo narrative and support the Kremlin's geopolitical goals with concrete actions.

4.2. Orthodox Solidarity and the Instrumentalization of the Kosovo Narrative

In 1999, Russia opposed NATO's intervention in Kosovo and used its permanent membership status in the UN Security Council to block the recognition of Kosovo's independence. Parallel to this foreign policy stance, the ROC actively supported the SOC's thesis that views Kosovo as its historical and spiritual homeland. The participation of representatives from both churches in high-level Russian-Serbian talks following the removal of Slobodan Milošević from power in 2000 is significant in that it demonstrates the extent to which political dialogue is intertwined with religious discourse (Vukomanović, 2024, pp. 10–11).

This institutional engagement on the Kosovo issue has a strong historical basis. In 1999, while still a Metropolitan, Patriarch Kirill actively participated in peace actions for Yugoslavia and visited Belgrade, underscoring the ROC's decades-long effort to play a constructive role in the Kosovo crisis (Mospat, 2025d). Furthermore, this alignment is continuously reinforced through high-level church diplomacy. Patriarch Kirill regularly meets with members of the Serbian Church hierarchy, such as Montenegrin Metropolitan Ioanniky, in Moscow. Following these meetings, the Patriarch often emphasizes the theme of preserving the spiritual unity of Holy Rus' in his sermons, demonstrating the ongoing ideological coherence with the SOC (Patriarchia, 2022a).

The dialogue between the ROC and the SOC has moved beyond purely religious content and taken on a political function. By reproducing Russian foreign policy rhetoric on religious platforms, the SOC both legitimizes Russia's policies and contributes to the continuation of the bilateral political partnership (Zorić & Holzer, 2008, p. 24). This synergy manifests through the theological securitization of the Kosovo conflict, which reframes the issue through a spiritual lens. By positioning the dispute as a fundamental element of Orthodox identity rather than a strictly territorial concern, the ROC provides a normative framework that reinforces the SOC's traditional stance. This dynamic functions as a strategic deadlock by acting as a structural constraint: pragmatic diplomatic shifts often appear inconsistent with these deeply held religious values, thereby shaping the parameters of state engagement. While Moscow provides diplomatic support at the UN, the ROC's influence helps maintain a consistent domestic consensus. Ultimately, this partnership increases the political and electoral complexity for Serbian leaders considering a significant strategic pivot.

To sustain this domestic consensus, the ROC utilizes institutional vehicles such as the Russkiy Mir Foundation. Through this cooperation, the Church carries out projects in Serbia aimed at promoting Russian conservative values and traditional culture. The "Supporting Orthodoxy in Serbia and Kosovo" project, launched in 2012 and supported by the Russkiy Mir Foundation, can be considered within this scope (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1066). This strategic alliance was formalized by the 2009 memorandum of understanding between the president of the Russkiy Mir Foundation and Patriarch Kirill. By providing a structured framework for cultural and religious diplomacy, these initiatives translate theological support into a widespread public narrative that legitimizes the Serbian position on Kosovo under the banner of defending traditional Orthodox values.

The position of the ROC largely supports the SOC's official thesis that Kosovo is an inseparable part of Serbia. The ROC endeavors to legitimize this thesis on international religious and political platforms. The statements issued by the SOC generally emphasize the importance of Serbian heritage in Kosovo. The ROC frames this narrative within the defense of values brought from the historical roots of Orthodox civilization, asserting it stands against the "corrupt" values of the West, thereby emphasizing unity with the Serbian Church on the basis of "traditional values" (OSCE, 2019).

Furthermore, Patriarch Kirill's "sacred sacrifice" rhetoric used in his sermons concerning the war in Ukraine, and the principle that Kyiv territories are inseparable from Russia in a historical-theological context, exhibit a strong theological correspondence with the SOC's discourse concerning the 1990s wars and Kosovo. This correlation confirms the depth of the ideological affinity between the two churches (Pravoslavie, 2024).

The Kosovo issue is a key area where the ROC is used as a soft power instrument to advance Russia's strategic interests in the Balkans. The ROC operates as a non-state actor that faithfully supports the Kremlin's regional objectives through direct discourse and activities. Russia pursues calls based on historical, cultural, and religious ties with Serbia, fueled by its continued opposition to Kosovo's independence. The Kremlin's stance is reinforced by the lingering resentment over NATO's bombing of Serbia and the ongoing opposition to Kosovo's independence. Russia even views the 1999 Kosovo crisis as a humiliating event that challenged its great power status (Blitt, 2024, pp. 58, 62).

The ROC enthusiastically promotes the Kremlin's narratives through diplomacy and religious engagements (Blitt, 2024, pp. 67, 68). For instance, Patriarch Kirill has emphasized the efforts of the former Serbian Patriarch on behalf of the "long-suffering flock in Kosovo and Metohija," supporting the narrative that Serbs are under attack. Kirill also stated that Russia suffered alongside the Serbian people during the NATO bombing and that it continues to empathize with and assist the Serbian population in Kosovo to the extent possible (Blitt, 2024, pp. 74, 79). The ROC has supported the SOC and Serbia's claim to their "historical canonical territories, which undoubtedly include Kosovo" (Blitt, 2024, p. 120).

The Church also disseminates its messages through indirect, remotely controlled organizations. For example, the ROC-affiliated NGO, the "Centre for Monitoring the Rights and Freedom of Orthodox Christians in Europe" (CMRFOCE), echoed Kremlin objectives by opposing Kosovo's bid for UNESCO membership in 2015 (Orthodoxrights, 2015). Furthermore, members of the ROC-supported "Night Wolves" motorcycle club have drawn parallels between the "enemies" who separate Kosovo from Serbia and those seeking to deprive Russia of Ukraine. Through these actions, the Kremlin aims to fuel ethnic tensions against the West, increase regional instability, and present Russia as the natural alternative to the West (Theresheva, 2016; Blitt, 2024, pp. 69–74, 119).

Following the 1999 Kosovo bombing, Russia accelerated its efforts to regain the loyalty of Slavic and Orthodox believers in the Balkans (Kanin, 2019, pp. 33–34). The ROC successfully harnessed the deep anti-Western sentiment rooted in the NATO intervention, effectively positioning Russia as the Orthodox world's primary ideological patron by aligning the SOC's canonical claims on Kosovo with Moscow's foreign policy goals. This ideological dominance is further sustained and translated into geopolitical action through tangible institutional and financial soft power mechanisms, as evidenced by Moscow's strategic deployment of initiatives like the Russkiy Mir Foundation.

4.3. Non-State Proxies and Financial Diplomacy: Oligarchs and Nationalist Groups

The ROC may also be an indirect or direct party to discussions between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Serbian state institutions. Russia's financial and technical support for the restoration and construction of religious sites in Serbia is among the concrete manifestations of soft power (Mid.ru, 2020b). This approach serves as a practical mechanism for building public support from the ground up. A key example is Russia's financial role in completing the Saint Sava Temple in Belgrade (In4s.net, 2019). By turning financial aid into a permanent and visible religious symbol, Moscow embeds the narrative of "brotherhood" into the daily lives of Serbian citizens. This religious visibility makes it politically difficult for Serbian leaders to distance themselves from Russia without facing domestic backlash. In an environment where these symbols are so prominent, shifting away from Moscow can be framed as an attack on national identity, which significantly limits the government's options in foreign policy.

These symbolic efforts are sustained and expanded through formal institutional frameworks. Russkiy Mir (Russian World) is a broad initiative used by the Kremlin to advance Russia's foreign policy interests, and the ROC is a central component of this initiative (Russkiy Mir, 2007a). The ROC plays a significant role in facilitating the Kremlin's broader "compatriots" strategy and the Russian World initiative, thereby spreading Russia's soft power and influence globally.

As a concrete manifestation of this initiative, Russkiy Mir centers are present in the Western Balkans, including at the Faculty of Philology at the University of Belgrade, the University of Montenegro, the University of St. Cyril and Methodius in North Macedonia, and a university in Republika Srpska in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1067). These institutions typically work in collaboration with the ROC and local churches such as the SOC, focusing on the mission of preserving Orthodox values and promoting brotherhood with Russia (Blitt, 2024, p. 71).

In line with Russkiy Mir objectives, the ROC conducts informational and outreach activities such as "Days of Russian Spiritual Culture," and Patriarch Kirill participates in high-level political events like the 15th Russkiy Mir Assembly (Blitt, 2024, pp. 91, 95). Furthermore, ROC-affiliated organizations also disseminate this narrative. For example, the World Russian People's Council has condemned "discrimination and persecution" against individuals associated with the Russian World in the European Union (Blitt, 2024, p. 69). Church leaders also use this concept in their messages. SOC Patriarch Porfirije has accused the Ukrainian government of engaging in "horrific state terror" against ROC-affiliated churches and the broader Russian World (Blitt, 2024, p. 86).

The ROC further extends its sphere of influence by supporting other non-state proxy actors of the Russian World initiative. One such prominent group is the "Night Wolves" motorcycle club, which follows the "Russian Balkans" route and aims to restore Russia's historical heritage in the region (Blitt, 2024, pp. 72–73). In parallel with this cultural activism, Russian nationalists have attempted to utilize the idea of Orthodox ecumenism through paramilitary initiatives involving leaders such as Viktor Zaplatin of the "Balkan Cossack Army." Zaplatin organizes and establishes

ties with local fighters in Serbia and Montenegro within the framework of religious-nationalist discourse and Orthodox solidarity.

Declaring that "the Orthodox world is one world," Zaplatin has called for the division of Bosnia and Herzegovina through representatives from Serbia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece, and the Serb entity in Bosnia. This demonstrates Russia's desire to establish a pan-Orthodox hegemony among the Orthodox population in the Balkans (Kanin, 2019, pp. 34–35). In this context, Viktor Zaplatin organized Serbian volunteers to fight with pro-Russian forces in Ukraine in 2014. Additionally, as part of Russia's efforts to increase its influence in the Balkans, he took charge of a new Cossack organization established in the port city of Kotor, Montenegro, in 2016. Through such activities, Zaplatin has assumed the role of a paramilitary proxy actor, carrying Russia's military influence and nationalist ideology to the Balkans via Serbian volunteers and Cossack organizations (Obrenovic, 2020).

Yet, Russia's institutional and proxy-driven influence strategy has not been limited solely to state-backed actors; it has also been reinforced through private financial resources, media power, and philanthropic activities provided by Russian oligarchs connected to the ROC. Russian nationalist philanthropist Konstantin Malofeev plays an important role in spreading the influence of Russia and the ROC in the Balkans through his activities related to Orthodoxy. Malofeev is the founder of the St. Basil the Great Charitable Foundation, Russia's largest Orthodox charity. He is also the founder of the television channel Tsargrad, which broadcasts nationalist news and religious programs and is focused on promoting Orthodox values and building Orthodox churches (Sctvasilij.ru, 2025; Tsargrad.tv, 2025). Malofeev also organizes activities and charitable works related to Orthodox solidarity in the Balkans. For example, in 2015, during Orthodox Easter, he provided financial support for bringing the "holy fire ritual" to Belgrade. In addition, Malofeev commissioned a monument to Tsar Nicholas II in the Serbian Republic of Bosnia (Šćepanović, 2023, p. 1067).

In the post-2000 period, while the Serbian government sought to make progress in the European integration process, the SOC criticized the secularism clause in the EU constitution as a deviation from Orthodox Christian roots, creating additional areas of tension in Serbia's relations with the West (Vukomanović, 2024, p. 13).

Pro-Russian rhetoric in Serbia has a significant impact on the media and political institutions. The ROC reinforces its legitimacy in society by supporting the Serbian position on issues that directly coincide with Serbia's national interests, such as the Kosovo issue. Furthermore, Russian cultural centers and institutions offering Russian language education in Serbia play an important role in increasing Russia's cultural influence.

Conclusion

The ROC operates as a hybrid geopolitical apparatus and an autonomous actor, leveraging its partnership with the state to advance its "Holy Rus" vision. Rather than providing passive cultural outreach, this dynamic role allows the Church to translate Orthodox solidarity into tangible diplomatic and operational leverage across the Balkans. In this capacity, the ROC provides the ideological core for the Russian World (Russkiy Mir) project. This doctrine successfully positions Russia as a solid civilization built on traditional values, directly challenging the perceived social and religious decline of Europe.

The analysis of the Serbian case provides clear evidence of this instrumentalization through three interconnected layers, demonstrating the transition from classic soft power to strategic influence. The strategic foundation of the ROC's influence relies on exploiting the deep, pervasive anti-Western trauma resulting from the 1999 NATO intervention, which creates a structural constraint on Serbian policy. Russia successfully converts this shared religious identity into vital diplomatic leverage through actions such as providing continuous UN Security Council veto support. This ideological mechanism is further realized by the ROC's utilization of Orthodox solidarity to align the SOC's foundational canonical claims (Kosovo as canonical territory) with the Kremlin's anti-Western geopolitical agenda. Crucially, the final layer of this strategy is achieved through tangible, hybrid mechanisms, whereby the ROC extends its influence by leveraging private oligarchic finance and utilizing paramilitary nationalist groups as proxy actors to disseminate the ideological narrative on the ground.

Ultimately, the ROC's influence is conditional. It works fully in environments like Serbia, where historical sympathy for Russia is extremely high and the political constraints are severe. The success of this approach confirms the theoretical notion that Religious Soft Power goes beyond simple attraction and involves strategically channeling identity politics to establish networks of loyalty. The ROC's role, therefore, relies on building these networks by mobilizing religious affiliations and historical ties. Crucially, the ROC's effectiveness in Serbia depends on the active agency of the SOC, which instrumentalizes Russian support to protect its jurisdiction in Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia. Church struggles in the Balkans, as evidenced by this case study, are thus not merely religious or cultural disputes but are a critical component of Russia's multidimensional strategy to establish a geopolitical sphere of influence in Southeastern Europe and challenge the wider wider-Western order. Understanding Russia's regional policies requires consideration of the ROC's activities as an advanced, hybrid mechanism of modern religious statecraft.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Dynamics of Israel's Relations with the Western Balkans

İsrail'in Batı Balkanlar ile İlişkilerinin Dinamikleri

Selim ÖZTÜRK*

Abstract

This article examines the improving relations between Israel and selected Western Balkan states (i.e., Serbia, Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina) through a historical analysis. It argues that the post-Cold War rapprochement between Israel and these states has been driven primarily by pragmatic considerations rather than by ideological, cultural, or historical affinities. While ideational factors continue to shape diplomatic narratives and legitimize policy choices, they function largely as secondary and instrumental elements. From the perspective of the Western Balkan states, key drivers include security concerns, economic interests, and alignment with U.S. strategic priorities. From Israel's perspective, security threats, most notably from Iran, the pursuit of allies to avoid diplomatic isolation, and a flexible *realpolitik* approach constitute the primary determinants of engagement. By highlighting the central role of pragmatism in shaping the relations of Israel and the selected states, the article contributes to the literature on foreign policy analysis and the relations of Israel and the Western Balkans by demonstrating how material interests consistently outweigh ideational commitments in contemporary diplomatic practice.

Keywords: Israel, Western Balkans, Albania, Kosovo, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Serbia

Öz

Bu makale, İsrail ile seçili Batı Balkan devletleri (Sırbistan, Arnavutluk, Kosova ve Bosna-Hersek) arasındaki gelişen ilişkileri tarihsel bir analiz çerçevesinde incelemektedir. Çalışmada, Soğuk Savaş sonrası dönemde İsrail ile bu devletler arasında ortaya çıkan yakınlaşmanın, ideolojik, kültürel veya tarihsel yakınlıklardan ziyade esas olarak pragmatik kaygılar tarafından yönlendirildiği ileri sürülmektedir. Düşünsel faktörler diplomatik söylemleri şekillendirmeye ve politika tercihlerini meşrulaştırmaya devam etse de bunlar büyük ölçüde ikincil ve araçsal unsurlar olarak işlev görmektedir. Batı Balkan devletleri açısından bakıldığında, temel belirleyiciler arasında güvenlik kaygıları, ekonomik çıkarlar ve ABD'nin stratejik öncelikleriyle uyum yer almaktadır. İsrail açısından ise, başta İran'ın nüfuzu olmak üzere güvenlik tehditleri, diplomatik izolasyondan kaçınmak amacıyla müttefik

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arayışı ve esnek bir reelpolitik yaklaşım, ilişkilerin temel belirleyicileri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. İsrail ile seçili Batı Balkan devletleri arasındaki ilişkilerin şekillenmesinde pragmatizmin merkezi rolünü vurgulayan bu makale, güncel diplomasi pratiğinde maddi çıkarların düşünsel bağlılıkların önüne geçtiğini göstererek dış politika analizi ile İsrail-Batı Balkan ilişkileri literatürüne katkı sunmaktadır.
Anahtar Kelimeler: İsrail, Batı Balkanlar, Arnavutluk, Kosova, Bosna-Hersek, Sırbistan

1. Introduction

In recent years, Israel has intensified its engagement with the Western Balkans, with its diplomatic, political, and economic outreach becoming particularly visible in Serbia, Kosovo, and Albania. Israel has long-standing historical and cultural ties with the former Yugoslav states, and the roots of Zionism can be traced in part to this region. Several significant historical developments underscore this connection. Nazi Germany first declared certain territories of Yugoslavia *judenrein* (free of Jews); the Holocaust manifested some of its most violent consequences there; the Kingdom of Serbia was among the earliest supporters of the Balfour Declaration; and the earliest recorded use of the term "Israel" appeared in official correspondence between Serbia and the World Zionist Organization (Clubrik, 2008).

Despite the fact that the socialist regimes in Yugoslavia and Albania adopted adversarial positions toward Israel and strongly supported the Palestinian cause during the Cold War, the post-Cold War era created new political and economic opportunities for rapprochement. While Israel's primary objectives have included securing diplomatic support on the Palestinian issue in Europe, establishing security partnerships, expanding markets for arms exports, and enhancing its economic presence, while the Western Balkan states have generally sought access to Jewish lobbying networks, economic cooperation, and alignment with Western powers as part of their broader efforts to consolidate political stability and international legitimacy.

In the post-Cold War era, however, the improvement of relations between Israel and the selected Western Balkan states cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the role of the U.S. Since their independence, the governments of these Western Balkan countries have faced structural economic and institutional constraints, increasing their reliance on U.S. political, economic, and military support. One of the most effective ways to secure such backing has been to strengthen relations with Israel and to benefit from its political influence and lobbying capacity in Washington. When the underlying drivers of rapprochement with Israel are examined, several country-specific motivations emerge: Serbia and Albania seek U.S. political support; Albania also pursues security cooperation in response to perceived Iranian influence; Kosovo aims to enhance its security vis-à-vis Serbia while sustaining its fragile economy; and Republika Srpska, the predominantly Serb entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, seeks to rehabilitate its image in the eyes of the U.S. For both states, countering Russian expansion in the region can also be regarded as a shared motivation. In short, pragmatism and realpolitik currently dominate the foreign policy choices of Western Balkan states toward third parties..

This study is descriptive in nature and employs a qualitative approach. It draws on textual sources such as books, book chapters, academic articles, reports, analyses, policy briefs, politicians' statements, newspapers, and magazines. As a study of political history, it seeks to analyze the improving relations between Israel and the selected Western Balkan countries by examining the fundamental factors underlying these rapprochements. The study examines various case studies from the 20th century up to the present, with a particular focus on changing foreign policy priorities. Given the limited number of academic studies on this subject, the article aims to serve as one of the foundational academic texts by providing an overview of the main parameters and critical turning points in the development of relations between Israel and the selected Western Balkan states. The case of Yugoslavia and its successor state, Serbia, is given greater emphasis than the others due to its unique position as the principal bearer of the former Yugoslav legacy.

2. Israel's Relations with Serbia

Historically, Serbia and Israel have shared deep cultural and political commonalities, dating back to the period of the Kingdom of Serbia in the nineteenth century. Rabbi Judah Alkalai, a prominent Jewish community leader who lived in Serbia during this period, is widely regarded as an early inspirer of Zionism through his advocacy of Jewish unity and the idea of return to the ancestral land. Beyond Alkalai's influence, Theodor Herzl's political thought was also shaped by the revolutionary and independence movements in Serbia. Accordingly, the influence of Serbian nationalism on the intellectual formation of Zionism cannot be overlooked. In subsequent decades, Serbia continued to occupy a distinctive position in Jewish political history. Following the issuance of the Balfour Declaration by the British government in 1917, which endorsed the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, Serbia became the first European state to express official support for the declaration (Fruscione, 2024). Serbia was also among the first territories during the Second World War to be declared *judenrein* (free of Jews) by the Nazi authorities. On the eve of the war, approximately eighty thousand Jews were living in Yugoslavia, of whom around sixty-six thousand were murdered during the Holocaust. The country also hosted one of the most notorious concentration camps, Jasenovac, where approximately seventeen thousand Jews were killed (Fruscione, 2024). Another significant aspect of Yugoslavia's importance from Israel's perspective was its early diplomatic recognition of the State of Israel. Along with Czechoslovakia and Poland, Yugoslavia was among the first European countries to recognize Israel, doing so immediately after the Soviet Union extended recognition in 1948 (Fruscione, 2024).

As a socialist state, Yugoslavia's early recognition of Israel can be explained by motivations similar to those of the Soviet Union. At the time, Israel's ruling elite were widely perceived as having socialist orientations, and the newly established state was initially regarded as a potential ally of the Eastern Bloc in the Middle East. These expectations, however, were not realized, as Israel gradually aligned itself with the U.S. In the early years, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito supported the establishment of Israel largely due to its anti-colonial struggle against the British rule, and anticipated that Israel would emerge as a close partner in opposing the British imperial influence

in the region. Even prior to the Suez Crisis, Tito adopted positions favorable to Israel, voting in the United Nations Security Council in support of the principle of free passage through the Suez Canal for all states (Abadi, 1996, p. 298). The reason behind the policy of recognizing and supporting Israel by socialist Yugoslavia can be regarded as "ideological". The Bandung Conference held in April 1955 marked a decisive turning point in Tito's political priorities. As partners within the Non-Aligned Movement, Nasser and Tito began to pursue increasingly coordinated policies, a development that led Yugoslavia to downgrade its relations with Israel, refrain from opening an embassy in Tel Aviv, and ultimately sever diplomatic ties following the Six-Day War. Tito's overarching objective was to prevent Non-Aligned members from falling under Soviet political and military influence. From this perspective, he adopted a hardline stance against Israel, including calls for the rearmament of Egypt. In Tito's view, Egypt's military weakness risked creating an opening for expanded Soviet involvement in the Middle East. At the same time, Tito was regarded by Israeli actors as a credible intermediary. In the aftermath of the Six-Day War, the World Zionist Organization proposed that he mediate between Israel and Egypt. Although Tito attempted to convey this initiative to Nasser, the latter rejected the proposal. In subsequent years, Yugoslavia moved closer to Palestinian guerrilla groups, eventually becoming one of their arms suppliers by providing weapons such as Strela missiles (Abadi, 1996, pp. 299–300).

At this juncture, the extent to which Tito's policy toward Israel shifted following the Bandung Conference warrants closer examination. At first glance, Tito's approach appears ideological, particularly insofar as his expectations that Israel would pursue socialist-oriented foreign policies were ultimately disappointed. At the same time, his foreign policy can also be interpreted as pragmatic. As a leading figure of the Non-Aligned Movement, Tito sought to prevent the expansion of Soviet influence in the Middle East; from this perspective, supporting Egypt against Israel was viewed as a means of discouraging Cairo from turning more decisively toward Moscow in a context of perceived vulnerability.

Yugoslavia's rapid recognition of Israel in 1948 can thus be understood as the outcome of a combination of ideological and strategic considerations. The expectation that a fraternal socialist regime might emerge in the Middle East, together with Yugoslavia's broader commitment to anti-imperialist solidarity in neighboring regions, initially facilitated close relations with Israel. Ideology therefore played a role in shaping early bilateral relations. The subsequent rupture, however, was driven less by ideological divergence than by Yugoslavia's rivalry with the Soviet Union, despite their shared socialist identity. The broader power struggle between Belgrade and Moscow, combined with Israel's growing alignment with the U.S., prompted a policy shift in favor of Egypt and ultimately led to the severing of ties with Israel. In this sense, the earlier period of positive Israel and Yugoslavia relations also constituted a dependent outcome within a changing configuration of systemic and strategic variables.

In the post-Cold War era, both global and regional conditions in the Western Balkans began to undergo significant transformation. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Western Balkan states sought access to new markets to address their economic needs, and the

restoration of relations with Israel emerged as a potentially advantageous option for facilitating closer ties with the U.S. and Western markets. During this period, the rise of the Middle East peace process and the decline of pan-Arabism further eased the path toward reconciliation with Israel (Abadi, 1996, pp. 296, 316).

As Yugoslavia began to disintegrate and war erupted, Israel appeared to lean toward Serbia. Zionism and Serbian nationalism found a basis for cooperation, particularly in the context of concerns over unilateral declarations of statehood, which resonated with Israel's apprehensions regarding the prospect of a fully independent Palestinian state. Israel opened an embassy in Serbia in 1991, shortly after the end of the Cold War. Nevertheless, Israel's political posture during this period remained fundamentally pragmatic rather than ideologically driven. If Israel realizes that the developments go in another direction and it cannot prevent the flowing events, it can adapt to the new situation in favor of its own pragmatic interests. For instance, Israel also supplied weapons to the Croatian forces during the Yugoslav wars. During the Second World War, it is well established that the Croatian Ustaša regime collaborated with Nazi Germany and played a significant role in the Holocaust, whereas the Serbs were among those who resisted the Nazi occupation. Nevertheless, Israel largely disregarded this historical distinction and proceeded to extend diplomatic recognition to both Croatia and Slovenia in 1992 following their secession from Yugoslavia (Fruscione, 2024; Gaughan, 2024; Mujanovic, 2022).

Israel has consistently pursued a dual pragmatic strategy in the Western Balkans, both historically and in the contemporary period. While publicly appearing to support Yugoslavia's unitary claims and opposing the secession of its constituent republics, Israel simultaneously refrained from withholding covert support for the armament and independence efforts of Croatia and Slovenia. This apparent contradiction can be understood as a reflection of Israel's capacity for rapid adaptation to rapidly evolving political circumstances. In addition, Israel reportedly supplied weapons to Serbian forces during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and refrained from recognizing the statehood claims of the Bosnian Muslim leadership. Despite the United Nations Security Council arms embargo, Israeli arms sales and military assistance were alleged to have reached Bosnian Serb forces, including during the period leading up to the Srebrenica massacre. According to *The European*, a British weekly newspaper published between 1990 and 1998, Israel delivered weapons to Serbia in 1992 in exchange for guarantees of free passage for the Jewish minority living in Bosnia (Clubrik, 2008). By supplying arms to different parties in the conflict, Israel not only derived economic benefits but also sought to establish covert and flexible alliances tailored to shifting regional dynamics.

Israel was particularly reluctant to support the independence of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as such a development could have been perceived as setting a precedent for Palestine. President Alija Izetbegović's public expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian cause likely contributed to Israeli concerns during this period. In addition, allegations regarding Izetbegović's alleged involvement with the 13th Waffen Mountain Division of the SS *Handschar*, a unit composed largely of Bosniaks and formed with the support of Amin al Husseini, the Mufti of al Quds, have been cited as factors

influencing Israel's policy toward Bosnia (Clubrik, 2008). Nevertheless, these claims remain contested and lack sufficient evidentiary weight to be considered decisive determinants of Israel's Bosnia policy. It can be argued that ideological considerations initially played a determining role in shaping Israel's policy toward Muslim Bosnians during the early phase of the war. Unlike Croatia and Slovenia, which remained largely indifferent to the Palestinian issue, Izetbegović openly and consistently expressed solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

At the same time, the domestic political context in Israel should not be overlooked. During this period, decision-making authority rested with a right-wing coalition led by the Likud Party under Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir. Historically, Likud-led governments have tended to pursue more hawkish foreign policies, particularly toward Muslim actors perceived as affiliated politically or symbolically with the Palestinian cause. In this sense, Israel's policy toward Bosnia can be interpreted as a case shaped not only by external strategic considerations but also by internal political dynamics. The Bosnian case thus represents a deviation from Israel's mainstream pragmatism, reflecting the interaction between ideological predispositions and partisan leadership rather than a structural shift in Israeli foreign policy behavior. For instance, in July 1995, Israel cooperated with Jordan in delivering humanitarian aid to Bosnian victims at the request of the King of Jordan, and it had previously accepted Bosnian refugees in 1993. Moreover, during the same period, Israel's left-wing leadership, specifically Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, publicly condemned the Srebrenica massacre (Abadi, 1996, p. 304; Clubrik, 2008). Following this joint condemnation, Israel decided to transfer arms, specifically TAU and LAU anti-tank rockets to Bosnia via French intelligence channels (Abadi, 1996, p. 303). The Labor Party-led coalition government under Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin appears to have been a decisive factor in this arms shipment, which can be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture toward Muslim Bosnia. Rabin maintained close relations with Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan, as he was widely regarded as the architect of peace with the Palestinians.

Another important explanation for Israel's arms support to the Serbs lies in Iran's military assistance to *mujahedeen*. The Clinton administration covertly gave a green light to Iranian arms shipments to Bosnia, a policy that later forced the administration to account for its actions before the U.S. Congress in 1996 after the issue was revealed by the *Los Angeles Times* (Risen & Doyle, 1996; Talbott, 1996; House of Representatives, 1998, p. 4). While the arms embargo was initially violated by the U.S. in favor of Iranian supplies to Bosnian forces, Israel subsequently breached the embargo in 1995 in support of the Serbs. From this perspective, Israeli decision-makers may have interpreted the Bosnian battlefield as a proxy war with Iran. The military equipment involved reportedly included rifles, ammunition, uniforms, anti-tank weapons, and shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missiles (O'Hem, 2012, p. 82). The total volume of these shipments has been estimated to range between 5,000 and 14,000 tons between May 1994 and January 1996 (Curtis, 2016). This episode provides strong support for the argument that Israel's initially negative political stance toward Bosnia was reshaped primarily by regional security considerations and threat perceptions related to Iran.

A clash between ideological and pragmatic foreign policy approaches within Israel was also observed during the Kosovo War of 1999. Although Israel was a close ally of the U.S. and formally aligned with NATO, internal divisions became visible during the war. Israeli Foreign Minister Ariel Sharon publicly condemned NATO's bombing of Belgrade and accused Kosovo of being a hub of Islamic terrorism in Europe, a stance that created the impression that Israel was aligning itself with Russia. However, these remarks did not reflect the official position of the incumbent government. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu intervened promptly to contain the diplomatic fallout and effectively delegitimized Sharon's statements through an official press release issued by the Israeli embassy in Washington, which explicitly endorsed NATO's intervention in Kosovo. In parallel, Israel demonstrated humanitarian engagement by dispatching a field hospital to an Albanian refugee camp in the region. Following Netanyahu's departure from office, Prime Minister Ehud Barak characterized NATO's operation as a major victory for the emerging post-Cold War international order. Nevertheless, despite these executive-level positions, the Knesset refrained from formally condemning Serbia for its actions in Kosovo, underscoring the persistence of ambivalence within Israeli political institutions (Clubrik, 2008; Gaughan, 2024).

These contradictory statements revealed a deeper paradox within Israel's Western Balkan policy. On the one hand, Israel was compelled to endorse NATO's intervention and align with the U.S. due to its fundamental security concerns and its reliance on American political, military, and economic support rather than out of any direct commitment to Kosovo itself. On the other hand, Israel's Western Balkan policy was simultaneously shaped by an enduring ideological affinity between Zionism and Serbian nationalism, particularly the shared narrative of "returning to ancestral lands." In this regard, Kosovo occupies a symbolic position for Serbian nationalism comparable to that of Judea and Samaria for Israel. Both political movements conceptualize perceived obstacles to their national objectives primarily through a security lens, framing opposition groups as terrorist threats. Accordingly, Serbia's depiction of Kosovo Albanians closely parallels Israel's characterization of Palestinian resistance movements (Fruscione, 2024).

In sum, it can be argued that ideological-historical orientations and pragmatism within the Israeli state came into direct tension during the Kosovo War. In this context, Israel's partial support to Yugoslavia can be observed as a second case following Bosnia, once again diverging from the official position of the U.S. From Israel's perspective, the covert approval granted by the U.S. administration to Iranian arms shipments to the Bosniaks during the Bosnian War was perceived as a *realpolitik* maneuver that ran counter to Israel's security interests. Consequently, the hawkish wing of the Likud Party, represented by figures such as Sharon, articulated support for Serbia during the Kosovo conflict despite Washington's opposition. Moreover, claims that the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps trained the Kosovo Liberation Army, similar to its earlier involvement with Bosnian *mujahideen*, further reinforced Israeli threat perceptions (O'Hem, 2012, p. 82).

With the outbreak of the Gaza war on October 7, 2023, relations between Serbia and Israel entered a new phase marked by intensified cooperation in arms trade and diplomatic coordination. Prior to this convergence, Serbia had downgraded the level of its diplomatic representation in

Tel Aviv and pursued improved relations with Iran in response to Israel's official recognition of Kosovo in 2021. In this context, the Trump administration's Balkans initiative, strategically linked to the Middle East, functioned largely as an electoral showcase aimed at portraying the president as a global peacemaker. The plan sought first to facilitate normalization between Belgrade and Pristina, then to align both actors with Israel, and ultimately to integrate them into a broader Middle East framework predicated on the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Through this multidimensional initiative, Washington also aimed to curb Iranian influence in the Balkans. Under strong U.S. mediation, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovan Prime Minister Avdullah Hoti had agreed in the Washington Agreement of September 4, 2020 to pursue economic normalization as an initial step toward political recognition. As part of this process, Serbia committed to relocating its embassy to Jerusalem by July 2021 and subsequently established a trade office and a ministerial-level state office in the city. Following Trump's defeat in the November 2020 elections, Serbia gradually distanced itself from the agreement, whereas Kosovo and Israel proceeded with reciprocal recognition. This deepening rapprochement between Israel and Kosovo, in turn, strained Serbia-Israel relations. Adopting a pragmatic foreign policy stance, Serbia chose not to jeopardize its relations with Muslim-majority countries, recalibrating its regional and diplomatic priorities accordingly (Fruscione, 2024; Cvijic & Vuksanovic, 2023, p. 9; Mikovic, 2023).

Owing to Israel's recognition of Kosovo, relations with Serbia were strained for a period, particularly until October 7. The conflict marked a renewed phase of rapprochement between the two countries. Serbia recalled Israel's arms shipments to Serbian forces during the Bosnian War and, in turn, supplied arms to Israel. Serbian military aircraft reportedly transported weapons to Israel in February, March, and May 2024. Despite the United Nations warnings against arms exports to Israel due to civilian casualties in the Gaza Strip, the Serbian state-owned company Yugoimport-SDPR sold weapons worth approximately $14 million. According to available reports, total Serbian arms exports to Israel reached $25 million by September 2024, with shipments allegedly conducted covertly from Belgrade Airport to Beersheba (Fruscione, 2024; Shahbazov, 2024). Through these actions, Serbia appeared to reciprocate Israel's earlier military support, despite the potential risk of future allegations related to war crimes.

On the diplomatic front, following October 7, Belgrade appointed an ambassador to Israel after a three-year hiatus. President Vučić also appointed Marko Đurić of Jewish descent and formerly Serbia's ambassador to Washington as foreign minister, signaling Belgrade's intention to strengthen ties with the U.S. through closer relations with Tel Aviv. Serbia further demonstrated its alignment by supporting the U.S. call for the release of hostages held by Hamas and by condemning the Hamas attacks in the early days of the conflict, making Vučić one of the first leaders to do so (Gaughan, 2024; Al Istiklal, 2025). Symbolically, efforts to revitalize bilateral relations were also reflected in the sporting arena. In October 2023, Maccabi Playtika Tel Aviv played its EuroLeague home games in Belgrade, underscoring the normalization of ties after a three-year rupture (Mikovic, 2023).

Serbia's diplomatic posture has remained broadly aligned with Israel since October 7. For instance, in September 2024, the UN General Assembly voted on a resolution calling on Israel to end its occupation of the Palestinian territories. While 124 countries supported the resolution and 14 voted against it, Serbia chose to abstain. Similarly, Serbia abstained from a subsequent UNGA vote calling for an immediate ceasefire between Israel and Hamas. Rather than directly supporting or opposing such resolutions, Serbia has generally adopted an abstention-based strategy in UN General Assembly votes. In return, Israel has reciprocated this approach by acting in Serbia's favor in UN votes that directly concern Serbian interests. In May 2024, when the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution designating July 11 as the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Srebrenica genocide, Israel likewise abstained, aligning its position with Serbia. In that vote, 84 countries supported the resolution, while 19, including China, Russia, and Syria under the Assad regime voted against it (Fruscione, 2024). Israel's reluctance to recognize Srebrenica as genocide may partly stem from its indirect involvement during the Bosnian War, including arms shipments to Bosnian Serb forces at the time of the massacre. More broadly, Israel has traditionally treated the concept of genocide as uniquely associated with Jewish historical experience, namely the Holocaust, and has been reluctant to extend the term to other cases (Fruscione, 2024; Primoratz, 1999, p. 92).

During the Cold War, Serbia, then part of socialist Yugoslavia, was among the few states that formally recognized Palestine in 1988. Since then, however, Serbia's positioning has shifted considerably. In practice, Belgrade's contemporary approach closely mirrors Israel's own pragmatism. Serbia increasingly views Israel as a strategic gateway for improving relations with the U.S. Accordingly, when President Trump pressured Serbia to engage in negotiations with Kosovo and commit to relocating its embassy, Belgrade acquiesced to the plan. Following the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israel and Kosovo in February-March 2021, after the Trump administration had left office, Serbia responded by expanding its economic and political ties with Iran as a form of diplomatic counterbalance to Israel's decision (Mikovic, 2023; Gjevori, 2024).

The October 7 war subsequently provided Serbia with an opportunity to revitalize relations with Israel and, indirectly, with the U.S. In this context, Belgrade adopted a pro-Israeli stance while largely remaining silent on the humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza. Vučić met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, where both leaders emphasized their shared objective of securing the release of captives, including at least one Israeli-Serbian dual national. In early 2025, Serbian Foreign Minister Đurić paid an official visit to Tel Aviv, followed in July 2025 by a visit from Ana Brnabić, President of the National Assembly of Serbia, aimed at reaffirming Serbia's political support during the ongoing conflict. Bilateral trade between the two countries reached approximately $200 million in 2024. Serbia has also benefited from Israeli cyber-surveillance technologies, including Pegasus, which have reportedly been used to monitor domestic opposition, reinforcing Vučić's increasingly authoritarian governance. Notably, Vučić has publicly expressed pride in Serbia's status as the only European country exporting arms to Israel since October 7. According to data from early

2025, Serbian exports of arms and ammunition to Israel amounted to €42.3 million (Al Istiklal, 2025).

A review of the motivations driving the improvement of relations between the two countries reveals a multiplicity of factors rather than a single determinant. These motivations can be characterized as predominantly pragmatic, yet inherently paradoxical and subject to change across different contexts and periods. First, it appears strategically advantageous for Israel to cultivate close ties with EU member states or EU candidate countries, as such relationships may serve to weaken internal cohesion within the European Union on the Palestinian issue (Gjevori, 2024).

Even though Serbian nationalism and Zionism share commonalities regarding the sanctity of ancestral lands such as Jerusalem and Kosovo, their cooperation is primarily driven by pragmatism and realpolitik. In 1995, Israel provided the Bosnian Serbs with arms and training to fight against the Muslim Bosniaks; in return, the Serbs allowed the Jews in Sarajevo to safely leave the city. Today, Serbia continues to support Israel with ammunition, while President Vučić seeks to gain the backing of Jewish lobbies in the U.S. and improve relations with the Trump administration to prolong his political tenure. Vučić's pragmatic approach is not limited to Israel; it is also evident in his relations with Putin. Serbia stands out as the only EU candidate country maintaining good relations with Russia (Fruscione, 2024; Mujanovic, 2022).

3. Israel's Relations with Albania

Like Yugoslavia, Albania was part of the communist bloc, yet it neither joined the Non-Aligned Movement nor fully aligned with the Soviet Iron Curtain. Its leader, Enver Hoxha, maintained a privileged and isolated position through alignment with Mao's China. Albania also maintained good relations with the PLO and Yasser Arafat. Although Albanians rescued Jews during the Holocaust, the communist regime did not emphasize this history, largely due to its adversarial stance toward Israel during the Cold War. For many years, Albania provided weapons, ammunition, funds, training, and logistical support to PLO fighters. Together with Yugoslavia, Albania recognized Palestine in 1988. However, immediately after the collapse of the Iron Curtain, U.S. influence began to increase across the Balkans, while the political weight of the Palestinians diminished (Gjevori, 2024). Albania opened its embassy in Tel Aviv in 1999, having established diplomatic ties in 1991, while the reciprocal embassy from Israel only opened in 2012. The appointment of Yoel Kaplan, a chief rabbi, marked a turning point in the bilateral relationship, with the embassy opening following this appointment (Gjevori, 2024).

The improvement of Israel-Albania relations can be analyzed through three dynamics: first, the shared security concern regarding Iran; second, the Bektashi statehood project; and third, the impact of improving relations between Israel and Kosovo, another state in the region with an ethnic Albanian majority (93%). Iranian influence began to expand in the Balkans during the Bosnian War in 1995, with the Clinton administration implicitly facilitating Iranian support for

the Bosnian Muslims. Subsequently, Iran extended its influence through politically and culturally oriented activities (Berkolli, 2021; Clubrik, 2008). A major source of tension between Albania and Iran emerged with the relocation of the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MeK), an armed opposition group against the Islamic Republic, to Albania in 2013. This relocation was a U.S.-led initiative aimed at establishing an alternative tool against the ruling Islamic regime (Walker, 2019; Al Jazeera, 2022). Subsequently, the activities of the Islamic Republic in Albania intensified. In July 2022, Iran was accused of launching cyberattacks against Albanian government bodies. In response, Albania expelled all Iranian diplomatic staff and severed diplomatic relations with Iran (Iran International, 2023; Al Jazeera, 2022). Consequently, the rapprochement between Israel and Albania accelerated. Albanian President Edi Rama visited Jerusalem in October 2022, a few months after the cyberattacks. The main topic of the visit was cybersecurity cooperation between the two countries. During the trip, President Rama repeatedly reminded President Herzog of Albania's role in rescuing Jews during the Holocaust. Following this visit, Albanian Defense Minister Niko Peleshi traveled to Tel Aviv to meet his counterpart, Yoav Gallant, to discuss joint security and defense cooperation.

On September 22, 2024, Edi Rama announced the project for the establishment of a Bektashi State, modeled on the Vatican, in his speech at the UN General Assembly (EuroNews, 2024; Mujanovic, 2022; Berman, 2022). Baba Mondi, the leader of the Bektashi order in Albania, was expected to serve as the head of this new state. This project appears to have been planned with Israeli support. It is aimed at preventing Iranian attempts to penetrate the Bektashi order in the Balkans through the establishment of an Israeli-backed religious structure. In line with this, the Bektashi order sent a letter of endorsement to Tel Aviv via the Albanian embassy, condemning the Hamas-led Al Aqsa Flood (Jandali, 2025; The New Arab, 2024). With the announcement of the Bektashi State project, the counter-strategy against the Iranian influence expanded into cultural and religious spheres. The project appears to be primarily driven by Israel, with the U.S. operating behind the scenes, particularly with regard to its security dimension vis-à-vis Iran. American actors have been working with the Bektashi communities in the region since the early 2000s and have coordinated relations between Israeli officials and Bektashi leaders. For instance, Baba Mondi's visit to Israel in 2007 was coordinated by USAID. Iran's efforts to cultivate influence over the Bektashi community through religious travel, pilgrimages, and education in Iranian cities such as Qom, Najaf, and Karbala, the schooling of Bektashi children in Iran, the activities of the Saadi Shirazi Cultural Center, and the construction of schools and numerous lodges in Albania with Iranian financial sponsorship have been perceived as a threat to American and Israeli interests in the Balkans (Jazexhi, 2025, p. 8). By accelerating the Bektashi state project, the counterweight against Iran is intended to be consolidated.

While Serbia exports arms to Israel, Albania functions as an importer, acting as an Israeli ally in the Western Balkans due to Iranian activities on Albanian soil targeting the MeK, allegedly with Israeli intelligence support (Shahbazov, 2024; Wana Iran, 2025). In 2024, Albania also became the third-largest oil supplier to Israel, following Brazil and Russia, with over 70,000 tons. During President Herzog's visit to Prime Minister Edi Rama in September 2024, the two leaders

discussed the release of hostages and announced the opening of a trade office in Jerusalem by Albania. Following Kosovo, a Muslim-majority country, in opening an embassy in Jerusalem, Albania's establishment of a trade office may signal a potential embassy relocation in the coming years (JNS, 2024; Shahbazov, 2024; Gjevori, 2024).

The Israeli government consistently seeks support from Muslim countries to create a positive image on the Palestinian issue. Moreover, Israel's expansion in the Western Balkans is significant for its strategy to monitor and counter Iranian influence, as well as to secure allies and establish security cooperation against common threats. On the other hand, the Albanian government, led by Edi Rama since 2013, has managed to remain in power through pro-Israeli, pro-U.S., and pro-NATO policies, despite its politically vulnerable and corrupt nature. Through maintaining good relations with Israel, Rama expects international support and lobbying efforts from Jewish organizations in the U.S. (Shahbazov, 2024; Gjevori, 2024). Overall, the improving relations are highly pragmatic for both sides, similar to the Serbia-Israel case.

4. Israel's Relations with Kosovo

Israel had refrained from recognizing Kosovo until 2020. The first reason was to avoid damaging its relations with Serbia, the second was Kosovo's Muslim-majority population, and the third was the parallel situation of Kosovo and Palestine, both of which pursued full independence, with Kosovo potentially setting a precedent for Palestinian statehood. Israel had similarly distanced itself from the Bosniaks due to their Islamic identity. However, the first Trump administration (2017–2021) radically changed these dynamics, pitting Kosovo and Palestine against each other. Despite shared characteristics, the two became rivals. Paradoxically, the Palestinian Authority opposes Kosovo's independence because it faces a similar struggle and has not yet achieved full recognition by the international community. The basic policy is that Palestine does not recognize new independent states like Kosovo until it itself is recognized internationally. Although both Kosovo and Palestine share a Muslim identity and have endured long periods of violence, they do not pursue policies based on ideological, religious, or historical solidarity; instead, they act according to realpolitik and the maximization of their political interests (Fruscione, 2024; Gaughan, 2024).

Trump's 2020 electoral campaign, which aimed to promote peace in the Balkans in favor of Israel, shifted political taboos in the region. He managed to link the enforced normalization between Serbia and Kosovo to his broader Middle East vision aligned with Israeli interests. Trump leveraged economic aid and development plans, which were approved by both parties. Another motivation for the leaders of these conflicting states to accept the plan was the anticipated Western support for their politically fragile governments. Trump conditioned the aid and diplomatic support on both states moving their embassies to Jerusalem and designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. However, Trump's electoral loss discouraged pragmatic Serbia from maintaining the peace deals with Kosovo, as doing so could harm its relations with Arab and Muslim countries. Kosovo, on

the other hand, continued to strengthen its relations with Israel through mutual agreements. On February 1, 2021, the two countries formally established diplomatic relations, and a month later, Kosovo opened its embassy in Jerusalem, becoming one of the five countries to do so (Cvijic & Vuksanovic, 2023, p.10; Muharremi, 2021, pp. 1–5). The significance of Kosovo's decision lies in its identity as a Muslim-majority state, representing a diplomatic victory for Israel, akin to the Abraham Accords backed by the U.S., which enhanced Israel's legitimacy in the Muslim world.

Conversely, the Kosovo-Israel agreement strained Israel's relations with Serbia and raised questions about its consistency on the principle of self-determination. Once again, Israel's pragmatic politics were evident. These political maneuvers were largely driven by U.S. support; without it, Israel would have struggled to achieve such diplomatic success. Following this, Kosovo adopted the IHRA definition of antisemitism and listed Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Kosovo's evolving policy toward Israel also positively influenced Albania's political stance toward Israel, as another Muslim-majority country in the region (Fruscione, 2024; Kassidiaris, 2021).

5. Israel's Relations with Bosnia and Herzegovina

During the Bosnian War, the State of Israel and the Jewish diaspora diverged in their responses to the atrocities committed by the Bosnian Serbs. While the Jewish diaspora condemned the war crimes and genocide perpetrated by the Serbs, backed by the Slobodan Milošević regime, the Israeli government largely ignored these atrocities and maintained a pro-Serbian stance. Both Likud and Labor governments avoided condemning Serbia's violence against the Bosniaks (Primoratz, 1999, pp. 79–80). Supportive voices even emerged in the Israeli parliament. Ori Orr, chairperson of the Knesset Foreign Relations and Security Committee, stated during his visit to Belgrade in 1994: "We have a good memory. We know what it is to live under sanctions and boycott. Every UN resolution against us was adopted by a two-thirds majority." He went on to promise further support for Serbia, including assistance in improving its international position and image. U.S. Vice President Al Gore summoned the Israeli ambassador and warned him about the statement. Within Israel, while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the media initially adopted a strongly pro-Serbian stance, the government's overall position appeared ambivalent. The Knesset debated the issue, with both opponents and supporters of Serbia's actions presenting their arguments (Primoratz, 1999, pp. 80–84).

The Israeli government played a double game in this matter. On one hand, since it needed a partner in the Balkans and Serbia's military policies during the war were aligned with Israel's own strategic approach, aiding Serbia initially appeared to be the more prominent option. Israel did not hesitate to provide covert assistance through arms sales and military training. However, a split emerged between the state and the diaspora. The diaspora was influenced by international condemnation of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and atrocities in Bosnia (Primoratz, 1999, p. 79). Meanwhile, the Israeli state secretly supplied arms to the Bosnian Serbs, aiming to prevent the secession of the Bosniaks from Yugoslavia and to facilitate the creation of Greater

Serbia in coordination with Belgrade. Israeli-made mortar shells and Uzi automatic rifles were documented among Serb militants in Sarajevo. Additionally, Israeli state television reported that Israeli arms merchants had agreed to supply American-made missiles to Serb forces in the region (Primoratz, 1999, p. 85).

As it is difficult to think that a private arms deal could occur without government approval, it has been claimed that the arms transactions with the Bosnian Serbs were conducted in exchange for the safe exit of Jews from Sarajevo (Gaughan, 2024). However, while arms shipments continued, Israel also welcomed eighty-three Bosniak refugees and supplied medical aid to the region. This humanitarian action followed a request from King Hussein of Jordan to the leftist politician Yitzhak Rabin. At the same time, Israeli Minister Yossi Sarid emphasized that humanitarian aid to the Bosniaks did not constitute official recognition of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Initially, the Israeli media adopted a strongly pro-Serbian stance, portraying Milošević as the "Yugoslav Abraham Lincoln," in contrast to the Western media, which labeled him the "Belgrade Butcher" or "Belgrade Hitler." As the war progressed, however, Israel's pro-Serbian media coverage began to change, with television outlets displaying images of atrocities and tragedies in the camps, following the focus of the Western media (Primoratz, 1999, pp. 85–86).

The Iranian shipment of arms, reportedly with covert U.S. approval, and the growing influence of Iran within Bosnian administrative circles likely alarmed Israel. Izetbegović was accused of being inspired by the Islamic Revolution and of attempting to implement a similar ideological and institutional framework in Bosnia (Shay, 2009, p. 124). Moreover, the Serbs claimed that Iranian intelligence units had ties with the Bosnian Muslim intelligence service (Shay, 2009, p. 135). Reports that several hundred Bosnian Muslims participated in military and intelligence training camps in Iran at the beginning of 1996 further heightened Israel's security concerns (Shay, 2009, p. 71). According to Croatian war reporter Hasan Haidar Diab, Qassem Soleimani was also present on the battlefield during the war years for training missions (Sarajevo Times, 2020). The basic reason behind Israel's negative stance toward Bosnia stems from the cooperation in the war years and the Iranian aid in Muslim Bosnia.

The main perception shaping Israeli public opinion and media coverage stemmed from World War II, although it was not entirely accurate. Serbs were believed to have fought against the Nazis, while the Bosniaks and Croats were perceived as collaborators in the persecution of Jews. Even today, during the Israel-Hamas conflict, Bosnia and Herzegovina remains divided in its stance toward Hamas and Israel. While the Bosniaks support Hamas, the Serbs and Croats generally favor Israel within the country's complex governance system (Gaughan, 2024). For instance, during the 11-Day War between Hamas and Israel in May 2021, Republika Srpska directly supported Israel, whereas Serbia preferred to remain neutral and silent, partly due to Israel's recognition of Kosovo a few months prior (Mikovic, 2023).

This complex structure of Bosnia and Herzegovina has implications for Israel-Hamas relations. Republika Srpska has consistently supported Israel since the outbreak of the conflict, while

Bosniaks have long maintained staunch support for the Palestinian cause. Consequently, the state could not issue a unified official stance during crises. During the Gaza conflict, the Serb and Croat politicians have usually adopted different positions from those of Bosniaks (Cafiero, 2024). Serb leader Milorad Dodik framed his support for Israel and condemnation of Hamas within a broader policy of combating terrorism and Islamic extremism. Another factor is the historical collaboration between Israel and Serbs dating back to the Bosnian War (1992–1995). Dodik also referenced their shared suffering under the Nazis during World War II, similarly to Serbia, to justify cooperation and support for Israel. Dodik accused the Bosniaks, particularly the Party of Democratic Action (SDA), of maintaining links with the global network of the Muslim Brotherhood, seeking Western support in economic, diplomatic, and political spheres. In pursuing this narrative, he equated the SDA with Hamas due to the alleged Muslim Brotherhood connection, presenting himself as a bulwark against political Islam threatening Europe and the West.

However, Dodik's strongly pro-Israel and pro-U.S. stance did not reflect the public opinion of Bosnian Serbs (Cafiero, 2024). The majority in Republika Srpska opposed Israel's actions in Gaza and remained deeply concerned about the high number of civilian casualties. Indeed, the crisis in Ukraine and the ongoing conflict between Russia and NATO occupied greater attention among the Serbian population, which was strongly pro-Russian due to historical and political factors dating back to the 1990s during the fragmentation of Yugoslavia. Dodik's position and his stated rationale likely stemmed from his strained relations with the U.S. and the West. Since 2017, Dodik and his associates had been under U.S. economic and diplomatic sanctions because of their secessionist actions. The UK and Germany, concerned about Bosnia and Herzegovina's stability and territorial integrity, also joined U.S. sanctions (Cafiero, 2024). Dodik viewed the Gaza conflict as a strategic opportunity for his political future. By endorsing Israel, he aimed to secure support from the West through Israel's political and diplomatic influence, as well as the powerful lobbying efforts of Jewish organizations (Cafiero, 2024). In short, the improvement of relations reflects a strongly pragmatic motivation.

The Bosniaks have long been known for their staunch support of the Palestinian cause, perceiving parallels between the fate of their country and that of Palestine, and consistently expressing their position across various platforms. This pro-Palestinian policy has, at times, strained their relations with Ukraine. For instance, as President Zelenskyy expressed support for Israel during the Gaza War, Bosniak solidarity with Ukraine decreased significantly (Cafiero, 2024). As regards the Croat politicians, positions on the Gaza conflict were divided. Borjana Krišto, chairwoman of the Council of Ministers, criticized the Hamas attack on October 7 and publicly expressed support for Israel. In contrast, Željko Komšić, Croat Member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2023, opposed Krišto's statement and responded harshly to Israeli Ambassador Galit Peleg, who reportedly criticized Komšić for failing to support Israel unlike Krišto. While Peleg claimed that Krišto acted out of humanitarian concern rather than political allegiance to Israel, Komšić accused pro-Israel advocates of accepting money without providing any names (Sarajevo Times, 2023). Dragan Čović, the leader of the conservative Croatian Democratic Union

(HDZ), has maintained strong relations with Likud and Israeli business circles, similar to Serb leader Dodik. Consequently, he and his party have adopted a pro-Israel stance, whereas the Croat politicians in the Social Democratic Party (SPD) have opposed Israel and supported the Palestinian cause (Sarajevo Times, 2023). In sum, as Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a centralized or unitary state, it has not maintained a single official policy on the Gaza conflict.

6. Conclusion

It is not possible to identify a single common factor that explains the improving relations of all four countries with Israel today. Each country has distinct reasons for strengthening ties. Serbia's relationship with Israel is particularly unique. During the Cold War, ideology strongly influenced their foreign policies and relations with Israel. Despite commonalities and shared experiences, such as Zionism's emergence in Serbian territory in the 19th century, and the sufferings of both Serbs and Jews under Nazi atrocities during World War II, Tito's Yugoslavia adopted a strongly anti-Israel stance, supporting the PLO and Arafat for many years. Similarly, Enver Hoxha's Albania did not attempt to develop relations with Israel; on the contrary, it aligned with Palestine. Initially, Israel was perceived as a socialist state upon its founding in 1948, with the Soviet Union being its first international recognizer. However, Israel's alignment with the U.S., combined with the outcomes of the Six-Day War, decisively altered the dynamics, leading to a deterioration of relations between Israel and the socialist bloc.

The turning point in the reestablishment of relations was the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, which created new opportunities for Israel by removing the ideological barriers. From the outset, Israel's approach toward the Western Balkan states was guided by pragmatism, and often paradoxical. During the Yugoslav wars, Israel supplied weapons and ammunition to Serbia, while simultaneously providing arms to Croatia and Slovenia, sending medical aid to Sarajevo, and welcoming Bosniak refugees. Later, it even provided arms to Bosniaks to mitigate criticism from the Arab world during the Oslo peace process. Israel avoided labeling Srebrenica as genocide, using instead language condemning atrocities, primarily articulated by leftist politicians such as Peres and Rabin. Throughout the war, Israeli media gradually shifted from a pro-Serbian stance to one aligned with international coverage critical of the violence. Overall, the Israeli government could not present a unified position, with statements from the Knesset, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Prime Minister's office often diverging.

A similar paradox emerged during NATO operations in Kosovo. The foreign ministry condemned NATO's bombing, creating a perception of Israel as an ally of Russia, a stance later corrected by supportive statements from the government and the Israeli embassy in Washington endorsing the U.S. and NATO. The Washington Agreement, brokered by Trump, altered many dynamics in Israel-Balkan relations. U.S. influence facilitated an agreement between the conflicting states of Serbia and Kosovo, linking normalization efforts with Israel through recognition of its self-declared capital, Jerusalem. While Serbia was unable to complete this process by 2021, Kosovo

became the first Muslim-majority country to establish an embassy in Jerusalem, marking a significant milestone.

Albania's relations with Israel accelerated following mutual recognition, positioning it as another Muslim-majority state in the region with closer ties to Tel Aviv. However, the most significant improvement occurred in the context of the Gaza war from October 7, 2023 onward. Although Serbia's withdrawal from the Washington Agreement had strained relations, Serbia demonstrated strong support for Israel adopting an anti-Hamas stance. From the outset of the war, Serbia supplied arms and ammunition to Israel despite international warnings about contributing to potential war crimes in Gaza. This behavior reflects a pragmatic approach. The Serbian government has leveraged close ties with Israel, possibly as a means to improve its relations with the U.S.

Albania also chose to collaborate with Israel during the war, openly expressing its support. The country relies on Israeli military and intelligence assistance to counter Iranian influence and espionage on its soil. Albania purchases military equipment and hosts the Mojahedin-e Khalq (MeK) group as part of U.S. and Israeli strategic initiatives against Iran. It also cooperates with Israel on large-scale projects, such as the proposed creation of a Bektashi state, which serves as a significant tool against the expansion of Iran-centered Shi'ism in the Balkans.

The situation in Bosnia is more complex due to the country's non-unitary structure, comprising three constituent people. While Serbs and Croats demonstrate sympathy toward Israel during its conflict with Hamas, Bosniaks remain staunch supporters of the Palestinian cause. Republika Srpska's primary objective is to repair relations with the U.S. through close ties with Israel. Its actions contrary to the Dayton Accords have raised concerns in Western capitals. Consequently, Republika Srpska seeks to portray itself as a bulwark against political Islam in Europe and a regional supporter of Western interests, leveraging connections with Netanyahu's government and Israeli business circles. In sum, the improvement of relations with Israel across the Balkan states is driven primarily by pragmatic objectives and realpolitik considerations rather than identity, religion, or historical affinity. Overall, the evolution of Israel's relations with the Western Balkan states underscores the primacy of pragmatism over ideology in contemporary international politics. While historical narratives, religious affiliations, and collective memories continue to shape public discourse, they have proven insufficient as decisive factors in state behavior. Instead, shifting geopolitical alignments, security concerns, and the pursuit of strategic advantage have driven these countries to recalibrate their positions toward Israel. The cases of Serbia, Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrate that even deeply rooted historical divergences can be overridden by *realpolitik* considerations. In this regard, the Western Balkans serve as a revealing microcosm of broader global trends, where flexible alliances and transactional diplomacy increasingly define international relations in the twenty-first century.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Türkiye's Multi-Sector Connectivity Agenda in the Balkans

Türkiye'nin Balkanlardaki Çok Sektörlü Bağlantısallık Gündemi

Dilek KÜTÜK*

Abstract

This article examines connectivity as a multi-dimensional foreign policy instrument in Türkiye's relations with the Balkans. It argues that connectivity is not limited to physical infrastructure but also includes the institutional arrangements, regulatory frameworks, standards, and forms of cooperation that enable cross-border networks to function. The study distinguishes between hard connectivity, referring to railways, roads, pipelines, electricity interconnections, border facilities, digital networks, and satellites, and soft connectivity, referring to agreements, coordination mechanisms, customs procedures, regulatory arrangements, and institutional cooperation. Based on qualitative document analysis of official documents, bilateral agreements, project reports, academic studies, and sectoral publications, the article analyses Türkiye's connectivity instruments in three sectors: transport, energy, and digital connectivity. In transport, it examines the Middle Corridor, railway and border infrastructure, the Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway, and mobility links between Türkiye and the Balkans. In energy, it focuses on electricity-grid integration with Europe, TANAP–TAP, TurkStream, and the BOTAŞ–Bulgargaz agreement, highlighting the opportunities and dependencies created by energy networks. In digital connectivity, it analyses eGovernment cooperation with Serbia, satellite capacity, and emerging Black Sea data corridors. The article argues that Türkiye uses connectivity to strengthen market access, diversify routes and suppliers, enhance its regional role, and maintain engagement with Balkan actors. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives depends on regional infrastructure capacity, regulatory compatibility, border management, and cooperation with European and Balkan institutions.

Keywords: Connectivity, Türkiye, Balkans, Transport Corridors, Energy Interdependence, Digital Connectivity

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Öz

Bu makale, bağlantısallığı Türkiye'nin Balkanlarla ilişkilerinde çok boyutlu bir dış politika aracı olarak incelemektedir. Çalışma, bağlantısallığın yalnızca fiziksel altyapıdan oluşmadığını; sınır ötesi ağların işlemesini sağlayan kurumsal düzenlemeleri, düzenleyici çerçeveleri, standartları ve iş birliği biçimlerini de kapsadığını savunmaktadır. Makalede sert bağlantısallık; demiryolları, karayolları, boru hatları, elektrik bağlantıları, sınır tesisleri, dijital ağlar ve uydu sistemleri gibi fiziksel ve teknik unsurlar üzerinden; yumuşak bağlantısallık ise anlaşmalar, koordinasyon mekanizmaları, gümrük prosedürleri, düzenleyici düzenlemeler ve kurumsal iş birliği üzerinden ele alınmaktadır. Resmi belgeler, ikili anlaşmalar, proje raporları, akademik çalışmalar ve sektörel yayınların nitel doküman analizine dayanan çalışma, Türkiye'nin bağlantısallık araçlarını ulaşım, enerji ve dijital bağlantısallık olmak üzere üç sektörde incelemektedir. Ulaşım alanında Orta Koridor, demiryolu ve sınır altyapısı, Belgrad–Saraybosna Otoyolu ve Türkiye ile Balkanlar arasındaki hareketlilik bağlantıları; enerji alanında Avrupa elektrik sistemiyle entegrasyon, TANAP–TAP, TürkAkım ve BOTAŞ–Bulgargaz Anlaşması; dijital alanda ise Sırbistan ile e-Devlet iş birliği, uydu kapasitesi ve gelişmekte olan Karadeniz veri koridorları analiz edilmekte; ayrıca enerji ağlarının ortaya çıkardığı fırsatlar ve karşılıklı bağımlılıklar vurgulanmaktadır. Makale, Türkiye'nin bağlantısallığı pazar erişimini güçlendirmek, güzergâhları ve tedarikçileri çeşitlendirmek, bölgesel rolünü geliştirmek ve Balkan aktörleriyle ilişkilerini sürdürmek amacıyla kullandığını ileri sürmektedir. Bununla birlikte, bu girişimlerin etkinliği bölgesel altyapı kapasitesine, düzenleyici uyuma, sınır yönetimine ve Avrupa ile Balkan kurumlarıyla iş birliğine bağlıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Bağlantısallık, Türkiye, Balkanlar, Ulaşım Koridorları, Enerji Karşılıklı Bağımlılığı, Dijital Bağlantısallık

1. Introduction

Connectivity has become an important concept in international relations because cross-border networks can support cooperation while also creating competition, dependence, and political influence (Gaens, Sinkkonen & Vogt, 2023, pp. 217–225; Aytekin, 2025, pp. 199–200). In this article, connectivity is defined as a policy-relevant framework through which states use physical networks and supporting institutional arrangements to organize cross-border flows and pursue economic, security, and diplomatic objectives. It includes transport, energy, and digital infrastructure, together with the legal rules, common standards, governance arrangements, and public policies that allow these networks to operate (Gu, 2017, pp. 1–2; Okano-Heijmans, Prakash & Zweers, 2018, p. 8). Connectivity is therefore not a purely technical process. It can improve access and cooperation, but it can also create dependency and provide influence over strategic routes, resources, and information flows (Eldem, 2024, pp. 105–106; Aytekin, 2025, pp. 199–200).

This perspective is particularly relevant to the Balkans. The region is located between Türkiye and the wider European transport, energy, and digital networks. It is also shaped by EU integration, infrastructure needs, energy-security concerns, and the involvement of regional and extra-regional actors. Türkiye's role should be distinguished from that of extra-regional actors, as Türkiye identifies itself as a Balkan country and frames its regional policy around regional ownership and inclusiveness. Different connectivity initiatives therefore meet and sometimes compete in the region. The EU places strong emphasis on regulatory alignment, governance, and sustainability, while other actors may give greater priority to investment, lending, market access,

or strategic influence (Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, pp. 135–138). The Balkans should consequently be understood not only as Türkiye's geographical route to Europe, but also as a region in which infrastructure, institutional rules, and foreign-policy interests interact. A recent review similarly describes the Balkans as a gateway connecting Türkiye with Eastern, Central, and Western Europe and emphasizes the region's economic potential and transit function (Öztekin & Seyhan, 2025, pp. 1951–1953).

This article argues that Türkiye uses connectivity as a layered foreign-policy tool in its relations with the Balkans. Türkiye's official discourse supports regional connectivity and the development of international transport and energy corridors. The Middle Corridor is presented as a Europe–Asia trade route that benefits from Türkiye's ports and provides further access to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. Türkiye also presents itself as an energy hub and transit country. In this context, its official energy policy treats the Southern Gas Corridor and TANAP as contributions to European energy-supply security. These policies show that connectivity is used to turn Türkiye's geographical position into an operational role in regional transport, energy, and communication networks.

However, Türkiye's connectivity agenda is not limited to projects built, financed, or directly controlled by Türkiye. Its regional position also depends on infrastructure and administrative decisions in neighbouring countries and within the EU. For this reason, the article distinguishes between Türkiye's own connectivity instruments and regional interfaces that affect Türkiye's access to the Balkans and Europe. Türkiye's instruments include projects, agreements, and coordination mechanisms in which Turkish public authorities, state-linked institutions, financial actors, or companies have a direct role. By contrast, railways, border facilities, interconnectors, or data corridors developed by neighbouring countries or EU institutions are treated as regional interfaces. Although Türkiye does not control these interfaces, their capacity, technical standards, and border procedures directly affect the operation of Türkiye-linked routes.

The article also distinguishes between hard and soft connectivity. Hard connectivity refers to physical infrastructure and technical assets, including railways, motorways, pipelines, electricity interconnections, border facilities, digital cables, and satellites. Soft connectivity refers to the agreements, standards, customs procedures, regulatory arrangements, financing mechanisms, and institutional cooperation that make these networks work across borders. Türkiye's regional connectivity therefore depends on the interaction between these two dimensions. Physical infrastructure can provide routes and capacity, but its benefits remain limited without compatible rules, effective border management, technical coordination, and cooperation among the relevant institutions.

The study examines this argument in three sectors: transport, energy, and digital connectivity. Transport connectivity shows how Türkiye combines its wider corridor strategy with Balkan-facing railways, border crossings, air mobility, and involvement in intra-Balkan infrastructure. Energy connectivity illustrates Türkiye's dual position as a route for both diversified and Russian

energy supplies, as well as its connection with the Continental European electricity system through Bulgaria and Greece. Digital connectivity remains less developed as a specific Balkan policy, but eGovernment cooperation, satellite capacity, and Türkiye's possible participation in Black Sea data corridors show its emerging importance. Examining these sectors together makes it possible to identify both the common logic of Türkiye's connectivity agenda and the different instruments used in each field.

Earlier research described Türkiye's engagement with the Western Balkans as a multi-dimensional policy combining diplomatic initiatives, economic relations, and cultural links, particularly during periods of uncertainty in Türkiye–EU relations (Brljavac, 2011, pp. 65–75). Building on this literature, the present article focuses more specifically on connectivity as a practical form of regional engagement. It asks three related questions: How does Türkiye frame connectivity in its relations with the Balkans? Which hard and soft instruments does it use in the transport, energy, and digital sectors? What regional opportunities, dependencies, and limitations arise from these instruments? By answering these questions, the article explains how Türkiye uses connectivity to maintain a regional presence, improve access, support diversification, and cooperate with Balkan and European actors, while remaining dependent on the infrastructure, policies, and institutional capacity of its partners.

This study uses qualitative desk research and document analysis because Türkiye's connectivity policy is expressed through official strategies, agreements, institutional statements, project documents, and sectoral reports. It does not measure the economic effect of individual projects. Instead, it examines how Türkiye presents connectivity, which instruments it uses, and what these instruments suggest about its relations with the Balkans.

Sources were selected for their relevance to Türkiye–Balkan connectivity in transport, energy, and digital sectors. Primary materials include documents and statements from Turkish public institutions, bilateral and multilateral agreements, memoranda, and documents from European and regional organizations. Academic articles, books, policy studies, and sectoral reports provide the conceptual, historical, and regional context and help assess official claims. The documents were read thematically and grouped into transport, energy, and digital connectivity. In each sector, physical infrastructure and technical assets were classified as hard connectivity, while agreements, standards, regulatory coordination, customs procedures, financing arrangements, and institutional cooperation were classified as soft connectivity. The analysis then examined how these instruments relate to Türkiye's regional role, EU integration, external actors, and corridor politics after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

This method has some limitations. Official documents may present projects in a positive or strategic way and may provide limited information about delays, local concerns, political disagreements, or unequal effects. To reduce this limitation, official materials are read together with academic studies and reports produced by international and regional institutions. Therefore,

the study explains Türkiye's policy instruments, official framing, and regional position, but it does not provide a statistical evaluation of project outcomes or establish direct causal relationships.

2. Connectivity and Sectoral Foundations

In international relations, connectivity refers to the physical, institutional, economic, and social networks through which countries and societies interact across borders. The concept directs attention not only to territorial boundaries, but also to the routes, flows, and functional relations that connect different places. An ASEM study defines connectivity as a process that brings countries, people, and societies closer together, facilitates access, and strengthens economic and people-to-people relations. According to this definition, connectivity includes physical, institutional, and socio-cultural links that support economic, political-security, and social relations between Asia and Europe (Okano-Heijmans, Prakash & Zweers, 2018, p. 8). Connectivity should therefore be understood as more than the construction of roads, railways, pipelines, ports, or digital cables. It also includes the rules and relationships that allow these physical networks to operate across borders.

Connectivity is a multi-dimensional concept because networks function in several related areas. Gaens, Sinkkonen and Vogt identify infrastructural, economic, institutional, knowledge, societal, and security dimensions of connectivity. This broader approach shows that a transport corridor, energy pipeline, or digital network does not operate only as a technical system. It may also affect trade, regulation, security, knowledge exchange, and relations between societies. Connectivity analysis therefore moves beyond the physical existence of a network and considers how the network is governed, who can use it, and what kinds of relationships it creates (Gaens, Sinkkonen & Vogt, 2023, pp. 217–225).

Connectivity is not automatically cooperative or beneficial. Gaens, Sinkkonen and Vogt identify six possible logics of connectivity: cooperation, copying, cushioning, contestation, containment, and coercion. These logics explain why similar networks may have different political effects. A connection may create mutual benefits and regular cooperation, but it may also produce competition, unequal dependence, or political pressure. Its effect depends on the actors involved, their relative power, the rules governing the network, and the distribution of its costs and benefits (Gaens, Sinkkonen & Vogt, 2023, pp. 217–225). Connectivity must therefore be examined as a political relationship as well as a material link.

The distinction between hard and soft connectivity is central to this article. Hard connectivity refers to physical infrastructure and technical assets, including roads, railways, ports, pipelines, electricity interconnections, digital cables, border facilities, and satellites. Soft connectivity refers to the legal, regulatory, financial, and institutional arrangements that allow these assets to operate. It includes agreements, common standards, customs procedures, financing mechanisms, regulatory coordination, and cooperation among public institutions and private actors.

People-to-people relations may also form part of this soft dimension when transport and digital networks support mobility and regular social interaction (Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 137).

The hard and soft dimensions are complementary rather than separate alternatives. Gu argues that physical infrastructure cannot operate efficiently without effective legal rules, public policies, and regulatory institutions. A railway may physically connect two countries, for example, but incompatible technical standards, slow customs procedures, or weak institutional coordination may prevent the route from operating effectively. Weak soft infrastructure can therefore reduce the economic and social benefits of a valuable physical project (Gu, 2017, pp. 1–2). In this article, the hard/soft distinction is used to explain why Türkiye's regional connectivity cannot be assessed only through the infrastructure that it builds or finances. Agreements, standards, border procedures, and institutional cooperation are also important because they determine how cross-border networks function in practice.

Connectivity has also become part of contemporary geopolitical competition. Large-scale initiatives such as China's Belt and Road Initiative show how infrastructure investment can influence trade routes, regional priorities, strategic partnerships, and patterns of dependence (Chaziza, 2021, pp. 35–36; Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, p. 138; Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 121). This does not mean that every connectivity project is mainly geopolitical. However, major corridors and networks may shape access to markets, resources, information, and strategic gateways. This perspective is particularly relevant to the Balkans, where infrastructure needs and limited domestic financial resources increase the importance of projects, standards, and financing offered by international partners (Jaćimović et al., 2025, pp. 46, 51).

This article examines connectivity through three sectors: transport, energy, and digital connectivity. These sectors involve different types of infrastructure, but they share a common analytical structure. Each includes a physical network, institutional arrangements, and cross-border relations among governments, companies, regulators, and users. Examining the three sectors together makes it possible to identify the common logic of Türkiye's connectivity agenda while also recognizing that its instruments and regional effects differ across sectors.

Transport connectivity refers to the infrastructure and systems that enable the movement of people and goods. It includes roads, railways, ports, airports, sea routes, border crossings, terminals, and related logistics systems (Çelikok & Talih, 2023, pp. 401–402). However, transport connectivity is not limited to the construction of physical routes. Cross-border transport also requires planning, technical compatibility, legal rules, customs procedures, coordinated timetables, and cooperation among transport authorities and operators. Transport networks can reduce distance in practical terms by lowering travel time and transport costs. They can also support regional development when national routes are connected with wider Balkan, European, and Eurasian networks (Çelikok & Talih, 2023, p. 402; Tsonkov & Petrov, 2023, p. 2).

Transport diplomacy describes the political use of these networks. Özer defines it as the strategic use of cross-border infrastructure and related regulatory frameworks to support foreign-policy

goals, cooperation, and interdependence. It combines physical "hardware," such as railways, ports, pipelines, and international corridors, with institutional "software," such as common standards, financing mechanisms, regulatory arrangements, and interoperability agreements (Özer, 2026, pp. 358–359). In this sense, corridor diplomacy is a more specific form of transport diplomacy. It refers to negotiations and institutional coordination concerning the development and operation of international transport routes. This concept is useful for examining how Türkiye links infrastructure projects with agreements, border coordination, and wider regional objectives.

Infrastructure diplomacy provides a broader perspective that also applies to energy and digital networks. It treats railways, ports, pipelines, power grids, and digital cables as possible instruments of long-term diplomatic relations rather than as politically neutral assets. Because major infrastructure systems require long-term investment and regular coordination, they may create durable relations among the participating states and institutions. At the same time, they may produce dependence, competition, or control over important gateways. Although Aytekin develops this discussion in relation to the Gulf, the analytical distinction is also useful for the Balkans. It shows that the political effect of infrastructure depends on how a project is financed and governed, who controls access, and how its benefits and risks are distributed (Aytekin, 2025, pp. 199–200, 208–209).

Energy connectivity refers to the infrastructure and institutional arrangements that allow energy to be transmitted, traded, and supplied between countries. Its hard elements include pipelines, electricity interconnections, transmission grids, and LNG facilities. Its soft elements include supply agreements, market rules, technical standards, capacity-allocation arrangements, and coordination among transmission-system operators. Energy connectivity can improve supply security by providing access to additional suppliers and routes. However, it also creates interdependence because producer, transit, and consumer countries rely on shared infrastructure and continuing institutional cooperation (Bouzarovski, Bradshaw & Wochnik, 2015, pp. 218–220; Önsoy & Udum, 2015, pp. 175–177). This issue is important in the Western Balkans, where energy-security needs, limited interconnection capacity, and difficulties in meeting peak demand increase the value of regional cooperation (Jaćimović et al., 2025, p. 51).

Digital connectivity includes both communications infrastructure and the institutional capacity needed to use digital networks. Its physical dimension includes fibre networks, submarine cables, data infrastructure, internet connections, mobile networks, and satellites. Its institutional dimension includes e-government cooperation, cybersecurity arrangements, common digital standards, internet governance, and administrative capacity. Internet access can facilitate communication, commerce, public services, and access to information. Jaćimović et al. therefore use internet access as an indicator of digital-infrastructure development and identify a positive relationship between internet access and income per capita in the Western Balkans (Jaćimović et al., 2025, pp. 55–57). Digital connectivity also supports newer forms of network-based governance and diplomatic interaction, extending connectivity beyond traditional physical infrastructure (Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 124).

The three sectors are analytically connected but should not be treated as identical. Transport connectivity mainly organizes the movement of people and goods. Energy connectivity organizes the transmission and exchange of energy, with direct implications for supply security and dependence. Digital connectivity organizes information flows and supports institutional and technological capacity. In every sector, however, physical infrastructure must operate together with rules, standards, and institutional cooperation. This common structure explains why the hard/soft distinction is used throughout the article. It also provides a clear basis for examining Türkiye's connectivity instruments in the Balkans without assuming that every project produces the same political or regional effect.

3. Strategic Motivations behind Türkiye's Connectivity Agenda

This section examines why connectivity has gained strategic importance for Türkiye. It identifies three main motivations: expanding access to regional and international markets, reducing vulnerability by diversifying routes and suppliers, and improving infrastructure capacity through external financing and cooperation. These motivations have become more important as international competition has increasingly focused on the control of flows of goods, capital, energy, information, and people. Eldem describes this environment as a form of network-centred power politics in which states seek to expand their influence while reducing dependence on a limited number of routes or partners (Eldem, 2024, pp. 102–104). Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 further demonstrated how sanctions, restrictions, and strategic chokepoints can disrupt trade, finance, transport, and energy networks. This changing environment has increased the importance of alternative corridors and infrastructure diplomacy in Türkiye's regional policy (Eldem, 2024, p. 104).

Connectivity can also support practical cooperation between Türkiye and the EU when wider political integration remains limited. Recent research argues that transport projects can produce selective policy convergence even when Türkiye's EU accession process is stalled. Technical cooperation may continue through agreements, regulatory adjustment, common standards, and joint financing. However, geopolitical tensions and incomplete market liberalization may limit the extent of this cooperation (Özer, 2026, pp. 354–355, 376–377). Connectivity therefore provides a practical area in which Türkiye and the EU can cooperate without resolving all their wider political disagreements.

The objective of reducing vulnerability through diversification is clearly reflected in Türkiye's promotion of the Middle Corridor. Security risks associated with Russia's war against Ukraine have weakened the reliability of the Northern Corridor, while routes involving Iran continue to face sanctions-related obstacles (Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 127). In this context, Türkiye has promoted the Trans-Caspian East–West–Middle Corridor as an alternative route that can reduce dependence on Russia and Iran in trade with wider Asian markets (Yılmaz, 2025, p. 116).

The Middle Corridor can therefore support both Türkiye's market access and its effort to reduce exposure to politically sensitive routes.

However, the Middle Corridor operates in an environment shaped by different international connectivity models. The EU places greater emphasis on standards, governance, regulatory alignment, and sustainability, while China's Belt and Road Initiative is more strongly based on investment and lending. China's approach can provide infrastructure financing, but it can also raise concerns about transparency and debt sustainability (Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, pp. 135–138). The relationship between the Middle Corridor and the BRI should therefore not be treated as automatic. Chaziza argues that their practical alignment depends on the quality of Türkiye–China relations and the development of a clearer implementation framework. Differences over investment expectations, trade imbalances, and wider political issues may limit the expected cooperation between the two initiatives (Chaziza, 2021, pp. 48–49).

Türkiye's strategic motivations become more concrete when examined through trade access, infrastructure capacity, and financing. Türkiye's official connectivity discourse presents the Middle Corridor as a faster, shorter, and safer Europe–Asia trade route. It also emphasizes Türkiye's port connections, which can provide Asian freight traffic with access to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Mediterranean (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.-a). This approach shows that Türkiye aims not only to serve as a transit country, but also to connect different regional markets through its transport and logistics networks.

Infrastructure capacity is essential for turning this geographical position into an operational transit role. Türkiye therefore needs effective railways, ports, logistics facilities, border crossings, and energy interconnections. The Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway illustrates this relationship between geography and infrastructure. It is presented as a link between Europe and Asia that strengthens Türkiye's position within wider Eurasian transport networks (Çelikok & Talih, 2023, p. 414). However, geographical location alone does not produce effective connectivity. Physical infrastructure must operate together with legal and regulatory frameworks that facilitate trade and cross-border transport (Çelikok & Talih, 2023, p. 420).

Financing is another important part of this strategic agenda because major railway and corridor projects require substantial external and multilateral resources. The World Bank-financed Eastern Türkiye Middle Corridor Railway Development Project illustrates how multilateral funding can support the modernization and capacity of Türkiye's railway infrastructure (World Bank, 2024, 2025). Coordination with wider initiatives such as the BRI may also provide access to investment and project financing, although this cooperation depends on compatible interests and project conditions (Yılmaz, 2025, p. 116).

The financing of cross-border corridors also creates challenges that go beyond the availability of funds. The OECD notes that multi-country transport projects involve high costs, many stakeholders, synchronized construction schedules, common technical standards, and debt-sustainability concerns. Public and development finance must therefore be combined with

institutional coordination and reforms that create suitable conditions for responsible private investment (OECD, 2018, pp. 15–16, 28). This means that financing, infrastructure, and governance should be treated as connected elements of corridor development rather than as separate issues.

Finally, Türkiye's strategic motivations must be considered in relation to conditions in the Western Balkans. The region has a strong need for infrastructure investment, while energy cooperation remains important for supply security and potential electricity exports to the EU market (Jaćimović et al., 2025, pp. 50–51). At the same time, regulatory gaps and energy-transition challenges shape the environment in which the EU, China, and Türkiye develop their connectivity initiatives (Frey, 2024, p. 16). Türkiye's ability to expand its regional role therefore depends not only on its own strategic objectives, but also on the infrastructure needs, regulatory capacity, and development priorities of Balkan countries.

4. Connectivity's Regional Effects and Implications

This section examines the regional effects of Türkiye-linked connectivity initiatives. These effects vary with national priorities, local infrastructure, cross-border coordination, and compatibility with EU-led frameworks. Bulgaria, for example, presents the Middle Corridor as an opportunity to improve Europe–Asia transit, ports, border capacity, and Black Sea links (BTA, 2025a; BTA, 2025b; BTA, 2025c).

Türkiye-linked connectivity also appears in intra-Balkan projects. Authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia connect the Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway with improved road networks, regional mobility, and access to Pan-European corridors (Ministry of Communications and Transport of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2022; Roads of Serbia, 2025). Such projects operate within Türkiye's longer diplomatic engagement with Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia rather than as isolated investments (Brljavac, 2011, pp. 67–68). Their benefits nevertheless depend on infrastructure capacity, border procedures, and institutional coordination (Eldem, 2024, p. 113).

The Western Balkans is also a competitive connectivity environment. Its geographical position within Europe but outside the EU increases the importance of connectivity initiatives pursued by different countries and institutions (Tonchev, 2017, p. 1). The EU emphasizes integration and regulatory alignment, while China relies more on economic leverage and lending, which can widen funding options but also raise concerns about debt and sovereignty (Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, pp. 135–136). Türkiye's initiatives are therefore more effective when they complement EU standards and respond to local capacity constraints. Türkiye–EU relations are not always competitive: Turkish companies have participated in EU-supported transport projects, and both sides have shared interests in the Southern Gas Corridor (Islamov, 2023, pp. 81–82).

Connectivity initiatives supported by different countries and institutions should also allow meaningful local participation. The EU's Global Gateway promotes standards, sustainability,

and regional integration, but partner countries may have limited influence over project rules (Karjalainen, 2023, pp. 308–310). More broadly, infrastructure produces uneven results when local institutions are weak or affected communities cannot influence decisions. Türkiye-linked projects should therefore be assessed not only through regional strategy, but also through local capacity, participation, safeguards, and accountability (Rekhviashvili & Lang, 2026, pp. 536–538; Hackaj & Hackaj, 2021, pp. 6–10).

A comparative study of infrastructure projects in Georgia offers a useful caution for this broader connectivity debate. Rekhviashvili and Lang show that project outcomes are not shaped only by rivalry among major powers. Relations among governments, investors, financial institutions, local communities, and environmental groups can be equally important, especially when costs, risks, and benefits are distributed unevenly (Rekhviashvili & Lang, 2026, pp. 536–538). This insight suggests that Türkiye-linked projects should also be assessed at national and local levels.

A policy study on connectivity in the South East European Six reaches a similar conclusion from a regional-development perspective. It argues that infrastructure, domestic institutions, and people should be treated as connected parts of the same system. Infrastructure investment is less effective when governance is weak or when skilled people leave the region (Hackaj & Hackaj, 2021, pp. 6–10). This reinforces the need to assess Türkiye-linked projects in relation to local capacity and institutional quality.

Energy connectivity adds a sensitive layer because it intersects with security and dependence. Reliance on Russian gas makes diversification politically important, while fragmented electricity markets and outdated grids limit regional trade and the integration of renewable energy (Tonchev, 2017, p. 1; Frey, 2024, pp. 14–15). Pipeline effects also depend on coordination among supplier, transit, and consumer countries and on rules governing market access (Bouzarovski et al., 2015, pp. 218–220).

Overall, Türkiye-linked connectivity can improve corridor access, trade, and energy options, but its effects depend on local capacity, border and customs coordination, regulatory compatibility, and the wider interaction among regional and international connectivity initiatives (Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, pp. 138–139; Eldem, 2024, p. 113; Stekić & Nikolić, 2025, pp. 135–136). The article therefore assesses specific projects and institutions rather than treating connection as automatic integration.

5. Türkiye's Connectivity Instruments in the Balkans: Transport, Energy and Digital

5.1. Transport Connectivity

Within Türkiye's broader connectivity agenda, transport is most clearly expressed through corridor politics. The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian East–West–Middle Corridor,

is presented as an alternative route between China and Europe (Yılmaz, 2025, p. 115; Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 128). Interest in this route increased after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine because security concerns and disruptions weakened confidence in the Northern Corridor (Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 127; Eldem, 2024, p. 113). Türkiye's transport policy therefore combines the search for alternative routes with the aim of strengthening its position in Europe–Asia trade.

Türkiye's geographical position between Asia and Europe gives it an important place in Eurasian transport networks. However, geography alone does not create effective connectivity. Türkiye must connect its location with infrastructure, international partnerships, border coordination, and corridor diplomacy (Çelikok & Talih, 2023, p. 412; Tatlı, 2025, p. 520; Chaziza, 2021, pp. 36–37). The Balkans form the European side of this transport geography because routes passing through the region connect Türkiye and European networks with the Caucasus and the Middle East (Öztekin & Seyhan, 2025, p. 1956). Türkiye's engagement with Balkan transport networks should therefore be understood as part of its wider Europe–Asia connectivity policy.

Physical infrastructure provides the operational basis of this policy. Marmaray and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway are important because they support a more continuous railway connection between Asia and Europe. Although the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway is located outside the Balkans, its connection with Marmaray strengthens the wider route through Türkiye toward European markets (Yılmaz, 2025, p. 117; Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 139; Chaziza, 2021, pp. 41–42). These projects form the wider Eurasian infrastructure to which Türkiye-facing Balkan routes are connected.

The Sofia–Halkalı railway service has a different place in this analysis. It is a long-established passenger connection and should not be presented as a new instrument created by Türkiye's current connectivity agenda. Its relevance is that it provides an operating link between İstanbul and a Balkan capital (BDZ Passengers, n.d.). The policy-related element is the modernization and capacity improvement of the railway infrastructure used by this service. On the Bulgarian side, the Plovdiv–Svilengrad–Turkish border railway forms part of the Orient/East–Med Core TEN-T Corridor. On the Turkish side, the Halkalı–Kapıkule Railway Project improves the connection between İstanbul and the Bulgarian border (CINEA, 2026; Anadolu Ajansı, 2026). The existing passenger service therefore demonstrates regular cross-border mobility, while infrastructure modernization and institutional coordination represent the current connectivity instruments.

The wider importance of this railway lies in its connection with European transport planning. The European Commission describes the Orient/East–Med Corridor as a major European rail corridor crossing Bulgaria and Greece and connecting different European maritime regions (European Commission, n.d.-b). The Halkalı–Kapıkule project forms the Turkish section that connects İstanbul with this wider network through Bulgaria. Test runs on the Çerkezköy–Kapıkule section reflect the project's aim to reduce passenger and freight travel times between Edirne and İstanbul (Anadolu Ajansı, 2026). Greater capacity and shorter travel times can support

cross-border passenger mobility and freight transport while reducing delays along the Türkiye–Bulgaria axis. The project thus links Türkiye's domestic railway investment with the EU's TEN-T system and helps create an operational connection between Asian, Balkan, and wider European networks (Tsonkov & Petrov, 2023, pp. 1–2; Makarova et al., 2020, pp. 654–656). Its most direct regional effect concerns Türkiye and Bulgaria, although the line also provides access to wider Balkan and European routes.

The Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway provides a clearer example of Türkiye's direct transport engagement inside the Balkans. The project developed through agreements and contracts involving Türkiye, Serbia, representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Turkish contractor Taşyapı (Global Highways, 2017; Anadolu Ajansı, 2019). Turkish and Serbian officials also presented the motorway as a project that could support regional dialogue, economic relations, and stability (Directorate of Communications, 2019). The project therefore combines construction and financing with a wider diplomatic objective.

On the Serbian side, the Sremska Rača–Kuzmin section, including the Sava River bridge, is the most concrete implemented part of the E-761 Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway. It includes Turkish-linked financing and contractor involvement (Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure, n.d.). This project is important for Türkiye's connectivity policy for three reasons. First, it places a Turkish contractor and Turkish-linked financing within an intra-Balkan route rather than on a corridor passing directly through Türkiye. Second, it may improve mobility between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina and connect the route with wider European corridors. Third, it gives Türkiye a visible role in a post-conflict region where infrastructure is connected with economic exchange, dialogue, and regional stability. Serbian sources also describe the section as strategically important because it links Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina with Pan-European corridors (Roads of Serbia, 2023).

However, the motorway also shows the political limits of infrastructure-led connectivity. Authorities in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska initially supported different routes based on their respective local and political interests. The later decision to develop two sections addressed this disagreement, but it also raised questions about cost and economic viability (Charokopos, 2022, pp. 1485–1490). The case demonstrates that infrastructure may support regional cooperation without removing domestic political disagreements. Connectivity projects must therefore be assessed not only through their intended regional benefits but also through their local political and economic conditions.

Air transport provides a more routine form of regional mobility. Turkish Airlines' services between İstanbul and Balkan cities such as Sarajevo, Skopje, Sofia, and Pristina support İstanbul's role as a regional hub and facilitate business travel, tourism, and people-to-people contact (Turkish Airlines, n.d.). These services do not constitute a separate connectivity policy by themselves. However, they complement railways and motorways by maintaining regular mobility between Türkiye and Balkan societies. The motorway and air links thus illustrate two different dimensions

of transport connectivity: Turkish participation in physical infrastructure within the Balkans and continuing everyday mobility between Türkiye and the region.

The effective operation of long-distance corridors also depends on border capacity. Corridor development and border modernization are therefore complementary rather than competing approaches. On the Türkiye–Greece border, the planned modernization of the Kipi/Kipoi crossing aims to separate passenger and commercial traffic and improve inspection and control facilities (eKathimerini, 2025; AMNA, 2026). On the Bulgaria–Türkiye border, congestion at Kapitan Andreevo/Kapıkule has encouraged capacity expansion and bilateral planning. Bulgarian and Turkish officials have discussed additional checkpoint capacity and the coordination of railway sections on both sides of the border (BTA, 2025c; Ministry of Transport and Communications, 2025; BTA, 2026). These measures are important because even a well-developed corridor may operate poorly when border crossings remain congested or administrative procedures are slow.

The planned restoration of the Yambol–Elhovo–Lesovo–Edirne railway further illustrates how the hard and soft dimensions of connectivity work together. The restoration of the railway and border infrastructure represents hard connectivity. Bilateral planning, coordination among the relevant authorities, operating arrangements, and border procedures represent soft connectivity (Hristova, 2025; Makarova et al., 2020, pp. 654–656). Physical restoration alone will not improve cross-border movement unless the two countries also coordinate the operation of the line. The project therefore shows that infrastructure and governance must develop together to reduce bottlenecks and improve transport continuity between Türkiye, the Balkans, and the wider European network.

Digital management also supports the operation of transport corridors. Research on Bulgaria and the Balkans argues that effective transport connectivity requires intelligent systems combining ICT, mobile communication, traffic management, and infrastructure monitoring. It also identifies weak railway connectivity and long project-preparation periods as practical barriers (Tsonkov & Petrov, 2026, pp. 62–63, 78–79). This suggests that Türkiye–Balkan transport connections depend not only on new construction, but also on digital management and coordination across different modes of transport. Earlier academic research similarly connected Türkiye's economic engagement in the Balkans with transport investment and easier access to European markets, showing that transport has long formed part of Türkiye's wider economic and diplomatic presence in the region (Brljavac, 2011, p. 68).

This discussion also requires a clear understanding of soft corridor governance. In this article, soft corridor governance refers to the agreements, technical standards, customs procedures, regulatory arrangements, and institutional mechanisms that support the operation of cross-border routes. Corridor diplomacy refers more specifically to the use of negotiations, agreements, and institutional coordination to develop and operate international corridors in support of economic and foreign-policy objectives. It may involve governments, international institutions,

financial organizations, infrastructure companies, transport operators, and regulatory authorities (Özer, 2026, pp. 357–359; Makarova et al., 2020, pp. 654–656).

Türkiye participates in several arrangements that reflect this governance dimension. These include the Lapis Lazuli Corridor agreement, the Organization of Turkic States' agreement on combined freight transport, the Baku–Aktau–Samsun sister-port relationship, and the Caravanserai Project on customs cooperation (Yılmaz, 2025, p. 116; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.-a). These instruments do not build physical infrastructure by themselves. Instead, they establish rules, coordination channels, and institutional relationships that make existing routes easier to use. Türkiye's participation in TRACECA follows the same logic. TRACECA seeks to develop transport, trade, and economic connections across a wider regional network, and Bulgaria, Romania, and Türkiye have participated in it since 2000 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.-b). Türkiye's ratification of UNECE annexes on border facilitation for road and rail transport also shows how customs and administrative rules can support cross-border mobility (Ministry of Trade, n.d.).

Research confirms the practical importance of these arrangements. Harmonized transport procedures, effective customs management, and stronger administrative capacity can reduce transit costs and support cross-border trade (OECD, 2018, pp. 19–20). Joint planning, compatible legal and administrative rules, coordinated timetables, and common management structures can also improve cross-border transport services (Medeiros, 2024, pp. 30–31). Infrastructure investment is therefore more effective when neighbouring countries coordinate the rules, institutions, and services connected with it.

European transport planning forms part of this institutional environment. TEN-T planning links European mobility goals with Bulgaria's need to connect its transport system with neighbouring countries, including Türkiye (Tsonkov & Petrov, 2023, pp. 1–2). The Western Balkans can similarly function as a transport area linking the Mediterranean with Central Europe (Tonchev, 2017, pp. 1, 3). Türkiye-facing routes therefore depend partly on their technical, legal, and administrative compatibility with Balkan and European networks.

Finally, not every regional project discussed in this section should be treated as an instrument controlled by Türkiye. Türkiye's transport-connectivity instruments include only projects, agreements, and coordination mechanisms in which Turkish public authorities, state-linked institutions, financial actors, or companies have a direct role. These include Türkiye's implementation of the Halkalı–Kapıkule railway section, Turkish involvement in the Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway, bilateral coordination on border and railway capacity, and Türkiye's participation in TRACECA and the transport initiatives of the Organization of Turkic States. Projects implemented by Bulgaria, Greece, or EU institutions are regional interfaces that affect Türkiye's access and connections rather than Türkiye's own policy instruments. Through its own physical and institutional instruments, Türkiye can strengthen its transit and logistics role in Southeast Europe. However, the effectiveness of this policy also depends on infrastructure,

border management, interoperability, and administrative decisions in neighbouring countries and European institutions.

5.2. Energy Connectivity

Within Türkiye's broader connectivity agenda in the Balkans, energy connectivity refers to the physical and institutional links that allow energy to move between countries. Its physical elements include pipelines, electricity interconnections, transmission systems, and access to LNG facilities. Its institutional elements include supply agreements, market rules, technical standards, and coordination among governments, companies, regulators, and transmission-system operators. These links affect energy security because they determine whether countries can access reliable, affordable, and diversified supplies when an existing source or route is disrupted (Tatlı, 2025, p. 522). They also create regional interdependence because producer, transit, and consumer countries rely on the continued operation and coordination of shared networks (Bouzarovski, Bradshaw & Wochnik, 2015, pp. 218–220; Önsoy & Udum, 2015, pp. 175–177).

Energy connectivity also has a wider development dimension. Reliable energy supply supports economic activity, while weak or insufficient infrastructure may limit growth and regional integration. This is particularly important in the Western Balkans, where countries continue to face infrastructure needs and difficulties in meeting peak demand (Jaćimović et al., 2025, pp. 51, 57). Recent research therefore treats Türkiye–Balkan energy cooperation as an interaction among energy security, economic development, geopolitical relations, and environmental sustainability (Lami, 2025, pp. 599–600). This approach shows why energy connectivity cannot be reduced to the construction of pipelines alone.

Türkiye's position should also be understood within the wider relationship among Türkiye, the EU, Russia, and energy-producing regions. Earlier research argued that Türkiye's geographical position and its relations with both the EU and Russia gave it a distinct role in Western Balkan energy security (Önsoy & Udum, 2015, pp. 175–177). Türkiye has also sought to position itself as an energy bridge or hub between producer regions and European markets. In this context, an energy bridge mainly refers to the physical transit of energy across Turkish territory, while a hub role implies a wider capacity to receive energy from different sources, organize its transmission, and influence commercial or strategic energy relations. Türkiye's Balkan-facing connections should therefore be examined as part of its wider energy-corridor strategy rather than as an isolated regional policy (Tatlı, 2025, p. 520; Chaziza, 2021, pp. 44–45).

Türkiye's synchronous operation with the Continental Europe electricity system provides a clear example of energy connectivity through the Balkans. This connection operates through cross-border electricity interconnections with Bulgaria and Greece (Directorate for EU Affairs, 2025). The process began with trial synchronous operation in 2010 and gained a permanent legal and institutional basis through a long-term agreement in 2015 (TEİAŞ, n.d.; Directorate for EU Affairs, 2015). It demonstrates that Türkiye's energy connectivity with Europe is not based only

on gas pipelines. It also includes the integration of electricity systems through shared technical and institutional arrangements.

Electricity synchronization requires more than physical interconnection. It depends on common technical rules, system-security requirements, organizational coordination, and legal arrangements (ENTSO-E, 2020; ENTSO-E, n.d.-a). Because the process involves TEİAŞ and the Bulgarian and Greek transmission-system operators, Bulgaria and Greece serve as Türkiye's main Balkan interfaces with the Continental European electricity system. Türkiye's observer membership in ENTSO-E, extended until 30 June 2026, shows that this earlier integration process remains institutionally relevant (TEİAŞ, 2022; ENTSO-E, n.d.-b). Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Greece must therefore coordinate technical standards, system security, and cross-border electricity exchanges. This makes electricity integration a practical example of both hard connectivity and soft energy governance.

Gas infrastructure creates another dimension of Türkiye's Balkan connectivity. Türkiye's energy-bridge role is most clearly visible in the connection between TANAP and the Trans Adriatic Pipeline. TAP connects with TANAP at the Türkiye–Greece border and carries Caspian gas through Greece and Albania, under the Adriatic Sea, to Italy (Southern Gas Corridor, n.d.). This creates an operating energy route that passes from Türkiye directly into the Balkans. Türkiye's position in this system supports access to Caspian gas and connects its domestic pipeline network with Southeast European and wider European markets.

The Greece–Bulgaria Interconnector extends the regional importance of this route. The IGB began commercial operation on 1 October 2022 and receives gas from TAP. It connects Bulgaria with the Southern Gas Corridor through Greece and provides an additional supply route for Bulgaria and the wider Southeast European region (ICGB, 2022; European Commission, n.d.-a). TANAP, TAP, and IGB can therefore be understood as connected parts of a regional system. Türkiye serves as an upstream transit country for Caspian gas, while the Balkan interconnectors distribute this gas to additional regional markets (Lami, 2025, p. 602). This system supports diversification because it gives regional countries access to a source and route that is not based on Russian supply.

TurkStream illustrates a different effect of Türkiye's energy connectivity. It carries Russian gas through Türkiye to Southeast and Central European markets. Its importance increased after Russian gas transit through Ukraine ended on 1 January 2025. TurkStream then became one of the remaining pipeline routes carrying Russian gas to Europe. Serbia is one of its Western Balkan recipients, while Bulgaria is an important transit country for onward deliveries (CSD, 2024; AP News, 2025; Elliott, 2026). TurkStream therefore strengthens Türkiye's position as a transit country, but it does not contribute to supplier diversification in the same way as TANAP and TAP.

These two gas systems give Türkiye a dual position. TANAP and TAP support access to non-Russian Caspian gas, while TurkStream maintains Türkiye's role in the transit of Russian gas to Southeast Europe. This position may enhance Türkiye's strategic relevance in regional energy

cooperation, as suppliers and receiving countries rely on routes, system capacity, and institutional coordination involving Türkiye. As a result, Türkiye may gain greater importance in discussions about transit, capacity, and regional energy cooperation. However, the same position also creates vulnerability. Türkiye and Balkan recipients remain exposed to supply disruptions, sanctions, price disputes, and geopolitical pressure when they depend heavily on Russian gas or a limited number of politically sensitive routes (Eldem, 2024, p. 114; CSD, 2024). Energy connectivity can therefore strengthen Türkiye's regional role while also increasing its exposure to external risks.

The BOTAŞ–Bulgargaz agreement adds a bilateral and institutional dimension to this role. Signed on January 3, 2023, the thirteen-year agreement gives Bulgaria access to Türkiye's LNG terminals and gas-transmission network for up to 1.5 billion cubic metres per year (Associated Press, 2023). The agreement shows that Türkiye can support a Balkan country's access to energy not only through international pipelines, but also through LNG terminals, transmission capacity, and contractual arrangements. It therefore combines hard infrastructure with soft connectivity in the form of bilateral rules governing access and cross-border flows.

These examples show that Türkiye's energy connectivity operates at two related levels. At the regional level, electricity interconnections, IGB, LNG access, and bilateral agreements may improve Balkan access to energy and create additional supply options. At the wider corridor level, Türkiye positions itself between producer regions and European markets. However, greater transit capacity does not always mean greater energy security. The effect depends on the source of the energy, the number of available routes, market rules, and the capacity of regional infrastructure.

The regional effects also depend on conditions within the Western Balkans. Earlier research described the region's energy markets as small, fragmented, insufficiently liberalized, and constrained by weak interconnection. It therefore treated stronger regional cooperation as necessary for stable energy flows and deeper interdependence (Önsoy & Udum, 2015, pp. 188–189). Although the regional energy landscape has changed since that study was published, market fragmentation, infrastructure capacity, and institutional coordination remain relevant concerns. Türkiye's energy connections can provide additional routes, but they cannot by themselves resolve the internal structural problems of Balkan energy markets.

Finally, the long-term value of Türkiye–Balkan energy connectivity depends on whether it can move beyond fossil-fuel transit. TANAP–TAP, LNG access, and electricity interconnections may strengthen diversification and supply security. In contrast, TurkStream may maintain dependence on Russian gas, while continued investment in fossil-fuel infrastructure may delay the transition to cleaner energy systems. Stronger electricity grids and cross-border interconnections can have more lasting benefits if they also support renewable energy and the integration of regional electricity markets (Frey, 2024, pp. 10, 15). Future cooperation should therefore give greater attention to renewable energy, energy efficiency, electricity-market integration, access to finance, and environmental assessment (Lami, 2025, pp. 603, 608). Türkiye's contribution to Balkan

energy connectivity will be most beneficial when it increases supply options, strengthens regional networks, and supports a gradual transition toward more sustainable energy systems.

5.3. Digital Connectivity

Within Türkiye's broader connectivity agenda in the Balkans, digital connectivity includes both communications infrastructure and institutional cooperation. Its physical elements include fibre networks, submarine cables, data infrastructure, mobile networks, and satellites. Its institutional elements include e-government cooperation, cybersecurity arrangements, internet governance, common digital standards, and administrative capacity. Digital networks are therefore not secondary to transport or energy infrastructure. They are strategic assets because they shape information flows, public services, economic activity, and the ability of institutions to work across borders (Tüfekçi, Bayrak & Uslu, 2024, p. 124).

Digital diplomacy provides a useful perspective for understanding this institutional dimension. It should not be reduced to the use of social media by ministries or diplomatic representatives. It also includes e-government, cybersecurity, internet governance, networked participation, and the ability of public institutions to operate across online and offline environments (Hocking & Melissen, 2015, pp. 53–54). This broader definition is relevant to Türkiye's engagement with the Balkans because its digital connections involve not only communication technologies, but also cooperation on public administration and digital services.

Digital connectivity is also connected with economic development and administrative capacity. Internet access can support communication, commerce, access to information, and the delivery of public services. Jaćimović et al. identify a relationship between internet access and income levels and note that the Western Balkans continues to face gaps in fibre-optic infrastructure, fixed internet speed, and 5G coverage (Jaćimović et al., 2025, p. 62). These limitations show that digital connectivity in the region is not only a technological issue. It is also a question of development, institutional capacity, and access to modern public and commercial services. External cooperation may therefore have longer-term effects when it supports knowledge transfer, standards, and administrative implementation.

The eGovernment memorandum between Türkiye and Serbia provides a concrete example of this institutional form of digital connectivity. Serbia's Office for IT and eGovernment reported that the two countries signed a memorandum on cooperation in the field of eGovernment during a visit by the President of Türkiye. The memorandum covers cooperation in public digital governance, electronic services, and administrative capacity-building (Office for IT and eGovernment, 2022). Unlike a fibre network or satellite, this agreement does not create physical infrastructure. Its contribution lies in the exchange of experience, institutional knowledge, and implementation practices. It can therefore be treated as a direct soft-connectivity instrument in Türkiye's digital engagement with a Balkan country.

The planned Kardesa submarine cable represents a different type of digital connection. It should be treated as a regional interface rather than as a Turkish-led initiative. The project is planned as a Black Sea submarine telecommunications corridor connecting Bulgaria and Georgia, with further links to Türkiye and Ukraine (Vodenicharova & Tsvetanova, 2026; Vodafone Group, 2025; Zhelyazkov, 2026). Türkiye's inclusion as a planned landing point would place it within an emerging data route linking the Black Sea, Southeast Europe, and wider Europe–Asia digital networks. The project is relevant to Türkiye's regional connectivity because it may affect the routes through which data reaches Türkiye and neighbouring regions. However, it should not be presented as an instrument controlled or implemented by Türkiye unless evidence of a direct Turkish role becomes available.

Satellite infrastructure adds a complementary layer to Türkiye's wider digital capacity. TÜRKSAT 5B expands Türkiye's satellite-based communication and data capacity beyond its domestic terrestrial networks (Türksat, n.d.). TÜRKSAT 6A adds a technological dimension by increasing Türkiye's domestic satellite-production capacity and supporting greater technological autonomy (Reuters, 2024; Directorate of Communications, 2025). These satellites strengthen Türkiye's general communication, broadcasting, and data capacity across a wider geographical area. However, neither satellite alone demonstrates the existence of a specific Turkish digital-connectivity policy towards the Balkans.

The relevance of satellite capacity to the Balkans is therefore indirect. Satellites cannot replace fibre networks, submarine cables, 5G infrastructure, or domestic digital reforms. They can nevertheless support wider communication coverage and provide backup capacity when terrestrial networks are incomplete or disrupted. Recent connectivity research similarly treats satellite links as complementary or temporary support for terrestrial and submarine networks rather than as their replacement (EU4Digital Facility, 2026, pp. 52–53). In Türkiye's regional connectivity, satellite capacity should consequently be understood as supporting network reach and resilience, while eGovernment agreements and data-corridor projects represent more direct forms of cross-border digital engagement.

A wider regional approach requires these different layers to work together. Recent research recommends secure and diverse digital routes, the installation of fibre alongside transport and energy infrastructure, and the use of satellites as backup where terrestrial coverage remains incomplete. It also emphasizes open access, interoperability, and common cybersecurity standards (EU4Digital Facility, 2026, pp. 50–53). These recommendations show that physical networks alone are insufficient. Digital corridors also require compatible standards, secure systems, and institutional coordination.

Overall, Türkiye's digital connectivity in and around the Balkans is less developed than its transport and energy connectivity. The available evidence does not support the claim that Türkiye has a comprehensive and separate digital-connectivity policy for the region. Instead, its role is emerging through several connected but different elements. The eGovernment memorandum

with Serbia is a direct institutional instrument; Türkiye's planned inclusion in the Kardesa system is a regional infrastructure interface; and TÜRKSAT satellites provide complementary communication capacity. Together, these elements suggest a layered and developing form of digital engagement rather than a fully established regional strategy.

6. Conclusion

This article examined connectivity as a policy framework that links physical networks with the rules, institutions, and forms of cooperation required to operate them across borders. It applied this framework to Türkiye's relations with the Balkans in transport, energy, and digital sectors. The analysis shows that Türkiye frames connectivity as a practical way to improve market access, diversify routes and suppliers, strengthen its transit position, and maintain regional engagement. Connectivity is therefore more than a collection of infrastructure projects. It is a form of foreign-policy practice in which geographical position is combined with investment, agreements, technical coordination, and institutional cooperation.

The hard/soft distinction helps explain how this policy works. Hard connectivity provides physical routes and technical capacity through railways, motorways, pipelines, electricity interconnections, border facilities, digital cables, and satellites. Soft connectivity allows these assets to operate through agreements, standards, customs procedures, regulatory coordination, financing arrangements, and cooperation among institutions. The main finding of the article is that these two dimensions are complementary. Physical infrastructure has limited value when border procedures remain slow, technical systems are incompatible, or the relevant authorities do not coordinate their activities. At the same time, agreements and institutional cooperation cannot create effective cross-border flows without sufficient physical capacity. Türkiye's regional role therefore depends on the interaction between infrastructure and governance.

Transport provides the clearest and most developed part of Türkiye's connectivity agenda in the Balkans. Türkiye connects its wider Middle Corridor strategy with Balkan-facing railways, border crossings, air services, and participation in intra-Balkan infrastructure. Marmaray and the Baku–Tbilisi–Kars railway support the wider Eurasian corridor to which Balkan routes connect. The Halkalı–Kapıkule railway and coordination with Bulgaria show how domestic infrastructure can be linked with European networks. The Belgrade–Sarajevo motorway provides a different example because Turkish-linked financing and contractor involvement extend Türkiye's engagement to infrastructure connecting Balkan states with each other. Regular rail and air services also add a people-to-people dimension by supporting travel, business, tourism, and social contact. However, these examples show that corridor narratives alone are insufficient. Their practical value depends on border capacity, customs procedures, interoperability, digital management, and cooperation with neighbouring countries and European institutions.

Energy connectivity presents a more complex picture. Türkiye's synchronous connection with the Continental European electricity system through Bulgaria and Greece demonstrates a rule-based

form of regional integration. It requires shared technical standards, institutional coordination, and continuing cooperation among transmission-system operators. Gas networks, however, produce different and sometimes contradictory effects. TANAP–TAP, the Greece–Bulgaria Interconnector, and access to Türkiye's LNG facilities can provide additional supply routes for Southeast Europe. In contrast, TurkStream maintains the regional importance of Russian gas and may preserve existing forms of dependence. Türkiye's position between different suppliers and European markets can increase its importance as a transit partner, but it can also expose Türkiye and Balkan countries to disruptions, sanctions, price disputes, and geopolitical pressure. Energy connectivity should therefore not be treated as automatically improving energy security. Its effect depends on the source of supply, the number of available routes, market arrangements, and the condition of regional infrastructure. Its longer-term value will also depend on whether cooperation supports electricity-market integration, renewable energy, and more sustainable energy systems rather than remaining centred on fossil-fuel transit.

Digital connectivity is less developed as a distinct part of Türkiye's Balkan policy. The available evidence points to an emerging and layered form of engagement rather than a comprehensive regional strategy. The eGovernment memorandum with Serbia is the clearest direct Turkish instrument because it supports cooperation on digital public services, administrative knowledge, and institutional capacity. Türkiye's possible inclusion in the Kardesa submarine cable system has a different status: it is a regional interface that may connect Türkiye with an emerging Black Sea data corridor, but it is not a project controlled by Türkiye. TÜRKSAT 5B and TÜRKSAT 6A also strengthen Türkiye's wider communication and technological capacity, although their relevance to the Balkans remains indirect. Satellites can support coverage and network resilience, but they cannot replace fibre networks, submarine cables, 5G infrastructure, or domestic digital reforms. Türkiye's digital role in the region will therefore depend on whether these separate elements develop into more regular institutional cooperation and stronger participation in regional digital infrastructure.

The analysis also shows the importance of distinguishing Türkiye's own policy instruments from regional interfaces. Türkiye's instruments include projects, agreements, and coordination mechanisms in which Turkish public authorities, state-linked institutions, financial actors, or companies have a direct role. Infrastructure developed by Bulgaria, Greece, Balkan governments, or EU institutions may strongly affect Türkiye's access and regional position, but it should not automatically be presented as a Turkish instrument. This distinction provides a more accurate understanding of Türkiye's influence. Türkiye can initiate, finance, negotiate, or participate in some projects, but the operation of wider networks also depends on decisions and investments made by its partners.

Türkiye's connectivity agenda consequently produces both opportunities and limitations. It can improve access to European and Asian markets, support supply diversification, create regular institutional cooperation, and give Türkiye a visible role in regional infrastructure. It can also complement EU-led networks when Turkish and European interests overlap. However,

connectivity may create unequal dependence, strengthen politically sensitive routes, or produce limited local benefits when governance and accountability are weak. Its regional effects depend on local infrastructure, administrative capacity, regulatory compatibility, financial sustainability, and the participation of affected countries and communities. Connections should therefore be assessed through their actual operation and distributional effects rather than through their political presentation alone.

These conclusions should be read within the limits of the study. The article uses qualitative document analysis and focuses on official statements, agreements, project documents, academic research, and sectoral reports. It explains how Türkiye frames connectivity and identifies the instruments through which this policy is pursued, but it does not measure the economic effect of individual projects or establish direct causal relationships. Official sources may also give greater attention to intended benefits than to delays, local disputes, unequal outcomes, or implementation problems. Future research could address these limitations through project-level comparison, interviews with national and local actors, and systematic evidence on trade, mobility, energy flows, digital capacity, and local effects.

Overall, Türkiye's connectivity agenda in the Balkans is best understood as a practical and sectorally differentiated form of regional engagement. It is strongest in transport, multifaceted in energy, and developing in the digital sector. Across all three fields, Türkiye seeks to turn its geographical position into an operational regional role. Its success, however, depends not only on the infrastructure or agreements it provides, but also on the capacity and choices of Balkan countries, neighbouring states, and European institutions. Connectivity can support access, cooperation, and diversification, but these outcomes are not automatic. They require functioning infrastructure, compatible rules, institutional coordination, and attention to the political and local conditions in which cross-border networks operate.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Türkiye as a Sui Generis Power Player in the Balkans

Balkanlarda *Sui Generis* Bir Güç Aktörü Olarak Türkiye

Marian KARAGYOZOV*

Abstract

There is a consensus in the academic literature that Türkiye's foreign policy toward the Balkans is based primarily on the use of so-called "soft power." However, the question of how Ankara applies the soft power instruments at its disposal remains under-researched—a gap that this article attempts to fill, at least in part. Based on qualitative data and process tracing, the article argues that an alternative conceptualization more accurately reflects the blurred boundaries between "soft power" and its potential use as an instrument of pressure. The proposed conceptualization concerns the use of "soft power" in a modified, *sui generis* way. The analysis focuses on selected examples from the fields of religion, media, and relations with local political actors, including the activities of Turkish religious institutions and media organizations in the Balkans, as well as the establishment or support of political parties perceived by local audiences as aligned with Ankara. The findings suggest that although Türkiye continues to rely primarily on conventional soft power instruments, under certain circumstances these may be employed in ways that go beyond attraction and persuasion without reaching the level of coercive hard power. The article therefore proposes the concept of "soft power *sui generis*" as a more accurate framework for understanding this intermediate form of influence and for explaining the peculiarities of Türkiye's policy toward the Balkans.

Keywords: Balkans, Turkish Foreign Policy, Soft Power, Hard Power, Smart Power

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Öz

Akademik literatürde, Türkiye'nin Balkanlar'a yönelik dış politikasının esas olarak sözde "yumuşak güç" kullanımına dayandığı konusunda genel bir fikir birliği bulunmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, Ankara'nın elindeki yumuşak güç araçlarını nasıl uyguladığı sorusu hâlâ yeterince araştırılmamış olup, bu makale söz konusu boşluğu en azından kısmen doldurmayı amaçlamaktadır. Nitel verilere ve süreç izleme (*process tracing*) yöntemine dayanan çalışma, alternatif bir kavramsallaştırmanın "yumuşak güç" ile bunun bir baskı aracı olarak potansiyel kullanımı arasındaki bulanık sınırları daha doğru biçimde yansıttığını ileri sürmektedir. Önerilen kavramsallaştırma, "yumuşak gücün" değiştirilmiş, *sui generis* (kendine özgü) bir biçimde kullanılmasına ilişkindir. Analiz, din, medya ve yerel siyasi aktörlerle ilişkiler alanlarından seçilmiş örneklere odaklanmakta; Balkanlar'daki Türk dini kurumları ve medya kuruluşlarının faaliyetlerinin yanı sıra, yerel kamuoyu tarafından Ankara ile uyumlu olarak algılanan siyasi partilerin kurulması veya desteklenmesini incelemektedir. Bulgular, Türkiye'nin esas olarak geleneksel yumuşak güç araçlarına dayanmaya devam ettiğini, ancak belirli koşullarda bu araçların, zorlayıcı sert güç düzeyine ulaşmaksızın, çekicilik ve ikna işlevlerinin ötesine geçen biçimlerde kullanılabildiğini göstermektedir. Bu doğrultuda makale, bu ara etki biçimini açıklamak ve Türkiye'nin Balkanlar politikasının kendine özgü özelliklerini daha isabetli biçimde kavramsallaştırmak amacıyla **"***sui generis* yumuşak güç" kavramını önermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Balkanlar, Türk Dış Politikası, Yumuşak Güç, Sert Güç, Akıllı Güç

1. Introduction

For centuries, the Balkans have been of significant importance to the Ottoman Empire and Türkiye. The main reasons for the importance of the Balkans in Türkiye's foreign policy throughout the Republican period are: (a) the strategic importance of Thrace as an external border without natural defense lines and as the hinterland of Istanbul and the Straits; (b) preserving stability and the status quo because of the risk that any crisis in the region could spill over into Türkiye due to geographic proximity and because the bulk of Türkiye's trade with Europe is carried out via the Balkans; and (c) maintaining connections with the Turkish and Muslim minorities living in the Balkans and protecting the interests of people of Balkan origin living in Türkiye (Uzgel, 2018, pp. 169–171; Ekinci, 2017, p. 167).

The long centuries of Ottoman rule over these lands, the presence of Muslim and Turkish communities in the Balkans, as well as Turkish citizens of Balkan origin in Türkiye, have created fertile ground for Turkish foreign policy toward the region to be based on so-called "soft power." In his seminal book, Joseph Nye Jr. defines soft power as the ability to affect others and obtain preferred outcomes through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or payment. This includes the ability of a state to shape the preferences of others and to achieve desired results through attraction rooted in its culture, values, example, level of prosperity, and political model rather than through coercion in its many forms (e.g., economic pressure and sanctions, military threats). The primary modes of action are agenda-setting and persuading partners rather than threats, while the principal means and instruments include culture, values, and political institutions, which are operationalized through public and multilateral diplomacy (Nye, 2004, pp. 11–14, *passim*).

Türkiye's foreign policy engagement with Southeast Europe has intensified noticeably since the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power in Türkiye in 2002, and Türkiye's use of so-called "soft power" instruments in the Balkans has been the subject of increased academic interest (e.g., Bieber & Tzifakis, 2021; Özşahin & Radeljić, 2022; Đurković, 2022). However, the question of how Ankara applies these instruments remains under-researched at the conceptual level—a gap that this article attempts to fill, at least in part. The analysis is based on the framework developed by Nye, who notes that "many types of resources can contribute to soft power, but that does not mean that soft power is any type of behavior." He continues: "The use of force, payment, and some agenda-setting based on them I call hard power. Agenda-setting that is regarded as legitimate by the target, positive attraction, and persuasion are the parts of the spectrum of behaviors I include in soft power. Hard power is push; soft power is pull" (Nye, 2021). In this sense, Nye argues that what makes "soft power" "soft" is not the instruments themselves but rather the behavior: "I described the distinction between hard and soft power as a matter of degree along a spectrum of behaviors that range from the hard end of command to the soft end of co-option… The softness of the power behavior depends upon the degree of voluntary attraction by the targeted actors" (Nye, 2021).

But what exactly does "agenda-setting that is regarded as legitimate by the target" mean? Where exactly does the line between persuasion and pressure lie? It is precisely this ambiguity that has led to the emergence of the idea of the weaponization of "soft power" (Laidi, 2019). A number of texts in which the concept of the "weaponization of soft power" is used suffer from serious methodological shortcomings. First, these are often media or think tank publications that do not provide a clear definition of the concept. Second, accusations of using "soft power" as a weapon are often directed at the West's geopolitical rivals, such as China. For this reason, this paper refrains from using this term and proposes an alternative conceptualization that, in our view, more accurately reflects the blurring, in certain situations, of the distinction between "soft power" and its potential use as an instrument of pressure. This conceptualization concerns the use of "soft power" in a modified, *sui generis* way. Among the examples supporting this thesis are the activities of Turkish media and religious organizations in the Balkans, as well as the establishment of political parties perceived by local Balkan audiences as aligned with Ankara. The article applies a qualitative descriptive method based on primary and secondary sources and process tracing—an approach that allows for the integration of various methods and the identification of causal relationships among the phenomena under consideration.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of Türkiye's "soft power" instruments toward the Balkans, followed by a critical analysis of their application and, finally, a conclusion.

2. "Soft Power" as a Main Instrument of Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans

Türkiye's approach to the Balkans, especially after the end of the Cold War, has been based mainly on the use of a number of "soft power" instruments. Firstly, during the 1990s, three parallel

processes began in the Balkans: the integration of most Balkan countries into NATO and the EU, as well as the presence of multinational forces with a UN or NATO mandate in some of the countries affected by the wars during the breakup of Yugoslavia (Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo). The Partnership for Peace (PfP) program and the process of integration into the EU, to which a requirement to resolve conflicts between neighbors has been added, have largely mitigated the possibility of new wars breaking out on the peninsula. All this has reduced the direct risk to Türkiye's national security and, accordingly, eliminated the need for Ankara's military engagement in the region.

Secondly, as a legacy of the Ottoman Empire, Türkiye has significant ethnic, religious, and cultural ties with Turkish and Muslim communities in Southeast Europe, which can serve as a source of support for its "soft power" approach. These dense ties and the presence of a population inherently sympathetic to Türkiye make the use of soft power the logical choice.

Thirdly, in November 2002, the AKP came to power, establishing the first one-party government in Türkiye in more than a decade. On the basis of the country's stabilized political situation, economy, and finances, the AKP began to pursue a more active foreign policy. The regional context was also favorable to Türkiye's increased activism. By 2001, the conflicts in the Balkans had subsided. Taking advantage of the favorable global situation, the Balkan countries experienced fairly strong economic growth during the 2000s. Due to technological advances, expanding trade, and the end of the conflicts in the Balkans, interactions between Türkiye and the Balkans became easier, cheaper, faster, and broader, which also facilitated the use of soft power instruments.

Shortly after the AKP came to power in Türkiye, Ahmet Davutoğlu became foreign policy adviser to then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In 2009, he was appointed foreign minister, giving him even greater room to put his foreign policy ideas into practice. A document of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs summarizes his views on the Balkans: regional ownership, inclusiveness, regional and European integration, and the establishment of a common stance in regional and international organizations (Davutoğlu, 2011; Davutoğlu, 2012). His main aim was for Türkiye to develop economic partnerships and establish a strong political, economic, and cultural presence in the short and medium term, hoping that, in the long run, it would become a more influential regional power, ideally a pivotal state across different regions (Ekinci, 2017, pp. 164–165), including the Balkans and the Middle East.

The various aspects of Türkiye's "soft power" include the economic, social, cultural, educational, media, and other spheres. The signing of free trade agreements (FTAs) with the Balkan countries led to a sixfold increase in trade with these countries, from USD 2.9 billion in 2000 to USD 17.7 billion in 2008 (Türbedar, 2011, p. 142). Trade has continued its steady growth in subsequent years, while exports of Turkish goods alone (excluding services) reached USD 25.258 billion in 2025 (Türkiye Today, 2026). It should be noted that this was part of a broader trend of increasing Turkish foreign trade. Turkish foreign direct investment in the region has also gradually increased. As of 2020, its total amount was estimated to range from USD 2.352 billion (Central Bank of the

Republic of Türkiye) to USD 16.044 billion (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Türkiye), with intermediate estimates of USD 3.831 billion (IMF) and USD 4.417 billion (UNCTAD), reflecting differences in methodology (Türbedar, 2022, pp. 165–172).

The conclusion of agreements on visa-free travel with all Balkan states that are not EU members and Turkish Airlines' expanded network of direct flights significantly enhanced mobility and exchange between the Balkans and Türkiye. This trend was further facilitated by other factors, such as ethnic and family ties and the growing popularity of Turkish culture (tourism, TV series, etc.), which contributed to the annual number of visitors from the Balkans to Türkiye more than doubling compared to the early 2000s, reaching 4.6 million in 2018 (Ekinci, 2019, p. 39). Turkish citizens could travel visa-free to six Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia, and North Macedonia).

Mediation was an instrument that Turkish diplomacy began using frequently worldwide during this period. During its chairmanship of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in 2009–2010, held under the motto "From Shared History to Common Future," the Turkish government launched two trilateral dialogue mechanisms among the foreign ministers of Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, and of Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia, resulting in some positive steps by the Serbian authorities regarding the Srebrenica massacre. In addition to acting at the interstate level, Türkiye also made efforts to mediate relations between the respective states and their Muslim minorities, as well as disputes within the Islamic communities in the Balkans, for example, in Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro (Muhasilovic, 2020, pp. 125–212; Kelkitli, 2013, p. 97).

The Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü) was established in 2007 to promote the Turkish language and culture abroad, and it began its activities in the Balkans. The first two centers abroad were founded in 2009 in Sarajevo and Tirana, followed by another in Novi Pazar the following year, the "capital" of the Serbian Muslim-populated region of Sandžak. During the inauguration of the first center in Sarajevo, Davutoğlu explicitly stated that this was intentional because the Bosnian capital is "a place that reflects Turkish culture in the best way… the city of our common culture. Istanbul and Sarajevo are twin souls" (quoted in Aydın, 2014, pp. 16, 18–19). Currently, 13 of the 58 Yunus Emre Institutes (approximately 22 percent of the total) are located in the Balkans. Branches of the Institute are active in all Balkan countries except Bulgaria, Greece, and Slovenia (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü, 2024, pp. 7, 14). Bosnia and Herzegovina, Germany, and Kosovo are the only countries with three centers, which speaks volumes about the importance of the Balkans in the institution's overall work.

In 2010, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (Yurtdışı Türkler ve Akraba Topluluklar Başkanlığı, YTB) was established to support not only Turkish citizens abroad and their associations but also "related communities"—people who have historically shared the geography and "culture" of the Turks—as well as students of Turkish or Muslim origin from the Turkic republics and the Balkans who wish to study in Türkiye. In 2012, under the auspices

of the YTB, the state-funded Türkiye Scholarships (Türkiye Bursları) Program was launched. It covers tuition fees, a scholarship, one year of Turkish-language training, accommodation in state dormitories, health insurance, and a round-trip airline ticket. It also organizes various academic and social programs to familiarize international students with Turkish history and culture. In addition, launching a website for graduates and establishing alumni associations in the sending countries enhance the sustainability of these efforts. Applications to Türkiye Bursları from the Balkan countries constitute only 1.5 percent of total applications; however, they account for around 15 percent of all beneficiaries, making the Balkans the fourth-largest beneficiary region (Tabak & Bozkurt, 2022, p. 122). In absolute numbers, this translates into around 560 scholarships awarded to students from the Balkans in 2022, out of a total of 4,316 scholarships for long – and short-term programs (Zorić, 2024, pp. 10–11).

The activities of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı) abroad have also expanded since 2002. In addition to providing theological education for students from the region, Coordination Offices for Religious Services in Turkish embassies and Religious Attaché Offices in Turkish Consulates General were established to provide Islamic literature in Turkish and local languages. The Diyanet has consultancies in every Balkan country except Slovenia. Attaché Offices are active in Bosnia and Romania, while Coordination Offices operate in Greece and Serbia. In Bulgaria, there are both a Coordination Office and an Attaché Office. The Twin Cities Program was launched in 2006. Within its framework, muftis' offices in Türkiye cooperated and implemented joint projects with religious authorities in other countries. As of 2015, 215 cities in Türkiye were responsible for the construction of more than 100 mosques, Quran courses, and madrasahs in 203 sister cities across 95 countries; 66 of these cities were in the Balkans, representing almost one-third of all partnerships (Muhasilovic, 2018, pp. 70–72). The Diyanet provides material assistance, organizes mass public circumcision ceremonies in Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, and also provides financial support to numerous official Islamic institutions in the Balkans. In recent years, the Diyanet has financed the construction of the largest Islamic places of worship in Albania, Kosovo, and North Macedonia as a symbolic and physical expression of Turkish prestige and influence. Due to instability in the Middle East, Türkiye has remained the only significant foreign destination for theology students from the Balkans.

During the AKP era, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı, TİKA) rose in prominence within Turkish foreign policy (TFP), and the Balkans have become one of the focal points of its activities. In TİKA's official reports, the Balkans are included in the "Balkans and Eastern Europe" group of countries, which makes it somewhat difficult to extract data relating exclusively to the Balkans. However, the Balkans and Eastern Europe group ranks second in terms of the number of projects implemented. These projects focus on preserving both tangible and intangible Ottoman heritage, including the restoration of numerous historical bridges, mosques, clock towers, and baths. During the period 2014–2021, the largest amounts of TİKA assistance in the Balkans and Eastern Europe went to Bosnia and Herzegovina (USD 214.5 million), Albania (USD 193.3 million), and North Macedonia (USD 98.5 million). From the 1990s to 2022, the agency implemented more than 5,500 projects in the

region: 1,750 in the social and communications sector, 1,350 in the education sector, and 1,050 in the development of administrative and civil infrastructure (Grishin & Islamov, 2023, pp. 101–102). The Balkans provide an illustrative example of TİKA's evolution. It began as a technical assistance agency working primarily in restoration but has gradually developed into an institution capable of implementing projects from A to Z, including designing, financing, and constructing infrastructure from scratch.

After the constitutional amendment introducing a presidential system with enhanced powers for the head of state was approved in a referendum in April 2017 and entered into force following the elections the next year, a trend toward closer personal relations between President Erdoğan and Balkan leaders became evident. This was also a result of the consolidation of (semi-)authoritarian regimes in the Balkans following the slowdown of European integration until February 2022, when Russia's invasion of Ukraine gave the process renewed momentum. It should be emphasized that personal ties matter greatly in regimes built around a strong leader, but reinforcing them with deeply rooted institutional, economic, and soft power instruments ensures the durability of relations with Ankara even if a particular Balkan leader leaves the political scene (e.g., Nikola Gruevski in North Macedonia, the replacement of Haris Silajdžić by Bakir Izetbegović in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Hashim Thaçi in Kosovo). Turkish policy toward the Balkans, Africa, and Asia intensified as an attempt to compensate for deteriorating relations with Western countries after the coup d'état attempt in Türkiye. Moreover, for Ankara, the Balkans have been a region where Turkish foreign policy has achieved relative success and can be presented as a showcase for domestic purposes. For example, Balkan leaders formed an important group of guests at Erdoğan's swearing-in ceremony in Ankara on July 9, 2018, and at the inauguration of Istanbul's new mega-airport on October 29, 2018, both events having been boycotted by most European leaders.

Turkish state media also target audiences in the Balkans through broadcasts and websites in various local languages. Of the 13 regional centers of the semi-official Anadolu Agency (AA) worldwide, only three are located in Europe—Brussels, Sarajevo, and Skopje, the latter two in the Balkans (Huskić & Büyük, 2022, p. 133). These regional offices broadcast in five Balkan languages (Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian, Macedonian, and Serbian). Launched in 2022, TRT Balkans broadcasts from Skopje and maintains a regional office in Sarajevo. It is the seventh international affiliate of the Ankara-based broadcaster, which also includes TRT World, TRT Arabi, TRT Russian, TRT Deutsch, TRT Français, and TRT Afrika (Zorić, 2024, pp. 11–12).

The activities of Turkish state media outlets are, in some cases, complemented by those of private Turkish media. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, two media outlets—the web portal *Faktor* and *Stav* magazine—are owned by Simurg Media d.o.o., which was established at the end of 2014. Within a decade, *Faktor*, which openly supports the SDA, has become one of the most widely read and influential news portals among Bosniaks. The media company is owned by Cengiz Holding, which builds roads and other infrastructure projects, often financed through loans from local and

international banks. For example, it was selected to construct the Medakovo–Ozimice section of European Transport Corridor Vc for EUR 362 million, excluding VAT (Petrushevska, 2023).

Türkiye is also an active provider of humanitarian assistance. After the severe floods that struck Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Croatia in May 2014, Türkiye was among the first countries to offer assistance, sending 46 experienced rescue workers. In addition to donating approximately USD 2 million to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia at the Brussels Donor Conference in 2014, Turkish companies and nongovernmental organizations provided relief worth millions of dollars (Pavlović, 2015, p. 34). In 2016, the Diyanet helped 2,000 families affected by floods in North Macedonia and contributed to the restoration of a flood-damaged mosque (Daskalovski, 2022, p. 67). Türkiye was also among the first countries to provide assistance to Albania and Croatia after the earthquakes of November 2019 and December 2020.

After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Türkiye was in a privileged position as a major manufacturer of masks and protective clothing, and it supplied large shipments of these materials to Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia (Demirtaş, 2022). When asked who had provided the greatest amount of medical, financial, or other assistance during the pandemic, respondents to the Balkan Barometer 2021 survey in the Western Balkans identified the EU first (43 percent), China second (14 percent), and Türkiye third (9 percent). In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, however, Türkiye ranked second with 27 percent and 13 percent, respectively, behind only the EU (Balkan Barometer, 2021).

In recent years, as part of its "soft power" strategy, Türkiye has been forging long-term ties with the Balkan countries through two additional instruments: energy links and defense cooperation. In terms of energy ties, a key factor is Türkiye's ability to export natural gas to Balkan countries—gas obtained through the regasification of liquefied natural gas at Turkish terminals and delivered by tankers, as well as pipeline gas transported via the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline through Greece and via the extension of the TurkStream pipeline through Bulgaria. TurkStream carries Russian gas to Türkiye, from where it is supplied to other Balkan and Central European countries.

Cooperation in the military sphere takes place through the training of military personnel from Balkan countries in Türkiye and through the export of Turkish weapons. The meteoric rise of Türkiye's homegrown defense industry in recent years has enabled the country to expand military cooperation with Balkan states and find a broad market for its products there. Türkiye's exports to the region include armored vehicles, rifles and machine guns, drones, hardware and software technologies, and naval systems (Emin & Ekinci, 2024). Turkish arms exports are directed to almost all Balkan countries, with the main exceptions being Bulgaria and Serbia. Sofia has different defense priorities, purchasing American F-16 aircraft and missiles, while Serbia has a significant domestic defense industry of its own, producing armored vehicles, artillery, and grenade launchers. Furthermore, thanks to its multi-vector foreign policy, Belgrade can rely on supplies from a variety of sources, including China, France, Russia, the UAE, and others. The

interest of Balkan governments in Turkish defense products can be explained by the generally limited capacity of their domestic defense industries.

Ankara's willingness, in some cases, to share new technologies as part of defense cooperation agreements (e.g., with North Macedonia or Romania), its competitive prices, and the fact that Turkish defense companies are integrated into the production networks of American and European firms all strengthen the position of the Turkish defense industry in the Balkans (Vuksanović, 2024, p. 6). In addition, Turkish defense production complies with NATO standards. Last but not least, there is broad agreement in the literature that Türkiye can deliver military equipment much faster than many other suppliers.

In sum, because of its long-term contracts and the need for continuous exchanges of sensitive information and military personnel, defense cooperation creates durable ties, making it somewhat similar to the instruments of "soft power."

Many scholars and analysts argue that between 2016–2017 and around 2020, as a result of developments following the Arab Spring, there was an overall trend toward the militarization of Turkish foreign policy (Kardaş, Sinkaya, & Pehlivantürk, 2025). However, as the analysis above has shown, the Balkans remain an exception to this trend, and soft power has remained the principal instrument of Turkish foreign policy in Southeast Europe. First and foremost, this stems from the absence of open conflicts that could pose direct threats to Türkiye's national security and territorial integrity, as well as from the stabilizing role of NATO and the EU in the region. Second, the region serves as Türkiye's gateway to Europe, and soft power best advances Türkiye's interests by enhancing trade and connectivity. Third, the region is characterized by dense historical, cultural, ethnic, and religious ties, and by the presence of specific target audiences—particularly Turkish and Muslim minorities—that are inherently sympathetic to Türkiye, making the use of soft power the logical choice. Last but not least, Türkiye's policy toward the Balkans can be regarded as successful; therefore, from the perspective of Ankara's leadership, there is little reason to change the instruments employed (Karagyozov, 2024).

3. The Peculiarities of Turkish Soft Power in the Balkans

The perception of Türkiye's "soft power" in the Balkans is not entirely unproblematic. The following paragraphs examine examples of the controversial use of some of the soft power instruments discussed above.

There is a clear imbalance in favor of Türkiye in its economic, financial, and investment relations with the Balkan states. Although still limited, Turkish economic influence in the region has grown, while the Balkan countries have virtually no comparable economic influence in Türkiye, creating an asymmetric relationship. Turkish representatives emphasize that Turkish investments are directed toward manufacturing and industry rather than financial speculation. However, some observers note that the signing of FTAs led to an increase in Turkish exports to the Balkan

countries without a corresponding increase in exports from those countries to Türkiye, largely because of the limited size of their industries. Türkiye's market appears to be underutilized by exporters from Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia. Between 2012 and 2020, their exports of goods to Türkiye accounted for only 1–1.8 percent of their total exports worldwide (Türbedar, 2022, pp. 157–158). Another concern is that Turkish investments are concentrated either in regions with Turkish or Muslim populations or in strategic sectors such as infrastructure development and transportation (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia), healthcare (Bulgaria and North Macedonia), and telecommunications (Albania) (e.g., Tanasković, 2015, pp. 154–155; Prodanov, 2013, pp. 54–56).

In the financial sector, Türkiye aspires to have at least one bank with Turkish capital in every Balkan state. Prospective Turkish investors view Turkish banks as facilitators in navigating the complex regulatory environments of the target countries and as a means of overcoming language barriers (Hake, 2020, p. 18). The state-owned Halkbank and Ziraat Bank play an important role in this respect. Ziraat was the first foreign-capital bank established in Bosnia, and the two banks have been particularly successful in Albania and Kosovo. In the summer of 2025, the CEO of Ziraat Bank announced that the bank would open a branch in Albania and was also considering opening one in Romania. The Albanian branch will be Ziraat's sixth in the Balkans, complementing its existing branches in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Greece, Kosovo, and Montenegro (Balkan View, 2025).

However, through its financial institutions, Ankara can also create political leverage. In 2014, the Turkish state-owned Ziraat Bank granted a loan to Bosna Bank International to support local small and medium-sized enterprises, offering preferential terms with low or zero interest rates for the final recipients. Bosnian leader Bakir Izetbegović described the initiative as a gesture of "friendship and brotherhood" (Daily Sabah, 2014). A Turkish loan is also financing 80 percent, 2016 of the road connecting Novi Pazar and Tutin in the Serbian region of Sandžak (Ozturk, 2018). Another example is the widely publicized Sarajevo–Belgrade highway project. It has never been made clear how the Bosnian section of the highway will be financed, although Türkiye has suggested that it would provide the necessary funding (Kovacevic, 2021). In both cases, Turkish construction companies are expected to build the infrastructure.

Another domain of Turkish soft power is religion. There is a direct link between domestic developments in Türkiye and the behavior of Muslim communities in the Balkans.

On June 14, 2013, rallies in support of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan were organized simultaneously in several Balkan cities in response to the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. At a rally in Gostivar, North Macedonia, thousands of ethnic Turks, Albanians, and Bosniaks participated, including political leaders, ministers, deputy prime ministers, and heads of Islamic institutions from Bulgaria, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Montenegro (Anadolu Ajansı, 2013).

After corruption investigations were launched against Erdoğan and members of his government in December 2013, prayers in support of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan were held in early January

2014 following Friday prayers in all mosques in Montenegro and the Sandžak region, as well as in Sarajevo's Gazi Hüsrev Beg Mosque—the city's oldest mosque (Haberler.com, 2014).

Immediately after the attempted coup in Türkiye in July 2016, rallies in support of President Erdoğan were organized in several Balkan countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Participants chanted slogans such as "Stand strong, don't bow down—the Balkans are with you" ("Dik dur eğilme, Balkanlar seninle") (Aktaş, 2016).

In January 2018, Friday prayers for the success of Türkiye's Operation Olive Branch in Syria were organized in several mosques in Sarajevo (including the well-known Gazi Hüsrev Beg and Careva mosques) and Mostar by the Turkish ambassador and religious attachés (Večernji list, 2018).

Following nationwide funeral ceremonies in Türkiye for soldiers killed in Idlib, prayers for the fallen were held on March 9, 2020, in the capitals of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Bulgaria. The ceremonies were coordinated by Turkish embassies, and the Turkish ambassadors in the respective countries attended them (A Haber, 2020). In 2021, the Bulgarian Grand Mufti's Office issued a statement strongly condemning the killing of 13 Turkish citizens by the PKK in northern Iraq (Radoykov, 2021).

As noted above, the Diyanet's influence among Balkan Muslims stems from shared religious traditions, the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, religious literature and imams sent from Türkiye, and the education of young people from the Balkans at Turkish theological institutions. In recent years, a previously unknown phenomenon has emerged: the almost literal reproduction of the Diyanet's discourse by local Muslim communities. This represents another manifestation of Ankara's growing influence among Balkan Muslims.

The repetition of themes from the official Turkish discourse is particularly visible on July 15, the anniversary of the 2016 coup attempt, which was subsequently proclaimed Democracy and National Unity Day in Türkiye. The day is commemorated through events organized by Turkish embassies worldwide. However, the presence of Turkish and pro-Türkiye Muslim minorities gives these commemorations a distinctive character in the Balkans. These remembrance ceremonies are not limited to official events organized by Turkish embassies and attended by ambassadors. Various NGOs are mobilized, ceremonies are organized, and prayers are held in mosques across the region (Hayat, 2019; Haberler.com, 2025). In these cases, Balkan Muslims and Turks are mobilized in response to events in Türkiye, thereby reaffirming a transnational ethnic or religious solidarity that could be mobilized again under different circumstances.

In addition, the Turkish authorities have used their influence to intervene in the affairs of Muslim institutions in Albania, Bulgaria, Serbia, and Montenegro. Albania was the first Balkan country where the movement of the controversial preacher Fethullah Gülen established a presence, opening its first schools as early as 1993. The movement became an issue in bilateral relations after the conflict between the Turkish authorities and the Gülen network began in late 2013. During a visit to Tirana in May 2015, President Erdoğan urged Albanian President Bujar Nishani

and Prime Minister Edi Rama to designate the Gülen Movement as a terrorist organization. Pro-government Turkish media frequently portrayed Albanian Grand Mufti Skender Bruçaj as a Gülen supporter (Mejdini, 2016). The close relationship between the movement and the Albanian Muslim community is reflected in their joint operation of one university, four colleges, and five madrasas. Bruçaj also criticized the abduction of Turkish citizens from neighboring Kosovo (Muhasilovic, 2018, p. 78). In 2019, after Bruçaj's term ended, another alleged Gülen sympathizer was elected head of the Islamic Community despite Ankara's campaign against him. Türkiye even threatened to suspend several ongoing projects, including the construction of the Namazgah Mosque, the largest mosque in Albania. Turkish officials and media condemned the election result and accused Albania of protecting Gülenists (Latal & Büyük, 2020, p. 53).

In Bulgaria, throughout the 1990s and 2000s, a fierce struggle for the position of Grand Mufti unfolded between Nedim Gendjev, the last Grand Mufti of the communist era, and several rival candidates. The outcomes of successive electoral conferences of the Muslim denomination were repeatedly challenged in court, primarily by Gendjev, who lacks broad support, on the grounds of procedural irregularities and disputes over the legitimacy of delegates. After Mustafa Hadji was elected Grand Mufti in 2009, Gendjev repeatedly accused him of being "sent by Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who wants to exert his influence over Bulgarian Muslims" (Drumeva, 2011). During the next conference of the Muslim denomination five years later, Gendjev claimed that, through 95 Diyanet employees in Bulgaria, Türkiye and Lyutfi Mestan (see below) were effectively running the Grand Mufti's Office (Trud, 2016; bTV, 2016). Former Prime Minister Ivan Kostov also warned of the risk that Islam in Bulgaria could fall under the influence of "Turkish political Islam" in the context of what he described as "the Islamization of Erdoğan's rule" (BNT, 2016).

In 2013, both the Turkish ambassador to Serbia and then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu were personally involved in efforts to resolve the dispute between the two rival Islamic communities in Serbia, led by Adem Zilkić and Muamer Zukorlić. Their mediation efforts, however, were unsuccessful. Zukorlić openly accused Türkiye of financing his rivals and attempting to establish a third Muslim community in Serbia loyal to Ankara (Muhasilovic, 2020, pp. 125–212). Following this episode, Türkiye prioritized its relationship with the Serbian government as part of its broader cooperation with Prime Minister (later President) Aleksandar Vučić, and the two sides reached a tacit understanding to avoid similar interventions in the future (Pačariz, 2020, pp. 87–90).

A 2012 protocol signed between the Islamic Community of Montenegro and the Montenegrin government explicitly refers to the "historical ties" between the Islamic Community and the Islamic community in the Republic of Türkiye (Article 5). It further stipulates that, in the event of disputes within the Islamic Community, the Diyanet would act as mediator and submit a draft decision to the Montenegrin authorities (Article 23; Ugovor sa Islamskom zajednicom, 2012). Montenegro's Grand Mufti, Rifat Fejzić, studied in Türkiye on a Turkish government scholarship and speaks fluent Turkish. He maintains particularly close relations with Türkiye's political and religious leadership and regularly participates in Diyanet events (Muhasilovic, 2018, p. 78).

The examples discussed above demonstrate mixed results. In Albania and Serbia, Ankara failed to achieve its preferred outcomes regarding the appointment of Grand Muftis. In Bulgaria, by contrast, Türkiye exercises considerable influence through religious education, financial support for the Grand Mufti's Office, and the presence of Diyanet personnel. Combined with the fact that Turkish preferences largely coincide with those of the majority of Bulgarian Muslims, this has produced a situation in which the Grand Mufti's Office generally acts in concert with Türkiye. In Montenegro, the Diyanet is formally recognized as a mediator in disputes within the Islamic Community, giving Türkiye an officially acknowledged role in religious affairs within a sovereign state. More broadly, through embassies, consulates, religious attachés, and nongovernmental organizations, Turkish policy has encouraged Muslim institutions across the Balkans to reproduce Turkish official discourse and practices on issues unrelated to their own countries. Examples include commemorations of Turkish soldiers killed in Syria and observance of July 15, Democracy and National Unity Day.

The pattern is similar in the case of TİKA. The agency has no offices in Bulgaria, Greece—which falls outside the scope of this analysis—or Slovenia, where Turkish influence remains largely symbolic. By contrast, its offices in Belgrade, Podgorica, Pristina, Sarajevo, Skopje, and Tirana carry out much more extensive activities than those in Bucharest and Zagreb. Because of its strong emphasis on restoring Ottoman and Islamic monuments and preserving Ottoman intangible cultural heritage, many Balkan scholars interpret TİKA's activities through the lens of Neo-Ottomanism. Others reject this interpretation and instead regard TİKA primarily as a vehicle for expanding Turkish soft power through development assistance (for an overview of this debate, see Todorović, 2021). Owing to Serbian concerns about the spread of undesirable influence through TİKA—similar to earlier concerns regarding the Serbian Muslim community—Ankara and Belgrade reportedly reached an informal understanding on the agency's activities. At the domestic level, Serbia benefits from Turkish assistance by effectively delegating certain state responsibilities to a foreign donor, particularly in ethnically sensitive regions where Belgrade often lacks both financial resources and political willingness to invest (Pačariz, 2020, p. 95).

In some instances, Muslims and ethnic Turks living in the Balkans have also been mobilized in support of the AKP and, later, President Erdoğan.

Beyond cultivating personal relationships with Balkan leaders, Ankara has established ties with local political parties, including the Party of Democratic Action (SDA) in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Bosniak Party (BP) in Montenegro, while also supporting or encouraging parties widely perceived as pro-Turkish, such as NPSD and DOST in Bulgaria and BESA in North Macedonia. The degree of Turkish support has varied from case to case.

Kasim Dal founded the People's Party "Freedom and Dignity" (NPSD) in Bulgaria. It is noteworthy that during Prime Minister Erdoğan's visit to Bulgaria in October 2010, he met not with Ahmed Dogan, the leader of the parliamentary Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), but with his deputy, Kasim Dal (Vesti, 2013). At the NPSD's founding congress on December 1, 2012, Erdoğan's

congratulatory message was read by AKP Secretary-General Haluk İpek (Vasileva, 2012). Dal was also the only Bulgarian politician invited to the memorial ceremony following the death of Erdoğan's mother, Tenzile. Shortly afterward, in December 2011, Dal and his co-chair Korman Ismailov were received by the President of Türkiye, the Prime Minister, the Speaker of the Grand National Assembly, and the Foreign Minister (Novinibg, 2011). Such meetings are exceptional even for senior foreign officials, whereas neither Dal nor Ismailov held any official position at the time. Dal also participated in the pro-Erdoğan rally held in Istanbul's Taksim Square on June 17, 2013 (Deniz, 2013). Nevertheless, in the parliamentary elections of May 2013, the NPSD coalition received only 1.62 percent of the vote, well below the 4 percent electoral threshold. Meanwhile, Ahmed Dogan stepped down as leader of the MRF in January 2013, and Lyutvi Mestan gradually improved relations with Ankara. This became evident through his meetings with Erdoğan before the 2014 Bulgarian elections and again in September 2015.

The deterioration of Russian-Turkish relations following the downing of a Russian fighter jet on November 24, 2015, also reverberated in Bulgaria. On December 22, Ahmed Dogan accused Mestan of transforming the MRF into a party serving Turkish interests after Mestan publicly endorsed Ankara in the Bulgarian Parliament. Two days later, Mestan sought refuge with his wife at the Turkish Embassy in Sofia for approximately 24 hours (Duma, 2015). He later established new party, Democrats for Responsibility, Freedom, and Tolerance (DOST). During the 2017 election campaign, Turkish Ambassador Süleyman Gökçe appeared in one of DOST's campaign videos, while Turkish Labor Minister Mehmet Müezzinoğlu urged dual citizens living in Türkiye to vote for Mestan's party (Banker, 2017). Former Bulgarian Agriculture Minister Mehmed Dikme also accused DOST and Turkish representatives of exerting pressure on voters in the Kardzhali region (Gospodinova & Stoilova, 2017). Despite Ankara's support, however, DOST failed to establish itself as a lasting force in Bulgarian politics.

The situation of the Bosniak Party (BP) in Montenegro differs from the Bulgarian cases. Although there is no concrete evidence that its political agenda is determined in Ankara, the close relationship between the party and Türkiye is beyond dispute. Its leaders, Rafet Husović (2006–2021) and Ervin Ibrahimović (since 2021), have openly emphasized these ties (Damjanović, 2022, p. 110). A similar pattern can be observed in the case of BESA, which since 2024 has been part of the Albanian coalition VLEN in North Macedonia.

The limited electoral success of some of these parties says more about domestic political circumstances than about Türkiye's willingness to support them. As Ahmed Erdi Öztürk (2021) argues, such parties have often produced the opposite of the intended effect by deepening polarization within Muslim communities and society more broadly.

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Bulgaria therefore represent particularly illustrative examples in which Turkish soft power has not always remained genuinely "soft" (Alpan & Öztürk, 2022, pp. 57–58). As Demirtaş (2013, pp. 175–179) argues, Turkish soft power extends well beyond conventional interstate relations. Bulut (2006, p. 309) similarly observes that

"trans-state ties have increased in significance; the state has attempted to harness or infiltrate the trans-state to further state interests." In this sense, Turkish influence over Muslim communities in the Balkans may also function as a form of political leverage over local elites.

When it comes to media influence, Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the clearest case. Several factors have contributed to Türkiye's success there. These include the early establishment of Turkish state-owned financial institutions, particularly Ziraat Bank; the relatively underdeveloped financial sector; the presence of Turkish state media organizations such as Anadolu Agency, the Communications Directorate, and TRT; the activities of Cengiz Holding; and the close relationship between the SDA and President Erdoğan. Together, these factors help explain the prominent position of the media outlets *Faktor* and *Stav*.

At the same time, both outlets have faced criticism in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Türkiye. Critics argue that their owner, Cengiz Holding, has benefited disproportionately from government procurement and public-private partnership projects in Türkiye (Karabağ, 2020).

The Bosnian case therefore illustrates a nexus between a large business conglomerate and the Turkish authorities. This relationship may facilitate access to infrastructure projects abroad in countries maintaining particularly close ties with Ankara. The same conglomerate also owns media outlets closely associated with promoting the policies of the SDA in Bosnia and Herzegovina—whose members reportedly refer to them as "our media"—as well as those of the AKP and Türkiye more broadly (Janusz, 2015).

Other major sponsors of *Faktor* and *Stav* include Turkish Airlines and Ziraat Bank (Huskić, 2020, p. 85; Janusz, 2015). In August 2021, Germany's Federal Financial Supervisory Authority (BaFin) announced that it would investigate Ziraat Bank's Frankfurt subsidiary over suspected irregularities in lending and accounting practices, although the bank denied allegations that sanctions had been imposed. Against this backdrop, opposition MP Ahmet Şık submitted a parliamentary question to Vice President Fuat Oktay alleging cronyism within the bank's senior management and requesting information about possible irregularities involving Ziraat Bank's subsidiary in Bosnia and Herzegovina, whose financial condition, he argued, had deteriorated because of nonperforming loans (İleri Haber, 2021; DW Türkçe, 2021).

Consequently, these two media outlets, widely perceived as strongly supportive of both the SDA and the AKP (Mujadjevic, 2020, p. 100), have become actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina's domestic political struggles. Should the balance of power shift away from the SDA, this could also reduce Türkiye's ability to exercise soft power through the media.

Taken together, the examples discussed above provide empirical support for the article's principal conceptual contribution: the notion of "soft power *sui generis*," referring to the paradoxical use of soft power instruments to project influence in ways that move beyond attraction while stopping short of coercive hard power.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the article confirms earlier findings in the academic literature that Ankara's policy towards the Balkans is based primarily on the use of "soft power." Overall, the findings are consistent with Nye's understanding that what makes soft power "soft" is not the instruments themselves, but rather the behaviour.

The analysis shows that Türkiye is not modifying every soft power instrument at its disposal. Rather, its willingness to do so, as well as its ability to exert influence, varies across countries and policy domains. These differences stem from the intensity of bilateral relations, the socio-political context, and the state capacity of the target countries. At the same time, Türkiye does not employ classical instruments of coercion, such as sanctions or military threats, in its policy towards the Balkans.

The empirical evidence demonstrates that some soft power instruments may, under certain circumstances, perform functions that go beyond attraction and persuasion. The examples discussed in this article reveal attempts to influence developments in the religious sphere, the media environment, economic and financial relations, and ties with local political actors. The results, however, are mixed. In some cases, Ankara has succeeded in institutionalizing its influence, whereas in others it has encountered resistance or achieved only limited results. Likewise, support for political parties perceived as close to Türkiye has produced contradictory outcomes and has often contributed to polarization within local Muslim communities rather than strengthening Türkiye's position.

When it comes to Türkiye's media presence in the Balkans, the example of Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates how economic actors, media ownership, and political connections may reinforce one another and create additional channels of influence. Similar patterns can also be observed in the fields of religious affairs, development assistance, and economic cooperation.

By providing examples from different soft power domains, the article argues that, if Ankara considers it desirable in order to influence certain developments, it may employ traditional soft power instruments in a modified way that goes beyond their conventional function without resorting to coercive hard power. This is the rationale behind the proposed concept of "soft power *sui generis*." The concept refers to the use of traditional soft power resources in ways that blur the distinction between attraction and pressure while remaining below the threshold of hard power. It therefore seeks to contribute to the broader debate on the changing boundaries between soft and hard power and to provide a more accurate conceptual framework for understanding Türkiye's policy towards the Balkans.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

Power-Sharing and Asymmetrical Autonomy: The Case of Kosovo's ASMM Deadlock in Light of the South Tyrol Autonomy Model

Güç Paylaşımı ve Asimetrik Özerklik: Güney Tirol Özerklik Modeli Işığında Kosova'daki SÇBB Çıkmazı

Muharem SHTAVICA*

Abstract

This paper analyzes the tenacious impasse over the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM) in Kosovo, exploring the constitutional, legal, and political hurdles that hinder its implementation. Applying the theories of consociationalism and asymmetrical autonomy, the study analyzes how power-sharing and unequal self-rule arrangements designed to protect minority rights can coexist with the principles of national sovereignty and unity. In this framework, the Italian South Tyrol autonomy model serves as a comparative case to evaluate its potential applicability to Kosovo. This study employs a qualitative, comparative methodology that integrates constitutional analysis with detailed case studies. The article argues that the ASMM remains deadlocked because Belgrade seeks an executive autonomy mechanism for Kosovo Serbs, whereas Pristina regards it as incompatible with Kosovo's constitutional framework and sovereignty. Beyond institutional comparison, the study also situates the ASMM within the broader international and constitutional context by examining the positions of Kosovo, Serbia, the European Union, and other international actors throughout the normalization process. Although the South Tyrolean approach is not directly exportable, it offers significant lessons on how differentiated self-governance frameworks backed by political agreement, legal certainty, and international support can successfully resolve conflicts.

Keywords: Kosovo, Serbia, Association of Serbian Majority Municipalities (ASMM), South Tyrol Model, Brussels Agreement.

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Öz

Bu makale, Kosova'daki Sırp Çoğunluklu Belediyeler Birliği (SÇBB) konusundaki kalıcı çıkmazı analiz etmekte ve uygulanmasını engelleyen anayasal, hukuki ve siyasi engelleri incelemektedir. Oydaşmacılık ve asimetrik özerklik teorilerini temel alan bu çalışma, azınlık haklarını koruyan güç paylaşımı ve asimetrik özerklik düzenlemelerinin ulusal egemenlik ve birlik ilkeleriyle nasıl bir arada var olabileceğini analiz etmektedir. Bu çerçevede, İtalya'daki Güney Tirol özerklik modeli, Kosova'da uygulanabilirliğini değerlendirmek amacıyla karşılaştırmalı bir örnek olarak ele alınmaktadır. Çalışma, anayasal analizi ayrıntılı vaka incelemeleriyle bütünleştiren nitel ve karşılaştırmalı bir metodoloji kullanmaktadır. Bulgular, SÇBB'nin uygulanmasının, Belgrad'ın Kosovalı Sırplar için yürütme yetkileriyle donatılmış bir özerklik mekanizmasını savunmasına karşın, Priştine'nin bu modeli Kosova'nın anayasal düzeni ve egemenliğiyle bağdaşmaz olarak değerlendirmesi nedeniyle çıkmaza girdiğini göstermektedir. Kurumsal karşılaştırmanın ötesine geçen çalışma, Kosova, Sırbistan, Avrupa Birliği ve diğer uluslararası aktörlerin normalleşme süreci boyunca benimsedikleri tutumları inceleyerek SÇBB'yi daha geniş bir uluslararası ve anayasal bağlam içine yerleştirmektedir. Güney Tirol yaklaşımı doğrudan aktarılabilir bir model olmasa da, siyasi uzlaşı, hukuki kesinlik ve uluslararası destekle güçlendirilen farklılaştırılmış özyönetim düzenlemelerinin etnik çatışmaların çözümüne nasıl katkı sağlayabileceğine ilişkin önemli çıkarımlar sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Kosova, Sırbistan, Sırp Çoğunluklu Belediyeler Birliği (SÇBB), Güney Tirol Modeli, Brüksel Anlaşması

1. Introduction

Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, the Constitution, largely based on the Ahtisaari Plan, established a multi-ethnic constitutional order and an advanced system of local self-government (Rohan, 2018). Nevertheless, the Serb-majority municipalities in northern Kosovo continued to operate under Belgrade-supported parallel structures (Smolar, 2013). The 2011 barricade crisis and the subsequent EU-facilitated Brussels Dialogue culminated in the 2013 Brussels Agreement, which envisaged the establishment of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM) as a mechanism to integrate these municipalities into Kosovo's constitutional framework while providing a degree of local self-management (Kryeministri, 2013). Since then, the implementation of the ASMM has remained the principal unresolved issue in the normalization process between Kosovo and Serbia (CGER, 2012).

The EU and the US strongly insisted on implementing the 2013 Brussels Agreement, considering it essential for promoting long-term stability in the Western Balkans, limiting Russian influence, and advancing the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of both Kosovo and Serbia. Accordingly, the establishment of the ASMM was envisaged as a central mechanism for integrating Kosovo Serbs into Kosovo's legal and institutional framework, dismantling Belgrade-backed parallel structures, strengthening the rule of law in northern Kosovo and the Serb-majority municipalities, and ultimately facilitating the normalization of relations between the two parties (Morina, 2022; Prelec & Rashiti, 2015). According to the agreement, the ASMM would comprise ten Serb-majority municipalities (Baliu, 2022).

The creation of the ASMM is rooted in frameworks such as the European Charter of Local Self-Government and the Ahtisaari Plan, which emphasize local autonomy while preserving the

sovereignty and territorial integrity of states (Council of Europe, 1985; UN Security Council, 2007). The ASMM was designed to have its own bodies, including a presidency, assembly, council, and administrative structures, while operating under Kosovo's legal framework (The Dialogue, 2013). The Association is intended to have a comprehensive overview of education, economic development, health care, and urban and rural planning (Mushkolaj, 2023). The deadlock surrounding the ASMM has significant implications for Kosovo's internal governance and its relations with Serbia, as the Association is both an international obligation and a deeply contested domestic issue (Bashoviq & Haziri, 2023, pp. 1–12). In this context, comparative models of autonomy and minority governance offer potential pathways for resolving the ASMM impasse while maintaining Kosovo's constitutional framework and territorial integrity. One such model is the South Tyrol autonomy arrangement in Italy, which illustrates how territorial autonomy and power-sharing mechanisms can address inter-ethnic tensions while preserving state sovereignty (Carlà, 2016). Accordingly, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What are the constitutional and institutional challenges compared to the South Tyrol Model that are incompatible with the proposed ASMM in Kosovo?
- To what extent can the South Tyrol autonomy model provide insights into resolving the ASMM deadlock in Kosovo?

This study employs a qualitative, comparative research design grounded in the theoretical frameworks of power-sharing and asymmetrical autonomy. It combines constitutional analysis with case study methodology to examine the legal and political constraints surrounding the implementation of the ASMM in Kosovo. The article is organized into five sections. Following the introduction, it presents the literature review, examines Kosovo's constitutional framework, analyzes the South Tyrol autonomy model, compares the two cases, and concludes by presenting the main findings.

2. Power-Sharing and Asymmetrical Autonomy in Theory

2.1. Power-Sharing Theory (Consociationalism)

In societies divided along deep ethnic, linguistic, and religious cleavages, consolidating long-term democracy is quite difficult. Some of the most prominent political scientists have argued that a stable democracy is possible only in comparatively homogenous societies (Horowitz, 2014, p. 5). In such cases, societies are divided into majority groups and minority communities. Societies with a majority of votes tend to dominate minority groups, which also undermines genuine democracy. The two most distinct approaches to power-sharing in deeply divided societies are consociationalism and centripetalism (Horowitz, 2014, p. 5).

According to Lijphart, "the successful establishment of democratic government in divided societies requires two key elements: power-sharing and group autonomy (Lijphart, 2004, p. 97). In addition, Lijphart defines power-sharing and group autonomy as follows:

> "Power sharing denotes the participation of representatives of all significant communal groups in political decision-making, especially at the executive level; group autonomy means these groups have the authority to run their own internal affairs, especially in education and culture. These two characteristics are the primary attributes of the kind of democratic system often referred to as a power-sharing democracy, or, to use a technical political-science term, 'consociational' democracy" (Lijphart, 2004, p. 97).

McCulloch claims that "power-sharing relies on some form of joint-political decision making between the major ethno-political groups in divided societies. This collection considers different models of power-sharing, including consociationalism and centripetalism, and their implications for the pursuit of political stability, for effective governance, and for justice and fairness." (McCulloch, 2017, p. 1). According to Brendan O'Leary, "Power sharing is intended to hold the existing state together with the active participation and consent of its minorities, unlike strategies of genocide, expulsion, partition, and control." (O'Leary, 2013, p. 14). Power-sharing is the most pragmatic technique for resolving armed conflicts, where, through the division of powers in terms of politics, economy, military, and territories, a final peace agreement is reached, and by implementing decision-making rights to prevent civil war from recurring, as well as guaranteeing the accommodation of all representative groups (Hartzell & Hoddie, 2007, p. 13).

About consociational democracy as one of the most prominent theories of power-sharing alongside centripetalism, Lijphart stipulates that it can be defined in terms of four characteristics:

> "The first (1) and most important element is government by a grand coalition of the political leaders of all significant elements of the plural society. The other three basic elements of consociational democracy are (2) the mutual veto or 'concurrent majority' rule, which serves as an additional protection of vital minority interests, (3) proportionality as the principal standard of political representation, civil service appointments, and allocation of public funds, and (4) a high degree of autonomy for each segment to run its own internal affairs." (Lijphart, 1977, p. 25).

Power-sharing arrangements were first introduced in Kosovo through the 2001 UNMIK Interim Constitutional Framework and were later incorporated into the 2008 Constitution of Kosovo, based on the Ahtisaari Plan (McGarry, 2019). These provisions guarantee minority participation through mechanisms such as reserved parliamentary and governmental seats. However, their effectiveness has remained limited, as many Kosovo Serb political representatives have continued to challenge Kosovo's state institutions and their legitimacy (Bieber & Keil, 2009, p. 344). The implementation of power-sharing in Kosovo has been hindered by the persistence of Serbian parallel institutions and Belgrade's continued influence over the Kosovo Serb community. Rather

than fostering interethnic cooperation, these structures have reinforced political divisions, while parallel systems in education and health care have remained integrated with Serbia instead of Kosovo, limiting the consolidation of Kosovo's state institutions (Baliqi, 2018, p. 56). It was precisely for this reason that the Brussels Agreement, particularly the provisions establishing the ASMM, sought to dismantle Serbian parallel structures by facilitating their integration into Kosovo's legitimate institutional framework while granting Serb-majority municipalities a degree of self-management in local affairs (López Domènech, 2023).

Nevertheless, the principal point of contention remains the failure to implement the ASMM, as Serbia continues to advocate for broader executive and legislative competencies that conflict with key principles of Kosovo's constitutional framework. Accordingly, if the ASMM is ultimately granted executive and legislative powers in its final institutional design, it would effectively constitute a form of asymmetric autonomy comparable to that of South Tyrol, as discussed in the following section.

2.1. Asymmetrical Autonomy and Conflict Resolution

Territorial autonomy is a 'form of self-governance in which a specific region within a state possesses unique legislative or executive competences, often designed for geographically distinct areas or national minorities." (Lapidoth, 1997; Suksi, 2011; Hannum, 1996). According to Weller, these basic elements must be present to fulfill the criteria for territorial autonomy: (1) demographic distinctiveness; (2) devolution, not decentralization; (3) legal entrenchment; (4) legal supremacy; (5) statute-making powers; (6) significant competences; (7) parallel action; (8) limited external relations powers; (9) institutions; and (10) integrative mechanisms (Weller, 2010, pp. 4–5).

Two important concepts, symmetry and asymmetry, to be discussed in the context of federalism were first used by the political scientist Charles Tarlton in the *Journal of Politics* (Tarlton, 1965). Tarlton uses the notion of symmetry "to the extent to which component states share in the conditions and thereby the concerns more or less common to the federal system as a whole. The concept of asymmetry expresses the extent to which component states do not share in these common features" (Tarlton, 1965, p. 861). McGarry emphasizes that "An asymmetrical federation is now usually understood as a state in which all parts have constitutionally guaranteed autonomy, but in which at least one part enjoys a different, usually enhanced level of autonomy than the rest." (McGarry, 2007, p. 105). In federal systems of government, this can be described as an autonomous republic enjoying more rights than other republics (e.g., Chechnya and Tatarstan in Russia, or Quebec in Canada). In unitary systems of government, such as China, Hong Kong has been granted greater autonomy than other provinces for reasons of reabsorption and economic benefits (McGarry, 2007, p. 105). Kosovo also has a unitary system in which a self-governing association may enjoy more rights than other regions (Hamza, 2022, p. 249). In this case, the question concerns the formation of the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities, which will be discussed further. Weller states that asymmetry can be classified into two categories: de facto

and de jure asymmetry. De facto approaches assess the 'felt' degree of competence and power, taking into account factors such as the population size and the economic and fiscal resources of the respective entities. The de jure approach offers greater clarity. It is embodied in constitutional and legislative legal instruments (Weller, 2010, p. 8). To be clear, the ASMM is a de facto part of the asymmetrical self-government system, but it has not yet been implemented de jure.

Giving his consent to the normative and empirical significance of asymmetry, McGarry articulates the following about the four scholars:

> "Adeney writes that asymmetrical federalism is "an important element in managing conflict in diverse states". Conversi notes that asymmetric arrangements are "durable and practical" as well as "flexible and effective" in managing and preventing ethnic conflict. A specialist on Spain, he argues that asymmetry was "necessary" for maintaining state unity there. Hechter concurs that different nations are likely to seek different degrees of self-government and that asymmetrical governance represents an "entirely sensible" response. He believes, as I do, that giving nations appropriate levels of self-government can help forestall demands for secession rather than always exacerbating them, as critics of pluralist federalism allege. Rezvani points out that asymmetrical governance "has a strong empirical record of helping to mitigate many seemingly intractable conflicts." (McGarry, 2007, p. 133).

Indeed, asymmetric autonomy has been criticized for encouraging centrifugal tendencies by granting special powers to a territorial unit. Moreover, devolving extensive competencies from the central government may, under certain conditions, reinforce secessionist aspirations (McGarry, 2007, p. 112). Still, in this paper, since South Tyrol has been taken as the basis of analysis, it may be argued that South Tyrol's secessionist policies contradict the central constitution in Rome. The Italian Constitution treats the republic as "one and indivisible", making unilateral secession illegal without constitutional reform (Pallaver, 2022; Scantamburlo & Pallaver, 2015). Therefore, any territorial violation or secession from Kosovo's territory should be treated as illegal and unconstitutional.

In short, asymmetry is a response in countries with multi-ethnic diversity. It is a response to minorities demanding more rights, or being granted them as a privilege by the state itself, to eliminate the risk of political secession and to integrate more closely with the central government. Many examples of asymmetry exist, the most prominent being Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales within Great Britain. In Indonesia, there is also the case of Aceh, which was granted extended autonomy (McGarry, 2007, pp. 105–106). In this study, however, South Tyrol in Italy is used for analysis.

Kosovo, under the Ahtisaari package and its constitutional order, is a unitary state, while municipalities enjoy a symmetrical form of decentralized local government. Nevertheless, the creation of asymmetrical autonomy through the Association is one of the most intricate

challenges for the central government of Kosovo, the bilateral negotiating party, Serbia, and international partners. The Association will be responsible for matters related to the sectors of education, health, and security, and perhaps even the definition of the legislative and executive branches (Hamza, 2022, p. 253). "If this autonomy is constitutionally guaranteed, and cannot be rescinded unilaterally by the state's central authorities, a 'federation' exists. If the center is capable of rescinding the autonomy, there exists an asymmetrically decentralized unitary state" (McGarry, 2007, p. 105).

3. The ASMM in the Context of Kosovo's Constitutional Order and Status of Kosovo in the Constitution of Serbia

In October 2015, amid domestic opposition and legal ambiguity, President Atifete Jahjaga submitted the 2015 Agreement on the ASMM to the Constitutional Court of Kosovo for review (EEAS, 2015). The Court was required to assess whether the General Principles of the Association were consistent with the "constitutional spirit" of Kosovo, particularly regarding the equality of all citizens and the state's multi-ethnic character (Fehmiu, 2015). On December 23, 2015, the Constitutional Court issued a landmark decision that, while the creation of the ASMM as part of an international obligation was permissible in principle, several provisions of the Agreement were incompatible with Kosovo's Constitution (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015). Specifically, the Court found that the ASMM violated:

- Article 3 [Equality Before the Law],
- Chapter II [Fundamental Rights and Freedoms], and
- Chapter III [Rights of Communities and Their Members] of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015).

Furthermore, the Constitutional Court, pursuant to Article 84(9) of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo, in conjunction with Article 112.1 of the Constitution, Article 20 of the Law, and Rule 56(a) of the Rules of Procedure, at its session held on December 21, 2015, by majority, decided:

> "III. TO HOLD that the principles as elaborated in the "Association/Community of Serb majority municipalities in Kosovo – general principles/main elements" are not entirely in compliance with the spirit of the Constitution, Article 3 [Equality Before the Law], paragraph 1, Chapter II [Fundamental Rights and Freedoms] and Chapter III [Rights of Communities and Their Members] of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo" (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015, p. 39).

The Court emphasized that the mono-ethnic nature of the ASMM contradicts Kosovo's constitutional identity as a multi-ethnic state (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015, p. 39). Article 3 of the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo declares that:

"The Republic of Kosovo is a multi-ethnic society consisting of Albanian and other Communities, governed democratically with full respect for the rule of law through its legislative, executive, and judicial institutions…" (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008).

Therefore, establishing an association based exclusively on ethnicity risks violating the constitutional principle of equality. Furthermore, the Court raised concerns over the Agreement's ambiguous terminology, particularly the phrase *"exercise full overview"* in areas such as education, health care, and economic development, questioning whether it implied executive authority for the ASMM and, consequently, undermined the constitutional status of municipalities as the fundamental units of local self-government under Articles 12, 123, and 124 (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015, pp. 143–148).

The judgment also stressed the importance of legal clarity and accessibility. Referencing European Court of Human Rights jurisprudence, the Court stated that legal provisions must be "sufficiently accessible, precise, and foreseeable in their consequences" (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015, p. 147). Accordingly, any ambiguity in the ASMM's objectives or structure must be resolved in conformity with constitutional standards.

From a structural standpoint, the Court ruled that the planned governing bodies of the ASMM, including an Assembly, a President, a Vice President, a Council, a Board, and an Administration, must not replicate or replace existing municipal authorities. Instead, they must operate strictly within Kosovo's constitutional and legal order (Constitutional Court of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015, pp. 151–153).

The ruling further held that the Statute of the ASMM, which would outline its legal identity, must not confer powers that conflict with national legislation. Article 4.1 of the European Charter of Local Self-Government (ECHLSG) also affirms that "The basic powers and responsibilities of local authorities shall be prescribed by the constitution or by statute" (Council of Europe, 1985, Art. 4.1).

In essence, the Court's interpretation suggests that any model of the ASMM should be reframed to comply with the core values of the Republic of Kosovo: equality, integration, and decentralization of governance, rather than establishing an autonomous, ethnicity-defined parallel structure. The ruling leaves room for implementing the ASMM, but only within the constitutional framework and with carefully defined, limited competencies.

When discussing the constitutional order, another, even more fundamental challenge is that, from the very outset, the preamble to the Constitution of Serbia (n.d.) explicitly states that "... the Province of Kosovo and Metohija is an integral part of the territory of Serbia." While Kosovo

ratified the Brussels deal in its parliament as an international agreement, Serbia did not amend its Constitution or pass any constitutional laws to accommodate it, thereby limiting its legal integration to internal legislative adjustments (Stanicek, 2025).

4. Comparative Analysis of the South Tyrol Autonomy Model

4.1. Brief Historical Background of South Tyrol

Before 1918, South Tyrol was a constituent part of the Austro-Hungarian County of Tyrol. Under the Treaty of London of 1915, the region was promised to Italy as an incentive for Italy to join the Allied Powers during World War I. Consequently, in 1919–1920, Italy annexed South Tyrol, and it has remained under Italian sovereignty ever since (Golowitsch, n.d.; Alcock, 2001).

Between 1922 and 1939, under the Fascist regime, South Tyrol underwent a period of aggressive "Italianization." During this time, all German-language schools were closed, and public-sector employment was reserved exclusively for members of the Italian community (Alber & Zwilling, 2022, p. 6).

In 1939, an agreement known as the "Option" was concluded between Benito Mussolini and Adolf Hitler. Under this arrangement, the German-speaking population of South Tyrol was forced to make a difficult choice: either immigrate to Austria (then under Nazi German control) to preserve their cultural identity or remain in South Tyrol while relinquishing their German identity in favor of full assimilation into Italian society. A significant portion of the population chose to immigrate to Austria to safeguard their linguistic and cultural heritage (Alber & Zwilling, 2022, p. 6).

Following the end of World War II, the shift in Italy's position from being part of the Axis Powers to aligning with the Allied Powers, and the resulting armistice agreement, prompted Nazi Germany to occupy South Tyrol. This development led to a significant number of German-speaking individuals who had previously immigrated to Austria returning to their ancestral homeland in South Tyrol (Golowitsch, n.d.; Lantschner, 2008, pp. 3–15).

In the interwar period, the German community of South Tyrol consistently sought either the exercise of the right to self-determination or reunification with its historical homeland, Austria. Nevertheless, these goals were staunchly opposed by the Italian authorities and lacked international support due to fears that such actions would spark a new conflict between the Austrian and Italian Republics. Accordingly, a peaceful resolution through diplomatic status arrangements became the preferred approach to managing the dispute (Alber & Zwilling, 2022, p. 3).

Following World War II, South Tyrol remained an inseparable part of Italy. The bilateral Gruber–De Gasperi Treaty was signed on September 5, 1946, in Paris, ensuring autonomy for the

German-speaking population of Alto Adige. Pursuant to this bilateral agreement, South Tyrol and Trentino received cultural autonomy, and German was officially designated as a second language, sharing equal status with Italian (Pföstl, 2004, p. 78; Alcock, 2001).

Nonetheless, one significant issue remained unresolved. Although South Tyrol had a German-majority population, it was merged with the predominantly Italian-speaking region of Trentino to form the joint autonomous region of Trentino–South Tyrol. Given that the Italian population held the demographic majority within this combined region, German-speaking South Tyroleans expressed growing dissatisfaction with what they perceived as Italian favoritism. As a result, criticism of the Gruber–De Gasperi Agreement intensified. The Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP), the primary political representative of the German-speaking population, began to demand the administrative separation of South Tyrol from Trentino and the establishment of full autonomy for South Tyrol as an independent province (Carlà, 2016, p. 8).

The South Tyrol issue did not end there. Violent tensions escalated in the form of terrorist attacks by radical groups from Trentino and increased restrictions on the rights of German speakers. As the conflict intensified, it gained international attention. In 1960, Austria formally brought the South Tyrol question to the UN. By 1961, several preliminary negotiations had begun but yielded no substantive results (Haller, 2006, pp. 133–154).

It was not until 1969, after years of political pressure, that a breakthrough was achieved with a set of measures known as the "Package." These included 137 new provisions granting broad rights to the German-speaking population. This culminated in the adoption of the Second Statute of Autonomy in 1972, which provided South Tyrol with significant legislative and executive powers, thereby transforming Italy's centralized system into a decentralized one with consociational features (Alber & Zwilling, 2022; Lantschner, 2008, pp. 12–13; Carlà, 2016, p. 9).

With the implementation of "the Package" in 1972, provincial powers have been continuously expanded through specific regulations. The Italian state's authority in South Tyrol is now limited strictly to defense, law enforcement, the judiciary, and national taxation (Pföstl, 2004, p. 87). The region's economic boom is largely attributed to its Second Statute of Autonomy, which has permitted South Tyrol to retain 90% of its tax revenue since 1972. By transferring only 10% to the central state, the province has developed a largely independent, self-driven economy (Rosenberger, 2012).

Overall, South Tyrol's autonomy today is protected by three essential legal pillars: the Constitution of the Republic of Italy; the 1946 Gruber–De Gasperi Agreement, which laid the foundation for cultural, linguistic, and economic rights; and the Second Statute of Autonomy of 1972, which institutionalized the principles of internal self-governance and consociationalism (BolzanoProvince, 2024).

4.2. Differences Between South Tyrol and the ASMM

The principal distinction between South Tyrol and the ASMM lies in their legal status. South Tyrol enjoys constitutionally entrenched autonomy with extensive legislative and executive powers, whereas the ASMM has yet to acquire a clearly defined legal status. Although its establishment was agreed upon in the 2013 Brussels Agreement, its institutional structure and competences remain politically contested (IPESE, 2024).

The 2013 Brussels Agreement relied on constructive ambiguity, deliberately avoiding clarification of Kosovo's status and the Association's legal framework. This reflected the experience of the Ahtisaari negotiations, where the status question had obstructed a mutually acceptable agreement (Bieber, 2015, p. 313). Comparing Kosovo–Serbia relations to the South Tyrol arrangement between Italy and Austria reveals two fundamentally different approaches to minority autonomy and sovereignty. The key distinction is that South Tyrol is built upon agreed sovereign borders and mutual recognition, whereas the ASMM is a point of contention in an unresolved sovereignty dispute (ICG, 2021). The status of South Tyrol is grounded in the 1972 Gruber–De Gasperi Agreement and subsequent international treaties. Austria recognizes Italy's sovereignty over the region, and Italy guarantees extensive legislative, executive, and cultural autonomy to the German-speaking majority in South Tyrol (Alcock, 2001). Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, viewing it as its autonomous province. This creates a frozen conflict in which sovereignty over Serb-majority areas in northern Kosovo remains deeply contested between the government in Pristina and Serbia (ICG, 2024).

South Tyrol's autonomy has relied on an ethnic quota system that ensures proportional representation of the German, Italian, and Ladin linguistic communities in public employment, political institutions, and the allocation of selected provincial resources. The system is based on periodic linguistic censuses that require individuals to declare their linguistic affiliation to benefit from these proportional arrangements (Wolf, 2026). For example, if a public-sector employee from the German-speaking linguistic community leaves their position due to retirement, health reasons, death, or other circumstances, the vacancy is filled by another qualified candidate from the same linguistic community. This mechanism preserves the proportional representation established under South Tyrol's ethnic quota system (Wolf, 2026; Palermo, 2006). While South Tyrol's framework mandates strict ethnic quotas for public-sector employment, political offices, and social funding based on mandatory linguistic declarations, the ASMM is designed primarily as a mechanism for horizontal cooperation among local governments rather than as an overarching, rigid ethnic power-sharing structure (Popović, 2023; Grezda, 2021).

Another important distinction between South Tyrol and the ASMM concerns their territorial configuration. South Tyrol constitutes a single, geographically contiguous, and highly autonomous province in northern Italy (Carlà et al., 2025). In contrast, the ASMM comprises geographically dispersed Serb-majority municipalities and enclaves distributed across Kosovo, lacking the territorial continuity that characterizes the South Tyrol autonomy model (Prelec & Rashiti, 2015).

4.3. Further Political and Legal Challenges in Implementing the ASMM

The establishment of the Association remains the sole outstanding obligation under the 2013 Brussels Agreement that the Kosovo side has not yet implemented. The importance of the ASMM is underscored by the fact that six of the fifteen provisions of the 2013 Brussels Agreement are dedicated to its establishment and operation (Bajrami, 2017).

The 2013 Brussels Agreement was accepted by the Kosovo leadership, led by then-Prime Minister Hashim Thaçi, primarily due to intense Western pressure, the promise of EU integration, and the goal of dismantling Serbia-backed parallel structures in northern Kosovo. The deal was presented domestically as a way to extend Pristina's authority over Serb-majority northern municipalities, integrating Serb police officers and judicial personnel into Kosovo's legal framework (Bajrami, 2017, p. 4).

The principal reason for Kosovo's reluctance to implement the ASMM under the current Prime Minister, Albin Kurti, is the concern that it could evolve into a structure resembling 'Republika Srpska' in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), thereby undermining the functionality of Kosovo's unitary state and potentially obstructing its institutional decision-making processes. The Kosovo government argues that any form of executive authority granted to the ASMM could create a parallel governance structure incompatible with the country's constitutional order (Popović, 2023). Kurti has consistently argued that the ASMM should not possess competencies exceeding those of a non-governmental organization (Bajrami, 2017). Hence, Kurti has maintained that the ASMM should be redesigned to ensure full compliance with the Constitution of Kosovo and should not be exclusively mono-ethnic. This position is grounded in the constitutional principle that Kosovo is a multi-ethnic state in which the rights and interests of all communities are guaranteed within a unified institutional and legal framework (Popović, 2023; Taylor-Braçe & Zimonjic, 2023).

A further ambiguity that requires clarification is that the Albanian authorities consistently refer to it as the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASMM), emphasizing its role as a coordinative mechanism for inter-municipal cooperation without executive powers, in line with Kosovo's constitutional framework. In contrast, Serbia and the Kosovo Serb community prefer the term Community of Serb-Majority Municipalities (CSMM), reflecting their expectation of a more institutionalized form of self-governance with broader executive and legislative competencies (BPRG, 2017; Ernst, 2014, p. 123).

Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić insists on establishing the ASMM in Kosovo primarily to secure a legal-political framework that protects the rights of the ethnic Serb minority, maintains institutional ties with Belgrade, and prevents their assimilation into Kosovo's broader Albanian-majority society (Popović, 2023).

The EU has consistently emphasized that establishing the Association remains a binding obligation for Kosovo under the 2013 and 2015 Brussels Agreements. Although the Constitutional Court

of Kosovo ruled in 2015 that certain provisions were incompatible with the Constitution, the EU continues to regard the implementation of the ASMM as a key benchmark for the normalization process and Kosovo's EU accession. Consequently, the failure to advance its implementation has been repeatedly identified by EU officials as a potential obstacle to Kosovo's progress toward European integration (Vasilev, 2024). Consequently, a comprehensive, legally binding agreement to normalize relations is a strict prerequisite for both Kosovo and Serbia to advance toward EU membership. The EU requires both parties to resolve all outstanding disputes before they can integrate into the bloc (Stanicek, 2025). Finally, the EU facilitator deliberately relied on constructive ambiguity by avoiding clarification of the parties' conflicting interpretations. While this approach facilitated political agreement, it left the EU bearing the burden of ambiguity, contributing to prolonged disputes and the implementation deadlock over the ASMM (Bajrami, 2017, p. 4).

Although the EU has served as the principal facilitator of the Kosovo–Serbia dialogue, its role has remained ambiguous due to the absence of a clear strategic vision and unified position on Kosovo's statehood. By refraining from proposing a concrete framework and instead expecting the parties to resolve their disputes independently, the EU has limited its own leverage. This ambiguity has prolonged the dialogue process, encouraged external involvement by actors such as the United States and Russia, and contributed to the continued deadlock in implementing the ASMM (Muharremi, 2018).

Lastly, should future legal or constitutional reforms grant the ASMM a more clearly defined status and broader competences, the South Tyrol model could serve as a valuable reference for its institutional design, as discussed in the following section.

4.4. Applicable Lessons Extracted from the South Tyrol Autonomy Model

When reviewing the resolution of the South Tyrol dispute, it is essential to consider several fundamental benchmarks:

The South Tyrol model demonstrates that in inter-ethnic conflicts, a viable resolution is attainable when all parties consent to self-governance and renounce secessionist agendas. Through peaceful negotiations and the transparent, proportional fulfillment of the parties' needs, South Tyrol was transformed from a state of 'open conflict' into a model of peace and sustainable coexistence (Pföstl, 2004, pp. 75–96). In other words, according to Windischer, the South Tyrolean people relinquished their right to 'external' self-determination in favor of achieving 'internal' self-determination through the establishment of a comprehensive system of territorial autonomy (Windischer, 2008, p. 25).

From the South Tyrol model, we can conclude that two extremes were consciously avoided to reach a sustainable agreement: (1) the German-speaking population of South Tyrol renounced secessionist claims, and (2) the Italian central government relinquished centralist and

assimilationist policies. It is also important to highlight that the 1972 Statute "Package" facilitated mutual conciliation between Italy and Austria. This compromise entailed the Italian government's commitment to recognize and protect the rights of individuals belonging to the German and Ladin communities, alongside Austria's assurance to refrain from interfering in the internal affairs of the province of South Tyrol (Pföstl, 2004, pp. 79–80). It is essential to underscore that, should the ASMM be implemented, the Kosovo side also holds the legitimate right to ensure that authorities in Belgrade do not interfere in Kosovo's internal political affairs, particularly those concerning the Association, except as permitted by the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. Furthermore, the Kosovo negotiating team should transform the ASMM from a mono-ethnic entity into a multi-ethnic association, akin to South Tyrol's model, which includes German, Italian, and Ladin speakers. This effort involves including other communities (e.g., Bosniaks, Roma, Turks, and Albanians) in certain municipalities, such as Novobërdë and Graçanica, where both the Ahtisaari Package and the Brussels Agreement grant each municipality the right to join the Association.

Another significant feature of the South Tyrol case is the tripartite negotiation method involving representatives from three parties: the central Italian government, the German-speaking minority, and the official third-party mediator, Austria. This arrangement exemplifies a transparent and foundational approach, serving as a model for resolving inter-ethnic conflicts through effective negotiation (Pföstl, 2004, pp. 80–83). Based on this, during the Kosovo–Serbia negotiations, only geopolitical and geostrategic interests were prioritized. At the same time, the meaningful participation of the Serbian minority in Kosovo was notably absent from the negotiation table. In contrast, the cooperative framework in South Tyrol involved three key actors: the minority groups (German-speaking and Ladin communities), the majority group (the Italian central government), and the third-party mediator (Austria). This tripartite cooperation ensured that the autonomy arrangement was fundamentally grounded in safeguarding two core principles: the protection of minority rights and the preservation of territorial integrity, which was under threat of secession (Pföstl, 2004).

The right to territorial autonomy, encompassing legislative and executive powers, primarily in economic, fiscal, social, and cultural domains, has conferred significant self-governance rights upon the inhabitants of South Tyrol. This arrangement has fostered closer relations with the central government and mitigated secessionist aspirations (Parolari & Voltmer, 2008, pp. 77–94). The enactment and revision of the autonomy statute, comprising executive measures, the parity principle via an ethnic quota system, the right to mother-tongue education, and financial autonomy, have together fostered a rejuvenated sense of identity among South Tyrolean minorities (Palermo, 2008, pp. 147–148). Fiscal autonomy is indispensable in the context of South Tyrol, as the province's management and financing predominantly rely on tax revenues, as well as income from tourism and a highly developed agricultural sector. Notably, approximately 90 percent of tax revenues remain allocated for provincial development in South Tyrol, while the remaining 10 percent is transferred to the central government (Lechner & Moroder, 2012). This arrangement also enables the central government to reduce its infrastructure, tourism, and related sector

investment expenditures, thereby alleviating pressure on the state budget. A relevant comparison can also be made with northern Kosovo.

It is important to mention that during the 1960s, before equal rights were secured for the German-speaking community, violent protests hindered and destabilized the tourism industry. However, following the enactment of the Second Statute in 1972, South Tyrol became a major center for tourism and agriculture, with revenues surpassing those of other regions in the Italian Republic. Consequently, increased prosperity and economic development have played a significant role in mitigating antagonistic and hostile attitudes among the different communities (Carlà, 2016, pp. 14–15). Today, South Tyrol stands as the most exemplary and successful case among both autonomous and non-autonomous regions on the Apennine Peninsula in Italy, owing to its rapid economic, social, and political development. The division of powers through effective power-sharing transformed South Tyrol from a region marked by conflict and unrest into a hub of economic growth and political stability. The implementation of the Second Statute of Autonomy (1972) mitigated the risks of division and fragmentation, shifting the region from a state of extraordinary instability to one of security and stability, an outcome often referred to in the international relations literature as the "principle of de-securitization" (Carlà, 2016, p. 15). Paul Roe asserts that 'societal securitization' simultaneously ensures minorities the right to recognition and protection of their identity, while guaranteeing the majority community and the central government that the minority will refrain from secessionist ambitions. This balance is maintained either through federal structures or through consociational arrangements characterized by cooperative governance (consociational democracy) (Roe, 2004, pp. 288–293). More precisely, Roe states that:

> "The minority can feel secure when certain provisions/legislations/mechanisms are put in place that will guarantee its existence (in identity terms), while similarly, the majority can also feel secure in the knowledge that the minority will thus work (politically, economically, and also societally) within the existing framework of the state" (Roe, 2004, p. 293).

Approaching the case of South Tyrol from the perspective of international security studies and the resolution of inter-ethnic conflicts, it can be argued that two significant advances have been achieved. First, the risk of violating the province's territorial integrity and of its potential secession from the Republic of Italy has been effectively eliminated, with protections enshrined in international law and the UN Charter (Article 2, Paragraph 4). Consequently, through the De Gasperi–Gruber Agreement, Austria no longer posed a risk of territorial infringement on Italy. Second, the Agreement, particularly the Statute of Autonomy of 1972, ensured that the German-speaking community was recognized as a group with rights fully equivalent to those of the majority community in Italy. These rights are further protected under the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 14), which strictly prohibits discrimination on the grounds of race, language, gender, religion, and other such factors (Wolff, 2003, pp. 148–150). Simply put, Italy

relinquished full sovereignty over a portion of its territory; Austria renounced any claims to re-annexation of the region; and the German-speaking community of South Tyrol effectively surrendered its right to 'external' self-determination (Windischer, 2008, p. 18). With regard to Kosovo, the Kosovo side, to safeguard territorial sovereignty, should acknowledge the power-sharing among municipalities with a Serbian majority, thereby expecting the official authorities in Belgrade to relinquish any ambitions to interfere in Kosovo's internal political affairs. Simultaneously, the Serbian minority, as a third party, should refrain from pursuing secession from the territory of the Republic of Kosovo (Marko, 2008, pp. 371–374).

Another significant fact to highlight is that during the negotiations and agreements between the Italian and Austrian governments, the official Austrian government in Vienna actively encouraged the political leadership of the Südtiroler Volkspartei (SVP), the largest representative body of the German-speaking community in the province, to integrate within the Italian constitutional framework (Wolff, 2003, pp. 148–150). Similarly, the Serbian government in Belgrade should encourage the largest representative party of Serbs in Kosovo, namely the Serbian List (Lista Srpska), to actively participate in the official governmental structures in Pristina, rather than using the party as an instrument for divisive and separatist agendas.

In terms of societal security, South Tyrol has successfully overcome the severe ethnic divisions that prevailed during the 1960s between German-speaking and Italian-speaking communities, characterized by an oppositional "we–us" versus "they" mentality. The system of equal power-sharing has effectively dismantled apartheid-like segregation and mitigated "hatred based on racial, linguistic, and identity differences" (Carlà, 2016).

The implementation of an 'ethnic quota system' for proportional employment has eliminated the dominance of the Italian majority that prevailed during the 1960s, fostering a new framework of multi-ethnic coexistence and social harmony, thereby bringing communities closer together. Once, the old slogan during the conflict period was "the further apart we are, the fewer problems we face"; it has now evolved into "the greater our mutual understanding, the less divided we become" (Pföstl, 2004, p. 96). South Tyrol has undergone an 'asymmetric' distribution of powers, granting the province extensive representation within administrative institutions to protect and accommodate minority groups. This multi-ethnic diversity distinctly sets South Tyrol apart from other regions within the Italian Republic. The unique provincial relationship between South Tyrol and the national authorities in Rome is an exclusive arrangement not found elsewhere, whether in autonomous or non-autonomous regions (De Villiers, 2017, p. 4). Accommodation at the provincial level offers a more effective solution for preserving national unity and mitigating the risk of secession (De Villiers, 2017, p. 5). Scholars Alber and Palermo, highlighting the achievements of the ethnic quota system, emphasize that: "The entire institutional structure in South Tyrol is a system of power-sharing based on a pronounced division and enforced cooperation between the two main linguistic groups: German speakers and Italians." (Alber & Palermo, 2012, pp. 287–309).

Regarding the level of international integration, the implementation of the Comprehensive Agreement between Austria and Italy, including the Second Statute of Autonomy of 1972 and its full enforcement in 1992, accelerated Austria's accession to the EU in 1995 (Wolff, 2003). In 2011, the European Region was established within the Council of the European Parliament, comprising the Tyrol Region (Austria), the South Tyrol Region (Italy), and the Trento Region (Italy). Its vision centers on fostering peaceful coexistence between distinct peoples through the framework of Cross-Border Cooperation (Europaregion, 2011). The primary objective of the Euroregion is to promote transnational cooperation, thereby eliminating not only physical but also perceived or symbolic borders (Engl & Zwilling, 2008, pp. 161–175). Building upon this example, Kosovo and Serbia could accelerate their European integration process if the agreements reached thus far are successfully implemented. Full normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina could facilitate the creation of a Balkan Euroregion spanning Serbia, North Mitrovica, and the Republic of Kosovo, based on the mutual recognition of each other's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In South Tyrol, a Joint Commission using the principles of parity and the ethnic quota system (regarding the German-, Italian-, and Ladin-speaking communities) has been established as an institutional mechanism in charge of supervising the autonomy statute and facilitating coordination between the regional authorities and the central government (Palermo, 2006, pp. 1–44). An analogous mechanism should be integrated into Kosovo's constitutional framework, under which a Joint Commission is tasked with managing and overseeing the application of the ASMM Statute. This body shall refer any vague issues or potential constitutional violations to the Constitutional Court of Kosovo. Mirroring the South Tyrolean model, the statute of asymmetrical autonomy is legally entrenched, meaning it cannot be amended solely by ordinary legislation of the central state. At the same time, the statute itself cannot override or contradict the Constitution of the Italian Republic. Consequently, the autonomy statute is superior to the laws of Parliament but subordinated to the Constitution (Palermo, 2008, pp. 143–159). The Kosovo Parliament cannot unilaterally dissolve the Statute of the Association. Instead, its dissolution might be determined internally by a two-thirds majority vote of the Association's Assembly. Furthermore, Palermo underscores that Austria holds the right to bring a case against Italy before the International Court of Justice in the event of a breach of the Gruber–De Gasperi Basic Agreement. Conversely, Italy may initiate proceedings against Austria if Austria undertakes actions that threaten the territorial integrity of South Tyrol (Palermo, 2008). Similarly, a corresponding system of joint accountability should be implemented under the Brussels Basic Agreement. Any actions regarding the application or execution of the Agreement require the mutual approval of both the Kosovo and Serbian parties and should be overseen by the Joint International Observation and Monitoring Commissions. This would ensure that neither side can unilaterally violate or undermine the provisions of the Brussels Agreement.

5. Conclusion

The establishment of the ASMM in Kosovo, as stipulated in the 2013 Brussels Agreement, remains one of the most contentious issues in the ongoing dialogue between Kosovo and Serbia. Fundamentally, the Association was established to dismantle unauthorized administrative structures in northern Kosovo that operated under Serbian directives and to facilitate the integration of the Serbian community into Kosovo's legitimate state system. Throughout this study, it is demonstrated that the ASMM remains a significant point of contention among the negotiating stakeholders.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings reinforce the relevance of power-sharing and asymmetrical autonomy as viable frameworks for managing ethnic conflict in post-conflict societies. However, the Kosovo case illustrates that institutional design alone is insufficient without political consensus, legal clarity, and credible external guarantees. In this regard, the South Tyrol model should therefore be understood not as a blueprint for institutional transplantation but as a source of context-sensitive lessons. In the Kosovo context, any future ASMM arrangement should be developed within the constitutional framework of the Republic of Kosovo and the 2015 Constitutional Court judgment. This requires political commitment by both Kosovo and Serbia, legal precision regarding the Association's competences, the dismantling of parallel structures, and a more coherent facilitating role by the EU to ensure a common interpretation and implementation of the Brussels Agreement. One of the Constitutional Court's main criticisms of the 2015 ASMM Agreement pertains to Article 2, which states that "The ASMM will be a legal entity defined by its Statute..." This formulation raises the critical question of whether the term "statute" implies a framework akin to a "statute of autonomy." Furthermore, ambiguity arises in Article 4 (sections b, c, d, and e), which asserts that the Association shall exercise "full overview" in sectors such as the economy, education, health, and urban and rural planning. When viewed through the lens of the South Tyrol case, this ambiguous phrase could be interpreted as referring to rights of autonomy and self-governance in these domains, suggesting a potential move toward territorial autonomy for the Serbian minority in Kosovo.

Ultimately, the success of the South Tyrol model is rooted in the active participation of the negotiating parties in a democratic process that rejected expansionist and secessionist ambitions in favor of power-sharing, asymmetrical autonomy, full minority inclusion, and integration within central institutional frameworks. This approach successfully avoided territorial fragmentation that could have reignited conflict. South Tyrol transitioned from a mono-ethnic province into a cooperative, multi-ethnic region marked by coexistence and mutual accommodation.

One of the most tenacious issues at present concerns the formal enactment of the Statute of the ASMM in a manner that ensures it neither contravenes nor supersedes the Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo. The implementation of the 2013 Brussels Agreement has stalled for over a decade, with the Statute still lacking official approval. Additionally, the procedures for amending it represent a crucial pending matter. As previously emphasized, the Parliament of Kosovo does

not possess the authority to dissolve the Association unilaterally. Such a decision can only be made internally by the Association's own Assembly and solely with a two-thirds majority vote. Drawing again on the South Tyrol autonomy model, it may be argued that any amendments to the Association's Statute should not be imposed solely through Kosovo's parliamentary legislation. Rather, they should originate from internal consensus within the Association's Assembly and be subsequently approved by the Parliament of the Republic of Kosovo.

In addition, South Tyrol's experience offers valuable lessons for international integration. Austria's accession to the EU in 1995 and the establishment of the Euroregion in 2011, uniting three ethnic groups, two states, and three regions in a borderless territory, demonstrate how deep-seated divisions can be overcome through cross-border cooperation and cultural unity. South Tyrol demonstrates how Kosovo's existing constitutional framework, particularly the provisions on local self-government under Article 124, could be operationalized through a context-specific institutional arrangement that remains consistent with Kosovo's constitutional order while addressing the governance needs of Serb-majority municipalities.

The comparative findings of this study further demonstrate that the feasibility of any future ASMM arrangement depends not only on institutional design but also on the broader constitutional and geopolitical environment in which it operates. The positions of Kosovo, Serbia, the EU, and other international actors, together with the constitutional constraints identified by the Constitutional Court of Kosovo and the continuing constitutional claims maintained by Serbia, fundamentally shape the prospects for implementation. Consequently, any context-sensitive adaptation of selected South Tyrol elements must remain fully compatible with Kosovo's constitutional order while simultaneously addressing the political realities of the normalization process. In sum, a comprehensive resolution of the Kosovo–Serbia conflict will likely require constitutional adjustments by both parties. Serbia would need to reconsider Article 182 of its Constitution, which still defines Kosovo as an autonomous province of Serbia. In contrast, Kosovo may need to establish a more definitive constitutional and legal framework for the Association, including, if necessary, targeted constitutional amendments.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

European Parliament Debates on Serbia's Progress Reports: A Constructivist Analysis (2012–2024)

Avrupa Parlamentosu'nun Sırbistan İlerleme Raporları Üzerine Tartışmaları: İnşacı Bir Analiz (2012–2024)

Neslihan Başak AĞAOĞLU*

Abstract

Drawing on a social constructivist framework, this study examines the European Parliament's (EP) deliberations on Serbia's Progress Reports from 2012 to 2024. Operating on the hypothesis that EU enlargement constitutes a normative identity-building process informed by the logic of appropriateness, the study employs qualitative content analysis on a corpus of 352 parliamentary speeches retrieved from the EP e-archive. These parliamentary views are consolidated into five overarching themes: Rule of Law and Judiciary; Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms; Regional Cooperation and the Kosovo Process; Common European Values and Identity; and Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Alignment. The findings demonstrate three salient discursive shifts in the EP's stance toward Serbia. In the 2012-2015 period, Serbia was articulated as a 'promising partner'; however, between 2016 and 2021, the discourse pivoted toward critiques of authoritarianization and processes of 'othering'. In the wake of the 2022 war in Ukraine, Serbia's candidacy has been reframed as a geopolitical loyalty test. Ultimately, the study reveals that the EP's discursive construction has established a normative and cultural barrier for Serbia, one that transcends the reach of conventional technical reforms.

Keywords: European Parliament, Serbia, Progress Reports, European Union, Constructivism

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Öz

Bu çalışma, 2012-2024 yılları arasında Avrupa Parlamentosu'nun (AP) Sırbistan İlerleme Raporları üzerine yürüttüğü tartışmaları sosyal inşacı bir perspektifle analiz etmektedir. AB genişlemesinin sadece teknik bir uyum süreci değil, aynı zamanda normatif bir kimlik inşası olduğu varsayımından hareket edilen bu çalışmada; AP e-arşivinden elde edilen 352 parlamenter konuşması nitel içerik analizine tabi tutulmuştur. Parlamenter görüşleri, en sık vurgulanan 5 tema altında gruplandırılmıştır. Bunlar: Hukukun Üstünlüğü ve Yargı, İnsan Hakları ve Temel Özgürlükler, Bölgesel İş Birliği ve Kosova Süreci, Avrupa Ortak Değerleri ve Kimliği, Dış Politika ve Jeopolitik Uyum. Analiz sonuçları, AP söyleminde Sırbistan'a yönelik üç belirgin söylemsel kayma yaşandığını ortaya koymaktadır. 2012-2015 arası ilk dönemde Sırbistan gelecek vaat eden bir ortak olarak inşa edilirken; 2016-2021 yılları arasında söylem otoriterleşme eleştirileri ve ötekileştirme üzerinden şekillenmiştir. 2022 sonrası Ukrayna Savaşı süreci ise Sırbistan'ın üyeliğini bir 'jeopolitik sadakat testine' dönüştürmüştür. Sonuç olarak, Avrupa Parlamentosu'nun inşa ettiği bu söylemin, Sırbistan'ın önüne sadece teknik reformlarla aşılması oldukça zor olan normatif ve kültürel bir bariyer koyduğu tespit edilmiştir.
Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Parlamentosu, Sırbistan, İlerleme Raporları, Avrupa Birliği, İnşacılık

1. Introduction

European integration, which emerged in the mid-twentieth century as a peace project through the supranational management of coal and steel resources, was redefined in the post-Cold War era as a strategic enlargement policy based on common values and the construction of a collective identity.

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, the European continent underwent a parallel transformation. As the Central and Eastern European countries, perceived as the 'other' by Europe, gravitated towards the European Union (EU), the concept of identity entered a process of re-creation. Indeed, the policy area where these constructed concepts have been most extensively utilized within the EU is enlargement policy. This is because enlargement policy is viewed as an effective foreign policy tool with positive connotations, particularly for candidate countries, due to its transformative impact on political and economic systems. In other words, the EU's enlargement policy claims to be influential enough to shape the internal and external policies of candidate countries through the membership perspective (Smith, 1999, pp. 4–7).

The process that began with Serbia attaining candidate status in 2012 is not merely an effort toward technical alignment with the EU *acquis*. On the contrary, as emphasized by social constructivist theory (Wendt, 1992, p. 396-397; 1999, p. 224-226), this process is directly related to how actors define one another and how they construct their identities.

In this context, this study, which adopts a social constructivist perspective as its core, interprets Serbia's progress within the EU accession process as a discursive reflection within the European Parliament (EP). The role of the EP in the enlargement process is as pivotal as that of the European Commission, where technical documents are drafted. The European Commission, which occupies a key position in enlargement policy, issues progress reports on behalf of countries that

have applied for membership and attained candidate status. Thus, through the progress reports in which it provides regular evaluations, the European Commission wields the power of guidance over candidate countries (Diedrichs & Wessels, 2006, pp. 210–212). Nevertheless, the rationale for selecting the EP for this study lies in the significant discursive power the Parliament possesses regarding enlargement (Judge & Earnshaw, 2003, p. 198). Furthermore, during this process, the Parliament holds formal authority, such as the power of assent regarding the accession of new members to the Union. Consequently, this mandate has become a decisive factor in determining the fate of candidate countries; furthermore, it transforms Parliamentary debates into critical arenas of normative socialization where candidates' adherence to 'European values' is continuously performed and identity-based boundaries are established (Sjursen, 2002, p. 496). By scrutinizing the debates in the EP (EP) e-archive between 2012 and 2024, this study aims to address questions concerning which normative values came to the forefront in the discussions held over Serbia's progress reports, the extent to which values forming the basis of concepts such as 'identity' and 'culture' were incorporated into the agenda of these debates, and how the discourses in question have evolved conjuncturally and been discursively constructed.

In order to answer these questions, this study employs qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis to examine Serbia's candidacy. While qualitative content analysis is essential for identifying the frequency and patterns of thematic clusters in the 352 speech transcripts, discourse analysis is crucial for unravelling how language functions as a constitutive power in building a value-based European identity. These complementary methods ensure that the research moves beyond descriptive reporting to reach a rigorous analytical understanding of normative construction. Furthermore, to reflect the multifaceted and overlapping nature of the deliberations, a 'multiple coding' approach was adopted, allowing each speech to be categorized under various thematic clusters. A more detailed technical breakdown of these coding patterns and the resulting frequencies is provided alongside the findings in the fourth section. However, analyzing these debates specifically through the lenses of each political group separately, or conducting a comparative study of Western Balkan countries other than Serbia, remains beyond the scope of this work.

The textual content of these documents was analyzed to identify how and in what manner the enlargement discourse concerning Serbia was discussed within the parliament. These debate transcripts were classified under specific themes, facilitating the uncovering of discursive patterns regarding Serbia. The texts analyzed, retrieved from the EP e-archive, consist of the minutes of the progress report sessions held in the Parliament from 2012—when Serbia attained candidate status—to 2024. In this context, a total of 352 speech contents belonging to the parliamentarians who participated in the sessions were analyzed. The primary rationale for selecting these reports for this research is that, by virtue of their content, they constitute the most fundamental documents specific to enlargement policy and provide the unique data set through which a candidate country's compliance with membership criteria, including European values, can be monitored.

To elaborate findings, the article is organized into four main sections. Following the introduction, the second section presents the social constructivist approach and its explanatory capacity regarding the notion of 'Europeanness' as the theoretical framework of the research. The third section addresses the path of Serbia towards EU membership, focusing on the discursive tension between its historical legacies and the requirements of modern European identity. Finally, the last section discusses the construction of identity and values based on findings derived from an analysis of Serbia's progress reports alongside broader European developments that have permeated the debates within the EP.

2. A Social Constructivist Approach to Defining 'Europeanness' in Candidate Countries

For the countries in question, being included in the European integration process was perceived as a 'return to Europe', from which they had been separated by an 'iron curtain' during the Cold War. Consequently, the inclusion of Central and Eastern European countries (Bulgaria, Czechia, Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, and Slovenia) in the EU accession process played an active role in their transition from the totalitarian regimes they had long been under to liberal democracies. However, EU membership was not immediately accessible for these states; candidate countries attained full membership status only on the condition that they fulfilled specific criteria prescribed by the Union. In line with this principle, accession criteria were finalized and crystallized through the EU's founding treaties. Therefore, the EU's enlargement policy delineates a boundary for candidate countries and, in this regard, can be considered a tool for identity definition (Sjursen, 1999, p. 45). In this regard, the phrase 'being a European state' as stipulated in Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU)—the founding treaty of the EU—is noteworthy. Indeed, it is quite difficult to discern, solely from the legal basis in question, what 'being European' conceptually encompasses or excludes.

Although no founding treaty provides a direct definition as to which countries are geographically or culturally included in Europe, the criteria are fundamentally based on the ideals of 'respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities', and the accession criteria have been constructed upon this conceptual foundation.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, the conditions governing the accession of potential new members sparked profound debates within the EU. To manage this new wave of enlargement, the accession criteria—which essentially function as a 'charter of values' for the EU—were promulgated at the 1993 Copenhagen Summit. The progress achieved by candidate countries in aligning with the Copenhagen criteria, which they are strategically mandated to fulfill, has been evaluated by the European Commission through annual reports since 1998 and deliberated upon within the EP. This enlargement momentum, which included Turkey's attainment of candidate status in 1999, has frequently brought the question of who qualifies as 'European' to the forefront of discussion (Dinan, 2004, pp. 190–192).

Following the massive wave of enlargement in the post-Cold War era that expanded the Union to twenty-five members, Croatia became the latest country to join the EU. With the accession of its most recent member, the focal point of the EU's enlargement policy shifted towards the Western Balkans. The concept of 'European identity', which has been a subject of debate since the accession of Central and Eastern European countries, has also become pertinent for the Balkan nations. In the specific case of Serbia, the candidacy is discursively framed as a profound mismatch between the country's persistent ethnonationalist legacies and the EU's postmodern identity project, which is founded upon supranational peace, liberal democracy, and the categorical rejection of revisionist geopolitics. By democratizing Serbia—which plunged the Western Balkans into chaos during the 1990s—within the framework of the Union, the EU aims to place the stability and security of the European continent on a firm foundation.

The multifaceted challenges presented by the integration of the Western Balkans not only reconfigured European political practice but also necessitated a theoretical reassessment within the field of International Relations. As of the early 1990s, the world witnessed both the transition from a bipolar world system to a multipolar one and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a superpower of the Cold War era. With the sequential collapse of socialist regimes parallel to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the democratization process of Central and Eastern European countries, it became evident that traditional paradigms, such as realism, remained insufficient in explaining the changing world. Precisely at this juncture, Nicholas Onuf first introduced the concept of constructivism, a sociology-based theory referred to as the 'constructivist turn' among international relations theories (Price & Reus-Smit, 1998, p. 263). In his book *World of Our Making: Rules and Rule in Social Theory and International Relations*, Onuf (1989, pp. 1–5) argues that international relations is a socially constructed structure and that, accordingly, states themselves are constructed by rules and human actions. This theory, first utilized by Onuf, owes its primary prominence to the concept of 'social constructivism' brought into the literature by Alexander Wendt. Social constructivism maintains a critical stance toward realism's focus on material power and anarchy, arguing instead that norms, values, and the identities shaped by these values must be considered as constitutive elements (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001, p. 392). Furthermore, focusing on the influence of language, history, and cultural elements, social constructivists have posited that norms and identities are not rigid and fixed, much like the languages employed. Therefore, social constructivists argue that norms and identities are mutable and reconstructible (Wendt, 1999, pp. 334–336). In this regard, according to social constructivism, the world is not 'given'; on the contrary, it is a world in the making (1999, p. 224)

According to social constructivists, focusing on the concept of 'identity' is essential to understanding how states act in foreign policy. Indeed, the concept of identity, which arises from the social interactions of states (Checkel, 1998, p. 326), has become one of the most fundamental building blocks of constructivist theory (Rosamond, 2000, p. 173). The theory in question addresses identity within the context of state behavior being determined by their respective identities. According to Wendt, who describes the relationship between states as 'mutually constitutive,' the concept of interest—another element of this relationship—is directly associated

with identity. Wendt (1992, p. 424) explains this nexus by stating that 'what actors do depends on who they are'. The key concept elucidating this identity-behavior link pointed out by Wendt is the 'logic of appropriateness' developed by James March and Johan Olsen (1989, pp. 160–162; 1998, pp. 951–952). According to this concept, rather than maximizing their interests, states prefer to exhibit behavior that is appropriate to their constructed identities.

This conceptualization leads to a more profound interpretation of 'Europeanization' as a process of normative socialization. Traditionally, in the rationalist accounts often cited in EU enlargement literature—such as Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier's (2020, pp. 817–819) 'external incentives model'—Europeanization is understood through a logic of consequences, where candidate states adapt to the EU acquis based on cost-benefit calculations for the reward of membership. However, from the constructivist lens of this study, Europeanization is not merely a top-down policy transfer or 'downloading' of rules (Radaelli, 2003, p. 30); rather, it is a sociological process of internalizing European values, norms, and identities (Checkel, 2001, pp. 560–562). Within this framework, the EP functions as a primary arena of normative socialization (Sjursen, 2002, pp. 496–498). While other EU institutions deal with technicalities, the EP provides a discursive space where European culture and identity are constructed indirectly through value-based discourse rather than explicit culturalist references (Diez, 1999, pp. 12–14). MEPs utilize fundamental concepts—such as human rights and the rule of law—not just as legal requirements but as identity-markers. Drawing on Epstein (2010, pp. 333–334), language in these arenas functions as a constitutive power; by invoking 'common values', the EP engages in a discursive construction that effectively defines the identity of the candidate state, positioning it within the moral boundaries of Europeanness based on its normative compliance. This process highlights that being 'European' is not a fixed geography but a performative act of belonging that is continuously negotiated within parliamentary debates.

Social constructivism in international relations is not a homogeneous structure; rather, it is divided into sub-branches such as conventional, critical, and post-structuralist (Hopf, 1998, p.172–175). Although the conventional constructivism of Alexander Wendt (1999, pp. 224–226), which focuses on the social construction of identities, provides the core foundation of this study, it is Nicholas Onuf's post-structuralist-aligned thesis of 'rules as speech acts' that determines the analytical depth of this research. While Wendt's framework based on the mutual construction of identities offers a fundamental baseline, the discourse analysis employed in this study is closer to the post-structuralist tendency, which treats language not merely as a reflection but as a constitutive force (Onuf, 2013, pp. 4–6). According to Onuf (1989, p. 82), rules are constructed through language via 'assertions, commissives, and directives' that actors direct at one another. In this context, language does not simply describe reality; it constructs the rules and roles of the social world simultaneously. Building upon this approach, it is posited that the debates within the EP are not merely exchanges of information; rather, they are performances that construct binding institutional facts regarding Serbia's 'candidate identity' and its 'compliance with European norms'. Consequently, these debates in the EP are not just 'talk' but institutional speech acts that

construct both the normative power of the EP over Serbia and the specific identity attributed to Serbia itself.

Accordingly, states first establish their identities and subsequently determine behavioral patterns—that is, interests—consistent with those identities. Consequently, from a social constructivist standpoint, a state's foreign policy orientation is shaped according to the elements it has incorporated into its identity. At this juncture, interaction with the 'constitutive outside', namely the 'other', constitutes an indispensable part of identity construction (Butler, 1993, pp. 3–4). In the process of defining their own identities, states simultaneously define other states as well. The dynamic nature of identities allows this construction to be re-created in response to shifts within international relations (Connolly, 1991, pp. 64–66). As Nicholas Onuf (1989, p. 35) observed, actors in the international system endeavor to control the values they produce and cluster around the structures formed by these values.

In this context, the EU accession process of Serbia—one of the Western Balkan countries positioned as the 'other'—constitutes a case study that warrants explanation through a social constructivist perspective. Ultimately, the debates conducted by the EP on Serbia's progress reports are the projection of a normative process that expects Serbia not only to fulfill technical criteria but also to manifest behaviors consistent with the constructed 'European' identity.

3. The Discursive Construction of Serbia's EU Path: Identity, Legacy, and Belonging

The accession of Serbia is not merely a modern bureaucratic process; it is a profound struggle against a historically constructed image of the 'Balkan Other'. To understand why Serbia is discursively constructed as a 'shady candidate' today, one must first engage with the concept of Balkanism. As Maria Todorova (1997, pp. 18–20) argues, the Balkans have been represented in Western discourse as Europe's 'Inner Other'—geographically European but culturally 'ambivalent' or 'incomplete'. This naming has historically transformed the term 'Balkan' from a geographic marker into a political stigma of 'fragmentation' and 'instability', providing the West with the necessary contrast to stabilize its own identity (1997, p. 126).

Efforts to overcome this exclusionary discourse began in the post-Milošević era; however, this 'othering' process was exacerbated by the twentieth-century historical trajectory. Serbia, as the most populous republic within the former Yugoslavia, was often perceived as the dominant and disruptive force after the death of Tito in 1980. Under the leadership of Slobodan Milošević, Serbia's shift towards ethnic nationalism—culminating in the 1992 Bosnian War and the 1998 Kosovo War—discursively positioned the country as the fundamental ontological antithesis to the EU's identity as a normative peace project (Poulton, 1993, pp. 35–37; Wachtel, 2009, pp. 110–113). Following the humanitarian intervention of NATO and the UN, Serbia was left in a state of liminality: situated at the physical borders of Europe but discursively expelled to its moral outskirts.

Consequently, Serbia's EU path, which gained momentum under the pro-European government of Boris Tadić in 2004, has been more than a technical alignment; it has been an arduous task of reconstructing an identity. While the EU used its 'External Incentives Model' and financial aids as tools of transformation, these rewards were strictly conditioned upon Serbian compliance with European normative ideals such as democracy and the rule of law (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020, pp. 817–819). The grant of candidate status in 2012 and the initiation of accession talks in 2014 represented a 'logic of consequences', where Serbia attempted to fulfill criteria in exchange for the institutional reward of belonging. However, the subsequent 'enlargement fatigue' and the stagnation of negotiation chapters have severely weakened Serbia's European perspective (Bieber, 2020, pp. 74–77). This stagnation has reopened the historical gray zone, driving Serbia toward its traditional Slavic-Orthodox identity ties with Russia, thereby reinforcing the perception of Serbia as an 'Unpredictable Other' within the EP's discourse (Bechev, 2017, pp. 200–204).

4. Discursive Shifts and Identity Patterns in EP Debates (2012–2024)

To operationalize Nicholas Onuf's 'rules as speech acts' and evaluate the logic of appropriateness within the EP, a thematic coding approach was employed to uncover identity – and value-based patterns within parliamentary deliberations. Although the progress reports debated in the EP comprise 33 acquis chapters, not all chapters were incorporated into the evaluation. Instead, this study is predicated on themes possessing the highest discursive and normative weight:

1. **Rule of Law and the Judiciary:** Emphases concerning judicial independence, democracy, and the fight against corruption (Chapter 24).

2. **Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms:** Emphases relating to freedom of expression, media independence, and violations of minority and human rights (Chapter 23).

3. **Regional Cooperation and the Kosovo Process:** Discourses focused on the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue and the process of establishing peaceful relations with neighboring countries (Chapter 35).

4. **Common European Values and Identity:** Discourses directly referencing values—such as democracy, equality, and freedom—stipulated in the EU founding treaties and the Copenhagen Criteria, constructed along the axis of whether or not Serbia is 'European'.

5. **Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Alignment:** Discourses regarding alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and its stance towards Russia (Chapter 31).

An examination of other acquis chapters within the progress reports prepared for Serbia reveals that progress in those areas remains at an insufficient level. However, the themes identified above emerge more prominently in Parliamentary debates than other subjects where progress is lacking.

These issues brought to the agenda also constitute the fundamental European values stipulated in the foundational texts of the EU. The frequent recurrence of these themes in Parliamentary deliberations illustrates that Serbia's EU accession process is constructed through an identity-based discourse rather than merely being a matter of technical alignment.

An analysis of the 352 speeches retrieved from Parliamentary transcripts for this study reveals that Serbia's economic performance has been overshadowed by themes such as judicial independence, human rights, European values, regional cooperation, and foreign policy alignment. This finding demonstrates that Serbia's accession process is evaluated by parliamentarians not as a mere technocratic exercise, but as a symbolic negotiation of 'Europeanness'. Consequently, the focal point of the EP's debates on Serbia is constituted by normative criteria rather than economic ones. As evident from the examination of the data in Table 1, the total frequencies (*f*) identified in the sections divided by periods exceed the total number of analyzed speeches (*n*). This discrepancy stems from the fact that a single Member of Parliament may have addressed multiple themes simultaneously within a single floor speech (e.g., referencing both the rule of law and the Kosovo dialogue). During the analytical process, such instances were processed using the 'multiple coding' method, which led the recorded theme frequencies to exceed the total number of cases. From an analytical perspective, this situation serves as evidence of the 'overlapping' nature of the themes.

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of EP Debates on Serbia's Progress Reports (2012–2024)

Period / Theme	**2012-2015 (=174)**	**2016-2021 (=125)**	**2022-2024 (=53)**
Rule of Law and the Judiciary	%23,0 (=40)	%32,0 (=40)	%30,2 (=16)
Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms	%34,5 (=60)	%24,8 (=31)	%20,8 (=11)
Regional Cooperation and the Kosovo Process	%34,5 (=60)	%26,4 (=33)	%18,9 (=10)
Common European Values and Identity	%18,4 (=32)	%21,6 (=27)	%28,3 (=15)
Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Alignment	%5,7 (=10)	%16,0 (=20)	%37,7 (=20)

Note: Prepared by the author based on parliamentary transcripts. Percentages are calculated based on the total number of speeches () for each period. Since multiple themes could be coded within a single text, column totals exceed 100%.

The twelve-year period presented in the table has been divided into three primary phases, taking into account the significant ruptures in Serbia's EU trajectory. The content analysis conducted clearly illustrates the discursive shifts in the emphasis placed on these themes, occurring in tandem with regional and global developments. Accordingly, within the enlargement process, the EU's discourse toward Serbia is observed to have evolved from a normative reform process into a 'geopolitical tool' (Dopchie & Lika, 2024, pp. 165–167). This discursive shift can be identified as the primary reason for the escalation of the theme of foreign policy alignment between 2022 and 2024.

4.1. The Construction of a 'Promising Partner': External Incentives and Parliamentary Discourse (2012–2015)

Drawing upon the official verbatim reports of the parliamentary deliberations between 2012 and 2014 (European Parliament, 2013; 2014; 2015), the 2012–2015 timeframe served as a 'logic of appropriateness' school where Serbian identity was strategically reframed to overcome its recent post-conflict history through a narrative of institutional inclusion. This period, marked by the first progress report after Serbia attained candidate status in 2012, represents a definitive shift in the EP's narrative from post-war monitoring to proactive integration. As Matias (2018, pp. 5–7) notes, the tone was increasingly milder, driven by the historic opportunity presented by the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. This motivating atmosphere aligns with the 'external incentives model' (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2020, p. 817), wherein the prospect of membership acted as a rational reward for normative compliance.

However, beyond simple rewards, the EP's debates functioned as commissive speech acts (Onuf, 1989, pp. 90–91), where words created an obligation of 'Europeanness' for Serbia. For instance, in the 2012 debate, the Rapporteur Jelko Kacin (ALDE) constructed the membership prospect as a tool for peace:

> "*The incentive of EU membership remains strong and appealing. I hope that we will together seize this unique opportunity to close the chapter of Balkan conflict and open a new one, which will be marked by accession-driven reforms and regional cooperation*" (European Parliament, April 17, 2013).

By using phrases like *"closing the chapter of conflict"*, Kacin does not merely describe a policy; he discursively constructs Serbia's identity as a subject moving from a 'conflict-ridden past' into a 'normative future'. This underscores the logic of appropriateness: Serbia is expected to behave not just as a rational state, but as a 'reformed neighbor'.

This period also illustrates how 'European culture and identity' were constructed indirectly through civilizational references (as suggested by the reviewers). The debate moved beyond the Copenhagen criteria to position Serbia as a long-lost part of the family. Ewald Stadler (Non-Inscrit) highlighted this ontological connection:

> "*We must recognize that Serbia and Croatia lie on a European fault line... Nevertheless, Serbia belongs to me, inseparably to the European family*" (European Parliament, April 17, 2013).

Furthermore, the launch of negotiations in 2014 solidified the 'Promising Partner' identity. The Rapporteur David McAllister (PPE) famously used a metaphor to fix Serbia's identity within a progressive framework:

> *"The train from Belgrade is on its track towards Brussels; let us encourage Serbia to stay on this European track"* (European Parliament, March 11, 2015).

Consistent with the data in Table 1, the discursive landscape during this timeframe was dominated by Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (34.5%, *f*=60) and Regional Cooperation (34.5%, *f*=60). The equal weight of these themes reveals that at this stage, the European 'Self' viewed Serbian identity through a lens of regional pacification. Simultaneously, the emphasis on the Rule of Law (23.0%, *f*=40) was discursively constructed as a technical milestone—a prerequisite for opening Chapters 23 and 24—rather than an existential identity crisis. Foreign policy remained marginalized (5.7%, *f*=10), indicating that Serbian-Russian ties had not yet been framed as an insurmountable barrier to the construction of Serbia as an 'EU partner'.

4.2. From 'Promising Partner' to the 'Other': Democratic Backsliding and the Standstill (2016–2021)

Drawing upon the parliamentary deliberations on the corresponding reports for this era (European Parliament, 2016; 2017; 2018; 2021), the second period marks a discursive turning point where the narrative of inclusion began to be superseded by a discourse of scepticism and 'othering'. In 2016, the EU began to struggle with 'enlargement fatigue' following Brexit, a shift reflected in the volume of parliamentary attention: the total number of speeches analyzed declined from *n*=174 to *n*=125 in this period. According to Table 1, the Rule of Law (32.0%, *f*=40) emerged as the dominant theme, signaling a departure from early technical optimism. As Bieber (2018, pp. 337–338) notes, Serbia entered a process defined as 'stabilitocracy,' where the EU's preference for regional stability began to clash with the EP's role as an arena of normative socialization. Parallel to this domestic erosion, Tzifakis and Vasdoka (2025, pp. 290–293) argue that Belgrade employed a policy of 'strategic hedging'—a calculated effort to navigate between EU requirements and the deepening influence of external actors like Russia and China—which further complicated its normative alignment.

During this period, EP debates functioned as commissive speech acts (Onuf, 1989, pp. 82–84), where parliamentarians increasingly used 'European values' as a yardstick to measure Serbia's deviance. Victor Boştinaru (S&D) provided a definitive example of this normative warning by explicitly invoking the 'stabilitocracy' frame to construct Serbia's current trajectory as problematic:

> *"Stability in the Western Balkans is important, but we should not sacrifice our values for stability... In playing with the so-called stabilitocracy we might lose what is the most important – Serbian citizens and their commitment towards democracy"* (European Parliament, June 14, 2017).

Parallel to the decline in Human Rights (24.8%, *f*=31) and Regional Cooperation (26.4%, *f*=33)—largely due to the stagnation of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue—the EP began to reconstruct Serbia not as an 'eager student' but as an 'Ambivalent Other.' Tanja Fajon (S&D) discursively

questioned the legitimacy of Serbia's 'Europeanness' by highlighting the gap between paper reforms and democratic practice:

> " *NGO reports show continuous decline in the rule of law... Investigative journalists are turned away and some of them are even physically attacked. I ask myself, and you: is this the Serbia which we want as part of our European family?* " (European Parliament, June 14, 2017).

Fajon's question serves as a performative act that draws the moral boundaries of the EU, implying that Serbia's current identity is incompatible with the Common European Values that, according to Table 1, showed a rising frequency of 21.6% (*f*=27) as a standard of exclusion. Furthermore, Rapporteur Vladimír Bilčík (PPE) underscored the lack of Foreign Policy Alignment, which reached 16.0% (*f*=20), asserting that a "meaningful European future" requires choices beyond technical chapters. This confirms the logic of appropriateness: becoming European is increasingly framed as a demand for ontological loyalty rather than mere transactional reform (Sjursen, 2002, pp. 496–498).

4.3. The 'Stranger Within': Identity Crisis and the Geopoliticization of Europeanness (2022–2024)

As reflected in the official deliberations regarding this final phase (European Parliament, 2022; 2023; 2025), the Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, effectively terminated the era of 'constructive ambiguity' in Serbia-EU relations, forcing a discursive transition from multi-themed bargaining to a singular security-based identity audit.

The post-2022 period marks the most radical discursive transformation in the 12-year trajectory analyzed. Russia's invasion of Ukraine served as a 'critical juncture', where EU enlargement was reconstructed from a standard reform process into a vital matter of ‹security and ontological survival› (Belloni, 2023, p. 285, 294–295). As shown in Table 1, the discursive frequency of Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Alignment surged to 37.7% (***f***=20), establishing itself as the primary litmus test for Serbian identity. Rapporteur Vladimír Bilčík (PPE) discursively established this shift by framing the Ukraine war as an irreversible crossroads for Serbia's European future:

> *"February 2022 was a defining moment that will change Europe's history... Serbia has now made a choice. It is therefore important to start moving towards the EU, not sideways"* (European Parliament, July 5, 2022).

This period reveals a decisive move from a 'logic of consequences' to a rigid 'logic of appropriateness'. Failing to align with EU sanctions was no longer treated as a technical divergence, but as evidence of a core identity mismatch. Thijs Reuten (S&D) voiced this by defining the refusal to implement sanctions as a direct erosion of EU credibility:

> *"Accession negotiations with Serbia should only continue on two conditions: clear progress on the rule of law and full alignment with our sanctions on Russia... Minimising Vučić's clear autocratic tendencies and focusing on investment projects instead is a dead end"* (European Parliament, July 5, 2022).

This shift signifies a trend where humanitarian and regional concerns are marginalized as the geopolitical dimension intensifies. By 2024, the EP's discourse linked internal corruption and external geopolitical loyalty into a single 'Stranger Within' narrative. The newly appointed Rapporteur Tonino Picula (S&D) famously used the tragic canopy collapse in Novi Sad as a metaphor for a systemic identity failure, contrasted against Belgrade's ties with Moscow:

> *"The tragedy in Novi Sad became a symbol of systemic corruption... leaders' claims of European commitment sound unconvincing while they plan trips to Moscow for new energy deals. This is not about progress on paper, but strategic side-choosing"* (European Parliament, February 11, 2025).

As evidenced by the figures (n=53), European identity in these debates is now explicitly constructed through the lens of security loyalty, as Foreign Policy and Geopolitical Alignment reached a historical peak of 37.7% (f=20). This dominant trend is closely followed by the Rule of Law, which accounts for 30.2% (f=16) of the discursive frequency, suggesting that domestic democratic standards and external geostrategic choices have become inextricably linked in the Parliament's normative audit. In this stage, Serbia's 'ambivalence' (two stools policy) is discursively framed as an insurmountable barrier, leaving the candidate in a liminal 'gray zone.' The Common European Values (28.3%, f=15) have thus been rearticulated as a 'geopolitical security shield' (Dopchie & Lika, 2024, pp. 165–167), effectively repositioning Serbia as an actor whose membership is deemed incompatible as long as its geostrategic heart remains tied to Moscow.

Conclusion

The EU, built upon universal values such as equality, human rights, democracy, and the rule of law to establish peace on the European continent, saw its geographical borders reach the Western Balkans following the post-Cold War waves of enlargement. Within this context, Serbia has presented a uniquely challenging profile. This research, utilizing a social constructivist perspective to analyze 352 speeches in the EP between 2012 and 2024, has identified three primary discursive shifts that define the trajectory of Serbian identity construction.

The analysis reveals that the initial narrative of a 'Promising Partner' (2012-2015)—sustained by technical optimism and the regional pacification resulting from the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue—was dismantled as Serbia entered a phase of democratic backsliding. Between 2016 and 2021, emerging signs of 'stabilitocracy' led the EP to discursively reconstruct Serbia as 'the other'. This shift peaked post-2022; the Russian invasion of Ukraine served as a definitive geopolitical

turning point where Serbian identity was subjected to a rigid 'loyalty test'. Data shows that foreign policy alignment escalated from a marginalized theme to 37.7% of the total discursive frequency, overshadowing regional cooperation (which dropped to 18.9%).

In conclusion, the EP's discourse—rooted in foreign policy alignment particularly post-2022—has placed a cultural and normative obstacle before Serbia that technical reforms alone cannot surmount. This obstacle stems from a clash between Serbia's Slavic-Orthodox ontological identity based on historical ties with Russia (Belloni, 2023, pp. 296–298) and the EU's emerging geostrategic, security-oriented identity (Dopchie & Lika, 2024, p. 172-174). Ultimately, the findings indicate that the EP constructs the candidate's identity indirectly through value-based discourse rather than explicit ethno-cultural references.

Within this framework, human rights and the rule of law have been rearticulated not merely as legislative milestones but as markers of a specific political behavior model—a logic of appropriateness in action. As Onuf (1989, p. 36; 2013, pp. 4–6) posits, social reality is institutionalized through the repetition of performative speech acts that define the rules of the world. In the case of the EP, these acts have effectively created a 'normative boundary' for Serbia. Consequently, as long as Serbia fails to demonstrate a coherent 'ontological belonging' through geopolitical alignment, it remains trapped in a discursive liminality. This open-ended identity test has transformed the accession process from a technical journey into an existential and cultural barrier that remains the most formidable challenge to Serbia's European future.

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ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ / RESEARCH ARTICLE

European Security in Transition: Comparative Analysis of the Aspirant Western Balkan Countries' Alignment with the EU's Emerging Security Architecture

Avrupa Güvenliğinin Dönüşümü: Aday Batı Balkan Ülkelerinin AB'nin Gelişmekte Olan Güvenlik Mimarisine Uyumunun Karşılaştırmalı Analizi

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Abstract

In light of the recent geopolitical tensions arising from the Russia–Ukraine war, the EU has introduced new initiatives within its security architecture. In line with the 2022 Strategic Compass and the March 2025 White Paper, the EU has undergone a transformation of its security structure aimed at enhancing the military capabilities of its member states, strengthening the defense industry, and promoting proactive security cooperation complementary to NATO. The Western Balkans, as key partners of the EU, play a crucial role in its emerging security architecture due to their strategic location, historical ties with EU member states, and recent geopolitical developments. This paper investigates how the aspirant countries of the Western Balkans have responded to these new European security and defense initiatives, particularly by focusing on their foreign policy alignment with the EU, formal security and defense partnerships with the EU, participation in EU CSDP missions, and measures against hybrid threats. To this end, the study employs a qualitative content analysis of the EU country reports on the Western Balkan countries published between 2023 and 2025 from a comparative perspective. The findings reveal significant divergence among the aspirant Western Balkan countries in their alignment with recent EU security initiatives, largely driven by domestic political environments and geopolitical dynamics, which, in turn, affect their EU accession prospects and regional stability.

Keywords: European Union, European Security Architecture, Russia-Ukraine War, Western Balkans, Geopolitical Dynamics

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Öz

Rusya-Ukrayna savaşının yol açtığı jeopolitik dinamikler AB güvenlik mimarisinde yeni girişimleri tetiklemiştir. 2022 Stratejik Pusula ve Mart 2025 tarihli Beyaz Kitap doğrultusunda, AB, güvenlik yapısında üye ülkelerin askeri kapasitelerini geliştirmeyi, savunma sanayisini güçlendirmeyi ve NATO'yu tamamlayıcı nitelikte proaktif güvenlik iş birliğini geliştirmeyi amaçlayan bir dönüşüm geçirmektedir. Batı Balkanlar, stratejik konumu, AB üye ülkeleriyle tarihî bağları ve son jeopolitik dinamikler nedeniyle, AB'nin gelişmekte olan güvenlik yapısında kilit ortaklar olarak önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışma, aday Batı Balkan ülkelerinin Avrupa güvenlik ve savunma alanındaki bu yeni girişimlere nasıl yanıt verdiklerini, özellikle AB ile dış politika uyumu, AB ile gerçekleştirilen resmî güvenlik ve savunma ortaklıkları, AB'nin Ortak Güvenlik ve Savunma Politikası (OGSP) misyonlarına katılımları ve hibrit tehditlere karşı aldıkları önlemler bağlamında incelemektedir. Bu amaçla, çalışmada 2023-2025 yılları arasında aday Batı Balkan ülkelerine ilişkin AB ülke raporları nitel içerik analizi yöntemiyle karşılaştırmalı olarak incelenmektedir. Çalışmanın bulguları, Batı Balkanlar'daki aday ülkeler arasında son AB güvenlik girişimlerine uyum konusunda önemli farklılıklar olduğunu ortaya koymaktadır; bu farklılıklar, ağırlıklı olarak ülkelerin iç siyasi ortamları ve jeopolitik dinamiklerden kaynaklanmakta olup, AB'ye üyelik olasılıkları ve bölgesel istikrar üzerinde etkili olmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Avrupa Birliği, Avrupa Güvenlik Mimarisi, Rusya-Ukrayna Savaşı, Batı Balkanlar, Jeopolitik Dinamikler

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) has faced various challenges ranging from economic, migration, and security-related crises. In light of the recent geopolitical tensions arising from the Russia–Ukraine war, the EU has introduced new initiatives within its security and defense architecture. In line with the 2022 Strategic Compass, the EU has responded to these security challenges with the strategic aim of strengthening its security and defense policy by 2030. The March 2025 White Paper represents a recent step in reassessing the EU's security threats and challenges. The White Paper addresses issues such as improving the military capabilities of member states, enhancing readiness to respond to military threats, and strengthening the European defense industry (European Commission, 2025g). This transition demonstrates that the EU requires enhanced security cooperation, regional stability, and a proactive approach to addressing emerging threats. The EU has developed new security and defense initiatives complementary to NATO.

As reiterated in the Strategic Compass, the Western Balkans, as key partners of the EU, play a crucial role in the EU's evolving security architecture due to their strategic location, historical ties with EU member states, and recent geopolitical developments. The EU's policy toward the Western Balkans has shifted dramatically since the 1990s. In the immediate aftermath of the wars, the Union's policies were shaped by security and stabilization concerns, considering the "Balkan question" a European security issue linked to the EU's emerging Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) (Rupnik, 2011). Thus, the EU's relationship with the Western Balkans moved from a post-war security focus to an explicit enlargement commitment following the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), and more recently to a regional approach that seeks to combine state-building with EU integration. This shift accelerated initiatives such as the Stabilization and Association

Process (SAP), the Berlin Process, and Open Balkan, which are intended to foster cooperation between the Western Balkans and the EU (Marku and Teqja, 2024).

There are various studies analyzing the process of Western Balkan integration into the EU from several perspectives. From a political perspective, Zhang (2024) provides a broad overview of the EU's conditionality approach, the Copenhagen criteria, and the role of the SAP in guiding Balkan countries toward democratic and market reforms. Domachowska (2021) offers a concise diagnostic analysis of why EU–Balkan integration has stagnated, highlighting internal political dynamics, EU institutional fatigue, and external competition from China, Russia, and Turkey. Shahini (2024) diagnoses the crisis of trust in the EU–Balkan enlargement process and proposes removing bilateral disputes from the agenda while opening accession negotiations to enable the fulfillment of the entire EU acquis communautaire. Becker and Lippert (2024) analyze the technical and legal steps required for aspiring Western Balkan states to gain access to the EU single market, highlighting both opportunities and systemic barriers. Kellerhals et al. (2023) synthesize recent developments, noting that the EU's 2023 Enlargement Package and the New Pact on Migration and Asylum have direct implications for Balkan candidate countries. Curić (2025) examines recent dynamics in EU–Western Balkan relations, arguing that both internal and external factors have contributed to the deadlock in EU accession negotiations, with a particular focus on enlargement fatigue within the EU and unresolved domestic impediments in the candidate countries.

From the economic perspective of EU–Western Balkan relations, Steinbach (2024) examines how differing legal regimes, such as association agreements and free trade agreements, affect the speed and quality of EU–Western Balkan integration, emphasizing persistent economic gaps despite expanding trade relations. Ognjanoska (2022) argues for a merit-based, interim single-market access track to revive the accession incentive structure and reduce the perception that EU enlargement is a risky undertaking for the Western Balkan countries. Subotic (2024) analyzes the 2024 EU Reform and Growth Facility and the Growth Plan, emphasizing early integration incentives such as access to EU programs and cooperation with EU agencies to bridge the pre-accession gap between the EU and the Western Balkan countries.

This multidimensional body of literature on EU–Western Balkan relations reveals a mix of common and country-specific challenges regarding the integration process of the Western Balkan countries. All Western Balkan countries face some degree of political and statehood-related challenges. For instance, Kosovo's limited recognition, Bosnia and Herzegovina's ethnic fragmentation, Serbia's non-recognition of Kosovo, and North Macedonia's former name dispute illustrate differing degrees of contested sovereignty and border-related challenges. Regarding state capacity and institution-building, weak bureaucracies, fragmented governance structures, and limited administrative capacity make it difficult to implement the reforms necessary for EU accession (Rupnik, 2011). Thus, the need for deep institution-building is a shared challenge across the region. Moreover, ethnic and intrastate fragmentation freezes political decision-making and impedes reforms (Rupnik, 2011). With regard to governance, corruption is endemic across the

Western Balkans and is accompanied by judicial inefficiency. Economically, the Western Balkans suffer from large informal economies, high levels of informal unemployment, low productivity, and a wide development gap (Marku and Teqja, 2024). Infrastructure deficits and dependence on foreign direct investment and loans exacerbate these problems, rendering Albania, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina particularly vulnerable to external assistance (Marku and Teqja, 2024). Each of these challenges demonstrates how common structural deficits can translate into country-specific political barriers. These domestic challenges are compounded by the EU's own policy shortcomings, including enlargement fatigue, ambiguous regional initiatives, and delayed financing, all of which have eroded confidence in the accession process.

Recent external shocks have added urgency to EU–Western Balkan relations. Russia's war against Ukraine and its disinformation campaigns have heightened concerns about authoritarian backsliding, while Chinese investment has raised concerns about strategic dependence (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023). The EU now balances credible accession prospects with strict rule-of-law conditionality, pursuing a hard line on corruption and judicial reform while seeking to maintain stability in the Western Balkans (Center for the Study of Democracy, 2023). In the literature, Ioannides et al. (2024) place Western Balkan enlargement within the broader security context of the post–Russia–Ukraine war environment, arguing that geopolitical imperatives can reenergize the process if political will is matched with concrete policy measures. Kellerhals et al. (2023), in their chapter "Western Balkans/EU: Current Developments," highlight how security concerns arising particularly from the Russia–Ukraine war and regional instability are reshaping EU–Western Balkan engagement, stressing the need for coordinated defense and migration policies. These studies provide a solid foundation for research on the political, economic, and security dimensions of EU–Western Balkan relations, the evolution of enlargement policy, and the prospects for deeper integration. Overall, the evolution of EU–Western Balkan relations reflects a shift from security-driven containment to a contested enlargement policy that emphasizes regional cooperation, institutional reform, and geopolitical resilience.

Given the significant role played by the Western Balkan countries in the EU's emerging security architecture in the context of the Russia–Ukraine war, this paper investigates how the aspirant countries of the Western Balkans have responded to emerging European security and defense initiatives. To this end, the study employs qualitative content analysis as its primary research method. The analysis is based on the EU country reports for the six aspirant Western Balkan countries—Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia—covering the period from 2023 to 2025. The EU country reports were selected because they provide regular and objective assessments of candidate countries' alignment with the EU acquis and policies guiding their accession process. The qualitative content analysis is structured around four key pillars that the aspirant countries are expected to meet under the EU's post-2022 security framework. These four interrelated pillars serve as indicators for analyzing alignment with the EU's emerging security architecture. Specifically, these pillars are alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and sanctions, formal security and defense partnerships with the EU, active participation in CSDP missions, and the development

of capacities to address hybrid threats, strengthen cyber resilience, and counter disinformation. These indicators were selected to directly address the central research question of this study using the EU's official assessment criteria as an analytical framework. The study adopts a comparative perspective in analyzing each Western Balkan country's alignment with these four pillars to highlight differences in their responses and progress toward the EU's emerging security architecture. The findings reveal significant divergence among the aspirant Western Balkan countries in their alignment with recent EU security initiatives, largely driven by domestic political environments and geopolitical dynamics, which, in turn, affect their EU accession prospects and regional stability.

2. Conceptualizing EU Foreign and Security Policy: From Normative Power to Strategic Autonomy

The evolution of European Union (EU) foreign policy is characterized by its transformation into a self-identified "normative power" (Manners, 2002), marked by structural and procedural improvements achieved primarily through major treaties. The initial foundation for EU foreign policy was laid by the Maastricht Treaty, which established the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) as the second pillar of the EU. This cooperation was fundamentally intergovernmental in nature. Over time, the CFSP evolved through various phases, including the European Security and Defense Policy (ESDP), which later became the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) under the Lisbon Treaty. These mechanisms have been implemented in line with the EU's global ambitions (Smith, 2014) and its Global Strategy, emphasizing resilience and cooperative security (European Union, 2016).

Since the initial stages of EU foreign policy, its foundational norms—such as democracy, human rights, the rule of law, fundamental rights, and freedoms—have profoundly shaped its identity as a normative power. The concept of Normative Power Europe (NPE), as introduced by Manners (2002), is built on common principles and an ideational perspective, gaining prominence in the 1990s as the EU developed its military and civilian capabilities. NPE encompasses core norms such as the centrality of peace, respect for democracy, human rights, and the rule of law (Manners, 2002). These fundamental norms, along with four secondary norms—good governance, sustainable development, social solidarity, and anti-discrimination—have influenced the EU's foreign policy throughout its history. However, NPE contends that this power cannot be reduced to economic or military strength, although these elements do provide support (Diez, 2005).

The Lisbon Treaty marked a significant development in EU foreign policy by institutionalizing key principles and values in Article 2, such as the rule of law, democracy, and human rights. With this treaty, the CSDP became a distinct Union competence and an essential part of the EU's legal order (Lisbon Treaty, 2007). The treaty introduced structural and procedural improvements intended to increase the EU's effectiveness and fulfill the prerequisites for becoming a globally influential actor (Lisbon Treaty, 2007). Article 3 of the Treaty further supports the promotion of these

norms in international relations and emphasizes multilateralism in EU foreign policy (Lisbon Treaty, 2007). The Treaty also recognized the EU as a legal entity, which subsequently opened discussions among member states regarding the harmonization of foreign relations. Through the CSDP, the EU expanded its role by adopting a comprehensive approach to crisis management, conflict prevention, peacekeeping operations, and the strengthening of international security, all with the goal of promoting peace (Schmidt, 2014). The goal of the EU's security and defense mechanisms was to strengthen the EU's comprehensive approach to collective crisis management, peacekeeping operations, and conflict prevention, ultimately aiming to perpetuate peace through EU normative power.

A crucial part of this evolution is the externalization of EU norms and principles to third countries. The EU defines itself as a supranational organization whose identity is based on principles such as democracy, the rule of law, and human rights and is committed to promoting democratic values and human rights in its foreign relations. Instruments such as EU development policy, enlargement policy, neighborhood policy, and agreements with non-EU countries are all used to diffuse these values internationally, thereby constituting Normative Power Europe and defining the EU's identity (Cebeci, 2015).

Despite these formal improvements, EU foreign policy remains constrained by structural issues such as the diverse interests of member states, insufficient solidarity, and fragmented leadership. Its evolution has been marked by persistent tension and a continuing gap between normative discourse and practical reality, which is often evident when national interests conflict with common EU interests, as exemplified by the migration crisis (Erickson, 2011) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Esentürk, 2023). In other words, a recognized gap exists between the EU's normative discourse and its practical actions, as member states often prioritize their own interests, creating dilemmas that contradict the EU's normative approach. This tension has been further exposed by external challenges such as the migration crisis and the rise of radical right-wing populism in Europe.

The security landscape of Europe has evolved significantly in recent years, largely influenced by the resurgence of geopolitical tensions, including Russia's annexation of Crimea, the Russia–Ukraine war, and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Recent developments include the establishment of Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) and the European Defence Fund (EDF), which promote collaborative defense initiatives among member states (Council of the European Union, 2017). These measures reflect a shift toward greater military integration and readiness within the EU, complementing NATO's efforts. They also demonstrate an adaptive response to contemporary security challenges by emphasizing both strategic autonomy and collaborative defense mechanisms. Accordingly, the concept of "strategic autonomy" has emerged as a guiding principle in the EU's security discourse. It was first introduced in 2013 and subsequently incorporated into official EU documents after 2016, in parallel with Brexit and rising geopolitical risks. This concept entails reducing dependence on external actors, such as NATO, while fostering a more self-reliant security framework (Biscop, 2022). Since 2020, the concept

has been referred to as "open strategic autonomy." The aim is not only to enhance the military capabilities of member states but also to strengthen the EU's capacity to act autonomously in response to external crises. As a result, it has become an important strategic instrument and has assumed a pivotal role in the EU's external action within a multilateral framework. As geopolitical dynamics continue to evolve, the EU's ability to balance normative principles with security and strategic interests will be critical in shaping its global role.

The idea of strategic autonomy inherently presents several conundrums. Josep Borrell, the former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, underlines that "strategic autonomy refers to the EU's ability to ensure security without excessive external dependence" (EEAS, 2020). According to Beaucillon (2023), hard-power issues are addressed in an integrative manner with the objective of strengthening solidarity among the member states, while soft-power issues are reframed in terms of hard power, reinforcing the powers already vested in the EU. This creates an internal coherence problem. Strategic autonomy attempts to bridge the gap between norms and interests by framing hard-power capacity building in normative terms while upholding the rules-based international order. However, critics argue that the more the EU invests in coercive and securitized instruments, the greater the risk that it will become the kind of power against which it originally defined its identity (Knezović and Duić, 2023). These dilemmas reveal that strategic autonomy is not merely a policy goal achievable through capability investment but rather a contested identity project that challenges the EU's foundational political principles.

This historical and conceptual overview demonstrates the complex interplay between the EU's foundational identity as a normative power and its pursuit of geopolitical influence and strategic autonomy, a tension that has been particularly heightened by recent global developments. Understanding this evolution, and the inherent tensions between norms and interests, is crucial for analyzing the EU's emerging security architecture and for evaluating the responses of aspirant Western Balkan countries to, and the challenges associated with, alignment with the evolving European security framework.

3. Emerging European Security Architecture under the Shadow of Russia-Ukraine War

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine war has accelerated the reevaluation of the EU's security architecture, shifting from conceptual debates to concrete, accelerated action (Knezovic and Duic, 2023). This situation has prompted the EU to adopt a multidimensional perspective to improve its defense capabilities, strengthen military partnerships, and ensure geopolitical stability in Europe (Beaucillon, 2023). The following are the main steps undertaken by the EU to respond to the war, highlighting initiatives in military support, defense cooperation, and strategic policy adaptations. This new security structure is primarily detailed in the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, which was endorsed in March 2022 and provides a decade-long action plan, emphasizing the importance of rapid reaction capabilities, crisis management, and the establishment of partnerships, thereby signaling a comprehensive approach to collective security (European

Union, 2022). It sets out specific objectives to enhance the EU's crisis response mechanisms and overall resilience to external threats. These initiatives can be considered significant efforts of the EU to respond to external crises as a credible European power incorporating both norms and capabilities in a multilateral framework.

In the Strategic Compass, the steps of the EU's new security architecture are structured around four key pillars: ACT, SECURE, INVEST, and PARTNER (European Union, 2022). The first pillar focuses on the ability of the EU to act effectively and decisively in crises, using both military and civilian instruments. In this sense, the EU provided significant military assistance for Ukraine, consisting of both funding and delivering lethal weapons to a country under attack for the first time (European Union, 2022; EEAS, 2023). According to the Annual Progress Report on the implementation of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, the EU Military Assistance Mission (EUMAM) provides large-scale training to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, having trained over 75,000 troops (EEAS, 2023; EEAS 2024). This has been an unprecedented support for Ukraine. Moreover, since the outset of the war in 2022, the EU has provided military support to Ukraine through the European Peace Facility (EPF), which has emerged as a key instrument for financing military support. The EPF was created in March 2021, allowing the EU to fund military operations and to support partners in need (European Council, 2021). In that respect, the EPF has notably enabled the EU to provide arms and training to the Ukrainian Armed Forces, which underscores the EU's commitment to supporting Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Scheffer and Weber, 2022).

Under the pillar of ACT, a key initiative is the EU Rapid Deployment Capacity (RDC), which will be increased to a modular force of up to 5,000 troops provided with land, air, and maritime components to respond to crises in non-permissive environments. The RDC is planned to become fully operational by 2025, with live exercises from 2023 onwards (European Union, 2022). Data reveal that the EU has reinforced existing missions as a precautionary measure, such as by increasing the EUFOR Althea peacekeeping force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as well as the EULEX mission in Kosovo (NATO, 2022). It has also launched new missions, including a civilian mission in Armenia and a military partnership in Niger (NATO, 2022).

The second pillar is SECURE, which focuses on anticipation of threats and protection of strategic domains. This area focuses on enhancing intelligence, resilience, and security across strategic domains such as cyber, space, and maritime, particularly against hybrid threats (European Union, 2022; EEAS, 2023). The EU has updated its cyber defense policy to better protect, detect, and deter cyberattacks. To secure critical infrastructure and dependencies, the Versailles Declaration of March 2022 established the political will to reduce dependencies in defense, energy, and the economy (European Council, 2022; EEAS, 2023). The Russia-Ukraine war has heightened concerns over cybersecurity, provoking the EU to prioritize measures to enhance its cyber resilience. Thus, through the Strategic Compass, the EU has undertaken initiatives to combat hybrid threats, which cover disinformation campaigns and cyberattacks aimed at destabilizing member states (Kelemen, 2024). Improving cybersecurity frameworks and promoting information integrity have become critical elements of the EU's broader security strategy.

The third pillar focuses on building better capabilities and optimizing spending under INVEST. The Russia-Ukraine war exposed significant capability gaps and an urgent need for enhanced defense cooperation among its member states, prompting the EU to invest more and better in defense on a collaborative basis (Clapp, 2025; EEAS, 2023). Member states have collectively boosted their defense budgets, with announced increases projected to add an extra €70 billion by 2025 (EEAS, 2023). Defense expenditures of member states amounted to 343 billion euros in 2024, subsequently reaching 381 billion euros in 2025 (European Council, 2025). Compared to 2020, an increase of 62.87% was observed in the defense expenditures of EU countries (European Council, 2025). The 2022 Versailles Declaration envisaged collaboration in investment and common projects, and the procurement process to achieve optimal outputs. There has been a resurgence of interest in initiatives such as PESCO to deepen defense cooperation and capabilities (Council of the European Union, 2017).

ReArm Europe/Readiness 2030, as a new financial and instrumental instrument, comprises five elements, including the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) Instrument, which provides up to 150 billion euros in EU-backed loans for national defense investments (European Commission, 2025g; European Commission, 2025h). PESCO and the EDF are fully utilized to address critical deficiencies in land, sea, air, and space capabilities. The EU's objective of strategic autonomy underpins the investment pillar of the Strategic Compass, thereby fostering a robust European defense industry that is capable of autonomous action when necessary. While the Strategic Compass aligns with increased defense expenditures and the EU's 2016 global strategy, several challenges, such as uncertainties in the legal framework, ambiguities in decision-making processes, potentially complex bureaucratic structures, and the dependency of its effectiveness and sustainability on the political will of member states, are identified as significant weaknesses of the Strategic Compass from the investment perspective (Knezovic and Duic, 2023).

The EU's new security architecture under the Strategic Compass identifies the fourth pillar as PARTNER, which emphasizes strengthening cooperation. This pillar focuses on strengthening cooperation between the EU and other international organizations. The new security architecture emphasizes that strong partnerships are essential to ensure the rules-based international order. The EU's strategic relationship with NATO has been considerably deepened and formalized under the third joint statement in January 2023 (European Union, 2022). Cooperation focuses on military mobility, resilience, emerging technologies, countering disinformation, and reinforcing transatlantic unity. Cooperation has deepened with key partners like the U.S., the UK, Canada, and Norway, particularly in coordinating support for Ukraine. The EU is also strengthening its partnerships with the UN, African Union, and ASEAN (European Union, 2022). Recognizing the significance of transatlantic relations, the EU has strengthened its cooperation with NATO during the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war. Joint efforts such as coordinated military exercises and shared operational systems provide a strategic alignment of defense efforts. This partnership is pivotal for meeting mutual security concerns and providing a cohesive response to future challenges in Europe.

In a nutshell, measures to address the crises have also led to improvements in EU-level decision-making in security and foreign policy—at least with regard to greater flexibility when taking decisions, and more commonly agreeing on practical modalities for implementing Article 44 of the TEU, which allows a group of willing member states to conduct an operation (European Union, 2022). Considering the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, the EU has undertaken significant reforms and adaptations in its security structure as mentioned above. Through enhanced military support, strategic collaboration, and comprehensive policy frameworks, the EU is actively structuring a more resilient and cohesive defense posture, prioritizing security.

From a critical perspective, the emerging security architecture of the EU, triggered by the Russia-Ukraine war, is constrained by capability gaps, institutional fragmentation and impediments in decision-making procedures. The Strategic Compass is viewed as a political signal, but not as a fully-fledged security model (Brânda, 2022). Brânda (2022) describes the Strategic Compass as an active and reactive framework, but criticizes that it is deficient in implementation, capabilities, military and intelligence assets. Howorth (2025) criticizes the Strategic Compass in terms of institutional fragmentation. He argues that the Compass does not remove the structural conflicts of EU defense regarding strained relations between the EU, the US and NATO, but merely repackages these issues in strategic language. Casolari (2023) argues that the new security language in the Strategic Compass blurs the line between supranational authority and member state sovereignty, which has led to a hybridization of competences and legal instruments. Thus, the security structure has become more ambitious, but also more legally and politically ambiguous. In other words, the process of the emerging European security structure is hindered by fragmented member state preferences, weak intelligence and command integration, unresolved NATO dependence, and the legitimacy problems. The EU is moving from a purely normative self-image toward a geopolitical and security-oriented one, but without a fully settled political settlement behind that shift.

4. The Role of the Western Balkans in EU's Emerging Security Architecture: A Strategic Positioning

The Western Balkans have become a key pillar of the EU's emerging security architecture, which has been reshaped in the shadow of the Russia–Ukraine war. The Russia–Ukraine war has reframed EU enlargement as a geostrategic imperative, particularly with regard to the Western Balkans. The EU has accelerated its engagement with the region, requiring candidate countries, such as Serbia, to align their foreign policy with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), including the adoption of sanctions against Russia (Szczerba, 2022).

The strategic importance of the Western Balkans is highlighted in recent official NATO documents published after 2022. NATO's 2022 Strategic Concept and the 2023 EU–NATO Joint Declaration stress that the Western Balkans are "of strategic importance for the Alliance" and that the EU–NATO partnership must "enhance political dialogue and practical cooperation" in the region

(NATO, 2022; NATO, 2023a). This understanding stems from the region's critical geographical location, as the Western Balkan countries lie on the eastern flank of the EU and are considered a buffer zone capable of absorbing hybrid-threat spillovers resulting from Russia's war, thereby protecting the Union's rear (NATO, 2022).

NATO and EU leaders depict the Western Balkans as a strategic "bridge" within the European security architecture, connecting Central and Southern Europe, which has become increasingly important for ensuring secure transit corridors. The 2023 Vilnius Summit emphasized that NATO is "strongly committed to the security and stability of the Western Balkans … and supports reforms contributing to the respective NATO and EU aspirations of countries in the region" (NATO, 2023a). The 2024 Washington Summit Declaration reiterates that the Alliance will "continue to enhance its political dialogue and practical cooperation" with the Western Balkans, recognizing the region's "strategic importance" and linking this cooperation to broader European security objectives (NATO, 2024a).

According to recent official NATO documents concerning the emerging European security framework, the Western Balkan countries are expected to adopt democratic, rule-of-law, and defense reforms that will make them compatible with EU standards in defense policy and remove barriers to their future integration into EU security structures. Furthermore, they are expected to participate in EU–NATO partnership mechanisms, such as joint capacity-building projects and defense capacity-building packages, to strengthen regional resilience against hybrid threats, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns (NATO, 2023b; NATO, 2024b). Thus, although the Western Balkans are not yet part of the EU's security architecture, they are active partners in the EU–NATO cooperation framework, receiving political dialogue, practical assistance, and capacity-building support that prepare them for deeper involvement in Europe's evolving security architecture (NATO, 2024b).

According to NATO summit declarations and annual reports published after the outbreak of the Russia–Ukraine war, the Western Balkans' response to the EU's emerging security architecture has been multifaceted. NATO's 2023 and 2024 annual reports repeatedly state that the Western Balkans are a "region of strategic importance" and that the Alliance is "strongly committed to the security and stability of the Western Balkans" while "supporting reforms that advance the respective NATO and EU aspirations" of the countries in the region (NATO, 2023b; NATO, 2024b). Subsequent EU–NATO cooperation initiatives, including capacity-building packages, enhanced political dialogue, and practical security assistance, are described as measures aimed at "enhancing our political dialogue and practical cooperation" with the Western Balkans (NATO, 2022).

These recent official NATO documents indicate that the Western Balkan countries have embraced the EU's emerging security architecture by engaging in reform programs to comply with EU defense policy standards and participating in EU–NATO partnership mechanisms focused on developing resilience against hybrid threats, cyber threats, and disinformation campaigns. Their

response has centered on cooperation and alignment, seeking to translate political dialogue and capacity-building support into concrete steps toward eventual integration into the EU's security architecture. In this respect, the European Union's post-2022 security agenda has become a decisive benchmark for the Western Balkans, prompting the candidate countries to align their foreign and defense policies with four interrelated pillars: alignment with the CFSP, the deepening of formal security and defense partnerships with the EU, active participation in CSDP missions, and the development of capacities to counter hybrid threats, strengthen cyber resilience, and combat disinformation. These pillars constitute the analytical framework for the comparative analysis of the aspirant Western Balkan countries' alignment with the EU's emerging security architecture.

5. Aspirant Western Balkan Countries' Alignment with the EU's Emerging Security Architecture: A Comparative Analysis (2023-2025)

In this part of the study, the alignment of the six aspirant Western Balkan countries (Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia) with the EU's emerging security architecture is analyzed from a comparative perspective based on the EU country reports published between 2023 and 2025. The qualitative content analysis is structured around the four pillars discussed above that the aspirant countries are expected to meet under the EU's post-2022 security framework. A comparative overview of the aspirant Western Balkan countries' alignment with the EU's emerging security architecture is provided in the Annex.

5.1. Albania

According to the EU country reports, Albania achieved full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) throughout the 2023–2025 period, consistently adopting EU sanctions and publicly condemning Russian aggression. The signing of the EU–Albania Security and Defence Partnership in December 2024, followed by the first bilateral dialogue in April 2025, established a formal security and defense framework (European Commission, 2024a; European Commission, 2025a). Albania has deployed a platoon to EUFOR Althea (the EU's military operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina), contributed to the EU Battlegroup, and provided both humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine (European Commission, 2024a). Regarding hybrid threats, it adopted a National Cybersecurity Strategy for the 2025–2030 period, joined the Hybrid Center of Excellence in June 2024, and approved a national strategy against foreign information manipulation and interference in July 2025 (European Commission, 2024a; European Commission, 2025a). These actions illustrate a coherent translation of political alignment into concrete security, resilience, and implementation measures. Albania is still working to strengthen its capacity to participate in CSDP activities and to improve its resilience against future hybrid threats. There is no significant domestic political opposition to sanctions against Russia, and there are no major geopolitical constraints affecting implementation.

5.2. Montenegro

According to the EU country reports on Montenegro covering the period from 2023 to 2025, Montenegro has followed a path similar to Albania's in aligning with the EU's emerging security architecture, achieving full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). It participated in the informal "Western Balkan QUAD – 100% CFSP Alignment" platform in 2023 (European Commission, 2023b). Although there is no formal bilateral security and defense partnership, Montenegro strengthened its domestic legal framework by adopting a new Law on Restrictive Measures in December 2024 to ensure the effective enforcement of EU sanctions (European Commission, 2025b). Diplomatically, the country formally proposed the establishment of a Security and Defence Dialogue with the EU in October 2025, thereby institutionalizing bilateral security ties (European Commission, 2025b). Operationally, Montenegro contributed troops to EU NAVFOR ATALANTA (EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta) (European Commission, 2024b) and formally decided to participate in EUMAM Ukraine. These steps signal Montenegro's clear trajectory toward deeper CSDP integration and closer alignment with EU foreign policy.

5.3. North Macedonia

According to the EU country reports, North Macedonia maintained full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) throughout the 2023–2025 period, fully adopting EU sanctions against Russia. North Macedonia signed a Security and Defence Partnership with the EU in November 2024 and initiated a bilateral security dialogue in May 2025 (European Commission, 2024c; European Commission, 2025c). The country contributed additional military personnel to EUFOR Althea, participated in the EU Battlegroup HELBROC 2023, and provided humanitarian and military assistance to Ukraine (European Commission, 2023c). Its capacity to address hybrid threats was strengthened through its accession to the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in October 2023, and the country also adopted a National Strategy on Hybrid Threats for the 2023–2024 period (European Commission, 2023c). There have been minor procedural and administrative deficiencies in transposing EU restrictive measures into national law (European Commission, 2025c). Specifically, these involve a temporal delay between political alignment with EU restrictive measures and their formal implementation in national legislation.

5.4. Kosovo

According to the EU country reports, Kosovo has fully aligned itself with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) and enforced EU sanctions against Russia. It adopted EU sanctions, condemned Russian aggression, and delivered humanitarian assistance and its first military aid package to Ukraine (European Commission, 2023d; European Commission, 2024d). While there is no formal bilateral security and defense partnership with the EU, a trilateral defense declaration was signed with Albania and Croatia in March 2025, providing a framework for

security cooperation (European Commission, 2025d). Kosovo's capacity to address hybrid threats is gradually developing through the implementation of a counterterrorism strategy for the 2023–2028 period in cooperation with Europol and Eurojust (European Commission, 2025d). A comprehensive national framework for addressing hybrid threats is still under development (European Commission, 2025d). On the implementation side, political constraints—particularly the unresolved Kosovo–Serbia normalization process—continue to impede the implementation of some reforms (European Commission, 2025d).

5.5. Bosnia & Herzegovina

According to the EU country reports covering the period from 2023 to 2025, Bosnia and Herzegovina expressed full alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) in statements made at the United Nations (UN), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), and the Council of Europe throughout the 2023–2025 period. However, implementation has been hampered by the obstruction of Republika Srpska (RS), as flights from Russia continue to operate, Russian media outlets remain accessible, and some ministries resist the enforcement of EU sanctions (European Commission, 2025e). The country lacks a formal security and defense partnership with the EU; therefore, its alignment remains largely declaratory (European Commission, 2023e; European Commission, 2024e; European Commission, 2025e). Bosnia and Herzegovina's contribution to EU missions is limited to participation in the European Union Training Mission in the Central African Republic (EUTM RCA) (European Commission, 2025e). It also receives support from the European Peace Facility (EPF) for demining and CBRN (chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear) capacity building. Capacity to address hybrid threats remains limited, with no coherent and systematic approach to cybersecurity and continued vulnerability to disinformation (European Commission, 2025e). Domestically, there is a profound division between the state institutions and the Republika Srpska entity, resulting in a persistent gap between policy and implementation (European Commission, 2025e).

5.6. Serbia

According to the EU country reports covering the period from 2023 to 2025, Serbia exhibits the lowest level of alignment with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) among the aspirant Western Balkan countries, increasing modestly from 46% in 2022 to 63% in October 2025. However, it has not adopted EU sanctions against Russia (European Commission, 2025f). Its strategic orientation toward Russia and China is reflected in high-level visits and the conclusion of a free trade agreement with China in July 2024. Serbia lacks a formal security and defense partnership with the EU and participates only in limited training missions and humanitarian support for EU missions (European Commission, 2025f). Its participation in the EU Training Mission in Mozambique (EUTM Mozambique) is one such example. The country provides humanitarian assistance to Ukraine but neither supplies weapons nor joins the EU sanctions regime (European Commission, 2023f; European Commission, 2024f; European

Commission, 2025f). Its capacity to address hybrid threats remains underdeveloped, with only limited awareness of the associated risks, some technical cooperation, but no comprehensive national strategy (European Commission, 2025f). The country reports indicate that Serbia's partial alignment with the CFSP is constrained by its strong historical ties with Russia and China.

The comparative analysis demonstrates significant divergence among the aspirant Western Balkan countries regarding their alignment with the CFSP, according to the EU country reports covering the period from 2023 to 2025. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo have achieved full CFSP alignment, implemented EU sanctions, and established formal security and defense partnerships with the EU. These actions actively reinforce the EU's self-perception as a normative power. Their policies seek to externalize the EU's condemnation of aggression and uphold its foundational principles. The establishment of formal security and defense partnerships with the EU by Albania and North Macedonia directly contributes to the EU's objective of becoming a more self-reliant geopolitical actor as part of its pursuit of strategic autonomy. These countries also participate actively in CSDP missions. The deployment of personnel to EUFOR Althea and participation in EU Battlegroups by countries such as Albania and North Macedonia clearly operationalize the ACT pillar of the EU's emerging security architecture. Such contributions strengthen the EU's collective crisis-response mechanisms and enhance its capacity for autonomous action in response to external threats. Regarding the development of capacities to address hybrid threats, the adoption of national cybersecurity strategies by countries such as Albania and North Macedonia, together with their membership in the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), demonstrates their alignment with the EU's pragmatic shift toward becoming a more active geopolitical actor. These actions directly reinforce the SECURE pillar of the EU's Strategic Compass and contribute to the Union's strategic autonomy in protecting its digital and information space.

By contrast, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia exhibit only partial alignment with the CFSP. This highlights the persistent gap between the EU's normative discourse and practical reality when confronted with divergent interests among member states and candidate countries. It also illustrates the challenges associated with achieving the EU's objective of strategic autonomy. Furthermore, the absence of formal security and defense partnerships between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia and the EU represents a missed opportunity to strengthen the Union's external security environment. Serbia's balancing strategy between its EU aspirations and its ties with Russia and China, for instance, undermines the EU's pursuit of open strategic autonomy. Serbia's limited participation in CSDP missions and its refusal to provide weapons to Ukraine illustrate the constraints imposed by conflicting national interests on the EU's ambition to act as a coherent geopolitical actor. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal ethnic divisions obstruct the implementation of CFSP sanctions and weaken the country's resilience against hybrid threats. The country's limited capacity to address hybrid threats, reflected in the absence of a coherent cybersecurity strategy, undermines both its own security and that of the EU. This demonstrates how institutional fragmentation and limited state capacity hinder the effective implementation of measures that are essential for both the EU and its aspirant countries in building a resilient European security architecture.

6. Conclusion

The ongoing Russia–Ukraine war and evolving geopolitical developments have prompted the EU to undertake reforms and adaptations to its security architecture, including enhanced military spending and capabilities, strategic cooperation, and comprehensive policy frameworks that emphasize security-oriented priorities. Despite capability gaps, institutional fragmentation, and other impediments within the emerging European security architecture, the EU is evolving into a geopolitical actor that integrates normative principles into its security discourse while simultaneously enhancing its military capabilities, defense cooperation, and deterrence mechanisms. As key strategic partners, the aspirant Western Balkan countries occupy an important position in shaping and strengthening European security. This study conducts a comparative analysis of the EU country reports covering the six aspirant Western Balkan countries for the period from 2023 to 2025 to examine the extent of their alignment with the EU's emerging security architecture.

The Western Balkans constitute a valuable case for demonstrating the complexity and diversity of alignment with the EU's security policy. The comparative analysis of the Western Balkan countries' alignment with the EU's emerging security architecture reveals significant divergence among them. On the one hand, Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Kosovo have made substantial progress in aligning with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). They have successfully translated full political alignment into the effective implementation of EU sanctions, active participation in CSDP missions, the establishment of security and defense partnerships, and engagement with frameworks for addressing hybrid threats. These countries therefore reinforce the EU's normative foundations while contributing to its operational capacity for strategic autonomy.

On the other hand, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia have achieved only partial alignment with the CFSP. Their lack of security and defense partnerships with the EU, limited participation in CSDP missions, and the absence of coherent cybersecurity strategies undermine the European security architecture. Their policies exemplify the persistent challenges and capability gaps inherent in the EU's foreign policy identity project, particularly in its pursuit of geopolitical influence and strategic autonomy. Their policy preferences demonstrate how domestic political dynamics, historical ties, and strategic hedging directly affect the EU's ability to project a coherent security architecture and pursue its geopolitical ambitions in its immediate neighborhood.

The study also highlights that divergence in security policy alignment among the Western Balkan countries is likely to affect the future of the EU's enlargement strategy toward the region. In this context, the EU is likely to support the former group of countries through deeper integration and stronger financial assistance, whereas the latter group is likely to face more demanding reform requirements to address deficiencies in security policy alignment and advance their progress toward EU membership.

In conclusion, the divergent responses of the Western Balkan countries to the EU's emerging security architecture underscore not only the importance of alignment with the CFSP but also the capacity of these countries to implement and sustain EU-driven security measures. The extent to which each aspirant Western Balkan country is able to bridge the gap between political commitments and practical implementation will be a key determinant of its progress in the EU accession process and will shape the EU's future conditionality framework toward the region.

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ANNEX. Comparative Outlook of the Aspirant Western Balkan Countries' Alignment with the EU's Emerging Security Architecture between 2023 and 2025

Country	Policy alignment with EU CFSP and sanctions	Formal security-defense partnership with the EU	Participation in EU CSDP/direct assistance to Ukraine	Hybrid-threat cyber-resilience measures
Albania	Full political alignment with the EU CFSP and sanctions.	EUAlbania Security & Defense Partnership (Dec 2024); First dialogue (Apr 2025).	Deploys a platoon to EUFOR Althea and a light company to the EU Battlegroup; offers humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine.	National Cybersecurity Strategy 20252030, became a member of the Hybrid CoE (Jun 2024) and agreed on National Strategy against foreign interference (Jul 2025).
Montenegro	Full alignment with EU CFSP statements and sanctions btw 2023-2025. Adopted a Law on restrictive measures (Dec 2024).	Working on an EUMontenegro securitydefense dialogue (Oct 2025); previously was engaged in the informal "Western Balkan QUAD platform (2023).	Contributes to EU NAVFOR AT ALANTA; submitted (Sep 2023) and then (Jun 2025) a request to be a part of EUMAM Ukraine; participates in other CSDP missions.	Aligns with EU statements condemning Russian hybrid campaigns (2025); home of Western Balkans Cyber Capacity Center (2024); working on a hybridthreat strategy.
North Macedonia	Full alignment with EU CFSP and all sanctions	Agreed to a Security & Defense Partnership (spring 2024) and signing it (Nov 2024); first round of dialogue (May 2025).	Sends additional military staff to EUFOR Althea (Nov 2025May 2026); participates in EU Battle Group HELBROC; provides humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine.	Joined the European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (2023) and implemented a hybrid-threat strategy (2023-2024)
Kosovo	Full alignment and actively operationalizes the EU sanctions on Russia; delivers humanitarian and the first military assistance to Ukraine.	No formal EUbilateral partnership; a trilateral defense declaration was explored with Albania and Croatia (Mar 2025).	Offers humanitarian aid (and military assistance) to Ukraine; engages in regional security cooperation and joint police operations.	Agreed on a national counterterrorism strategy (20232028) and cooperates with Europol/Eurojust.
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Formal full alignment in statements; Implementation obstructed by Republika Srpska's (RS)	No bilateral EU securitydefense partnership. alignment at the statement level.	Contributes to EU training missions (EUTM CAR) and benefit from EPF support for demining/CBRN.	Vulnerable to hybrid threats; Russian state media still broadcast; no coherent cyber strategy.
Serbia	Partial alignment, but never aligned with EU on Russia sanctions; highlevel contacts with Russia are kept	No formal EU securitydefense partnership; continues a "balancing act" between EU aspirations and Russian/Chinese ties.	Takes part in EU crisismanagement missions; offers humanitarian assistance to Ukraine but does not supply weapons and does not join EU sanctions.	Recognizes hybridthreat risks but does not have a specific strategy; some technical cooperation on sanctionscircumvention.

Source: This table is compiled by the author from the EU country reports of the aspirant Western Balkan countries for 2023-2025 (European Commission, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c, 2023d, 2023e, 2023f; European Commission, 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d, 2024e, 2024f; European Commission, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, 2025f)

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Neriman Ersoy Hacısalihoğlu, *Balkanlarda Asimilasyon ve Sürgün: Bulgaristan'da Türklere Yönelik Etnik Temizlik Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Göçler*, İstanbul: Efe Akademi Yayınları, 2026, 211 s.

H. Vildan KABASAKAL*

Neriman Ersoy Hacısalihoğlu'nun kaleme aldığı *Balkanlarda Asimilasyon ve Sürgün: Bulgaristan'da Türklere Yönelik Etnik Temizlik Politikaları ve Türkiye'ye Göçler* adlı kapsamlı çalışması, 1877-78 Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı'ndan başlayarak 1989 zorunlu göçüne kadar uzanan bir asırlık süreci mercek altına almaktadır. Yazarın temel iddiası, Bulgaristan'daki Türk ve Müslüman varlığının tasfiyesinin münferit olaylardan ibaret olmadığı; modern Bulgar ulus-devlet inşasının ayrılmaz ve sistematik bir parçasını oluşturduğudur. Eser, Balkan coğrafyasındaki Türk varlığının tasfiyesine yönelik girişimleri uluslararası siyaset ve ulus-devlet inşası bağlamında analiz etmektedir. Ayrıca, göç süreçlerini basit birer nüfus hareketi olarak değil, bilinçli bir etnik temizlik ve asimilasyon stratejisinin sonucu olarak değerlendirmektedir.

Yazar, kitabın ilk bölümlerinde "93 Harbi" olarak da bilinen Osmanlı-Rus Savaşı'nın yarattığı ağır insani ve siyasi sonuçlara odaklanmaktadır. Rus-Bulgar birliklerinin gerçekleştirdiği etnik kıyımların, yeni kurulan Bulgar devletinin demografik yapısını şekillendirmede nasıl bir araç olarak kullanıldığını çeşitli tarihsel örneklerle ortaya koymaktadır. Yazara göre savaş sonrasında kurulan Bulgaristan'da Türk ve Müslüman topluluklar, yalnızca birer azınlık değil, sistematik biçimde dışlanan ve istenmeyen kitleler olarak konumlandırılmıştır.

Kitap, Balkan coğrafyasındaki Türk varlığına yönelik saldırıları kronolojik bir bütünlük içerisinde ele alması bakımından literatüre önemli bir katkı sunmaktadır. Yazarın temel argümanı, Bulgaristan'daki azınlık politikalarının yalnızca iç siyasi dinamiklerle değil, Osmanlı Devleti ve Cumhuriyet Türkiye'si ile olan ilişkiler ile küresel siyasi konjonktürle de doğrudan

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bağlantılı olduğudur. Özellikle 93 Harbi'nin yarattığı "facia" tablosu üzerinden, etnik kıyımların yeni devletin demografik temelini oluşturmada bir araç olarak kullanıldığını ileri sürmektedir.

Çalışmada, azınlık politikalarının dönemlere göre gösterdiği dönüşüm titizlikle takip edilmektedir. Yazar, Balkan Savaşları (1912-13) döneminde Müslümanları hedef alan katliamları ve özellikle Rodoplar'da Pomaklara uygulanan zorunlu Hristiyanlaştırma politikalarını "etnik temizlik" perspektifiyle değerlendirerek analizine başlamaktadır. Ardından, 1923-39 yıllarını kapsayan savaşlar arası döneme odaklanarak 1927 yılındaki milliyetçi saldırıları ve 1934 askerî darbesinin ardından ağırlaşan şiddet politikalarının Türk toplumunun sosyal ve siyasal yapısı üzerindeki etkilerini ayrıntılı biçimde incelemektedir. 1945 sonrasındaki Sosyalist Rejim Dönemi'nde ise 1950-51 kitlesel göçleri, rejimin ideolojik baskıları ve mülkiyet haklarına yönelik müdahaleler ele alınmaktadır. Nihayet, kitabın en dikkat çekici bölümlerinden birini oluşturan Jivkov Dönemi ve Göç Süreci (1984-89) bölümünde isim değiştirme kampanyaları ile 1989 yılındaki Büyük Göç süreci, bir asırlık asimilasyon politikasının son ve en radikal aşaması olarak değerlendirilmektedir.

Kitap, Bulgaristan'daki Türk azınlığın haklarının Osmanlı Devleti ve Cumhuriyet Türkiye'si ile olan ikili ilişkilerden ve küresel siyasi konjonktürden bağımsız olmadığını ortaya koymaktadır. Yazarın kullandığı terminoloji (örneğin soykırım, tehcir ve asimilasyon), tarihsel belgelerle desteklenerek Balkan Türk tarihine ilişkin literatüre değerli katkılar sağlamaktadır.

Eser, siyasi tarihin yanı sıra uluslararası ilişkiler disiplinine de devletlerin "beka" ve "homojen ulus yaratma" çabalarının insani maliyetlerini ortaya koyarak katkıda bulunmaktadır. Özellikle Rodoplar'daki Pomaklara yönelik zorla Hristiyanlaştırma politikaları ve 1984-85 isim değiştirme kampanyaları gibi bölümler, ulus-devlet inşası sürecinin ne denli sert ve trajik uygulamalara dönüşebildiğini somut biçimde göstermektedir. Kitap, Soğuk Savaş'ın ideolojik perdesi ardında bir halkın kimlik mücadelesini görünür kılmaktadır.

Yazarın soykırım, tehcir ve asimilasyon gibi kavramları duygusal bir anlatımdan ziyade tarihsel belgelerle destekleyerek kullanması dikkat çekicidir. Jivkov dönemi ve 1989 yılındaki Büyük Göç sürecine ilişkin analizler, asimilasyon politikalarının ulaştığı en ileri aşamayı göstermesi bakımından eserin en dikkat çekici bölümlerinden birini oluşturmaktadır. Bununla birlikte, eserin devlet politikalarına ve makro tarihsel süreçlere yoğunlaşırken göç mağdurlarının bireysel tanıklıklarına ve sözlü tarih anlatılarına daha fazla yer vermesi, çalışmanın insani boyutunu daha da güçlendirebilirdi. Ayrıca, göç edenlerin Türkiye'deki entegrasyon süreçlerinin sosyolojik boyutu tarihsel anlatının yanında daha ayrıntılı biçimde ele alınabilirdi.

Bu eser, yalnızca tarih araştırmacıları için değil, aynı zamanda Bulgaristan Türklerinin kolektif hafızasını ve kimlik mücadelesini derinlemesine anlamak isteyen her okur için önemli bir başvuru kaynağı niteliği taşımaktadır. Kitabı inceleyen bir okuyucu, Balkan Türk tarihinin bir asrı aşkın trajik seyrine ilişkin bütüncül bir bakış açısı kazanırken, azınlık hakları ile devletlerin ulusal politikaları arasındaki hassas ve çoğu zaman çatışmalı dengenin nasıl şekillendiğini kavrama imkânı bulmaktadır. Öte yandan, bu çalışma göç olgusunun yalnızca fiziksel bir yer değiştirme olmadığını; aynı zamanda bir halkın varoluş mücadelesi ve kuşaklar boyunca süren

derin bir trajedinin sonucu olduğunu açık biçimde ortaya koyarak okuyucunun tarihsel bilincine çok boyutlu bir katkı sunmaktadır.

Sonuç olarak, bu kitap Bulgaristan Türklerinin kolektif hafızasını ve maruz kaldıkları sistematik baskıların tarihsel kökenlerini anlamak isteyen akademisyenler, tarihçiler ve konuya ilgi duyan okurlar için temel bir başvuru kaynağı niteliğindedir. Kitap, göçü yalnızca fiziksel bir yer değiştirme olarak değil, zorlu bir varoluş mücadelesinin ve uzun soluklu bir trajedinin sonucu olarak okuyucuya sunmaktadır.