

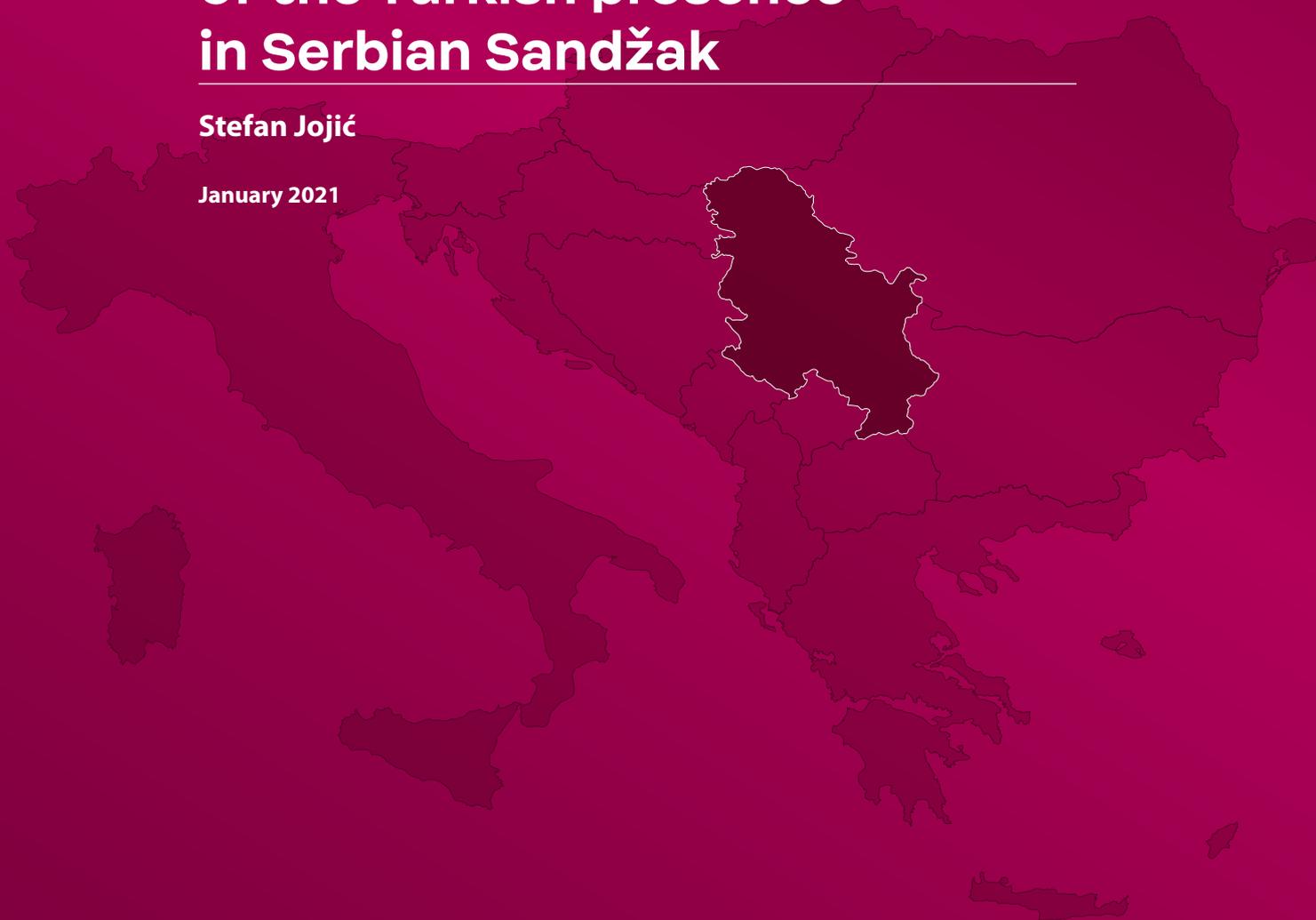


# **Erdogan as an admired sultan or an instrument in political competition? Locals' perceptions of the Turkish presence in Serbian Sandžak**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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This paper seeks to fill the gap in research of Turkish policy in the Balkans, providing original insight into Turkey's presence in the Sandžak region of Serbia with a special focus on local perceptions. More specifically, this study deals with locals' understanding of the Turkish presence, as well as differences in perception between different ethnic, political, ideological, and interest groups. The article also deals with how the foreign factor is being used in political confrontations between different political-interest groups in Sandžak. Given its historical, demographic, and geopolitical features, and declared significance for strategists in Ankara, Sandžak region is a fruitful area for exploring Turkey's foreign policy in the region.

The research draws on primary and secondary sources, and data obtained from dozens of interviews with elites and citizens of Sandžak cities and towns. The results confirm the assumed divergence between the perceptions of ethnic Serbs citizens and political elites, and their Bosniak counterparts. While the former mostly have negative attitudes about the Turkish presence, which they observe through the lens of a more or less transparent *realpolitik* agenda, the latter group is characterized by positive attitudes about Turkey's presence.

However, the Bosniak elites are not homogenous in their perception and not all of them see the Turkish presence in solely positive terms. Unlike their opponents from other Bosniak parties, members of the conservative Justice and Reconciliation Party and liberal elites can be singled out as having somewhat more pragmatic and critical views of Turkey. Hence, this case signals a clear divergence in attitudes about Turkey among different political and ideological poles of the Bosniak populace.

The results also indicate that Turkey's reputation among the Bosniaks of Sandžak is instrumentalized by local political-interest groups in their mutual clashes. Intending to undermine the positions of rivals in Turkey or to influence local public opinion, some local actors try to present others as enemies of Turkey, while promoting narratives about their own close ties with Ankara. The paper provides original insights in the Turkey's engagement in the region and is of interest to researchers of socio-political realities in Sandžak and the Balkans, as well as those interested in presence of Turkey in Sandžak, the Balkans, and Europe in general.



# INTRODUCTION

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Contrary to the passive foreign policy during the most of the 20th century, after Erdogan and his Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) came to power Turkey has pursued a more ambitious and unilateral policy in international relations. In line with the guidelines formulated in the early 2000s by Ahmet Davutoglu (2014), a former leading Turkish foreign policy figure, Turkey has increased its international activities in many areas and promoted its interests in its geographical vicinity. The Western Balkans are also on the radar of AKP's ambitious foreign policy agenda, and the multiethnic region of Sandžak with its unique Ottoman legacy plays an important role in Turkish presence in the region. Once dividing and now divided by Serbia and Montenegro, the Sandžak region was among the last territories to remain under the Ottoman rule in the Balkans. In addition to its specific geographical position, the geopolitical importance of the region is reflected in its demographics, since the area of both Serbian and Montenegrin part of Sandžak is inhabited by a mixed population of Christians and Muslims. The importance of this region has been widely recognized by key foreign policymakers in Ankara during the 21st century, making this area suitable for Turkish foreign policy research.

Hand in hand with Turkey's intensified activities, academic and public interest in Ankara's foreign policy has also increased, sparking debate on Turkey's influence in neighboring regions, including the Balkans. While there have been many recent reports investigating the Turkish presence in the Balkans, little is known about local perceptions of that presence. With a focus on locals' perceptions and Serbian part of Sandžak as its spatial focal point, this paper aims to fill this gap. With its socio-political and geographical specificities, more broadly discussed in the following chapters, Sandžak is a promising area for exploring perceptions of Turkey's foreign policy in the era of Erdogan. This study aims to analyze perceptions of

the political, intellectual, media, and religious elites, and residents of Sandžak (both Muslim and non-Muslim) of the Turkish presence in the region. It examines the following research question: In what ways do locals understand and perceive the Turkish presence in Sandžak, its pros and cons, and the reasons for its engagement? How do perspectives differ between various socio-political groups in the region? How do local actors use Turkey's presence and popularity for their own political interests and clashes?

In order to answer the research questions, it was necessary to employ data collected through both desk and field research. During 2020, 35 semi-structured interviews were conducted with local elites – representatives of the local administration, politicians, religious leaders, journalists, and NGO representatives. Furthermore, 57 interviews were conducted with citizens of four municipalities in Serbian Sandžak – Novi Pazar, Tutin, Sjenica, and Prijepolje to obtain the data necessary for the examination of lay-citizen perceptions. Interviews were tailored for different categories of interviewees and included both closed- and open-ended questions. By conducting in-depth and comprehensive research, the paper aims to bring a better understanding of various groups' perceptions of the Turkish presence in the region and get beyond the widespread notion that Muslims have a much more benevolent attitude towards Turks than non-Muslims.

The first chapter gives a brief overview of Turkey's presence in the Western Balkans. The second chapter deals with the socio-political specificity of Sandžak. The third chapter gives insight into locals' perceptions and the differences among various ethnic, political, and interest groups. It also deals with the political dynamics of interactions between Turkey and Sandžak, observing both Turkey's relations with local political actors and the way the Turkish card is being played by locals in their political clashes.

# TURKEY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

After the centuries of Ottoman domination over the Balkans, the period between the collapse of the Empire and the last decade of the 20th century could be described as one of Turkish absence rather than presence in the Balkans. Turkey's visibility in this region increased during the 1990s when Ankara took a strong stance on the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina and later in Kosovo as a promoter of the interests of Muslim communities in conflict areas (Jojić, 2018). But real increase in Turkey's presence in the Balkans came during the 2000s, when the AK Party formulated an ambitious foreign policy.

Since the Balkans were defined as an area vital to Turkey's foreign policy (Davutoglu 2014) during the early period of the AKP's rule, Turkey significantly increased its presence there in many spheres. In political terms, Turkey has worked to establish closer relations with the Balkan countries, especially those with significant Muslim populations, while seeking to impose itself as a mediator in resolving conflicts between the region's various actors.<sup>1</sup> The activities of the Diyanet, Turkish Directorate for Religious Affairs, should be considered in terms of strengthening Turkey's political influence as well. The Diyanet engaged in supporting education, construction of mosques, and other forms of material support (Muhasilović 2018, 64; Oktem 2012, 43), in close cooperation with local Islamic communities.

A good indicator of increased Turkish activism in the Western Balkans is in the economic field, where, thanks to free trade agreements between Turkey and countries in the region, economic and trade relations between the two sides significantly deepened (Bechev 2012, 136-143; Hake 2020, Jojić 2018b, 65-75). Another important consequence of Turkey's economic development is the growth of unilateral material assistance to the countries of the Western Balkans, where the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı – TİKA) stands out as the most visible actor. By restoring Ottoman cultural heritage in the Balkans, as well as assisting local communities with their material needs, TİKA "presents itself in a timely constructive manner by considering both the past and present" (Nuroglu 2013, 2).

The Turkish presence can also be noticed in the area of education. On the one hand, a large number of young

people have obtained higher education in Turkey through a system of state scholarships provided by Turkey (Pačariž 2020, 92), while on the other hand young people have been encouraged to study at some of the Turkish universities opened in Balkans (Ajzenhamer and Trapara 2013).

Increased Turkey's regional activity has been accompanied by popularization of the term "neo-Ottomanism", instigated by political, academic and media circles outside of Turkey, raising suspicions that Turkey is motivated by "imperial nostalgia" in advancing in its neighborhoods (Bechev 2012, 131; Tanasković 2010; Prasanna 2020; Bechev 2017; Somun 2011). The popularity of the term "neo-Ottomanism" was further enhanced by the rhetoric of Turkish officials, especially Davutoglu who frequently referred to Ottoman times in positive manner. The term itself provokes a lot of controversies and, due to the danger of evoking negative memories, is extremely unpopular in pragmatic circles in Turkey.<sup>2</sup> With the desire to restore the empire or not, the foreign policy agenda of modern Turkey is based on ambitions of global proportions, with a focus on areas once under the control of the Ottoman Empire, including the Balkans.

The dynamics and various aspects of Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans states are to a large extent reflected by its presence in Sandžak. According to Davutoglu (2014, 285), Sandžak, along the banks of the Drina river, is an area of vital geopolitical interest for Turkey and the link between Bosnia and the Albania, the region's two predominantly Muslim states. In political terms, Turkey maintains close ties with political actors in Sandžak, primarily with competing Bosniak parties, which were even reconciled through the efforts of Turkey's diplomacy. Another, far more complex area of Turkish involvement in Sandžak was an attempt to mediate the conflict between the two Islamic communities competing for influence in the region. Turkey also distributes material assistance to Sandžak, where actors such as TİKA comes to the fore. Finally, Turkey is also active in the economic field – for decades there has been significant trade between Turkey and Sandžak, especially in the field of the textile industry, while recently Turkey has emerged as a financier of and contractor for infrastructure projects. However, Sandžak lacks profitable and employment-oriented Turkish direct investments.

1 As key communities for Turkey's long-term interests in the Balkans, Davutoglu highlights Bosniaks and Albanians as "heirs of the Ottoman Empire" (Davutoglu 2014, 134).

2 A typical example of academic critics towards the term "neo-Ottoman" is the work of Inan Ruma (2012, 133) who labeled neo-Ottomanism as "... fancy, but inherently empty shell".

# SOCIO-POLITICAL REALITY OF SANDŽAK

Sandžak is a multi-ethnic cross-border region covering northern Montenegro and south-western Serbia. Although the area is not formally organized as an administrative region, its Bosniak inhabitants have a strong sense of distinct regional identity. As one of the last regions in the Western Balkans to remain under Ottoman rule, Sandžak is one of the areas with the most surviving traces of its Oriental past. The region owes even its name to its Turkish past – Sandžak (sanjak) was the name for a type of

administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire. After Austria annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, the Sandžak of Novi Pazar occupied a unique position on the peninsula as the northernmost Ottoman territory in Europe, dividing Serbia and Montenegro. Through to frequent invocation of its status as a former Ottoman province, the modern identity of this region was formed over time (Morrison and Roberts 2013). However, the issue of the name is among the points of contention between Serbs and Bosniaks.<sup>3</sup>

**Location of Sandžak on the map of Serbia and Montenegro**



**Note:** In 2014, the Montenegrin municipality of Plav was divided into two – Plav and Gusinje.

Sandžak’s socio-political reality is specific because of its multiple ethnic, religious, and political cleavages that are concentrated on the small territory. The population of Serbian Sandžak consists of two dominant ethnic groups – Bosniaks (Muslims) and Serbs (Orthodox Christians). In the largest urban center, Novi Pazar, Bosniaks are a majority, as

well as in Sjenica and Tutin. Serbs are a majority in Priboj and Nova Varoš, while the ratio in Prijepolje is nearly equal. In the overall demographic structure of Sandžak, Bosniaks predominate with almost two thirds of the total population, with an increasing trend in their demographic share over past decades.

<sup>3</sup> While the name Sandžak is most frequently used by the Bosniak/Muslim population, Serbs usually refer to it as an area of Raška (Raška oblast) or Old Serbia (stara Srbija). The Serb/Montenegrin population from Montenegro would simply call it the North (Sjever).

**Demographic structure of the Serbian part of Sandžak**

	Novi Pazar	Tutin	Sjenica	Prijepolje	Priboj	Nova Varoš	<b>TOTAL</b>
Population	100 410	31 155	26 392	37 059	27 133	16 638	<b>238 787</b>
Bosniak*	81.21%	93.5%	78.55%	44.01%	21.2%	7.89%	<b>64.83%</b>
Serbs	16.16%	3.49%	19.55%	51.61%	75.85%	89.54%	<b>32.48%</b>

**Note:** Data according to 2011 census. Source: Statistical office of the Republic of Serbia, <https://www.stat.gov.rs/>.

\* The number of Bosniaks also includes those Sandžak residents who still declare themselves as Muslims in the national sense.

The demographic complexity of this society is also reflected in local political dynamics. Ethnic Serb political parties are mostly monolithic political subjects, with parties strongly leaning towards Belgrade and gathered around the ruling Serbian progressive party (Srpska napredna stranka – SNS). The situation with Bosniak parties is much more complex. Sandžak is dominated by three Bosniak political parties of similar strength. The oldest party is the Party of Democratic Action of Sandžak (Stranka demokratske akcije Sandžaka – SDA) led by Sulejman Ugljanin, who imposed himself as the political leader of the Bosniaks of Sandžak in the early 1990s. In the mid-1990s, Rasim Ljajić, a former secretary of the SDA, left the party to form his Sandžak Democratic Party (Sandžačka demokratska partija – SDP) at the end of the decade. The party soon grew into a respectable political force, taking part in many coalition governments at the national level. During the last decade, the Justice and Reconciliation Party (Stranka pravde i pomirenja – SPP), led by the former key Muslim religious figure in Sandžak, Muamer Zukorlić, has emerged as a new force on the political scene of Sandžak. His religious authority among Bosniaks in Sandžak, the position of the continued informal leader of his Islamic community, together with its resources, enabled Zukorlić to quickly become one of the

three most influential Bosniak political actors, if not the most influential.

A significant point of conflict on the socio-political map of Sandžak is the division that emerged in the Islamic Community in 2007. After the adoption of the Law on Churches and Religious Communities in 2006, prescribing there may only be one Islamic community on the territory of Serbia, the hitherto non-united muftiates in Serbia had to be united into a single Islamic community. In early 2007, a group of disgruntled imams of the Muftiate of Sandžak left the organization and embarked on the independent formation of a single Islamic community. As a result, there are two Islamic communities in Serbia today. The first is the Islamic Community in Serbia (ICiS), founded by the imams remaining in the former Sandžak Muftiate and loyal to Mufti Muamer Zukorlić. The other, founded by a group of dissatisfied imams, was named the Islamic Community of Serbia (ICoS) and is based in Belgrade. The first community, led by the President of the Meshihat and the Mufti, is a functional part of the Riyaset of the Islamic Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina (ICBH). The ICoS has its own Riyaset and calls for the continuity of the Islamic Community of Serbia, founded in 1868, later merged into the Islamic community of Yugoslavia.



# TURKISH PRESENCE IN THE EYES OF LOCALS

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The following sections analyse locals' views of Turkey's presence, with an aim to enrich existing knowledge about Turkey's engagement in the Balkans from the receiving side. Examining how locals view, understand and make use of the Turkish presence helps to break some stereotypes about the assumed clear borders between the perceptions of different ethnic and religious groups. The first and second sections offer answers to questions about how locals see the political aspect of the Turkish presence. In that sense, differences in dominant perceptions between Serbs and Bosniaks will be examined, as well as within the Bosniak

population itself. The third part provides an insight into the perceptions of Turkey's role in mediation between ICoS and Zukorlić's ICiS. The fourth section deals with the perception of the economic aspect of Turkey's presence in Sandžak. The fifth section refers to the interaction between Turkey's presence and local political dynamics, observing Ankara's direct influence on those dynamics and its relations with local actors. The last section examines how Turkey passively affects local political dynamics, by being an object and an instrument used by locals in their political competition.

## Turkey – imperial actor with neo-Ottoman ambitions?

In accordance with popular understanding of perceptions of the Turkish presence in the Balkans, the Serb citizens of Sandžak and their political elites hold a mainly negative view of the Turkish presence, seeing it through the framework of neo-Ottomanism and the hidden political agenda behind Turkey's activities. Many ethnic Serb citizens see a plan to return to the Balkans and achieve their imperial ambitions behind the increased Turkish presence. Some quoted Erdogan's famous statement from Prizren in 2013 that "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo" and Davutoglu's statement about golden Ottoman times in the Balkans as evidence of Turkey's intentions. A member of the Serbian party from Sjenica views Turkey's entire foreign policy, especially in the Balkans, through the prism of neo-Ottomanism, pointing to Davutoglu's guidelines from his capital work "Strategic Depth" and his later statements.<sup>4</sup> Another member of the Serbian party from Prijepolje supported his position, bringing up the previously mentioned statements of Erdogan about Kosovo and the call for Turks in Europe to have more children "because they are the future of Europe".<sup>5</sup>

The key Bosniak political actors in Sandžak, as well as most of my interviewees of Bosniak ethnic background, reject the term "neo-Ottomanism" as a way to stigmatize Turkey, but it is interesting to note that, unlike the Serb respondents, not all of the Bosniak citizens were familiar with the term. Rasim Ljajić, the president of the SDP, sees the term as a "political phrase and nonsense" (Sandzakhaber, 2016). Most of the Bosniak interlocutors perceive neo-Ottomanism as a malicious term for describing contemporary Turkish foreign policy and something aimed at manipulating the domestic non-Muslim population's negative sentiment about Turkey. But the opposite perception of the term was present as well. For example, a journalist from an independent media outlet from Novi Pazar does not see neo-Ottomanism as a gimmick of Serbian Orientalists as most of the Bosniak non-liberal elite do, but as Erdogan's intention to manipulate his own public, playing the card of imperial nostalgia with his own voters.<sup>6</sup> According to this understanding, the term was not coined by malicious domestic Turkophobes in order to spread the fear about Turkey's return to the Balkans, but by Turkish political elites with the goal of mobilisation of their voters.

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4 Personal interview with a Serb party member, Sjenica, July 3, 2020.

5 Personal interview with a Serb party member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

6 Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

## Erdogan – sultan of Sandžak’s big brother state

Contrary to anti-Turkish attitudes among Serbs, many among the Bosniak citizens and part of the political elite perceive Turkish presence in positive terms and cited fraternal assistance and support as a motive for the presence of Turkey in Sandžak. For many citizens of Bosniak background, Turkey is perceived as a “big brother” and President Erdogan as a “sultan”. Esad Džudžo, former president of the Bosniak National Council,<sup>7</sup> sees Turkey as a “protector country” of Bosniaks (Sandzakhaber 2014). A political activist from Novi Pazar and a member of the local administration in Sjenica, both coming from the SDA, have a similar stance, referring to the fact that good state relations between Turkey and Serbia are beneficial, since Turkey’s intensive presence makes Bosniaks feel secure.<sup>8</sup> Among the Bosniak residents of Sandžak, negative emotions towards Erdogan are very rare and for the vast majority, he is simply a “sultan”.<sup>9</sup> Some of them cited Turkey’s rise during Erdogan’s rule as his greatest source of credibility. Noticeably, respondents had a strong identification with the rise of Turkey, affected by narratives about glorious common past and a privileged position of Balkan Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>10</sup> Part of the credit for this situation may be found in the local media, which broadcast Turkey’s foreign policy activities with special enthusiasm.

Erdogan’s popularity in Sandžak is vividly illustrated by the events that followed Turkey’s 2016 coup attempt when rallies in support of Erdogan in Novi Pazar briefly united members of opposing Bosniak political camps. A few days after the coup, the local SDP administration in Novi Pazar issued a statement fully supporting the legally elected Turkish government and warning citizens of Turkish opposition figure Fethullah Gulen’s “terrorist” network in Sandžak (Politika 2016). Several interviewees pointed to the case of the mayor of Novi Pazar’s adviser for international cooperation, who was removed

from the local political scene shortly after being identified as a Gulenist.<sup>11</sup> The overall attitude of the political actors in Sandžak towards the situation in Turkey after the 2016 coup attempt speaks to the importance of relations with Ankara in their local political calculations. Local self-government has gone far beyond its competence in its treatment of Erdogan’s opponents, in an obvious attempt to prove itself a loyal partner to Ankara. On the other hand, mutual support for Erdogan has united opposing political actors from Sandžak like never before.

However, despite prevailing sympathy among Bosniak citizens and elites towards Erdogan’s Turkey, critical voices also exist among more liberally-oriented Bosniaks. Sead Biberović, director of the pro-civic Urban In NGO from Novi Pazar, points out the absurdity of the abstract and unrequited love of most Bosniaks towards Turkey, comparing it with Serbs’ sentiments towards Russia.<sup>12</sup> Biberović’s opinion could be considered among pragmatic views, that also include the views of most respondents of liberal provenance and a few from a conservative milieu close to Zukorlić’s SPP. Unlike the uncritical stances of the SDA and SDP, members of Zukorlić’s structures share the valorization of Turkey’s role in Sandžak with liberals. They mostly judge Turkey’s presence in terms of concrete benefits for the local population, relying less on the emotional component and identification with the Turkish rise itself. In observing Turkish politics, both Sead Biberović and Jahja Fehratović, Zukorlić’s close associate, emphasize the need to differentiate between the Turkish state, people, and Erdogan himself.<sup>13</sup> But the vast majority of Bosniak respondents do not make that distinction – Erdogan is the most popular politician among them, even when their own political representatives are taken into account.

7 National councils are representative bodies of national minorities in Serbia.

8 Personal interview with an SDA member, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020; Personal interview with an SDA member, Sjenica, July 6, 2020.

9 During Erdogan’s visit to Novi Pazar in 2017, thousands of gathered citizens ecstatically chanted “Sultan Erdogan”.

10 “We were elite then” (during the Ottoman times, A/N), proudly said one middle-aged Bosniak citizen. Personal interview by author, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

11 Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 23, 2020; Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020; Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020..

12 Personal interview with Sead Biberović, director of Urban In NGO, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

13 Both pointed to the strong historical ties between Bosniaks and Turks, whose relations cannot be viewed only through the framework of the contemporary Turkish government’s attitude towards Bosniaks. Personal interview with Sead Biberović, director of Urban In NGO, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020; Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.



## Turkey and the economy of Sandžak – a betrayal of raised expectations

Although significant Turkish investments have been announced, the economic field is a problematic case for finding evidence of Ankara's declared intentions to help the „brotherly“ Bosniak people, who perceive Turkey as economically potent enough to solve many of their problems.<sup>14</sup> Investments in the manufacturing sector and agriculture have not gone further than pompous announcements during Turkish officials' visits to Sandžak. Most of my interviewees pointed to the trade that has been going on for decades between the businessmen of Sandžak and those from Turkey, especially in the textile sector. However, putting aside visible TIKA investments, most of my interlocutors point out the absence of direct profit- and employment-oriented investments from Turkey, despite the promises.<sup>15</sup> Several years ago, then minister Rasim Ljajić announced an investment from a prestigious clothing manufacturer from Istanbul, but it was never realized. During Erdogan's visit to Serbia and Novi Pazar in 2017, contracts were signed for the export of traditional Turkish dumplings from Sandžak to Turkey, which never started. Another project agreed to during the same visit, which also required some investments in processing facilities, was the annual export of 5,000 tons of beef to Turkey, but it was never realized as well.

The failure to realize the mentioned projects caused discontent among the elites with whom I had the opportunity to talk. The indignation is greater given the fact that there are hundreds of Turkish factories operating throughout Serbia. The interviewees mostly agree that the often-repeated assessment that “Turks give investments to Serbs and love to Bosniaks” absolutely corresponds to the truth. Salahudin Fetić, journalist close to Zukorlić, recalls Erdogan's statement that “Sarajevo and Istanbul are brothers, while Belgrade and Ankara are partners”, alluding to the emotional rather than utilitarian relations between Bosniaks and Turks.<sup>16</sup> The most frequently cited reasons for the lack of investment are pragmatic ones – the unfavorable geographical position of Sandžak, bad

infrastructure, and poor local administration. However, Jahja Fehratović, a close associate of Zukorlić, questions this argument, citing the example of Turkey's investment in Raška, only 20 kilometers away from Novi Pazar.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike Fehratović and most of Zukorlić's other associates, the members of SDA and SDP I talked to have an uncritical tone about the lack of direct investments, rather seeing the reasons for this in the geography and bad infrastructure of Sandžak, or even obstacles posed by the central government in Belgrade. A high-ranking member of the SDA, with the experience of meetings with delegations from Turkey, points out the desire of the Turks not to provoke public opinion in Serbia by investing in Sandžak.<sup>18</sup> According to him, Turkey first intends to change its negative stereotypes among the Serbian public by investing throughout Serbia. Turkey's increased regional presence has been accompanied by narratives of a Muslim population-centric ‘return to the Balkans’, and investment across Serbia before direct investment in Sandžak could contribute to a favorable shift in Serbian public opinion.

The only economy-related project is the reconstruction of the road connecting Novi Pazar and Tutin, misinterpreted as a direct foreign investment by many interlocutors. The project, announced back in 2010, is currently under realization by the Turkish company “Tashyapi”. However, the reconstruction is being funded with loans provided by Turkey, which is why the investment cannot be classified as FDI. Some of my interviewees pointed out the unfavorable aspects of the project, namely the engagement of a foreign company instead of competent domestic companies, and the fact that the project is financed through a loan.

Despite the close ties between Bosniak citizens and politicians with Turks, the mentioned cases indicate that Turkish business is guided by profit rather than emotion. Otherwise, at least one among the hundreds of Turkish manufacturing facilities opened in the rest of Serbia would

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14 Many of my Bosniak citizen interviewees see Turkey as an economic power, and the rapid infrastructure development over the past 20 years was the most frequently cited indicator of its strength.

15 Even though TIKA had significant investments in the restoration of public infrastructure or Ottoman cultural heritage, it rarely invested in productive fields. Distribution of raspberry seedlings or agricultural equipment to Sandžak residents are among the rare production-oriented donations, though ones of marginal reach.

16 Personal interview with Salahudin Fetić, director of Sandžak TV, Novi Pazar, June 29, 2020.

17 Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

18 Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.



end up in Sandžak. Instead, Turkish businessmen preferred to invest in more geographically favorable areas with developed infrastructure. The Turks' insistence that the reconstruction of the Novi Pazar – Tutin road get carried out by a Turkish company and with Turkish labor despite the competence of local enterprises to perform such work shows that Turkish investors worry little about the added value of their project for the local population. On the other hand, the apparent divergence between Ankara's rhetoric and economic activity speaks to its insincere approach to Sandžak. The rising of expectations by top officials, followed by pompous media content, further fuels the narrative of Turkey as a protector of Bosniaks. However, Turkey does not act in accordance with its declared intentions.

The attitude towards local economic issues, therefore, remains the most significant litmus test of overall attitudes about the Turkish presence in Sandžak, through which both liberals and Zukorlić's conservatives perceive the true intentions of Turkey. Given that there are no direct investments in Sandžak on the Turkish side, some of

the interviewees expressed the view that raising locals' expectations was for Turkish domestic use, and in the service of Erdogan's personal interests.

A pro-civic NGO activist from Novi Pazar considers the failure to fulfill promises made during Erdogan's visits to be hypocritical.<sup>19</sup> He states that the visits were organized and timed in a way that, at key moments for the AKP, raised Erdogan's rating at home, especially among Bosniak descendants from the Balkans living in Turkey.<sup>20</sup> His stance is shared by a journalist from Novi Pazar, who sees "the way of populist reign in Turkey" in Ankara's activities in the Balkans, and the tool with an echo for domestic use, serving the mobilization of voters.<sup>21</sup> NGO activist from Sjenica cites that "misuse of sentiments" as a negative side of Turkey's presence.<sup>22</sup> And indeed, Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar and promises made there were timed in a way that they could produce some benefits at home. Namely, crucial presidential elections were held a few months after his visit, when Erdogan materialized the results of the 2017 Constitutional referendum, further centralizing power.

## Turkish religious diplomacy in Sandžak

The case of division between two Islamic communities operating in Serbia is one of the most significant issues of contestation among Bosniaks in Sandžak, with reflections on the religious, political, and legal spheres of Sandžak's socio-political everyday life. The features of the conflict go beyond the continuous raising of questions of "legality" and "legitimacy", or its effect on the quality of religious services provided to the Muslim inhabitants of Sandžak. The conflict has an unequivocal political connotation and is a first-class political issue for some local actors, especially Zukorlić and his SPP. The political dimension of the conflict can also be seen through the engagement of mediators from Turkey, who have been repeatedly offering their assistance to the warring parties in order to reach a compromise. Turkish mediation in the reconciliation of the two Islamic Communities in Serbia not only represents a significant component of the Turkish presence in Sandžak but is also a game-changer in the way in which some local political and religious authorities perceive this presence.

The first of its initiatives for reconciliation, known as "the Turkish initiative", dates back to 2011. It was a diplomatic one, with Ahmet Davutoglu, at that time Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, as its main protagonist. Later initiatives were taken over by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet), a Turkish state institution dealing with religious issues both domestically and internationally. The first initiative was unsuccessful and definitively abandoned in 2012. During Diyanet's subsequent initiatives, the attitudes of Zukorlić's ICiS toward the Turkish reconciliation attempts were further sharpened, as they accused Diyanet of trying to take control over their community and condemned the initiatives as interference in its internal affairs (Mesihat 2013).

The most severe ICiS statements against Turkey were issued in 2019, during Diyanet's representatives' visit to the enthronement of ICoS' Senad Halitović as Sandžak Mufti. Zukorlić himself, the former Mufti of the ICiS, called on Erdogan and Diyanet to stop those who break up the

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19 Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

20 Ibid

21 Personal interview with a journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.

22 Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Sjenica, July 3, 2020.



Islamic community in their name, while the ICiS threatened to sever relations with Diyanet (Mesihat 2019; Snews 2019). Interlocutors close to Zukorlić, such as Rešad Plojović, believe that mediation initiatives were Turkey's attempt to subsume local Islamic communities under the service of the Turkish Diyanet.<sup>23</sup> The ICiS's refusal to agree on such terms then, according to him, resulted in Diyanet's hostility towards ICiS (Plojović 2019). Salahudin Fetić, close to Zukorlić, also believes that Diyanet did not want a partnership on equal terms, but a superior relationship, as in the case with the Islamic Community of Montenegro.<sup>24</sup> Jahja Fehratović, another of Zukorlić's close associates, sees Diyanet as a political instrument of Turkey's current state apparatus used to govern Islamic communities in Albania, Macedonia, Kosovo, and Montenegro.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, leader of the competing ICoS, Sead Nasufović, who is close to Turkey, talks about more than 30 attempts by Diyanet to reconcile the two Islamic communities, stating that Diyanet approached impartially.<sup>26</sup> Reis has a manifestly positive attitude towards the role of Turkey, seeing the reasons for the failure of the mediation attempt in the rigidity of Zukorlić's ICiS.<sup>27</sup> Members of political parties rivalling Zukorlić's also emphasize the positive side of Turkish initiatives. A senior member of the nationalist SDA highlighted Turkey's good intentions to help the reunion of the Islamic communities, given Turkey's interest in Bosniak unity.<sup>28</sup> The SDP member holds a similar stance, seeing Diyanet's engagement as a fraternal hand given to locals.<sup>29</sup>

The case of Turkish intervention into mediation between two Islamic communities is an important one, given the fact that it produced ruptures in the perceptions of Turkey within the Bosniak populace. The positive attitudes of the SDP and SDA towards Turkish mediation may be observed as a pragmatic political calculation. While they did not risk worsening relations with Ankara, the religious dispute is a place where their and Turkey's counter-Zukorlić interests meet. Moreover, if the dispute between two Islamic communities remains in force, Zukorlić would have a continuous obstacle in his attempts to establish good relations with Turkey. Otherwise, the positions of the SDA, the nationalist Bosniak Party, which insists so much on Bosniak unity with Sarajevo, would be hardly understandable. Their support for the ICoS, based in Belgrade and outside the jurisdiction of Sarajevo, certainly does not contribute to bringing Sandžak closer to Bosnia and Herzegovina. For the ICoS, the positions are quite clear – any initiative that offers the possibility of any compromise solution is better than agreeing to the rigid demands of the ICiS for their unconditional abolition. Finally, for Zukorlić and his ICiS, any cooperation with Turkey in the reunion plan would undermine their hard line. They chose independence at the cost of lack of Diyanet material assistance and at the expense of the political interest of SPP to dominate the Sandžak political scene, something certainly more achievable in the case of good relations with Turkey.

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23 Personal interview with Rešad Plojović, the ICiS official, Novi Pazar, July 2, 2020.

24 Personal interview with Salahudin Fetić, director of Sandžak TV, Novi Pazar, June 29, 2020.

25 Personal interview with Jahja Fehratović, a member of SPP, Novi Pazar, June 27, 2020.

26 Personal interview with Sead Nasufović, Reisu-l-ulema of the ICoS, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

27 Ibid

The issue of IC unity has been permanently raised to a political level by Zukorlić's ICiS, adding the issue of Bosniak national survival in Serbia on the table, while inviting the other side to unconditionally return under the auspices of the only legal Islamic community. More in: Mesihat (2016).

28 Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.

29 Personal interview with an SDP member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

## Turkey and the local political dynamics

Turkey's presence affects local political dynamics in Sandžak to a large degree, whether actively through relations with local political actors, or passively where the Turkish card is played by locals for their own political interests and in their own disputes.

Turks have the closest political cooperation with Ugljanin's SDA. A member of that party sees the reason in fraternal relations between SDA and Erdogan's AKP and good personal relations between the two party leaders.<sup>30</sup> Although none of the three dominant Bosniak parties in Sandžak, nor media close to them, lack support for Turkey, the SDA remains Erdogan's favorite on the ground.<sup>31</sup> However, the problem for this long-term arrangement is the fact that SDA is losing power in Sandžak – after the 2020 local elections, they remained in power only in Tutin. For that reason, Rejhan Kurtović, a member of Zukorlić's SPP, does not see anything good in Turkey's favoring of the SDA.<sup>32</sup> He considers it a declining party, kept alive only by funds and support from Turkey, and wonders whom Turkey will rely on once the SDA greatly weakens.

Turkey's second favorite is Ljajić's SDP, which can be partly attributable to Erdogan's close relations with the Serbian president and the SDP's participation in every single state-level coalition government with Vučić's SNS. It is Ljajić who can offer more to Ankara than the rival SDA these days, especially after Ugljanin sharpened his rhetoric against Belgrade, which in turn ignores his SDA for their pro-Sandžak-autonomy agenda.

Muamer Zukorlić and organizations close to him stand out as political actors the least close to Turkey. However, now the political leader, and once the Chief Mufti of the ICiS, Zukorlić together with his entourage do not attack Erdogan directly. Instead, they object exclusively to lower levels of government, diplomatic representatives of Turkey in Serbia or Diyanet, which they see as an actor who provides wholehearted support to the rival ICoS (Fehratović 2013). Tense relations between Zukorlić and some actors from Turkey date back to the time of the split in the

Islamic community, and was later further strained during Turkish attempts to interfere. According to Rešad Plojović from the ICiS, Zukorlić was marked as a disruptive factor during the mandate (prior to 2010) of the former Turkish ambassador to Serbia, Suha Umar, who allegedly provided false information about Zukorlić to Ankara (Plojović 2019). Plojović pointed out that the ICiS had written to Erdogan on several occasions about the omissions of his diplomatic officials, but without success.<sup>33</sup>

In 2017, Zukorlić himself expressed hopes that the departure of a key duo blamed for straining relations between his ICiS and Turkey, Davutoglu and Mehmed Gormez, Diyanet's president, could resolve the misunderstanding (Sandzakpress 2017). However, Zukorlić's relationship with relevant Turkish actors has not significantly warmed. Zukorlić's political opponents see the reason for this in his alleged closeness to religious-political movements of which Turkey is not in favor, such as Gulenism or Wahhabism.

Regardless of criticism of certain Turkish actions by some Bosniak actors, the overall media image of Turkey, and Erdogan specifically, remains very positive in Sandžak. Even media close to Zukorlić supported Erdogan at key moments, such as the confrontation with the Gulenists or the situation after the failed 2016 coup attempt (Sandzakpress 2014; Sandzakpress 2016a). Media close to Ljajić's SDP are also highly supportive of Erdogan. For example, the portal Sandzakhaber (2020) supported Erdogan's decision to send an army to Libya in early 2020 in a laudatory article with the title "Sultan has made his decision". Such headlines and the enthusiastic transmission of Turkish foreign policy activities are certainly part of the reasons why Turkey was perceived as a leader and protector of the Muslim world.

Given Turkey's image in Sandžak, maintaining close relations between Sandžak politicians and the Turkish authorities certainly has positive implications for their local popularity. The partisan media are working hard to publicly

30 Personal interview with an SDA member, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

31 There are frequent mutual inter-party visits between Erdogan's AKP and Ugljanin's SDA. Also, the Bosniak National Council, which is under SDA's control, is in excellent relations with Turkey's state authorities.

32 Personal interview with Rejhan Kurtović, a member of SPP, Sjenica, July 5, 2020.

33 Personal interview with Rešad Plojović, the ICiS official, Novi Pazar, July 2, 2020.

expose their representatives' meetings with Turkish officials. But when it comes to their rival meeting Turks, they hardly ever mention them. Media outlets close to parties present

key local political figures in a way that fits their own political interests.

## Turkish factor as an instrument in local political competition

The popularity and importance of Turkey are also used as a weapon in local parties' mutual competition. It is often the case that actors in Sandžak label each other as enemies of Turkey, in order to tarnish the reputation of the other side in the local public image or damage its image in Turkey. A pro-civil NGO activist from Novi Pazar points out the public's negative attitude and the anti-Turkish stigma against anyone who publicly expressed a critical tone towards Turkey and Erdogan.<sup>34</sup> A theologian from Sjenica supported such a view, referring to the recent trend of labelling a person or organization as Gulenist in order to damage his reputation in Turkey.<sup>35</sup>

Zukorlić can again serve as an illustrative case in point as it was his figure which was most often accused of Gulenist or Wahhabist ties by other public officials. Rifat Fejzić, the Montenegrin Reis (Islamic community leader) and close to Diyanet, used his position to publicly proclaim Zukorlić as an enemy of Turkey (Sandzakpress 2016b). Similarly, the Snews web-portal, close to the SDA, linked Zukorlić's associates to those on the Turkish wanted list (Snews 2020). A similar opinion is held by a high-ranking member of the SDA, who was allegedly familiar with the cooperation between Zukorlić and some people close to Gulen's movement before the coup in Turkey.<sup>36</sup> He later added that within "Zukorlić's Islamic Community the Wahhabis have room to act", something that certainly would not be welcomed gladly by the Turkish side. Portal Sandzakhaber (2017a), close to the SDP, went a step further in stigmatization, describing the non-positive comments of BDZ supporters (predecessor of the SPP) about Turkey and Erdogan on social media as "betrayal". Also, the same portal accused Zukorlić and his close associates of maintaining close relations with the Mufti of Albania, allegedly a "vassal of the FETO organization" (Sandzakhaber 2018).

Two days prior to Erdogan's visit to Novi Pazar, SDP's Sandzakhaber (2017b) reminded the local public of a text by one of Zukorlić's associates, Jahja Fehratović, in which he criticized Turks for the way they were involved in mediation between the two conflicting Islamic communities. An SDP member interviewed by the author also understood both the Gulenists and the Wahhabis to be "on the Mufti's team", asking in a concluding manner if anyone ever saw Erdogan shake hand with Zukorlić during his visits to Novi Pazar.<sup>37</sup> More recently, Sandzakhaber (2019) accused Mustafa Cerić, former Bosnian Reis and close to Zukorlić, for acting in an anti-Turkish manner when he publicly blamed Erdogan for not pushing Vučić to recognize the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. Sandzakhaber described the act as a "manifestation of turkophobic discourse produced by the Arabic centers of power".

Structures close to Zukorlić did not stand aside in this labelling, and also resorted to the stigmatization of competitors as Turkey's opponents. Immediately after the coup, Zukorlić's media declared Reisu-l-ulema of the competing Islamic Community of Montenegro and his closest associates as Gulenists (Sandzakpress 2016a). Moreover, former Reisu-l-ulema of rival ICoS Adem Zilkić and his closest associates were in the same manner labeled as enemies of Turkey (Sandzakpress 2016a). As part of the same campaign, one of those marked as Gulenist was Sead Ibrić, an Islamic theologian and president of the „Most“ organization from Novi Pazar. Although he does not hide his connection with the Hizmet movement, whose spiritual leader is Fethullah Gulen, he sees the „Gulenist“ stigma as a form of inaccurate personalization of the movement.<sup>38</sup> On the other hand, relying on his familiarity with the Hizmet movement and the people targeted in the campaign, Ibrić sees the campaign as an attempt by Zukorlić to fawn over the Turkish government. If Fejzić and Zilkić, leaders

34 Personal interview with a pro-civic NGO activist, Novi Pazar, June 25, 2020.

35 Personal interview with an Islamic theologian, Sjenica, July 4, 2020.

36 Personal interview with an SDA member, Prijepolje, July 7, 2020.

37 Personal interview with an SDP member, Prijepolje, July 6, 2020.

38 Personal interview with Sead Ibrić, director of Most NGO, Belgrade, December 1, 2020.



of two competing Islamic communities, were indeed close to Erdogan's enemies, it is hard to understand how they preserved good relations with Diyanet and Turkey. Most recently, Zukorlić's media reported how Rasim Ljajić, president of the SDP and then-minister in the Serbian government, was on strike in Turkish media because of Serbia's arms exports to Armenia, even though it was only his statement about the issue that was transmitted in media Sandzakpress referred to (Sandzakpress 2020).

These examples speak to the importance of Turkey for local political dynamics, something expected given its image in Sandžak. But instead of exerting an open influence on the local political scene by using its leverage in Sandžak, Turkey

rather appears as an object in local political ambitions. The (mis)use of narratives about relations with Ankara seems like a pragmatic political strategy for local political actors. On the one hand, local politicians are recommending themselves to Turks and proving their loyalty. This way, locals are promoting themselves in front of domestic and international audiences as friends of Turkey, simultaneously struggling for the favor of Ankara and local opinion, strongly in favor of Turkey. On the other side, their strategies aim to damage an opponent's reputation in Turkey and to discredit it in front of Sandžak public opinion. Promoting narratives about the other's anti-Turkish stances certainly rejects and alienates some of the opponents' voters, while an echo might also be heard in the Turkish embassy.



## CONCLUSION

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Despite growing interest in studying Turkey's presence in the Balkans over the past two decades, there is a lack of research on how locals perceive that presence. With a focus on Sandžak residents' perceptions and relying on a mix of desk and field research, this study aimed to bridge that gap, using the region's socio-political specificity as a base for adding to existing knowledge about Turkey's presence. For that purpose, the study's research focus was related to the understanding of Turkey's presence by the locals, determining the difference in perceptions between different socio-political groups, as well as on the way that the Turkish factor is used by locals for local political interests and competition.

The results confirmed the expected differences in the attitudes of the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, i.e. Bosniaks and Serbs. Serb citizens and their local political representatives mostly view Turkey through the lens of perceived negative historical experience, and see the modern Turkish state as an imperial power pursuing its neo-Ottoman agenda in the Balkans.

In contrast, many Bosniak citizens, together with the representatives of the Bosniak parties SDA and SDP, have a positive opinion about the presence and role of Turkey in Sandžak. Bosniak citizens tend to see Turkey as a protector, a "big brother," and a country that under the leadership of "Sultan" Erdogan experienced a renaissance that allowed it to play a much larger role in international relations and act in the role of leader in the Islamic world.

However, the perception of Turkey's presence among Bosniak elites is not monolithic, as one could assume. Among the political elites, the most pragmatic and critical position was held by interviewees coming from a milieu close to Zukorlić, a conservative political and formerly religious leader. Even though they never questioned Turkey's significance for Bosniaks or Erdogan himself, they blamed Ankara for favoring the rival SDA, the unfavorable role Turks played in mediating between the two warring Islamic communities, and the lack of direct Turkish investment in the economy of Sandžak. Despite the unfulfilled promises and data showing dubious Turkish

involvement in the economic sphere, the representatives of the opposing SDA and SDP parties did not blame Turkey for the lack of direct investments. Zukorlić's negative views on Turkey's economic passivity are shared by pro-civic NGO activists and journalists of liberal provenance, who add the abuse of local pro-Turkish sentiment for the internal political interests of the ruling clique in Ankara to the list of objections to Turkey's presence.

Last but not least, the research indicates that Turkey's popularity in domestic public opinion is being used by local actors to settle scores with political opponents. The importance of relations with Turkey for their political status in Sandžak imposed the using of Turkish card as a pragmatic political strategy. While political actors and their media promote their own cooperation with Turkish representatives, they keep silent about their rivals' collaboration with Turks and promote narratives according to which political opponents are enemies of Turkey. Labeling opponents as enemies of Turkey may prove to be an effective strategy, given that it not only decreases the reputation of the rival political option before local public opinion but also results in an echo that may be heard in Turkey.

The geopolitical significance of a certain area and the declared will to help do not imply exclusively economic help. While it could likely do more to address many of the economic problems in Sandžak, Turkey does not do so, avoiding acting on raised local expectations. Interest-driven policy, both in a political and economic sense, contributed to the divergence of local views, not only between the clear and expected emotion-based stances of Bosniaks and Serbs, but also among Bosniaks themselves. The cases of paternalism-oriented mediations or abusing economic matters for Ankara's own political interests are among factors that shaped that divergence decisively, signaling that the Turkish presence in the region is not a one-directional process. Instead, the Turkish presence is observed in different ways by locals, and as such it becomes a part of local political dynamics.

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- A journalist, Novi Pazar, June 24, 2020.
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## About the project

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**“Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Ways Forward in Analyzing External Actors' Influence”** is a follow-up project that aims to build upon a knowledge base established in the preceding project “Western Balkans at the Crossroads: Assessing Non-Democratic External Influence Activities,” which mapped, analyzed and publicized Russian, Chinese, Turkish, and Gulf States' influence activities in the region. The innovative project focuses on in-depth socially rooted research and investigative journalism. Its design reflects the aim to go beyond conventional analytical frameworks, overcoming ideologically constructed stereotypes and methodological nationalism while combining a variety of methodological approaches from security studies to visual anthropology.

Project outputs consist of fifteen analytical studies and fifteen journalistic articles drawing on their findings. Major observations on external actors' influence gathered throughout the work on the project will be summarized in a final reflection paper.

Project duration: 10/2019 – 03/2021

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## About Prague Security Studies Institute

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**PSSI** is a non-profit, non-governmental organization established in early 2002 to advance the building of a just, secure, democratic, free-market society in the Czech Republic and other post-communist states. PSSI's mission

is to build an ever-growing group of informed and security-minded policy practitioners dedicated to the development of democratic institutions and values in Central and South-East Europe.

