

## **GEO-CULTURE AS A TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOOL FOR INFLUENCE IN ALBANIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Culture is a priority in davutogluian thought. In his doctrine of "Strategic Depth," the architect of Turkish foreign policy, Ahmet Davutoglu, has included important concepts, such as cultural depth or cultural crossroad. All this is seen as an "offensive" for Turkish hegemony in the Balkans to "neutralize" other forces, mainly the West and Russia. Based on the definition that geo-culture describes how human beings think of their culture in order to explain the underlying assumptions and understandings on which human nature is built, the ruling Justice and Development Party, following Davutoglu's foreign policy, holds the position that there is space to project power in the territories designed for Turkish influence. Given that the main purpose of this paper is to elaborate the impact of Turkish geo-culture in Albania, the methodology used is based on qualitative approach - analysis of discourse - focused on the operationalization of the core concepts explaining Turkish geo-culture. In order to fulfill the purpose of the paper, the research questions are: What is meant by geo-culture, according to Davutoglu? How are the Turkish geo-cultural instruments materialized in the design of Turkish foreign policy? How are they applied in Albania? Davutoglu says that culture is an important element that links the constant parameters of power with potential parameters of power, and consists of psychological, sociological, political and economic components. In this framework, a specific human element (population) produces an identity and a sense of belonging, in a certain environment (geography) and in a certain time dimension (history). Soft power is exercised by Turkey through its state agencies, TIKA and Diyanet, cultural and religious foundations, education, television etc. The general goal of Turkish foreign policy is that Turkey shall be a powerful actor not only on regional stage.

**Keywords:** Geo-culture, cultural depth, cultural crossroad, influence, regional and global actor.

### **GEO-CULTURAL COMPONENT – GEO-CULTURE AS CONSTANT PARAMETER OF POWER**

Geo-culture describes how human beings think of their culture in order to explain the underlying assumptions and understandings on which human nature is built. It is a set of norms, which are accepted in a particular social environment. It is also closely linked to the political process and the factors making geo-cultural norms, derived from the political aspects (Wallerstein, 1991: 15). In this spectrum, after four victories of Justice and Development Party (AKP), there is more space to implement geo-culture, in parallel with geo-economics and geo-politics. The goal of Turkish foreign policy is that Turkey will be (again) a powerful actor on the regional and global stage.

According to Davutoglu, the history (h), geography (g), population (p) and culture (c) are constant parameters of power, while economic capacity (ec), technological capacity (tc) and

military capacity (mc) are potential parameters of power. Davutoglu says that “the parameters of power should not be considered as the only elements independent of each other, but as dynamic elements that influence each other. . . These dynamic elements are connected to coefficients involving human elements” (Ersoy, 2010: 121). Therefore, these coefficients are: strategic mindset (sm), strategic planning (sp) and political will (pw), and Davutoglu (2001: 121) makes up the following power equation:  $\text{Power} = (h + g + p + c + ec + tc + mc) \times (ms + sp + pw)$

Culture, therefore, is a priority in davutogluian thought. In his doctrine, he has introduced important concepts such as cultural depth or cultural crossroad. All this is seen as a Turkish “war” for hegemony - based on theoretical davutogluian framework - in the Balkans to neutralize the other forces, mainly the European Union and Russia.

In a detailed review of Davutoglu (2010) about Turkish foreign policy - under the AKP government – “Strategic Depth” is clearly illustrated when he states that:

*"In terms of areas of influence, Turkey is a country of Europe, the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, Caspian Sea, Mediterranean Sea, Persian Gulf and the Black Sea. Given this picture, Turkey should fulfill a new role . . . taking a new position that offers security and stability not only for Turks but also for the neighboring regions. Turkey must ensure its security and stability by taking a more active and constructive role to ensure order, stability and security in its surroundings" (p. 1).*

## **AKP AGENDA**

The AKP government, which has been in power during the last sixteen years, has conceptualized the Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkan countries in accordance to its geo-strategy and its geographic location. Under the leadership of the AKP, Turkey has pursued an independent and active foreign policy with the Balkan countries - largely based on the principle of “zero problems with neighbors”. It has paid attention specifically to Albania where there are opportunities for cultural and economic “interventions”, and therefore more influence.

Turkey has emerged as an influential country in the Balkans. Despite much controversy about the religious roots of the AKP, Turkey is a secular state, with a western political agenda – despite some recent disagreements (at least at this point, its orientation coincides with the foreign policy agenda of the Balkan countries). However, today’s Turkey carries a moderate understanding of Islam. The emergence of Islamic politics as an international force has played a major role in increasing Turkish influence in the region. Therefore it is important to note that Turkey is using such opportunity to exploit the cultural, historical and ethnic ties with the Balkan countries.

Using the constant parameters - geography, history, population and culture - Turkey implements its soft power. Instead of (pre)judging them as obstacles, a phenomenon occurring during the Kemalist era, Turkish policymakers have turned them into strategic assets. Thus the new Turkish public diplomacy (a form of communication with other countries to establish a dialogue to obtain the information and then influence) was built to spread the soft power into the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus and other

territories. It seems as if Turkey has become more confident to overcome the fears of the past, building a new identity in international relations.

Soft power is a concept developed by Joseph Nye to describe the ability to attract and cooperate instead of imposing the use of force or giving money as a means of persuasion (Nye, 1990: 5). But recently, this term is also used to create impact on social and public opinion through relatively less transparent channels and lobbying by means of powerful political and non-political organizations. And in this context it is worth mentioning the operational principles that have become objectives of Turkish foreign policy. Methodological approaches in its foreign policy towards the regions to be influenced, including Albania, enable the adoption of this new discourse. This kind of discourse with an influential diplomatic style is characterized by the use of soft power. Davutoglu noted that Turkey applies a relatively peaceful foreign policy towards the Balkan countries and all her neighbors, part of the doctrine of "strategic depth".

Turkey appears as a key country in its geopolitical environment. This is happening because it is a bridge connecting the East and the West, not only geographically, but also culturally. Exploiting these assets, the declaration of the president Demirel in the '90 that "There is a Turkic world from the Adriatic Sea to the Chinese Wall" (Cagaptay, 2006: 19) reinforces current Turkish goals.

## **GEO-CULTURAL "OFFENSIVE"**

### **- TIKA**

As mentioned above, Turkey has taken a multidimensional approach to foreign policy in terms of its role in the Balkans and specifically in Albania, even at the cultural level. Turkish International Agency for Cooperation and Development (TIKA) has undertaken important projects in countries that were under Ottoman rule - in order to preserve the cultural and historical heritage. Therefore, using heritage assets in the newly established countries of Central Asia has enabled the implementation of many projects in different fields, such as social, economic and cultural ones. Initial assistance later served to improve cooperation. The need for an organization that could implement and coordinate such projects, as a tool of the foreign policy strategy, resulted in the creation of the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and Development in 1992. "With the establishment of the *active policy* concept in our foreign policy, TIKA became a mediator in the implementation of Turkish foreign policy, particularly in countries with which we have common values ... " (Ibid). As AKP came into power, TIKA became more "aggressive" in an already globalized world - after the changes in the world order. Since then, TIKA has penetrated beyond the western borders of Turkey, and Albania became a target where a considerable numbers of Turkish projects have been implemented.

Emerging as an economically powerful country and referring to the Ottoman legacy, this kind of Turkish cultural diplomacy has contributed to the improvement of Turkey's relations with countries where TIKA implements its projects. Focused on the restoration works focused on places of worship, the role of TIKA has had a major impact in their respective countries. "According to experts, Turkey's presence in each country of the Balkans, as it has restored historical monuments and other objects, shows once again the deep-rooted ties between Turkey and the Balkan, which is considered a common historical revival. . . especially in Albania and territories inhabited with Albanians" (Schwartz 2010, paragraph 5).

In Kosovo, TIKA was open in 2000 and since then has achieved "the restoration, establishment and maintenance of various objects across the country, from the mosque to the Ottoman cemeteries" (Schwartz 2010, paragraph 10). Only during 2012 – 2013, TIKA invested a total of 3.7 million euro. This cooperation establishes a connection (implying protection and impact) of the Muslim population in the country, but the main goal is the preservation of Ottoman heritage in the Balkans.

Thus, TIKA's work is part of cultural diplomacy, which is a kind of public diplomacy and soft power exercised by Turkey. "Winning the war of ideas is a big challenge," says Waller (2009: 107). It is the duty of public diplomacy to include "the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture between nations and their people in order to promote mutual understanding" (p. 74). The purpose of cultural diplomacy is that people of a receiving nation should be able to develop an understanding of the ideals and institutions of the sending country in an effort to build broad support for economic and political purposes. Although it is often overlooked, cultural diplomacy can play an important role in achieving political goals. Conclusion of Waller (2009) is that "Strategy [public diplomacy] provides the agenda for a new diplomacy leading to a more vigorous and creative and strategic communication system. This system predicts instead of reacting. In case it needs to be responsive, such a system should be dynamic and flexible. It accepts a variety of approaches and new functions. And this brings about immediate benefits in rapidly changing situations" (p. 403). And this is what TIKA does. Turkish Agency for International Cooperation and Development Agency has become not only a facilitator between Turkey and the countries where it carries out programs, but also an important tool of Turkish public diplomacy.

In the framework of public diplomacy, this Agency is "an important instrument that creates new ways of classic diplomacy in social, cultural, humanitarian and economic areas" (Tika 2010, paragraph 12). In many plans, the agency has assumed the role of coordinator for the achievement of Turkish influence in different geographical regions to fulfill its interests. In this sense, TIKA has a strategic mission: to promote a positive image of Turkey and establish stable relations with other countries, demonstrating that "Turkey . . . stands next to these countries as a caretaker" (Schwartz 2010, paragraph 15). Although Turkey has carried out similar activities before the creation of TIKA, the agency has begun to coordinate these initiatives for geopolitical domination in a more cohesive way. So, Turkey - through an agency of such dimensions - conveys political messages through various projects in the cultural domain.

### **- Diyanet**

Presidency of the Turkish Religious Affairs (Turkish: Diyanet) was established in 1924 after the abolition of the Caliphate, and as specified by law, Diyanet's duties are "to implement projects related to beliefs, worship and ethics of Islam, to inform the public about their religion, and to administer the holy places." Diyanet has an annual budget allocated by the government amounting to one billion dollars. Since the distant Kemalist year of 1924 Diyanet has been perceived as an instrument to create a national identity based on turkicness, Islamic religious tradition and secular state system. In parallel with the evolution of these policies, Islamist movements began to gain ground in the political life of Turkey, launched initially from Necmetin Erbakan in 1969 and finalized with the AKP victory in 2002 (despite the fact that AKP has an dual attitude: runs a secular state, but it is a party with Islamist roots).

Referring to the case of the AKP's foreign policy, it can be stated that AKP is very interested to have full control of Diyanet. Initially, AKP, with conservative agenda, and Diyanet, a Kemalist institution, did not find a common language regarding their respective goals. But after sixteen years in power, the AKP has worked to "absorb some state institutions under its umbrella, aiming at a firm grip on Diyanet, which was born within the Kemalist spirit. Political conservatism of the AKP is demonstrated by the etatist attitude toward the religious belief" (Axiarlis, 2014: 83). To reinforce this attitude, in 2012, President Abdullah Gul visited the institution and stated that "it is undoubtedly one of the most important tasks of Diyanet to teach our religion to our people in the most accurate manner. .." (paragraph 3). In 1995, Prime Minister Tansu Ciller, stated in Sarajevo that "in the Islamic world, there is a Turkish model and a model of radical Islam. The Islamic World and the Balkans should adopt the Turkish model" (Korkut, 2010: 117). It was a message that would be conveyed more clearly only few years later by AKP, while Ciller, with secular roots, could not predict such a future for Turkey. Thus, this shift in the balance between the secular center and the Islamic periphery in the Turkish society has started at an early stage, and is being implemented today.

Since the early 90s, Diyanet has opened its own missions in the Balkans, aiming to support the Turkish communities in the region, but also to develop cooperation with Islamic institutions. One of the main tasks of Diyanet is to select students to study theology in Turkey. Diyanet, in collaboration with local religious institutions, attach great importance to the student exchange programs. Another aspect of Diyanet's work is the translation and distribution of religious literature. Only in Albania about 40,000 religious texts books have been translated and distributed (Korkut, 2012: 117-123). Obviously, Turkey has been very present in recent years in the region - at institutional level - to strengthen political relations between the Muslims part of the Balkan and Turkey.

### **- Gulen Movement**

Despite recent confrontation between this movement and the Turkish state, Gulen institutions have served properly within the general Turkish public diplomacy. Gulen movement is a transnational religious and social movement, headed by Turkish scholar and Islamic preacher Fethullah Gulen. Informally, it is called movement Hizmet (Service) from its followers. It is active in education (having schools in over 140 countries). It has invested in media, finance and non-profitable clinics (White, 2002: 112). For example, the "Guardian" (2013) described as a society "that has the characteristics of a cult" and that is influential in Turkish politics. The movement focuses on global dialogue, and has established a number of institutions worldwide aimed at promoting interfaith activities and intercultural dialogue. Gulen declares that "Today interreligious dialogue is a necessity, and the first step for its institutionalization is forgetting the past, ignoring the polemical elements and prioritizing common grounds which shall eliminate countless controversies" (Gulen, 2007: 17).

The manual published in Albania for Gulen movement, "Fethullah Gulen, a life dedicated to peace and human happiness", elaborates the orientation of this movement. First, in a wider aspect, the Gulen movement has opened more than five hundred secular schools in Turkey and other countries, in areas with low level of socio-economic development. This fact can be seen in the light of the practical exercise of dialogue. Secondly, the movement published high circulation newspaper in Turkey, "Zaman", and owns television network "Samanyolu TV" (now closed by the Turkish state) with a focus on objectivity and sound intellectual journalism, with no obvious religious tendencies. Thirdly, Gulen's worldview and social activity movement is the devotion to knowledge (schools and universities administered by the

movement). Gulen Movement has become an international network that promotes Islam less than spirituality and Turkish-Islamic culture. A key concept in global Gulen movement is the idea of preparing a “golden generation” of young people who are morally aware and well-educated. (Gulen, 2007: 30-47). The Gulen movement tries to spread the Turkish-Islamic culture and to expand the sphere of influence of Turkey. For Fethullah Gulen, Turkey - as in the case of Davutoglu - is the continuation of the Ottoman Empire and the center of a civilization stretching from the Balkans to Central Asia. In 1989 he urged his followers to open schools and businesses in post-communist countries in the Balkans and Central Asia in order to create morally conscious and educated elite.

Currently in the Western Balkans, there are twenty primary and secondary schools funded by Gulen movement. The first school was opened in Tirana in 1993. Most of these schools have had a steady increase in the number of students. There are ten schools in Albania and three in Kosovo; only in 2005 the number of pupils was 3000. Gulen community also funds the madrasas in Tirana, Elbasan and Kavaja (Michaletos: 2015: 1). Foundation "SEMA, one of the organizations of the Gulen movement, manages the schools and madrasas in Albania, including two universities. As mentioned above, despite the fact that Erdogan has called for the closures of all activities of Gulen movement in Albania, after the failed *cout d'état* last June, it should be emphasized that there are meeting points between Gulen movement and AKP.

#### **- Turkish Islamic charity networks in the Western Balkans**

A considerable number of Turkish Islamic charity organizations are also active in the Western Balkans, including Albania. Charitable institutions have a long tradition in Turkey. In Ottoman society, educational services, health and social services were provided mainly by religious foundations (*vakifs*). These foundations were nationalized in 1924, but the institution's Islamic of *vakif* provided a model for pro-Islamist civil society in the 1980s and 1990s (Barnes, 2012: 7).

##### **- Suleymans**

Suleymans are a community established in the '20s as a reaction to the closure of schools. They have their roots in Sufism of their spiritual leader, Süleyman Hilmi Tunahan (1888-1959), born in Turkish Bulgaria. Currently they are influential in some European countries. Suleymans are traditionalists in the interpretation of the principles of Islam and distance themselves from political parties. Their goal is to discipline the Sunni Muslim tradition. (Barnes, 2012: 24). They teach Balkan Muslims the Turkish tradition Sunni-Hanafi and protect them from the influence of neo-Salafism, which they consider a deviation from Islam. They have a very well organized network in the Western Balkans, with dormitories and schools where the Koran is studied throughout the region through a number of different foundations. Suleymans have been active in Albania since 1996, and run nine dormitories in eight different locations across the country. They have been active in Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia since the early 2000s. They are also aiming to expand their activities and open new dormitories in many regions. (Barnes, 2012: 8-12).

##### **- AMHV**

“Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi” Foundation (AMHV) is associated with Erenkoy community, which nowadays is one of the most influential communities. AMHV was founded in 1985, in honor

of Sheikh Aziz Mahmud Hüdayi-t (1541-1628). At first this foundation dealt mainly with social services, particularly distribution of aid to the poor. Now the network has extended itself beyond Turkey. The bulk of its financial resources come from religious Turkish businessmen, many of them originating from the Balkans who want to support their Muslim supporters in the Balkans (Barnes, 2012: 14-17). AMHV started its activity in Kosovo in the late 1990s to provide humanitarian assistance after the war. It set up an association, "Istanbul International Brotherhood and Solidarity" (IIBS) which has opened a permanent office in Pristina in order to coordinate humanitarian activities in the region. Since then, AMHV has been developing its activities in a similar way as in Turkey, building dormitories and running Koran courses. IIBS coordinator in Pristina explains that their main goal is to ensure that the Turkish tradition remains the dominant form of Sunni Islam in the Balkans. Currently they manage dormitories and madrasas in Kosovo. AMHV is also active in Albania - with the madrasa in Shkodra - and constantly tries to extend its activities. (Barnes, 2012: 44).

#### - IHH

IHH - İnsan Hak ve Hürriyetleri İnsani Yardım Vakfı (Foundation for humanitarian aid and human rights) was founded in 1993 by German branch Milli Gorus (Milli Gorus - National Vision is one of the leading Turkish organizations in Europe) and supported by the Refah Party (outlawed in 1998). Understandably it is now close to the AKP and to reformist wing of Milli Gorus. IHH has helped - during the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo – through humanitarian aid for refugees in Albania, Macedonia, Sandzak and Bosnia. Besides humanitarian aid, IHH also emphasizes the need to provide spiritual support to Muslims in the Balkans, especially in areas where there is Christian missionary activities. In 2006, IHH distributed 10,000 Korans in Albania and Kosovo, and 5,000 books for children in Tirana. Although IHH is now focusing on other countries like Palestine and Lebanon, it still close ties with Islamic institutions and Muslim communities in the Western Balkans (Barnes, 2012: 71).

Besides their humanitarian activities, these charities have played an important role in establishing contacts between the pro-Islamic civil society in Turkey and Muslim and Islamic communities and institutions in Western Balkans - exercising in this way public diplomacy so pronounced by the new spirit of today's Turkish foreign policy.

#### - Soap operas

Turkish soap operas shown in the Balkans and beyond are becoming part of the Turkish public diplomacy. The term soap opera is used ironically as soap power (instead of soft power). Turkish soap operas are becoming more popular in the Balkans, but also in other countries that "enjoy" the Ottoman legacy. This industry has played an important role in increasing the popularity of Turkey in the Balkans and the Arab world (Kiper, 2009: 1). Albania has not been subject to any poll, but it is noted that there is a large number of soap operas shown on Albanian televisions. It is certainly an indication of the growth of the Turkish cultural influence in Albania. In a survey conducted in the Middle East, 78% of respondents admit that they have followed a Turkish soap opera (Seibert, 2012: p. 3). "It is a form of soft power," says one analyst of TESEV (Turkish Foundation for Economic and Social Studies) (Ibid). According to Minister of EU Affairs, Egemen Bagis, "soap operas play an important role to the introduction of modern Turkey to the world and have become one of the cornerstones of Turkish soft power" (Monitor, 2012: 2-3). From this point it is noted that the popularity of these soap operas parallels the expectations of Turkish foreign policy of soft power.

So, let us go beyond popular frameworks, and step into the true essence of this unprecedented popularity. It has to be emphasized that the Ottoman geography is interpreted as a manifestation of Turkey's growing influence in the region. Even soaps operas can be inserted under the large spectrum of "strategic depth", because as Davutoglu says "Turkey is located in the center of the geo-cultural basin (Middle East, Balkans and Central Asia) . . . and shall use its mindset in these areas" (Mumcu, 2011: 14- 15). Furthermore, Mumcu (2011) lists three main components of the doctrine of strategic depth: no problems with neighbors; use of geographical and cultural "depth" to form alliances; and restoration of Ottoman civilization (p. 16). Therefore, it can be concluded that Turkey has undoubtedly projected influence in the cultural basins, and has become a regional power. After all, since AKP came into power, all this enterprise is related to the image and prestige of Turkey in the region.

## CONCLUSION

Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans at geo-cultural level is mainly oriented towards Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. The human factor plays an important role in attracting Turkey to the Balkans. Approximately nine million people in the Balkans are Muslims and they form the majority of the population in Albania, Kosovo and Bosnia (Oktem, 2010:8). Turkey is using the region's Ottoman legacy as a tool for its involvement in the Balkan territory. While the AKP took power in 2002, Turkey's presence in the Western Balkans was limited by the Kemalist secular philosophy. However, it is worth noting that after centuries of migrations, strong relationships are created between Turkey and the Muslim communities in the Balkans. Therefore, Turkey wants to proclaim itself as the "ambassador" of Muslim part of the Balkan and often representative of Albanians and Bosnians, when it comes to protecting their interests (Tanaskovic, 2010: 19).

Davutoglu's doctrine, under the leadership of the AKP, has adopted a new model of engagement that has substantially expanded the scope of Turkish influence in the region. The shift from traditional diplomacy to the public diplomacy has brought about an increase of cooperation with religious and charitable foundations networks (Oktem, 2010: 12). For example, TIKA has managed to develop a complementary foreign policy by promoting cooperation with Muslim associations in the Balkans.

Everything related to geo-culture is applied mainly in a geographical artery starting in the north and going down to south along the Western Balkans: Bihac - Central Bosnia - Bosnia East Sanzhak - Kosovo - Albania - Macedonia - Kardzhali - Western Thrace and Eastern Thrace. This is an area of great interest for Turkish foreign policy and at geopolitical and geo-cultural level.

The map below illustrates this vital artery.





So, once again, the “strategic depth” doctrine is closely related to the concept of geographical center, a center that, besides being geopolitical and geo-economic, is also geo-cultural. This asset, as Davutoglu calls it, is being used by Turkey to extend its network in Albania, which is a reference point for political, economic and cultural influence not only in Albania proper, but also to territories inhabited by Albanians.

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