



THE PERCEPTION OF TURKIYE OF MINORITY AND NON-MINORITY CITIZENS LIVING IN BULGARIA¹

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ABSTRACT

Bulgaria is among the lands in the Balkans where the Turks live intensely. The Turks existed in the Balkans for five centuries, however, they became the minority there when Bulgaria gained its independence. There is a close interaction between Bulgaria and Turkiye in several political, social and military fields for a long time. The minorities in the country are directly affected as a result of these interactions that have contributed to the formation of various perceptions about Turkiye. It is observed that the minorities and non-minorities living in Bulgaria interact ethnically and culturally with each other and have certain perceptions about Turkiye. It is important for Turkiye to be aware of the perceptions here and to manage these perceptions in its own favor that may pose a risk for the policies it plans to realize in the Balkans, which have a rich ethnic diversity.

The aim of this study is to evaluate the perception of Turkiye of minority and non-minority citizens living in Bulgaria. In this context, providing information on the geography of Bulgaria, the perception, the factors affecting the formation of perception and the concept of identity, the historical background of the relations between Turkiye and Bulgaria has been examined. The survey methodology using questionnaire tool has been applied in the research and detailed findings have been obtained on the perception of Turkiye of the minority and non-minority citizens living in Bulgaria

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Introduction

The societies in which individuals live teach them how to do what within the norms that they have developed. As long as the individuals act according to the norms set by society, they can be included in the category of “we”, and when they stand against these norms or do not comply with these norms, they become the “others”. Individuals are also under the influence of their emotions in connection with their perceptions, history, symbols and, the life that they live. There are various definitions of how citizens living in society perceive themselves ethnically or religiously. These different definitions and interpretations vary depending on the cultural codes that individuals have lived in the past and the common practices that they have experienced together. Therefore, individuals may perceive countries, symbols, and other individuals differently. (Türk, 2017).

Bulgaria is located on the Balkan peninsula, where Türkiye also has a part of its land. There are many different ethnic and religious communities in the country. The Turks constitute the largest minority in Bulgaria. One of the most important factors determining the relations between the two countries from the past to the present is the Turks living in the country. Bulgaria has an important but also multidimensional place in Türkiye's foreign policy. Türkiye's prominence in the international arena or the neighbourhood of two countries within the framework of political, military, and economic relations affects the minorities in the country. In other words, there is a mutual interaction between two countries and at the level of minorities. However, it was observed that it has been tried to form some negative attitudes on the mutual perceptions about each other between Türkiye and Bulgaria.

Using survey methodology, this study aims to research the effects of the developments in Türkiye on the perceptions of the minority and non-minority citizens in Bulgaria after the end of the Cold War.

The Concept of Minority

Although the concept of the minority is one of the oldest notions in the literature, it has become more popular with globalization. Even though minorities have existed in every period of history, the protection of minorities has been raised for discussion

with the emergence of the nation state in the mid-16th century. While the first known minorities were religious minorities, ethnic/national minorities have emerged with the development of nationalism in later years. (Üste, 2020).

The minority issue is one of the vulnerable political and social problems today and it has been defined in many different forms in the literature. Scholars and researchers have had the various perspectives on the definition and classification of the concept of minority. The “minority” is the word from Latin “minor”, which means “few” and “small”. The concept of minority has been defined in three different forms by the Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu, 2022). The first of these is the situation of being different from the others in terms of their distinctive characteristics and less in number than the majority. The second definition is the state of being less in number during the voting. In the last definition, a few people from different races or religions in the country are defined as a minority. There is no legally accepted official definition of minorities. However, according to a definition offered in 1977 by Francesco Capotorti, Special Rapporteur of the United Nations Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, a minority is: “A group numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a state, in a non-dominant position, whose members—being nationals of the state - possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population and show, if only implicitly, a sense of solidarity, directed towards preserving their culture, traditions, religion or language” (Inanç, 2004,p.54). As it is clear, the lack of dominance being low in numbers, being a citizen of the state and having minority consciousness are the main indicators of a minority and it can be considered as a smaller group which is dominated by the majority within the state. Two types of states can be mentioned in terms of this group. While the first state is the “host state”, the second state is the “relative state”. The host state is the state in which the minorities live and define as a homeland, while the kin state is the state in which minorities feel as ethnically lost (Oran, 2018,p.137). The minorities accept the kin state as the motherland. For example, the homeland is Bulgaria for the Turkish minority living in Bulgaria, while the motherland is Türkiye.

In order to define the minority, it is important to consider the definitions together. Oran (2018) evaluates the mentioned main indicators as a “narrow (legal) definition”. He also sociologically identifies the minority. Although he accepted all disadvantaged - women, homosexuals and disabled people - as a minority, his definition does not correspond to international law (Oran, 2018, p.97).

Ethnic and Religious Minorities in Bulgaria

Bulgaria has a multinational and multicultural society. In the last 20 years, demographic trends and increasing immigration affected the number of ethnic groups in the country. Today, there are Bulgarians, Turks, Romans, Greeks, Ukrainians, Armenians, Vlachs, Crimean Tatars and Pomaks in Bulgaria (Özlem, 2016). Considering the ethnic ratios in 2021, the population of the country consists of 6.520.314 people. %84.8 of the population define themselves as Bulgarian. Turks, the second largest ethnic group in the country, constitute %8.8 of the population. Romans constitute %4.9 of the population. The remaining %1.5 of the population do not feel any ethnic belonging (T.C. Dışişleri Bakanlığı, 2021).

There are differences in identity awareness along with religious and ethnic belongings in the country. While Islam is at the forefront as a religious identity for Pomaks, an ethnic identity differs from person to person or it is not preferred to be specified. For Jews, ethnic belonging is identified with religious belonging, so Judaism and Jewishness are perceived as a whole. The minority, which differs from other minorities religiously, is the Romans. While they prefer the Christianity in areas with an intense Bulgarian population, they prefer Islam in areas with a crowded Turkish population (Atasoy, 2010,p.13).

Research Methodology and Measurement Sampling

As above mentioned, this study aims to measure the perception of minority and non-minority citizens living in Bulgaria about Türkiye. A questionnaire has been used as a research tool featuring a series of questions to collect useful information from respondents. It is proposed:

- *to determine whether there is a change in the views of the respondents about Türkiye according to whether they visit Türkiye or not;*
- *to measure whether their views differ according to whether they are a minority or not;*
- *to reveal whether there are differences depending on age groups and gender as a result of the relations and collaborations carried out.*

It has been conducted with the citizens of several regions in Bulgaria, however, %94.5 of them live in Ruse, Varna and Sofia. The questionnaires have been conducted in three different languages: Turkish, English and Bulgarian. Using all information

collected during research, the comparative data tables have been created in SPSS program and interpreted then. The 5-point Likert scale has been used in questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire includes the questions about the demographic characteristics of the respondents. %49 of whom are men and %51 are women. %11 of respondents are between 18-25 ages, %21.5 are between 26-33 ages, %14 are between 34-41 ages and %34.5 are over 50 years old. %55 of the respondents work in private sector, %14.50 of them work in the public sector. %13.5 are students, %9.5 are job seekers and %7.00 are retired. The education level of the respondents is also different: %3.5 graduated from primary school, %31 graduated from secondary school, %20.5 graduated from high school, %40 graduated from university and %5 have a postgraduate degree. Additionally, %62.5 of the respondents define themselves as a minority, %37.5 do not identify themselves as minority. %88 of the respondents are people, who have visited Turkiye at least once before. The remaining %12 consists of people, who have never been in Turkiye before. %13.1 of them visited Turkiye between 1989-2009, this rate was % 86.9 for those who travelled between 2009-2020.

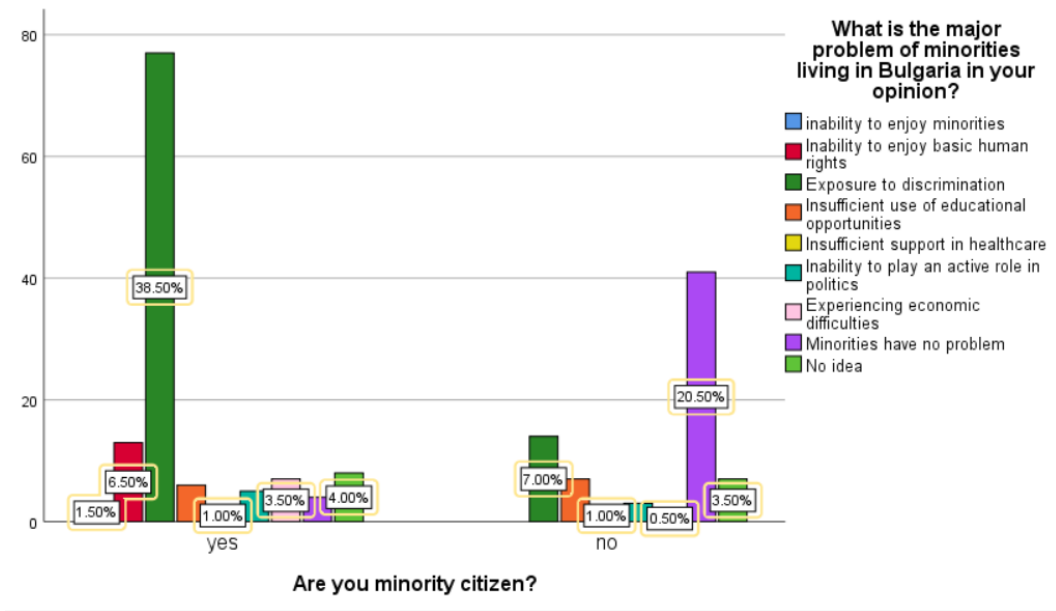
Considering the aim of study, which focused on the perceptions of Turkiye of minority and non-minority citizens living in Bulgaria, the ethnic and religious identities of the respondents have not been being questioned. This is the limitation of the research.

Analysis and Findings

Since the Bulgarians gained their independence from the Ottoman Empire, under the influence of rhetoric of otherization and state policies against the Turks, the Turks have represented the others in Bulgaria. It has been observed that the policies and the anti-Turkish discourses during the Todor Jivkov period have negatively affected the visits to Turkiye from Bulgaria. The number of visitors to Turkiye and the rate of positive perceptions about Turkiye increased in the following years compared to 1989-2009 that which can be explained by some factors such as the lifestyle, accessibility to products, opportunities in the health field, young and dynamic population and strong infrastructures.

Since the rate of respondents, who visit Turkiye at least 1 and at most 10 times is high, their opinions about Turkiye are not only based on the sensations and emotional perceptions, but also on observations.

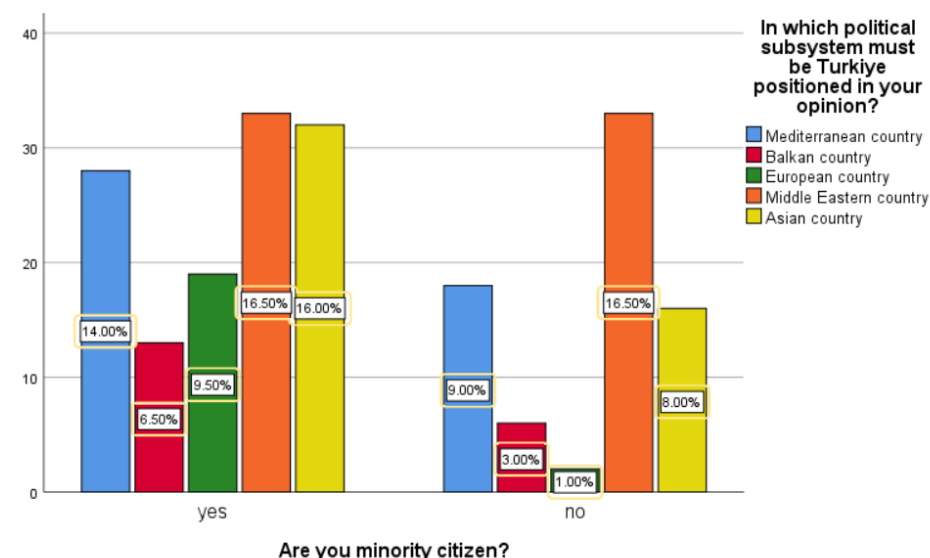
Figure 1: The most important problems of citizens living in Bulgaria by minority or non-minority status



While %38.5 of the minority citizens living in Bulgaria consider that they are exposed to discrimination, %20.5 of the non-minority citizens argue that the minorities living in the country do not have a problem (Figure 1). This question reveals that those who are minorities in the country have problems with discrimination.

Another question aimed to determine in which political subsystem the citizens living in Bulgaria position Türkiye. %33 accept Türkiye as a Middle Eastern country, %24 accept as an Asian country, %23 accept as a Mediterranean country, %10.5 accept as a European country and %9.5 accept as a Balkan country (Figure 2). The total rate of those who evaluate Türkiye within a Middle Eastern and Asian political subsystem %57. This fact creates a contradictory perception with Türkiye's European Union vision.

Figure 2: Political subsystem that respondents position Turkiye according to their minority or non- minority status



If to evaluate the respondents' opinions according to whether they are a minority or non-minority, it has been detected that they have the same opinions. %16.5 of minority and %16.5 of non-minority respondents accept Turkiye as a Middle Eastern country. While %16 of minority respondents accept it as an Asian country, %9 of non-minority respondents accept Turkiye as a Mediterranean country. These perceptions can be evaluated as a result of the education policies of the Bulgarian state. Because Turkiye is a candidate country for EU membership and historically has had close relations with Europe since the Ottoman Empire, compared to all other geographies. Thus, to define Turkiye within the Middle Eastern region is not real (Oran 2009, pp.19-29).

%96 of both minority and non-minority respondents support the bilateral relations between the two countries. %73.5 of both minority and non-minority respondents state that the two governments have established good relations. The mutual initiatives of both Bulgarian and Turkish governments in the post-Todor Jivkov period regarding the minority problems and the development of commercial and social interactions are the main motivations for such positive perceptions. The intertwining of the relations and the increase in the number of joint projects during the globalization era have also positive influence on perceptions.

Figure 3: The most important problem of Bulgaria for minority or non-minority respondents

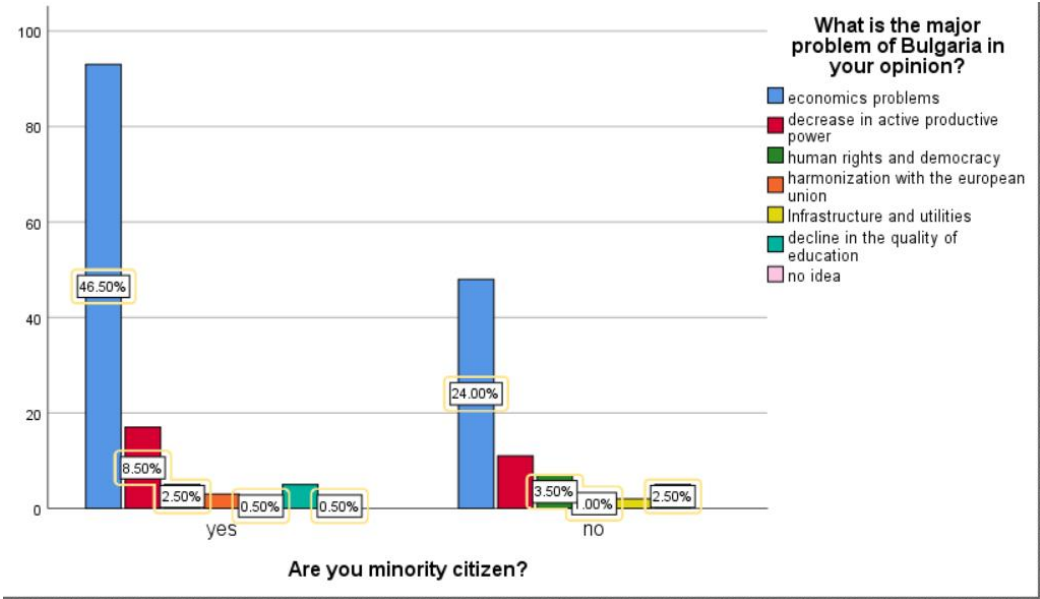
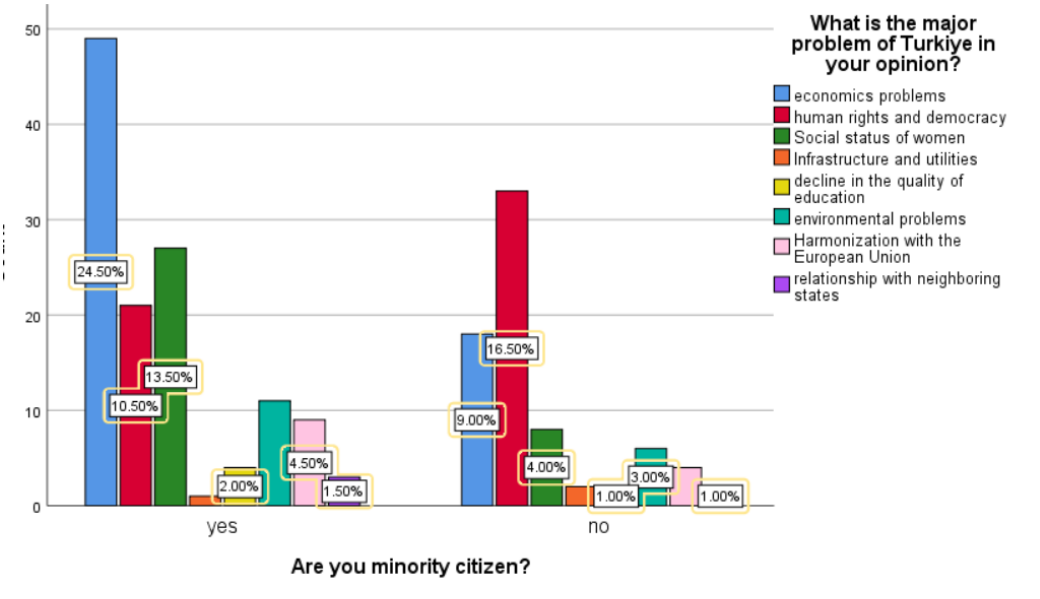
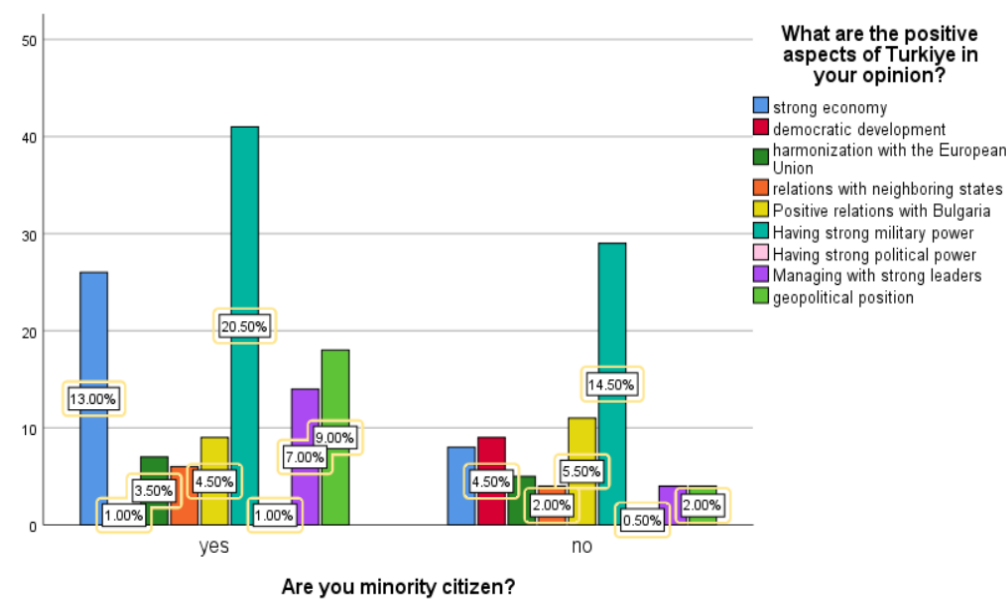


Figure 4: The most important problem of Turkiye for minority or non-minority respondents



The economic problem has been defined as the major problem of Bulgaria by both minority and non-minority respondents (Figure 3). Economic problems usually create an effect beyond the identities as a common difficulty area. The decrease of active labour force has been evaluated as a second major problem in Bulgaria by both minority and non-minority respondents. There is no difference in opinion of groups about Bulgaria's biggest problem. On the other hand, minority respondents see the economic problem as a biggest problem for Türkiye (Figure 4). However, according to the opinions of non-minority respondents, the human rights and democracy are the most important problems of Türkiye. For minority respondents, the social status of women is the second most important problem in Türkiye, while non-minority respondents define the economic problem as the second most important problem in this country problems. As it is seen, there is a difference between the opinions of minority and non-minority respondents on the biggest problem of Türkiye. Especially the non-minority Bulgarian citizens highlight the problem of democracy and human rights in Türkiye that can be explained with the criticism directed towards Türkiye during the EU membership process.

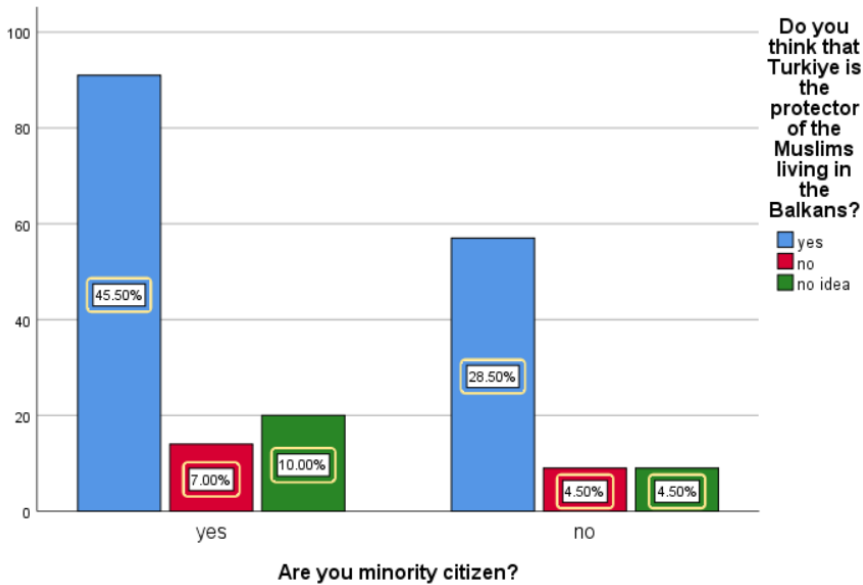
Figure 5: Türkiye's positive aspects for minority or non-minority respondents



%35 of both minority and non-minority respondents evaluate Türkiye's strong military power as a positive aspect of the country (Figure 5). %88.5 of the respondents recognize Türkiye as a militarily strong country. While for minority respondents the

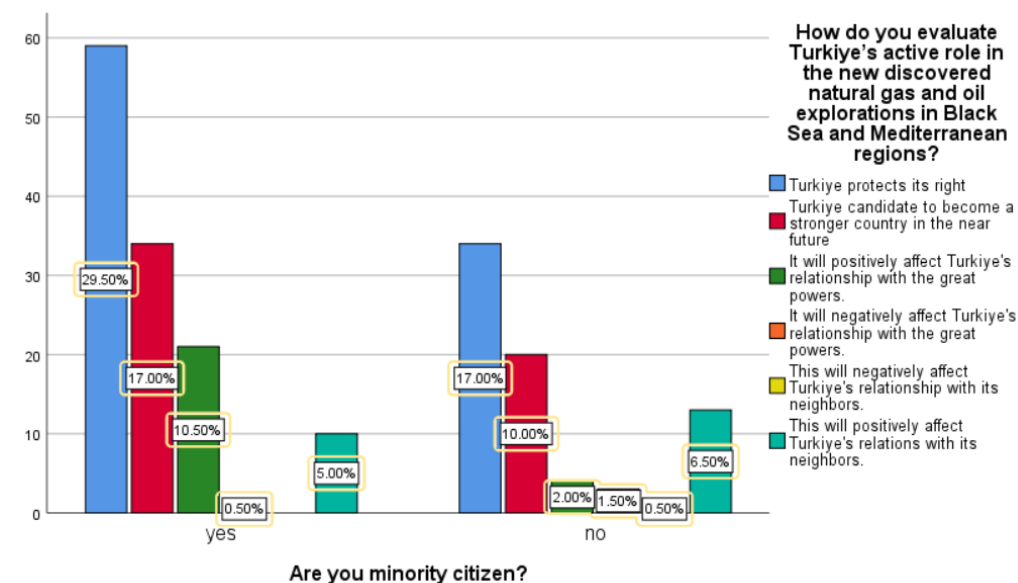
second positive aspect of Türkiye is its strong economy, for non-minority the second positive aspect is the good relations with Bulgaria. For minority respondents the third positive aspect of Türkiye is geopolitical location, however, non-minority respondents consider Türkiye's democratic development as the third positive aspect (Figure 5).

Figure 6: The opinions of the respondents on whether Türkiye is the protector of Muslims in the Balkans



The respondents recognize Türkiye as a protector of the Muslims living in the Balkans. Both minority and non-minority respondents accept the existence of Türkiye's protective power over the Muslims living in the Balkans (Figure 6). The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency's (TIKA) food support programs in the Balkans reached more than 10 thousand people in Bulgaria during Ramadan (TIKA, 2020). At the same time, the renovation and restoration of various places of worship by the TIKA (TIKA, 2019) show that Türkiye uses a soft power based on cultural and historical values over the people living in the country. These are the main factors in the formation of a common opinion of both groups.

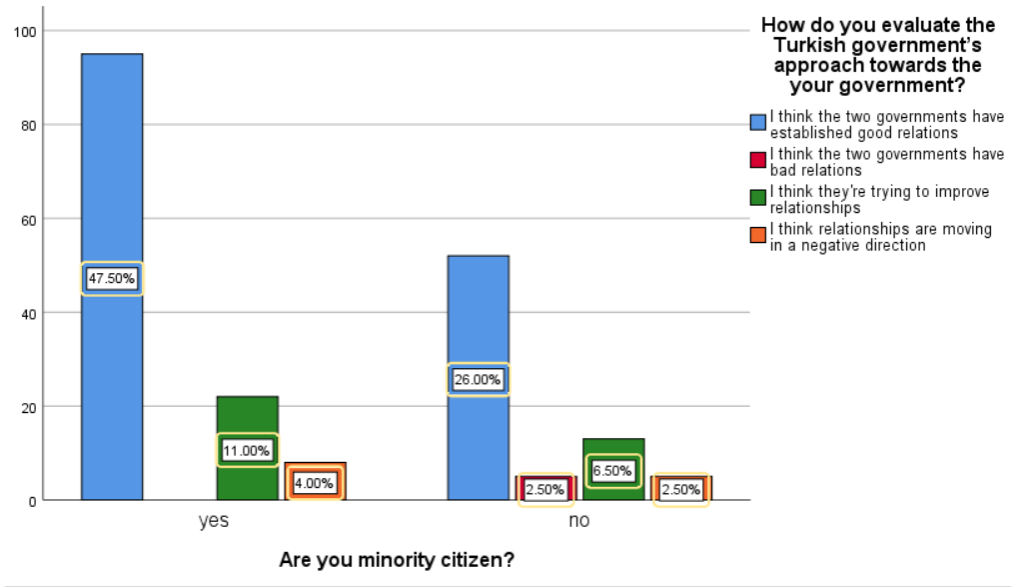
Figure 7: The opinion of the respondents on Turkiye's active role in natural gas and oil explorations



The respondents have been asked about Turkiye's active attempts to explore newly discovered oil and natural gas resources in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean regions. %29.5 of minority respondents and %17 of non-minority respondents consider that Turkiye protects its rights (Figure 7). %17 of minority and %10 of non-minority citizens recognize Turkiye as a stronger country in the near future. This fact explains the positive thoughts of both minority and non-minority citizens in Bulgaria about the future of Turkiye, not feeling pessimistic about its future.

According to the data, both minority and non-minority citizens think that the two governments have good relations. It can be considered that the steps taken between the Bulgarian and Turkish governments in the post-Todor Jivkov period regarding minorities and improving bilateral relations in several fields of cooperation have a great impact on the formation of such positive perception.

Figure 8: The opinions of the respondents on the approach of the Turkish government towards the Bulgarian government



Conclusion

For Türkiye, the Balkans can be defined as an important part of the homeland for centuries with close historical ties and as a region where the cultural and historical influence of the Turks is still intense (Üste 2014).

Today, approximately 9% of the Bulgarian population are Turks. The Turkish minority in Bulgaria is one of the major factors shaping the relations between Bulgaria and Türkiye. The discriminatory discourses about the Turks since the independence of Bulgaria and the reflection of these discourses on the state policies have made the Turks “others” in this country. Besides, the fact that Turks are accepted as the “others” has also led to the formation of a negative perception of about their homeland, Türkiye in Bulgaria. However, it has been determined that the views of both minority and non-minority Bulgarian citizens have changed positively after visiting Türkiye. It has been found that being a minority in the country is the major factor of exposure to discrimination. Taking the necessary steps to improve the discrimination faced by minorities is necessary both for a human rights standard and for the sustainability of a multicultural nature in Bulgaria.

Particularly the non-minority respondents define Turkiye as a "Middle Eastern", "Mediterranean" country. These answers can be interpreted as a reflection of Bulgaria's efforts during the nation-building process to erase the 510 years of the fact that it has been under the rule of the Ottoman Empire. Positioning Turkiye in geography far from Europe can also be thought of as an effort to keep the distance between it and the "others". However, Bulgari, which is the EU member, and Turkiye are bordered.

The findings about Turkiye's political subsystem of minority citizens living in the country are quite remarkable. According to them, Turkiye is far from the vision of the European Union. Since it is both a neighboring country with Bulgaria and a candidate country for the European Union, this perception should be changed as a country approaches European values.

The activities of institutions such as the TIKa and Yunus Emre Institute are the most important factors besides the historical background that allow the respondents to recognize Turkiye as a protective power over Muslims in the Balkans. TIKa is one of the soft power instruments of Turkish foreign policy. The respondents have delivered positive opinions about the relations between two the governments. Turkish schools opened by Yunus Emre Institute to promote Turkish culture constitute a soft power element in this sense.

The positive relations between the countries allow the Bulgarians to accept Turkiye as a stronger global and regional political actor. Both minority and non-minority citizens consider that with its active participation in the operations of newly discovered natural gas resources Turkiye protects its rights both in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It can be argued that the respondents have a positive opinion and do not expect a pessimistic picture regarding the future of Turkiye. In general, in this research it has been determined that there are no negative attitudes regarding the social perceptions against Turkiye's more active foreign policy towards cooperation in the Balkans.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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