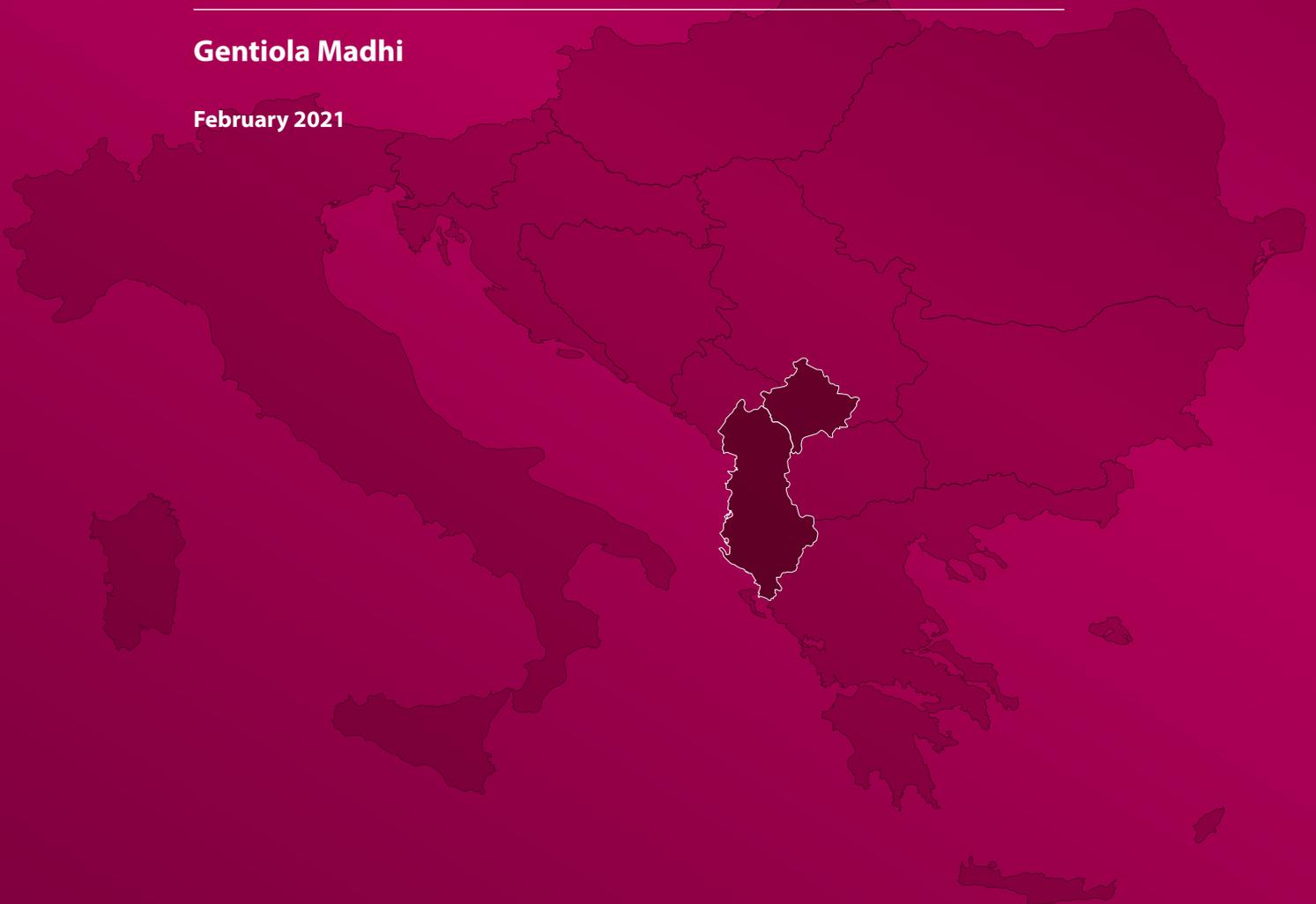




“Our brother Erdogan” – From official to personal relations of political leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President

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Executive summary

This paper focuses on the forging of personal relations between leaders of Albania and Kosovo with the Turkish President and its coexistence with traditional interstate relations. In particular, it deals with President Erdoğan's approach to shifting from interstate institutional relations towards the predominance and favouring of one-to-one personal relations with country leaders, as an alternative means to blur the line between foreign and domestic affairs. Such a shift in the cases of Albania and Kosovo is deemed risky, with a negative impact on their democratization perspectives and fuelling of ad hoc practices in the state administrative procedures.

The paper analyses the two sets of friendship bonds between the leaders on the basis of three dimensions, namely: (i) manifestation of personal friendship in the public realm; (ii) Turkey's religious agenda abroad; and, (iii) Turkey's extraterritorial requests against Gülen movement supporters. The first dimension reflects on the leaders' attempts to 'idealize' their relationship and convey to the public opinion the image of 'friends' through the media, whereas the other two dimensions are strictly linked to the two main priorities of the Turkish agenda in the Balkans. The ambivalence of Turkey's religious soft power and its attempt to export its domestic conflict in Albania and

Kosovo, are deemed essential for understanding the extent to which this personalisation of relations is of a strategic and transactional nature.

The research draws on a triangulation of sources in order to address the limits deriving from the personal and subjective nature of the relationship between the leaders, the unavailability of diversified sources of information as well as general lack of transparency and accountability over the leaders' shift from official to informal *tete-à-tete* meetings, thereby ignoring the official procedures that trace the decision-making process.

The results show that the brokered sets of friendship have been promoted on the basis of a temporary congruence of interests and calculated political benefits, missing therefore a structural basis for an institutionalisation at the state level. In the case of Albania, Prime Minister Rama has adopted an ambivalent approach vis-à-vis Turkey's agenda, and his concessions to the Turkish requests has been duly rewarded. Whereas, in the case of Kosovo, *Thaçi's* friendship with Erdoğan has resulted less balanced in terms of mutual empowerment. The satisfaction of Turkish requests has resulted in an exploitation of Kosovo's domestic vulnerabilities in favour of the Turkish corrosive agenda.



Introduction

Modern politics has facilitated the prominence of political personalities in the public realm. Political leaders' official and informal interactions have witnessed growing attention and visibility worldwide, especially in the field of foreign affairs.

In line with this global trend, a similar shift in the foreign policy domain has been identified by scholars in Turkey with the rising prominence of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Selçuk et. al. 2019: 542). The adoption of a new system of governance in Turkey, based on a centralized presidential system, confers a considerable amount of additional authority and power on the president. He can now shape Turkish foreign policy in new and even more personalised ways (Kiris and Toygur 2019), where the preference for personal friendship bonds, or in other words, for 'personal diplomacy', can be observed. In particular, Erdoğan has shown a policy of prioritizing the Western Balkans (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019), considered "part of [Turkey's] natural sphere of influence as the former imperial power" (Weise 2018). The region is of strategic interest because of its proximity to the EU, and symbolically it represents Erdoğan's ambition for the establishment of a Neo-Ottoman space (Hopkins and Pitel 2021). Among the Balkan leaders, Erdoğan has nurtured very good relations with Edi Rama, Prime Minister of Albania, and Hashim Thaçi, President of Kosovo, whose personal meetings have made the headlines in their respective domestic media settings in the last years. Over time, the Turkish presence in both of the predominantly ethnic Albanian countries has followed a positive trend, both in terms of strategic investments and through humanitarian and cultural/religious assistance.

Based on these insights, this paper seeks to shed light on the nature of personal relations cultivated by Erdoğan with Albania's Prime Minister and Kosovo's President, through a normative, interest-based dichotomy therein.

While Erdoğan's opting for 'personal diplomacy' in foreign affairs is justified on the basis of achieving quick solutions to international problems (Ulgul 2019, 162), this approach

in turn excludes the participation of traditional state actors. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, the forging of personal relations between national leaders is motivated on the basis of an alignment of interests and/or existence of enabling conditions. In the presence of weak governing systems, the 'personal diplomacy' approach may facilitate the access to governmental affairs of other countries by means of preferential treatments, such as investment bids, blurring the line between foreign and domestic affairs.

As the analysis has an exploratory aim, it faces several limitations due to the personal and subjective nature of relationships between national leaders, the lack of diversified sources of information about this practice, along with a general lack of transparency over leaders' frequent informal meetings, as venues where state-related agendas are discussed but not traced. In order to address these limits, a triangulation of sources has been applied, where the collected materials online –such as media articles, reports, academic papers, etc. – have been confronted with verifications on institutional websites and leaders' official declarations over time, coupled with six semi-structured interviews with experts from the three countries conducted online in September 2020.

The paper is organized in five sections: Section one provides a short analysis of the concept of 'friendship' in international relations, followed by an overview of the political dynamics of recent years. The third section focuses on Erdoğan's preference for forging personalized relations in the foreign realm, as a tool to maximize Turkey's influence and role on the geopolitical chessboard. Section four and section five then respectively trace the bilateral relations of the Albanian and Kosovo leaders with Erdoğan, with a specific focus on how friendship ties are portrayed in the public sphere, the religious nexus and the extrajudicial requests against the Gülen movement. Overall, the analysis shows that the two sets of friendship relations are based on strategic calculations of the parties, who opt for mutual concessions in order to maximize personal benefits.

Friendship ties between political leaders: A theoretical overview

Political leaders are usually considered a ‘personification’ of the country they represent, on the basis of the assumption that a state ‘is conceptualized as a person’ (Lakoff in Giacomello, Ferrari and Amadori 2009). They directly engage in maintaining cordial relations on behalf of their respective countries, and in the exercise of their official duties, these leaders to a certain extent also develop mutual relations and connections of a personal nature that go beyond the traditional conceptualisation of official diplomatic exchanges. On certain occasions, political actors publicly declare and recognize each other as ‘friends’. The frequent use of this term in international politics has primarily referred to interstate relations, but with the passing of time it has evolved also to refer to the establishment of interpersonal ties as well (Digeser 2009, 327).

Although not significantly explored by scholars of international relations, friendship is considered a multifaceted concept by those that have studied it, and there is no static definition available at the moment. In principle, international friendship is seen as a selective process, which tends towards bilateral relations rather than multilateral ones, and it sets the basis for an exclusive space created among the involved parties (Oelsner and Koschut 2014). Berenskoetter conceives friendship as a voluntary relationship based on choice (2007, 669), and it should be considered a continuously evolving process (2014), demanding therefore constant exercise. Friendship develops through a space where, through negotiations, parties bridge diverse positions and create common understanding, which serves to maximize their respective political ambitions, thus allowing them to think about *friendship as a political relationship* (Berenskoetter 2014, 5). In countries where leaders hold considerable power in shaping national policies, the cultivation of friendship relations can serve as a shortcut for the solution of problems (Ulgul 2019, 162), or as a mean to bypass ordinary bureaucratic procedures.

International friendship can materialize as a strategic or as a normatively-based relationship. According to Oelsner and Koschut (2014, 13-14), *strategic friendship* emerges in cases where political actors show a preference for referring to each other as ‘friends’ in the public realm, on the basis of their congruence of interests and not on genuine trust. This type of friendship is relatively unstable and temporary in nature. To be sure, strategic friends will certainly rely on each other for mutual support to manage uncertainty, but only under certain structural conditions, such as mutual reassurance through transparency, information flow, and shared interests. Meanwhile *normative friendship* is most likely to develop among actors who share high levels of ideational and emotional bonds that permit mutual identification and trust. The drivers that push political leaders to establish such friendship bonds differ according to specific contexts and the interests they seek to pursue.

The paper analyses these friendship relations between the leaders on the basis of three dimensions, namely: (i) how personal friendship is manifested in the public realm; (ii) Turkey’s religious agenda abroad; and, (iii) extraterritorial requests involving actions against Gülen movement supporters. The first dimension reflects the leaders’ attempts to ‘idealize’ their relationship and convey to the public the image of ‘friends’ through the media, whereas the other two dimensions are strictly linked to the two main priorities of the Turkish agenda in the Balkans. The ambivalence of Turkey’s religious soft power and its attempt to export its domestic conflict (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019) in Albania and Kosovo are deemed essential for understanding the extent to which this personalisation of relations is of a strategic and transactional nature. The analysis becomes even more interesting, when considering that personal friendship is established between political leaders of opposite parties, who managed to go beyond their parties’ ideological differences and forge mutual friendships. The presence of these nuances provides a good basis for comparisons between empirical case-studies.

Regional political dynamics

“Erdoğan is our inseparable friend and brother, in celebration but also in adversity,” declared Prime Minister Rama, speaking on behalf of Albania and Kosovo back in October 2013 in Prishtina, less than a month after he took office in Albania (Jacaj 2013). The event was hosted by President Thaçi and the Turkish President attended as special guest of the inaugural ceremony of the country’s sole airport, given as a concession to a Turkish-led consortium. The selection of a linguistic reference to the Turkish leader using such close, personal and family related terms attracted public attention and raised concerns over the ongoing power dynamics in the bilateral relations of the two Western Balkan countries with Turkey.

In foreign policy terms, for the last two decades or so, Albania and Kosovo share a common pro-Western orientation, with a strong political ambition to and citizens’ support for EU membership, as well as strengthening of bilateral relations with the US. Whereas, during the same period, Turkey has derailed itself from EU-anchored democratization, with a progressing shift towards competitive authoritarianism, and dismantling of its internal checks and balances system (Onis 2019). Nevertheless, the differing foreign policy orientations have not affected the cultivation of personal relations between the leaders since 2013 onwards.

Traditionally, official relations between both Albania and Kosovo and Turkey have been positive, with bilateral cooperation in different spheres, from security to infrastructure, energy, telecommunication, education, health and cultural sectors. In economic terms, both countries are considered strategic markets for the distribution of Turkish products, and Turkish investments rank high in both of their foreign investment stocks. Turkey is the fifth largest trading partner and the sixth leading foreign investor in Albania (European Commission 2019,

53). Meanwhile in Kosovo, Turkish investments rank third, after Germany and Switzerland, with a capital stock of approximately 1.2 billion euro (Ahmeti 2020). While the positive pace of Turkish investments is seen as demand-driven, they are also considered a critical venue for the cultivation of leaders’ personal relations, since they serve as a tool for the clientelistic system of governance (Maliqi 2020, 18).

In a broad perspective, Erdoğan’s success at the domestic level in Turkey is attributed in part to his strong backing from the business sector, which in turn benefits from direct access to the political process, and he is defined as “a new kind of political entrepreneur” (Onus 2019, 207, 211). The application of this entrepreneurship concept in the political realm has permitted Erdoğan to shift from investments in interstate institutional relations to one-to-one personal relations with national leaders. Such a shift in the case of Albania and Kosovo risks having a negative impact on the democratization perspective of the two countries, indirectly undermining their reform efforts by fuelling ad hoc practices in public procurement processes or facilitating corruption, for example. The political landscapes in Albania and Kosovo play an enabling role in this regard, since they both are characterized by weak democratic governance and political polarisation. Recently, both countries have experienced a backsliding of democratic standards, which has had spill over effects on the countries’ rule of law systems and their fight against corruption. The exploitation of these domestic vulnerabilities through the established friendship bonds between the leaders would create room for crony capitalism (Maliqi 2020, 16). In this perspective, the analysis of the two sets of personal relations of Albanian leaders with Erdoğan allows for the identification of possible corrosive effects for the Turkish regime in the two countries.

Erdoğan's personalised relations: A leaders' affair

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has been dominating Turkey's political scene for almost two decades. His political engagement started in the mid-1990s as the mayor of Istanbul and evolved through 2018 when he became the country's president. Under his leadership, the right-wing Justice and Development Party, with conservative and Islamist leanings, has become the hegemonic force in Turkey's political scene (Muftuler-Baç and Keyman 2012). He is described as an influential political figure and "his leadership style remains a puzzle to understand" (Kesgin 2019, 2). Gorener and Ucal have analysed Erdoğan's political traits, arguing about his 'black and white tendency' and categorical thinking on most matters in international politics, which has a defining effect on his orientation of and decision-making on Turkish foreign policy (2011, 367-368, 376).

Over time, Erdoğan has succeeded in concentrating power in his hands, facilitated by the restructuring process of the state apparatus (Kirisçi and Toygur 2019, 6), which is reflected in the reorientation of Turkish foreign policy. He is following a pro-active agenda (Kesgin 2019, 3), which reflects simultaneously the assertive nationalism aimed at domestic politics, and the co-existence of soft power with increasingly coercive approaches applied outside of national borders (Onis 2019, 208 & 211). This choice is motivated also by the current multipolarity present in international relations, the perception of the West's decline and the necessity to diversify Turkey's allies, opening up to Russia and China (Kirisçi and Toygur 2019, 6). This 'new'

understanding of Turkish foreign policy is followed by a greater attention in the military sector, by expanding domestic capabilities in view of playing a major role (Kirisçi and Toygur 2019, 7). Turkey's increased political and military weight has led to him becoming a more independent player in world politics (Alaranta 2020, 4).

Erdoğan's preference for breaking personal distance is visible in cases such as his addressing Italy's Berlusconi as 'my friend', or when referring to Albania's and Kosovo's leaders in an even more family-related style, conveying his role as "older brother". In his political discourse, the frequent use of emotional connotations prevails, while the speeches are characterized by a "mixture of diplomatic rhetoric, religious sermons and historical folklore", and are rooted in common historical heritage (Sejdiu 2018, 111). Erdoğan's friendship approach is generally well-received by almost all Western Balkan leaders. The coupling of Erdoğan's personal diplomacy actions with these leaders with investment flows has contributed to the strengthening of his image as the region's credible leader. Moreover, as Turkey is considered as a regional actor, "having the attention of its president [...] cuddles the ego of the local leaders".¹ The cultivation of personal bonds constitutes the backbone of Turkey's foreign policy outreach in the region, seeking to nurture Erdoğan's image as a paternal figure (Aydıntaşbas 2019), which at the same time makes use of the Balkan political leaders as tools for the maximization of his diplomatic actions abroad.

1 Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

Rama–Erdođan: A friend in need or a friend indeed?

Edi Rama, an artist-turned-politician, became Albania's Prime Minister in summer 2013, after eight years in opposition as leader of the Socialist Party. His foreign policy vision relies on Albania's Euro-Atlantic integration and reflects a realistic and dynamic positioning within the regional strategic quadrilateral, consisting of traditional partners – Italy, Austria, Greece, and the newly introduced Turkey (Qeveria e Republikës së Shqipërisë n.d., 23). The preferential treatment of Turkey among the Western allies was announced by Rama as the first step towards the establishment of a 'new chapter' in bilateral relations between the two countries (Sot.com.al 2013), and it was motivated by existing traditional relations and friendship among Albanians and Turks, as well as their shared membership in NATO.

The establishment of ties with Turkey's leadership entered the public domain in May 2013, during the election campaign, when Rama travelled to Turkey to meet Erdođan for the first time in person, calling it an "unforgettable meeting" (Partia Socialiste n.d.). Once he had become Premier-elect, Rama visited Ankara again that summer to discuss with Erdođan an extensive bilateral cooperation plan, marking the beginning of a new season in Albania's relations with Turkey. This political choice was received in public with perplexity, suggesting a lack of clarity on the final aim of the newly established strategic partnership (Dyrmishi 2015, 10).

Since then, besides official state relations, Rama and Erdođan also start to advance a personal friendship bond, which developed over time in bilateral phone calls, and frequent informal meetings in Ankara or Istanbul, around three times per year, as advertised on the social media accounts of Rama. These meetings have been publicly motivated on the grounds of shared interests or undertaking of joint strategic initiatives – especially in the business sector (Top Channel n.d.). The move from

official to informal meetings has been characterized by untransparency, and is almost not reflected at all on the Albanian Prime Minister's official website. Instead, Rama has preferred to personally announce on his social networks the launch of joint ventures like Air Albania company, a new flag carrier where 49% is owned by Turkish Airlines, or the unsolicited request of a Turkish consortium to build an airport in Vlora (criticized by the European Commission). In principle, the risky side of this personal friendship bond stems from the lack of transparency in the agenda and decisions that the leaders have adopted during their *tete-à-tete* meetings, ignoring the administrative procedures that record and trace the decision-making process when dealing with the country's strategic interests and state affairs.²

The relinquishing of their parliamentary mandates by the Albanian opposition in February 2019 has contributed to the strengthening of Rama's decision-making power, enabling him and his party to take control of the reform processes and allowing for *ad hoc* practices, such as exemptions from regular public procurement rules in favour of Turkish companies. The parliament today has turned into a mere 'generator of laws', rather than a means for demanding more government accountability. Internal political tensions have also resulted in a more polarized climate with little possibility of breakthrough. In the meantime, since 2018, ongoing justice reform has paralysed the functioning of the Constitutional and High Courts, leading to an almost complete absence of a checks and balances system, and empowerment of the country's leader in defining the rules of the game. In this enabling context, the course of the relations between Rama and Erdođan is seen as dependent on the alignment of mutual interests, which evolves through untransparent routes. As the analysis seeks to show, and as noted also by an interviewee: "We read only the messages they want to convey [to the media] and [there] is part of this friendship and dynamic relationship that no one has access to".³

2 Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

3 Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.



A mediatized personal friendship

The Rama-Erdoğan relationship is often portrayed as a 'special friendship', where both leaders seek to communicate high mutual respect, personal esteem and appreciation for the mutual trust extended to one other. On different occasions, Rama has spoken with superlatives about Erdoğan, either from the personal perspective or about what Erdoğan has done for Turkey's transformation process. In personal terms, he has publicly stated his proudness of being Erdoğan's friend (Gazeta Shqiptare 2020), arguing that their friendship is special since it is based on a unique principle that is rare in international relations, where "yes' means 'yes' and 'no' means 'no'" (Exit.al n.d.). In professional terms, Rama has declared that he admires Erdoğan's "extraordinary work" as Mayor of Istanbul, which served him as an inspiring example for Tirana mayorship (Idriz, Ademi and Cuka 2018). In turn, Erdoğan has been less expressive, but more practical in using different occasions to publicly honour Rama's friendship, such as hosting him as a witness at his daughter's wedding or serving as his driver in the inaugural trip on the new "Osmangaze" bridge. It is interesting to note Erdoğan's predisposition for having close political leaders as special guest at his family celebrations. The same happened in 2003 at his son's wedding where Rama's predecessor as socialist leader, Fatos Nano, acted as witness (Bekdil 2003).

Both leaders have invested significant efforts and energy into conserving the emotional aspects of their relations. Showing personal affection has become a ritual, which has served their populist agendas at home. In the case of Rama, having a charismatic leader like Erdoğan as a close ally and personal friend contributes to the spread of the image of being a well-respected leader of his own country, besides having someone to lean on in case of necessity.⁴

Turkey's religious agenda in Albania

In Albania, as in other countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina or Kosovo, Erdoğan has tried to use any occasion to publicly promote his commitment in favour of and to maintaining influence on Muslims, as part of his wider instrumentalization of religion for power consolidation purposes (Buyuk and Ozturk 2019). The

For a small country like Albania, the declared friendship with Turkey's leader acts significantly in favour of Rama's political ambitions, especially now that he is seeking a third governing mandate. In this bilateral relationship, no reference is made to the ideology (and derivative political choices) promoted by the political parties that the two leaders chair. Rama's centre-left Socialist Party relies on a liberal and pro-EU orientation, which is situated opposite to Erdoğan's conservative ideology, with strong populist-nationalist and anti-Western style rhetoric (Onis, 2019: 2007). Instead, the mediatization of this personal relationship is intended to go beyond these dividing points, thus serving as an instrument which is expected to spill over positive effects in other spheres, such as, for instance that of the inter-institutional relations between the countries, although it still needs to be proven whether this expectation exists in reality.

Nevertheless, this personal friendship between the leaders has recently been 'crowned' with an important symbolic gesture, namely Erdoğan offering the Turkish presidential plane as a gift to Albanian government. This gift was facilitated through unclear and non-transparent procedures (Erebara 2020), raising questions about the personal dimension of this friendship and the potential use of official channels for personal interests.⁵ The same questions were raised after Erdoğan's last declaration about building a hospital near the city of Fier, with a cost of approximately 70 million Euro, and handing it to the Albanian authorities a few weeks before the forthcoming parliamentary elections on 25 April 2021 (Euronews Albania 2021). Rama denied the existence of any particular intention behind the Turkish gift, claiming it was motivated by reciprocal respect and friendship (Ora News 2021).

materialization of this approach has not faced any type of resistance from Rama, who has instead offered to Erdoğan an excellent occasion for practicing his rhetoric back in 2015. It refers to the construction of the Namazgah Mosque in Tirana, which has been used as a 'promised investment'

4 Journalist based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 17, 2020.

5 Policy Researcher based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 3, 2020.



during the electoral campaigns for almost two decades by the political parties, but with no follow up.

The use of the religious card by the Turkish authorities in Albania has not flourished as may have been expected, or as it occurs in other Muslim-majority countries, because of traditions of secularism and multi-religious society in Albania. Rama himself has created a dedicated section in his social networks called 'Saints' Words', frequently citing sayings from both the Qur'an and the Bible. As religion falls under the personal sphere for Albanians in general, relations with Turkey are instead mostly perceived from the economic and security standpoints. In the case of the construction of Namazgah Mosque with Turkish funds, or the reconstruction of other mosques through the same mechanisms, they have been promoted by Rama and the government in general as an initiative in favour of the protection of national cultural heritage. From this perspective, any action taken in the religious field by Erdoğan is seen as a contribution to the "restitution of mosques' splendour" (Cuka 2021), and is equated with other countries' interventions, such as the Greek or Italian funding for churches' restoration.

The main problem with the construction of the Namazgah Mosque is not the religious dimension per se, but that it has been an unkept promise of all political parties in Albania and has been instrumentalized during the electoral periods for political interests. The long wait for the construction of the mosque is a symptom of these parties' interests, corrupt affairs and ordinary irregular procedures conducted by state institutions. Back in 2011, in the capacity of Mayor of Tirana, Rama called for an international competition on the mosque's architectural design, in order to attract the best architectural proposals. However, the selection process ended with the winning project characterized by classical Ottoman style, and the entry had not even part of the actual competition (Sadiki 2015). Once in power as Prime Minister, in October 2014, Rama kept the promise by issuing a construction permit for the Namazgah Mosque in the city centre alongside Catholic and Orthodox cathedrals, thus creating the so-called 'triangle of faith'. The ground breaking ceremony took place in May 2015 in the presence of President Erdoğan.⁶ Among others, Erdoğan declared

that "[Namazgah] mosque will be a unique symbol of the brotherhood between our nations" (Isik 2019), and proclaimed that Turkey still accepts all brothers in Albania and the whole Balkans as their inseparable part (TIKA n.d.), thus implicitly recalling the Ottoman past with positively nuanced connotations. Namazgah Mosque's construction is entirely funded by Turkey's directorate for religious affairs, Diyanet, with a cost of approximately 40 million Euro (Halluni 2021).

Rama's acquiescence to Erdoğan's requests on the mosque's construction led to disappointments among the Albanian Muslim Community (AMC), since part of this religious community would have preferred other sources of support rather than Turkey (Lapsi, 2018). By accepting the Turkish sponsorship for the mosque's construction, it was implicitly favoured by the Turkish-affiliated wing within the AMC. In fact, the AMC suffers from continuous interferences from Turkish authorities, which accused the last two chairmen of the AMC of supporting the Gülen movement. The transposition of this Turkish domestic issue to the Albanian Muslim Community has resulted in further internal divisions and fragmentation, to the detriment of the principle of non-interference. Recently, the media has insinuated that Turkey has conditioned the funds for the completion of the mosque on the replacement of the AMC's chairman (Ora News 2018). When asked, Rama refused to properly reply to the question, pointing out that the AMC is an independent institution and that the government cannot interfere in its affairs and relations with third parties (Ora News 2018). Since the mosque is built with Turkish funds, it remains de facto under Erdoğan's authority and is not expected to be inaugurated until the dispute with the AMC is resolved (Van Gerven Oei 2018).

6 This was the second ground breaking ceremony for the Namazgah Mosque, as a previous one took place in April 2013, organized by the Albanian Muslim Community and then Democratic-led government. Following the June 2013 national elections, a dispute emerged between the Democratic Mayor of Tirana and the newly established Rama government on the construction plan of the site where the mosque was planned. The mosque construction got stalled and the work on the ground started only in January 2015.



Albania's response to the requests against the Gülen movement

Erdoğan considers the Gülen movement a terroristic network, allegedly responsible for organizing the attempted coup in Turkey of 15 July 2016. Rama was one of the first leaders expressing his solidarity with Erdoğan on Twitter the next morning: "Happy for the brotherly Turkish people and our valuable friend, President Erdoğan, for going out with full success from a very difficult night"⁷. However, the relationship between Rama and Erdoğan later got particularly complex with regard to the coup.

Erdoğan has assertively engaged in perpetual political rhetoric against the Gülen movement, not only at the domestic level, but also beyond Turkey's borders. On various occasions, Erdoğan and other Turkish authorities have engaged in cautionary discourse against Gülen's malign intentions and their serious penetration into Albania's state system (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2018b). Moreover, he has ensured the state authorities that Turkey will always protect Albanians from those trying to divide the country (Cuka 2017), in view of the Rama government's taking action against Gülen cells operating in country. Erdoğan's requests refer to the closing down of Gülen-affiliated educational institutions – considered as shelters for alleged supporters – and the handing over to Turkey of those supporters. In return for honouring of such requests, Erdoğan has promised a considerable flow of investments to Albania, going even further by stating that he "do[es] not know how many investments have arrived from the EU, but [Turkey's] will not stop" (Top Channel 2017). Posed in this form, Erdoğan friendship with Rama takes the shape of a transactional and exchange type of relationship.

Notwithstanding the political pressure exerted on Tirana (Hopkins and Pitel 2021), Rama has followed a reluctant approach on the matter. The showing of public loyalty and understanding to Erdoğan's pleas has been accompanied with government ministers' declarations that Albania stands committed to respecting international treaties on extradition (Ministria per Evropën dhe Punët e Jashtme 2018). Recently, Rama has argued that the Gülen network is dangerous, since it organized a violent overthrow of an elected government in Turkey, and that Albanian authorities are monitoring all those persons that are allegedly connected to that network (Ora News 2018).

In an interview for Turkish media, he asserted that his government is committed to protecting the country's education system from external negative influences (Idriz, Ademi and Cuka 2018), leaving open the interpretation of his viewpoint.

Rama has shown little intention of honouring Erdoğan's requests, and his resistance is interpreted in the context of Albania's strong pro-Western orientation. Any attempt to open up to Erdoğan's requests would be politically harmful for Rama, because it would be a precedent for further concessions as well as a breach of national norms on extradition. Moreover, the public opinion in Albania is strongly pro-European and any concession towards Turkey is perceived as a deviation from the country's alignment with EU foreign policy.

To date, the Albanian authorities have deported only one alleged supporter of the cleric Gülen, which took place some weeks after an earthquake hit Albania. The news became public through the Turkish media, promoting it as "a successful operation" carried out by the Turkish Secret Services on Albanian soil (Buyuk and Erebara 2020). International media has reported inside information from the Albanian government side, stating that this deportation was an 'exchange of favours', a transactional concession so that Turkey could disburse the promised millions in aid and build 500 apartments in the area of Lac, which was hardly damaged by the earthquake of November 2019 (Hopkins and Pitel 2021). The construction agreement was signed by the parties two weeks after the deportation (Halluni, 2020). In early September, a second alleged supporter saw his asylum request rejected by the Albanian authorities on procedural grounds, although his extradition has not taken place yet (Karaj 2020). This second event happened a few days before Rama travelled to Turkey to meet Erdoğan, followed afterwards by the government's decision to close three pre-university Turkish education institutions operating in Albania since the early 2000s. This is not the first time that a synchronization of actions is noticed around the days of Rama's visits to Turkey. Back in summer 2019, a few days before Rama's trip to Marmaris, a symbolic memorial stone was placed at the premises of Tirana's artificial lake commemorating the third anniversary of and resistance by Turkish people against the attempted

7 <https://twitter.com/ediramaal/status/754217860201848832>



coup (Milloja 2020), coupled with the planting of 251 trees brought from Turkey and naming of the street 'Martyrs of 15 July' (Mero 2019). The first of its kind in a foreign country, the memorial raised strong reactions and concerns about the kind of relationship with and possible interference and manipulation risks from Turkey (Mero 2019). State authorities avoided taking on responsibility for the act, trying to downplay its importance. Critical voices argued that the memorial recalled the concept of vassalage, after 500 years under the Ottoman empire (Panorama 2019).

"The erection of the memorial constituted an institutional favour offered [by Rama's government] [...] [as] a genuine personal favour to satisfy the ego of the Turkish President"⁸ From this perspective, "this kind of [personal] relationship does not build on an institutional relation or [can] turn it into a strong commitment between the two countries", commented an interviewee.⁹ It primarily shows the contractual dimension of these personal relations, raising questions on the real motivations and calculated moves of the parties.

8 Policy Researcher based in Albania, Skype interview by the author, September 3, 2020.

9 Researcher based in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Skype interview by the author, September 7, 2020.



Thaçi-Erdoğan: From friends to brothers

Hashim Thaçi is a key political protagonist in Kosovo, driving major events in the country's independence process. He spent over two decades in power, acting alternatively as minister, prime minister, and, since 2016, as Kosovo's president. Thaçi is also a founder of the Democratic Party in Kosovo, which originally had a social-democratic orientation, and since 2013 shifted its position towards the centre-right. For years, he has been the "go-to-guy" for the international community dealing with state building and reconciliation processes between Kosovo and Serbia.

Under Thaçi's leadership, Kosovo's foreign policy followed a pro-Western orientation and aimed at EU and NATO membership in the future. The main policy priorities reflected the domestic conditions in which Kosovo finds itself, starting with the need to protect its national and territorial integrity, as well as to enhance the process of recognition of its independence from the international community in view of a UN membership status. At the regional level, the normalization of relations with Serbia leads Kosovo's priorities.

Turkey was considered by Thaçi as Kosovo's greatest ally (Naddaff 2018), alongside Albania, considering its

contribution in the lobbying process for its recognition. Erdoğan has been personally involved in lobbying in favour of Kosovo's independence with the leaders of Pakistan, Egypt and Brunei during 2012-2013 (Kursani, Haxholli and Gjikolli 2014, 73). His involvement marked not only long-term strategic cooperation but also the beginning of a personal relationship between the two countries' leaders. Thaçi has regularly acclaimed Erdoğan's pivotal presence, calling him "one of the most powerful world leaders and biggest supporter of Kosovo's independence" (Prime Minister's Office n.d.). The relations between Thaçi and Erdoğan initially were of an institutionalized nature, with the leaders meeting in an official capacity,¹⁰ evolving over time into what the media often describe as genuine friendship, and the leaders referring to each other metaphorically as 'brothers' (Morina 2016). This special relationship is believed to have facilitated a considerable Turkish presence in different sectors in Kosovo,¹¹ and Thaçi has often been criticized for such personal links. Turkish firms have purchased important economic assets in the country, among which stands the tender for the privatization of Kosovo Electricity Distribution and Supply, with a cost of 26.3 million Euro, given to the Turkish consortium led by Erdoğan's son-in-law (Olluri 2012).

A portray of leaders' personal friendship

The friendship between Erdoğan and Thaçi evolved steadily over time, and in part is characterized by public demonstration of mutual care and respect. Thaçi's narrative was based by frequent public expressions of gratitude towards Erdoğan, acknowledging his constant presence in good and difficult times, as well as his support for Kosovo's recognition and Euro-Atlantic integration. In his social media posts, Thaçi has made constant reference to Erdoğan as 'a true friend' or 'indispensable ally'. Erdoğan followed a similar approach when referring to Thaçi, recurring always to his preferred style with family-related expressions. Although both leaders are backed by conservative parties, the differences in their leadership style and values that they publicly profess differ considerably. Thaçi represented a contemporary leader with a moderate political tone,

who promoted Euro-Atlantic values in public and the integration of Kosovo in the future. On the other hand, Erdoğan's approach remained rooted in the past Ottoman grandeur coupled with religious and nationalistic elements. Thaçi found in Erdoğan a politically useful ally at national and regional level¹² –considering the statehood-related vulnerability of his country – whereas Erdoğan conceived this friendship in the wider frame of the personalized foreign policy approach in the Balkans, where domestic electoral considerations remain his end goal (Toygur 2018).

Turkey is one of the few countries in the region that has offered extensive political space to Kosovo (Kursani, Haxholli and Gjikolli 2014, 76). The intensity of their bilateral relations has also developed through Thaçi's frequent

10 Research fellow based in USA, Skype interview by the author, September 4, 2020.

11 Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.

12 Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.



informal visits to Turkey, serving as a shared informal space and venue in which to discuss tete-à-tete issues of common interests. Erdoğan's friendship has been beneficial to Taçi in enhancing his political leverage, at least in PR terms, in some critical moments for Kosovo's political landscape. Erdoğan has visited Kosovo officially only two times since its independence, in November 2010 and in October 2013, both of which uncoincidentally happened to be during election campaigns in Kosovo. On the eve of the 2013 local elections, Erdoğan's participation in the inauguration of Pristina's airport was considered to be an

endorsement to Taçi's party (Emin 2013). That ceremony turned into a political rally and show of strength for Taçi (Emin 2013). Furthermore, Erdoğan has frequently included Taçi among the region's political leaders regularly personally invited to celebratory events in Turkey, such as the presidential inauguration ceremony or the opening of an Istanbul airport. Taçi's attending of these events shows his need for affiliation, and has been trumpeted as a clear sign of the bilateral strategic relations in place with Turkey (Baykal 2018).

Turkish religious card played in Kosovo

Erdoğan has tried to present himself as a reliable political partner for Kosovo's leadership (Phillips 2015), while seeking to indirectly influence the political discourse in the country for his own political interests. Back in 2013, in Prishtina, he made a controversial declaration: "Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey!", resonating a paternalistic attitude and polarising domestic public opinion in Kosovo (Edwards and Colborne 2019). Although this statement was made in his presence, President Taçi did not spark any public reaction, giving rise to interpretations of possible 'tacit consent'.

Turkish administration has requested on several occasions that Kosovan leadership remove negative references to the country's Ottoman past from school textbooks (Fazliu 2016). The revision of the historical past takes place in the wider attempt to create a single narrative of long-lasting friendship between Turks and Albanians. It is not perceived by the Turkish administration as a "brainwashing tendency", but as a fertile initiative on the basis of the excellent bilateral relations in place.¹³ Nevertheless, there is not enough evidence to show that Taçi has been personally involved in the facilitation of the religious agenda of Turkish authorities in Kosovo.

As in the case of Albania, Turkey has allocated to Kosovo foreign aid dedicated to cultural heritage and the reconstruction of religious institutions. With an estimated contribution of 35-40 million euro, the new mosque in Prishtina follows classical Ottoman architecture. The mosque's architectural design was meant to be selected among proposals coming from renowned architects. In a case of déjà vu reminiscent of the aforementioned situation involving the Albanian mosque, in 2013 an international competition was organized in which contemporary architects like Zaha Hadid or Winny Mass participated, but at the end an already-existing project of a Turkish company was favoured, missing an opportunity to have a new and contemporary attraction in Pristina (Sadiki 2015). For part of the local population, this mosque represents a symbolic political declaration vis-à-vis Kosovo's leadership rather than a mere faith institution (Shehu 2020). Its construction started in mid-summer 2020 and, unlike in Albania, it was accompanied by some local public resistance, with the citizens demanding for more pressing services like schools and kindergartens instead (Qenaj 2020). However, Taçi has avoided commenting or taking any stances on the Turkish-led religious and cultural agenda in Kosovo, shifting his discourse on the importance of interreligious and interethnic peaceful coexistence of the society (Shehu 2020).

13 Researcher no. 1 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 4, 2020.

Honouring Turkey's requests

Erdoğan places crucial value on his authority and on being honoured with loyalty among friends (Kesgin 2019:10), and Taçi's loyalty was shown on the morning of 16 July 2016, immediately after the attempted coup, by condemning the act and declaring his "support of the democratically elected government and law and order in the country"¹⁴. Taçi's message on Twitter was published 24 minutes after Rama's, and these immediate reactions from the ethnic Albanian leaders were significant for Erdoğan, also in front of the slow reaction from the major Western countries. The relation between Erdoğan and Taçi has focused on Kosovo's national security risks deriving from the Gülen movement. Erdoğan has advised and publicly urged Taçi and local authorities to take immediate action, as they allege that the Gülen movement has its largest organizational network in Kosovo (Presidency of the Republic of Turkey 2016). When referring to Gülen, Turkish senior officials have used neo-colonial attitudes, seeking to emotionally influence public perception, besides expressing Turkey's will and readiness to inform, advise and protect Kosovo citizens.

The high confidence posed in Erdoğan's personal investment in forging a personal friendship with Taçi also posed a risk for local state institutions. In the case of Kosovo, political pressure has been boosted not only through diplomatic channels but also publicly, with the Turkish diplomatic corps' request to silence a local journalist commenting on the 2016 attempted coup (Bytyci 2016) or the clandestine deportation of six alleged Gülenists by Turkey's secret service together with Kosovo's intelligence agency in March 2018, without prior notification to Prime Minister Haradinaj. Such political developments have been perceived as patronizing by local civil society, opposing

the unwelcomed influence that Turkey seeks to exert on Kosovo's institutions (Fazliu 2016). "The deportation was a sign of a return of favour to Erdoğan [...] as Kosovo was the first country breaking state security protocol", said an interviewee.¹⁵ The exploitation of Kosovo for personal interests proved the authority that Erdoğan invests in his international friendship bonds, by means of "creating parallel structures" in a foreign country that satisfy his decisions (Hoez 2018).

Taçi initially denied any knowledge of the operation, but then confirmed the opposite on the grounds that it "posed a threat to national security" (Naddaff 2018). The satisfaction of Erdoğan's requests by Taçi confirmed the mere existence of a segment of state authorities responding and obeying only to PDK elites and Taçi, highlighting Kosovo's vulnerability to external political pressure and resulting in a domestic political crisis and rule of law violation. The illegal deportation evidenced also the application of a sort of coercive diplomacy from the Turkish side on Kosovo's legitimate institutions, particularly in proving the threat of punishment addressed to Prime Minister Haradinaj for harbouring alleged Gülenists, while reminding him that Turkey was a leading country in Kosovo's recognition of independence (Stockholm Center for Freedom 2018a). Erdoğan's engagement in such coercive acts relies upon his direct calculation of relative power and partially shows his preference for a transactional type of relationship with Kosovo's leadership. By honouring Erdoğan's requests, Taçi put into risk Kosovo's political stability for his own benefit of having more political space and showing loyalty in this bilateral friendship, besides setting a precedent in giving in to Turkish authorities' pressure. Moreover, his act shows a certain level of reliance on Turkish leadership.

14 <https://twitter.com/HashimThaciRKS/status/754223801047678976>

15 Researcher no. 2 based in Kosovo, Skype interview by the author, September 16, 2020.

Conclusions

Given recent EU disengagement in the Balkans and general backsliding of democratic standards in Albania and Kosovo in the past years, the fraternization of the countries' leaders with the Turkish leadership is seen as problematic, considering the potential corrosive effects that it may exert on these countries. While media outlets have focused mostly on the declaratory aspects and linguistic terms used to describe the relations in place between Erdoğan and Rama and Taçi respectively, the substance of these personal bonds still remains a mystery. The frequent visits of the Albanian leaders to Ankara and Istanbul and the closed-door meetings with the Turkish President have managed to bypass all the traditional decision-making and tracing procedures of the state administrations, in disrespect of public transparency and governmental accountability standards.

In the case of Erdoğan, the forged friendships with Rama and Taçi are seen as part of his wider political ambition to become a regional leader, as well as a tool to influence their domestic audiences. By breaking with traditional diplomatic schemes, Erdoğan has used personal relations to get access through ad hoc investment decisions, such as the establishment of Air Albania or privatization of Kosovo's Electricity Distribution and Supply. Moreover, he has sought to promote his religious agenda by disbursing aid for cultural heritage purposes.

In the case of Albania, Rama sought to promote the strategic partnership with Turkey since the beginning of his first mandate as prime minister, which simultaneously developed into a personalized relationship with its leader. This brokered friendship has been promoted on the basis of the parties' strategic interests and calculated political benefits. It has served as a source of empowerment for both sides, with Erdoğan attempting to maximize his image as the protector of Muslims abroad, and Rama trying to reinforce his position both at the domestic and regional level. However, the relationship has found its limit in Turkish requests to receive satisfaction from Tirana through the deportation of Gülen supporters living in the country. Beyond expressed declaratory support, Rama has followed an ambivalent approach, opting for the offering of symbolic gestures like the building of the memorial to honour the martyrs of the attempted coup. The single episode of deportation of a Gülen supporter occurred

after the earthquake at the end of 2019, as a transactional concession for Turkish reconstruction investments in Albania. The synchronisation of satisfactory actions before and after their *tete-à-tete* meetings reflects Rama's containment strategy and his lack of will to effectively satisfy Erdoğan's requests.

In the case of Kosovo, the forged friendship between Taçi and Erdoğan has resulted in an exploitation of the country's vulnerabilities in favour of Turkish interests. Taçi has relied considerably on Erdoğan's support in order to advocate for the recognition of Kosovo by other Muslim countries. The country's disputed statehood demands its leader's affiliation with relevant political actors at the regional level in order to maximize diplomatic efforts. As in the case of Albania, this personal bond between Taçi and Erdoğan is founded on the basis of strategic calculations and economic and political interests. In Kosovo, Erdoğan has not been satisfied with access to state-owned infrastructure properties that have been passed under the administration of or privatized by Turkish companies. His political pressure has resulted in Taçi's consent to illegally deported six alleged Gülenists in 2018, in serious violation of the internal procedures and Constitutional norms. While Taçi's returned benefit of such action is difficult to quantify, his decision has exposed Kosovo to the corrosive effects of Turkish influence in the country, undermining its domestic stability and fuelling political tensions and polarization.

Overall, the forging of these friendship bonds between the countries' leaders has resulted in a shift of attention and public discourse from national relations with Turkey to a leader-focused level, creating a certain overlap and coexistence of the leader's personal agenda with the state's foreign relations. Both Albanian leaders have shown a certain flexibility towards Erdoğan's agenda in the Balkans, offering him certain concessions in exchange for benefits in return, expressed either in terms of political support or through the influx of Turkish funds. The breaking point between Rama's behaviour *vis-à-vis* Erdoğan with respect to Taçi's materializes at the moment of Turkish meddling in their respective domestic affairs. The way how these friendships have evolved over time show little opportunities for an eventual transformation of the leaders' personal ties into more stable institutional relations.



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Gentiola Madhi is a researcher and political analyst whose research focuses on civil society, media and Western Balkans' European integration process. Since 2018, she has been working as a consultant researcher for plethora of non-governmental organizations. She regularly contributes to Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso – Transeuropa on Albania's political, societal and cultural landscape. Gentiola holds several research fellowships

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About the project

“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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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.

