

# Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans and “Neo-Ottomanism”: A Personal Account

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## ABSTRACT

*This essay examines the influence and performance as well as the perception of the new, pro-active Turkish foreign policy in South-East Europe. It emphasizes that certain political and intellectual circles in the Balkans have a different take on Turkey's policies in the region. The paper assesses how Turkey's activism in the Balkans has revived the debate on the Ottoman legacy in the region and Turkey's perceived aspirations to renew its influence under the guise of “neo-Ottomanism.” This paper will also address the impact in this debate caused by the recent book of the well-known Serbian orientalist, Darko Tanaskovic, entitled “Neo-Ottomanism – the Return of Turkey to the Balkans.”*

The current Turkish regional policy has been widely evaluated and explained as a new, assertive policy. As far as the Balkan region is concerned, that policy is less new but more dynamic, less restrained but more decisive. Turkey's regional policy was already active, but today it has become a pro-active policy. Previously, Turkey's foreign policy, especially in the Balkans, was carried out in harmony with the Western alliances. However, Turkey now has emerged on the international and regional stage as an independent power, relying on its own geo-political and economic strength. This newfound independence in its pro-active regional policy is the main reason that it has met with mixed reactions and suspicions of a potential rise of neo-imperial and neo-Ottoman ambitions. Current Turkish regional policy has three directions: the Caucasus and Eurasia in a wider sense, the Middle East, and South-East of Europe or the Balkans.

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In terms of its relation with Turkey, the Balkans has some characteristics in common with the other two regions, but there are marked differences. First, for centuries the Balkan region was an important and stable area of the Ottoman Empire until the last century of the Ottoman reign. Many Grand Viziers hailed from the Balkans and Bosnian was one of official languages at court. In contrast, despite sharing the same Turkic roots and culture, Eurasians were never part of the Empire. As for the Arab lands under Ottoman control, although they shared for the most part the same Islamic faith, the populations of the Middle East remained under Ottoman administration. Thus, the Balkans and modern Turkey share the Ottoman heritage, whose influence cannot be belittled. And today, they share a connection through their attachment to Europe. Moreover, the Balkans remains strategically essential to Turkey as a physical bridge for Turkey's accession to the Euro-Atlantic institutions.

The world's largest powers continue to exert their influence over the regions surrounding Turkey. The US strives to maintain its position of dominance over the entire Middle East while Russia still considers itself the master of Eurasia. However, the Balkans remain an area relatively free and open to outside influence. Meanwhile, Turkey has a privileged position and enjoys a positive engagement with most of the countries in South-East Europe. This is a welcome relief compared to its deteriorating relations with Israel or the continuously tense relations with Armenia.

We might agree that Turkish diplomacy, under the stewardship of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu and his doctrine of "strategic depth," has made constructive breakthroughs in regions Turkey has until recently not paid much attention to or even faced hostile opposition. Overall, Turkey's proactive policy has added a new dimension to Turkey's relations with the world; it is not a total change, particularly in the Balkan region. In that sense, it would be exaggerated to say that Turkey "is returning to the Balkans." There were, although short-lived, two past attempts to create regional pacts. Normal relations already existed and efforts were made to improve economic and trade cooperation between Turkey and other regional countries. However, only the former Turkish president, Turgut Özal, brought Turkey out of its apathy towards the Balkans twenty years ago. Özal's policy also echoed in other regions surrounding Turkey as well. Two decades ago,

the Bosnian journalist, Slobodan Stajic, wrote a piece entitled: “The return of Turkey to the Balkans – as a partner, but not as an invader,” stating that “The Balkans needs Turkey just as Turkey needs the Balkans for its path towards the West. After the collapse of blocks an inter-space appeared for new geopolitical realignments in which Turkey has seen a chance to fill certain vacuums.”<sup>1</sup> This comment could have been written today.

Nowadays, as Turkey’s interest towards the region is renewed, the perception of Turkey and Turks in the Balkans varies from situation to situation and from country to country. It differs also when the political and public sphere are compared to everyday life. One issue stands out as particularly sensitive: Turkey’s policy towards Bosnia. President Abdullah Gül, during his visit to Sarajevo and Mostar in September 2010, reaffirmed Turkey’s resolute support for the sovereignty and unity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as he had done many times before. Unfortunately, the Bosnian Serb leadership used that visit to denounce Turkey’s continuous destructive policy towards its own country and reveal its deep antagonism towards Turkey. Despite President Gül’s readiness to talk with representatives of all ethnic communities in Bosnia, Bosnian Serb leaders avoided meeting him. At the same time, Milorad Dodik, the leader of the Republika Srpska, accused Turkey of having a “hidden agenda” for the Balkans. He also warned leaders of Serbia not to be “naïve” about Turkey’s intentions.<sup>2</sup> President Gül clearly rejected the criticism of Bosnian Serb leaders. Stressing that “We want to see this region become the heart of Europe, a crossroad of important political and economic corridors,” he added, “Anything else outside this is not on our agenda.”<sup>3</sup> He also denied that Turkey favours Bosnia’s Muslims (Bosniaks) over the country’s Serb and Croat people.

### The Neo-Ottomanism Debate

The new Turkish regional policy raised a wide debate in the Balkans, particularly focusing on its so-called neo-Ottoman aspect. Last September, this took on a new intensity with a live program on Bosnian *TV1*,<sup>4</sup> in which its editor, Senad Pecanin, invited Belgrade professor Darko Tanaskovic, one of the leading Balkan orientalists, to participate with me on a discussion. The reason for the debate was the publication of professor Tanaskovic’s latest book, entitled *Neoosmanizam – Povratak Turske na Balkan* (“Neo-Ottomanism – The Return of Turkey to the Balkans”).<sup>5</sup> The polemic was carried over by the Bosnian dailies and weeklies.<sup>6</sup> Fikret Karcic, professor of law at the Sarajevo University and at the Faculty of Islamic Studies, wrote a profound analysis of the term “neo-Ottomanism” itself in the weekly magazine *Dani*. He said it was incorrect to describe Turkey’s actual foreign policy as “neo-Ottomanism” (Yeni Osmanlılık). Because it did not fit the

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real meaning of the term "Ottomanism" (Osmanlılık, Osmanlıcılık) that has been used to describe the ideology and political program of the Ottoman modernist reformers. Professor Tanaskovic made a lengthy joint reply to both Karcic and myself in the same magazine.

A highly knowledgeable professor of the Islamic sciences, professor Tanaskovic is also, unfortunately, considered - not only by Bosnian Muslim, but by some Serbian intellectuals as well - as one of leading anti-Islamists in the region. He was able to influence the official Serbian policy while serving as advisor to the president of Yugoslavia, Slobodan Milosevic, during the war in Bosnia. His engagement in that regard, together with some other historians and orientalists, was clearly elucidated in a study by Norman Cigar, researcher at the Institute of the Balkan Studies in Washington.<sup>7</sup> The well-known Serbian activist for human rights, Sonja Biserko, also cited professor Tanaskovic in her study on Islamic fundamentalism and how negative stereotypes about Muslims as a "foreign, inferior and dangerous element" in the Balkans were disseminated. She referred to those authors who advanced these harmful stereotypes, which were also advocated by Slobodan Milosevic's "Memorandum," his philosophical and theoretical program during the war in former Yugoslavia. She wrote: "Tanaskovic interpreted the Bosnian Muslims' appeal to Turkey for help as 'their furtive return to the old-time position of *poturice* (converts from Christianity to Islam)': for the Serbs, he recalled, *poturice* were 'worse than Turks.' Tanaskovic warned: 'To threaten the Serbs with Turks is even worse and more ominous than to threaten them with Germans.'"<sup>8</sup>

It was especially significant that Professor Tanaskovic's book on neo-Ottomanism was published not in Belgrade but in Banja Luka, the capital city of the Bosnian Serbs, where he went to participate in its promotion at a conference on "neo-Ottomanism and Republika Srpska." Under the title "Turkey searches for new janissaries," Belgrade's *Politika* wrote that the Bosnian Serb leading politician, Milorad Dodik, had honoured the event and told them that Turkey "exclusively supports Bosniak-Muslim interests" and that "its final aim is to create in Bosnia and Herzegovina an Islamic state in the Balkans."<sup>9</sup>

Neo-Ottomanism is predominantly a pejorative term by which Turkey's actual regional policy is being called by those who oppose or have at least are suspicious



Photo: AA, Salih Zeki Fazhoğlu

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towards that policy. Some scholars are denying its connection with the Ottoman rule, and some, such as Can Erimtan, think it could be qualified as a “pseudo-Ottoman” policy.<sup>10</sup> Professor Tanaskovic gave his own “definition” to the term in his book: “It is possible to define neo-Ottomanism most concisely as an ideological amalgam of Islamism, Turkism, and Ottoman imperialism.”<sup>11</sup>

The difference between Professor Tanaskovic’s approach and my own is that I do not consider Turkey’s current foreign policy as neo-Ottoman nor imperial, but as a very pragmatic and realistic endeavour to secure the ground under its own feet by establishing a peaceful environment around its borders and creating

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opportunities for its economy to progress. Tanaskovic also agrees it is a pragmatic foreign policy, but a neo-Ottoman pragmatism. As I understand him, he means that such pragmatism has the major characteristics of neo-Ottomanism itself (Islamism, Turkism and Ottoman imperialism) as outlined above. In media debates, Tanaskovic stressed, "I do not agree, however, with those analysts who, like Somun and Karcic, are trying

to dispute the ideological dimension of neo-Ottomanism, declaring it as, might be, a certain ontological pragmatism."<sup>12</sup>

In supporting our respective argument we both use similar sources but analyse the information from different angles or viewpoints. Thus, Professor Tanaskovic refers in his book to known Turkish analysts, such as Ömer Taşpınar, one of the leading experts on Turkey's foreign policy. While he reads Taşpınar's approach to neo-Ottomanism in a recent article as a "permeation of nationalists, Islamists and Kemalists" that might emerge in a kind of "Turkish Gaullism," I chose another conclusion by the same author who wrote that Turkey, "in this neo-Ottoman paradigm, does not pursue a neo-imperialist policy aimed at resurrecting the Ottoman Empire," and added, "Instead of imperial nostalgia, neo-Ottomanism is essentially about projecting Turkey's 'soft power' -a bridge between East and West, a Muslim nation, a secular state, a democratic political system, and a capitalistic economic force."<sup>13</sup> The same type of language was used in Minister Davutoğlu's emotional speech he delivered in Sarajevo in October 2009. Professor Tanaskovic and other analysts read it as proof of pure neo-Ottomanism. It is true that Davutoğlu said something like "Sarajevo is ours" and "İstanbul is yours," and that "the Ottoman centuries in the Balkans are a successful story that needs to be renewed." However, these words should not be taken out of context because Davutoğlu also stressed that he does not mean that there should be a return to the Ottoman state. He mostly alludes to the common Ottoman heritage.

It is surprising to see that this improvised speech met with such far fetch reactions that certain observers considered that it confirmed alleged Turkish imperial ambitions. In the so-called WikiLeaks release of 2010, the US embassy in Ankara described Turkey's new active policy towards the Balkans "as problematic" based solely on Davutoğlu's speech in Sarajevo. Only an improvised translation of Davutoğlu's speech appeared in the Bosnian magazine *Dani* that was immediately

widely published. According to the US Embassy’s cable, Davutoglu speech made in Sarajevo was a “ringing defence of the centuries long Ottoman presence in the region,” saying “Alas the region has been ravaged by division and war ever since. However, now Turkey is back.”

Returning to the polemics raised by Tanaskovic’s book<sup>14</sup> I tried to defend my attitude that pragmatism, based on national and state interests, is the main motivator of Turkish foreign policy and that the driving force is Turkey’s economy, not ideology. I found that many other observers also avoid mentioning neo-Ottomanism while they argue that Turkey “is today one of the most important countries in the world, central to events over across a broad region.”<sup>15</sup> The Macedonian poet and diplomat, Trajan Petrovski, former ambassador to Ankara, says, “Turkey as a Balkan and European state is a very important factor in the Balkan policy. Stability, peace and prosperity of the Balkans could not be imagined without the active role and influence of Turkey. The past of the Balkan peoples is deeply connected with Turkish history. The fact that the Ottoman Empire ruled the Balkan territories for more than five centuries speaks clear enough about its influence and interconnection.”

Contrary to the Islamism that Professor Tanaskovic considers an integral part of neo-Ottomanism, I see pragmatism as the dominant approach. When Turks appear before Arabs and Iranians, they stress their common religion more than the still unpopular Ottoman heritage. In the Caucasus and Central Asia, Turks stress their common ethnic roots rather than religion, due to the prevailing secularism in that area. If Turkey’s foreign policy possesses some elements of the so-called neo-Ottomanism and if its major actors openly and publicly profess their creed, it cannot be immediately concluded that Turkey is acting based on an ideological program of Islamism. We have to recognize that, in the Balkans, though having a predominantly Christian Orthodox population, the Ottoman cultural heritage does include Islamic elements and that is simply unavoidable. However, the great majority of Serbs in the Balkans still view everything coming from Turkey as having an Ottoman tone, followed by an Islamic overtone.

Professor Tanaskovic particularly emphasised that Turkey “persistently and decisively supported Bosnian Muslims” (Bosniaks) in the wars of the 1990s. According to his conclusion, it was “ipso facto, an anti-Serb attitude” and “in essence neo-Ottoman logic.” He, of course, avoided in his book the real answer to a question, “Wasn’t it due to aggression perpetrated by Serbia [which at the time went by the name of Yugoslavia] against Bosnia and Herzegovina and its decision to not prevent the genocide in Srebrenica, which was even recognized as a

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crime against humanity by The Hague's International Court of Justice?" All those wars of the 1990s were for Tanaskovic, as well as for almost all Serb nationalists, nothing more than "happenings." I wonder how professor Tanaskovic, in his efforts to prove his theory of neo-Ottomanism, would interpret the words

spoken by Ratko Mladic (the Bosnian Serb war commander, who was wanted for war crimes) on the occasion of the 'liberation' of Srebrenica, on July 11, 1995: "On the eve of yet another great Serb festive day we offer this town as a gift to the Serb people. The moment has finally arrived, following the rebellion against the *dahiya* (Ottoman tyrant), for us to take our vengeance on the Turks in this area."<sup>16</sup>

Minister Davutoğlu's statement might be placed above such considerations based on conflict and past enmities: "In order to prevent the geopolitical buffer zone characteristics of the Balkans, which makes the Balkans a victim of conflicts, we have to create a new sense of unity in our region. We have to strengthen the regional ownership and foster regional common sense."<sup>17</sup>

Does the current debate among Serbian scholars mean that the Balkan countries, after almost a hundred years since the first Balkan wars, are still not capable to achieve lasting peace and stability at a regional level? Through conflict and war, the Balkans have attracted or pulled in the interest of the world's great powers during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an increasingly multi-polar world, regional powers such as Turkey seek to play a mediating role to ensure that peace and stability are maintained in the Balkans. However, Russia is suspicious, Europe is nervous, and America sees Turkish initiatives as "problematic." So, the opponents of Turkey's pro-active foreign policy are trying to dress it up as "neo-Ottoman, Islamist, and imperial", but they are missing the point about the new activism in Turkish foreign policy.

## Endnotes

1. Slobodan Stajic, *Vjesnik*, Zagreb, 1990.
2. *Today's Zaman*, September 4, 2010.
3. Ibid.
4. *TV1*, Sarajevo, September 4, 2010.
5. Darko Tanaskovic, *Neoosmanizam – povratak Turske na Balkan* ("Neo-Ottomanism – Return of Turkey to the Balkans"), Banja Luka, Official Gazette, 2010.
6. These included Oslobodjenje, Avaz and Dani.

7. Norman Cigar, "Serbia's Orientalists and Islam: Making Genocide Intellectually Respectable," *Islamic Quarterly: Review of Islamic Culture*, Vol.33, No. 3 (1994), pp.147-170.
8. Sonja Biserko, The Bosnian Institute, London, 2006.
9. "Turkey Searches for New Yanicheris," *Politika*, Belgrade, September 10, 2010.
10. Can Erimtan, "A pseudo-Ottoman Policy: Turkey, new station in the world," *Today's Zaman*, April 4, 2010.
11. Tanaskovic, *op.cit.*, p.19.
12. Darko Tanaskovic, "Vrline promasenog osporavanja" ("Virtues of the Failed Disputing"), reply to article by Hajrudin Somun "Zasto je Turska (bila) antisrpska" ("Why Turkey (Was) Anti-Serb" and by Fikret Karcic "Bauk koji kruzi Balkanom" ("Spectre that Circles around the Balkans"), *DANI*, Sarajevo, November 5, 2010.
13. Omer Taspinar, *Turkey's Middle East Policies: Between Neo-Ottomanism and Kemalism* Carnegie Papers: (September, 2008), p.3.
14. For me personally it was not easy to participate in a debate with Professor Darko Tanaskovic. We were both ambassadors of our respective countries to Turkey at the same time, in the mid 1990s. We had in Ankara some tense discussions while he was the emissary and exponent of Slobodan Milosevic's policy and I represented the country that was the victim of this policy. I found, however, that human communication should not be avoided having in mind that today's government in Serbia is different from that of Milosevic's period - although its attitude towards Bosnia on vital points has not changed.
15. Graham Fuller, *The New Turkish Republic: Turkey as a Pivotal State in the Muslim World* (Washington DC: US Institute of Peace Press, 2008).
16. Also quoted by Sonja Biserko, The Bosnian Institute, London, 2006.
17. Speech by Ahmet Davutoğlu on the opening ceremony of the conference "Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today" in Sarajevo, October 16, 2009, retrieved from [http://www.ius.edu.ba/dzsusko/Davutoglu\\_transcript\\_dzs.doc](http://www.ius.edu.ba/dzsusko/Davutoglu_transcript_dzs.doc).

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