

# Turkey's Balkan Policy and Its Skeptics

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**ABSTRACT** *During the last decades, in parallel to its economic growth and foreign policy activism, Turkey has become an important regional actor in the Balkans. Turkey's activism has led to different reactions both from inside and outside the region. Skeptical views regarding Turkey's intentions are occasionally expressed in the international media. The skeptics' mostly voiced claim is that Turkey is undermining the Balkans' stability and Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet Turkey's approach to the region does not provide a justifiable basis for these claims.*

**B**ecause of its geographical proximity and historical, social, and cultural ties, the Balkans is a region of particular interest to Turkey. During the last decades, in parallel to its economic growth and foreign policy activism, Turkey has intensified economic relations, public diplomacy, and cultural activities with this region. In the late 2000s, Ankara began playing an active role in regional politics and started important initiatives to establish regional cooperation and mediation, particularly in the Western Balkans. Although its political initiatives slowed down in the aftermath of the Arab spring, Turkey's bilateral rela-

tions with Balkan governments have remained reasonably warm while economic, social, and cultural ties have strengthened.

Turkey's engagement with the Balkans has led to different reactions both from inside and outside the region. Every once in a while, skeptical views regarding Turkey's intentions in the Balkans are expressed in the international media. The skeptics' most-voiced claim is that Turkey is undermining the Balkans' stability and Euro-Atlantic integration. Yet Turkey's approach to the region does not provide a justifiable basis for these claims.

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### **What Turkey Does in the Balkans?**

During the 2000s, Turkey became an active economic player in the Balkans. Between 2000 and 2018, Turkey's exports to Albania, Bulgaria, Greece, Romania, and the ex-Yugoslavian countries increased almost tenfold, and its imports from these countries almost fivefold.<sup>1</sup> While more than 80 percent of Turkey's trade with the region is with EU member countries, trade with the rest of the region has also shown a remarkable increase, thanks to the conclusion of free trade agreements during the 2000s. Turkey's investment stock has exceeded seven billion dollars in Romania and approached two billion dollars in Bulgaria.<sup>2</sup> In the Western Balkans, where Turkish investments were almost nonexistent at the turn of the 2000s, Turkish businesses have become active, making Turkey one of the leading investors in Kosovo and Albania.

Contributing to the Balkans' energy security and interdependence through pipeline construction is another element of Turkey's economic vision regarding the region. The Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), which was inaugurated in June 2018, connects Caspian gas to Greece, while the TurkStream Pipeline will, when complete, transmit Russian gas to the Balkans.

As the poorest region in Europe, the Balkans' economic vulnerability not only limits Turkey's trade and investment opportunities but also poses an indirect security risk for Turkey, as a potential source of political and social instability. Since the early 1990s, Turkey has consistently provided development aid to the Balkan countries to alleviate infrastructural shortcomings, accelerate development, and improve living standards. From the mid-2000s onwards, the amount of financial assistance has increased considerably and has exceeded one billion dollars in total. The Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TİKA), which is one of Turkey's most active public institutions in the Western Balkans, has provided financial and technical support to small entrepreneurs, particularly in the field of agriculture, while offering contributions to health, education, and infrastructure in less-developed parts of the region. A significant portion of TİKA's budget has been allocated to the restoration of Ottoman buildings and monuments with the aim of reviving the history and increasing tourism in the region.<sup>3</sup>

Since the late 2000s, the volume of tourism between Turkey and the Western Balkans has shown a fairly steady increase. Due to a convergence of factors, such as the conclusion of bilateral visa exemption agreements, active cultural diplomacy, and the popularity of Turkish TV shows and series, Turkey has become one of the most popular tourist destinations for people from the region. Compared to the early 2000s, the annual number of visitors from the Balkans has more than doubled, reaching 4.6 million in 2018.

Education has been among the leading areas in which Turkey has offered its contribution to the region. Turkish government scholarship programs offer university education in Turkey to hundreds of students from the Western Balkans, both at undergraduate and graduate levels. Two major universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia (the International University of Sarajevo and the International Balkan University, respectively) are operating with Turkish funding. The Yunus Emre Institute, which has offices in all Western Balkan countries, concentrates on teaching the Turkish language and culture, while the Maarif Foundation, founded in 2016, has been acquired and opened schools in the region.

Through bilateral agreements, Turkey provides military training, logistics, and technical support for the modernization of Western Balkan military forces. Turkey also supports local police forces through the training of officers and the supplying of equipment.

Turkey also actively contributes to religious education and services for Balkan Muslims. Turkey's Presidency of Religious Affairs and its affiliate, the Diyanet Foundation, maintain strong relations with the Islamic institutions in Balkan countries and support the financing and staffing of religious education and services. They also provide students from the region with financial support for studying in *imam-hatip* schools and theology departments in Turkey.

As Turkey's economic, social, and cultural relations with the region improved, Turkey took steps to advance its political role in the Western Balkans. During its chairmanship of the Southeast European Cooperation Process (SEECP) in 2009-2010, the Turkish government launched a number of initiatives for resolving political problems and promoting regional cooperation. Two trilateral dialogue mechanisms (Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Serbia, and Turkey-Bosnia and Herzegovina-Croatia) were launched in this period, and yielded positive results within a short period of time. With these efforts, Turkey drew international attention as an honest broker and a rising political actor in the Western Balkans.

The emergence of political turmoil and security threats in the Middle East diverted Turkey's attention and energy away from the Balkans and prevented the enhancement of the above-mentioned regional political initiatives. Nevertheless, Turkey has been able to maintain strong relations with Balkan governments, which con-

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tinuously invite Turkish investments and show willingness to cooperate in fields like migration management and security. No significant tension in Turkey's relations with any Balkan country has been observed recently; on the contrary, there are frequent high-level visits between the Balkan countries and Turkey, and their political leaders have developed a strong rapport among each other.

While advancing bilateral relations, Turkey has maintained an active neutral stance in regional issues such as the signing and ratification of the Pre-spa Agreement in Skopje and Athens, and the tensions between Belgrade and Pristina. In the former, Turkey welcomed the two governments' willingness to resolve the longstanding dispute and, when the agreement came into force, declared its pleasure to see North Macedonia as a prospective NATO member. In the latter, Turkey did not take any steps to openly support either of the parties or to take advantage of the situation

economically when Kosovo increased customs to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Instead, through telephone diplomacy, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan repeatedly encouraged the leaders in Belgrade and Pristina to aim for a compromise solution.<sup>4</sup> Nor did Turkey show any interest in interfering in domestic political disputes in the Balkan countries. In response to requests from Zagreb to influence the Bosniaks to come to terms with the Croats about the disputed Election Law, Ankara argued that the elements in Bosnia and Herzegovina should solve the problem among themselves. Turkey's aversion to interfering in domestic or regional problems apparently stems from its will to maintain a delicate balance in its Balkans policy, and hence its position as a reliable third country for all actors in the region.

### **Skeptic Views Regarding Turkey**

Turkey's deepening of social, economic, and political relations with the Balkans have attracted international attention. Alongside neutral commentaries, some observers in Europe and the United States, as well as from the Balkans, have received the growth of Turkey's role in the region with skepticism. A common feature of skeptic commentaries is Turkey's inclusion in the list of suspicious, if not ominous, external actors. For example, in an article published in *The New York Times*, businessman George Soros called for more support to Western Balkan countries in their path to EU membership by claiming



that if the region is not integrated into the EU, it will become a sphere of influence of third actors like Russia, China, and Turkey.<sup>5</sup> A German historian described Turkey as a part of a historical ‘great game’ in the Balkans, pursuing its hegemony as an alternative to EU integration.<sup>6</sup> A retired U.S. army general warned about “creeping destabilization” in the Western Balkans, which he described as “a region ripe for exploitation by terrorist organizations and meddling by outsiders, including Russia, China and Turkey.”<sup>7</sup>

While those who are unsure of Turkey’s intentions advise “a close watch” and proactive action against challenges,<sup>8</sup> those who adopt a more negative attitude present Turkey as a threat to the stability of both the region and Europe. The latter conceptualize Turkey’s activism in the Balkans as “neo-Ottoman expan-

sionism” and interpret all its moves within this framework. Developmental assistance, cultural and educational projects, and the restoration of Ottoman-era buildings are viewed as the “export of Islamism,”<sup>9</sup> and even “invasion.”<sup>10</sup> Divisive aims were attributed to Erdoğan’s condemnation of the Srebrenica genocide.<sup>11</sup> Another recent example was the rumors before Erdoğan’s election rally in Sarajevo in May 2018. This event, which was intended as Erdoğan’s only public meeting with Turkish voters living in Europe before the election, was interpreted by skeptics as aiming to extend Turkey’s influence over Bosniaks and even to decide the prospective Bosniak member of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina.<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, no such argument was raised after the event, which turned out to be irrelevant in terms of Bosnian politics.

Presidents of Turkey, Azerbaijan, Serbia, Ukraine, and Northern Cyprus in June 2018 participated in the opening ceremony of TANAP, which is a part of Turkey’s economic vision in the Balkans.

ALI ATMACA /  
AA Photo



Skeptics' claims on Turkey's intentions are usually based on Turkey's special interest in the Turkish and Muslim communities inhabiting the region. According to them, Turkey's intention in supporting these communities is to subvert the region, disrupt its integration with European institutions, and establish its hegemony.

Recent fluctuations in Ankara's relations with Brussels, European capitals, and Washington are also highlighted frequently as a sign of conflict of interests between Turkey and the West. Turkey is thus presented as an alternative to the West and hence an actor to be approached with caution. This view is often expressed by pro-EU and pro-U.S. analysts in the Balkans, who suspect that non-Western actors, particularly Russia and Turkey, are derailing their Euro-Atlantic objectives.<sup>13</sup>

Other premises on which they base their skepticism are the occasional references of Turkish politicians to the Ottoman past and to Islam in their speeches regarding the Balkans. Among these speeches, which are not too numerous anyway, skeptics have usually focused on two quotes, one by the then Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu in 2009 about "reinventing the Ottoman golden age," and the "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo" remark Erdoğan made in Prizren in 2013. Both are posited as evidence of Turkey's ambitions in the region.<sup>14</sup> The latter phrase was even interpreted by a senior British diplomat as "designed to suggest that

in some way the EU and NATO are treating both of them equally badly."<sup>15</sup>

## Is the Skepticism Justifiable?

Bearing in mind the historical experiences of the Balkans and current dynamics of international politics, the concerns of liberal and pro-EU observers regarding the future of the region are understandable. Long-standing ethnic and religious rivalries, unresolved political problems, and post-Cold War conflict do indeed indicate the Balkans' proneness to tensions, while in today's international conjuncture some external actors may benefit more from a troubled Balkans than a peaceful one.

However, inferring expansionist ambitions from the dynamics of Turkey's relations with the Turkish and Muslim populations is at best oversensitivity, at worst scaremongering. While Turkey has a special interest in the situation of the Turks and Muslims in the Balkans, this is not necessarily a sign of a subversive agenda. Experiencing socio-economic problems and lacking resources for running their cultural and religious institutions, these communities ask the support of Turkey, a country they regard as a kin-state. Besides, millions of Turkish citizens of Balkan origin, who still maintain their family connections with the region, expect the Turkish government, municipalities, and NGOs to pay attention to the region's needs. In return, as a regional power having strong cultural and social ties with these

communities, Turkey offers its contribution for economic development, the advancement of human capital, and preservation of cultural heritage. Turkey's contributions in this regard by no means target Turks and Muslims only. Development aids are provided according to requests from Balkan governments, while individuals belonging to any community may benefit from cultural and educational programs such as Turkish government scholarships and the Turkish language courses at the Yunus Emre Institute.

It is true that Turkey has recently been experiencing political differences with Western governments, as well as organizations like NATO and the EU. Yet these differences do not automatically put it into a rival position to the Western world. Similar differences have also been observed within the Euro-Atlantic bloc itself, which is far from being fully united. Under the current presidency, the U.S. has engaged in political and economic competition with the EU; the United Kingdom is currently negotiating the terms of leaving the EU; while the EU countries have failed to adopt a common position regarding pressing issues such as migration management and sanctions against Russia. It is natural that Ankara, which faces its own geopolitical reality and challenges, may every now and then have different political priorities, concerns, and interests from those of Western governments.

In assessing whether Turkey really is undermining the Euro-Atlantic in-

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tegration of the Balkans, or aiming to do so, the real matter of concern should be the overall situation of Turkey's relations with the West and the compatibility of their preferences in the region. As a founding member of the Council of Europe, a member of NATO, and a candidate to the EU, Turkey is still a strong partner of the Euro-Atlantic bloc. Economic relations are quite strong as well. As of the end of 2018, EU and North American countries received more than half of Turkey's exports and owned more than 70 percent of foreign direct investments in Turkey.<sup>16</sup>

It is a fair observation that due to economic competition and cultural differences, Turkey and the EU have for some time been conducting "soft balancing" against each other in the Balkans.<sup>17</sup> That being the case, the mutual interests of Turkey and the EU in the region are far more significant. Above all, sustainable peace and the development of the Balkans, a goal which the EU wants to achieve, is



TİKA restored the Ottoman clock tower, in one of the oldest settlements of the Balkans, Podgorica, Montenegro.

EMIL SABOTIC /  
TİKA / AA Photo

one of Turkey's key priorities as well. If the region becomes more prosperous, Turkish businesses can make more partners in the region and increase their exports there. Better infrastructure will encourage more Turkish companies to invest, while an increase in the region's welfare will decrease the risk of socio-political tensions and violent radicalization. On the other hand, any instability or conflict in the Balkans will incur significant risks and losses for Turkey. An outbreak of conflict would disrupt Turkey's land transportation with Europe and bring security risks, such as terrorism and transnational crime, at its European border.

Moreover, any serious tension or conflict would likely damage Turkey's multilateral Balkan policy. Unlike other major international actors involved in the region, Turkey has a

strong potential to establish close relations with all Balkan communities on various grounds. Its geographical proximity, shared elements in language, religion, and culture, as well as mutual economic interests, provide Turkey with a fertile ground for cooperation with not only Turkish and Muslim populations but also non-Muslims. Because of this structure of opportunity, the continuation of peace in the Western Balkans is crucial for Turkey's interests. Indeed, it has largely been thanks to the prevalence of peace and stability from the early 2000s onwards that Turkey has found the opportunity to communicate and cooperate with a wide spectrum of political and social actors in the region. If that peace and stability is damaged, Turkey will not only have to cope with the complications caused by conflicts, but will also be obliged to take sides –espe-



cially if Turkish or Muslim actors are involved— thereby losing the opportunity to utilize its broad relationship potential.

Nor are there any observable concerns among Turkish policymakers about negative consequences of the region's integration with the West. There has not so far been any case in which Turkey's bilateral relations with a Balkan country was injured after the latter's membership in Euro-Atlantic institutions. On the contrary, Turkey's most important economic partners in the Balkans have long been Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece, all of which are both NATO and EU members. Leaving aside the longstanding disputes with Greece on the Aegean Sea and Cyprus, which are unrelated to the context of Balkan politics, Turkey has close political relations with all these countries. No deterioration of relations with other recent members of NATO and the EU in the Balkans has been observed, either. Turkey's political relations with Albania, Montenegro, Slovenia, and Croatia have been on very good terms and its economic relations are deepening.

As regards to Turkish politicians' discourses on the Balkans, their interpretation should bear in mind their venue, context, and target audience. Some statements may sound, for unfamiliar or oversensitive ears, to convey a meaning about foreign policy, but in essence they don't. For example, to someone from the Balkans the mention of a number of Balkan towns within "Turkey's spiritual borders" may sound like a threat to their

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territorial integrity,<sup>18</sup> but if it is made at a local party congress in a city inhabited by citizens of Balkan origin, it would be more appropriate to interpret it as a heartening speech to party members. Even a statement made at an event abroad, such as Erdoğan's Sarajevo rally in 2018, may be intended for a domestic target audience rather than an external one.

Turkish politicians' association of the Ottoman past and Islam with the Balkans are almost exclusively addressed to Turkish and Muslim audiences and, more importantly, not necessarily articulated in the context of foreign policy. Davutoğlu's 2009 remark was made in the opening speech about a conference on the Ottoman history, while Erdoğan's 2013 remark was in an informal public meeting attended mostly by Turks. When read with the rest of the speeches, neither

of these quotes implies an aggressive or discriminatory intent; on the contrary, both speeches emphasize peace and solidarity in the Balkans.<sup>19</sup>

Considering that these are the most oft-cited quotes by the skeptics, Turkish politicians cannot really be accused of using provocative or divisive rhetoric regarding the Balkans. Thus, attributing ulterior motives to them by cherry-picking their statements out of context is a misinterpretation at best. Turkey's official Balkan discourse is also far from indicating an expansionist or disruptive agenda. For years, Ankara has repeatedly declared its respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Balkan states, and encouraged regional dialogue and cooperation, while neither Islamism nor "neo-Ottomanism" has ever been pronounced as an element of Turkey's Balkan policy.

## Concluding Remarks

Contrary to the expectations in the early 2000s, the Euro-Atlantic integration of the Balkans has not progressed smoothly and a variety of international actors have become increasingly active in the region. In response, the securitization of external actors has become a discourse practice among some observers in Europe and the U.S. Questioning the intentions of external actors is understandable to a certain extent, as some of them may indeed not mind seeing tensions and conflicts in the region, and even benefit from that. Yet the problem with this discourse is in its

tendency to depict all non-Western actors as suspicious intruders. Many commentaries give the impression that while Western governments and Euro-Atlantic institutions are legitimate international actors to be present in the Balkans, all third actors are potentially a menace to peace and stability. This is obviously an exclusionist and hegemonic discourse.

Turkey's policy principles and preferences in the Balkans do not yield any solid ground to characterize it as a revisionist or destabilizing actor. With its "regional ownership" and "all-inclusiveness" principles, Turkey has been offering the region a vision of peace and stability based on inter-governmentalism and interdependence. It has so far contributed to the alleviation of occasional disputes while taking concrete steps to strengthen regional dialogue and cooperation through inter-governmental consultative mechanisms and infrastructural projects such as the Belgrade-Sarajevo highway. Turkey has not so far raised any objections to the Balkans' deepening of relations with Euro-Atlantic structures. On the contrary, it has long supported, even lobbied for, the Balkan countries' membership in NATO and the EU.

Skeptic views on Turkey's intentions may stem from different factors. Some commentators, especially those based in the Balkans, might be under the influence of longstanding prejudices about Turkey, while others might be unfamiliar with the Turkish political discourse or overly sensitive about "early signals." Mean-

while, some may be aiming to alarm the Euro-Atlantic bloc to accelerate enlargement or to discredit Turkey in the region.

Whatever purpose they have, these views do not appear to resonate much in the Balkans. Despite the fluctuations in Turkey's relations with the EU and the U.S., its relations with all the Balkan countries have shown a positive trend in recent years. Thanks to its balanced approach, cooperation in economic, social, and security-related areas, as well as Erdoğan's personal friendship with leaders like Boyko Borisov, Bakir Izetbegović, Edi Rama, Hashim Thaçi, and Aleksandar Vučić, Turkey has become one of the closest political partners of the Balkan countries. The frequency of high-level visits, on-going and planned projects and the stable increase in trade volume and tourism all indicate the strengthening of relations.

Observers concerned about external actors today often present historical analogies to earlier instances of international competition over the Balkans. One should not forget that the real source of the past conflicts was not the presence of international actors per se, but rather the strictly zero-sum understanding of relations, both among great powers and Balkan communities. This mindset, which is unfortunately still observable in the context of Balkan politics, narrows the opportunities for mutual understanding while keeping rivalries alive. In today's geopolitical conjuncture, the Balkans is a geography in which

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a number of international actors are involved, and this does not seem likely to be reversed in the near future. The more the actors involved in the Balkans today regard the system as a zero-sum one, the more likely that history will repeat. To avoid this, international actors need to acknowledge each other's existence and prioritize the maintenance of peace in their regional policies.

Since stability and prosperity in the Balkans is in the common interest of the EU, the U.S., and Turkey, Turkey's involvement in the region should be regarded favorably, and even encouraged by the West, especially at a time when the EU is no longer the only political power in the region. Turkey's inter-governmental approach can help Balkan countries resolve their problems through dialogue and allow them to cooperate through bilateral and multilateral mechanisms,

while Turkish initiatives can help prevent unforeseen crises and conflicts that could emerge in a geopolitical vacuum. Turkey can thus play a complementary role in the EU's integrative and transformative efforts in consolidating understanding and interdependence in the Balkans. ■

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