

An Overview of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Balkans: 1990-2016

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ABSTRACT *The reforming of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans was a process that started at the end of the Cold War and with the disintegration of Yugoslavia. Turkey started reinventing its role in the geopolitical scene by standing strong to its national interests, opening up to new relations, strengthening old ones and taking a more secure place in the international arena. 25 years after, Turkey has not only earned the position of a strong player in the Balkans but has also become a regional regulator and mediator. Some suspiciously see it as a “neo-Ottoman” approach.*

Since the end of the Cold War, Turkey has been largely regarded as a very important world actor and this comes not only due to shifts in the geopolitical scene and the creation of new axes regarding the western alliances since the fall of the Berlin wall, but also due to Turkey's striking economic, political and social development from the beginning of the 1990's onwards. During this period, of more than 25 years, not only has the international order changed, but together with this new actors have emerged to taken a solid place in the international arena where alongside Turkey. Together with the changing world order Turkish foreign policy has also changed,

reshaped at different stages, following not only the major world historical events but also its internal politics.

In general, Turkish foreign policy has been characterized at times Kemalist, at times Conservative and at times a mixture of both. Mainly designed by a Kemalist school of diplomacy with strong elements of a modern and reformist approach, where national interest is in the forefront of its formulation and the balance of power one of its main characteristics, Turkish foreign policy started its real era of transformation at the end of the Cold War. In fact, modern Turks could not very well understand the

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problems and the nature of communism in the Eastern bloc. This is even though a type of Marxist approach or Marxist philosophy has always existed and been the case in Turkish political thinking especially within the Kemalist groups which have not only been represented just by left or center left in Turkey but also by a very good portion of center right. Kemalism is a tradition, philosophy and way of life that as Philip Robins writes in his paper "Turkish foreign policy since 2002," predates the period of the Kemalist movement in Turkey and it derives from the period of the great reforms of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. This direction has also set the tone of the Turkish government's foreign policy until the early 1990's. Although not understood well ideologically by the average Turkish citizen, as being left-wing was seen as being progressive for many Turks while regressive for many eastern Europeans of the early 1990's, the end of the communist regimes brought a wave of economic benefits for Turkey which was very well utilized by successive governments. Not only did it result in a sudden expansion

of the Turkish markets in the Eastern bloc, which was craving for foreign goods at the cheaper price that Turkey readily offered, but the people in the respective countries were also very keen to travel freely abroad after many years of isolation and Turkey offered security, diversity in culture and cheaper commodities.

In 1992 the statement of President Turgut Özal "Three important areas have opened in front of Turkey: the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Middle East" laid the path to some very important regional agreements between Turkey and the Balkan countries. The same year, the visionary leader of Turkey Özal, conceived in Turkey the Black Sea Economic Cooperation Agreement and Council which also included countries from the Balkans, and in November of the same year a large Balkan summit which convened in Ankara brought together for the first time leaders from the Balkans. Reinventing Turkish foreign policy in the new post-Cold War era, meant a new role for Turkey in the region as a regional player and actor which could easily make up for a missing "big brother" which shared common values, democratic interests, cultural and historical heritage and could offer a fresh new market for the newly independent states. The Balkans were the ones to share the most of the new Turkish experience while also rediscovering the historical ties with the direct descendants of the Ottoman Empire.

As Turkey was trying to give a new orientation to its foreign policy to-



The then Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accompanied by his Kosovo and Albanian counterparts attended the official ceremony for the inauguration of the new terminal building in Kosovo, built by a Turkish company in 2013.

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wards “the new world order,” by showing a more proactive approach to the new post-communist countries north, west and south, the war in Yugoslavia broke. Initially, Turkey resisted any support for the disintegration of former Yugoslavia for fear of a similar situation in the south-east of the country with pro-Kurdish demands increasing every day. Seeing the support of the west towards the newly derived states in the Balkans, while also receiving instructions through the NATO channel and recognizing the intentions of the strenuous nationalist government led by Slobodan Milošević to keep Yugoslavia intact by any means, Turkey decided to support the independence of the former Yugoslav Republics. Therefore it embarked on a new strategy on initially secretly assisting the Bosnian and Kosovar guerrillas, preparing them for the war and afterwards strongly

supporting NATO led coalitions to intervene and stop the bloodshed. The aftermath of the last Balkan war with the strong support for Kosovo’s independence also marks the start of a very intensive relationship between Turkey and the Balkan states. By directly supporting the Balkan countries politically, economically, through direct investments and large trade volumes, through investing in their military capabilities and security as well as opening a new page of these exchanges, the Turko-skeptics have at times labelled this policy as neo-Ottoman.

Turkish Foreign Policy and the Balkans

With the exchange of population in 1923, which came as a result of the Lausanne Treaty or the Treaty of

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Venizelos and Atatürk, thousands from the autochthonous Albanian Muslim Cham population of Northern Greece, together with the remaining Turkish people in the area were forced to leave their homes and were exchanged for the Greeks living on the western shores of Turkey. The second biggest infamous agreement between Turkey and Yugoslavia was signed in July 1938 which was called the Convention on Expatriation of the “non-Slavic element.” This agreement signed by Prime Minister İsmet İnönü of Turkey, saw almost 200,000 Albanian Muslims from the Yugoslav held territories and 28,000 Bosnians be expelled to Turkey in a period from 1938 to 1952. Then yet a second “gentlemen’s agreement” between Tito, the Yugoslav supreme leader, and Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Fuat Köprülü was reached in 1953, an agreement which revived in a way the Convention of 1938 by supposedly using the term of the time “connecting families.” The policy of the Yugoslav authorities to expel Muslims of Albanian and Bosnian ethnicity, which largely continued during the period of the self-iso-

lation of the State of Albania under Hoxha’s dictatorial regime, as well as from provinces such as Kosovo, Sandjak, and Republics such as Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH), Macedonia and Montenegro, in general from Yugoslavia, found support with the Turkish authorities of the time who tried through this mechanism to populate certain areas in Anatolia to balance an increase in the population of Kurds in the east and south east of Turkey.

It has been reported that by 1951 the number of the Muslims in Yugoslavia who were declaring themselves as “Turks,” in order to leave the repression of the Yugoslav authorities had increased by twenty six times, with an estimate of more than 700,000 Albanian Muslims leaving the Yugoslav territories up until the 1970’s. The de-Albanisation of Yugoslavia was not merely a project of Tito which derived from Vasa Cubrilovic’s elaborations of 1935, but the de-Ottomanization of Yugoslavia also seems to have been a very important element in Yugoslav politics until the late 1980’s. Unfortunately, this was carried out with the consent of the Turkish state either through agreements or mainly through regular payments for the compensation of the emigrants. Without mentioning this period of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans, from the last days of Atatürk until the beginning of the 1980’s, a period that is not very enlightening in human terms and political consequences to the region, one cannot analyze Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans from 1992 till today, nor can one explain

the intensity of the Turkish-Balkans relations' during the governments of AK Party and specifically Ahmet Davutoğlu's doctrine on "neo-Ottomanism."

The trend setter for the new Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans from 1991 to 2016 is largely believed to be the end of the Cold War and the Yugoslav dissolution. Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans as part of the general changes and reorientation of the general trends of Turkish external relations can be categorized and analyzed in three different stages of developments which also coincide with major changes in the Turkish domestic affairs:

1. 1991-1998: the ANAP governments (*Anavatan Partisi*) and DYP governments (*Doğru Yol Partisi*), were all center right governments. This was a period which was marked by the reestablishment and intensification of diplomatic relations between Turkey and all the countries in the region. The period coincided with the start of the break-up of the Former Yugoslavia, the independence of Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia and the bloody Bosnian war together with the Dayton Peace Agreement. The end of the communist regimes in the former Eastern bloc had a direct impact on the Turkish society and politics as it occurred at a time when Turkey was finally experiencing a relative calm period in its domestic front with vibrant democratic, center right and reform-led governments of Turgut Özal, and Süleyman Demirel, which enjoyed

excellent relations with the West especially the United States and Germany. The breakdown of the iron curtain did not have an ideological effect on Turkey as the Turks were far from many problems of the Europeans as this has been the case until 1992 where Ankara avoided having foreign policy initiatives and followed the allies. However, the intensity of the relations since 1992 and the pro-NATO and pro-EU approach that the governments of these periods in Turkey followed, towards the Balkan states, set the foundation for the future developments that increased during the period of the Bosnian and Kosovo war and prepared Turkey to take a more active role in the region, although at times contemplated as "support for the Muslims in the region."

2. 1998-2002: Democratic Left Party (*Demokratik Sol Parti*, DSP) led Turkish governments. This period coincided with the Kosovo war, the Macedonian armed conflict, which led to the Ohrid Agreement –an agreement between the Albanian Macedonian National Liberation Army and the Macedonian Security forces– and the consolidation of the new state of Bosnia Hercegovina, which derived from the Dayton Peace Agreement. Despite the active role and the commitment of the Turkish Government to not allow a Bosnian scenario in Kosovo, Turkey remained engaged only through the NATO framework and did not make much effort to become a contact group member for the former Yugoslavia which then consisted of



A Turkish delegation attended the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) summit in Bucharest, Romania on June 25, 2014.

AA PHOTO / KURBANI GEYİK

the U.S., UK, Germany, France and Italy. Had Turkey requested it and become a member of the five decision making countries on Former Yugoslavia, probably the situation could have been much different for Turkish foreign policy in general, as it could have lifted the status of Turkey in the international arena. Additionally, Turkey could have given extra input to the decisions taken by the Contact Group, having a unique cultural and historical understanding of the Balkans. İsmail Cem, who was also the first Foreign Minister to set foot in Prishtina airport in 1999, said in a press statement in Ankara on March 05, 1998, "Turkey is concerned that Kosovo may turn into a second Bosnia. Turkey felt the Bosnian tragedy deep in its heart. We are very sensitive about the issue, and we want to prevent a repetition of the Bosnian drama."

In the case of Macedonia, Turkey became the only country in Europe to recognize the Republic of Mace-

donia with its real name and not as the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM). This was done at a time when the relations between Ankara and Athens were at their worst, with the Cyprus issue being on the top of the agenda, the continental shelf, the grievances on the Aegean islands, the treatment of the Turkish minority in Thrace and the many threats to each other's airspace. President Demirel's official visits to Skopje were a reminder of the harmonious relations between the former Yugoslav Republic and Turkey while offering a new era of cooperation with the new independent states, during the period when the Kosovo war was at its peak. However in 2001, during the Macedonian armed conflict, Turkey was status neutral, while on one side offering help to the Albanian Liberation Army in Macedonia and parts of the Turkish minority in the country and on the other side trying to negotiate a deal with the Macedonian authorities. The involvement of

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the President of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel, and then Prime Minister Ecevit, in reaching a peaceful deal in Macedonia were of a great assistance but not enough to show the strength of the Turkish political outreach in this area of the Balkans. The most important contribution to the peace in the Balkans came from Turkey during the severe stage of the Kosovo war from June 1998 to June 1999. During this period the Kosovo Government in Exile opened an office in İstanbul, and thousands of young Albanian guerrillas were trained in Turkey. None of these could have been possible without the silent approval of the Turkish authorities who at times came under diplomatic attack from Belgrade and Moscow but still continued to host thousands of fleeing refugees as well as helping with the preparations of the NATO bombing campaign until the liberation of Kosovo in June 1999. From that point on, during the period of the reconstruction of Kosovo, as well as during the crisis in Preshevo valley and the Macedonian armed

conflict in 2001, Turkey secured its position as a strong regional player. It was highly regarded by the U.S. and EU for its efforts in solving the Balkans quagmire and its thorough understanding of this region's affairs. With this important contribution during the turbulent years of the late 20th century and beginning of the new millennia, Turkish foreign policy was finally settled in the Balkans, close relations opened the path to fruitful reciprocal cooperation and Turkey earned its seat in the Contact Group for Kosovo, where important decisions for the future of Kosovo and the region were taken.

3. The most important period for Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans is the period from 2002 to 2016, starting from the day that AK Party came to power. Turkish foreign policy in general took a new path and was reoriented towards a more conservative trend, by taking more regional responsibilities, offering security and stability to the region, opening up to new markets and using the expansion of the Turkish economy and its economic development to reach new targets in cooperation and investment. A very important impetus for this new outreach was the decision of the EU to open accession talks with Turkey in 2004, and use this as a model for the Balkans. A European style and European Neighborhood Policy was used as a direction by Ahmet Davutoğlu and his team in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkey. Davutoğlu's thesis on "zero problems with

the neighbors” and “a win-win situation” was a paradigm of the time in the regional affairs in Balkans. Turkey’s involvement not only increased in the regional affairs on bilateral terms, but its pro-active policy in many new regional initiatives, where Turkey was a model of cooperation, was also acknowledged by the U.S. State Department’s reports and the annual Progress Reports issued by EU. Turkey was suddenly becoming the new indispensable actor in the region which also took the Balkan floor as a mediator. The trilateral meetings in Belgrade and İstanbul between Presidents of Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia Hercegovina or the trilateral meetings of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of Turkey, Croatia and Serbia as well as/or Serbia and BiH, were some culminating points in Turkish foreign policy dealings in the region. Helping Kosovo towards recognition of independence in the Islamic Conference Organization or Middle Eastern countries (where Turkish influence was of great importance), assisting Albania’s, Croatia’s and Macedonia’s bid to NATO membership, supporting BiH’s Membership Action Plan for NATO and helping the military and security forces throughout the region towards NATO and regional cooperation, were some of the areas that Turkey clearly worked on during the last ten years. Turkey was associated with the Balkans more than ever before in its history and this brought great relevance to its relations with EU. So intense were these exchanges that for the first time the Turkish Minister of European Integration

started convening consultation talks with counterparts from Albania, Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo and even Croatia which was almost a member, on pre-accession talks and exchange of know how in the field of *acquis communautaire*, at least referring to the Turkish experience on the chapters that Turkey was already negotiating.

This open door policy also had an important economic token. Economic agreements between Balkan countries were signed with Turkey during this period so not only opening the doors to direct Turkish investments but also increasing by two or three times the trade volume between Turkey and many of the Balkan countries in a matter of six years. In 2009 the trade volume between Serbia and Turkey was \$338.9 million, while in 2014 the same trade volume had a great leap and became \$ 819.7 million. Turkey became Albania’s first trading partner in 2015; in Macedonia the second largest investing country and the trade volume with Kosovo, BiH and Montenegro quadrupled in a matter of ten years. This trend clearly showed the new orientation of the Turkey’s Balkan policy which until 2004 had been keeping a balance and following the allies, while from 2004 until 2016 served towards the expansion of the Turkish markets in the Balkans, making Turkey a major player in regional affairs. Turkish companies earned privatization bids in almost all countries in the region by investing in strategic areas such as tele-communication, energy, infra-

structure, mining, tourism, health sector and education. The expansion went further by also opening Turkish cultural centers in almost all the Balkan capitals and some other important historical regional centers such as Novi Pazar, Mostar, Shkoder, Ohrid, Prizren, etc.

By 2015, the outburst of Turkish interests, investments and trade, culture and educational links, became so intense that it was not left unnoticed by the Europeans and U.S. who starting questioning about a “forceful cultural intruder” in the affairs of the Balkans. The then Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutoğlu’s doctrine on the so called “neo-Ottomanism” although based on the Turgut Özal’s school of political thought at the beginning of 1990’s raised worries in European capitals about a possible expansionist policy of Turkey. It became one of the most debated thesis among intellectual circles and political elites in the Balkans, although at times taking a religious connotation which was accompanied by arguments about whether this wave of Turkish geostrategic rationale had sprawled as a result of the religious identification of the elites in this post-conflict region and pre-European accession Balkans, or was it an indication of what Turkey wanted to induce to the regional politics, through its expansionist economic policy mixed with cultural infusions and historical reminiscences. What helped in furthering this debate were also three other important elements that assisted Turkish politi-

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cal and economic dominance in the region. Firstly the investment in the education sector during the last 20 years in almost all countries in the Western Balkans and the extent of this investment in the education of a “young intelligencia” in the region which, although they studied under a Turkish flag and system within their national curriculum, until July 2016 were without their preoccupation and knowledge part of the underworld system that this group had created; the cultural expansion of the Turkish culture, history and common heritage caused by the very capable Turkish soap opera industry; and the very attractive Turkish cultural and sea tourism which attracted millions of citizens from the Balkans who until 2012 could not move freely in Europe and elsewhere so Turkey served as the only accessible gateway.

The general debate on “neo-Ottomanism” and “expansionism” was exacerbated by what Henry Kissinger calls the “personalization of foreign policy” whereby leaders address foreign policy issues based on personal friendships rather than pure national interest. The statements issued in Prizren square or

the center of Sarajevo, have raised doubts among allies, who have shifted in a matter of years from a position of seeing Turkish involvement in the region as very constructive, to a position of seeing it as dubious.

Conclusion

Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans remains to be a very important development since the end of the Cold War. Whether through a “neo-Ottoman” doctrine or a less-expansionist foreign policy approach, Turkey’s role in the region is directly linked to its geopolitical position in the world as an important world player and a

bridge between east and west. The Balkans have a long experience with the direct descendant of the Ottoman Empire, and they know that allies once proved to be allies always remain as such, especially when they are part of the same allegiance. Turkey’s policies towards the region will continue to be very important even if all the countries in the region join the European Union. The membership of the EU is not a substitute for an important player in regional affairs that has managed to become a major Regional Regulator by earning its place through historical relevance and cultural proximity, and serving as a strategic pillar for many future challenges in this still volatile region. ■