

# Diplomacy Meets Paradiplomacy: Unpacking Central Government Responses through Evidence from Turkey's Paradiplomacy

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## Abstract

This study examines the central government's response to the paradiplomacy of sub-state actors through an analysis of the Turkish case, using a qualitative approach. As part of this research, a total of twelve face-to-face or virtual interviews were conducted with the representatives from the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Marmara Municipalities Union, and academics between June 2023 and November 2023. It views paradiplomacy as an outcome of the ongoing trend to localize diplomacy and aims to identify varying central government responses to paradiplomacy. These responses are analyzed using a three-fold categorization: positive, negative and mixed. The characteristics of each category explored in the context of the Turkish case. The study suggests that, despite the central government's opportunistic approach to paradiplomacy, its response has shown a cyclical tendency. The central government's stance on paradiplomacy is therefore complex and politically driven. It fluctuates along a broad spectrum, ranging from direct support to outright exclusion. This reflects the shifting political dynamics in Turkey.

**Keywords:** Sub-state diplomacy, Local diplomacy, Sub-state actors, Local governance, Turkish Municipalities

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## Introduction

Despite the ongoing belief in the dominance of state centrism in today's world, global politics is actually shaped by a variety of actors. Tavares (2016: 2) refers to these actors as "brand-new international actors" operating at both sub-state and transnational levels. The increasing activism of these actors, particularly influential ones like cities, is transforming many aspects of global politics, including diplomacy, which was once viewed as an exclusive domain

of states (Kamiński 2021: 7). As two key realities of international politics, diplomacy and paradiplomacy now intersect in the same spaces, making their interaction essential, as they support, complement, duplicate, correct or challenge each other (Soldatos 1990: 40).

Paradiplomacy is no longer specific to the federal democratic states of the West. It is now a globally observed phenomenon that takes place in all kinds of political systems. In each political and national setting, however, it manifests in forms that reflect the specific characteristics of that setting and can exhibit substantial variation across both time and region (Cantır 2024: 561-562). Thus, conducting case studies that explore this diversity of political contexts is essential for the theoretical development of paradiplomacy. This study is grounded in the idea that a central government's response to paradiplomacy is directly influenced by its country-specific political and cultural context.

The purpose of this study is to contribute to the existing body of knowledge on paradiplomacy by analyzing the responses of the central government to paradiplomacy, using evidence from the Turkish case. In doing so, it seeks to offer a deeper understanding of the interrelationships between the central governments and sub-state actors. Paradiplomacy literature is still less developed in terms of integrating experiences of non-Western centralized unitary states. Despite the challenge of tracing paradiplomacy in centralized and unitary states, where there is no clear division of labor as in federal states or obvious evidence of power being delegated to the constituent units of federations, this study examines Turkey's response to paradiplomacy as a unitary and highly centralised state, strongly committed to the traditional notion of state sovereignty (Erdoğan and Atar 2023).

The primary focus of this study is to address the research questions: "How can central governments respond to paradiplomacy and what determines the nature of their response?". The article begins by exploring the integration of sub-state actors into the realm of diplomacy through paradiplomacy. Then it outlines the methodology and main rationale of the study. Following that, three distinct central government responses to paradiplomacy are identified and the empirical case of Turkey is presented, along with data gathered from the fieldwork.

## **Integration of Sub-state Actors to Diplomacy through Paradiplomacy**

The dominant parameters of the Westphalian system are changing as the state monopoly on conducting international affairs comes to an end. This is triggering a multifaceted transformation in the field of diplomacy, with the integration of new actors, new tools and new issues (Hocking 1993; Kennan 1997; Sharp 1997; Neumann 2005; Toticagüena 2005). The widening of the diplomatic zone with the internationalization of new issues, including those previously dealt with exclusively at the local level, extends the reach of sub-state actors and enabled their more direct engagement in global affairs. This is achieved by innovative channels of diplomacy, such as peering or networking (Aguirre 1999). Therefore, it is no longer possible to draw a sharp and strict line between "domestic policy" and "foreign policy" (Kuznetsov 2015: 104). Everything, including diplomacy, takes place in an environment that is highly fluid.

States are increasingly sharing their diplomatic authority with sub-state actors at the regional and local levels. Diplomacy has recently come to include many new formal and informal practices that serve the emergence of linkages between societies (Keohane and Nye 1997; Cornago 1999; Acuto, Kosovac and Hartley 2021; Álvarez and Ovando 2024). The international activism of sub-state actors is the direct result of the interplay between changes in the international political system and the management of localities (Grandi 2020). This trend in diplomacy has been portrayed as a localization trend, bringing local actors and new interests into the international sphere (Hocking 1997), and coined by Cornago (2013: 59) as the age of plural diplomacy or diplomacies. There are even those who regard the increasing involvement of sub-state actors in diplomacy as a democratization of the field (Nganje 2014). This is primarily because sub-state actors are more directly connected to ordinary people and more responsive to their ideas and preferences.

The most widely accepted definition of paradiplomacy was formulated by Lecours (2002). In this definition, paradiplomacy is described as the involvement of non-central governments in international relations through the establishment of permanent or ad hoc contacts with foreign public or private entities. This engagement aims to promote socio-economic or cultural issues, as well as any other foreign dimension of their constitutional competencies. Despite their controversial status as actors in international law and debated international personality (Andrade e Barros 2010: 42), sub-state actors are more welcomed in the field of diplomacy, and by the 1980s paradiplomacy (Cornago 1999) had become a widely observed global phenomenon (Cornago 1999; Owtram and Mohammed 2014; Newland 2023).

From the perspective of sub-state actors, the changes in their areas of action, particularly the need to defend some of the local interests at the international level, necessitates their involvement in foreign policy in the contemporary era. The first examples of paradiplomatic action began to emerge in the field of economics. As a result of global economic competition, sub-state actors have usually been active in the field of diplomacy for the promotion of the economic interests of their locality (Tatham 2018: 283). It spread to the financial sphere in the 1980s, when sub-state actors, notably regions, attracted large amounts of foreign investment. Since the end of the Cold War, there has been an increase in the involvement of sub-state actors in political and cultural spheres (Lecours 2008: 2).

Paradiplomacy is more likely to occur when sub-state actors share borders with other states, represent a different community to that of the center, they are dissatisfied with the central government's foreign policy, they experience competition between the center and the region, or they are influenced by partisan politics because they belong to different political parties (Grandi 2020). Despite the eagerness of sub-state actors to engage in diplomatic activities, it is important to acknowledge their limited capacities and legal powers compared to central governments (Joenniemi and Sergunin 2014: 18). Since diplomacy requires specialized training and the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills, central governments can play a crucial role in helping sub-state actors develop the capacities necessary for paradiplomacy (Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016).

Paradiplomacy, once seen as exceptional or deviant, is increasingly becoming normal (Cornago 2010). In the era of globalization and transnationalization, states require the support of sub-state actors, for example, to become more humane and to achieve sustainability. In this new context, the division of responsibilities among stakeholders in world politics is undergoing a process of redefinition and redistribution (Papisca 2008). However, it is too early to claim, as Barber (2013) does, that the era of the nation-state is coming to an end due to its failure at the global level. In most cases, the autonomy and capabilities of sub-state actors do not replace or challenge the agency of the state (Curtis 2014). As a result, there is a strong tendency to view paradiplomacy as a complement to, rather than a substitute for the state (Wolff 2007).

## Data and Methodology

This research was conducted as part of a university-funded project. As part of this project, a total of twelve face-to-face or virtual interviews were held between June 2023 and November 2023 to gather data for the qualitative research.<sup>1</sup> Seven of the interviewees were from the staff of the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), and one worked for the Marmara Municipalities Union (MMU), a state agency that acts as a mediator between 192 member municipalities from the Marmara region and governmental bodies. The participants from the ministry, with one exception, were senior-level diplomats, who had served in various diplomatic missions abroad and worked in the ministry's central office in Ankara. As a result, they are highly familiar with the internal operations of the ministry. The exception was a scholar who has worked as a high-level staff member at the ministry for the past few years. The interviewees were selected randomly, mostly through prior social networks. Since there is no specific ministerial unit solely responsible for paradiplomatic activities in Turkey, the tasks are distributed within the ministry based on world regions rather than the specific nature of the issues. Therefore, any unit within the ministry can handle a paradiplomacy-related issue. The remaining four interviews were conducted with scholars who were either familiar with the concept of paradiplomacy or had previously studied paradiplomacy.

The interviewees were expected to reflect on the following questions: Which actors should be involved in diplomacy and which should not?, Is it possible for non-state or sub-state actors to participate in diplomacy?, Do non-state or sub-state actors have the capacity (knowledge, experience, resources, etc.) to engage in diplomacy?, Does the presence of non-state or sub-state actors in diplomacy lead to a democratization of diplomacy?, Is sub-state diplomacy (paradiplomacy) an asset for states?, Whose interests are served by sub-state diplomacy?, What can states or governments do to ensure that subnational diplomacy produces results that are in their best interests?, Is subnational diplomacy in conflict with the sovereignty of states?, Can subnational diplomacy cause problems in relations between states?, How do

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1 Ethical clearance for the interviews was obtained from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan University's Ethics Board on 28 December 2022.

states and governments become aware of sub-state diplomacy?, Do you have any observations on the relationship between the state and sub-state actors engaged in diplomacy in the Turkish context or in other contexts?, Can sub-state diplomacy be the subject of multilateral or bilateral cooperation between states?.

After reviewing the literature on paradiplomacy and analyzing the interview data, the researchers decided to apply a thematic qualitative analysis. This approach identified and categorized recurring patterns in central government responses to paradiplomacy. Thematic analysis allows researchers to avoid rigid generalizations while effectively capturing diversity in a structured manner (Creswell 1998; Riessman 2008). To conduct this analysis, each category was first defined to establish the study's conceptual foundation. The empirical findings were then presented, incorporating these categories and supporting them with evidence from fieldwork. Based on the relevant data and literature, the study identifies three patterns for categorizing central government responses to paradiplomacy: positive, negative and mixed.

## **State Response to Paradiplomacy: An Analysis at the Level of Central Government**

As previously mentioned, diplomacy has more recently evolved into a space of coexistence among various actors. These actors interact within the shared diplomatic sphere and respond to each other's actions. Among these responses, those of the central governments are particularly noteworthy, as they continue to hold the status of primary diplomatic actors within the national sphere. The central government's response plays a crucial role in shaping the overall potential of paradiplomacy within a country, as it largely determines the level of freedom sub-state actors have in this sphere. In other words, the functional autonomy of sub-state actors in engaging paradiplomacy, as well as the diplomatic tasks assigned to them, is closely tied to the central government's perception of paradiplomacy and its subsequent actions.

Although central governments often disagree with the sub-state actors, they may still allow them to engage in paradiplomacy, particularly in democratic systems. Sub-state actors can sometimes become opposition forces, campaigning against controversial decisions made by central governments on the international stage. In doing so, they may seek support from external sub-state actors or even foreign governments for their opposition (Van den Berg 2008). However, in highly centralized autocratic regimes, a wholly negative or ambivalent response to paradiplomacy is more common. These regimes generally provide little space for independent paradiplomatic activities (Grandi 2020). Contrary to this assumption, a positive central government response to paradiplomacy is strongly associated with democratic and less centralized regimes. Paradiplomacy functions most effectively in democratic and decentralized settings where the sub-state actors are formally granted powers (Mierzejewski 2018). Thus, while the activities of sub-state actors are enabled by decentralization, they are also shaped by the authority of the central government, and the broader state system.

## Positive Central Government Response to Paradiplomacy

Central governments may respond positively to paradiplomacy if they hold a highly favorable image of both paradiplomacy and the sub-state actors engaging in it. This positive response is driven by the recognition that the ever-expanding and increasingly complex nature of international diplomacy requires diverse knowledge, information and strategic approaches. In a world where traditional diplomacy alone is insufficient to address global challenges, central governments often embrace decentralized diplomatic initiatives by sub-state entities, acknowledging the valuable expertise and insights they can provide (Constantinou, Cornago and McConnell 2016: 91-92; Özcan 2023: 16).

When a central government responds positively to paradiplomacy, it tends to support the paradiplomacy of sub-state actors through various mechanisms. These include allocating funds, delegating certain powers, and/or providing direct assistance through the ministry of foreign affairs and its constituent units. This support reflects an effort to leverage the unique opportunities that paradiplomacy offers. Such opportunities enable central governments to advance their foreign policy objectives, expand their influence, and address transnational challenges, such as climate change, migration or public health crises, more effectively (Lecours 2008: 6; Grydehøj 2014).

Depending on the specific context, political climate and strategic objectives of central governments, their support for paradiplomacy can be either implicit or explicit (Nganje 2014). Implicit support may involve tacit consent or general acceptance of sub-state actors' activities, where central governments neither oppose nor obstruct paradiplomatic action, but also refrain from providing direct assistance. This form of support is often observed when central governments acknowledge the benefits of these initiatives but prefer not to formalize or publicly endorse them due to concerns about sovereignty, political sensitivities, or potential conflicts with other international partners (Lecours 2008). On the other hand, explicit support entails a clear and public endorsement of sub-state diplomatic efforts, including the allocation of resources (Grydehøj 2014). By providing either implicit or explicit support, central governments aim to balance the autonomy and initiatives of sub-state actors with the overall coherence and strategic objectives of their policy on the international stage.

Drawing on the Dutch experience, where the central government gradually delegates more powers to sub-state actors based on merit, Van Den Berg (2008) argues that a central government's positive response to paradiplomacy is primarily driven by an assessment of the added value it brings to the state's foreign policy. In federal systems like Canada, the involvement of sub-state units in international relations is actively encouraged. For example, the province of Quebec pursues independent foreign policy initiatives to strengthen its ties with French-speaking communities worldwide (Lecours 2008). India also provides strong example of a merit-based positive response to paradiplomacy. The effective use of paradiplomacy, particularly well-tuned distribution of the diplomatic responsibilities between the central government and sub-state actors, has played a key role in India's growing economic and diplomatic influence in recent decades (Bora 2024).

Paradiplomacy generally does not challenge traditional diplomacy, as sub-state actors typically acknowledge the central government's dominant role in both the formulation and execution of foreign policy. As a result, any potential conflict between diplomacy and paradiplomacy is seen as an exception rather than the norm (Segura and Etherington 2019: 4-5). States often view paradiplomacy as an asset and tend to adopt a supportive stance, particularly when there is complementarity or a high degree of alignment between states' diplomatic agenda and the paradiplomatic activities of sub-state actors (Nganje 2014). This typically occurs when relations between sub-state actors and the central government are non-confrontational, and sub-state actors act align their actions with the central government's foreign policy (Hocking 1996: 41-42; Demirtaş 2016: 157). When there is synergy between the central government and sub-state actors, it significantly enhances the country's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives (Duleba 2024).

### Negative Central Government Response to Paradiplomacy

Central governments may adopt a negative stance towards paradiplomacy, actively contesting the international activities of sub-state actors. Some states continue to adhere strictly to the traditional model of diplomacy, maintaining that national interests must be represented and defended through a single, centralized channel under the full authority of the central government (Zamorano and Morató 2015: 569). Compared to decentralized states, which provide more space for paradiplomacy, this negative response is more common in centralized and unitary political systems. These governments envision diplomacy as a critical public service that should not be entrusted to non-state actors, whom they perceive as lacking the necessary expertise and potentially disrupting diplomatic protocols with their amateurism (Newland 2023: 19).

Even in states with negative perception of paradiplomacy, paradiplomatic actions still occur. Rather than rejecting paradiplomacy outright, these states tend to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable paradiplomatic actors and actions. In general, the central government welcomes the paradiplomatic efforts of sub-state actors that are closely aligned with its policies or function as local representatives in non-central areas. In most cases, such activities do not raise concerns for the central government. Paradiplomacy of another group of sub-state actors, those independent of the central government and engaging in diplomacy for self-representation, sometimes in ways that conflict with the central government's identity, tend to cause significant concern in the central government. In such cases, central governments may sometimes perceive themselves as being in competition with these sub-state actors who assert their distinct identities and seek to promote their own agendas (Holmes 2020).

Central governments are more likely to respond negatively to paradiplomatic actions, particularly when sub-state actors engage in high-profile paradiplomatic activities that resemble those traditionally reserved for central governments, or are driven by a desire to express dissatisfaction or opposition to the central government's foreign policy (Casson and Dardanelli 2012; McConnell, Moreau and Dittmer 2012: 811; Arteev and Klyszcz 2021). In such cases, central governments perceive sub-state actors as directly challenging their authority

in foreign policy (Herrschel and Newman 2017). As a result, they expect sub-state actors to avoid independently advocating for their interests on the international stage and instead work within the established framework of national diplomacy to make it more responsive to the promotion of local demands on the international stage. Although less common, central governments that are deeply dissatisfied with paradiplomacy may, under certain conditions, be driven to take measures to exclude it from the realm of diplomacy. This is particularly likely when sub-state actors disregard their country's diplomatic priorities and pursue a diplomatic agenda that may even conflict with the central government's diplomacy. Moreover, despite the ongoing primacy of the territorial integrity norm over the right to self-determination in today's international political system, some sub-state actors use paradiplomacy to advance their aspiration of autonomy or secession by seeking external support for their cause (Duchacek 1984: 30). In such cases, central governments have a strong incentive to uphold the sovereign and state-centric nature of diplomacy (Cornago 2010: 98).

Central governments may perceive paradiplomacy as a challenge to their sovereignty, or as a complication in maintaining a coherent national foreign policy due to the presence of multiple voices representing the same country on the international stage (Lecours 2002). For instance, during the jet crisis between Russia and Turkey in November 2015, Russia's Tatarstan region chose not to enforce the central government's quick and harsh economic sanctions against Turkish exports and companies (Rüma and Çelikpala 2019; Stremoukhov 2022). As a result, central governments closely monitor paradiplomatic activities, especially when the sub-state actors establish ties with the central governments of other countries (Herrschel and Newman 2017). For example, the Australian government enacted a law called Australia's Foreign Relations Act 2020, which deviates from the country's historical and democratic traditions by granting the central government veto power over agreements between sub-state actors and foreign actors. The rationale behind this legislation was emphasized as the need to present a unified voice in foreign policy (Carr 2023). To maintain its monopoly over diplomacy, states may increase the cost of paradiplomacy for sub-state actors, for example, by using judicial processes challenge and declare paradiplomatic actions illegal (Lecours 2008).

### **Mixed Central Government Response to Paradiplomacy**

Given the coexistence of both positive and negative responses, central governments' response to paradiplomacy can be ambivalent or mixed. They may choose to respond on a case-by-case basis, considering the prevailing dynamics of each situation. In this context, paradiplomacy operates within an environment of both freedom and control. On the one hand, central governments seek to leverage the benefits of paradiplomacy; on the other hand, they strive to ensure it does not undermine the unity and overall direction of national foreign policy. The response of central governments in Czechia, Poland and Slovakia to paradiplomacy is generally mixed. In all three countries, regions serve as the primary paradiplomatic actors. Relevant legislation stipulates that the international cooperation of the regions must not contradict the constitution, national laws, international agreements and obligations, or the public interest (Duleba 2024). In these three countries, central governments create legal

space for paradiplomacy while also establishing conditions for its functioning. Among them, Poland applies the most direct and stringent control over the paradiplomacy of regions. The ministry of foreign affairs approves all planning documents related to paradiplomatic activities, including agreements with foreign partners. Ministerial approval is required at the final stage before an agreement can be signed. That means that while regions are free to initiate, negotiate and draft agreements with foreign partners, they cannot sign or implement them without the ministry's approval. As a result, regions are compelled to consult the ministry continuously, not just before signing, to prevent potential misunderstandings. Nevertheless, in some cases, such as Turkey, paradiplomacy lacks a legal framework that exclusively defines the rules for the conduct of paradiplomacy. There are, however, laws that refer to paradiplomacy, in particular Law No. 1173 on the Conduct and Coordination of International Relations, adopted in 1969, Article 127 of the 1982 Constitution, Law No. 5393 on Municipalities, adopted in 2005, and more recently the legal regulations adopted in 2018 during the transition to a presidential system. These legal frameworks generally require sub-state actors to obtain prior approval for their paradiplomacy from central government bodies and to act in accordance with the principles of international law when engaging in paradiplomacy. But the current nature of the legal framework makes the paradiplomacy of sub-state actors highly vulnerable to political intervention, either positive or negative (Avellaneda and Fantoni 2022). On these occasions, the political processes are determined by mechanisms that are outside the legal framework and that change in each case of paradiplomacy, especially based on the identity of the sub-state actors (Kamiński 2018).

In every type of state, whether unitary or federal, there is some level of control over paradiplomacy. The degree of this control largely depends on the central government's attitude toward paradiplomacy, whether it is seen as an asset or a threat plays a crucial role in the extent of control over paradiplomacy (Grydehøj 2014). This suggests that control may be the most common response from central government to paradiplomacy. The reason behind this is rooted in the traditional understanding of diplomacy, as an exclusive domain of the state, with control measures seen as a legitimate right of the central government (Soldatos 1990: 40). Additionally, the great majority of sub-state actors do not have enough experience and knowledge in diplomatic matters, and their paradiplomacy, especially when it clashes with the established diplomatic norms, may bring about some unintended consequences or even state liability (Duchacek 1984: 14).

When considering the question of control mechanisms over paradiplomacy, factors such as the timing of control, the degree and form of control, as well as the identity and nature of the sub-state actor's previous relations with the central government can be configured. Regarding timing, state control of paradiplomacy can be ex-ante or ex-post. In the former, the sub-state actor is subjected to the control of the central government before practicing its paradiplomacy, similar to obtaining a formal mandate; in the latter, control happens after the completion of the paradiplomatic action. While the first operates as a prior authorization and approval, the second is like an audit. In some states, ex-ante and ex-post control mechanisms over paradiplomacy may co-exist. Ex-ante control may be more effective in the elimination of some potential

conflicts between the central government and sub-state actors. In this case, states generally form formal mediatory institutions that carry out coordination and consultation functions between the central and sub-state levels. Through this mechanism, the parties become aware of each other's intentions and objectives, which reduces misunderstandings.

Because of their sovereign identity, central governments have the authority to determine the scope of paradiplomacy. Central governments may refrain sub-state actors from adopting a global and comprehensive action in their paradiplomacy and instead require them to have a regional approach. In this regard, central governments may allow sub-state actors to establish relations only with their counterparts and conduct their paradiplomacy within a specific and limited number of sectoral policy areas. In addition, central governments may also pose control over the actors with whom sub-state actors engage and define the acceptable types of behavior for these sub-state actors. Parent states of the sub-state actors can put pressure on the external actors willing to form paradiplomatic relations with their sub-state entities. They can use their own diplomatic tools, such as sending letters of complaint, using trade and investment to weaken paradiplomatic ties, to discourage such actions (Newland 2023: 4).

## **Paradiplomacy in Turkey and the Response of the Central Government**

### **Paradiplomacy under 1982 Constitutional Order: The Period Until 2018**

Article 127 of the Turkish Constitution, which can serve as a guideline for the practice of paradiplomacy, states that “local governments can operate within the limits set by the central government”. This provision highlights the degree of control exerted over paradiplomatic activities by sub-state actors in Turkey. Such control mechanisms or limitations are unsurprising, given that Turkey is a centralized unitary state, where skepticism or restrictive approaches to paradiplomacy are more common. From the outset, the central government's responses to paradiplomacy have tended to be mixed, driven more by political considerations rather than legal frameworks. However, as a rule, Turkish central governments do not allow sub-state actors to play an independent role in international politics through a formal delegation of powers. Furthermore, initiatives that conflict with national policies are not allowed.

The interviewees offered various explanations for the Turkish central government's strong inclination to control paradiplomacy. Two of them, whose views are presented below, linked the central government's response to the very nature of diplomacy:

“In my opinion, diplomacy is a unique and indivisible entity. Diplomacy is an effort to bring order to an international system that is inherently anarchic. The fragmentation of diplomacy is undermining this effort, leading to the creation of a chaotic environment” (Interview, representative from the MFA)

“Diplomacy, like judiciary and defence, is the exclusive function of the state and should therefore be carried out solely by the state and its institutions.

I reject the notion that the activities of non-state actors should be labelled as diplomacy simply because it is fashionable or appealing. Such activities are merely international relations. They have no connection to diplomacy or foreign policy. Therefore, the term diplomacy should not be used for them. Diplomacy cannot be conducted by uninterested, uninformed, incompetent and unauthorized persons who do not follow the relevant dossiers and fully understand the issues at hand. Nor should such individuals be in positions where they influence public perception. In addition, after what has happened in the recent political history of our country, any concepts prefixed with “para” should be treated with caution” (Interview, representative from the MFA 2023).

“Since it is the states that carry out the responsibility of all kinds of diplomatic actions, including paradiplomacy, their authority to exercise control is legitimate” (Telephone Interview, representative from the MFA 2023).

Some interviewees attempt to interpret the Turkish central government’s response through the lens of Turkey’s unique characteristics, such as its enduring bureaucratic culture and state system. These views are listed below in sequence:

“Because of Turkey’s bureaucratic culture, the diplomatic community finds it difficult to adapt easily to change. The diplomatic service is built on a strong institutional framework and a deeply rooted tradition that shapes its operations. Within this institutional framework, diplomatic agents are programmed to maintain the status quo. This situation prevents the diplomatic community from being as flexible as civil society or the business world in responding swiftly to global changes” (Interview, representative from the MFA 2023).

“Turkey is not a federal state. It retains a strong centralized governance model inherited from the Ottoman Empire. In addition, there is a persistent fear of state fragmentation, which diminishes the central government’s willingness to share authority with sub-state actors” (Interview, representative from the MFA 2023).

The choices made by sub-state actors in conducting paradiplomacy can sometimes influence the central government’s response. In general, central governments expect sub-state actors to avoid engaging with external actors that they do not recognize, consider illegitimate, or that could create serious problems in inter-state relations. As outlined below, some interviewees attributed the Turkish central government’s control over paradiplomacy to the decisions and actions of sub-state actors:

“Sub-state actors are unfamiliar with the proper language and established customs of diplomacy. In practicing paradiplomacy, both the availability of human resources and the qualifications of existing staff are inadequate. In some cases, individuals with limited English proficiency are even involved in the process” (Telephone Interview, former staff of the MFA 2023).

“Sub-state actors in Turkey have a limited understanding of the diplomatic nature of their paradiplomatic activities or their roles in state representation” (Online Interview, representative from the MMU 2023).

“The principle of reciprocity is a key concern for central governments in conducting diplomacy, yet it is largely absent from the diplomatic perspectives of sub-state actors. Countries should not be allowed to develop relations with sub-state actors in Turkey if these interactions create challenges for Turkey in terms of paradiplomacy” (Interview, representative from the MFA 2023).

In addition to the absence of a legal framework that clearly defines the role of each actor in the conduct of state diplomacy, there is also a lack of an appropriate mechanism to determine when the central government should intervene. This mechanism would allow the central government to monitor the paradiplomatic activities of sub-state actors. Turkey lacks a systematic strategy to guide the central government’s stance to both domestic paradiplomacy and foreign paradiplomacy. This absence limits the central government’s ability to provide a consistent response to paradiplomacy, allowing decisions driven by political considerations, resulting in varying responses to the paradiplomacy of different sub-state actors. To underline this point, a scholar (Online Interview 2023) mentioned that “Paradiplomacy of sub-state actors which are closely linked to the central government and its political positioning is more likely to get the central government backing in the Turkish case”. Two representatives from the MFA (Telephone Interview 2023) identified this as a weakness or poor performance in Turkey’s paradiplomacy, highlighting the need for the central government to develop a swift response focused on intervening at the time of the issue. One interviewee underlined the negative consequences of the lack of a coherent paradiplomacy strategy for Turkish diplomacy, as quoted below:

“Turkey has significant potential for paradiplomacy in regions, such as the Balkans, due to its historical and cultural ties. However, it has not fully leveraged this potential to strengthen its diplomatic position. Turkey’s primary focus has always been on establishing relations with state institutions. As a result, much of Turkey’s resources have been directed toward the wrong actors, rather than to sub-state actors willing to act on its behalf” (Online Interview, representative from the MMU 2023).

Representatives from the MFA and MMU (Online and Telephone Interviews 2023) identified the economy as the area in which the Turkish state has shown more recognition and approval for the conduct of paradiplomacy. However, all the interviewees acknowledged the existence, role and even necessity of paradiplomatic activities in the conduct of Turkish foreign policy today. They argued that paradiplomacy has turned into an alternative mechanism for defending and promoting state interests (Interviews, representative from the MFA and a scholar 2023), developing bilateral contacts outside the formal constraints, such as through joint sports and cultural activities (Interviews, representative from the MFA and a scholar 2023), or contributing to peacebuilding and reducing conflict potential (Online Interview, representative

from the MMU 2023). To exemplify this, a representative from the MFA (Telephone Interview 2023) stressed that the presence of actors other than the central government in diplomacy is inevitable today and linked this presence with some newly emerging areas of diplomacy, such as energy, tourism and the environment, which require a high level of technical knowledge and expertise possessed by sub-state actors. An interviewed scholar (Online Interview 2023) also confirmed the expansion of diplomacy to include highly technical areas and noted central governments' willingness to get support from sub-state actors with specialized expertise and knowledge in these new areas of diplomacy. In addition, when sub-state actors engage globally, they may undergo a transformation, which sometimes places them ahead of formal state positions. As they align more with global norms, they may become more proactive in demanding changes in the central government's official diplomatic approach. As an example, a scholar (Online Interview 2023) mentioned that, on the issue of environmental sensitivity and climate change, some municipalities in Turkey adopted an attitude that surpass the country's general policy, especially by entering into cooperations aimed at achieving ambitious climate targets. These municipalities are now putting pressure on the central government to align more closely with the global climate regime.

For much of the last few decades, up until 2018, the Turkish central government has generally allowed space for conducting foreign policy while retaining its authority. In line with this argument, a representative from the MFA (Telephone Interview 2023) stated that Turkey is intentionally supporting the emergence of certain sub-state actors and their paradiplomacy to achieve some of its diplomatic objectives. According to this perspective, by allowing these actors to appear independent, Turkey can avoid the high costs associated with accusations of interfering in the internal affairs of other countries, thus maintaining an image of respect for the sovereignty of other states. During this period, the Turkish central government also supported the sub-state actors' engagement in state-like diplomatic activities, such as membership to international or transnational organizations or concluding bilateral cooperation agreements. Besides, as stated by an interviewed representative from the MFA (Telephone Interview 2023), relations with external actors can also provide an incentive at the state level to support paradiplomacy. In the Turkish case, relations with the European Union (EU) have enabled the involvement of sub-state actors in various policy areas. Moreover, despite the political impasse in relations between the parties, the EU continued to provide funding and grants for capacity-building projects in Turkey. As beneficiaries of these projects, many sub-state actors in Turkey gained the skills and awareness necessary to engage with the global community.

### **The Changing Landscape of Paradiplomacy in Turkey from 2018 Onwards**

While Turkey initially exhibited a mixed response to paradiplomacy, predominantly positive with some occasional negative instances, this stance changed significantly with the country's transition to a version of the presidential system in 2018. Following the introduction of the presidential system, the centralizing tendency of the Turkish government grew markedly, with political power concentrated around the executive (Öztürk and Reilly 2024). This pressure over paradiplomacy further intensified after the main opposition party, the Republican People's

Party (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*, CHP), won the 2019 local elections in major metropolitan cities with significant paradiplomatic capacities, such as Istanbul, Ankara, Adana and Antalya (Ertürk and Kuorou 2024). As a result, paradiplomacy became a point of political contestation between the ruling party and the opposition bloc in Turkey after the 2019 local elections.

In this new political environment, the central government became more involved in local politics and increasingly scrutinized the paradiplomacy of sub-state actors, such as their close ties with Western institutions and governments to secure better international financing opportunities for urgent and costly investment projects, sometimes using aggressive control mechanisms. In other words, the Turkish central government's tendency to control paradiplomacy grew after the 2019 local elections, making it a focal point for political polarization between the two main political forces in Turkey. A scholar (Online Interview 2023) identified the effect of 2019 local elections on paradiplomacy and the central government's response as follow: "The 2019 local elections are a turning point for paradiplomacy. After this election, the ruling party lost control of cities with high paradiplomacy potential and the opposition began to govern these cities."

The identity of the sub-state actor and the influence of this identity on the nature of the relations between the central government and sub-state actors play a critical role in the Turkish case, shaping the level of state control over paradiplomacy. Noting the increasing polarization in Turkish politics over the last decade, a former staff of the MFA (Telephone Interview 2023) argued that the central government tends to exert more control over the paradiplomacy of the sub-state actors that either act as an oppositional force or are closely linked with the opposition ideology, such as municipalities governed by opposition parties. Furthermore, an interviewed scholar (Online Interview 2023) shared information about a ministerial strategy used to maintain control over paradiplomacy in the absence of formal reporting from sub-state actors. In such cases, the ministry can even get in touch with Turkish Airlines' foreign offices to get a list of individuals visiting a particular country.

Since 2018, the Turkish central government has mostly exercised its control over sub-state actors by managing their borrowings from external sources or access to international funding. Since then, municipalities, the main paradiplomacy actors in the Turkish context, cannot use international funds, especially for major construction and transportation projects, without the approval of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change (Ertürk and Kourou 2024). The delays in the approval of paradiplomatic outcomes, such as those coming from the Ministry of Environment, Urbanization and Climate Change, were also identified by the interviewed representative from the MMU (Online Interview 2023) as another control mechanism used frequently by the central government in recent years.

The fiercest contestation during this period occurred between the central government and the mayor of İstanbul, Ekrem İmamoğlu. He established close connections with representatives of Western governments and their diplomatic staff in Turkey, particularly those from the EU, and made visits to the European capitals to attract foreign investors and secure loans (Euronews 2019a). During these visits and reciprocal trips, he not only met with his counterparts but also held meetings at the ministerial level (Euronews 2021). In these contacts,

İmamoğlu was regarded as a raising national leader and a potential presidential candidate, rather than just the mayor of the country's largest metropolis (Euronews 2019b). He even received support from European media outlets when he was convicted for his remarks against the Supreme Election Board members (Euronews 2022a). Observing this trend, the central government responded with a new wave of opposition to Istanbul's paradiplomacy, further intensifying the contestation.

In 2022, for the first time in the country's history, an official letter was issued, directing sub-state actors to comply with a presidential decision requiring the MFA approval for any contact with foreign agents, including telephone calls. Sub-state actors were explicitly warned not to engage with foreign agents or respond to their requests without prior approval of the ministry. This approval mechanism was justified based on principles of reciprocity, bilateral political relations, customary practices and other considerations related to international protocol (BBC News Türkçe 2022).

## Conclusion

As Chan (2016: 136) points out, a state's willingness to adapt diplomatic strategies can significantly enhance human welfare by improving its ability to deal with global challenges effectively. Paradiplomacy, involving sub-state actors, has become a crucial and influential component of contemporary international politics. All states, including Turkey, face the challenge of navigating a multilayered diplomatic landscape. Central governments increasingly recognize the role of sub-state actors in diplomacy, especially in specialized and intensively technical areas such as energy, tourism, and the environment. As a result, paradiplomacy is seen as a tool for strengthening a state's global standing and influence, especially in sectors where the actions of sub-state actors complement and reinforce national diplomatic efforts.

Despite the growing recognition of paradiplomacy in international affairs, there is no consensus on the extent of sub-state actors' involvement or the scope of their diplomatic activities. While this study categorizes central government responses to paradiplomacy into three broad types, it points out that these responses vary across states and are shaped by multiple factors, including the country's governance model, political system, perceptions of security threats posed by sub-state actors, the conceptualization of diplomacy, and the broader dynamics between the central government and sub-state entities. In addition, central governments responses are not static over time. They evolve over time and may even exhibit contradictory tendencies simultaneously.

Before conducting this research, the researchers assumed that Turkey has not yet adopted a new systematic diplomatic culture that fully embraces and exploits plurality in diplomacy. The empirical data collected through this project supports this assumption. The findings suggest that Turkey employs a combination of the three responses identified in this study, rather than adhering strictly to any single approach. Consequently, that central government's stance on paradiplomacy is complex and politically driven, fluctuating along a broad spectrum from direct support to outright exclusion.

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