

**BUSINESS, RELIGION AND ERDOĞAN:  
INFLUENCE OPERATIONS OF TÜRKIYE  
IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

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**Abstract.** The text analyses Türkiye's influence operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their implications for the internal situation and the EU's interests. Turkish activities are analysed in the fields of diplomacy, public diplomacy, information operations, economic operations, and clandestine and military operations using an updated RAND model. The article argues that Türkiye adopts a pragmatic approach, prioritising economic ties and carefully tailoring narratives for diverse audiences in the country. This approach enables Ankara to maintain constructive relations with representatives of the three main ethnic groups and act as a mediator during Bosnia and Herzegovina's internal crises and the EU's diminishing presence. However, as Turkish relations with local actors are mainly Erdoğan-centric and personalised, there are also potential risks and challenges. These encompass corruption, the erosion of democratic institutions, the exportation of Türkiye's internal issues to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the undermining of the EU's influence in the country.

**Keywords:** Türkiye, influence, operations, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, diplomacy, Erdoğan

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## 1. Introduction

Due to its geographical location, ethnic diversity, historical significance, and economic potential, Bosnia and Herzegovina has been an important yet turbulent playground for foreign actors for centuries. One of the most active players in the country has been the Republic of Türkiye. There are up to five million people living in Türkiye with roots in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Büyük 2021). This fact, together with common Ottoman history, geographic proximity, increasing economic presence, and close relationship between the Turkish government and local elites and communities, makes Türkiye one of the key actors in the Balkan country. To further increase its influence and assert its interests in the region, Ankara has been using a multitude of influence operations. In recent years, the activities of the Republic in Türkiye in the region have worried policymakers and analysts. Ethnic tensions, economic difficulties, and ongoing democratisation processes create a fragile balance that can be easily disturbed, leading to conflicts and democratic backsliding. In the past two years, the tensions in Bosnia and Herzegovina have grown even further, caused by the decision of the Bosnian Serb entity's suspension of recognition of rulings made by the Constitutional Court in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Office of the High Representative, OHR, called the law "a serious challenge to the rule of law in the RS, and an assault on the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina" (Latal 2023). The deepening internal crisis and the continuing weakening of the EU's presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina creates a power vacuum, which other geopolitical players, such as Türkiye, may try to fill. As Sarajevo was granted an EU candidate status on December 15, 2022, the text will focus on analysing Türkiye's influence operations in the country in order to understand the impacts of these activities on the internal situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as the impact on the interests of the EU.

## 2. Influence operations

Although the term 'influence operation' has been used for decades, notably in the context of military and intelligence operations, there is no widely accepted definition. For the purpose of this text, the authors use the definition as presented by RAND. "Influence operations are the coordinated, integrated, and synchronised application of national diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and other capabilities in peacetime, crisis, conflict, and post-conflict to foster attitudes, behaviours, or decisions by foreign target audiences [...]" (Larson et al. 2009: 12). To analyse the elements of the influence operations, the text uses the updated RAND model, as presented by Fratrič (2023). The model identifies five main elements of the influence operations:

- Diplomacy – activities conducted through various channels by diplomatic agents, other state officials, and private individuals. It aims to advance a specific state's objectives by influencing their foreign counterparts, state representatives, or foreign agencies.

- Public diplomacy – activities carried out by state institutions, parastatal organisations, or NGOs. These activities are conducted with the goal of influencing foreign government actions or positions by engaging with the community and shaping public opinion.
- Information operations – the dissemination of curated information, propaganda, or the fabrication of false narratives to either gain support for a specific cause or to alter perceptions and ideas, instil fear and/or uncertainty within the target audience (via numerous channels such as social media, TV, newspapers, etc.).
- Economic operations – a wide variety of business and economy-related activities involving investments in the foreign country, loans, signing trade deals, gaining control over companies or gaining influence over companies in any other ways in order to promote state interests in the foreign country.
- Clandestine operations and military cooperation – Clandestine operations describe activities conducted by state bodies or agencies in a foreign country in a concealed way. Examples include covert influence, espionage, and assassinations. Military cooperation entails agreements between states to establish long-term institutional frameworks for routine bilateral defence relations, including joint exercises, policy coordination, research, and procurement (Fratric 2023).

### **3. The influence operations of Türkiye in Bosnia and Herzegovina**

#### *3.1. Diplomacy: Pragmatic economist vs. Muslim brother and protector*

Undoubtedly, there was a special meaning attributed to Bosnia and Herzegovina within the Turkish religious-conservative circles even before the rise of the AKP, but the country which is referred to as ‘the West Coast of the Ottoman Empire’ and ‘the banner of Islam in Europe’ became especially important during the AKP period (Özkan 2015). The main political ties between Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina are in the form of links between the AKP and the largest political party of Bosniaks, the nationalist and conservative Party of Democratic Action (SDA) (Öztürk 2022). More specifically, between Erdoğan and the SDA leader Bakir Izetbegović, the son of the former president of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Alija Izetbegović. Erdoğan has been criticised for establishing a personal network with selected Balkan leaders who see him as a role model, turning a blind eye to his gradually more and more authoritarian rule – Izetbegović being one of them (Büyük and Öztürk 2019). Erdoğan shows support and personal preferences towards Izetbegović, and Izetbegović is also a vocal supporter of Erdoğan (Dolejší 2019).

When Erdoğan was banned from organising election rallies in 2018 by Western European countries, the Union of International Democrats (UID) organised a rally in Sarajevo. During the rally, Izetbegović said that Erdoğan was sent by God (Colborne

and Edwards 2018). Erdoğan, on the other hand, “emphasised Türkiye’s internal political outlook and underlined the Ottoman-Islamic elements of Türkiye’s current foreign policy towards the Balkans” (Büyük and Öztürk 2019). Such a narrative was, however, not welcomed by all groups within the Bosnian society. Izetbegović stated that “if Erdoğan were elected president, he would not only act as president of Türkiye but also as president of Bosnia” (Büyük 2015). It is, therefore, not surprising that his most significant opponent Radončić declared concerning Bosnian elections that he fought not only against Izetbegović but also against Erdoğan (Özkan 2015).

The ties between the AKP and the SDA are not only in the sphere of politics but also in family and business life. The Turkish president was the best man at the wedding of Izetbegović’s daughter (Sarajevo Times 2022b). Likewise, Izetbegović was the guest of honour at the wedding of Sümeyye, Erdoğan’s daughter (Anadolu Ajansı 2016). The Turkish president also supports Izetbegović’s wife, Sebija. For example, the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA) renovated the Sarajevo hospital at the very time when Sebija Izetbegović held the position of director (Dolejší 2019, Büyük and Öztürk 2019). The fact that not only TİKA’s largest overseas office but also the Balkan office of the state-run news agency, Anadolu Ajansı (AA), are located in Sarajevo shows the importance that the AKP attaches to Bosnia and Herzegovina in its foreign policy (Özkan 2015).

Turkish influence in the sphere of politics does not concern only Izetbegović and his family. Muzaffer Çilek, a Turkish businessman with close ties to the AKP, was appointed a senior advisor to the SDA’s leader (Büyük 2015). Some Mayors from the SDA have often been accused of being too submissive to the AKP. For example, the Mayor of Sarajevo decided to name Orhan Pamuk an ‘honorary citizen of Sarajevo’. Pamuk, a Turkish author and Nobel laureate who was forced to flee Türkiye, is also known for his criticism of Erdoğan (Freely 2005). However, as his statements and views were not in line with the Turkish government, the Mayor of Sarajevo backed down and decided not to further pursue the idea (Muhasilović 2022).

After Davutoğlu’s resignation and the unsuccessful coup d’état in 2016, the political focus of Türkiye on Western Balkan countries was primarily through the lens of catching FETÖ supporters. However, with the tensions between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia, as well as between Serbia and Kosovo rising, the Turkish government indicated in 2021/2022 its ambition to act as a more active mediator in the region, and Erdoğan significantly increased the intensity of visits with the local state representatives.

Besides the SDA, the AKP also has political ties to Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb politician, the president of Republika Srpska, and the leader of the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD). They not only share similar views on questions such as sanctions on Russia due to the war in Ukraine or their negative narrative towards the West and the EU, but they also cooperate in business development projects. Another point of agreement between Dodik and Ankara paradoxically involves the Srebrenica genocide. In July 2023, the AKP-led parliament rejected the Bill on the Recognition of the Genocide in Srebrenica despite Türkiye condemning the event as a genocide for a long time. The rejection was motivated by the fear of

its effect on the discussion about the Armenian genocide, the fact that the bill was brought to parliament by the opposition and, last but not least, by the unwillingness to damage relations with Serbia.

Involving Erdoğan in mediation in the region is seen by Dodik as a tool to diminish the power of the EU (Yeni Akit 2022). Dodik also named Erdoğan ‘one of the world’s greatest leaders’ and called for his participation in the resolution of conflicts within Bosnia and Herzegovina (Yeni Akit 2022). He added that war within the country is not an option since he promised Erdoğan that Republika Srpska would not resort to using arms (Yeni Şafak 2021).

The political influence of the AKP towards Bosnia and Herzegovina can be asserted through other channels besides its direct cooperation with Izetbegović and Dodik. It is also likely that AKP can influence other Bosnian political entities, such as the Bosnian-Herzegovinian Patriotic Party (BPS), through its cooperation with the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP), the strongest political partner of the AKP in Türkiye (Dolejší 2019).

Finally, Erdoğan has also received positive praise from the representatives of the Croat community in the country. After attending the Turkish president’s oath-taking ceremony in June 2023, Željko Komšić, current Croat member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, said: “Türkiye is a reliable friend and a factor of stability in the Western Balkans, both in the internal affairs of the countries and in regional relations as in Bosnia and Herzegovina” (Öztürk 2023).

### *3.2. Public diplomacy: education, religion, and cultural heritage*

Among the most prominent and active means of public diplomacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina are the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), Yunus Emre Institute, the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet or DİB). With regard to public diplomacy, Türkiye mostly focuses on education, religion, Islamic institutions and history, and popular culture. Already in the 1990s, Bosnia and Herzegovina saw schools and foundations being built by the Gülen movement. After the unsuccessful coup d’état in 2016, Türkiye has been focusing on eliminating any and all activities by this group and replacing them with new structures.

Since the 1990s, TİKA, a government department subordinate to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, has implemented over 800 projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These activities have been executed mainly in the spheres of health, education, cultural heritage restoration, and agriculture, for example, renovations of hospitals, restoration of mosques, Ottoman monuments, or funds for local farms. “One of the eloquent examples of this was the reconstruction of the Emperor’s Mosque in Sarajevo [...] Costing around 1.3 million euros, the mosque was ceremonially reopened by former Bosnian presidency member Bakir Izetbegović and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan” (Santrucek 2019). Projects implemented are usually visible and easily noticeable for the general population (for example, generally focusing on highly symbolic buildings from the Ottoman Empire) and increase awareness about Ankara’s help as well as Türkiye’s prestige regionally.

Nevertheless, Ankara has been taking into account the perceptions of the local communities and has been pragmatically choosing the thematic orientation of the projects. Whereas TİKA's activities are usually focused on Muslim-majority regions and try to revive ties and links to the Ottoman Empire, in projects involving Republika Srpska, the AKP has been careful not to anger the Orthodox Christian population avoiding Ottoman sentiments. Additionally, TİKA has been an influential factor in education, opening private universities and vocational training centres and providing funds for local state university faculties (for example, for new libraries for Turkish language departments) (Santrucek 2019).

Another powerful tool of public diplomacy is Yunus Emre Institute. It was launched by the Turkish government in 2009, and it offers Turkish language courses and promotes Türkiye, its culture, literature and cinema by financing exhibitions, events, and workshops. The Sarajevo branch has provided services to more than 5,000 students studying the Turkish language. A project called "My Choice Is Turkish Project", which aimed to "make Turkish part of official curricula as an elective course", was implemented in 7 cantons of the country, reaching over 8,000 students (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü 2019). The activities of this institute can be considered an effort to cultivate a young generation with a pro-Turkish mindset. The increasing presence of the institute, which is under the control of the Turkish government, should be perceived in the broader context of the AKP struggle with Gülen. Gülen schools have been present in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1997 – way before the power struggle with the AKP began (Knežević 2016). Before the internal power struggle and failed coup d'état, the schools enjoyed support from Ankara. The wife of the then Turkish Foreign Minister and AKP member Ali Babacan visited a Gülenist university during the couple's official visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2009 (Hürriyet 2009). The schools were perceived as offering high-quality education and were often chosen by local elites. For example, the Gülenist International Burch University has been ranked the second-best in Sarajevo and fifth-best in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EduRank 2023). The Yunus Emre Institute has been heavily supported by the AKP in the region as a competitor to diminish the influence of the Gülen education network. This, however, also created a feeling of unease and anger among the local alumni from Gülen schools – the perception shifted from being an alumnus of a respected and high-quality university to being a former student of a terrorist organisation. Additionally, the feud between the AKP and Gülen created two movements within the religious communities in the country that carried disputes to local mosques. Therefore, the current activities of Ankara in the field of education have not been seen as a positive influence by all groups of the population. Nevertheless, the thousands of students who completed Turkish language and culture courses might form a young pro-Turkish generation.

The YTB is a state instrument which provides links between communities abroad and the Turkish government to meet the needs of people abroad who share historical and cultural ties with Türkiye. It is also used by the Turkish government to carry out student exchange diplomacy. According to some experts, this is the most efficient way to conduct public diplomacy (Muhasilović 2020). The exchange programs

for Bosnian students are offered to Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral students, with accommodation provided for free. Additionally, students get monthly stipends (Fratrič 2023). Moreover, students get free tickets to Türkiye at the beginning of their studies as well as back to their respective home countries at the end of their studies, suggesting that these students bring more value to Ankara abroad than if they stayed living in Türkiye. Pupils who cannot speak Turkish will attend a free intensive language course, taking them from A1 level to C1 level in an academic year before their university studies begin. In addition, students are offered a variety of events to get to know the Turkish culture. These arrangements enable a full immersion into the Turkish culture and language and result in the creation of a young pro-Turkish generation of foreign nationals.

Through Diyanet, an official state institution established in 1924, Türkiye carries out ‘religion-related public diplomacy’ (Seib 2013). It has become the centre of religious power, directly under the prime minister. The organisation focuses on Bosnian regions where the majority of the population is Muslim. For example, it acts as a donor for building new mosques in the Balkan country – with the donations being collected in mosques in Türkiye. It also distributes the Quran, provides religious education, restores religious buildings, and even provides wages for local imams. Diyanet also established the so-called “Sister City Project”, which forms links and connections between a city in Türkiye and another in a country from the Muslim world to deepen cooperation with foreign religious structures and institutions. There are currently 13 cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the program, participating in joint projects in the fields of religion, culture, education, and social affairs (Muhasilović 2020). Moreover, Diyanet has been sending hafises to Bosnia and Herzegovina to provide Quran courses to the population and lead prayers in the mosques, distribute Ramadan packages, and meet with local religious representatives. Except for gaining proponents vocally supporting Erdoğan among local religious leaders, Diyanet also provides the AKP with a structure to support the creation of Muslim identity in the region in line with the Turkish interpretation of the religion with roots in the Ottoman Empire. A state supporting Islam-based activities in foreign countries might be perceived by some of the EU countries as dangerous. Nevertheless, Türkiye has been competing in religion-based dominance mainly with Saudi Arabia, which has a more radical interpretation of Islam. The radical Saudi interpretation has been worrying the security forces in the country. Keeping the radical notions in Islam contained became a particular priority to the West (and to the EU) after 2001.

Numerous other organisations (established by the Turkish state or linked to the state) are active in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Union of European Turkish Democrats UETD, Turkish World Union of Municipalities TDBB, and others). There is also an informal Bosnian branch of the Grey Wolves affiliated with the far-right MHP active in the country. The organisation officially focuses on humanitarian activities, such as collecting clothing to give to children and distributing meat at Eid and has contacts with the members of the SDA in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

However, not all groups of the local population are content with Ankara’s activities in the region and its influence operations in the field of public diplomacy might

have even been reaching their limits. Türkiye came under scrutiny, for example, for organising “a public mass circumcision of disadvantaged Bosnian children [...] by the Istanbul Educational-Cultural Center, an NGO led by the conservative Turkish Muslims stationed in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Yunus Emre Institute, and the Eskişehir Municipality [of Türkiye]” (Muhasilović 2022: 291). A Turkish lobbying group, the Union of European Balkan Democrats (UEBD), was also criticised for producing propaganda videos with fluent Turkish-speaking Bosnians praising Turkish military operations in Syria (Balkan Insight 2018).

Despite these setbacks, Turkish public diplomacy has been efficient. Based on a public opinion poll from 2017, almost one-third of Bosnians saw Türkiye as their main ally. Moreover, over 26 per cent of people believed that Türkiye was the single biggest donor to Bosnia and Herzegovina – and this number increased to almost 40 per cent among Muslim Bosniaks – even though the assistance provided by the EU the same year was greater by almost tenfold (Santrucek 2019). These incorrect assumptions might be a result of Ankara implementing projects which are visible and easily noticeable among the local population. An example illustrating the visibility of Turkish projects might be old trams in Sarajevo. Türkiye donated old trams from Konya, which were not used anymore, to Sarajevo. Besides articles promoting this donation in local news, the whole trams were covered with large ‘Konya’ texts and pictures of dervishes – leaving no doubt about who provided the trams (Özen 2019). Another example includes Türkiye donating 30 thousand doses of Sinovac vaccines against coronavirus (COVID-19), raising praise from Bosniak state representatives. “Türkiye showed that she is ready to support us like always,” said Bosnia-Herzegovina Minister of Security Cikotić (Türkiye Stops COVID 2020).

This trend of falsely perceiving Türkiye as the main donor and ally for the country at the expense of the EU does not show the Union in a favourable light, further undermining its position and influence among the Bosnian population. Moreover, even though the aim of Ankara has not been to provide an alternative to the membership in the European Union for Bosnia and Herzegovina and has been supporting accession talks, influence operations in the domain of public diplomacy might create a future pro-Turkish EU member as the country was granted an EU candidate status on December 15, 2022.

Nevertheless, influence operations in the realm of public diplomacy are important for Erdoğan not only to further Ankara’s influence in the country but also to demonstrate to the Turkish public that he has been a successful leader that foreign countries look up to. Showing the domestic audience how the AKP has been improving the lives of Bosnian citizens has been an effective tactic to gain more support at home, as there are up to five million people living in Türkiye with Bosnian roots. In addition, SDA politicians and Dodik openly supported Erdoğan before the 2023 elections in Türkiye.

### *3.3. Information operations: TV, radio, and soap operas*

Türkiye has been operating several information channels in Bosnia and Herzegovina in local languages as well as in Turkish and has been exerting significant

influence over the media space (MacGregor 2020). The most prominent media in the region is Anadolu Ajansı (locally operating as Anadolujia Balkan), with an office in Sarajevo or Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT). Local Bosnian news media often share information from these channels. Especially media tied to the SDA are resharing information from Turkish media sources. According to the latest research, Türkiye is also a source of disinformation in the region (Cvjetičanin et al. 2019). “Türkiye [...] is understood to have used this tactic as part of its competition with the EU for influence – for example, by portraying itself as a bulwark against migration into the region” (Directorate-General for External Policies 2021: 15). Türkiye mainly uses the tactics of inserting curated messages into the regions in an “attempt to ‘spin’ certain public discussions” (Directorate-General for External Policies 2021: 34). Moreover, Diyanet has been active in creating faith-based broadcasts and publications, advancing Türkiye’s dominance in the religious sphere.

In general, information operations have been used to promote Ankara’s public diplomacy activities or to show the shortcomings of the EU when reporting about events (such as COVID-19 vaccines and the migrant crisis). These remained mostly in the sphere of attempts to ‘spin’ public discussions rather than fabricating utterly untrue information. These activities might worsen the reputation of and support for the EU among the local population. Moreover, Türkiye has been producing popular soap operas, which are said to bring a sense of closeness to Turkish culture, even among non-Muslim communities. Some of the soap operas have been a source of controversy as they promote anti-Semitic, anti-Western and anti-liberal narratives – values and opinions heavily criticised by the EU.

### *3.4. Economic operations: pecunia non olet*

The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the Republic of Türkiye and Bosnia-Herzegovina, allowing both countries free access to their respective partner in the sphere of service and public procurement, was signed on July 3, 2002 in Ankara and entered into force on July 1, 2003. According to the Bosnian state agency Foreign Investment Promotion Agency (FIPA): “The only two countries that Türkiye has allowed free access to services and trade are Singapore and Bosnia and Herzegovina” (FIPA 2019). Even though Bosnia and Herzegovina is a relatively small market with lower purchasing power, recent years showed a steep increase in economic endeavours by Türkiye in the country. According to the 2021 reports, Türkiye is the second leading investor in Bosnia and Herzegovina after Switzerland (Sarajevo Times 2022a). While in 2016, Türkiye was only the 11th biggest investor in the region. In September 2022, Erdoğan announced plans to further intensify economic cooperation with the country with a goal of reaching \$1 billion worth of bilateral trade in the foreseeable future (Daily Sabah 2022b).

Turkish businesses have been using geographic proximity to their advantage – not only the proximity of Türkiye to Bosnia and Herzegovina but also the proximity of the Balkan country to the European Union. The Turkish state and private companies have a particular interest in investments that can be labelled as strategic. In addition to the textile industry, the main focus lies on the energy sector, infrastructure

(highways, airports, ports), and banking. Among the most important investments are Natron-Hayat in Maglaj (producer of paper and paper packaging), Şişecam Soda Lukavac (producer of soda), Cengiz İnşaat (construction company) and the Ziraat Bank (Spaić 2018). “Turkish Airlines has purchased 49% of Bosnian flag carrier in 2008” (Arežina 2018: 205).

In the construction sector, the Turkish Taşyapi Group signed a contract with Serbia to build a highway, with the Bosnian government later agreeing to link the highway from Belgrade to Sarajevo. Erdoğan called the project the “Peace Highway”, bringing stability to the region (Dünya 2023). It is expected that this is also one of the reasons behind the good relationship between Erdoğan and Dodik since the highway will link Republika Srpska with Belgrade. “Our main strategic, communication goal is to build the Banjaluka-Bijeljina motorway towards Belgrade” (The Srpska Times 2019). In March 2023, it was announced that the Turkish Cengiz İnşaat won a tender for the Corridor 5C Highway Medakovo-Ozimize Section, which is to be the highest budgeted tender of Bosnia and Herzegovina with the cost of €361.75 million (excluding VAT). The fact that the project will be financed by EU grants and the European Investment Bank was not promoted (Dünya 2023). In 2022, Sarajevo Canton announced that they chose a Turkish consortium Yapı Merkezi İnşaat ve Sanayi and Yapıray Demiryolu İnşaat Sistemleri Sanayi ve Ticaret A.Ş to build tram tracks in the capital city worth €20 million (Petrushevska 2022).

Dodik also called for a new branch of the TurkStream natural gas pipeline to be built along the newly planned highway between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia (through Republika Srpska). Erdoğan already announced that this would not be a problem for Türkiye and that they will provide ‘all kinds of support’ for the project (Daily Sabah 2019). These activities are in line with Turkish hopes to become the main European energy hub. Türkiye opted for its usual narrative also concerning gas imports to the region since the sanctions imposed on Russia – praising their own role in Bosnia and Herzegovina while criticising the EU (N1 Belgrade 2022).

Again, as in the previous spheres of influence operations, Ankara has been heavily promoting its activities and trade volumes even though the contributions and activities by the EU are much larger or more significant economically in comparison. However, contrary to the EU, Ankara has not linked its investments and development of further economic ties to normative conditions (the rule of law, democratisation processes, reforms, etc.). Some of the local politicians have a similar leadership style to Erdoğan – based on personalised relationships and agreements behind closed doors rather than following administrative processes and tenders. This is in stark contrast to the values promoted by the EU. Relationship-based business deals (on the company as well as state level) further undermine the ambitions of the EU in the region, increase corruption and decrease the quality of democracy. On the other hand, it cannot be said that Ankara is against the efforts of the EU in the region. A stable economy with investment opportunities integrated into the structures of the European Union would open new opportunities for Ankara.

Türkiye has been acting highly pragmatically regarding economic relations. Even though the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina have been promoted by

Ankara as in line with the wishes and goals of the EU, the personalised style of economic diplomacy implemented by Ankara might negatively affect the level of corruption and the rule of law, damage public procurement processes and tenders, and subsequently diminish healthy levels of competition.

### *3.5. Clandestine operations and military cooperation: FETÖ and tanks*

Since 2016, the Turkish intelligence services have been primarily focused on tracking people who are suspected of being involved with FETÖ. Türkiye has also been requesting extraditions of these individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The requests were followed by their detention and cancellation of their residence permits by the authorities controlled by SDA. However, Bosnian courts rejected these decisions due to insufficient evidence or due to pressure from the international community (Büyük 2019). It might be argued that it was mainly the complex internal structure of the state in Bosnia and Herzegovina that prevented Türkiye from achieving its goals. Whether successful or not, such cases by state authorities (controlled by SDA) might lead to a decreased trust of the local population in the state institutions. Such motions in society are against the efforts of the EU in the region and against the values that the Union has been trying to promote worldwide. Numerous studies have shown that trust in institutions is a crucial aspect of ensuring a stable and peaceful society. “Public trust leads to greater compliance with a wide range of public policies [...] It also nurtures political participation, strengthens social cohesion, and builds institutional legitimacy. In the longer term, trust is needed to help governments tackle long-term societal challenges [...]” (OECD 2023). Erdoğan’s image and success in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider Western Balkans region are also meant to be consumed by his potential voters in Türkiye. Nevertheless, such acts and the obedient reactions of local state representatives towards the Turkish leader might have caused a more negative image among the Bosnian population. Activities of MIT are not the only tool Türkiye uses to collect information on suspected Gülen members in the country – it is reported that Diyanet is widely used. It is believed that Diyanet collects information through the network of imams, mosque officials, religious coordinators, and religious services counsellors. Reports claim that this network is collecting information and creating files about individuals linked to FETÖ in 38 countries, including Bosnia and Herzegovina (Erdem 2016). In addition, even the members of the Bosnian branch of the Grey Wolves personally took part in a search for FETÖ members in the country.

In September 2022, Turkish Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu and his Bosnian counterpart Selmo Cikotić signed a security cooperation agreement which defines cooperation in the fight against cross-border crime, especially terrorism, organised crime, smuggling of migrants, trafficking in people, drugs, and cybercrime (FENA Press 2022).

Türkiye’s military presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a new occurrence – Turkish military units were assigned to post-conflict missions and peacekeeping deployment after the Yugoslav wars. However, in recent years, Türkiye’s cooperation

with the country in the fields of military and defence has been significantly increasing. Bosnian representatives have been meeting with several Turkish defence companies, namely Roketsan, Havelsan, and STM, in order to provide equipment for the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Türkiye will provide 200 million lira [approximately €10 million] for the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and this money will be used to procure new equipment from the Turkish defence industry for his country” (Defensehere 2022). In 2022, a Turkish state-owned defence firm overtook the maintenance of the tanks and armoured vehicles as well as responsibility for spare parts and inventory of the Bosnian defence ministry (Daily Sabah 2022a). Generally, there is one advantage which helps Türkiye to increase its influence in the defence industry in the Balkan country – its military equipment has been relatively cheap. This makes Türkiye an ideal supplier for countries with lower budgets. These operations and cooperation projects might lead to a higher dependency of Bosnia and Herzegovina on Türkiye. It also deepens the impact of Türkiye’s influence operations. As seen in the previous parts, soft power might have its limits. Ankara has been stretching those by coupling them with a hard power tool. Moreover, long-term military and defence cooperation creates further ties and relationships between representatives of the state on various levels. Nevertheless, the fact that Turkish companies primarily sell products on the lower end of technology and innovation does not pose a significant challenge in term of regional security. Moreover, EU member states have been also buying technology from Ankara.

In addition, Türkiye and Bosnia and Herzegovina cooperate on the training of Bosnian military personnel. Bosnian cadets are studying at the Military Academies of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Türkiye. The military education in Türkiye lasts for five years - in the first year, the cadets learn the Turkish language. During their education, accommodation and food are provided in boarding schools. Upon completion of education, cadets obtain a university degree and are admitted to professional service in the Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. On the one hand, this provides an excellent opportunity for Bosnia and Herzegovina to further the competencies of their staff. On the other hand, it might be questioned if the loyalty after many years of education and social integration in Türkiye stays on the side of Bosnia and Herzegovina once the personnel return home.

The military cooperation between the two countries continues despite Izetbegović not being elected a member of the Bosnian presidency in the 2022 elections. In August 2023, both countries signed a military cooperation plan to strengthen future activities.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Influence operations of Türkiye in Bosnia and Herzegovina can be described as Erdoğan-centric and pragmatic in the sense that they are not exclusively focused on a specific type of political party or community. However, the AKP and Erdoğan,

specifically, have shown some preferences by cultivating personalised relationships with like-minded influential politicians in the country, such as Dodik or Izetbegović.

*Muslim brother and protector.* The main partner of Türkiye in the country is the Party of Democratic Action and its leader, Izetbegović. They share an affinity with Türkiye and see it as a Muslim brother and protector. They are closely connected to the current Turkish leadership and maintain exceptional relations with the AKP, acting as its proxy in Ankara's influence operations in the region. Party's representatives vocally support the AKP during elections, visit inaugurations or political summits in Türkiye, and they, in turn, enjoy Erdoğan's obvious support during local elections. Concerning Bosniaks, Ankara opts for a culture and religious-based narrative and common Ottoman past, acting as an older Muslim brother and protector of the Bosniak Muslim community. Besides the shared Ottoman heritage is the declared bond between Bosniaks and Turks based also on the fact that a significant part of the Turkish population is of Bosniak heritage.

*Pragmatism based on economic interests.* Relationship with Republika Srpska is based on pragmatism, business development, and the improvement of economic ties. Ankara has been cooperating with Serbian and Bosniak political parties simultaneously, even though they often have conflicting interests and visions for the country. Even though Erdoğan has been acting as a protector of Muslim communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he was also able to significantly improve his relationship with Milorad Dodik. Ankara carefully adjusted the narratives formulated for the Serbian community to shift a focus from the Ottoman past and religion, not to anger the Orthodox Christian minority.

Similarly, the pragmatism can also be seen on the state level. Despite Izetbegović losing a presidential race in the 2022 elections, Türkiye continues to cooperate closely with Bosnia and Herzegovina, establishing good relations with actors across all communities in the country. With the steadily increasing trade between the two countries, it is the economy that is becoming one of the most important factors behind the Turkish involvement in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the last few years.

*Personalisation of politics and the export of a clientelism-based system.* Personal ties with Izetbegović and Dodik form the backbone of influence operations in the field of diplomacy. Both leaders have been attending informal bilateral meetings with Erdoğan behind closed doors with no disclosure of what was discussed. As a result, projects and contracts with Türkiye have been accepted, which have not undergone standard administrative procedures of public procurement. This form of conducting politics can undermine the process of democratisation in the country and increase corruption rates. Moreover, there is a parallel in how the relations between Ankara and the various actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina and AKP and local businessmen in Türkiye are being built. "Since coming to power in 2002, the AKP has established a centralised system of rewards and punishment to pursue a policy of capital accumulation targeting its supporters" (Esen and Gumuscu 2017). We can see similar features in the case of the relationship between Erdoğan and local politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Turkish president openly supports selected candidates in return for their support and obedience.

The AKP has also been actively using close ties to SDA to influence them to act against FETÖ members. Such situations can further undermine the democracy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and enforce the unwanted elements of stabilitocracy. These trends are in stark contrast with the aims of the European Union in the region and the Europeanization process implemented. Unlike the EU, Ankara has not linked its investments and development of further economic ties to normative conditions (the rule of law, democratisation processes, reforms, etc.). Countless studies showed that violations of human rights (attempted deportations) and increased corruption lead to greater political instability, undermine democratic institutions, and hinder the exploitation of the full economic potential of the country (Shumetie and Watabaji 2019). Specifically, it was corruption that has been proven to be a leading factor for political unrest (Dawson 2015). Increased instability poses a threat to the EU for various reasons. The sheer proximity of the region and the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina share borders with the EU means an increased risk of a spill-over effect in case of political turmoil or regional conflict. Increased flows of migrants due to political instability seeking safety or better economic opportunities might pose a burden on the neighbouring EU states.

*Support for the EU integration at the expense of the EU.* As depicted, Erdoğan is a vocal critic of the European Union when visiting Bosnia and Herzegovina – using the already-existing frustration in the country stemming from the complicated and slow EU accession process. This criticism and frustration created another common ground between local leaders and Erdoğan. Politicians such as Dodik see Türkiye as a means to diminish the local influence of the EU – or as an alternative to the Union. Unlike the EU, the AKP has been offering cooperation and financial and political support without imposing conditions in the spheres of the rule of law or human rights. On the other hand, the AKP has been adamant in claiming their support towards Bosnia and Herzegovina in regard to eventually becoming an EU member. This ambition is especially relevant to Ankara in recent years with the worsening of the Türkiye-EU relations. If the country indeed became a part of the EU, Türkiye would have even more allies to influence the Union from within. Considering the ability of one country (such as Hungary) to hinder EU efforts, block resolutions or embargos as witnessed in recent years (often in accordance with the interests of Ankara), pro-Turkish Bosnia and Herzegovina could pose a serious threat to the internal cohesion of the EU and weaken its position in the international environment.

*Spill-over effect of the internal problems of Türkiye.* The case of cancelled residence permits of suspected Gülenists demonstrated how the internal situation and political turmoil in Türkiye can influence the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ankara's internal problems also play out in the analysed country – an example can be the conflict between the AKP and FETÖ. Since the coup d'état attempt, one of the main political objectives of the Turkish government has been to capture FETÖ members and eliminate any influence the organisation might have in the region. Internal political problems within Türkiye have, therefore, a considerable spill-over effect and can negatively influence the political and security situation in the analysed country. Moreover, the willingness of the state authorities to comply with

the demands of Ankara to extradite Gülenists without taking into account the legal considerations might lead to a decreased trust of the local population in the state institutions.

*Neutral mediator.* On the other hand, Ankara also proved to be a stabilising factor, at least in the short term. Erdoğan, being committed to acting as a local mediator, has been called to participate in multilateral talks by practically all sides with considerable tensions and regional problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Respect from some of these parties is something that the EU does not enjoy, especially in the case of Republika Srpska and Milorad Dodik. Türkiye, therefore, has the potential to decrease the tensions and stabilise the situation in the country to a certain degree. This, in turn, is a positive development for the EU as well.

*PR expert.* Ankara has been very successful in creating the image of the most important partner of Bosnia and Herzegovina. This trend of falsely perceiving Türkiye as the main donor and ally for the country at the expense of the EU does not show the Union in a favourable light, further undermining its position and influence among the Bosnian population. On the other hand, successes in public diplomacy significantly help Türkiye to be a respected actor across various communities in the country.

*Raising pro-Turkish population in Bosnia.* Despite the fact that the influence operations of Türkiye are largely Erdoğan-centric (and therefore with a short-term effect), Ankara has been able to construct a robust multileveled network with a long-term impact in the country. Firstly, on a societal level, the positive image of Türkiye as a partner and benefactor is strengthened through various public diplomacy activities, helping to raise a pro-Turkish generation in Bosnia and Herzegovina through various exchange, cultural and educational programs. However, this also presents a risk for the Balkan country, as there might be individuals whose loyalty might be greater towards Türkiye than towards their home country. Similar long-term influence potential has the economic investment and defence cooperation.

*In conclusion,* Türkiye has been using a very complex set of influence operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina to achieve its goals. While in many instances, there are considerable risks attached, especially when taking into account the internal situation in the country and also the interests of the EU in the region, Ankara has been able to become one of the most influential and respected foreign actors in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, not all groups of the local population are content with Ankara's activities in the region and Ankara's influence operations, especially in the field of public diplomacy, might have even been reaching their limits.

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