RESEARCH ARTICLE

Religion in Turkish Diplomacy

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Abstract

During the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government, the rise of religion in Turkish diplomacy was noted. It was assumed that by fulfilling specific functions, religions are fundamental to implementing the main principle of the state's foreign policy. Religion can become an instrument for assessing influence in the international arena, expanding its influence regionally, and also an instrument for dependent projection. Subsequent mediations and events in the dialogue between the Republic's civilizations are aimed at stabilizing new areas and providing important elements of a geopolitical "player". Its goal was also to shape a new global balance of power. The organization was attributed to religion, which is subject to the influence of the AKP government and President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdoğan. This publication describes, specifies, and discusses the functions of religion in Turkish diplomacy. It addresses the question of whether religion figures in the country's foreign policy decisions. The following research methods and techniques were employed in this paper. Factor analysis were conducted to identify the determinants of religion's use in Turkish diplomacy. In this context, ideological, socio-political, historical, and geo-political factors were considered paramount Content analysis of documents—in this case, excerpts from the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey—allowed for the identification of the significance and role of Islam in society. An analysis of the state of the literature and research was applied to the collected empirical material and its subsequent verification.

Keywords

Turkey, diplomacy, religion, foreign policy, Middle East

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Introduction

In the circumstances of the formation of the post-Cold War international system in the 1990s, Turkey - as an active player - pursued a multifaceted policy, which manifested itself in the creation of relations with the entities originating from different civilizational and cultural circles. The authorities considered a strategic partnership with the United States and integration with the European Union a priority. The eastern direction of the foreign policy included cooperation with the countries in the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East. Turkey's religious and cultural ties with the countries of the Middle East, and in the case of the former republics of the Soviet Union and the countries of the South Caucasus, also historical ties, were to become an element integrating this country with these areas. Due to the cultural and civilizational nature of the state, as well as Kemal Pasha Atatürk's legacy in the form of the so-called Six Arrows of Kemalism, Turkey's leaders aspired for it to play an international role as *a bridge* between the West and the East.[1] The religious component is also an important instrument of the foreign policy concept in force since the beginning of the 21st century, developed by the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Taking advantage of the religious ties, the Turkish authorities are making efforts to regain influence and the ability to influence events that take place in the area of the former Ottoman Empire,[2] which is to help strengthen the country's international position.

The goal of the article is a political analysis of religion in Turkish diplomacy, drawing attention to its meaning, specificity and function. For the purpose of the problem undertaken, the research assumption was made that religion in Turkish diplomacy is mainly an instrument of its influence on the behavior of other states, Using it the authorities of the Republic of Türkey are pursuing important objectives of its foreign policy, including changing the international system to a multipolar one strengthening and expanding its existing spheres of influence mainly in the Western Balkans and the Middle East, as well as stabilizing the international environment. Amidst the long-term economic crisis, the tragic earthquake and criticism from the opposition and parts of society the strengthening of Türkey's international position and the expansion of its spheres of influence, religion also began to mobilize President Erdoğan's nationalist and conservative electorate and strenghten his image as a strong leader and statesman.

Taking into account the research goal and the assumptions adopten within the article firstly, the conditions that determined the important significance of religion in the Turkish diplomacy will be indicated. Secondly, the assumptions of "Strategic Depth", the foreign policy concept of the Republic of Turkey, will be analysed, showing the importance and functions of religion in the state diplomacy. Thirdly, an attempt

[1] K. Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji w XXI wieku* (UMCS Publishing House, 2020), 320.

[2] F. Donelli, "Historical Reflection on Neo-Ottoman Weltanschauung: between Identity-making and Foreign Policy," *The Copernicus Journal of Political Studies* no. 1 (2018): 55–65.

will be made to answer the question of which of the assumed functions religion actually performs in the Turkish diplomacy. The analysis will cover the period of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ruling.

The following research methods and techniques will be used in the publication. Factor analysis will be conducted to identify the determinants of religion's use in Turkish diplomacy. In the context, ideological, socio-political, historical, and geopolitical factors are considered paramount. A content analysis of documents - in this case, excerpts from the Constitution of the Republic of Turkey - will be used to show the importance and role of Islam among Turks. An analysis of the state of the literature and research will be applied to the collected empirical material and its subsequent verification.

Determinants of religion in Turkish diplomacy

Since the beginning of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) ruling, religion has been an important instrument used by the party to implement the country's foreign policy objectives. Its choice was determined by conditions of an internal and external nature. The kay internal determinants include: the ideologization of domestic policy by those in power (the ideology of Neo-Shamanism), as well as the political and social role of Islam in the state. On the other hand, the important external determinants include: Turkey's historical and religious ties with the former areas of the Ottoman Empire, geopolitical changes at the regional level (particularly in the Middle East and Western Balkans), as well as the unfavourable balance of forces in the international system.

Internal determinants of religion in Turkish diplomacy

For the first time, the concept of Neo-Ottomanism, as a term for Turkey's actions in the international arena, was used by the Greek authorities after the Turkish invasion of Cyprus in 1974.[3] In this way, the Greeks wanted to draw the attention of the international community to Turkey's neo-imperialist aspirations. The above event did not imply the adoption of a new foreign policy doctrine by the Republic of Turkey. This happened many years later in 2002 with the Justice and Development Party (AKP) coming to power and announcing a foreign policy concept entitled: "Strategic Depth".[4] Nevertheless, some references to the ideology of Neo-Osmanism could have been already observed in the policies of President Turgut Özal and Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan.[5]

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[3] *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History. Selected Articles and Essays*, ed. K.H. Karpat (Brill Publishing House, 2002), 524; A. Urbanik, "Neoosmanizm. Polityka zagraniczna Turcji okresu rządów Partii Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju (AKP)," *Edukacja Humanistyczna* 31, no. 2 (2014): 31.

[4] For the purposes of this publication, the assumptions: "Strategic Depth" will be analysed in the next section.

[5] A. Szymański, "Polityka zagraniczna Turcji w latach 2007–2009: kontynuacja czy zmiana?," *Polski Przegląd Dyplomatyczny* 48, no. 2 (2009): 47.

The foundations of neo-Ottomanism were laid in 1876 with the adoption of the first Turkish consitution and the transformation of the Ottoman Empire into a constitutional monarchy. The founders of neo-Ottomanism are considered to be the Young Ottomans movement, which emerged in the mid-19th century.[6] The term itself denotes a conservative and Islamist ideology that glorifies the legacy of the Ottoman Empire while criticizing the reforms implemented in the secular, Kemalist Republic of Turkey. More broadly, neo-Ottomanism promotes greater Turkish political involvement in areas formerly ruled by the Ottoman Empire.

The Neo-Ottoman tradition and reference to the period of Ottoman Empire's splendour became the AKP's ideological basis for making significant re-evaluations of the country's previous foreign policy. Their goal included, firstly, the restoration of Turkey's international position. Secondly, to regain its influence in the former areas of the Ottoman Empire.[7] The above process was accompanied by an evolution in the choice of foreign policy instruments. One of them was religion, which, on the one hand, was supposed to facilitate dialogue between civilizations, and, on the other hand, build Turkey's multidimensional ties with the countries whose territories were part of the Ottoman Empire in the past, which was supposed to enable Turkey to influence events within this vast area.

As a result of the ideologization of the foreign policy by those in power, there has been an awakening of superpower ambitions and aspirations in society. The Justice and Development Party's (AKP) pursuit of decisive and, in the initial period of its rule, also effective actions in the international arena resulted in a strengthening of its domestic position. In particular, its leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who since that time has been perceived as a strong and charismatic leader of the state, began to enjoy high public support. The above trends did not change noticeably in the following years. Now, under the conditions of a prolonged economic crisis, the neo-imperialist foreign policy and ideology of Neo-Ottomanism are intended to serve certain political functions. Firstly, they are supposed to serve the consolidation and mobilization of Erdoğan's and AKP's conservative and nationalist electorate ahead of the presidential and parliamentary elections scheduled for May 2023. Secondly, to strengthen the president's image as a statesman and world leader. Thus, religion also became an internal instrument of legitimization for the authorities.

The above mechanism was possible due to the ideological foundations of the so-called New Turkey. These are: the nation, the state, the leader, and the struggle for a better tomorrow. The nation, through its will, legitimizes the authorities that are supposed to serve.[8] The state, in turn, is an entity tasked with ensuring stability, prosperity,

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[6] Y. Demirağ, "Pan-ideologies in the Ottoman Empire against the West: from Pan-Ottomanism to Pan-Turkism," *The Turkish Yearbook of International Relations* 36 (2005): 139–158.

[7] A. Dzisiów-Szuszczykiewicz, "Sukcesy i porażki "anatolijskiego tygrysa" – wyzwanie dla polityki zagranicznej i bezpieczeństwa Turcji," *Bezpieczeństwo Narodowe* no. 21 (2012): 68.

[8] M. Chudziak, "Pucz jako mit założycielski. Filary ideologiczne Nowej Turcji," *Punkt Widzenia OSW* no. 66 (2017): 33.

and development. At the same time, it must be strong, sovereign, and free from external influences. The state should draw on its imperial and Islamic traditions and be active in the international arena.[9] In accordance with the adopted ideology, President Erdoğan, as a strong leader, leads the nation and the state to renewed power.[10] Moreover, it restores society's "conservative-religious dignity" and ties with Middle Eastern states.[11]

The second factor that, on the one hand, builds Turkey's identity and, on the other, creates ties and facilitates cooperation with the areas that were once part of the Ottoman Empire is Islam. Since the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the specific position of Islam in the state has been created over the years.[12] The model introduced by Kemal Pasha Atatürk completely eliminated religion from the public sphere, assuming that it was only related to an individual's beliefs. Kemalist religious policy, however, did not imply an anti-religion approach. Its goal was to separate religion from the state sphere and to end the power of religion and its representatives in political, social and cultural affairs. The above measures, combined with the reduction of Islam only to the private sphere of the individual, were to make it a modern religion with national forms.[13]

Moreover, it was the national element, not religion, that was supposed to unite Turks and build their identity. The new concept of nationhood, created by the Kemalists, assumed a complete unification of society. It was assumed that the principle of "one language, one culture, and one idea" would play a key role in building Turkish citizenship. Religion was not assigned a significant role in this process, as it was considered inconsequential to the nation's cohesion. Therefore, the views and attitudes of Turks were to be shaped by culture and language. Only these, according to the then authorities, offered a chance for the creation of a unitary nation-state. In the case of religion, this would be difficult due to the multiethnicity and religious diversity of the Republic of Turkey in its early years.[14] It must therefore be stated that the Kemalists' attitude towards religion was complex.

Laicism constitutes one of the main bases of the normative constitutional order of the Republic of Turkey. Protection of the principles of a secular state is ensured

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[9] Chudziak, "Pucz jako mit założycielski. Filary ideologiczne Nowej Turcji," 34–37.

[10] Chudziak, "Pucz jako mit założycielski," 37–41; K. Maras, "Dlaczego Recep Tayyip Erdoğan wygrał wybory w 2023 roku? Prezydencie roszczenia do legitymizacji władzy," *Eastern Review* 12, no. 1 (2023): 89.

[11] M. Matusiak, "Wielki skok. Turcja pod rządami Erdoğana," *Punkt Widzenia OSW* no. 51 (2015): 39; Ł.S. Fraszka, "Dyplomacja religijna Republiki Turcji," *Nowa Polityka Wschodnia* 2, no. 37 (2023): 261.

[12] E. Kaya, *Secularism and State Religion in Modern Turkey: Law, Policy-Making and the Diyanet* (I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2018).

[13] B. Lewis, *Narodziny nowoczesnej Turcji* (PWN Publishing House, 1972), 479.

[14] N. Potera, "Od kemalizmu do erdoganizmu – laicko-świecki model nowoczesnej Turcji," *Alcumena* 1, no. 1 (2020): 99, 100.

by Article 2 of the Constitution. It is also mentioned, among other things, in the preamble of Article 13 concerning restrictions on the exercise of guaranteed rights and freedoms and Article 14 on the prohibition of abusing these rights.[15] Officially, state authorities have the ability to impose religious restrictions to protect public security and order. As the guardian of public order and rights, they are also obliged to control and supervise religious affairs.[16] At the same time, the state apparatus guarantees unrestricted religious freedom when it relates to the private sphere of individuals' lives. It prohibits the use and abuse of religion when it extends beyond the spiritual life of citizens.[17]

Over the time - like the other principles of Kemalism - secularism has also undergone some modification in Turkey. In order to describe its current form, the term: "modified secularism" is used.[18] The new form of modern secularism is evidenced by the approach of the state apparatus to Islam and the important role of religion in social life. Although secularism has been one of the principles of Turkey's constitutional order and socio-political system for several decades, the practical dimension of the relationship between the state and the church makes it possible to consider Sunni Islam as a state religion. The Muslim community is privileged on the political, ideological, as well as socio-economic level.[19] The state's special attitude toward Islam results from the fact that it is an important element in building a sense of national unity and identity. As many as 99.8 percent of Turks are followers of Islam (mainly Sunni).[20] Religion shapes the spiritual dimension and various manifestations of daily life, especially for the residents of the provinces and the second generation of their migrants who live in the suburbs of large cities.[21] Among this group, non-dogmatic, so-called folk Islam is dominant. Elites living in large cities have been more affected by the process of secularization. For them, Islam means routine practices and is linked to the history of the state.[22]

Along with the ideological transformation of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), the process of its members contesting the secular nature of the state

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[15] "Constitution of The Republic of Turkey," https://www.anayasa.gov.tr/media/7258/anayasa_eng.pdf.

[16] H. Schüller, "Re-Islamisierung: der Fall Türkei," *Zeitschrift für Türkeistudien* no. 1 (1989): 63; A. Szymański, *Między islamem a kemalizmem. Problem demokracji w Turcji* (Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2008), 34.

[17] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji w XXI wieku* (UMCS Publishing House, 2020), 294.

[18] Szymański, *Między islamem a kemalizmem. Problem demokracji w Turcji,* 36.

[19] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji w XXI wieku*, 295.

[20] "CIA – The World Factbook," 2023, https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/turkey-turkiye/#people-and-society.

[21] See more *Turkey's New Geopolitics from the Balkans to Western China,* eds. G.E. Fuller and J.O. Lesser (Westview Press, 1993).

[22] *Turkey's New Geopolitics from the Balkans to Western China*, eds. G.E. Fuller and J.O. Lesser, 5; J. Misiągiewicz, *Polityka zagraniczna Turcji po zimnej wojnie* (Adam Marszałek Publishing House, 2009), 29.

began. After 2010, the Kemalist establishment began to be particularly criticized. It was accused of oppressing the conservative part of society and imposing secularism. The ruling party's official rhetoric defined conservatism as opposition to authoritarianism and radical change. It has been argued that the AKP normalized the long-standing tensions between: "religion and politics, tradition and modernity, religion and the state, the state, society and the individual".[23] The anti-Islamic rhetoric does not mean a shift toward a religious state. Islam has become a tool of political struggle and an instrument for ruling party politicians to build support among conservative Turks. Externally, criticism of secularism has allowed the Turkish authorities to appeal to the pan-Islamism abandoned by Atatürk years ago. Islam is supposed to unite the Republic of Turkey with Muslims from other countries.

External determinants of religion in Turkish diplomacy

An important factor that determines Turkey's current foreign policy is its historical heritage (so-called historical depth). The Justice and Development Party (AKP) identifies it with the religious, historical and cultural ties that link modern Turkey to the former areas of the Ottoman Empire.[24] As its heir, the Republic of Turkey is supposed to be responsible for stabilizing and developing the post-imperial area, which stretches from the Maghreb to the Caucasus and from the Balkans to the Indian Ocean.[25] According to Turkey's leaders, using its shared history and religion for dialogue and multidimensional cooperation has the potential to become a bridge between the Islamic and Christian worlds.[26] In addition, Islam is supposed to be an instrument to deepen ties between Turks and Muslims from other countries, especially the Western Balkans and the Middle East, which is supposed to justify Turkey's political activity in these regions and facilitate its geopolitical interests.

Almost the entire Balkan Peninsula came under the Turkish rule in the second half of the 16th century. The Ottoman Empire's several centuries of influence in the area ended with the Balkan Wars of: 1912–1913.[27] The empire's policy toward the communities living there was characterized by relative tolerance and lack of forced assimilation. Nevertheless, part of the population changed their faith over the time and converted to Islam.[28] Today, the influence of Islam in the region is considerable.

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[23] K. Bieniek, "Turecka Partia Sprawiedliwości i Rozwoju (AKP) - na drodze ku "nowej Turcji," *Cywilizacja i Polityka* no. 15 (2017): 130, 131.

[24] Szymański, "Polityka zagraniczna Turcji w latach 2007–2009: kontynuacja czy zmiana?," 47.

[25] A. Balcer, *W stronę strategicznego partnerstwa Unii Europejskiej i Turcji w polityce zagranicznej* (DemosEuropa, 2010), 13.

[26] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji w XXI*, 58.

[27] K. Bieniek, *Polityka zagraniczna Turcji wobec państw bałkańskich* (Publishing House Adam Marszałek, 2008), 21.

[28] See more M. Ickiewicz-Sawicka, "Religions in the Balkans – with special emphasis on Islam – a historical sketch," *Nurt SVD* 48, no. 2 (2014): 7–19.

Muslims are the majority in: Kosovo and Albania (87 percent and 70 percent of adherents, respectively). 45 percent of citizens follow Islam in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 33 percent in Macedonia, 19 percent in Montenegro, 13 percent in Bulgaria. Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia are countries where the percentage of Muslims does not exceed 3 percent. Most Muslims in the Balkans are Sunni.[29]

Since the 16th century, the Middle East has also been an area where the Ottoman Empire extended its influence. Apart from the historical factor, the Republic of Turkey is linked to the region by:[30] geography and religion. Of the approximately 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, about 400–500 million reside in the Middle East.[31] Despite the dominance of Islam, the Middle East has for years been an arena of geopolitical confrontation between the Muslim states representing two fractions of Islam: Shiism and Sunnism.[32] In Turkey, adherents of Sunnism predominate. However, it should be emphasized that the Republic of Turkey's long-standing institutional ties with Western structures, as well as its active and dominance-oriented policies in the region, have caused it to be treated with reserve by other states. Moreover, Turkey is not an Arab state.

The re-evaluation of Turkey's previous foreign policy and the increased importance of religion in its diplomacy were also largely determined by the adverse geopolitical changes at the regional level and the international balance of power, which was to result in a weakening of its international position. During its first years in power, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) continued the foreign policy direction outlined by the previous governments. It was based on the so-called Western direction and Turkey's integration with the Western structures: The North Atlantic Alliance and the European Union, while also valuing other regions, especially the Middle East.[33] Nevertheless, the distant prospect of the Republic of Turkey's membership in the European Union, the gradual loss of influence in the regions important from the perspective of its geopolitical interests: Western Balkans and Central Asia, an insufficiently strong - compared to the aspirations - position in the increasingly sensitive Middle East are factors that should be considered crucial in the context of revising Turkey's foreign policy strategy to date. Religion has begun to play an important role in Turkey's diplomacy especially in building its relations with two

[29] D. Wilk, *Bałkański dżihad* (Znak Publishing House, 2016), https://www.miesiecznik.znak.com.pl/balkanski-dzihad/.

[30] The foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey refers to the broadly understood Middle East region, which includes: the Persian Gulf states, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, the Palestinian Authority, Syria and North Africa.

[31] Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, "World Population Prospects 2019," https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org.development.desa.pd/files/files/documents/2020/Jan/wpp2019_highlights.pdf; *Międzynarodowe stosunki polityczne*, ed. M. Pietraś (UMCS Publishing House, 2021), 293.

[32] *Międzynarodowe stosunki polityczne,* 293.

[33] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji w*, 56–59, 92–129.

regions: The Western Balkans and the Middle East. In the case of Central Asia, the Russian Federation retained a strong influence there. The Turks did not have the economic potential to create long-term relations with the countries there while the instruments from the *soft power* category did not prove attractive enough.

Analysing the post-Cold War international system,[34] it should be noted that the authorities of the Republic of Turkey seek to revise it. Like China and Russia, they are critical of the hegemonic position of the United States. They advocate changing the system from unipolar to multipolar. In the new international order, Turkey would evolve into a regional power and become an important political actor and an active global player. Turkey's involvement in stabilizing sensitive regions of the world and mediating international disputes is expected to increase its international position.[35]

"Concept" of religion in Turkish diplomacy

"The concept" of religion in Turkish diplomacy largely stems from this country's foreign policy strategy entitled *Strategic Depth* (in Turkish: *Stratejik derinlik*), developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's foreign affairs advisor and a leading AKP politician.[36] Although in recent years there have been several violations of *the Strategic Depth* and attempts to implement foreign policy based on *hard power* with regard to the importance and function of religion in the diplomacy of the Republic of Turkey, they remain unchanged.

In line with the strategy, Turkey's international activity is conditioned by two factors: geographical and historical. Due to its specific geographic location (the so-called "geographic depth"), i.e. its location between Europe and Asia, near Africa and in the vicinity of sensitive regions of the world such as the Balkans, the Middle East, Central Asia and the South Caucasus, as well as its historical experience (the legacy of the Ottoman Empire),[37] Turkey plays an important role as a "central state" with *strategic depth* and as a *bridge* between the Christian and Islamic worlds. In case of the so-called "historical depth" - as mentioned in my earlier discussions - as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, Turkey is responsible for the stabilization and development of the events in the post-imperial area, which stretches from the

[34] See more *Międzynarodowe*, 399–435.

[35] A. Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*, May, 2008, https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/journals/it/v10i1/0000917.pdf; Z. Meral and J. Paris, "Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy Hyperactivity," *The Washington Quarterly* no. 75 (2010): 75.

[36] A. Davutoğlu served as foreign minister in Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's government from May 2009 to August 2014. He then succeeded Erdoğan as prime minister after Erdoğan's victory in the presidential election. Davutoğlu served in this position until May 2016; Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji*, 57.

[37] Szymański, "Polityka zagraniczna Turcji w latach 2007–2009," 47.

Maghreb to the Caucasus and from the Balkans to the Indian Ocean.[38] The elements that foster closer cooperation between the states located in these vast areas should include: a common tradition, history, culture and, precisely, religion.[39]

The *soft power*[40] is supposed to be the key instrument to guarantee the Republic of Turkey's implementation of an active policy in the regional dimension, i.e. replacing force with dialogue and cooperation, economic interdependence, and political, economic and social reforms. At the same time, Turkey should renounce interference in the internal affairs of individual countries, so as to build correct relations with its neighbours (the principle of "zero problems with neighbors").[41] Turkey's international position is also to be strengthened by its involvement in the stabilization of the sensitive areas and mediation in international disputes.[42] "Strategic Depth" implies the use of the above attributes - including religion - to pursue global and proactive policies regionally. Turkey should present a balanced approach to all regions and active geopolitical players. In this way, it has a chance to play the role of a regional power.[43]

Analyzing the significance and functions of religion in Turkish diplomacy, it should be noted that as an instrument in the implementation of the "Strategic Depth", it has been applied primarily to two regions: The Western Balkans and the Middle East. For Turkey, the Western Balkans[44] remain an attractive potential sphere of influence because of, firstly, their central position in relation to the main regions. Secondly, the passage of important transportation routes through them. Thirdly, having strong historical ties with the Muslim population there.[45] The shared historical experience - as intended by Turkey's leadership - is expected to give it an advantage over other geopolitical rivals in the region and enable political and economic

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[38] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie,* 57.

[39] See more A. Stein, *Turkey's New Foreign Policy: Davutoglu, the AKP and the Pursuit of Regional Order* (Routledge, 2015).

[40] See more J.S. Nye Jr, *Soft Power. How to achieve success in the world politics* (Academic and Professional Publications, 2007).

[41] Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007," *Insight Turkey*.

[42] Davutoğlu, "Turkey's Foreign Policy Vision: An Assessment of 2007."; Meral and Paris, "*Decoding Turkish Foreign Policy Hyperactivity*," 75.

[43] A. Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 6 (2006): 951–953; Szymański, "Polityka zagraniczna Turcji w latach 2007–2009," 48.

[44] In order to analyse the importance of the Western Balkan region in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey, a part of the article was used: A. Domachowska, A. Jagiełło-Szostak and K. Smoleń, "Türkiye in the Balkans: the role, position and bilateral relations (part 1)," *Policy Paper* no. 10 (2022): 27, 28.

[45] See more T. Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy: does Turkey dissociate from the West?," *Turkish Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008).

expansion.[46] Building a stable and predictable Western Balkans remains a priority for Turkey. Since Turkey's accession process to the European Union has been stalled, the Turks have been striving to develop an alternative, long-term formula for cooperation with the countries in the region that are not members of the European Union.[47] For the economic reasons, it is crucial to gain markets, as well as for Turkish entrepreneurs to participate in the expansion of the local infrastructure. Turkey also has aspirations to be a significant partner in the emerging energy transmission networks in the Western Balkans. Turkey's policy in the region is characterized by a clear pragmatism aimed at developing a peaceful environment in its immediate surroundings and promoting progress and development there.[48] Mainly through the use of the instrument of *soft power*.[49]

The intensification of the Republic of Turkey's activities in the Middle East is aimed, firstly, at its lasting stabilization, secondly, at the growth of Turkey's regional power. Due to its "historical depth," as well as its cultural and religious ties with the Middle Eastern societies, Turkey is obliged to establish multidimensional cooperation with them for peace and security in the region. In this context, especially in the first years of its rule, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) emphasized Turkey's special role in the inter-civilizational dialogue.[50] On the one hand, because of its cultural-religious ties with Middle Eastern communities, and on the other, because of its institutional ties with Western structures, the Turkish authorities sought to make it a channel for interaction between civilizations in the 21st century. After all, as a democratic and secular state, whose most citizens adhere to Islam, it was supposed to confirm that it is possible to combine these seemingly opposing values without conflict. Another - still relevant - instrument of influence of the Republic of Turkey on the events in the region is mediation.[51] In geopolitical terms, an important goal of Turkey's foreign policy concept remains to make it a leader among those countries in the region where Sunnis are in the majority. Turkey's regional leadership is to be based on respect for the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of the Middle East.[52] According to the adopted strategy and the soft power model it

[46] J. Lachert, "Bałkany Zachodnie w kontekście rywalizacji Chin, Rosji, Unii Europejskiej i Turcji," Warsaw Institute, November 25, 2018, https://warsawinstitute.org/pl/balkany-zachodnie-w-kontekscie-rywalizacji-chin-rosji-unii-europejskiej-turcji.

[47] *Bałkany Zachodnie w systemie bezpieczeństwa euroatlantyckiego*, eds. A. Głowacki and S.L. Szczesio (Publishing House of Łódź University, 2015), 232.

[48] T. Kopyś, "Polityka Turcji wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich po 2008 roku," *Politeja* 53, no. 2 (2018): 131; G. Öztek, "Situation in the Balkans and Turkey's Balkan Policy," *Turkish Review of the Balkan Studies* no. 8 (2003): 4.

[49] See more M. Ekşi, *The Rise and Fall of Soft Power in Turkish Foreign Policy During JDP: The rise and fall of the "Turkish model" in the Muslim world* (Lambert Academic Publishing, 2016).

[50] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji,* 325.

[51] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji*, 325, 326.

[52] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji*, 330.

promotes, diplomatic efforts (in this case using a common religion) should be prioritized over the military actions in the region.[53] The implementation of the above is also important from the perspective of the economic interests of the Republic of Turkey in the Middle East. Firslyt, because of its dependence on external supplies of energy resources. Secondly, seeking to play the role of *transit state* for hydrocarbons.[54] Thus, religion has become an external instrument of so-called soft power.

Implementation of the "concept" of religion in Turkey's diplomacy

Using religion to implement the state's foreign policy objectives in the Western Balkans and the Middle East, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) moved away from Turkey's role as *a peripheral actor* and began to adapt to the dynamically evolving international system.[55] Analysing the policies of Turkey's leaders in the Western Balkans at the beginning of the 21st century, it should be noted that at that time they took advantage of the apparent lesser interest of the United States and the West in the area and intensified their activities in the region. Considering the fact that in the first years of their rule the priority for the AKP was Turkey's membership in the European Union during the course of the negotiation process, the Western Balkans constituted a kind of "bridge" to Western Europe for Turkey. Cooperation with the countries there was to confirm the political maturity of the Middle Eastern partner and its use of the same standards and instruments (mainly the *soft power* category).[56] Moreover, Turkey's presence in the Balkans and its inclusion in the geopolitical competition for influence in the area allowed it to be seen from the perspective of an important international "player".

Paradoxically, the "Balkan" direction intensified in the foreign policy of the Republic of Turkey after its accession talks with the European Union stalled.[57] The weakening of the geopolitical position of the United States during the presidency of Barack Obama was also significant. Turkey's Prime Minister at the time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, saw it as an opportunity to change the world order in a multipolar direction. In order to accomplish the above goal, it was necessary to further consolidate Turkey's influence. Since then, Turkey has continued to focus on the region's

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[53] *Turcja i Europa. Wyzwania i szanse,* ed. A. Szymański (Polish Institute of International Affairs, 2011), 160, 161.

[54] Smoleń, *Geostrategiczne położenie Turcji,* 230.

[55] A. Davutoğlu, "Turkish Foreign Policy and the EU in 2010," *Turkish Policy Quarterly* 3, no. 8 (2010): 12, 13.

[56] Ł. Reszczyński, "Geopolityczna emancypacja Turcji i jej wpływ na Bałkany Zachodnie, Polish Institute of International Affairs," July 20, 2010, https://psz.pl/117-polityka/geopolityczna-emancypacja-turcji-i-jej-wplyw-na-balkany-zachodnie.

[57] Lachert, "Bałkany Zachodnie w kontekście."

political stability and economic development.[58] Taking advantage of religious and historical ties with the countries there, Turkey is creating itself as a stabilizer of the Balkan Peninsula and a mediator in the bilateral and interethnic disputes.[59]

The ever-present aspirations of the Republic of Turkey in the Western Balkans are confirmed by a number of initiatives, including its chairmanship of the *South-East European Cooperation Process* (SEECP) in early June 2009. For the time of Turkey's chairmanship, its authorities chose the eloquent slogan: "From a history that divided to a common future".[60] At the same time, there was a diplomatic "offensive" by Turkey's leadership in more countries of the region. Turkey considers Serbia to be a key partner in the context of the security and continued stability of the Western Balkans. It also has extensive political contacts with Bosnia, Herzegovina and Croatia.[61] The establishment of these contacts is accompanied by Turkey's emphasis on the importance of Muslim communities in the Balkans, as well as the Turkish minority living in the region.

Turkey would not have succeeded in establishing close relations with the region without the use of the *soft power*.[62] A key role in this regard is played by a government institution called the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA). Its main goal is to promote the Republic of Turkey through development assistance. TIKA focuses its activities on the areas inhabited by minorities. As part of these, it engages in: the construction of educational facilities, hospitals, playgrounds and the development of local infrastructure. It also joins in the restoration and modernization of monuments from the time of the Ottoman Empire, mainly mosques.[63] In the years alone: 2012–2013 TIKA spent $3.7 million for this purpose.[64] By creating a network of ties in the region and creating a positive image of Turkey, this entity supports the implementation of the state's interests in the Balkans.[65]

A crucial part of Turkey's efforts in the Western Balkans is the promotion of moderate Islam. So-called Turkish Islam is intended to be an alternative to the fundamentalist Muslim movements and thus influence the stability of the region. A key

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[58] Domachowska, Jagiełło-Szostak and Smoleń, "Türkiye in the Balkans: the role, position," 30, 31.

[59] M. Szpala and A. Michalski, "Męska przyjaźń. Aktywność Turcji na Bałkanach Zachodnich," Center of Eastern Studies, November 22, 2022, https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/komentarze-osw/2022-11-22/meska-przyjazn-aktywnosc-turcji-na-balkanach-zachodnich.

[60] Kopyś, "Polityka Turcji wobec Bałkanów Zachodnich," 131.

[61] *Religious Education. Between Radicalism and Tolerance,* eds. E. Aslan and M. Rausch (Springer, 2018), 291–300.

[62] Domachowska, Jagiełło-Szostak and Smoleń, "Türkiye in the Balkans," 31, 32.

[63] Szpala and Michalski, "Męska przyjaźń. Aktywność Turcji."

[64] Kopyś, "Polityka Turcji wobec Bałkanów," 157.

[65] See more *Turkey's Public Diplomacy*, eds. B.S. Çevik and P. Seib (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 99–120.

role in its promotion is played by the Diyanet (Council for Religious Affairs),[66] which is involved in the establishment of theological schools and the training of imans at Turkish universities.[67] The Yunus Emre Institute, in turn, has established branches in the Western Balkans to popularize the Turkish language and the culture of the Republic of Turkey. The Turkish authorities also support the establishment of Turkish universities in the region. Thanks to their efforts, they have opened, among others: International University in Sarajevo (2004) and International Balkan University in Skopje (2006).[68] They are attended by students from Bosnia and Turkey. On the territory of Macedonia, where 77,000 people who consider themselves Turks reside, Turkish is taught in elementary schools, and cultural and entertainment programs are also broadcast in this language.[69]

Considering rapprochement with the Islamic world as one of the priorities of Strategy: *Strategic Depth*, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has intensified multidimensional cooperation with the Middle East as well. In order to emphasize the importance of the same values, Turkey has become an active member of Islamic international organizations. It has intensified its activities in the Organization of the Islamic Conference, whose structures it joined in 1969. As a result, in 2005 a Turk took the position of secretary general of the organization. This should be interpreted as an increase in the importance of Islam in Turkey's relations with the Middle East.[70] Since the election victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Turkey, began to participate more frequently in the meetings of the Arab League and made attempts to strengthen institutional ties with the organization. The above plans were confirmed, among other things, by the project to make the embassy of the Republic of Turkey in Cairo its representative office to the League.[71] Turkey joined the D-8 group, which brings together Islamic developing states. Together with Spain, it initiated the so-called Alliance of Civilizations, an agreement aimed at establishing cooperation between different civilizations.[72] The country is also the originator of the *Expanded Ministerial Meetings of Iraq's Neighbours.*[73] Seeking to strengthen its position in the region, Turkey has been granted observer status in organizations such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council.

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[66] A.E. Öztürk, "Turkey's Diyanet under AKP rule: from protector to imposer of state ideology?," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 619–635; A.E. Öztürk, "Transformation of the Turkish Diyanet both at Home and Abroad: Three Stages," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* no. 27 (2018).

[67] Szpala and Michalski, "Męska przyjaźń. Aktywność."

[68] Szpala and Michalski, "Męska przyjaźń."

[69] Kopyś, "Polityka Turcji," 157.

[70] See more Oğuzlu, "Middle Easternization of Turkey's foreign policy: does Turkey dissociate from the West?."

[71] *Turcja i Europa. Wyzwania i szanse*, 156.

[72] M. Śmigasiewicz, "Geopolityczne perspektywy Turcji," *Sprawy Międzynarodowe* no. 1 (2011): 92.

[73] The initiative is formed by Iraq's neighbours, G-8, ONZ, OIC, Arab League and the European Commission. Its goal is to stabilize Iraq.

Until the events of the so-called Arab Spring, the AKP used the soft components of the state power to promote Western values and shape public sentiment in the region. It created the Republic of Turkey as a modern welfare state that had adopted the right model of development and modernization. It argued that Islam could coexist with democracy and modernity.[74] The above actions were to facilitate dialogue between civilizations, which in time should result in mutual understanding between Christianity and Islam.[75] The so-called Arab Spring confirmed the weakness and ineffectiveness of Turkey's previous policy towards the Middle East, and limited its ability to influence the events in the region. It should be assumed that in addition to the geopolitical considerations, this was also determined, among other things, by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's overly offensive policy in the Middle East, manifested in the promotion of Turkey's leadership role in the region. As a result of it, some countries – in particular Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq and Iran - see the Republic of Turkey's actions as a threat to their own regional interests and internal legitimacy. Internal conditions are also significant, especially the authoritarian form of the president's rule and the process of re-Islamization of the state.

The above factors have had a significant impact on the present Republic of Turkey's geocultural strategy towards the Middle East. Turkey's participation in the dialogue between Christianity and Islam is not justified. While introducing pro-Islamic reforms and violating the rule of law, it cannot at the same time effectively promote a secular development model for a state with Islamic roots. The Turkish authorities also had to abandon for a while their offensive leadership built in the region. By becoming involved in regional military conflicts, Turkey has also lost credibility as a mediator. Non-military instruments for building security and stability in the region continue to be used: diplomatic activity, the *soft power* model and development assistance.

The media and meetings with representatives of the non-governmental sector remain effective tools for promoting the Republic of Turkey. Turkey's rapprochement with the Middle Eastern countries is also facilitated by the culture. In the sphere of its promotion, among others, in: Baghdad, Jerusalem and Tehran there are Turkish Cultural Centres.[76] The products of the Turkish mass culture, especially movies and music, have been very popular among the people there for years.[77] A 2009 study found that more than 71 percent of the Saudi Arabian citizens watch Turkish

[74] See more V. Amitina, "Between East and West: Turley's Foreign Policy in a Multipolar World," *LUP Student Papers* (2012): 29–34.

[75] G.A. Khan, "Turkey set to boost track ties," *Arab News*, 2006.

[76] J. Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna "nowej" Turcji. Implikacje dla partnerstwa transatlantyckiego* (Institute of Political Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, 2013), 79.

[77] I. Krastew and M. Leonard, *Widmo Europy wielobiegunowej* (Stefan Batory Fund, 2011), 65.

series.[78] Important instrument for promoting Turkey in the Middle East is sports. In this context, it is necessary to mention Istanbul, which, by hosting major sporting events, effectively builds its brand. In 2012, the city was declared a European City of Sport by ACES - the European Association of Sports Capitals.[79] Analysing Turkey's involvement in development assistance, as an example, in May 2011 it organized the Fourth Meeting of Least Developed Countries in Istanbul.[80]

Summary

In conclusion, during the rule of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), there was an increase in the importance of religion in Turkey's diplomacy. It was assumed that by fulfilling certain functions, it would contribute to the main objectives of the state's foreign policy. Religion was to become an instrument for creating a positive image of Turkey in the international arena, expanding its spheres of influence regionally, as well as an instrument for attracting Muslim partners. Through mediation and participation in the dialogue between civilizations, the Republic of Turkey strived to stabilize the sensitive areas and build its position as an important geopolitical "player". It also aimed to shape a new global balance of power. At the same time, religion was assigned the important function of strengthening the rule of the AKP and President (formerly Prime Minister) Erdoğan. By consolidating their conservative electorate around an effectively implemented state foreign policy.

Analysing the effectiveness of religion in Turkey's diplomacy, it should be emphasized that it is conditioned by the actions and ideological transformation of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). Due to the historical, cultural and religious factor, as well as the use of the *soft power* - regardless of the potential that is lesser than its competitors possess - the Republic of Turkey has managed to acquire and retain a relatively strong influence in the Western Balkans for nearly two decades. The long-lasting activity of Turkish institutions in the region (TIKA and Diyanet) is crucial in this context. As a Muslim state integrating into Western structures, Turkey has also shown that dialogue and reconciliation of secular and liberal values with Islam is possible, which provided a counterweight to fundamentalist movements in the Western Balkans and at the same time gave credibility to the Turks as partners with the West. The above cultural-religious specificity also determined Turkey's attractiveness in the Middle East. The "Turkish model" it promoted was credible, as Turkey's power of attraction stemmed from the fact that it was not democratic enough, not Muslim enough, and not distant enough from the Western world and Israel (Akgün *et al.*). Thus, it can be concluded that religion and the *soft power* model have been a catalyst for regional cooperation and civil society development over

[78] K. Kírişcí, "Turkey's "Demonstrative Effect" and the Transformation of the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 13, no. 2 (2011): 41.

[79] Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna "nowej" Turcji*, 79.

[80] Wódka, *Polityka zagraniczna*, 78.

the years, as well as an effective tool for promoting Turkey's image in the Middle East as well.[81]

The evident changes in Turkey's policies at the internal and external levels in recent years, create new conditions for the AKP's use of religion in diplomacy. The most important of these are: the internal transformation towards authoritarianism, the re-Islamization of the state, anti-Western rhetoric and anti-Western actions internationally, Turkey's involvement in the conflicts in the Middle East and offensive policies towards the region. At the same time, Turkey's involvement in the dialogue between Islam and the West may prove problematic.

Data availability statement

No data is associated with this article.

[81] See more W.R. Lynch, *From 2002–2017, to What Extent Has Turkish Security Policy Been Effective?* (School of Advanced Military Studies United States Army Command and General Staff College Fort Leavenworth, 2017).