



ERDOĞAN'S INFLUENCE IN CROATIA: A WARNING SIGN FOR THE EU

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RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN CROATIA HAVE INDICATED A GROWING TURKISH IMPACT IN THE REGION, POSING A SIGNIFICANT THREAT TO THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EFFORTS TO EXPAND ITS INFLUENCE IN SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE. TURKEY'S NEO-OTTOMAN FOREIGN POLICY, UNDER PRESIDENT RECEP TAYYIP ERDOĞAN, HAS FOCUSED ON THE WESTERN BALKANS, INCLUDING CROATIA, AS A PRIMARY AREA OF INTEREST. THIS MULTI-PRONGED APPROACH INCLUDES SPREADING ITS POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND CULTURAL INFLUENCE IN CROATIA, THE YOUNGEST EU MEMBER STATE.

Turkey has made significant investments in the Croatian banking sector, tourism, and transport infrastructure, among other areas. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency maintains offices in Zagreb, while a Turkish company won a public tender worth €321 million for the reconstruction of a key railroad connecting northern Croatia to Hungary. Furthermore, Turkey has made significant inroads in cultural and educational spheres, with the Yunus Emre Institute opening an office in Zagreb and the Croatian-Turkish cultural society combating negative historical images of Turkey in Croatia.

Erdoğan's visit to Zagreb in 2022 and the opening of the Islamic Center named after him in the city of Sisak indicate Turkey's growing influence in Croatia. The mosque and auxiliary facilities were financed by the Turkish government, and according to experts, Erdoğan is seeking to influence the Islamic community in Croatia and bring it closer to the vision of Islam promoted by his AKP party, as observed by an expert on Turkey and the Middle East. However, the success of this strategy remains limited.

While some Catholic conservative politicians and non-governmental organizations in Croatia admire Erdoğan, particularly due to similar positions on abortion and the LGBT community, the relationship is not one-dimensional. Since the 2016 attempted coup d'état in Turkey, Croatia has become more cautious regarding Ankara. In fact, the country has even started granting asylum status to Kurds, signaling a shift in its policy towards Turkey.

The Turkish government's attempts to exert its influence in Croatia should serve as a warning sign for the EU. Turkey's expansionist policies, both in its immediate neighborhood and beyond, threaten to undermine the EU's efforts to promote stability, democracy, and the rule of law in Southeastern Europe.

The EU must take a more assertive approach towards Turkey, particularly in light of its human rights abuses, aggressive foreign policy, and increasing authoritarianism. The EU should prioritize

the Western Balkans, including Croatia, as a critical region for its engagement efforts, including through increased political, economic, and cultural cooperation. The EU must also take a firmer stance against Turkey's expansionist policies and urge Ankara to respect the sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors.

Moreover, the EU must engage with civil society actors in Croatia and the wider Western Balkans region to promote democratic values, human rights, and the rule of law. By supporting civil society actors and promoting a more inclusive and democratic vision for the region, the EU can counter the influence of external actors, such as Turkey, and build a more resilient and stable Southeastern Europe.

Furthermore, the Turkish government's attempts to influence the Islamic community in Croatia may cause tension between different ethnic and religious groups in the country. While Croatia has a significant Muslim minority population (Bosniaks, Albanians, Romani), they have traditionally followed a more moderate form of Islam. Erdoğan's vision of Islam, on the other hand, is seen as more conservative and aligned with the AKP party's values, as pointed out by an International Relations professor. This could lead to a clash of ideologies and a division within the Muslim community in Croatia.

In addition to the EU's engagement with civil society actors in the Western Balkans, the bloc must also strengthen its support for democratic reforms and good governance in the region. Corruption and weak institutions remain major challenges in Southeastern Europe, and these issues provide fertile ground for external actors, such as Turkey, to exert their influence.

The EU's enlargement strategy for the Western Balkans, launched in 2018, provides a roadmap for the region's integration into the bloc. However, progress has been slow, and the EU must do more to provide tangible benefits and incentives to these countries to undertake the necessary reforms. A credible enlargement perspective for the Western Balkans is crucial to promoting stability and security in the region and countering external influences.

Likewise, the EU should work closely with its member states, particularly those in the region, to coordinate their policies towards Turkey. Croatia, as the youngest EU member state, has a significant role to play in this regard. As a country that shares historical and cultural ties with Turkey, Croatia can offer valuable insights and expertise on how to engage with Ankara effectively. At the same time, Croatia must also be mindful of its obligations towards the EU and not compromise on its principles and values in pursuit of closer ties with Turkey.

In conclusion, Turkey's growing impact in Croatia is a matter of concern for the European Union. While Turkey's investment in the country's economy and culture cannot be ignored, its expansionist policies and attempts to influence the region's political and social landscape pose a significant threat to the EU's efforts to promote stability, democracy, and the rule of law in Southeastern Europe. The EU must take a more assertive approach towards Turkey, particularly in light of its human rights abuses, aggressive foreign policy, and increasing authoritarianism. The EU should prioritize the Western Balkans as a critical region for its engagement efforts, support civil society actors and democratic reforms, and coordinate its policies towards Turkey with its member states. By doing so, the EU can counter external influences and build a more resilient and stable Southeastern Europe.

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