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DECONSTRUCTING KOSOVO'S RELATIONS WITH TÜRKİYE

BETWEEN REALITY AND EXPECTATIONS



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper examines the evolution of relations between Kosovo and Türkiye from Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 to 2025, with a specific focus on the security dimension of this partnership. Its central aim is to analyse how Türkiye's foreign policy tools and priorities toward Kosovo have evolved under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and how these changes are perceived domestically in Kosovo, particularly in light of Kosovo's stated Euro-Atlantic aspirations.

The analysis reveals change and continuities in Türkiye's engagement, complementing an early emphasis on historical, religious and cultural narratives associated with "Neo-Ottomanism" to a more pragmatic "Erdoganism", an interest-driven approach, particularly evident after 2022. The initial engagement under the AKP was heavily influenced by Ahmet Davutoğlu's "Strategic Depth" doctrine, which emphasized soft power, shared heritage, and a "zero problems with neighbors" policy. This included religious diplomacy through institutions like the Diyanet (Presidency of Religious Affairs) and TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency), which promoted a shared Sunni-Hanafi Islamic identity and renovated Ottoman-era heritage sites. The paper argues this has been complemented by a more assertive "Erdoganism", which combines strategic depth with hard-power tools, particularly economic and defense cooperation, where Türkiye has become a crucial partner in modernizing the Kosovo Security Force through the provision of advanced military hardware and joint industrial projects. Additionally, Türkiye's command of KFOR in 2023 and 2025 underscores its central position in regional security underlying the strong coordination between the bilateral agreements within the spirit of NATO's formal structure and coordination with key allies like the United States.

The paper also finds out that the Strategic partnership between Türkiye and Kosovo can be seen as exceeding its line between cooperation and interference in Kosovo's domestic affairs, nevertheless these perceptions often derive from the misconceptions regarding the excessive use of Ankara's soft-power tools. Henceforth, although Türkiye has sought to shape the country's cultural narratives and public discourse, leveraging historical memory and kinship ties to project influence within local institutions and communities, there is a notable divergence between public perception and strategic reality. While an overwhelming 91% of Kosovars view Türkiye favorably, strategic allegiance remains firmly with the United States, indicating that popular support is emotive and pragmatic rather than an ideological endorsement of Türkiye's political model.

The paper recommends that Kosovo navigate this complex dynamic by supporting the transition from personalized "brotherhood diplomacy" toward a more structured, transparent, and institutionalized state-to-state partnership, one that avoids political interference on either side, remains embedded within NATO-compatible frameworks, and is clearly communicated as complementary to Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration. Such an approach would allow Kosovo to maximize the benefits of its partnership with Türkiye while safeguarding its secular, independent, and democratic principles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite Kosovo's strong pro-EU and pro-NATO orientation, Türkiye has emerged as one of its most visible and active strategic partners, especially in the security and defence sectors. While early Turkish engagement was often framed through cultural, religious, and historical narratives, frequently associated with the concept of "NeoOttomanism", recent years have witnessed a noticeable shift toward more pragmatic, interest-driven cooperation. This raises an important puzzle: how can Türkiye's growing security role in Kosovo be understood within a broader geopolitical context marked by Kosovo's EuroAtlantic trajectory and Türkiye's increasingly complex relations with the EU and NATO? Moreover, to what extent does deeper security cooperation with Türkiye reinforce, or complicate, Kosovo's long-term strategic objectives?

Exploring this question is particularly timely. Since 2016, and even more so following Russia's fullscale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Türkiye has recalibrated its foreign policy in the Western Balkans, complementing its earlier emphasis on soft power and identity-based diplomacy with a stronger focus on trade, defence cooperation, and strategic autonomy. In Kosovo, this shift has translated into increased engagement in the security sector, at a time when the country continues to face unresolved regional tensions, limited international recognition, and stalled progress toward EU and NATO membership.

Understanding the nuances of Kosovo-Türkiye relations therefore matters for three reasons. First, it sheds light on how small states like Kosovo navigate partnerships with non-EU but NATO-embedded actors in a fragmented geopolitical environment. Second, it contributes to broader debates on Türkiye's role as a security actor in the Western Balkans and its positioning vis-à-vis Euro-Atlantic structures. Third, it allows for the identification of policy-relevant insights and best practices that could help align bilateral cooperation with Kosovo's primary strategic objective: integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

Research Methodology:

The research adopts a qualitative methodology centred primarily on comprehensive desk research and semistructured interviews. The desk research draws on a wide range of primary and secondary sources, including academic literature, policy reports, official documents, and media coverage on Türkiye's foreign policy, Kosovo-Türkiye relations, and the broader Western Balkan context.

In addition, the study incorporates five semi-structured interviews conducted with policy experts, representatives of Kosovar civil society, and government officials. These interviews provide insight into domestic perceptions of Turkish engagement and help unpack the political and security implications of deepened bilateral cooperation. All collected material is analysed through a structured analytical lens that situates Kosovo-Türkiye relations within: (a) Türkiye's evolving foreign policy under the AKP; (b) Kosovo's security and statebuilding trajectory; and (c) the broader geopolitical context of EU-NATO-Türkiye relations.

By embedding the Kosovo-Türkiye case within these overlapping frameworks, the paper aims to offer a contextualised and policy-relevant assessment of Türkiye's role in Kosovo's security architecture and its implications for the country's Euro-Atlantic future.

The paper is structured as follows. Following the introduction, the second section situates Kosovo-Türkiye relations within the broader geopolitical and conceptual context of Türkiye’s foreign policy in the Western Balkans, outlining key continuities and shifts from the “Strategic Depth” doctrine to a more pragmatic, security-oriented approach under President Erdoğan. The third section provides an in-depth empirical analysis of Kosovo-Türkiye relations across three interrelated dimensions: political and diplomatic engagement, socioeconomic and cultural relations, and defence and security cooperation, combining desk research with interview evidence. The fourth section assesses the implications of this evolving partnership for Kosovo, critically examining the tension between partnership and interference, and between public perceptions and strategic realities, particularly in relation to Kosovo’s Euro-Atlantic trajectory. The paper concludes with a set of analytical conclusions and policy-oriented recommendations aimed at strengthening Kosovo-Türkiye relations while safeguarding Kosovo’s democratic resilience, institutional autonomy, and long-term integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.

2. GEOPOLITICAL CONTEXT OF KOSOVO-TURKIYE RELATIONS

In the context of the geopolitical shifts triggered by Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine, there has been an increased focus on hybrid activities and external influence in the Western Balkans. Türkiye's actions in the Western Balkans have often been analysed as part of a broader group of non-Western actors, namely Russia, China, and the Gulf states, seeking to exploit existing cleavages and extend their influence in the region.¹ However, a distinguishing feature of Türkiye's foreign policy approach is its articulation of a nuanced foreign policy vision, underpinned by the utilisation of soft power instruments, in conjunction with measures to foster security and stability² further substantiated by its membership in NATO³. Interview evidence suggests that Türkiye's engagement in the Western Balkans is strongly shaped by regional economic and geopolitical considerations. A civil society representative highlighted the strategic relevance of the region as a major transit corridor for trade between Türkiye and Western markets, as well as for energy infrastructure linking Türkiye to Europe.⁴ Nevertheless, the historical and religious legacy of the Ottoman Empire is regarded as one of the main factors inspiring contemporary Türkiye's aspirations toward the Western Balkans, often triggering the perception of potential malign influence.⁵ Türkiye's foreign policy aspirations cannot be fully understood without reference to former Türkiye's Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision. This vision is rooted in Türkiye's "Neo-Ottoman" strategy, which rests on reviving the Ottoman past and advocating for greater engagement of Türkiye with the countries once part of the Ottoman Empire. The "zero problems with neighbors" doctrine embodies this approach, promoting multidimensional activities across political, economic, and security spheres⁶ through soft-power means aimed at giving Türkiye so-called "strategic depth" in neighboring regions.⁷

In the case of Kosovo, the "Neo-Ottoman" strategy has adapted with a tailor-made approach that takes in consideration peculiarities of population, culture and economic structure. With a combination of soft and hard power, Türkiye's growing prominence has been evident both in the political, socio-cultural, economic and security sphere. Analysing this progression will help understanding changes and continuities of Turkish foreign policy while highlighting the impact of these combined strategies, and the consequent implications for Kosovo's strategic interests. For instance, significant changes in Turkish foreign policy took place under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's presidency after the 2016 military coup attempt. Domestic priorities have brought the attention to national security, an assertive style in policy implementation, a preference for transaction-based relations, and a quest for more "strategic autonomy."⁸ The changes do not represent a shift in Turkey's overall international orientation, rather an attempt to combine the Davutoğlu "strategic depth" with a more pragmatic, hard-power-oriented "Erdoğanism"⁹ often couched in security terms and where Türkiye defence sector's successes are the new tools to increase international reputation and regional standing.¹⁰

Understanding this is important to determine how Kosovo's relationship with Türkiye could be improved by focusing on common interests, especially continued support for Kosovo's stability and security within the NATO security architecture, and bilateral economic and military cooperation with Türkiye. To better analyse this relationship, the next paragraph will focus on three specific subjects: political/diplomatic relations, socio-economic relations, and security.

3. KOSOVO-TÜRKİYE RELATIONS ACROSS THREE INTERRELATED DIMENSIONS

3.1 Political/Diplomatic Relations

Political and diplomatic relations reveal how Türkiye translates strategic ambitions into influence over Kosovo's state-building process and foreign policy alignment. Türkiye was one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence, it has been a traditional strategic partner, and as a member of the G20 and Organization of Islamic Cooperation, it has provided considerable support in the country's recognition process.¹¹ According to interviews, this was partially due to the influence of the large Albanian diaspora in Türkiye, a community that Ankara considers highly important, with Turkish officials of Albanian origin occupying high-ranking positions within the administration and security institutions, reinforcing ties and shaping policy considerations. This factor, according to interviews, demonstrates that "foreign policy is shaped not only by rational calculations of state interests but also by personal and identity-related considerations."¹²

Considering the key drivers of Turkish foreign policy during Davutoğlu's tenure (2007-2016), Turkey's approach toward Kosovo was shaped by a combination of neo-Ottoman historical and cultural narratives, proactive diplomatic support for Kosovo's statehood, extensive soft-power engagement, and a sustained commitment to regional security. Within this framework, Kosovo's leadership under Hashim Thaçi developed a strategically significant yet highly personalized relationship with President Erdoğan, which further consolidated Turkey's influence in Kosovo and contributed to aligning Kosovo's foreign policy orientation with Ankara's broader Balkan strategy. Their relationship enabled Thaçi to strengthen his political leverage at critical moments in Kosovo's domestic political landscape, while simultaneously bolstering Erdoğan's domestic image as a decisive and influential actor in the Balkans.¹³ Notably, Erdoğan's visits to Kosovo in 2010 and 2013 coincided with electoral campaigns and effectively functioned as political endorsements of Thaçi's party.¹⁴ Over time, informal bilateral meetings in Istanbul or Ankara served as consultations and joint decision-making, going beyond the regular state administration procedures and without any public disclosure of information, often occurring alongside high-profile events such as presidential inauguration ceremonies or the opening of Istanbul's airport.¹⁵ Thaçi's attendance of these events has been trumpeted as a clear sign of the bilateral strategic relations in place with Turkey.¹⁶ The so-called "*brotherhood diplomacy*" has been instrumental both for Kosovo to foster its international status and for Erdoğan's aim to consolidate Turkish reputation within Kosovo's muslim majority population while fostering soft-power and economical presence.¹⁷ This long-standing relationship remains strong, as evidenced by Türkiye's support for Kosovo's international recognition, as demonstrated by Erdoğan's contribution to Syria's recognition of Kosovo in 2025.¹⁸ Nevertheless, although Thaçi's successors (President Osmani and Prime Minister Kurti) have maintained a robust and collaborative alliance with Türkiye, the degree of influence exercised by Erdoğan during Thaçi's leadership has diminished. This phenomenon may be attributed to the Western-centric perspective and educational background of the new Kosovar leadership, being more influenced by the US and the EU in the government's operations compared to Türkiye.¹⁹ It could be assessed that Turkish official diplomacy in Kosovo is not as prevalent as other foreign policy approaches. However, Türkiye's current support at the bilateral level, particularly in the defence sector, is indicative of a change in foreign policy priorities, characterised by a heightened focus on security and economy, while cultural soft-power tools are employed to maintain a favourable perception among the population. According to security expert, the

current geopolitical reality, shaped by the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, brought Türkiye to reposition its foreign policy towards Kosovo, shifting from an “interference type” of relation to a more state-to-state approach²⁰. Indeed, Ankara currently supports the dialogue for normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia with the expectation that the normalisation of relations would bring more stability to the entire Western Balkans region, paving the way for a unified regional market from which Turkish businesses could benefit, and finally reduce potential diplomatic pitfalls. In line with these interests, Türkiye aligns its actions with the EU and the US, endorsing NATO enlargement to the Western Balkans and maintaining a non-confrontational stance toward EU enlargement.²¹

3.2. Socio-Economic Relations: Soft-Power In Action

Socioeconomic relations constitute another relevant factor of analysis when examining Türkiye’s soft power in Kosovo, which operates through an interconnected framework linking cultural and religious influence with economic involvement. Although these spheres may appear distinct, public and religious diplomacy function as strategic investments that later generate economic returns, particularly through Turkish companies that are both willing and welcomed to invest in Kosovo. Consequently, socioeconomic relations are shaped to support the expansion of the Turkish economy while simultaneously promoting shared cultural heritage and a common religious past.

3.2.1 Public and Religious Diplomacy

Cultural and historical legacies of the Ottoman Empire strongly influence Turkish foreign policy under Erdogan. Türkiye’s cultural and religious involvement with Kosovar citizens was consistent from the early 2000s onwards and grew stronger when Türkiye recognized Kosovo’s independence. After AKP came to power in 2002, Türkiye sought to strengthen the role of Islam in Kosovo through close cooperation between the Diyanet (the Turkish Presidency of Religious Affairs) and local Muslim communities, to promote Sunni-Hanafi Islam.²² Later on, the Turkish Coordination and Cooperation Agency (TICA) assumed the main role of renovating mosques dating the Ottoman Empire, as well as other Turkish-Islamic heritage sites. TICA offers support to countries that share historic, geographic, social, and cultural bonds with Turkey.²³ It opened its office in Prizren in 2004 and established the Pristina Program Coordination Office in 2008. The total value of all projects undertaken in Kosovo amounted to \$4.69 million.²⁴ Parallel to the bureaucratic political leadership, another way of implementing its soft power has been in the social framework. The Gülen Movement has been the most active and efficient in the Balkans in successfully spreading a new spirit of Turkish Islam through a good network of education, media, clinics and the financial market. Nevertheless, after the breakdown of Gülen’s relations with Erdogan in 2016, the influence of the Diyanet in domestic and foreign policy undoubtedly increased, augmented also by the transnational nature of the clash between the Gülen Movement and the AKP.²⁵ The Turkish government indeed exerted pressure to close Gülenist schools in the Balkans. For his special relations with Erdogan, Taçi was the first national leader to deport six alleged supporters of the Gülenist movement in 2018, considered by Türkiye to be a terrorist organisation. The operation was kept secret from then Prime Minister Haradinaj, exposing Kosovo to direct foreign influence and violating its Constitution. Taçi afterwards justified the operation on grounds of “threat to national security”.²⁶ His decision had repercussions for Kosovo’s political stability, which resulted in Erdogan making public threats against Prime Minister Haradinaj.²⁷

Other crucial tools which have increased Türkiye’s popularity and its influence, and that Kosovo welcomed is the increase of investments in educational spheres, particularly the exchange of mobility schemes, but also radio and television. These patterns demonstrate a shared emphasis on building educational infrastructure and preserving cultural heritage. Türkiye’s influence through educational initiatives has first gone through the Gülenist movement and later the Maarif Foundation and the Yunus

Emre Institute. The Turkish Maarif Foundation, established in June 2016, is uniquely authorized, alongside the Ministry of National Education of the Republic of Türkiye, to open educational institutions abroad, established to counter the influence of Gülen schools in the region, with the Turkish Ministry of Education allocating a substantial budget to the Maarif Foundation to support this mission each year.²⁸ However, according to the responses gathered in an interview:

“Turkish investments are oriented towards the restoration and strengthening of the cultural heritage of the Ottoman Empire, which reflects the common Kosovar-Turkish history during that period. Türkiye’s goal through these investments is to improve the historical image of that time and that power in the region. Being an important actor in the defense, economy, and diplomacy sectors, Turkey has the opportunity to “rebrand” the historical perception of the Ottoman Empire. For these reasons, in addition to cooperation in other areas, Kosovo should maintain and strengthen religious cooperation with Türkiye, because this represents a concrete protection against interference from states that do not practice Sunni-Hanafi Islam - an interpretation that has historically been best adapted to Albanian culture and its liberal-democratic orientation. Any distancing from this cooperation creates space for the penetration of other, more conservative religious currents.”²⁹

3.2.2 Economy

While the religious and socio-cultural investments have progressed, so has been the case of economic interests in Kosovo. By offering a free trade agreement to Kosovo, since the first years in power of the AKP, Türkiye has been active in investing in the strategic sectors: from banks, to telecommunications, and infrastructure.³⁰ The increase of Turkish investments in almost every sector in Kosovo and generally in the Western Balkans could be explained by the proximity to the EU Single Market. The economic considerations are, therefore, the main drivers of Türkiye’s Foreign Policy in the region.³¹ Moreover, the slowness in the EU accession process makes the Western Balkans search for alternative sources of investments and partners. Ankara is believed to be more eager to invest in the region with higher infrastructural needs and is faster to adapt to tough conditions in the Balkans than its EU counterparts.³² Indeed, Ankara financed some of the large infrastructural projects in Kosovo. Pristina International Airport “Adem Jashari,” described by President Erdoğan as “the most modern and beautiful airport in the Balkans,” was financed by the Limak–Aéroports de Lyon consortium of Turkish and French firms, with an investment exceeding €140 million.³³ Under the 20-year concession (until 2030), the consortium operates the airport while Kosovo retains ownership. Similarly, the Turkish-American consortium Bechtel-Enka was awarded contracts for two major infrastructure projects, Routes 7 and 6. The 102-km “Patriotic Highway,” linking Pristina to Albania’s border at Morinë and representing Kosovo’s first motorway, was accompanied by significant controversy as construction costs for its 77-km section escalated from €400 million to over €820 million.³⁴ Close ties between Thaçi and Erdogan reportedly influenced cooperation at this level.³⁵ In 2012, the Limak-Çalık consortium acquired the Kosovo Electric Distribution Company (KEDC) for €26.3 million. Following privatization, energy distribution improved visibly, with fewer power outages enhancing perceptions of energy security. A 2023 survey found that 49% of Kosovars believed the Limak-Çalık investment strengthened Kosovo’s energy security, while 65% viewed Turkish companies as having a positive environmental impact.³⁶ These views reflect a generally favorable perception of Türkiye as a strategic partner. Nonetheless, the EU remains Kosovo’s dominant economic and trade partner, reflecting both its integration ambitions and long-standing ties with the EU and Switzerland. Trade with Türkiye, however, has expanded substantially. Türkiye ranked among Kosovo’s top import sources in 2022–2023 and became the leading one in 2024, with trade volume reaching €909 million, ahead of Germany and China. Another key area of Türkiye’s investment in Kosovo is the banking sector - a cornerstone of its broader regional economic strategy.³⁷ Ziraat Bank plays a dominant role in Kosovo’s financial landscape.³⁸ Operating within a Turkish consortium that includes four Turkish-owned banks collectively control about 16% of Kosovo’s banking market.³⁹ This economic presence exemplifies Ankara’s use of financial diplomacy to cultivate interdependence and goodwill.

The interplay between economic investments and soft power through religious diplomacy, cultural initiatives, remain central pillars of Türkiye's relationship with Kosovo. Nevertheless the shifting global geopolitical landscape, particularly from the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, has enabled Türkiye also to become one of the most relevant exporters in the defense sector, demonstrating a significant strategic shift in its foreign policy.⁴⁰

3.3 Defence

This section aims to highlight Türkiye's progressive role in enhancing Kosovo's security and supporting its alignment with Euro-Atlantic strategic objectives.

3.3.1 Bilateral Cooperation

Although Türkiye's influence in Kosovo has largely been exercised through socio-cultural, religious, and economic channels, the military and defense sector has become a crucial component of bilateral relations. Following the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, the deployment of Turkish troops within NATO's KFOR peacekeeping mission gave Ankara a sustained presence in the country. Since Kosovo's 2008 declaration of independence, Türkiye has assisted in the ongoing transition of Kosovo's Security Force into a full-fledged national army through training, equipment, and technology transfers. Over the past decade, Kosovo and Türkiye have signed several defense agreements, both within the KFOR framework and bilateral level.⁴¹ These include the agreement on defense materials supply (May 17, 2022), and the Military Framework Agreement (January 30, 2024).⁴²

In terms of bilateral cooperation, Türkiye's engagement in defense and capacity-building in Kosovo has accelerated independently of NATO mechanisms, which, however, remains the cornerstone of regional security. From what emerged from the interviews, all agreements made bilaterally between Kosovo and Türkiye are de facto outside NATO, but in the spirit of NATO. For this reason, they must be made in coordination with the key guarantors of security in Kosovo, such as the United States of America.⁴³

Current developments further illustrate this growing partnership. More recently, Türkiye exported OMTAS anti-tank missiles⁴⁴, ALKAR 120-mm mortar systems, Vuran armored vehicles⁴⁵, and MKE PMT-76-57A⁴⁶ machine guns to Kosovo. In 2025, Skydagger drones were delivered to the Kosovo Security Forces (KSF)⁴⁷. According to Kurti, these new unmanned aircraft (UAV's) would operate alongside Kosovo's existing fleet of Baykar TB2 Bayraktar and U.S. Puma systems, "contributing to the ongoing effort to build and modernize the military through new technologies and contemporary combat tactics."⁴⁸ Türkiye's support to enhance Kosovo's defense capacity and deter potential threats is a pro-status-quo rather than revisionist policy considering the general race in fostering the defense sector at the regional level. Against this backdrop, the turnkey agreement with the Turkish state-owned defense manufacturer MKE to establish an ammunition production facility in Kosovo marks another milestone in bilateral defense cooperation. Scheduled for completion in 2026, the factory will produce 20 million cartridges annually, with MKE providing production lines, equipment, construction, and training for the local workforce.⁴⁹ Türkiye's expanding defense exports to Kosovo mirror its broader global rise as an arms producer. Manufacturing to NATO standards gives Turkish products a competitive advantage, particularly in allied states like Kosovo. For Kosovo, procurement from Türkiye enhances defense capabilities amid heightened European security concerns following Russia's war in Ukraine.

In terms of capacity building, Ankara's direct assistance has also helped develop the Kosovo Security Force beyond the limitations of the Ahtisaari Plan (Annex VIII, Article 5.2), which restricts heavy weaponry and caps troop levels.⁵⁰ Türkiye's role thus extends beyond NATO obligations, contributing directly to the professionalization of Kosovo's military institutions. Nonetheless, Türkiye's impact is most effective

when operating within NATO's collective framework, where its contributions complement broader Alliance objectives. In this context, a representative of Kosovo's Ministry of Defence, recommended military operations conducted at the bilateral level in Africa, which, if not conflicting with those of Kosovo's main allies, such as the US and UK, would benefit mutual relationships with Türkiye."⁵¹ Overall, Türkiye's engagement - through defense cooperation, military assistance, and industrial investment - reinforces stability in the Western Balkans and strengthens Europe's eastern flank, supporting the region's transition from a security consumer to a security provider.⁵²

3.3.2 Multilateral Level

After the end of the Kosovo War in 1999, the deployment of Turkish military units in Kosovo within the framework of the NATO-led KFOR peacekeeping mission granted to Türkiye a tangible presence and influence in the country. Upon the establishment of the NATO-led Kosovo Force (KFOR) through UNSC Resolution 1244 on June 12, 1999, Türkiye swiftly prepared to deploy troops for this multinational peacekeeping operation.⁵³ In recent years, Türkiye's role in KFOR has visibly expanded as a result of increasing tensions in the Balkans. As the EU-led normalization dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina did not progress as expected and in the face of the possibility of external actors destabilising the region, NATO requested member countries to maintain reserve forces for KFOR. After recent tensions between the Kosovo government and the Serbian community living in the northern municipalities escalated, and statements suggesting that Belgrade could intervene prompted NATO to take additional measures. Following the incidents between Serbian protesters and KFOR personnel in the municipalities in northern Kosovo on May 29, 2023, Türkiye sent its Operational Reserve Battalion to Kosovo in June 2023 at the request of NATO's Joint Force Command.⁵⁴ Furthermore, since Türkiye is among the most significant contributors to KFOR, it took over the command of this force for one year in 2023.⁵⁵ The appointment of Turkish General Major Ozkan Ulutaş again after one year of direction by the Italian General Major Enrico Barduani, as the commander-in-chief of KFOR in October 2025 serves as a tangible manifestation of Türkiye's central position within the mission and his in regional security efforts.⁵⁶ By strengthening its presence in the peace mission on the ground, Türkiye opens a political channel of communication with both sides thereby evidencing its sustained commitment to the region and within NATO structures. KFOR currently wields greater influence than bilateral agreements, although the latter are steadily increasing in significance.

4. WHAT KOSOVO NEEDS: MORE PARTNERSHIP, LESS BROTHERHOOD RELATIONS

Despite its small territorial size, Kosovo's central position in the Balkans gives it strategic value within the region's security architecture. Kosovo's strategic embrace of Türkiye's multidimensional engagement in the Western Balkans as a complementary partnership is in line with the aim to enhance state capacity, support of economic resilience, and strengthen security institutions. Türkiye's engagement is calibrated to Kosovo's specific political, security, and societal dynamics, while remaining adaptable to the heterogeneous threat perceptions and interests of other regional actors. Owing to its Ottoman legacy, Türkiye's soft power in the Western Balkans resonates distinctively, shaped by the region's shared historical experience among diverse ethnic groups.⁵⁷

The results of the consistent multidimensional presence of Türkiye in Kosovo is indicative of significant engagement in shaping public opinion and maintaining a favorable image. According to the 2023 National Survey conducted by the International Republican Institute (IRI), 91% of Kosovars hold a favorable view of Türkiye, a figure that surpasses even perceptions of support from the European Union.⁵⁸ This was displayed on the night of Türkiye's 2023 presidential elections, when President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's victory was celebrated across Prizren and other Muslim-majority cities in the Western Balkans. Among Kosovo Albanians, Erdoğan's popularity remains particularly high, reflecting both gratitude for Türkiye's consistent support for Kosovo's independence and the resonance of his strong leadership image. Yet beneath this surface of solidarity lies a more complex and at times contradictory dynamic. Türkiye's engagement in Kosovo has not only been strategic but also deeply political and cultural, oscillating between genuine partnership and assertive interference. While Ankara is not viewed as an alternative to Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic path, it has nonetheless sought to shape the country's cultural narratives and public discourse, leveraging historical memory and kinship ties to project influence within local institutions and communities.

Kosovo's positive perception of Türkiye is rooted in Türkiye's early recognition of its independence and its consistent advocacy in international forums. Turkish investments in infrastructure, energy, and banking have further strengthened its reputation as a pragmatic and reliable ally. Yet Ankara's influence also extends through soft power: educational programs, cultural exchanges, and the activities of TİKA and the Yunus Emre Institute have normalized Türkiye's political presence and embedded a sense of shared heritage within Kosovo's public life. While these efforts have strengthened bilateral ties, they have also blurred the line between cultural cooperation and political leverage. According to the responses gathered during interviews, although Türkiye has a legitimate interest in preserving the Ottoman cultural heritage in the Balkans, it needs to be careful about religious discourse and historical narratives in the current regional political environment. This should be considered by taking into account that each Balkan nation has its historical narratives, often displayed in the form of "competing truths."⁵⁹ Especially considering the religious aspect, another expert highlighted that Türkiye should be aware that Kosovo wants to pursue the common interpretation of Islam, while detached from any politicization.⁶⁰

Despite Turkey's soft power engagement in Kosovo, public positive perception of Türkiye appears to be largely emotive rather than ideological. A respondent confirmed that ideological values "are not as strong as they used to be in Kosovo, considering its priority to align with European values. "Although there is still a religious connection between Türkiye and Kosovo, it cannot, however, 'move mountains' and make Türkiye an indispensable partner in all domains."⁶¹ As the last IRI survey highlights, only 3 percent of

respondents identify Türkiye as Kosovo's most important ally, a position overwhelmingly reserved for the United States. Ankara is therefore perceived as a supplementary partner rather than a strategic substitute, appreciated for its assistance but not viewed as a model for governance.⁶²

Still, Türkiye's soft power occasionally transforms into overt interference in domestic affairs. One example occurred in 2011, when Ankara requested that Kosovo revise its school textbooks to remove "negative" portrayals of the Ottoman Empire. The Turkish Embassy's demand to delete terms such as "killing, violence, and revenge" provoked strong domestic backlash and was widely interpreted as an attempt to sanitize historical memory.⁶³ A more serious breach followed in 2018, when six Turkish citizens residing in Kosovo were detained and deported to Türkiye over alleged links to the Gülenist movement. Conducted without due judicial process, the operation sparked international condemnation and raised concerns about Kosovo's sovereignty and rule of law. More recently, a controversy in Prizren (a city with a significant Turkish community) has reignited debates over Ankara's influence in Kosovo's cultural sphere. In 2024, the Prizren City Theater "Bekim Fehmiu" twice canceled the play "The Six Against Turkey", which critiques the Turkish government's authoritarian tendencies. Evidence later emerged that the Turkish ambassador had met with the mayor of Prizren to express concern over the play's potential to "damage relations with Türkiye." The formal request to cancel the performance was signed by a member of the Prizren Municipal Assembly affiliated with a Turkish minority party. While municipal authorities denied political interference, the episode underscored the extent to which Türkiye's kin-politics can shape local decision-making, blurring the boundary between cultural sensitivity and political pressure (Koha, 2025).⁶⁴ Experts' opinions gathered have been different regarding these three specific episodes. Some argue that diplomatic responses when state authority and narratives are contrasted are very common even where there are friendly relations between two countries, like in this case. However, no cultural event can be stopped without a court order.⁶⁵

Regarding the Gülenist Question, interviews claimed that it has been a transnational problem for Türkiye that has shaped its foreign policy even outside the Western Balkans, underlining the case of Sweden, whose NATO membership was almost vetoed by Türkiye for this exact reason.⁶⁶ Indeed, according to a representative of the Kosovo Ministry of Defence, the matter of the six deported Turkish citizens can be legitimately debated in terms of human rights concerns and the legal framework underlying the entire operation. However, Kosovo, as a country operating under bilateral agreements with Türkiye, has an obligation to return Turkish citizens to their home country, and it is not within Kosovo's purview to address Turkey's domestic political issues. The interview also noted that Türkiye has assisted Kosovo's institutions on several occasions, particularly concerning Kosovar foreign fighters attempting to travel to Syria. In those instances, Turkey deported Kosovar citizens back to Kosovo without any preconditions thus far. Therefore, for Kosovo's institutions, there was no viable alternative course of action in this case.⁶⁷

Regarding the remaining two cases, clear interference in domestic politics is evident. In Kosovo, freedom of expression regarding political and historical figures is normatively guaranteed. Thus, the actions in question appear more as attempts to censor critical perspectives on the brutality of the Ottoman Empire and to impose censorship on theatrical performances.⁶⁸ Others confirmed that there has been political pressure in demanding the revision of school textbooks, stating that "professional revision of history books in the Balkans can happen if it is regional-wide" however, this "should be done with professional/scientific vigor for all history books; not only in Kosovo and not with the idea of adapting historical realities to today's political necessities."⁶⁹

This pattern of influence reflects the transnational projection of Erdoğanism as a political and cultural model. This transnational feature is in line with widely used kin-state policies by many countries, by adopting kin minorities as foreign policy instruments. A representative of Kosovo's Ministry of Defense indeed referred to the Turkish minority in Kosovo as "one of the main Türkiye's foreign policy instrument," underlying that Turkish minority keeps strong alignment with Turkish institutions.⁷⁰ As a result, Kosovo's

policies typically reflect the perspectives of Turkish minority representatives within the Assembly, while soft power mechanisms, such as TİKA, cultural diplomacy initiatives, and educational mobilisation schemes, remain crucial foreign policy tools within Erdoganism.⁷¹ Furthermore, Erdogan's model of leadership appears as both a symbol of empowerment and a subtle endorsement of centralized authority. Within this framework, Erdogan's leadership appeals to citizens beyond Türkiye's borders, offering a narrative of strength, pride, and authenticity that resonates in societies marked by political distrust and institutional fragility. In Kosovo, his popularity functions as charismatic soft power: he embodies decisiveness and national confidence, qualities often contrasted with the more institutional, rule-based Western governance.⁷² While this admiration does not equate to ideological convergence, it reveals an emotional identification with the image of a strong leader. Furthermore, Türkiye's religious diplomacy is considered one of the most consistent influence operations since the early 2000s, suggesting that efforts to leverage cultural and religious ties have been particularly effective in this context.⁷³ Yet Kosovo's society remains predominantly secular in its political orientation, reflecting a strong commitment to the country's constitutional framework of secular governance. Broadly speaking, religion is treated as a private matter rather than an element of national identity, and the country's Euro-Atlantic aspirations reinforce a civic rather than religious understanding of belonging.⁷⁴ Türkiye's instrumentalization of religion, therefore, serves more as a symbolic resource than as an effective political mobilizer, being designed for cultural diplomacy to maintain familiarity and reinforce soft-power networks. Indeed, as a security expert claimed, "Islamic ideology should be incorporated into Turkey's competition for primacy in the Islamic world, specifically in its Sunni part, which seeks to counter Saudi Arabia or Egypt".⁷⁵ However, the religious role still has a significant influence, considering that the Diyanet and TİKA will support the construction of the Grand Mosque in Pristina. According to the interviews, Türkiye has indeed placed great importance on the substantial assistance provided through TİKA. However, the revitalization of Ottoman heritage cannot be considered intrusive, just as the close relationship that the Islamic Community of Kosovo has with Türkiye is not significant, because they share the same Sunni-Hanafi Islamic doctrine and Ottoman heritage. In any case, experts claimed that Turkey is formally and constitutionally a secular state and has understood that Albanian nationalism is secularist nationalism. Indeed, religion has no role in Kosovo Albanian national identity.⁷⁶

Economically, Türkiye continues to be a major player in Kosovo's development, being the second trading partner with 926 million euros of export towards Kosovo in 2025.⁷⁷ Turkish companies have invested heavily in infrastructure, energy, and banking, providing employment and capital in a context of economic fragility. Türkiye's presence in Kosovo thus operates through a dual dynamic: it is both an indispensable ally and a potential intervener. Its strategy consists of economic pragmatism, diplomatic advocacy, and cultural symbolism to sustain influence in the Western Balkans. This duality helps explain why public opinion remains overwhelmingly favorable even when Ankara's actions raise concerns about democratic norms and domestic affairs interference. However, the positive public opinion about Erdogan's style of governance may desensitize part of the population to authoritarian practices and weaken support for democratic accountability. Turkish-linked parties and municipal actors could translate cultural ties into political influence, while overreliance on Turkish investments may create structural dependencies that complicate Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic trajectory.

The challenge for Kosovo is to navigate this relationship with strategic clarity. While acknowledging Türkiye's contributions, it has to recognize the political costs of a "big brother" relationship and the need to gradually disengage from it. Nevertheless many responders claim that "small countries are always exposed to the influence of bigger ones. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between exercising systematic influence with putting specific bilateral requests to a smaller country, which are not always received positively by the latter".⁷⁸ Indeed, it would be simplistic to frame Türkiye's role as purely coercive. Its investments, humanitarian initiatives, and diplomatic backing remain vital to Kosovo's international positioning. The objective for Pristina is therefore not to distance itself from Türkiye, but to balance partnership with principled independence. According to experts, a good partnership at state level between Kosovo and Türkiye in the future "will not depend primarily on their will, but from the

current geopolitical arena, which is now redefining itself with the new administration of President Trump.”⁷⁹ Scenarios of the future world order will be fundamental in determining the possible scenarios between Kosovo and Turkey. It is not possible to make a qualified assessment, given the unpredictability of future scenarios in international politics. One thing, however, is certain: “Turkey will continue to be a very important regional actor because of the military and economic potential it currently possesses”.⁸⁰ Interviews show that what could seriously affect relations with Turkey is if Kosovo moves even closer to European integration while Türkiye remains on the sidelines. An example would be when Kosovo will have to impose visas on Turkish citizens, and “here the stalemate could spread, because there would no longer be benefits from the gray zone.”⁸¹

Türkiye’s engagement in Kosovo illustrates both the promise and the peril of soft power in fragile democracies. It is a relationship built on gratitude and shared experience, yet marked by asymmetry and competing narratives of modernity and belonging. As Kosovo continues to deepen its Euro-Atlantic integration, it must do so being aware that every external partnership carries normative implications. Managing Türkiye’s influence with caution and confidence, neither antagonizing nor submitting, will be a crucial test of Kosovo’s political maturity. The gradual shift from personalized diplomacy to institutionalized cooperation suggests that this process is already underway. The resilience of Kosovo’s democracy will depend on its ability to maintain this balance, ensuring that friendship does not translate into dependency and that partnership remains consistent with the principles of autonomy, transparency, and democratic governance. Evidence shows rapid strength of institutions and significant economic growth particularly comparing it at the regional level.⁸² Thereby, as long as Türkiye supports Kosovo’s international ambitions, religious and domestic illiberal ideology elements of Türkiye’s Foreign Policy, although significantly threatening, could remain peripheral. “For Kosovo, Turkey’s geopolitical value is measured by its current potential rather than its historical grandeur. Size and population, geography, economic development, strong army, NATO membership, and the loud voice in many other international platforms are attributes that make Türkiye an important player in international politics.”⁸³

Since 2022, Türkiye’s engagement with Kosovo appears to have undergone a notable recalibration. While instruments of religious and cultural diplomacy remain present, they have been increasingly complemented, and in some respects overshadowed, by a more assertive emphasis on military cooperation and defence exports. The growing supply of Turkish military equipment to Kosovo, including drones and other defence systems, suggests a shift toward a pragmatic security-oriented approach that aligns with Ankara’s broader regional ambitions under President Erdogan. This evolution represents both continuity and change when compared with the framework articulated during Ahmet Davutoğlu’s Strategic Depth era. Continuity lies in Türkiye’s sustained aspiration to exercise influence in Kosovo and the Western Balkans through multidimensional engagement - political, economic, and cultural - framed within a narrative of shared Ottoman and Islamic heritage. However, the change is evident in the rebalancing of instruments with the relative decline of overt religious diplomacy and the concurrent rise of hard-power and security tools as preferred means of projection. In this sense, Erdogan’s post-2022 approach can be understood as an adaptation of Strategic Depth to a more competitive geopolitical environment, where defence cooperation and military presence serve as both a signal of Türkiye’s regional agency and a means of consolidating bilateral loyalty beyond the sphere of cultural affinity.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the current climate of global geopolitical uncertainty, Kosovo should continue to diversify and expand its network of allies to consolidate its international standing. While the Euro-Atlantic path remains its strategic priority, cultivating a broad range of partnerships is essential for reinforcing sovereignty and resilience. Türkiye has played a crucial role in Kosovo's state-building, as well as in its economic, cultural, and security development. Interviews suggest that to make sure that Kosovo remains the key factors of security and stability in the Balkans (for Türkiye as well as the EU and the US), it needs to build a more advanced partnership in order to achieve this common goal. The fact that, within a three-year period, Türkiye has held command of KFOR is important in this regard and demonstrates the stabilizing role Türkiye aims to play in Kosovo. According to experts, advancement implies that Kosovo is moving beyond the paradigm of dependency and transforming it into a paradigm of partnership with Türkiye. This is a goal Kosovo has with all of its allies. A good cooperation in the field of defense is currently in place, but there is potential for advancement to another level of partnership that could serve the interests of all key actors.

For Kosovo, the maintenance of cooperative relations with Türkiye in the economic and security domains is of strategic importance. Similarly, such engagement is beneficial to Türkiye as well, since it can consolidate its regional influence, provided that it does not resort to domestic interference. In Kosovo's case, the bilateral relationship has remained friendly and productive. Yet, Türkiye's occasional political pressures for questions regarding its domestic problems could be perceived as a potential source of domestic interference. As highlighted by interlocutors, Kosovo institutions are fully prepared to address any potential threats; however, in this instance, there is a lack of political will to respond effectively to possible risks originating from Türkiye.⁸⁴ While Kosovars generally value Türkiye's political and diplomatic support, such internal political/diplomatic breaches hold limited appeal for a population whose aspirations are firmly anchored in Euro-Atlantic democratic models. Although the vast majority of citizens of Kosovo express a favorable opinion of President Erdogan, this support likely derives from Türkiye's substantial international backing of Kosovo and its close economic and military cooperation with the country. Alternative channels of influence over the Kosovar population do not necessarily imply endorsement of Erdogan's political model. Henceforth, reducing his reliance on ideological instruments could potentially only contribute to his ambition to be perceived as a leading regional statesman. The deepening of Kosovo-Türkiye security cooperation represents the type of pragmatic partnership that aligns with Kosovo's strategic objectives of strengthening national defense, reinforcing the European security architecture, and contributing to stability on NATO's eastern flank. To preserve democratic integrity, Kosovo should nonetheless take proactive measures to prevent any external influence, direct or indirect, that might encourage tendencies toward illiberal or competitive authoritarian practices.

Henceforth, the following recommendations should be considered:

- 1) **Reframe relations with Türkiye around institutions, not personalities.** Kosovo should continue to deepen cooperation with Türkiye in security and economic domains, but do so through formalised, transparent, and institutional channels. This implies regular strategic dialogues led by line ministries rather than ad-hoc leader-level interactions. Embedding bilateral defence cooperation within NATO-compatible frameworks, ensuring alignment with Kosovo's main security guarantors, particularly the United States. Recent high-level defence agreements provide a solid basis for this approach; the next step is to institutionalise cooperation and reduce reliance on personalised diplomacy.

2) **Preserve partnership with Türkiye while setting clear boundaries.** Kosovo's objective should not be to distance itself from Türkiye, but to normalise the relationship as a state-to-state partnership based on mutual interests and respect for sovereignty. This requires clear red lines on domestic interference, particularly regarding media freedom, education, and cultural expression, communicated through diplomatic and not political channels. Increased transparency around bilateral agreements, including parliamentary oversight and public communication.

3) **Adopt a Strategic Communication Approach.** A political and communication approach that frames cooperation with Türkiye as complementary to Kosovo's Euro-Atlantic integration, not as an alternative to it. A balanced partnership will allow Kosovo to benefit from Türkiye's economic and security engagement while safeguarding democratic norms as well as strategic priorities and alliances.

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Established in April 2008, the **Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS)** is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice. Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development; identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime; foreign policy and regional cooperation; and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

This paper has been developed within the framework of the KCSS's **Foreign Policy and Regional Security Cooperation Programme**, which stands as one of the core initiatives of the Kosovo Center for Security Studies which one of the core thematic programmes of organization.

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