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Turkey's Presence in the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* in the Context of Turkey's Soft Power

Obecność Turcji w *Konwencji o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy wobec kobiet i przemocy domowej* w kontekście tureckiej *soft power*

• Abstract •

The *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, and in Poland also as the anti-violence convention, was opened for signature in Istanbul on May 11, 2011. Turkey was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the document. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then as Prime Minister-in-Office, was one of the great advocates of Ankara ratifying the Convention. However, the politician, already as president, “celebrated” the Republic’s decade-long presence in the Convention by signing a decree in March 2021 annulling Turkey’s ratification of the document. The text aims to analyse Turkey’s involvement in the preparation and subsequent adoption of the Istanbul Convention in the context of building Turkish soft power on the Old Continent. The text structure is as follows: the first part will define the concept of soft power and analyse the evolution of Turkish soft power. Then, the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* will be described, and the next part

• Abstrakt •

Konwencja Rady Europy o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy wobec kobiet i przemocy domowej, zwana potocznie konwencją stambulską (Istanbul Convention), a w Polsce także konwencją antyprzemocową, została otwarta do podpisu w Stambule 11 maja 2011 roku. Turcja należała do państw, które jako pierwsze podpisały i ratyfikowały ów dokument. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, wówczas jako urzędujący premier, należał do wielkich orędowników ratyfikowania przez Ankarę konwencji. Jednak ten sam polityk, już jako prezydent, dekadę obecności Republiki w konwencji „uczcił”, podpisując w marcu 2021 roku dekret unieważniający ratyfikację dokumentu przez Turcję. Celem niniejszego tekstu jest analiza zaangażowania Turcji w przygotowanie, a następnie przyjęcie konwencji stambulskiej w kontekście budowania tureckiej *soft power* na Starym Kontynencie. Struktura tekstu przedstawia się następująco: w pierwszej części nastąpi zdefiniowanie pojęcia *soft power* oraz analiza ewolucji tureckiej *soft power*, następnie opisana zostanie *Konwencja o zapobieganiu i zwalczaniu przemocy*

will chronologically describe the presence of the Republic in the Convention. The last part analyses Turkey's activities related to the preparation and adoption of the Istanbul Convention in the context of building Turkish soft power in Europe.

wobec kobiet i przemocy domowej, w kolejnej części nastąpi chronologiczny opis obecności Republiki w konwencji. Ostatnia część to analiza działań Turcji związanych z przygotowaniem i przyjęciem konwencji stambulskiej w kontekście budowania tureckiego *soft power* w Europie.

Keywords: Istanbul Convention; Turkey; soft power; Turkey's soft power

Słowa kluczowe: konwencja stambulska; Turcja; *soft power*; *soft power* Turcji

Introduction

The *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, and in Poland also as the Anti-Violence Convention, was opened for signature in Istanbul on May 11, 2011. Turkey was one of the first countries to sign and ratify the document. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then as Prime Minister-in-Office, was one of the great advocates of Ankara ratifying the Convention. However, the politician, already as president, “celebrated” the Republic's decade-long presence in the Convention by signing a decree in March 2021 annulling Turkey's ratification of the document. The text aims to analyse Turkey's involvement in the preparation and subsequent adoption of the Istanbul Convention in the context of building Turkish soft power on the Old Continent.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP), led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, took power in Turkey. The change at the helm of power brought fundamental changes in the country's domestic policy and foreign policy. In the case of the latter, this involved, among other things, the evolution of Turkey from a state based on, and associated with, hard power into a state that is trying, more or less successfully, to realise the concept of soft power. That was to be achieved, among other things, through the highly dynamic growth in number and quality of institutionalised initiatives aimed at strengthening Turkish soft power, observed practically in all parts of the globe, including the Old Continent in the first decade of the 21st century. The main hypothesis assumes that Turkey's involvement in the preparation and subsequent adoption by the Council of Europe (CoE) of the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, which took place during the Republic's chairmanship of the CoE Committee of Ministers, was part of this trend. A logical complement to these deductions is to lean into the problem of what impact, if any, the Convention's

exit has on the development of Turkish soft power in the Old Continent. In this context, it will be crucial to answering the following questions: What steps did Turkey take to prepare and adopt the anti-violence Convention by the CoE? When and in what context did it take these actions? Are there any indications that the Turkish authorities perceived the adoption of the Convention in the context of developing Turkish soft power and pursuing Turkish foreign policy objectives? How is Turkey's pull out of the anti-violence convention perceived on the Old Continent?

Internet sources constitute a significant part of the sources used in this text, which was intentional. In order to verify the hypothesis, it was necessary to consider the Turkish politicians' statements and sources produced by intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations and experts operating in the field regulated by the Istanbul Convention. The text structure is as follows: the first part will define the concept of soft power and analyse the evolution of Turkish soft power. Then, the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* will be described, and the next part will chronologically describe the presence of the Republic in the Convention. The last part analyses Turkey's activities related to the preparation and adoption of the Istanbul Convention in the context of building Turkish soft power in Europe.

The notion of soft power. The evolution of Turkish soft power during the AKP rule

The term 'soft power' was introduced into scientific circulation and popularised by Joseph Nye. Under his concept, it means the power of attraction, achieving goals and positions in the international environment, and influencing the other states' preferences by peaceful means, without coercion. The concept emerged as a response to the changes in international space that were visible at the end of the last century. These were manifested, among others, by the growing importance of non-military and asymmetric security threats, the increasingly widespread departure from the perception of strength and power in the traditional way, the progressive globalisation, the increasing influence of non-state actors and the mediatisation of politics (Nye, 2007, pp. 34–38; Ociepka, 2013, pp. 16–18). Nye distinguished soft power resources, that is, resources that cause such attraction (Nye, 2007, p. 35). Their three main categories include culture, political values, and foreign policy. Culture should have elements that are attractive to others and universal values. On the other hand, political values and foreign policy should incorporate generally accepted standards. The American researcher also pointed out that no dissonance

is necessary between declarations and political practice. It applies to actions taken by the government in both domestic and foreign policies. Any discrepancies in this area threaten adequate soft power (Nye, 2007, pp. 40–44). Jakub Wódka notes that a state builds “its international position on the attractiveness of its institutions, foreign policy and cultural influence” when conducting adequate soft power (Wódka, 2019, p. 202). Appropriate instruments are needed for the effective implementation of soft power. The role is played, among others, by institutions created to promote the language and culture or by expanding the educational offer for foreigners, for example, at domestic universities or creating branches of universities in the target country. Polish researcher Robert Łoś proposed a research model of soft power, which consists of six categories: diplomacy; socio-political category (e.g., political and civil liberties, free access to traditional and electronic media); popular and high culture (e.g., popularity and range of language, number of Nobel Prize winners in literature, export of cultural goods); education (e.g., number of foreigners studying at universities, ranking of universities); socio-economic category (e.g., innovation and patents, development aid) (Łoś, 2018, p. 38).

Turkey’s geopolitical position and its functioning in the Cold War reality, and its internal situation, including the Kurdish conflict, meant that practically until the end of the last century, Turkey was a “typical coercive power”. The changes in the international arena and the domestic situation led to an increased interest among Turkish politicians in the use of “soft instruments” in the Republic’s foreign policy (Wódka, 2012, pp. 40–43). Such a concept first appeared in the political debate at the highest level in 2000, and the grouping promoting the new foreign policy outlook was the AKP. It was linked, among other things, to increased interest in the Middle East and the Balkans, namely, the areas that had been part of the Ottoman Empire in the past. Turkish soft power, stimulated largely by Turkey’s strongly accented aspirations for accession to the European Union (EU), developed dynamically with the Erdoğan’s party coming to power in 2002. It was also fostered by the international image of the Republic as a modern, secularised, Westward-looking country that could serve as a model for other countries in the Middle East. The concept of Turkey as a role model was also exploited in the domestic debate on soft power potential in foreign policy (Çevik, 2019, p. 56). That period, dubbed the rise of soft power by Turkish researcher Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, was characterised by the increased activity of organisations and institutions counted among the most effective tools of Turkish soft power. These included the Fethullah Gülen’s *Hizmet* movement, the Yunus Emre Institute (Yunus Emre Enstitüsü – YEE) established in 2007, and the Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon Ajansı Başkanlığı – TİKA). Nevertheless, the beginning of the

second decade of this century was characterised by a decline of soft power, largely related to domestic developments. Among other things, the process of the country's Islamisation began to become visible, and the *Hizmet* movement, hitherto an ally of the government in Ankara in building soft power, also began to be fought against abroad. The turning point was the failed putsch of July 2016, after which one can speak, following Ahmet Erdi Öztürk, of the ambivalence of soft power. It is associated with a turn in domestic and foreign policy, marking a decisive retreat from democracy, tensions in relations with the West, and a drastic increase in the importance of pro-Islamic and nationalist rhetoric (Öztürk, 2020, p. 118).

Researchers of Turkish soft power emphasise that its dominant resource is culture, appreciated both in its higher form, as evidenced by the Nobel Prize for Orhan Pamuk or awards for Turkish directors at prestigious film festivals and Turkish mass culture, led by TV series. Some scholars even speak of Turkish “soap opera diplomacy” (see, e.g., Çevik, 2019, pp. 63–64; Ağırseven & Örki, 2017, pp. 841–850; Anaz & Özcan, 2016, pp. 247–256; Woźnica, 2019, pp. 203–204; Wódka, 2019, pp. 216–218). However, the problem is using the remaining soft power resources, especially in the European context. That is because the dissonance mentioned by J. Nye is becoming increasingly visible, and the political values and foreign policy promoted by Ankara are less and less accepted on the Old Continent, especially in its western part. As a result, Turkey's soft power potential is diminishing.

Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

The *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*, also known as the anti-violence or Istanbul Convention, was opened for signature in Istanbul on May 11, 2011. Thirteen countries, including Turkey, signed it. The main goals of the Convention are to prevent violence against women, protect victims of violence and prevent impunity for perpetrators. As stated in the *Preamble* of the document, violence against women is “structural” and constitutes “a major obstacle to the achievement of equality between women and men”. It also notes that women and girls, because of their gender, are particularly vulnerable to acts of violence, including domestic violence. This document defines violence against women as violence occurring between former or current spouses/partners, regardless of whether or not the perpetrator and victim are cohabiting (Article 3, Paragraph b). The Convention provides for the criminalisation of violence against women. Physical violence, psychological violence, stalking, sexual violence, including rape, forced

marriage, forced abortion and sterilisation are, among others, listed as punishable. The possibility of justifying violence on cultural, customary, religious, traditional and the so-called “honour” grounds was excluded (Article 42). The prevention of violence is also supported by education, including through social campaigns on combating gender stereotypes. Besides, states ratifying the Convention establish effective mechanisms to protect victims, such as a free emergency hotline, legal advice, accommodation and financial assistance. The parties to the Convention undertake to cooperate with NGOs working in the area, to introduce appropriate educational programmes and various forms of assistance and support for victims of violence, as well as to introduce appropriate legislative amendments (*Council of Europe Convention on Preventing...*, 2011).

The Istanbul Convention is classified as a human rights agreement. It is not the first international document on protecting women against violence adopted by a regional organisation dealing with these rights. Earlier, for example, a similar act was adopted by the Organisation of American States. That is the *Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Elimination of Violence against Women* (the so-called Belém do Pará Convention), adopted in 1994 (Burek & Sękowska-Kozłowska, 2020, p. 245). However, the Istanbul Convention aroused and still arouses a lot of controversies, which is evidenced by the fact that there is a group of countries belonging to the Council of Europe, including the European Union Member States, which have not signed or ratified this document so far (e.g., Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, Slovakia, Russia). The document has often met with opposition in conservative and religious circles, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The ratification process has often been accompanied by protests, demonstrations and heated public debate. The provisions on “gender identity”, “socio-cultural gender”, and “sexual orientation” are particularly controversial. There is talk of the Convention introducing “gender ideology” and “LGBT ideology” through the back door and promoting them. One of the most controversial provisions in this context is undoubtedly Article 4, Paragraph 3, in which the parties undertake to implement its provisions, including those concerning the protection of victims’ rights “without discrimination based on: biological sex, gender, race, colour, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, membership of a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, health, disability, marital status, refugee or migrant status or otherwise” (Article 4, Paragraph 3). The inclusion of sexual orientation within the scope of the article is interpreted as promoting homosexuality. On more than one occasion, the highest hierarchs of religious communities have spoken out on the anti-violence convention, on the one hand pointing to the importance of

the problem it addresses, but on the other expressing concern about its promotion of a concept of gender identity “which is not rooted in the natural order” and is “incompatible with the fundamental values of faith and culture”. In Bulgaria, for example, the process of ratification of the Convention was accompanied by a very heated debate, the opposition of a large part of the population to the document was evident, and the Bulgarian churches – Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant, as well as the Muslim community – showed a rare consensus on the Convention in their (negative) assessment of the document. After protests from churches and religious communities, in mid-February 2018, the Bulgarian government decided not to submit the Istanbul Convention to parliament for ratification (*Debatten um die Istanbul-Konvention...*, 2019, pp. 2–11).

Turkey in the Istanbul Convention

The Turkish theme emerged early during the work on the Convention. Although work on the document began in 2008, it gained momentum after the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) of June 9, 2009 in the case of *Opuz vs Turkey* (Burek & Sękowska-Kozłowska, 2020, p. 246). The case concerned Turkey's failure to protect two women from domestic violence. Nahide Opuz brought a complaint against Turkey on July 15, 2002 before the ECHR for failure to provide her with protection (İstanbul Sözleşmesi: Sebep..., 2021). Two women, the applicant and her mother, had been victims of domestic violence by Nahide's husband for years, which they repeatedly reported to the police. Apart from one conviction in which he received a fine, the cases were dropped. That was due to “lack of evidence” and because the women withdrew their complaints, even though they reported that they did so because of threats from Nahide's husband. Finally, when the women decided to move out, the man shot the complainant's mother claiming that he had killed his mother-in-law “in the name of honour”. The relatively harsh judgment of the court of first instance was considerably mitigated by the court of second instance, which found that the victim herself had provoked the perpetrator. On the other hand, the European Court found that there had been a violation of Article 2 (right to life) of the European Convention on Human Rights as regards the murder of the applicant's mother and a violation of Article 3 (prohibition of inhuman or degrading treatment) of the same Convention in respect of the State's failure to protect the applicant. It was also pointed out that Turkey had failed to establish and implement a system for punishing domestic violence and protecting victims. It was also stressed that the authorities had not made use of existing legal

solutions, treating the case as a “family matter”. In this context, the Court noted that there should be solutions to initiate proceedings even when victims withdraw their complaints (Grzyb, 2014, pp. 105–106; *Zestawienie...*, 2020, pp. 11–12; İstanbul Sözleşmesi: Sebep..., 2021).

Today, this judgment concerning Turkey is considered one of the landmark judgments on domestic violence (Burek & Sękowski-Kozłowska, 2020, p. 246). For the first time in a domestic violence case, the Strasbourg Court pointed to the violation of Article 14 of the European Convention on Human Rights on discrimination. As noted, the region inhabited by the applicant (Diyarbakır) recorded very high rates of domestic violence, whose victims were exclusively women, and observed an inappropriate police approach to this type of crime treated as a “family matter”. Thus, it is possible to qualify this crime as gender-based violence, and it is reasonable to speak of discrimination against women. According to the ECHR, the passivity and tardiness of the police and the courts violated women’s right to equal protection before the law, and this failure was intentional on the part of the state authorities (Grzyb, 2014, pp. 105–106; *Zestawienie...*, 2020, p. 12). The European Court of Human Rights decided that inadequate protection of women from violence is a problem not only for Turkey but also for the other Member States of the Council of Europe. Moreover, there is a need to harmonise legislation to ensure the same level of protection for women in different countries, which inspired the General Secretariat of the Council of Europe to set up a working committee that joined the work on preparing a relevant convention. Professor Feride Acar, one of the most prominent women’s rights practitioners in Turkey, joined the committee to represent Turkey. On her initiative, the work was completed in 2011, when Turkey still chaired the CoE Committee of Ministers. The *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* was opened for signature on the occasion of the 121st session of the CoE Committee of Ministers in Istanbul, where Turkey was handing over the chairmanship to Ukraine (*Historical Background*, n.d.; İstanbul Sözleşmesi: Sebep..., 2021). The document’s signing precisely in Istanbul and the fact that Turkey was the first country to ratify the document can be considered symbolic.

However, almost exactly ten years after the fact, on March 20, 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed a decree annulling Turkey’s act of ratifying the anti-violence convention and exit from the agreement took place on July 1, 2021. A heated discussion preceded this fact in 2020 regarding the legitimacy of the Republic remaining in the Convention. It was mainly conservative politicians who were critical of the document, including those from the ruling AKP. Supporters of leaving the Convention alleged that the Convention “smuggles in LGBT ideology” and promotes homosexuality and poses a threat to traditional values, including

the family. At the same time, they cited the AKP's achievements in improving the situation of women in Turkey and emphasised that it would be more beneficial to adopt "culturally appropriate" legal solutions to combat violence against women. There was also the argument that Turkish society expected such a step, although opinion polls showed that most Turks were in favour of remaining in the anti-violence convention, and this group dominated even among AKP voters. NGOs dealing with human rights and women's problems in Turkey, a considerable part of the opposition and some AKP politicians were against the termination of the Convention. The supporters of staying in the anti-violence convention raised the insufficient implementation of the provisions of the Convention arguing, however, that withdrawal from this document could mean, among other things, intensification of such negative phenomena as domestic violence, discrimination of women or the so-called honour crimes, which are noticeable in contemporary Turkey (Buyuk, 2020; Kepenek, 2020; KONDA, 2020; *Only...*, 2020; *Survey...*, 2020; Szyszlak, 2020; *The Functioning...*, 2021, p. 12).

Istanbul Convention as a soft power tool of Turkey

As already mentioned, the work on the anti-violence convention gained momentum after the 2009 ECHR judgment in *Opuz vs Turkey*. It is worth mentioning that the Republic joined the Council of Europe in 1949 and ratified the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) relatively quickly. However, it only recognised the individual complaint mechanism in 1987. At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, i.e., at the time of the judgment in the case of *Opuz*, it was the country against which judgments confirming violations of the ECHR were most frequently issued. That was more frequent than in other states – the CoE Members (Baranowska, 2013, pp. 339–340). The judgments also concerned the situation of women, including violence (*Zestawienie...*, 2020, pp. 2–15), the extreme form of which was *femicide* together with the so-called honour crimes.

The term *femicide* is used to describe an act that results in the death of a woman because she is a woman. It is the gender-related killings of women. It can take the form of intentional killing, for example, the so-called dowry killing or selective abortion, and actions and practices that indirectly lead to the woman's death without it necessarily being the aim of the perpetrator. However, these practices take place because of the victim's sex. Death occurs in this case, for example, due to harmful traditional practices (e.g., genital mutilation), rape, or abortion. Researchers on the issue point to cultural and social causes of *femicide*, as they are a manifestation of

misogyny and sexism and structural discrimination against women in given societies or cultures (Grzyb, 2014, pp. 78–81). The crime of *femicide* includes homicides justified on cultural or honour grounds. These are the so-called honour killings, also referred to in Europe as “honour violence” or “honour crimes”. It has been argued that the term ‘honour’ should not be used to describe these crimes because they have nothing to do with honour. Invoking honour in their name diminishes the harm to the victims and the gravity of these acts (Grzyb, 2016, pp. 75–77). The specific features of these murders include that they are carried out to “restore honour” to the family and are committed against a woman who is believed to have violated “family honour”. Often the perpetrator is persuaded or instigated to commit the crime by family members (Grzyb, 2016, p. 78). The so-called honour killings are a vital part of the problem of *femicide* in Turkey. In the context of the article’s topic, it is worth emphasising that it is not infrequently the case that the future victim could have been saved by an earlier quick reaction and support of the relevant services or institutions. As mentioned, the Istanbul Convention provides solutions and postulates helpful in the fight against the phenomenon of so-called honour crimes. For this reason, the argument that its denunciation may to an actual extent limit the possibility of preventing and counteracting violence against women, including precisely the so-called honour killings, is so frequently raised (Amnesty International, 2021; Kepenek, 2020; Szyszlak, 2020).

With the AKP coming to power, Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union intensified, including obtaining official candidate status for the Republic. It resulted in legislative changes aimed, inter alia, at introducing human rights protection standards. These included, for example, the amendment of the Constitution in 2004, introducing the direct application of international agreements or the abolition, in 2002, of the death penalty in peacetime (Baranowska, 2013, p. 342). These actions not only brought results in the domestic arena, but thanks to them the international image of Turkey changed – from a country with huge problems with respecting human rights, to a country that recognises these rights as part of its values. In this context, Turkey’s assumption of the chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe in November 2010 was very significant.

In his speech on that occasion, the then Foreign Minister, Ahmet Davutoğlu, strongly stressed the importance of human rights in the activities of the Council of Europe. The Turkish minister announced that one of the priorities of the Turkish Presidency is to ensure the effectiveness of human rights protection mechanisms in the Council of Europe, including the reform of the ECHR. He stated that the monitoring of obligations related to respect for these rights, democracy, and the rule of law make the CoE unique. Davutoğlu then stated that this area of the Council’s

activity needs to be developed specially and preserved for future generations. He also pointed out that Turks have always supported the development and respect of human rights. He concluded by expressing the hope that the next ministerial meeting in Istanbul “will reflect the outcome of our collective efforts in this direction” (*Statement by H.E. Ahmet Davutoğlu...*, 2010). Also, during the speech on the occasion of the handover of Turkey's chairmanship of the CoE Committee of Ministers, held on May 11, 2011, the Turkish minister stressed the importance of the human rights activities undertaken in the CoE, pointing out the importance of the monitoring mechanism for these rights produced within the organisation. In this context, he placed the fact that the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* was opened for signature on that day, stressing that Turkey actively participated in the preparation of the draft document and strongly supported its adoption. He also expressed the hope that “this Convention will function as a major instrument in this important area in Europe and globally” (*Address by H.E. Ahmet Davutoğlu...*, 2011). Davutoğlu, as the host representative, was the first to sign the document. In turn, due to the place of signing, the Council of Europe Convention, which is part of the trend to expand human rights and constitutes one of the essential instruments in Europe to combat violence against women and domestic violence, has gained the adjective “Istanbul” in widespread communication, associating it with Turkey. As Italian columnist Luigi Mastrodonato stated, the anti-violence convention “owes a great deal to Istanbul” since it was here that it was opened for signature, and it was here that its first ratification (by Erdoğan's government) took place (Mastrodonato, 2021). Indeed, Turkey was the first signatory of the Convention and the first country to ratify it, in March 2012, in Istanbul. It is also worth mentioning that Prof. Feride Acar was the first chair of the Group of Experts on the Prevention of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), the supervisory body of the Istanbul Convention (*Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: A Retrogressive...*, 2021). Besides, Turkey was the first country to adopt the legal regulations implementing it (*Law No. 6284 on protecting the family and preventing violence against women*). It should be noted that it happened on a symbolic day for women, i.e., March 8 (İstanbul Sözleşmesi: Sebep..., 2021; *Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: A Victory...*, 2021). The Istanbul Convention, it is worth mentioning, has been described by the United Nations (UN) as the “gold standard” of legislation on gender-based violence (*Pierwsze sprawozdanie ogólne...*, 2021, p. 11).

Those involved in Turkey's efforts to promote the adoption of this document pointed out the current president was instrumental in getting Ankara to sign and then ratify the Convention. He was also very supportive of their actions, being one of

the initiators of adopting the anti-violence convention. Interestingly, years ago, when encouraging Turkish MPs to vote for the ratification of the Convention, Erdoğan argued that this step would positively impact Turkey's perception in the international arena (Buyuk, 2020). Addressing the Convention to the Turkish Grand National Assembly, Erdoğan wrote in his cover letter: "Our country played a leading role in the preparation and finalisation of the said Convention, which is the first binding document on violence against women and domestic violence in the international arena [...]. It is symbolic that the Convention was opened for signature during our term in the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, and our country signed it [...]. It is believed that accession to the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* will not place an additional burden on our country and will positively contribute to the development of our country's international reputation" (İstanbul Sözleşmesi: Sebep..., 2021). For his part, Nurettin Canikli, speaking in parliament on behalf of the AKP at the time, expressed his hope that Turkey would be the first country to ratify the Convention. He also stated that this was a historic moment for Turkey (İstanbul Sözleşmesi 2011..., 2021). Through such actions, Turkey confirmed its position as a leader on women's rights in the region. In the context of soft power theory, it is also worth mentioning the role of Turkish human rights experts – the already mentioned Feride Acar and Yakın Ertürk, who was the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences (*Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: A Retrogressive...*, 2021).

The actions and words of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then Prime Minister, testify to the fact that the Turkish authorities were perfectly aware of the advantages that the adoption of the anti-violence convention during Turkey's chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe would have for the international perception of Turkey, and the "lending" of the adjective 'Istanbul' to the Convention. The involvement in the preparation of the Convention and, above all, the opening for signature of the Council of Europe's fundamental document on human rights and women's rights in the Turkish metropolis, which was, after all, Erdoğan's deliberate act, have inextricably linked the anti-violence convention with the Republic. Today, it is commonly referred to in the world as the "Istanbul" Convention. These actions were perfectly in line with the trend of increasing Turkish soft power and Ankara's increased interest in building influence through this tool, also on the Old Continent, which was noticeable in Turkey's foreign policy at the time. From the perspective of soft power theory, the fact that the values declared in domestic and foreign policy were identical to those promoted in reality was also significant. In the first decade of the 21st century, Turkey was a democratising country with a strongly accented

pro-European orientation, for which one of the most critical foreign policy objectives was EU accession. Involvement in the drafting and later adoption of the Istanbul Convention was fully compatible with processes taking place within the country and with actions taken on the international arena.

Furthermore, the withdrawal from the anti-violence convention can be considered in an international context, including from the perspective of soft power theory. Numerous protests in many Turkish cities accompanied the discussion that took place in 2020. They were also held in 2021 in response to President Erdoğan's decision. It also met with an adverse reaction from human rights and women's rights NGOs in Turkey, Europe, and the United States. It was also widely commented on by international organisations and their bodies, European politicians, including the Head of EU diplomacy and the President of the United States. In their statements, they expressed disappointment with President Erdoğan's decision, describing it as a step backwards for the international movement to end violence against women worldwide, as "disappointing" and "destructive" (Fazeli, 2021; *Nordic Council...*, 2021; *Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: A Retrogressive...*, 2021; *UN Women's Rights Committee Urges Turkey to Reconsider...*, 2021). In 2020, the "#Challenge Accepted" campaign was launched on social media. The initiators published black and white photos of themselves, indicating that they did not want to end up as victims of domestic violence whose photos, according to Turkish custom, mourners pin to their collars at funerals. The campaign found resonance around the world, quickly becoming a popular topic on Instagram.

The media image of Turkey as a country where women's rights and human rights are violated began to dominate. Publicists emphasised the systematic deterioration of the women's situation, their progressive social exclusion, the growing problem of violence against them, even fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic. Statements concerning the President's annulment of the ratification of the Convention also stressed that it is contrary to the Constitution, as the Turkish Basic Law does not give such powers to the head of state, thus confirming the increasingly authoritarian nature of the Turkish political system and the rise of populism. Moreover, the adverse effects of this decision on the development of human rights and women's rights in the world have been pointed out (Altan-Olcay & Oder, 2021; Buyuk, 2021; Mastrodonato, 2021; *The Functioning...*, 2021, pp. 12–13; *Turkey's Withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention: A Victory...*, 2021). Erdoğan's decision thus directly translates into the international image of Turkey, which has begun to appear as a country in dire need of an anti-violence convention, struggling with the problem of *femicide* and the so-called honour crimes, and undergoing a rapidly progressing process of (de)democratisation.

Conclusion

Signing the *Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence* occurred at the end of the first decade of AKP rule. In domestic politics, it was a time of dynamic democratic changes, while in foreign policy, there was a strong tendency to “soften” it and an apparent interest on the part of those in power to use “soft” tools. These processes created significant potential for the development of Turkish soft power. Furthermore, indeed, at that time, the Turkish authorities attached great importance to building the Republic’s soft power, practically in every corner of the globe, reaching for several instruments (Wódka, 2012, pp. 40–53, 2019, pp. 202–220). The Istanbul Convention has become one of them. The actions and statements of leading Turkish politicians related to the work on the Convention and its ratification testify to the fact that, at this stage, it was treated by them as a valuable tool for the implementation of Turkish soft power, an element of building Turkey’s image and a factor enriching such resources as political values and foreign policy. The fact that the authorities in Ankara positioned the Istanbul Convention among the instruments of soft power implementation is also confirmed by the fact that the successive stages of Turkey’s soft power development are reflected in Ankara’s attitude towards the anti-violence convention and towards the implementation of its provisions.

The annulment of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention is related to changes in the internal situation and the “ambivalence” of Turkish soft power, which has been noticeable for several years. However, it is also a fact of symbolic significance. The Turkish authorities have given priority to immediate political goals. They have treated the Convention as an element in their internal political games, knowing that withdrawal from the Convention is not indifferent to Turkey’s soft power prospects, especially on the Old Continent. The question arises as to whether the reason for President Erdoğan’s decision is the significance of the anticipated benefits on the internal political scene, or whether it should be treated as a symbol of a lack of interest in the development of Turkish soft power in Europe. The actions of other states, such as Poland, might have encouraged the Turkish President to take that decision. However, the Republic is undoubtedly depriving itself of one of the fundamental tools for building soft power. In this context, it is paradoxical that it is abandoning an international agreement resulting from Turkey’s chairmanship of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe, which was signed in Turkey’s largest metropolis and to which it “lent” its name.

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