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Erdogan's Kin Society Policies Divide Balkan Muslims

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Demographic intervention and population engineering are common foreign policy tools used by post-imperial kin-states, including Turkey. For Orbán's Hungary, the methods may be subtle, as seen in efforts to grant Hungarian speaking minorities citizenship in Croatia, Ukraine, Slovakia, and Romania. For Russia, the approach takes on a harsher form, as seen in its illegal annexation of Crimea and its aggression in eastern Ukraine ethnic Russians form a significant minority..

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. While the Erdogan 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 Erdogan's transnational Islamist expansionism.

Here, I find it useful to emphasize that defining a national identity requires shared notions of the "other" in addition to cultural symbols. 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 Erdogan, Turkey, the kin-state of foreign Turks in its near abroad, has used a contemporary Ottoman Millet (Nation) System in which individual status depends on one's affiliation with a religious community, 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 Erdogan's Islamist regime has deepened the problem of transitive identities in the Balkans.

While the regime maintained elements of the Ottoman Millet System, transforming religious divisions into political and social categories, it thereby confused its responsibilities as a kin-state with Erdogan's responsibilities as an actor in the transnational "Muslim Brotherhood" network. 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.

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. The Erdogan regime 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 Turkish state institutions to intervene in the ethno-politics of ethnically divided nations. 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.

Erdogan'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. However, the secular character of the Balkan Turks remains Erdogan'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". The best example of this is in North Macedonia, where Turkey's policy has contributed to identity clashes among Muslim communities, especially those who are minorities. 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" as an unintended consequence of the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2001.

While the ethnic Turkish NGO unions that have been operating since the independence of North Macedonia were coopted by pro-Erdogan, 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 Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) and similar Turkish institutions. The resultant expanding autonomous structure foments political polarization, isolating Turks who do not support Erdogan's government and creating a new multi-ethnic politicized kin-community.

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 so-called home state of Turkey. 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 Alawites and Bektashis from Western Thrace and North Macedonia, whose entry to Turkey has reportedly been banned recently due to social media posts criticizing the Erdogan regime.

Politically, North Macedonia's BESA party was openly supported by Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), as part of Erdogan's neo-Ottoman foreign policy. Erdogan's goal was to use BESA as a first step in the "conquest" of North Macedonia by capitalizing on ethnic and political divisions between Orthodox Macedonians and Muslim Albanians. In their first elections six years ago, BESA won five seats in parliament – outnumbering ethnic Turks.

As a result of key political misjudgment and the division of BESA into the Albanian nationalist new "BESA" and the openly pro-Erdogan, Islamist "Alternativa", Erdogan 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 elections.

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, Erdogan's palace unsuccessfully tried to create DOST, a second ethnic Turkish party in Bulgaria distinct from the Movement of Rights and Freedoms (MRF). During the 2017 presidential referendum in Turkey, the Turkish minority in Bulgaria underwent severe polarization, as DOST promoted a 'yes' vote granting Erdogan advanced powers while the MRF urged dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizens to vote 'no'. Today the MRF drives a policy of balance. Since the Erdogan regime does not have an interlocutor with the Turks in Bulgaria, it seems to have to negotiate with the MRF for now.

The Erdogan regime, seeking to deepen its political base, has become the biggest threat to Turkish identity in the Balkans and 30 years of democratic advancement in the region. The policies of his regime divide Balkan societies, so much so that Balkan Turks, unfortunately, have increasingly come to conceal their identities.

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