

Defender of the faith: the role of religion in Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans in the 21st century

The main goal of this project is to determine the role of religion in Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans in the 21st century. The Justice and Development Party (tur. *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi - AKP*), ruling there since 2002, has been seeking to expand its political influence over the former Ottoman Empire for nearly two decades, which is to be the first step towards achieving the status of a regional power. According to the doctrine of Turkish foreign policy, at the beginning of the 21st century the primary task of Turks was to rebuild the Muslim world's unity. Active diplomacy, which promoted the model of Turkish democracy based on Islamic values, was the main tool responsible for enabling Ankara's political expansion. In this way, Turkey has been strengthening the community of Muslim states as a leader of Islamic civilization. Sunni religion thus functioned as a binder of the political doctrine, being the only factor directly connecting the vast majority of nations covered by it.

As part of this project, special attention has been drawn to Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans region which includes the following countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. At this point it is worth noting that the Balkan Peninsula was the first region towards which the AKP government had decided to implement basic elements of its doctrine in political practice. As a result of active foreign policy and significant financial support, the Turks established positive relations with both Muslim (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina) and Christian countries (Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro). Although AKP politicians have managed to improve Turkey's image in the region and also strengthen economic and cultural ties connecting Ankara with the Western Balkans, this has not yet translated into gaining significant political influence. So how did the role of defender of faith, declared by the AKP government, prevent successful execution of Turkish strategic interests in the Western Balkans?

At the initial stage of this research, it is planned to continue a literature review, with particular regard to the latest publications of Turkish authors. Afterward, the Principal Investigator (PI) will analyze official documents regarding the subject of this study, issued by the office of the President of the Republic of Turkey and the AKP government. In addition to the source research, fieldwork conducted in both Turkey and the Balkan countries will be an equally important phase of the project. In order to gain the most up-to-date information on Turkish initiatives in the Western Balkans, it is aimed to interview politicians, government agency employees and representatives of third sector organizations. Moreover, during research trips to Turkey and the Balkans, the PI intends to establish contacts with local political science scholars and of international relations researchers. Conclusions obtained in this way will certainly allow verification of preliminary hypotheses and contribute to enriching the project with new perspectives.

The growing importance of the Republic of Turkey on the international arena requires tracking and interpreting its actions as well as explaining the assumptions of Turkish foreign policy. In this regard, huge cultural support for Muslims in the Western Balkans, observed in the last few years, is a key aspect of research interest. In combination with significant investments by Turkish enterprises, the AKP government creates the image of Turkey as a reliable partner, involved in providing sustainable development for the entire Balkan Peninsula. However, has the position of the Republic of Turkey already been strong enough to intensify efforts to broaden its political influence in the Balkans? An attempt to find the answer to this question is one of the primary goals in this project as well.

In order to explain basic aspirations of President Erdoğan and the Justice and Development Party's foreign policy on European level, the PI of this project decided to employ mainly Turkish sources related to this topic. Thus, it will be possible to reliably present Turkey's views and attitudes in the area that represents the subject of this project. Employing all available materials, the PI will conduct a comprehensive summary of Turkish authorities' contemporary policies in the Western Balkans, and attempt to introduce scenarios for further developments in this region. The results of this work may therefore broaden the knowledge of Republic of Turkey's geopolitical conception and contribute to further research on the foreign policy of this state. An in-depth analysis of Turkish-Balkan relations should be also valuable for the European Union institutions which could then utilize its conclusions to prepare a comprehensive integration strategy towards the region and to react faster to dynamic changes occurring in this area in the future.