



VRIJE
UNIVERSITEIT
BRUSSEL



COUNTER HEGEMONY OR AN AWKWARD MELODY?

**How Does Turkey as an Awkward Middle Power
Challenge the EU's Hegemony in the Western
Balkans?**

Haci Ahmet Ünlü
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Promotor: Jouke Huijzer

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Introduction

The status of Turkey on the world stage is widely discussed and disputed (Haugom, 2019). There have been many attempts at classifying Turkey, but there's yet to be a consensus. This is significant because it is an increasingly important player worldwide and especially regionally in the Balkans, the Middle East and the Caucasus. However, there are many dated or wrong perceptions of Turkey as a state and its role in the world, this is the case both domestically and internationally. This might lead to some mistakes in dealing with the country which can have negative consequences, Turkey is not the only such state. After the Cold War, the political climate has allowed some states to claim a bigger stake on the world stage (Prys, 2010).

What would one call those states whose position is uncertain and ever-changing? According to Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021), we should call them awkward powers. This new classification can help understand the versatile new world order that came to be after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The Western Balkans is a good example where the new world order's arrival has caused significant changes, like how the European Union (EU) came to be the hegemon in the region (Turkes, & Gokgoz, 2006). and it sees it as the next region for potential EU enlargement (Ker-Lindsay, Armakolas, Balfour & Stratulat, 2017).

According to Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021, p. 292), Turkey is an awkward middle power and thus has its specific context. One which can be further researched seeing its relative novelty in the field. It emerged on the Western Balkans geopolitical scene after pursuing a relatively isolationist foreign policy (Haugom, 2019). Turkey has previously been defined as a middle power or even regional power. However, these fall short of fully defining their role in world politics, hence the choice to classify it as an awkward middle power. According to Prys (2010) middle powers do not necessarily want to increase their hegemony, understood as primacy in one or multiple spheres like economy, culture and politics (Cox, 1983), but can the same be said for Awkward middle powers?

This paper follows the neorealist concept of hegemony as it offers interesting and relevant insights, better explaining the foreign policy actions of Turkey, because of its strict focus on interests and power rather than constructs like cultural proximity. So, it would be interesting to apply it to the case of Turkey and the Western Balkans, focusing on Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Northern Macedonia.

that paper seeks to create a new theoretical framework that can be used to research and analyse whether and how an awkward middle power can exercise counter-hegemonic tendencies. This is necessary as the awkward middle power theory is relatively new and cases such as Turkey have yet to be sufficiently studied. The value of this new framework lies in its ability to analyse the counter-hegemonic tendencies of other states, focusing on three main factors: economy, politics and culture.

The specific case of Turkey and the Western Balkans is relevant because of the complexity of the Balkan region that led to the West miscalculating and misunderstanding the actors and their motives. These kinds of misjudgements cannot be afforded as intergroup tensions are rising again in Bosnia (Gadzo, 2021). The Balkans' geopolitics have changed considerably, the historic animosities that the region was a host to, though still leaving a legacy, have been ignored by some seeking to establish trade and move towards the future. The case of Turkish- Western Balkan relations is the best example of this as the legacy of the Ottoman empire could form a barrier to Turkish investments in the region. A better understanding of actors like Turkey might help in preventing further miscalculations from occurring in the Balkans. There are new concepts that may help, but these are currently underexplored when it comes to Turkey. Hegemony may offer interesting and valuable insights into the actions and ambitions of Turkey, but it hasn't yet been rigorously researched.

This paper will begin by discussing the multiple types of power and what differentiates them from each other. Once the relevant types to Turkey are defined, the awkward middle power concept will be introduced. This will be followed by an attempt to classify Turkey in this new concept. It will discuss Turkey's continuous changing position and understanding in the international relations literature. After reaching the current conception of an awkward middle power, the paper shall discuss how well Turkey fits that description. Afterwards, hegemony will be discussed, focusing on the neorealist understanding of it. The new framework will be introduced, aiming to better analyse the counter-hegemonic tendencies of awkward middle powers. This is followed by three main factors of analysis: political, economic and cultural. Turkey is used as a test case to test its classification credentials, the new framework and its counter-hegemonic activities. To help guide the research there will be three hypotheses that allow for a more nuanced understanding. Finally, after these analyses, the paper will discuss relevant topics and answer these hypotheses and the research

question itself. Of course, the limitations and further recommendations shall be discussed in the conclusion.

The goal of this paper is to simultaneously see if Turkey as an awkward middle power acts counter-hegemonically and whether it can achieve it. As well as gaining more insights into Turkey-Western Balkan relations which might help in gaining a better understanding of this complex region.

Literature review

Understanding Turkey's actions is a difficult task, but with the right concepts, it can be made easier. To gain deeper insights into the country's foreign policy actions, the paper will analyse its current involvement and presence in the region through the lens of hegemony. However, to do this, the paper will also have to classify Turkey's power status because of the clarity and help it offers in both positioning it on the world stage as well as offering templates for how such a state is concerning hegemony.

This paper builds on neorealist ideas regarding the concept of hegemony. Bound to this perspective is the subdivision of states into different kinds of powers like superpowers, great powers, middle powers and small powers. These powers, though unique, share some similarities with their fellow powers, this may range from the way they negotiate or even their preferred method of dealing with hegemony (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2021; Prys, 2010). Hegemony is understood in the neorealist sense, meaning that there is a specific focus on power relations. Resulting in an approach to hegemony that revolves around states' interests (Yilmaz, 2010). To correctly classify Turkey, it is important to understand the relevant and plausible types of power that it can belong to. After this discussion, there will be a section on the awkward middle power literature followed by a case study of Turkey.

Classifications of powers

In the literature on international politics, scholars have discerned various types of powers that are relevant to understanding the role of Turkey: Regional powers and emerging middle powers among others. These different typologies serve multiple purposes as they allow for more structure in analysing the power relations of a particular region, in this case, the Western Balkans. Typologies also come with certain characteristics that help to better understand and explain certain behaviours and actions that are typical to a certain power. A good example is how knowing what

powers great powers and which ones are small powers allows one to more easily guess which one is more likely to exert influence abroad.

Regional powers are generally secure in their neighbourhood, even being able to exercise influence over it. This allows for a more directed and far-reaching pursuit of interests as it can order or influence other states to follow their lead or abide by their rules. These states can act independently and exercise their influence in the region they belong to. However, this influence is limited to this specific region, once outside of it they are significantly limited. Thus, it is not in the same league as a great superpower which can influence the world stage and not just one region. The distinctions between powers are sometimes contested and thus it is hard to find a consensus on most countries' status (Parlar Dal, 2016). Regarding hegemony, Prys (2010) tried to reclassify and study the post-cold war emergence of regional powers. She concludes that regional powers can have influence, even hegemony over a region, but the manifestation of that hegemony may differ according to its context.

There are multiple types of middle powers, the most relevant of which will be discussed here. However, regardless of their differences, they all share some common characteristics which will be touched upon before discussing them separately. Middle powers are states that do not have the means to enforce their will on other continents as a superpower might, but they can reasonably safeguard their immediate interests. What separates them from regional powers is that not all of them necessarily have a strong influence over their region(s), but they do have to be included in talks concerning one or more important regional agreements. Middle powers thus aren't as strong or influential as superpowers, but they can hold their ground in international affairs and can occasionally make a difference. These states vary in military capabilities and their reliance on and use of them, but this normally isn't their main method of interaction. Middle powers mainly rely on their diplomatic apparatus to both interact with states and settle possible disputes. When interests and capabilities align, these states can, despite larger opposition, sometimes achieve their international ambitions (Robertson, 2017; Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2021). Robertson (2017) explicitly states that middle powers are impactful actors and thus shouldn't be overlooked.

The debate around the distinctions between different types of middle powers has led to multiple standpoints on the issue as seen in Robertson (2017). Three relevant ones pertain to hegemony. The first type is traditional middle powers that

accept their standing in the international system and seek to work with the current hegemon, this is because it best suits its interests. These are often states that have a well-established system and are sure of their position. The second type is emerging middle powers that do not have this security, partly because of their later socialisation on the world stage, and because of their less well-established democracies and institutions. These tend to be more self-oriented and try to exert as much outward influence as possible to maintain security (Jordaan, 2017).

Awkward middle powers

Finally, there are the awkward middle powers. This concept is relatively new as its first mention comes from Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021). The concept was introduced to distinguish between different types of middle powers which behave differently in the global order (Prys, 2010; Jordaan, 2017). Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021, p. 3-39) argue that this exact lack of consensus, as indicated by this literature review, is the reason they felt the need to create the new concept of awkward powers. This concept builds on that inability to define it according to already existing concepts. They further divide awkward powers along the lines of great powers and middle powers.

Abbondanza and Wilkins (2021, p. 221-241) discuss Nigeria as an example of an awkward middle power since the state falls in between a regional power and a middle power. It exercises a clear hegemony according to them, but still portrays signs of a middle power. They argue that this confusion makes it an awkward middle power, so following that line of argument it could be said that awkward powers can exercise hegemony over a region whilst still having the title of a middle power. However, as this concept is new there are many aspects to be explored regarding their behaviour in the global and regional order.

Classifying Turkey

While other studies have classified Turkey as an emerging middle power and regional power, this study regards Turkey as a typical example of an awkward middle power. Because defining Turkey isn't easy, depending on where you look at it from you reach different conclusions. Some scholars like Dilek, Iseri, and Celik (2015), Kardas (2013) and Parlar Dal (2016) classify it as a regional power. However, they also agree

that it is a contested claim, because of multiple reasons like its ability to act independently and project influence over its neighbouring regions.

Prys (2010) doesn't fully consider Turkey to fall into the two existing categories of middle power, this can be inferred from being mentioned only twice in the entire paper, thus indicating a lack of pertinence or interest (Prys, 2010, p. 497). Sandal (2014) argues that Turkey is an emerging middle power and that like Brazil it seeks to legitimise its role on the world stage through activism and proactive foreign policy, notwithstanding whether it is adhering to the rules of the order or not. Jordaan (2017) argues that the concept of the middle power should exclude countries like Turkey that challenge the current hegemony. These are some of the arguments why Turkey doesn't fit neatly into the existing types, thus meriting a search for other possibilities.

In many respects, Turkey can be considered an Awkward Middle Power since the other existing categories fall short of capturing their place in the global and regional order (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2021, p. 292). We do, however, know little about the behaviour of awkward middle powers within a neorealist framework, which merits a study of the subject. There are three important questions when it comes to the behaviour of awkward middle powers, in this case, Turkey.

1) how do awkward middle powers (such as turkey) relate to superpowers with hegemonic or counter-hegemonic aspirations? (e.g., US and China).

2) And how do such powers relate to smaller powers? In this case the most proximate ones like the ones in the Caucasus and Balkans.

3) how does this behaviour (in terms of hegemonic aspirations) differ from "normal" or other middle powers?"

This study focuses on 2 and 3. It does so by studying the relations between Turkey as an awkward middle power and smaller powers, in this case, Serbia, Northern Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Hegemony and Middle Powers in International Relations

As stated by Jordaan (2017) there is a trend of scholarship that argues for a clear divide between the middle power states that are comfortable with their spot and the current hegemonic system as a whole and those who aren't. If we accept this division then those who act counter to the current hegemony can be classified as

awkward middle powers, if indeed they were considered middle powers in the first place (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2021, p. 3-39). A good example of this is the case of Thailand which doesn't (want to) conform to others' expectations of it and the allotted slice of power as decided by the current hegemony (Abbondanza and Wilkins, 2021, p. 131-149).

This suggests that awkward middle powers, unlike "normal" middle powers tend to behave more counterhegemonic in their foreign policy attitude and endeavours. This may stem from the relative instability and vacuums that exist in the system, especially after the cold war. However, this isn't enough evidence to come to a certain conclusion. There are a lot of varieties in countering hegemony, one can have completely different reasons or even approaches. It seems interesting to gain more insight into the relations between awkward middle powers and hegemony. This could be done by studying Turkey, a country classified as an awkward middle power, but which hasn't yet been sufficiently studied in this light (Abbondanza and Wilkins, 2021, p. 292).

Turkey, as indicated by the literature, seems to be an awkward middle power, so what can we find by analysing its hegemony related activities? The opinion is once again divided: according to Mufti (2011), Turkey, following the US' example, seeks to create its own hegemony in the middle east. This is what the literature on Neo-Ottomanism, Turkey's desire to regain influence over regions previously under Ottoman control, claims (Yavuz, 1998). However, Ruma (2010) claims that these allegations are unfounded, which doesn't mean that Turkish ambitions fit perfectly in the current hegemonic structure. Thus, establishing its counter-hegemonic intentions and tendencies, how does it do it and in what regions?

As stated by Mufti (2011) there are grounds for counter-hegemonic activities in the Middle East, more specifically to create a more Turkish-friendly hegemonic environment. Yet in the Middle East, there exists no clear hegemon. This is different in the Balkans where Turkey competes with the EU which can be considered the hegemon. Although the exact demarcation of the Balkan region varies (See: Delevic, 2007, p.11-16) this paper will focus mostly on the relations between Turkey and two states: Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. Although they are culturally somewhat different, they share historic ties to Turkey. In addition, they are geographically equally proximate, and neither is a member of the EU.

To analyse the three big components of possible counter-hegemonic struggle the paper shall use three sectors to determine to what degree, if any, they play a role. The focus on their hegemonic activity comprises three main parts:

- a) Economic: foreign direct investments (FDI), trade and finance.
- b) Political: diplomatic relations and subnational involvement with political parties.
- c) Cultural: religion, cultural products like music and series.

These parts are useful for several reasons, chief among them being the clarity they bring to the paper, they help in guiding some components of the research. Secondly, they are all essential in gaining a better and more comprehensive understanding of counter-hegemonic structure. Finally, because of the novelty of this theory, there isn't a lot, if any, research on the topic so more exploratory research discussing multiple aspects briefly seems more beneficial to the field than a deep dive into a single dimension with the rest remaining untouched.

There are multiple ways to establish or assess hegemony, to concretise this, there is the case of EU hegemony in the Western Balkans. The EU has consistently been the single largest trading partner with all Western Balkan states and even though there are some political tensions, most of them about the former-Yugoslavian states, all states are in the process of striving to be part of the EU (Mojsavska, 2019). In practice, this means that these states are economically dependent on the EU, but also that they must follow its rules and adopt their policies as stated in the *acquis Communautaire* before they can join the Union. No other state holds this power and influence over the region, so it is a fair assessment to state that the EU is the current hegemon of the Western Balkans (Kadribašić, 2017). Neo-Ottomanism: The Relations of Turkey and the Western Balkans

There are several accounts that explain the interest of Turkey in the Balkan region, one that receives particular attention because of its historical weight is Neo-Ottomanism. This account is popular, especially among Western researchers, but it fails to explain Turkey's foreign policy decisions in multiple ways. Even Though more contemporary research tends to view this account as unfairly representing Turkey's actions, it is still necessary to discuss it as there is plenty of research supporting this view of reality.

According to Neo-Ottomanist literature Turkey wants to expand its influence based on an ideological conviction of it being rightfully theirs because of historic reasons. Somun (2011) claims that, indeed, Turkey seeks to expand its influence in the Balkans, not based on ideological conviction, but because of pragmatist considerations. It is a nearby region with some pre-existing bonds and a large and cheap pool of labour. This interest in the region follows a realist understanding of geopolitics like that of neorealism, which claims that a state's material and security interests are its main priority in foreign policy (Waltz, 1990). Others like Ülgen and Weise (2018) would argue that Turkey's ambitions aren't that invasive in the Western Balkans, regardless of its ideological underpinnings and that the EU shouldn't be worried.

Other powers

Great powers are more highly positioned in the international hierarchy, but this doesn't say anything about their level of content with the status quo. The United Kingdom is an example of a state that is more accepting of the current hegemony, while India is more critical and wants to change it. This tendency of a state's position being unclear, and its ambitions being frustrated might be the new reality in our contemporary international landscape, where multipolarity and power vacuums allow for the testing and expanding of states' limits of influence. (Abbondanza and Wilkins, 2021, p. 73-94).

Prys (2010) argues that a middle power, both traditional and emerging, can have the possibility of exercising more influence or even hegemony but they do not always feel the need to, an example being Belgium. This may be, as already mentioned, because of them benefiting from current affairs or fearing another configuration to be worse. So middle powers, depending on the type, are either able and willing to act counter-hegemonically or to comply with existing hegemony. Based on the literature, it seems that it is the awkward middle powers that are most in favour of changing the system as they are perhaps most free to as the chaos allows for exploration and testing of boundaries. Or because they believe that another configuration would allow for more power. However, there is also the possibility that due to their suboptimal positioning and need for security these states decide that going against the hegemony is the best course of action. This logic of awkward powers thus shows a large influence of

neorealist thought, where the power of a state is at the forefront of its policies and not ideology (Waltz, 1990).

Awkward powers thus, being against the dominant hegemony, show signs of hegemonic struggle. But because of the still large and varied grouping of these awkward middle powers much remains to be explored on the various ways they relate to the hegemon and other (smaller) powers. This paper will take the Turkey case as an example of how it might be done to better understand the methods, possibilities and realities. Because there isn't much research on this, it seems crucial to research three big ways of countering hegemony and then recommend further research focusing on specific dimensions for future research on the topic.

Data methods

After a careful review of the relevant literature, this paper will now touch upon the methods it will use to obtain and analyse the data. To better understand the role of Turkey, the paper conducts a qualitative, exploratory case study. The benefit of a qualitative approach is that it allows for a more in-depth understanding of complex phenomena. This is necessary as there is relatively little research on the relation between awkward powers and hegemony. The data, though quantitative in nature, shall be put into context and not viewed as mere data. They will be viewed to gain a broader insight, once again due to the lack of previous research, which means that a considerable part will be descriptive (Bryman, 2012, p. 380-413).

The paper chooses a case study as it studies the case of Turkish-Western Balkans relations through an awkward middle power and hegemonic lens. This design also allows for the most detailed analyses, which is necessary as this is relatively understudied. Because there is so little known about the topic, the paper shall also be exploratory, because of the lack of literature and so that with the gathering of information it can pave the way for future research which shall be able to choose a different route (Seawright & Gerring, 2008).

As for a lot of international relations research, this one shall use the document analysis method. This will allow for in-depth studies of official documents, research and trade deals. By analysing these first-hand sources this way the paper shall gain a more unobstructed picture of the situation and relations (Bryman, 2012, p. 543-562). The documents themselves will thus range depending on the aspect/hypotheses being researched. So, for example: to gain more insight into the cultural aspect the paper will

analyse data on popular shows, series or music, as well as official statements and documents concerning cultural heritage and protection, the latter part being relevant for the Muslim and Turkish minorities in the region.

For the political part, the paper will study official documents and statements, focusing on signs of furthering cooperation and the ties between them relative to other powers like the current hegemon the EU. Lastly, the economic ties are a bit more straightforward as it consists of FDI and a general amount of trade, this is always relative to other states to obtain a comparison. However, the intentions and plans and deals can offer insight into the goals of the actors, which may show counter-hegemonic tendencies.

The data analysis method will be a qualitative case; it is meant to look for deeper meaning and trends. By studying the data through this method, the paper can uncover not so obvious signs of counterhegemonic behaviour and/or intentions Bryman (2012, p. 564-588).

This paper aims to create a new comprehensive framework to analyse and study the counter-hegemonic tendencies of awkward middle powers. This framework serves as a guideline that can be systematically used in other research to ascertain whether counter-hegemonic tendencies are present within the foreign policy of a state. If this tendency is present the framework can help in gauging the severity of it using several aspects and indicators. These are as follows: politics, economics and culture. Their operationalization can differ slightly according to the context, but the structure presented here offers a universal list. The indicators for politics are the diplomatic ties, direct political influence in for example electoral politics, alliances and willingness to cooperate. Regarding economics, there are FDI, exports, imports and development cooperation. Finally, for culture, there is religion, cultural products and education. However: education can also be classified as a separate aspect depending on the scope and depth of the paper.

Once these factors are sufficiently analysed, the researcher gains a deeper understanding of the relation between a state and the hegemonic reality of a region. What helps is the nuanced approach with a study of three separate factors that allow the researcher to analyse them separately. For example, when a state has significant counter-hegemonic tendencies in the political sphere but lacks economic actions to back it up, it differs from a state that has a strong economic presence but no counter-

hegemonic political tendencies. Thus, it is important to view the results of these factors, for analysing them separately can lead to false conclusions.

Analysis

The analysis of this paper consists of multiple parts focusing on different aspects and indicators. The main goal is to apply the created framework to the case of the awkward middle power Turkey in the Western Balkans, with its current hegemon the EU. The three main aspects are politics, economics and culture, these will be analysed in this order with further explanation on their operationalization and indicators in their respective parts. The goal is to analyse whether a counter-hegemonic tendency is present, the degree and effectiveness are also important, but aren't the main purpose of the research. The analysis is thus dedicated to finding signs of Turkish foreign policy behaviours that indicate counter-hegemonic tendencies against the current hegemony in the Western Balkans. However, it might also serve as an example of this newly created framework in practice.

Politics

Politics are essential in hegemonic studies as it is the main form of official interaction between states. These interactions are, according to a neorealist understanding of international relations, primarily based on interests and power distribution (Waltz, 1990). Thus, a state being able to acquire and maintain its interests in a region and offering a politically attractive model has a sort of power that other states cannot match; thus, it is the hegemon. So, to analyse whether a state, in this case, the awkward middle power Turkey has intentions to challenge this hegemon, the paper has multiple indicators. First, it looks at the historical ties between states as they might explain some foreign policy preferences or media headlines. Afterwards, this paper will look at direct influence via political means such as Western Balkan minorities that are sympathetic to Turkey and serve as its lobbyists in their respective countries. This is followed by diplomatic ties and alliances that indicate cooperation, finishing with an analysis of the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency, formally abbreviated as TIKA.

Turkey has often been accused of striving for a neo-Ottomanist equilibrium in the region, but as the literature review has shown, these are more speculative

accusations than arguments based on material reality. However, the perception of this intent and the legacy of the Ottoman empire is still present in media and popular culture, which might translate itself into policy actions (Ergin & Karakaya, 2017). However, despite this obstacle, the ties between Turkey and the Western Balkan states are quite good as there are embassies and even consulates in these three Western Balkans states. This shows that states are looking toward the future and not the past, pragmatism is the dominant ideology of all their heads of state (Rašidagić & Hesova, 2020). The current relations show the reciprocal need for one other as both economic and political partners.

Direct Turkish influence

Turkey has a comparatively smaller economy and smaller political attraction to these states than the EU. This means that to even be able to consider challenging its hegemony it needs to first have some 'edge' or unique advantage that the EU and other contenders do not have. This form of 'asymmetric hegemonic struggle' has multiple sides in Turkey's Western Balkans policy, the following are the most pertinent ones.

The Balkans is a multi-ethnic region, one of these ethnicities is the Turks who inhabit the region after having migrated there following the Ottoman expansion. Although most of these Turks left or fled the region during the Ottoman retreat in what is known as the *muhacir* or the migration, some stayed behind and became a part of the new nation-states (Içduygu & Sert, 2015; Shoup, 1963). A relevant example is a Turkish community in Northern Macedonia that has its own political party representing their community's rights and close ties to the country of Turkey. Their affinity to and bonds with Turkey are apparent on their official website (Türk Demokratik Partisi, n.d.). They aren't the only sympathetic group, the Sandzak Muslims in Serbia are perhaps the most enthusiastic supporters of not only Turkey but the current regime under President Erdogan (Jojčić, 2021).

These groups share a desire for further cooperation with Turkey, which they view as the guarantor of their minority rights. However, these groups are relatively small, consisting of a small fraction of their respective countries. The main power in the region, Serbia, is closely cooperating with Turkey because of realist politics as Turkey often is an attractive economic and political alternative. Northern Macedonia follows this example but is also more supportive of Turkish ambitions because it

supported the country with their name dispute with Greece (Eminoglu & Emir, 2020). Bosnia and Herzegovina have a political elite and population that are rather sympathetic to Turkey. However, the Serbian entity Republika Srpska is more oriented towards Serbia and Russia and views Turkey less favourably as a necessary partner because of the political and economic reality (Bechev, 2012). So, it seems that these states hold rather positive views of Turkey, which can indicate closer cooperation in the future. However, their aspirations for closer cooperation with the EU are still larger (Tholens, 2014).

Turkey has an advantage in counter-hegemonic tendencies as there is a clear pull from local actors to see it more involved in the region. However, what is perhaps unique to Turkey are those within Turkey that plead for more involvement in the Western Balkans as well. One of the most prominent is the millions of people of Bosnian descent currently residing in Turkey, some of them there for multiple generations (Dedeic-Kirbaç, 2012). These lobby groups want Turkey to use its power in the region to safeguard Bosnia's interests and territorial integrity, thus simulating an environment where both states view each other as invaluable allies in the region (BIRN, 2018). Thus, the presence of such lobby groups ensures a bid for more involvement for a significant amount of time in the future. They also lobby for Turkish regional interests, serving as mouthpieces and support organizations of Turkey.

The Turkish democratic party of Macedonia, the Sandzak region in Serbia and the Muslim communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina seem to have the potential to advocate Turkish interests. The Sandzak region even hosts a separate Turkish consulate in the regional capital of Novi Pazar, showcasing its symbolic value and importance (Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d.) However, to put it into perspective, none of these groups has the power to act alone or decisively. The minorities are rather a niche group and the sympathies of the Muslim community in Bosnia is balanced by the Croat and Serbian parts of the government so unless the material interests of these states were to fully align with Turkey, much more than they are now, Turkey has no chance to assert its will completely. However, there is the possibility of possible Turkish influence within the EU in the case of further enlargement as these communities could be used to demand Turkish accession, but the effectiveness of this remains to be seen.

Perhaps a good way to see if these voices could be helpful in Turkey's accession to the EU can be seen with the large Turkish diaspora in Western Europe. They amount to around five million people and have a say in politics (Norell, 2020).

However, this amounted to little as Turkey's bid for accession has yet to be accepted and it even seems to be more unlikely due to current developments. It is for this reason that this paper doesn't consider the possibility of Turkish accession into the EU being facilitated by minority group lobbies within the EU. However, a significant part of these lobbyists' work consists of countering the work of anti-Turkish lobbyists group working in Europe (Kaya, 2011; Salihyol, 2015).

These states, as already discussed, have good political ties, not only bilaterally but also multilaterally, as they are part of multiple international organisations like the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, n.d.) and the Organization for security and co-operation in Europe (OSCE, n.d.). These organisations serve multiple purposes, one of them being a channel for possible talks and negotiations between certain member states that are essential to maintaining good ties. Turkey's desire to be a part of these organisations is mostly explained by its desire to closely cooperate with the European powers (Toygür, 2022). The Western Balkans are a welcomed addition to partners, but not its focus in these organisations.

However, the South-East European Cooperation Process and Regional Cooperation Council are different as in these organisations the three Western Balkans states and Turkey are members of an organisation whose main goal is closer regional cooperation. The RCC's main goal is to integrate this region into a more Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence (Council, n.d.), thus serving the EU's hegemony. The SEECP serves a similar goal, working towards establishing structures which allow the member states to be full and respected members of the Euro-Atlantic sphere of influence (SEECP, n.d.). Thus, these organisations are a testament to closer regional cooperation but display no signs of Turkish counter-hegemonic actions.

TIKA: Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency

The Turkish cooperation and coordination agency is perhaps one of the strongest tools and indices of the Turkish counter-hegemonic struggle. It was created in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union as an organisation meant to promote Turkish culture, language and influence across Central Asia and the Caucasus. Later, it expanded its focus to other regions like the Western Balkans, where its influence in the cultural sphere is strong and its economic activities significant. (TIKA, n.d-b.; Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019). This organisation has programme coordination offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Northern Macedonia,

showing the importance of these countries to Turkey as the organisation is part of Turkey's ministry of culture and tourism (TIKA, n.d.-a). Its political influence is less visible, but its economic and cultural activities facilitate and are facilitated by closer political cooperation, which shows that Turkey's relations with regional countries is good enough to merit such cooperation.

Western Balkans: regional political dynamics

Turkey is viewed as an important political and economic partner, but this doesn't mean that it is a viable alternative for the countries in the region. They currently prefer to be in the European bloc, but if the EU stalls the accession talks and backs down from its promises as it did with Turkey (Pontecorvo, 2019). Then these states will have an incentive to move toward Turkey in a more meaningful way as it offers alternatives for multiple goods and services as well as sharing the shared frustration of failed EU accession. This political bond could lead to the formation of an organisation or could be done purely bilaterally. Whatever the case, Turkey would gladly fill this new role, concerning the EU: it would still trade with all these states as they are valuable markets (Popović & Erić, 2018). A more likely scenario is that Turkey's politics-based counter-hegemonic actions will lead to more influence in the region as the second or third biggest actor after the EU and perhaps China.

Russia and China also deserve a quick mention as these states play an invaluable role in the region's politics. Russia's influence depends on Serbia's alignment of interests as the other states are wary of its presence (Nelaeva & Semenov, 2015). China on the other hand enjoys improving relationships as the one belt and road initiative (Zuokui, 2019). is taking shape and expanding. Its exports are impressive, and it is a regional economic power that needs to be reckoned with? However, this doesn't mean that it has any political power to reflect its economic presence as most states are more eager and prone to join Western-led organisations. Whether this can change in the future is a pertinent question, but one deserving its own paper.

Economics

Economics is an essential part of studying hegemony as material reality is one of the main factors in assessing a population's standard of living. This means that

apart from all the ideas and narratives, the wealth of a nation and the ways they acquire it can tell a lot about its political system. For example, the capitalist economic model was often more associated with Western states during the cold war. On a similar note, the FDI exports, imports and development cooperation of a state often show clear signs of a political nature or influence. In this case, Turkey's deliberate choice to strategically invest or trade in the Western Balkans may show signs of counter-hegemonic tendencies.

This part of the paper starts with an analysis of Turkey's exports to and imports from the region, followed by its FDI and finally its development cooperation. Concluding with a brief comparison of other states' presence in the region aiming to contextualise the region's economic leanings. Economics is essential as Antonio Gramsci, who is credited with popularising the term, viewed it as perhaps the most important part of hegemonic studies. The cultural hegemony of a state or movement is thus a tool to achieve economic hegemony, which translates itself into power (Cox, 1983).

In the economics part of the analysis, statistical data, as well as research, is gathered and interpreted to gauge if there has been a substantial increase in Turkey's activity in the region. This part aims to thus ascertain whether Turkey's economic presence has increased, and if so substantially. This increase may be comparatively small compared to states like Germany or the whole European trading bloc, but the attempt to enter these markets as a competitor can show signs of counter-hegemonic tendencies. This paper analyses 3 major economic activities. First is Turkey's exports, second is Turkey's imports and finally development cooperation. Finally, these findings are, to a reasonable degree for the scope of this paper, compared to similar statistics of the EU and to a lesser extent Russia and China.

Turkey's exports

The most recent statistics from the TÜİK: Türkiye İstatistik Kurumu (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2013–2022), show that Turkish exports to the Western Balkans have steadily increased over the last twenty years, with the occasional downturn like during the 2008 financial crisis. This indicates increased economic cooperation and demand for Turkish products and the necessary logistics and political ties to deliver them. Serbia is currently on top with close to one billion worth of exports, however when we compare this to the relative size of the economies and population, then we

see that these numbers indicate pragmatic choices rather than a special kind of affinity towards Serbia. Turkey and Serbia, contrary to popular belief do share significant economic ties (Mulalic, 2019).

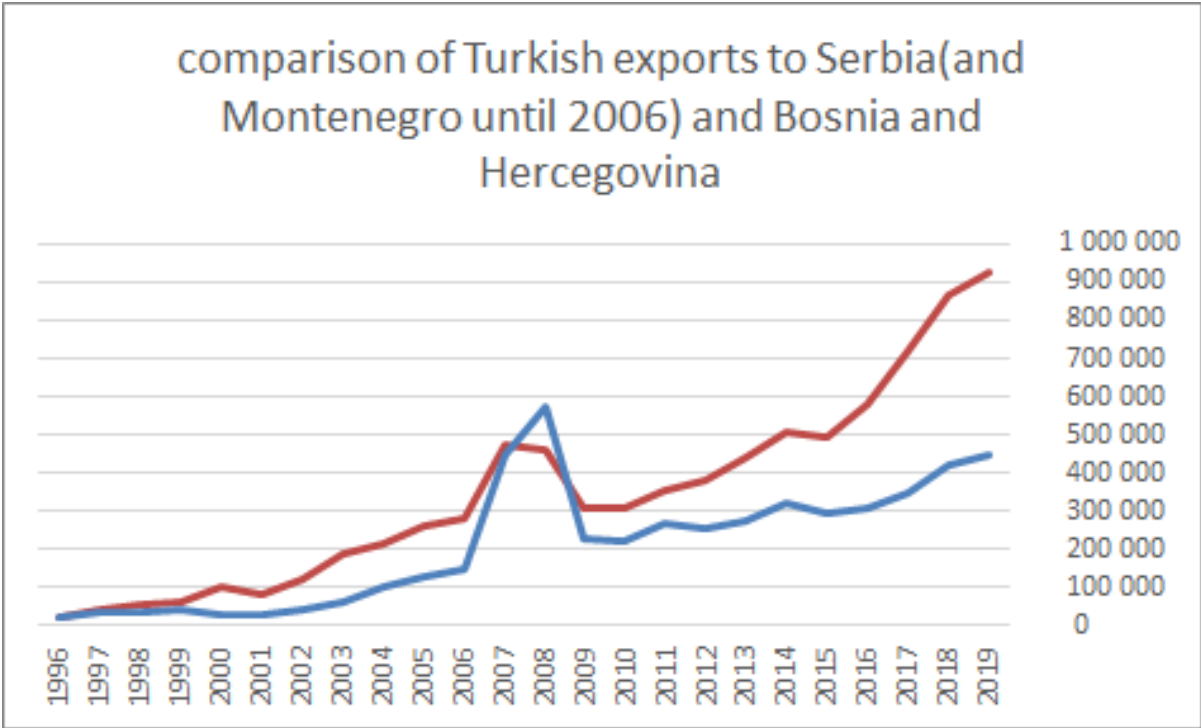


Fig.1 A comparison of Turkish exports to Serbia (and Montenegro until 2006) and Bosnia and Herzegovina, based on data retrieved from Turkish Statistical institute (2013–2022).

Turkey’s recent ‘economic boom’ from 2008 until 2017 is one factor that can explain this increase, but there are also others like improved economic and political ties with the region and a changed material reality. To put these factors into chronological order: After the collapse of the Communist bloc and the fall of Yugoslavia, these states were in urgent need of foreign capital to rebuild their economies. Turkey was initially viewed as a less attractive option than the EU or even Russia. However, after diplomatic efforts from both sides and a growing need for capital, Turkey entered the Western Balkans market as a significant player. Turkish goods are also important as they are often cheaper and still of decent-to-good quality, filling a spot in the Western Balkans market (BIRN, 2018c).

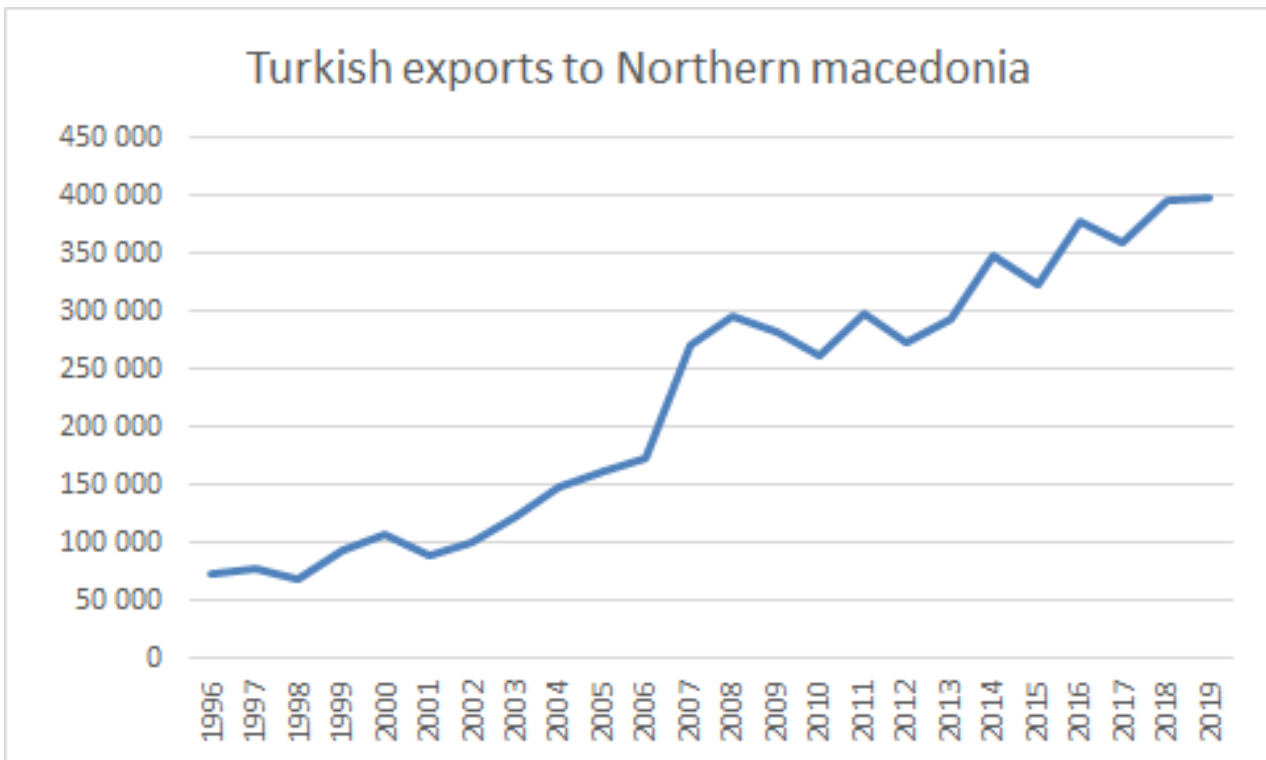


Fig.2 Turkish exports to Northern Macedonia based on data retrieved from Turkish Statistical institute (2013–2022).

Turkey's imports

Turkey has similarly increased its imports from these three Balkan states, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Northern Macedonia, maintaining a positive trade balance as the exports are in absolute terms bigger than the respective imports. This mutual trade shows an acknowledgement of each other's worth as trading partners. Whether Turkey will be able to maintain this current growth in trade is unclear, but as it currently stands it seems to have entered a European dominated market by offering its own alternatives (BIRN, 2018c; Türk İstatistik kurumu, 2013–2022)

Turkish imports from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Northern Macedonia, or to frame it as their exports to Turkey, have all increased over the past decade. It doubled in Northern Macedonia from 84 908 thousand US Dollars(USD) in 2013 to 201 540 thousand USD in 2021, while Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina saw an increase of around sixty per cent. Serbia's exports to Turkey increased from 257 596 thousand USD in 2013 to 448 720 thousand USD while Bosnia's exports increased from 141 396 thousand USD to 229 421 thousand USD in the same period (Türk İstatistik kurumu, 2013–2022).

These numbers indicate a clear increase in exports, combined with the imports numbers it shows increased economic cooperation between Turkey and the three Western Balkans states. Serbia's larger economy means it is the largest partner, proving that the culture of pragmatic politics persists in the region, setting aside their past to trade. analysed without ideological glasses, this increased trade does showcase an attempt to enter the regional market which can be interpreted as a counter-hegemonic move.

Development cooperation (TIKA)

TIKA is active in a lot of terrains, one of them being development cooperation; its activities in this field can be one of the clearest signs of counter-hegemonic struggle. It isn't the only platform through which Turkey provides development aid, but it is the biggest official Turkish development cooperation organisation. It is active on all continents and according to the most recent statistics of a 2020 TIKA development aid report, Bosnia and Herzegovina ranks as the ninth-largest receiver of Turkish development aid while Northern Macedonia ranks thirteenth on the list. Serbia ranks lower on the list but still is a substantial receiver of aid such as hygienic products and sewing machines to make masks to combat the COVID 19 pandemic (T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanligi, 2021).

Turkey ties Sweden on the top as the most generous nation in development aid among the OECD states with approximately 1.14% of its Gross domestic product being allocated to development. This can be seen as a move to increase its visibility in certain areas as often this type of aid is part of public diplomacy (Kalin, 2011). However, considering that both North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina rank so high on the list can be explained by the presence of Muslims and Turkish speaking people or the intention to establish a foothold in the region. Most likely it is a combination of these factors as the proximity of cultures could play in the allocation of funds, while Turkey could see this as an opportunity to increase its visibility in the region. This is part of public diplomacy that in turn leads to an increase in its attractiveness as both a political and economic partner (Nye, 2019).

Comparison to the EU, China and Russia

A careful study of the statistics indicates that Turkey has indeed increased its economic presence in the region. However, it still doesn't approach the EU's exports

to the region. As shown by Eurostat (2022), the EU exports just under 37 billion to the region, significantly more than Turkey's exports. The EU has, like Turkey, also enjoyed closer economic ties with the region as its exports and imports have strongly increased in the past 10 years from 20.5 billion to 36.9 billion and from 11.5 billion to 28.2 billion respectively. Thus, Turkey doesn't seem to be nearing the EU's presence, in absolute terms, it is even falling behind more.

Russia and China have also been active in the region, but due to their competing interests with the EU hegemony, the media isn't always as clear about their degree of influence. Counter to popular assumptions it seems that Russia might not be as strong a power in the region as previously thought (Kelkitli, 2021; Samokhvalov, 2019). China has increased its regional activity with the one belt one road initiative, laying the groundwork for future economic cooperation that can evolve into political cooperation further on (Pavličević, 2019; ŁOpacińska, 2017). These two states also show counter-hegemonic tendencies in the Western Balkans, even though separately they aren't a major challenge to EU hegemony their combined force could threaten EU interests.

Culture

Culture is a crucial aspect of hegemony as through cultural dominance one can influence political decision-making resulting in material economic changes (Burstein, 1991). Thus, this analysis will look at how Turkey seeks to expand its cultural influence and presence in the region and how it can be portrayed as filling a unique or even historic role. To offer a clear picture of Turkey's cultural counter-hegemonic struggle, this part starts with a brief overview of the historical context. Afterwards, it goes over the religious influence, followed by cultural products exports and finally education as a tool to project cultural influence. This aspect is especially pertinent for this case as Turkey's historical legacy has left clear cultural footprints in the area, perhaps offering it a head start in this aspect.

TIKA: Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency

TIKA is the most active organisation when it comes to the restoration of cultural heritage in the region which stems from the Ottoman presence in the area. Turkey as the successor state takes pride in helping to maintain what it views as its cultural heritage. TIKA also offers numerous training courses ranging from farming to healthcare in all these states as part of development cooperation and public diplomacy.

They promote Turkish culture and practices through ceremonies and events where Turkish food and drink are on display while Dancers perform traditional Turkish dances. The organization is viewed as the biggest organization busy with rebuilding the cultural heritage of the region and gaining it prestige. (TIKA, n.d.-a; Akıllı & Çelenk, 2019; Todorović, 2021).

It rebuilt and renovated numerous sites, buildings, tombs and various mosques across the region (Todorović, 2021). This is significant as these projects are often marked with Turkish flags to showcase its presence and generosity, which is another act of public diplomacy (Kalin, 2011). TIKA hosts multiple iftars all around the world, including the Balkans where it offers thousands of people from all background's free food, drinks and sometimes even animation (TIKA, 2022). This has multiple dimensions as it promotes a Muslim practice, which the region views as linked to Turkey while it wins over people who are financially less affluent.

Religion

Turkey's historical presence in the region left a lasting cultural legacy, the most obvious signs of which are the Ottoman style mosques and bathhouses. These are now being built again, often being overseen or funded by the Turkish government. These kinds of investments showcase Turkish influence over the Western Balkans. During the cold war, these states were part of Yugoslavia, which was part of the non-aligned movement, while Turkey was a member of NATO, thus the Western camp. This political difference led to Yugoslavia looking elsewhere for the training of its imams than Turkey whose Islamic influence is based on history and is more closely linked to that of the Balkans (Öktem, 2012; Solberg, 2007).

After the end of the Cold War and the normalisation of their relations, Turkish Islamic educational institutions were once again consulted. However, there is now also the presence of Islamic teachings that are more influenced by that of Egypt and Saudi Arabia, which could be a sign of future contestation surrounding religion. Turkey sends Imams and builds mosques, but the lack of transparency concerning the funds raises suspicion among the population and some of the political elite (Öktem, 2012; Bougarel, 2016; Politics Today, 2021).

Turkey's religious influence is a major asset to its presence in states like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, Northern Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia with considerable Muslim minorities. These are the communities like the Sandzak Muslims,

Bosnian Muslims and the Muslim Albanians among others (Bieber, 2000; Elbasani & Roy, 2015). They view Turkey like the Orthodox Serbians view Russia, seeing it as the protector of both the religion and the state's identity which gives Turkey a lot of prestige in their eyes. However, this doesn't apply to the non-Muslims and some parts of the Muslim population. Turkey's religious footprint in the region is clear and its emphasis on maintaining it can be interpreted as a means of increasing its influence and thus countering hegemony (Solberg, 2007; Buyuk, 2020).

Cultural products and diplomacy

Turkey has gained international notoriety for its cultural products, especially its telenovelas which are a specific type of drama-filled series as well as historical series like the *Magnificent Century* about Sultan Suleyman's life, which has become a worldwide hit (Panjeta, 2014; Arsan & Yildirim, 2014). Turkey's series and movies are sometimes specifically meant for such an international audience as it portrays a perhaps idealistic mix of modern life and traditional values. These cultural products have incentivised people to learn Turkish or made them consider it a possible tourist destination (Ağırseven & Öрки, 2017) thus potentially increasing the state's revenue. This can be classified under public diplomacy as Turkey is often shown in a rather good light in these series, portraying it in such a way can alter peoples' opinion of the state. In the Balkans, it is especially popular as most Ottoman series are based in that region because of its historical importance to the Ottoman empire (Ağırseven & Öрки, 2017; Pehlivan, 2021; BIRN, 2011).

The Turkish Foreign Ministry is also very active with public diplomacy as shown in the most recent report published by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign affairs (2021) the country is actively participating in and hosting intercultural exchanges. There is a special focus on the Middle East, Central Asia and the Balkans, which can be explained by their historic legacy and cultural proximity. Turkey showcases its arts and culture in the region and promotes classes on traditional Turkish hobbies like archery to create the image of a country with a vast and diverse history with links across the world, in this case, the Balkans. This image isn't necessarily wrong, but the acknowledgement of working actively on its public diplomacy in the region does clearly show a sign of counter-hegemonic tendencies. Turkey didn't and to an extent still doesn't enjoy a good image in the region, thus challenging stereotypes and promoting intercultural exchanges is a way to improve ties and increase its presence.

Education

Turkey's educational policies in the Balkans are a strong example of where it has attempted and succeeded to expand its influence and presence in the Western Balkans. Turkish educational facilities are purposefully well-staffed and funded to maintain the positive image of the state. These schools and facilities, both in Turkey and in the Balkans, are therefore very popular in the region (Kondakçı, Çalışkan, Şahin, Yılık, & Demir, 2016; Türkiye Maarif Vakfı, n.d.). Turkey also offers Turkish language courses and programmes to encourage the learning of and use of the language not only for the Turkish minorities but for the region (Anadolu Ajansı, 2018; Toè, 2020). Regional universities like the International Balkan university even offer Erasmus+ like exchange opportunities for Turkish students and universities called the Mevlana exchange programme, named after a famous poet in Turkish history (Yükseköğretim Kurulu Başkanlığı, n.d.; International relations office- International Balkan University, n.d.)

Turkish military educational facilities and opportunities are likewise highly esteemed in the region with applicants from all over the Balkans (Petrovic & Reljic, 2011; Isayev, 2020). This is significant as defence is crucial for the state's security and thus sending soldiers to study elsewhere is a sign of trust in the quality of education of the said state, in this case, Turkey. This combined with the other cultural aspects and indicators shows that Turkey boasts a strong presence in the cultural sphere and thus can and to a certain extent does challenge the hegemony of the region (Ekinci, 2019; Egeresi, 2018). However, Turkey's strategic planning of when to invest in what projects may give off a stronger presence that (Shehu, 2021), which can be interpreted as smart public diplomacy.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the analysis and compares them to the hypotheses put forward in the text, after which it ascertains whether there are counter-hegemonic tendencies present. Finally, the paper links these findings to the awkward middle power theory.

Returning to the first hypothesis: "how do awkward middle powers relate to superpowers with hegemonic or counter-hegemonic aspirations?", the findings of this research seem to suggest that awkward middle powers can increase their own influence rather freely, but this doesn't mean that the hegemon cannot increase its

presence as well. In this case, it seems that Turkey is able and does increase its activities in the region, but it still is nowhere near the dominance of the EU. It thus seems that a shot for hegemony can take a while to even be noticed and perceived as a threat by the hegemon.

The second hypothesis: "And how do such powers relate to smaller powers?" has a surprising result as awkward middle powers' relations to smaller powers vary less than one might have presupposed. These smaller powers, regardless of ideology and especially in the Balkans, need capital, trade and sometimes even development aid, hence these states do not seem to mind where this capital comes from initially. However, once these economic ties translate into political power, the situation might change as Turkey's influence isn't seen as very positive, much less if it can disrupt the EU accession talks. So, with regards to smaller powers it seems that if they stay within reasonable bounds, awkward middle powers are welcomed as valuable trading partners.

Finally, the third hypothesis: "how does this behaviour (in terms of hegemonic aspirations) differ from "normal" or other middle powers?", awkward middle powers seem to be more willing to take risks as they see the status quo as unreasonable or unfair. Turkey doesn't shy away from putting itself in the spotlight if it increases its foothold in the Western Balkans. This indicates that they tend to be more prone to risk-taking, especially when the risk is associated with greater gains.

Turkey's presence and influence in the Western Balkans have increased over the last decade, this in political, economic and cultural domains indicating a coordinated effort from Turkey. However, the EU still has a stronger presence that is nowhere near being challenged, thus there is no real shot for Turkish hegemony, but Turkey's actions might be beneficial in the long term if it keeps its efforts up. With EU expansion into the Western Balkans being a hot topic (Euronews, 2019; European Commission, 2020), these states might be disillusioned with the EU and look for other states, which Turkey could be only if it currently lays the groundwork for closer Turkish-led political cooperation in the Western Balkans.

These findings to a certain degree align with the theory of awkward middle powers (Abbondanza & Wilkins, 2021), as Turkey is challenging the international status quo by increasing its share in the power distribution. Turkey doesn't necessarily want to overrule the entire international hierarchy, rather it attempts to carve out a greater slice for itself, if this means supporting counter-hegemonic movements or

policies, then that is the preferred option. An interesting find is that Turkey doesn't want to challenge it head-on because it cannot do so, and it is sometimes wiser to bide its time. So, Turkey fits this definition quite well as it isn't an awkward great power because it doesn't and cannot substantially challenge the status quo, but it can increase its own sphere of influence, even if slowly.

Conclusion

Turkey fits the awkward middle power category quite well as its regional ambitions and actions align with the definition. The country is attempting to carve out its own niche and does so with its interests in mind, willing to achieve its goals within the status quo if possible or outside of it when necessary. Turkey's actions show clear counter-hegemonic tendencies in the political, economic and cultural realms. However, it isn't currently able to offer any alternatives to the current hegemony of the EU, so its shot for regional hegemony in the next twenty years seems bleak. Turkey does, however, still work on the foundations for closer cooperation so that when the opportunity arises it has the capabilities to be a regional power centre.

This study of Turkish-Western Balkans relations shows that awkward middle powers are a valid and interesting concept as it offers clarity on certain states' characteristics and foreign policy actions. However, the theory needs more case studies to test and improve it. A strong point of using it is the nuance it adds to the study of the complex Western Balkans region, Turkey's ambitions are constrained by the status quo, but it can still act within it, to a certain degree, to challenge it. The Western Balkans is under the EU hegemony, but as this case study has shown, there are other actors present as well.

This case study has some limitations which are linked to the scope of the paper and the availability of sources. First, this paper didn't mention the three other Western Balkans states of Albania, Kosovo and Montenegro which could have perhaps yielded different conclusions. Secondly, focusing on more than one state and aspect, like for instance the economy, prohibited a more in-depth analysis, which meant the paper had to take a wider approach. Furthermore, there wasn't a sufficient analysis of Russia and China's role in the region, as Turkey isn't the only actor that seeks to increase its influence. The economics part didn't analyse the FDI, which could have been an added value to the paper. Finally, there aren't a lot of sources on the awkward middle power theory which is relatively new. The theoretical framework linking awkward middle

powers to hegemony is also new and has room for improvement as education is currently part of the culture, while it merits its own aspect.


Concerning future research, this paper has shown that there needs to be more attention paid to Russian and Chinese counter-hegemonic actions in the Western Balkans, thus a similar case study with Russia or China could be a valuable addition. Similarly, this study could be applied to Turkish relations in the Caucasus, Central Asia or the Middle East and North Africa, as Turkey is also increasing its presence in these regions. Further studies with a focus on opinion polls and media could also be interesting as the population's opinion wasn't sufficiently discussed in this paper. Finally, there are numerous options for different methodologies for this very research, going more in-depth, using interviews or focusing on just one aspect like culture to gain a deeper insight.

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