New Turkey's Other Turks Abroad: Erdoğan Regime's Kin-State Policy in North Macedonia

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Introduction[1]

The definition of national (and ethnic) identity and its effects in the public sphere of former Yugoslavia can be situation halfway between strict standardization of socialist countries of the Eastern Bloc and democratic practices in Western Europe. The "identity" definition in former Yugoslavia has also become a tradition for determining the realization of community rights and communities' participation in democratic governance of post-Yugoslav democracies.

During the disintegration of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, nationalism had replaced socialism as the dominant force in the region (Çavuşoğlu, 2007). The ensuing armed conflicts that have emerged with new successor countries' transformation into independent nation states have returned the "national question" to the forefront of debates. The gap that emerged with the disintegration of Yugoslavia and the breakdown of the citizenship regime created a vacuum effect for the kin-states that had kin-minorities on the territory of the former Yugoslavia.[2]

Under these circumstances new countries with existing communities accompanied by the problem of transitive identities were born on the Southeastern borders of the EU.

Kin-state activities, essentially limited to ensuring that minorities enjoy equal rights with the majority society while also having their identities preserved under the sovereignty of their home state as the Venice Commission (2001) noted, are today tools of ruling regimes of some post-imperial kin-state for transnational authoritarian expansionism.

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[1] While this paper was being prepared, in June 2022, the United Nations agreed to change the official, diplomatic name of the country commonly known in English as Turkey, to Türkiye, heeding a request by the administration of Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

[2] The terms minority and disintegration of a multi-ethnic country bring a third actor, the protector of the minority (if any), to the table. In *Nationalism Reframed*, Brubaker (1996, p. 4.) describes this relationship as a "a triad linking national minorities, the newly nationalizing states in which they live (home-states), and the external national 'homelands' (kin-states) to which they belong by ethnocultural affinity though not legal citizenship".

The diasporization of minorities and the instrumentalization of co-ethnicity in the interests of state power and domestic political legitimacy of ruling elites are common foreign policy tools used by post-imperial kin-states, including Turkey (Smith *et al.*, 2019, p. 538). For Hungary, the methods may be subtle, as seen in efforts to grant Hungarian speaking minorities citizenship in neighboring Ukraine, Slovakia, and Romania (Globalcit, 2010). For Russia, the approach takes on a harsher form, as seen in its illegal annexation of Crimea, its aggression in eastern Ukraine where ethnic Russians form a significant minority and its invasion of Ukraine in 2022, using the so-called kin-state responsibilities in eastern Ukraine and Crimea as an excuse. Another aspect of over-activism by a kin-state in the field of minority protection that is rarely mentioned in the literature is that they may lead to identity clashes between ethnic minorities in divided societies.

Over-activism by a kin-state can lead to identity clashes between ethnic minorities in divided societies

Bearer of the Ottoman legacy, Turkey has had difficulty in defining its kin abroad, and thus never developed a consistent definition or criteria on who to include and exclude (Baklacıoğlu, 2015, p. 48). The main reason for this difficulty in defining kin abroad has a historical background. At the end of 19th century, when the Ottoman Empire began to lose its economic and military dominance to the Balkans, the Ottoman *millet* (nation) system in which personal status depends on one's registration within a religious community, was replaced with national narratives. Before the emergence of nationalism, the major identity split in the Balkans was between Muslims and Christians. Regardless of how many of its Muslims speak Turkish, Muslim communities who spoke other languages were often also called Turks and could identify as such, since the identity system in the Ottoman *millet* system was the conversion of religions from the categories of belief into social categories despite each millet (nation) had unprecedented domestic autonomy (Barkey & Gavrilis, 2016, p. 24).

Here, I find it useful to emphasize that defining a national identity requires shared notions of the "other" in addition to cultural symbols (Yagcioglu, 1996; Volkan, 1992). The "other" is one of the most used devices in the reconstruction of historical heritages of kin-states in the home countries of kin-minorities, as it helps define the members of the community vis-à-vis an "outsider". Under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's reign since 2002, Turkey, the kin-state of foreign Turks in its near abroad, has used a contemporary *millet* system effectively delineating "outsiders" and eliminating any ambiguity with reference to in- and out-groups. This shift from defining Turkish kin abroad based on ethno-linguistic (Turkic) notions to Neo-Ottoman religious (Muslim) ones, coupled with the application of Turkish soft power by Erdoğan's Islamist regime has deepened the problem of transitive identities in the Balkans (Gözübenli, 2021a).[3]

This paper is a brief introduction to the division and polarization of Balkan Turks and Muslims, especially in North Macedonia, which emerged as a result of Turkey's transnational identity policies under Erdoğan's reign. This paper offers a discussion in the context of recent examples observed by the author during a field research in North Macedonia since 2019 and reflected in international media and scholarly studies. The identity of interviewees is not disclosed in order to avoid kin-state surveillance and political policing by Turkish institutions, and for the sake of a more open and lively political debate.

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[3] For a comprehensive study about the transition of national identities in North Macedonia see; Markov, 2021.

How Erdogan's Kin-State Policy Divides Turks and Other Majority Muslims of North Macedonia

Direct contact and communication with kin abroad has become one of the characteristic features of Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) period's foreign policy that is driven by domestic politics (Gözübenli, 2021b). Throughout this period, Turkey's instrumentalization of religion in kin-politics and its exercise of extraterritorial authoritarian practices by way of civilizational belonging (Islamic civilization) and transnational historical memory (Ottoman legacy) show that it is indeed taking its place among the post-imperial kin-states.

In post-imperial kin-states, the combination of authoritarian rule and selective historical memory in home-states of their kin-minorities have led to a dangerous brand of ethnic politics. In the absence of fully established minority regimes in home states, kin-minority often serves as the primary arbiter of political interactions between countries and their governing elites. These conditions combine to present minority elites and their political big brothers in the kin-state with strong incentives to (mis) use ethnic issues as a means of securing and maintaining power in the kin-state's domestic politics. Moreover, fears and insecurities on the part of majorities and minorities are amplified by simultaneous processes of (re-)building the political state and the ethnic nation. Many of the former Yugoslavis's multi-ethnic states feature insecure "young" nations as well as newly independent states, preoccupied with an enormous array nation- and state building tasks. Politically mobilized and diasporized kin-minority populations increase the volatility within their home-states, while the cross border kin politics still remains unwelcomed for ethnic war-torn Balkans (Huber & Mickey, 2000, p. 17).

Since the early 2010s, Turkey's so-called soft power in the Balkans has markedly shifted from the charitable undertakings of the early 1990s and 2000s. While the Erdoğan regime maintained elements of the Ottoman Millet System, transforming religious divisions into political and social categories, it has sought to fulfill its regional ambitions by various means, whether through the exportation of intense political polarization to its kin-communities abroad or through the employment of Turkey's so-called soft power institutions such as Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA),[4] Directorate of Religious Affairs (*Diyanet*),[5] Yunus Emre Institute, Presidency of Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), state broadcaster TRT and Anadolu Agency (AA) to intervene in the ethnopolitics of ethnically divided countries.[6]

A mixture of pan-Islamist and pan-Turkist export product emerged as Erdoğan tried to balance his responsibilities to his ultra-nationalist far-right coalition partner[7] in domestic politics with his responsibilities as an actor in the transnational "Muslim Brotherhood" network in foreign policy with his communitarian foreign policy agenda of hegemonic Islamism. Although the regime did not speak out against China's crimes against humanity targeting Uyghurs and other Turkic Muslim minorities to not risk credits from the CCP regime (Jones, 2021). This blending of Pan-Turkism with an Islamist

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[4] TİKA is today the key tool of Turkish Cultural Diplomacy in the Balkans. Sunni Islam is quite clearly the "basic substrate" of Turkish cultural policy abroad and the repudiation of Muslims in the Balkans (Öztürk, 2020; Büyük, 2016, Cupcea, 2020).

[5] For comprehensive studies about Turkey's religious actors in the Balkans and discussions, see Öztürk & Sözeri, 2018; Öztürk & Gözaydın, 2018.

[6] For an empirical research of Turkey's kin state policy in the Muslim community in Dobruja see Cupcea, 2020.

[7] After the July 15 coup attempt, Erdoğan allied with the ultra-nationalist, far-right Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, MHP) to establish and electoral alliance called People's Alliance (*Cumhur İttifakı*) before the 2018 general election in Turkey.

authoritarianism highlights the agency of ideological seduction that accompanies Ottoman legacy in Turkey's near abroad (Gözübenli, 2022).

The latter has seen Turkey attempt to culturally annex communities throughout the Balkans by way of cultural activities such as mass circumcision events, mass Ramadan dinners, and mosque restoration projects, all of which have attempted to capitalize on the Balkan Turks or "ancient contacts", a notion that holds no water among local Turks.[8]

Erdoğan's Turkey aims to remold foreign Turks not into local cultural societies in their home countries, but into extensions of Anatolia that must prove their loyalty and obedience to their masters in Ankara (Tirali, 2020). However, the secular character of the Balkan Turks remains Erdoğan's biggest obstacle. To overcome this, the regime has used financial and political soft power to create new subgroups, proliferating divisions and defining new "others" (Büyük & Öztürk, 2019). The best example of the over-activism of Turkey as a kin-state is in North Macedonia, where Turkey's policy has contributed to identity clashes among Muslim communities, especially those who are minorities.

Are the Turks of North Macedonia an Easy Win for Erdoğan's Long Arm?

This comes despite the fact that basic human rights, such as the right to language for the Turks of North Macedonia has often been brought on to the agenda since "Turks and non-majority groups other than Albanians are a matter of negotiations between ethnic Macedonians and Albanians in the country"[9] as an unintended consequence of the Ohrid Framework Agreement (OFA) of 2001.

As Colley (1992) notes, it is no coincidence that – as Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) also insist – the emergence of nation states has typically been accompanied by the creation of national histories and that was the basis of the future problems of identity for Turks who remained in the Balkans after the Balkan Wars. One of the largest presence of those who remained in the Balkans live in North Macedonia, one of the most ethnically diverse countries in Europe, with a substantial minority population of around 40 percent (MakStat, 2005).

During the turbulent years in the country when kin-relations-induced inter-ethnic violence has jeopardized coexistence between Macedonian majority and Albanians the largest non-majority of the country, Turks, third largest ethnic community in the country, avoided violence in demanding equitable representation of ethnic communities in the state institutions and aimed at the integration of the community into the Macedonian state identity while maintaining their ethnic identity.

After the security crisis in 2001, the consociational power-sharing system (power-sharing and cultural autonomy) was redesigned along with the definition of minority in the country (Gözübenli, 2016; Bieber, 2008).[10] In the post-conflict environment, ethnic Turks, who account for nearly 4 percent of North Macedonia's population, claim that the lack of implementation of the power-sharing system and cultural autonomy (Lagerspetz, 2014) has created two parallel ethnic worlds and their position

8 Interview conducted on 17 August 2019 in Skopje.

9 Interview conducted on 17 August 2019 in Skopje.

10 After the OFA, terms used to describe the ethnic minorities divided into two separate categories: the group represented more than 20 percent of the population of North Macedonia which describes the Albanian community (that constitutes 25.2 percent of the population) and non-majority communities under 20 percent, which describes all communities that are less than 20 percent of the population according to the 2002 census, namely Turks, Roma, Serbs, Bosniaks, and Vlachs.

has been harmed in the bipolar society,[11] just like in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (1945-1991/1992) where Turks have faced systematic Albanization and Slavization in order to break kin-state relations (Oran, 1993, p. 119).

Considering the strong sui generis kin-state relationship between Turkey and Turks in North Macedonia, the Turks, who remained neutral in the conflict of interests among the dominant ethnic groups in the country, are more vulnerable than other ethnic groups in transition of identities.

Alternative but "Acceptable" Kin-community-making

While the ethnic Turkish NGO unions (e.g., the Union of Macedonia Turkish Civil Society Organizations, MATÜSİTEB) that have been operating since the independence of North Macedonia were coopted by pro-Erdoğan, ethnically Turkish families and elites, much of the rest of Turkish civil society was taken over by alternative Islamist associations established under the auspices of the TİKA and similar Turkish institutions. The resultant expanding autonomous structure foments political polarization, isolating Turks who do not support Erdoğan's government and creating a new multi-ethnic politicized kin-community.[12]

Religiously, while the Turks and other smaller Muslim minorities' concern that the Islamic Religious Community in North Macedonia (ICM/IVZ/IRC), the official Muslim religious community in North Macedonia, which gets its financial support mostly from Turkey, would become an instrument of the Albanian political elite having assimilationist tendencies, the Community is using the narratives that Turkey is the leader of the Sunni Muslim world and dreams of restoring the "glory" of the Ottoman Empire (Mandacı, 2007, p. 12; Öztürk, 2021, p. 14). In the 1950s and 1960s, a significant number of Albanians in North Macedonia declared themselves Turks and migrated to Turkey, hence the strong ties between today's Albanian community in northwestern North Macedonia and their pseudo kin-state of Turkey.

As Perica (2002) argues, Islam, which started to gain importance again in the region's Muslims in the 1980s, independently of other facts, became more protested in today's North Macedonia due to Macedonian nationalism and the symbols, myths and institutions created by the antiquization. In addition, Albanians, who cling to their myths, symbols and institutions more tightly due to this othering, are adding new ones to these every day as the antithesis of Macedonian nationalism. The fact that Erdoğan's portrayal of himself as the Sultan, as the leader of Muslim world and the long-awaited (so-called) defender of the Muslims in the Balkans, found a positive response among the Albanians, who make up the majority of the Muslims of North Macedonia, can be more easily explained with this argument.

It is known that many of those Albanians, especially in Skopje, Gostivar, and Tetovo assume the "Ottoman" and "Turkish" identity as inextricable from their Muslim faith. The other side of the coin shows that most secular Turks hide their Turkish identity to avoid possible harm from Turkey's proxies, as exemplified in the hundreds of Balkan Turks, mainly Alevis and Bektashis from Western Thrace and North Macedonia, whose entry to Turkey has reportedly been banned recently due to social media posts criticizing the Erdoğan regime (Çolakali, 2021). It should be remembered that the Erdoğan regime actively uses the "religious other" perception hegemonically against seculars and

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[11] Interview conducted on 17 August 2019 in Skopje.

[12] Interview conducted on 25 August 2019 in Skopje.

Alevis and Bektashi believers in domestic politics (Yilmaz & Shipoli, 2021: 6-9)

I mentioned above that demographic intervention and design is one of the most common foreign policy approaches of post-imperial "protectors". Recently, it is reported by media and local sources, a large number of Turkish NGOs, financed and supported by TİKA and other Turkish aid organizations, distributed food aid parcels[13] in the villages and neighborhoods of Torbeši (Muslim Macedonian), Bosniak, Albanian and Roma communities in North Macedonia and locals were promised financial support and scholarships to their children in exchange for registering them as ethnic Turks with North Macedonia's long awaited and disputed census after 19 years. Likewise, Turkish-Macedonian dual citizens of Bosniak, Torbeši and Albanian origin were advised to register as Turkish in the census. At this point, it should be noted that the pressure exerted by the Turkish government on the Turkish community in North Macedonia with its proxies has caused some community members to boycott the 2021 census (Büyük, 2021).[14] As a result, the Turkish population increased from 3.85 percent in 2002 to 3.86 percent, while the share of native Turkish speakers decreased by 4 percent in the same period, to 3.41 percent (MakStat, 2022).

Due to the divisive nature of Erdoğan's policy in the region, Balkan Turks have started to conceal their own identity

Politically, North Macedonia's BESA party was openly supported by Turkey's ruling AKP as part of Erdoğan's neo-Ottoman foreign policy. Erdoğan's goal was to use BESA as a first step in the "conquest" of North Macedonia by capitalizing on ethnic and political divisions between Christian Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. In their first electoral participation, in 2016, BESA won five seats in parliament – outnumbering ethnic Turkish parliamentarians (Ben-Meir & Xharra, 2018).

As a result of key political misjudgment and the division of BESA into the Albanian nationalist new "BESA" and the openly pro-Erdoğan, Islamist "Alternativa", Erdoğan once again turned to the Turkish community in the country. But of the three ethnically Turkish political parties in North Macedonia, the one backed by Ankara failed to enter the parliament in the last general elections in 2020.

The same happened in Bulgaria, which hosts 700,000 ethnic Turks or 10 percent of the country's population, proportionately the largest autochthonous Muslim community in a European Union member state. Before 2017, Erdoğan's palace unsuccessfully tried to create DOST, a second ethnic Turkish party in Bulgaria distinct from the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF).[15] During the 2017 presidential referendum in Turkey, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria underwent severe polarization, as DOST promoted a "yes", vote granting Erdoğan advanced powers, while the MRF urged dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizens to vote "no" (Gotev, 2017). Today the MRF drives a policy of balance. Since the Erdoğan regime does not have an interlocutor with the Turks in Bulgaria, it seems to have to negotiate with the MRF for now.

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13 During the 2021 census, the food aid parcels that were sent by Turkey to the non-majority communities in North Macedonia and that had labels with the slogan "You are Turkish, claim your identity" caused serious reactions among the local ethnic Turks. The leading politicians of the Turkish Community in North Macedonia reacted to this propaganda as "identity does not fit in a box", "You will not be able to turn your kinsman's pure heart into profit", "We are living the biggest disgrace in Turkish history with the money of our own kinsmen". See the Facebook post by Elvin Hasan (2021), a former ethnic Turk cabinet minister in the North Macedonian government.

14 Remote interview conducted on 21 October 2021.

15 The MRF is officially a liberal party with an emphasis on human and minority rights, since the Bulgarian state does not officially allow ethnic minority political parties.

Conclusion

Relations between ethnocultural minorities and majorities in non-homogeneous societies all over the world have almost always been uneasy and often conflictual. However, in the Balkans, where ethnic and linguistic diversity are so pronounced, it becomes a larger problem. And if a third party has a legacy of 700 years of political presence in the region, things get more complicated. As a result of the shift of the definition of Turkish kin abroad from ethnic to religious components of Turkish identity in the last two decades, Turks in the Balkans, face their forgotten problem of identity crisis. The ruling AKP's hegemonic arbitrariness of the discourse surrounding securitization makes the Turkish community isolated from home-state affairs and has led to Turks being polarized by the import of domestic politics of Turkey. During Erdoğan's time in power, Turkey's financial and political soft power has been used to create new subgroups, proliferating divisions and defining new "others" such as pro-Erdoğan Islamist Albanians and anti-Erdoğan secular Turks or vice versa.

While the Erdoğan regime reshapes Turkish politics in the Ottoman image, it also defines its kin as those loyal to his palace. Kin-state activities, essentially limited to ensuring that minorities enjoy equal rights with the majority society while also having their identities preserved under the sovereignty of their home-state, are today tools of Erdoğan's transnational Islamist expansionism. Seeking to deepen its political base, the Erdoğan regime has become the biggest threat to Turkish identity in the Balkans, indigenous data sovereignty of the kin-communities and Turkish community's 30 years of democratic advancement in the region, especially in North Macedonia. The policies of his regime divide Balkan societies so much so that Balkan Turks have increasingly started to conceal their own identity.

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