

Turkey's New Activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and Obstacles

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ABSTRACT

Following the Turkish Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), 2009 represented the year of Turkey's return to the Western Balkans as an influential actor. Granted, Turkey's Balkan policy became a matter of contention. Ankara's Bosnia and Herzegovina initiative even raised questions as to whether Turkey is aspiring to restore its former power and influence over the region. Those expressing their unease over this initiative are accusing Turkey of nurturing inclinations reminiscent of the Ottoman state. To counter this image, Turkish officials are using every opportunity to underline that Ankara has no intentions other than to contribute to the consolidation of peace and stability in the Western Balkans. This article reviews the last two years of Turkish policy towards the region, and includes evaluations on the perception of Turkey's proactive Western Balkans policy.

As of 2002, Turkey entered a process of important social and political transformation accompanied by a rise in national income per capita that eventually positioned Turkey as the 16th largest economy in the world in 2010. Economic success, along with the improving political stability in the country, led to the growth of self-confidence in Turkish foreign policy. With a proactive foreign policy spanning from the Balkans to the Middle East and the Caucasus - regions that are connected to Turkey geographically and historically- Turkey is endeavoring to contribute to the peace and stability in these regions. At the same time, while working towards a global order based on justice, equality and transparency, Turkish leaders envision their country not solely as a regional power, but as a global power. In January 2011, Turkey's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, declared that in 2023 Turkey would be one of the world's greatest economic powers, with an effective regional and global role.¹

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It is obvious that Ankara's new foreign policy makers are offering a vision, which puts Turkey at the center of the international system, while refusing to be a pawn for others' strategic goals. In line with this policy, Turkey has taken a pro-active stance and followed a multi-dimensional foreign policy approach. Turkey's twin goals are: first to make peace with its neighbors through policies of conciliation, and second to act as an agent of mediation between its clashing neighboring countries.

In the last two years, the growing role of Turkish diplomacy is particularly evident in the Western Balkans. However, this new dynamism has also led to new questions as to Turkey's "true intentions" in the Balkan countries. This concern was reinforced when Davutoğlu delivered a speech in Sarajevo on October 16, 2009, where he declared that the objective of Turkish foreign policy was to put the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus along with Turkey at the center of world politics in the future.²

Different attempts have been made to explain the new dimensions of the Turkish foreign policy approach in the Balkans. The mainstream account argues that Turkey is eager to strengthen its position in the Balkans, so that it could improve its status on the global scene. But other regional nationalistic circles have developed rhetoric of 'neo-Ottomanism' with the arguments that Turkish involvement in the Balkans is of an ideological nature and that it has historical and religious roots.

Engaging this debate, the first part of the article aims to explain the importance of the Balkans for Turkey. The second part evaluates Turkey's dynamic new Western Balkan policy and its implications. The third part is devoted to the discussion of how Turkey's Western Balkans policy is perceived, and what obstacles remain before a more successful Turkish foreign policy in the region.

Why does the Balkans Matter for Turkey?

Until a few years ago, Turkey undisputedly had a completely Western-oriented and unchanging foreign policy. With the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in the early part of the 20th century, Turkey's political elites chose to align themselves and participate in the Western defense and security system and integrate into the Western economies. For this reason, the developments taking place in the Balkans closely concern Turkey since the Balkan region is the geographic bridge to the West. With varying intensity, Turkey's interest in the Balkans has been a constant throughout the history of the Republic.

There are five key reasons that explain Turkish engagement in the Balkans. The first reason is the longstanding common history of Turks with the peoples of the

Balkans. Although this common history has not always been smooth or without conflict, the populations and cultures of the region are familiar with each other. They could draw on their commonalities to secure a constructive basis for regional cooperation.

A second reason that draws Turkey into the Balkans is the human factor. According to the official statistics, more than one million Turkish minorities live within the Balkan states. In addition, other Muslim communities in the region are important to Turkey. After centuries of migrations, unbreakable ties have been established between Turkish society and Muslim communities living in the Balkans. Those Turkish citizens with Balkan origins now form a natural lobby within Turkey, which is integrated into the state system. This lobby is made up of associations, foundations, journalists, academics, parliamentarians, ministers, diplomats, and military personnel etc. This is one of the core reasons why the government of Turkey cannot be indifferent to the conditions and future of the Muslim communities in the Balkan countries. To better respond to this situation, certain initiatives have recently been taken at the institutional level. A department was recently set up under the Prime Ministry for Turks and relative communities abroad. In this regard, Turkey essentially wants assurances that these communities will live under good conditions and enjoy equal rights and respect by their co-citizens in the Balkan region. Turkey has no ambition to control these communities or the countries that host them; hence, the Balkans' Muslim communities and their political representatives are independent of Turkey.

The third reason for Turkey's engagement in the Balkans is associated with geography. Any instability that emerges in the region may have political, economic and cultural ramifications on Turkey. For this reason, having peace and stability in the Balkans is among Turkish foreign policy's top priorities. According to Turkey's Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "History has showed that it is not possible to establish and maintain global peace without peace and stability in the Balkans and the Middle East. And since Turkey is in the center of this area, it cannot remain indifferent to the developments there."³

Improving economic presence in the region is the fourth reason to explain Turkey's policy of engagement in the Balkans. Turkey's foreign trade with the Bal-

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kan countries was 2.9 billion USD in 2000 and rose to 17.7 billion USD in 2008. Even though Turkey's exports to the Balkans showed an increase of 84 percent between 2000 and 2008, the Balkan countries' share in Turkey's foreign trade continues to remain low. Balkan countries accounted for 6.7 percent in Turkey's total exports in 2009 and 3.4 percent in its total imports. The cumulative value of Turkish foreign direct investments in the Balkans in 2009 was around 4.6 billion USD. And the total value of Turkish construction projects in the Balkan countries, during the period of 1994-2009, was around 8.8 billion USD.⁴ In order to improve economic relations with the Balkan states, the "Balkan Countries Working Group" has recently been established within the Under-secretariat for Foreign Trade.

The last reason for Turkey's policy of engagement in the Western Balkans is to secure allies among these countries to support Turkey's EU bid in the future. The United States helped Turkey increase its political and military influence in the Western Balkans during the 1990s. In fact, since the beginning of the 1990s, whenever the United States took an active part in the Balkans, Turkey also increased its influence in that region.⁵ However, after the September 11 terrorist attacks, the United States left Turkey to make its own way in the region. Since then, as part of a larger international presence in the region, Turkey has been working harder to enhance its relations with the Western Balkan countries.

Only two months after Davutoğlu was appointed as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Turkish Chairmanship-in-Office of the South-East European Cooperation Process (SEECP) started. During this one-year chairmanship, the frequency of high level visits between Turkey and the Balkan countries remarkably intensified, and Turkey organized many significant Balkan events, which were presented in a positive light in the Balkan media. But almost immediately after the Chairmanship-in-Office of the SEECP, Turkey's Western Balkans policy started to concentrate on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Well aware of how fragile the transition period is for Bosnia and Herzegovina and the potential negative regional effects, Turkey has started pursuing an active policy with a special focus on this country.

Acting for Bosnia and Herzegovina

Turkey has historical, cultural and inter-communal ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Through the Peace Implementation Council, an international body charged with implementing the Dayton Peace Agreement for Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey works for maintaining peace in this country. Turkey's foreign policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is based on the support for territorial integrity,

and the respect for the country's multi-ethnic and multi-cultural composition. Moreover, Turkey's involvement in this country goes beyond technical issues, as there is a deeper connection between the two countries. Among the more religious circles within Turkey, the perception of Sarajevo and Bosnia is emotional, as Sarajevo is sometimes referred to as the "Jerusalem of Europe."⁶

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Turkey has expected to become one of the mediators in the Butmir negotiations, headed by the EU and the US, in an effort to contribute finding a solution to the constitutional changes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, since Turkey was not invited to be a moderator, Davutoğlu has initiated his own brand of diplomacy.⁷

Davutoğlu's policy towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is being conducted on three levels.⁸ The first one is the local level where the aim is to reinforce dialogue between the country's main ethnic groups. Turkey's longstanding position on this issue is that Bosnian politicians should reach a compromise rather than have constitutional amendments imposed upon them by Western countries. As a reflection of this approach, in an effort to add momentum to the formation of a new government, Davutoğlu went to Bosnia and Herzegovina twice after the October 2010 elections.

The second level is a regional one, where Davutoğlu is trying to bring Bosnia and Herzegovina and its neighbors, namely Serbia and Croatia, together, so that they can resolve their existing problems. Turkey's regional approach could also contribute to improving relations because it can help nurture mutual confidence and respect between different ethnic communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina.⁹ For this reason, Davutoğlu has initiated trilateral meetings with his colleagues from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina on the one hand, and colleagues from Serbia and Croatia on the other. Turkey's central message during these trilateral meetings is to convince Bosniak politicians that it would be better for them to cooperate with their neighboring countries.

The third level of Davutoğlu's diplomatic efforts towards Bosnia and Herzegovina is to lobby for the country and act as its representative of sorts at international platforms. The main aim is to preserve the territorial integrity and multiethnic

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character of Bosnia and Herzegovina while accelerating its Euro-Atlantic integration. It could be said that Turkey has become the quasi spokesperson for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the international arena. In the context of his Bosnia and Herzegovina visit of September 2010, Turkish President Abdullah Gül reiterated Turkey's support for this country, saying that Turkey wants to see Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as other Western Balkan countries, become member states of NATO and the EU.

During his October 2009 speech in Sarajevo, Davutoğlu underlined that for Ankara territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina is as important as the territorial integrity of Turkey, and that the prosperity and security of Sarajevo is as vital as the security and prosperity of Istanbul.¹⁰ These words indicate that Turkey will not be a passive actor when it comes to handling issues pertaining to the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It can be argued that Davutoğlu treats Bosnia with a parental and protective approach. Even though Bosniaks do not regard Turkey as the mother country, they greatly appreciate Turkey's sensitivity to issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some Bosniaks hold the view that Turkey's active presence in their country means that Bosniaks are not alone in international politics and have not been left to their fate.

Improving Relations with Serbia

One of the key results of Turkey's active engagement in the Balkans has been the improvement of bilateral relations between Turkey and Serbia. In recent years, high level mutual visits between Turkey and Serbia have intensified. For example, Serbian President Boris Tadic visited Turkey in 2007 and in 2010; Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic visited Turkey in 2011, while Turkish President Abdullah Gül visited Serbia in 2009, and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan visited in 2010. In addition, during the last two years, dozens of ministerial visits have been carried out.

Relations between Turkey and Serbia have been very closely affected in the past 20 years by the negative developments in the former Yugoslavian region. In the past, although Turkey conducted a cautious and tentative policy in matters regarding Serbia and showed desire to maintain its relations with Belgrade, the conflicts in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995 and in Kosovo in 1999 have negatively



Photo: AA, Salih Zeki Fazlıoğlu

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affected Ankara-Belgrade relations. Serbs believe that during the 1990s Turkey sided with Serbia's opponents.¹¹

However, bilateral ties between Turkey and Serbia began to improve when democratic forces were elected to government in Serbia in October 2000. Following Kosovo's declaration of independence on February 17, 2008, Turkey-Serbia relations soured again as Turkey became one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence. According to Turkey's former ambassador to Belgrade, Suha Umar, Kosovo was not the only reason why relations were complicated again. The bilateral relations deteriorated again because of the lack of common ground, prejudice against Turkey, and outside manipulation.¹² However, since 2009 Ankara and Belgrade have been taking determined steps to improve bilateral ties.

Turkish officials use every occasion to underline that they see Turkey and Serbia as neighbors, despite the absence of a common border. Ankara views Serbia, whose location provides for Turkey the quickest way to reach Europe, as the key country for peace and stability in the Balkans. From Serbia's point of view, Turkey is central to the development of certain infrastructure projects. The negative ef-

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Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic began a policy of engaging with Ankara after March 2009, with the hope of landing some deals.¹³

Whatever the cause for the recent rapprochement between Turkey and Serbia, it highlighted the weaknesses in relations and insufficient dialogue between the two countries in the past. This lack of dialogue led to mutual negative media criticism and rebukes. Similarly, the current positive development in their bilateral ties seems to have also found its echo in the media of both countries. The governments of both countries believe that relations are evolving towards a strategic partnership. The changes in the direction of Turkey's foreign policy towards Serbia are seen in the statements of President Abdullah Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan and Davutoğlu. The common message is that Serbia is a key partner in creating a new era of relations in the Balkans. During his visit to Turkey in March 2011, Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetkovic said that good relations between Serbia and Turkey constitute a critical contribution to stability in the Balkans. Currently, Turkey and Serbia are working on improving their economic ties, as reflected in the growing interest of Turkish businessmen in Serbia.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Kosovo continues to remain as a major thorn between Ankara and Belgrade. After Kosovo's declaration of independence, Turkey initially acted with caution, as it did not want to be positioned on the front lines as one of the strongest supporters of Kosovo. For example, Turkey didn't deliver its opinion (in favor of Kosovo) at the International Court of Justice, when Serbia brought the question forward in 2009 of whether Kosovo's proclamation of independence was in conformity with international law. However, when the International Court of Justice expressed its legal opinion and recognized legitimacy of the independence of Kosovo on July 22, 2010, Turkey's official position changed in favor of Kosovo. During his visit to Kosovo on November 3-4, 2010, Prime Minister Erdoğan reiterated Turkey's support for Kosovo's independence, economic development, and its territorial integrity. Furthermore, during the December 2010 electoral campaign, the Prime Minister of Kosovo, Hashim Thaci, used the posters showing him alongside Erdoğan in his election campaign.

Nevertheless, the true test of the Ankara-Belgrade rapprochement will be how these two countries deal with future developments in Kosovo. Although Serbia's

position is that the EU would be the only viable mediator in a new dialogue process between Belgrade and Prishtina, the door has been unofficially left open for Russia, and potentially even the United States.¹⁵ In contrast, although both Erdoğan and Davutoğlu have proposed to mediate a new dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, so far, this offer has not met with a positive response from Serbian officials.

Even though Serbia's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Vuk Jeremic, has worked towards a rapprochement between Turkey and Serbia, his public statements have cast a shadow of doubt over his sincerity. For instance, Jeremic said in November 2009 during an address to the European Parliament "that they had been under the reign of Turks for 500 years, and that they did not want to be in the same waiting room with them for the EU membership."¹⁶ Also, in an interview published in a German newspaper on May 30, 2010 Jeremic warned that "if Serbia did not become a new member to the EU, his country would come under the Turkish sphere of influence, like it was the case during the Ottoman times."¹⁷ Jeremic ascribes to Turkey a negative image, while he also uses Turkey as a threat to blackmail the European Union into accepting Serbia as a new member. Meanwhile, Serbian authors Petrovic and Reljic make point that Davutoğlu committed a political misstep when he said, "if there was no Ottoman state, Sokullu Mehmed Pasha - Ottoman Grand Vezir who was taken from one Serbian family - would be a poor Serbian man who lived just to have a small farm." They said Davutoğlu must be aware that such assertions are not winning the hearts of non-Muslims in the Balkans.¹⁸ As this example suggests, officials from both countries will be well advised to mind the language and imagery used on certain highly sensitive issues. Instead, they should concentrate on cooperation and their common European future.

Outcomes of Turkish Engagement in the Western Balkans

Turkish engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the improving relations with Serbia opened the way for the Balkan Summit held in Istanbul on April 24, 2010. Presidents of Turkey, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, accompanied by their respective foreign ministers, participated in the summit. The Istanbul Declaration, adopted at the summit, proposes that efforts will be made to secure a lasting peace and stability in the region, and the territorial integrity of Bosnia and Herzegovina will be respected.¹⁹

The Turkish media qualified the tri-partite Balkan Summit in Istanbul as "historic." Many foreign commentators also considered it a success. Not only were favorable messages exchanged at the summit, but also positive steps were taken towards a common future. Although the Bosnian Serbs remained highly critical,

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the Istanbul Summit has the potential of being hailed as one of the turning points in the relations between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia. After three years of almost complete cessation of regular inter-state relations, the summit in Istanbul was important because it reopened a conduit for normal communication be-

tween Belgrade and Sarajevo. Granted, no one should haste to label this summit as "historic." The Serbian government and President Tadic appear to have been playing a double game. On the one hand, they stated that Serbia would respect Bosnia and Herzegovina's territorial integrity. On the other hand, they staunchly support Milorad Dodik, a Bosnian Serb leader, who aspires to undermine the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. His threats continued well into March 2011, when Dodik declared that Bosnia and Herzegovina will disappear like the former Yugoslavia.²⁰

With Ankara's mediation, Serbia finally approved the contentious appointment of the ambassador from Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is believed that the crisis over the appointment of a new ambassador to Bosnia and Herzegovina's Embassy in Belgrade was defused as a result of a meeting between Erdoğan and Tadic. Turkey also mediated between conflicting political parties of Bosniaks in the Serbian part of the Sandzak region. Turkey helped Spain, in its capacity as the term president of the EU, to find an acceptable formula for Kosovo's participation to the EU-Western Balkans Summit, which was held in Sarajevo on June 2, 2010.

There is a strong belief in Turkey that Ankara has influenced the Serbian Parliament's adoption of a decision regarding the Srebrenica genocide. The Serbian Parliament's April 2010 decision condemns the killing of eight thousand Bosniaks in Srebrenica in July 1995 and apologizes for it.²¹ Before the adoption of the decision on Srebrenica, Davutoğlu indicated that Serbia would soon officially "apologize" for it. Turkish media sources also reported that Davutoğlu had seen the text of the resolution approved in the Serbian Parliament long before the vote, and that Turkish officials helped the two sides to reach an understanding over the content of the apology.²²

It should be clear that some Serbian politicians, non-governmental organizations, and westerners were for several years pushing Serbia's government to apologize for Srebrenica. Then again, the timing of the passage of Srebrenica decision by the Serbian Parliament leads us to think that the situation in Kosovo could be behind this move. Serbia had filed a complaint to the International Court of Jus-

tice through the UN General Assembly against Kosovo's declaration of independence and was expecting the decision of the Court to be in favor of Serbia. This expectation may have pushed the Serbian government to stop ignoring the anti-Serbian articles of the judgment passed by the same court in 2007.²³ So, the Serbian government might have encouraged its parliament to pass the Srebrenica decision to put itself in a favorable light when it would come to the Kosovo issue. Still, the decision on Srebrenica and the Balkan Summit in Istanbul remain important steps towards improving relations between Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Obstacles before Turkey's Western Balkan Policy

The main obstacles before Turkey's becoming an influential player in the Western Balkans are regional prejudices and fears and the West's lack of support and cooperation for Turkey's quest for a more dynamic role. Because these factors are essentially out of Ankara's control, Turkish influence in the Western Balkans may remain limited for now.

Prejudices inside the Region

Much of the fears stacked against Turkey originate from deep-rooted prejudices, misunderstandings, and a lack of information. However, Turkey's modern cultural influence has been felt throughout the Balkans. For example, Turkish television series are very popular in the region. There is a growing audience for this sector in many parts of the world. Moreover, efforts and activities in the field of education and tourism have recently become an effective tool enabling individuals from the Balkan countries to not only learn more about Turkey, but also to question their prejudices against Turks, and change their perceptions. A concrete example was the simultaneous broadcasting on March 18, 2011 on seven famous TV channels in Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo of different Turkish television series. This pop culture medium can open the door towards an improved perception of Turkey among the local populations of the Balkans and open their minds towards improving relations towards Turkey. In turn, this could facilitate Turkey's Balkan policy.

Although Turkey views its historic relations with the Balkans through a positive lens, the people and the governments of the Balkans have a very different take on their shared history. The contrast can be so marked that certain nationalists

in the Balkans blame all the wrongs and misfortunes of their countries on the Ottoman era. While the Turkish government presents the Ottoman period as a golden era for the Balkans, one Croatian journalist wrote that for many people of the region the Ottoman period represented an era of persecution, widely regarded as a national tragedy.²⁴ Even for some Bosniaks, like the founder of the Bosniak Institute in Sarajevo, Adil Zulfikarpasic, who had a positive view of the medieval Bosnian state, the Ottoman period of Bosnia and Herzegovina was characterized as a silver era, not quite a golden era.²⁵ Official histories of other Balkan states, including Albania, generally describe their past in terms of a centuries-long fight to liberate themselves from the “Ottoman yoke.” In the pages of the Albanian Academy of Sciences, Ottomans have been described as fanatic, backward and intolerant rulers, who oppressed Albanians with heavy taxation, political discrimination and the absence of the most elementary human rights, and would even resort to the massacre of the Albanian population.²⁶

To understand the deep prejudices held against the Ottomans during their reign over the Balkans, two explanations should be given. During the 19th century Balkan populations were exposed to Western romantic ethno nationalism, which based itself on notions of shared language, history, religion, and ethnography. Balkan romantic nationalists, who were often educated, worked, or lived in Western Europe or Russia, succeeded in shaping national identities and engendering a desire for political self-determination, but they also laid the ground for a distorted interpretation of Ottoman history.²⁷ For example, Albania’s interests were for centuries integrated into the interests of the Ottoman state, so that there would be little cause for general unrest. According to Dennis P. Hupchick, without a real threat coming from Greek, Serbian, Montenegrin, and Bulgarian territorial encroachment into their lands, Albanians would most likely not have adopted Western-style nationalism.²⁸ Nevertheless, through Albania’s recent nation-building process and its drive to develop a modern western oriented Albanian identity, it is rewriting its history and is portraying the Turks as the enemies of Albanians.

The second explanation is that the collective memory of the Balkans does not reach the more distant past. The populations of the Balkans remember the more recent history of the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th century, when struggle and tensions were rampant not only in the Balkans, but also at the other parts of the Ottoman state, including Anatolia. Specific events and problems of that time period are being cast over the whole Ottoman period. Ottoman history and its rule over the Balkans is far more complex and Balkan historians need to dig deeper and have a more holistic and complete reading of the entire period of the Ottoman history to have a more balanced outlook.

Despite historical disagreements between Turkey and the people of the Western Balkans, especially for the Muslim populations, Turks are viewed as a friendly nation. According to the Gallup Balkan Monitor Survey 2010, 75.1 percent of the population of Albania, 60.2 percent of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 93.2 percent of Kosovo, and 76.6 percent of Macedonia consider Turkey as a friendly country. However, the situation is not the same for the non-Muslim population of the Western Balkans. For example, in Croatia only 26.7 percent of the population considers Turkey to be a friendly country, in Montenegro it is 33.5 percent, and in Serbia it is only 18.2 percent. Because of Turkey's political support for Macedonia's territorial integrity and the dispute over its name with Greece, Macedonians are the exception when it comes to the attitude of non-Muslim people. It is worthwhile to notice that compared to 2006, in 2010 the number of people who consider Turkey as a friendly country has increased 33 percent in Albania, 52 percent in Kosovo and 76 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while the perception of the non-Muslim population in the Western Balkans remained relatively the same, with minor changes.²⁹

The main reason for the rise of "friends of Turkey" among Albanians, both in Albania and Kosovo, is Turkey's support for Kosovo's independence. Albanians are totally Western oriented, without any particular religious solidarity with Turkey. Nevertheless, Albanians need to maintain religious ties with Turkey to block the influence of certain Muslim-Arab groups, whose interpretation of Islam is highly controversial for Albanians.³⁰ At the same time, while Kosovo officials ask for Turkish support for their independence, they also do not want to see a serious increase of Turkish involvement in their domestic affairs, revealing a complex relationship between Turkey and Albanians.

The lack of friendly relations between the non-Muslim Balkan populations and Turkey stems from a heavy dose of regional skepticism towards Turkey, which is historic and has not yet been overcome. This explains why different countries in the Balkans are reticent of being part of a Turkish Balkan policy. Certain political groups in the Balkans even fear that Turkey's engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina is part of a larger Turkish ambition to create a greater space for its influence in the region. Perhaps, this is why Ankara has supposedly chosen to cooperate locally with more Islamic oriented politicians. Some *Wikileaks* cables have revealed that a number of U.S. diplomats share similar concerns.³¹

Leading Serbian Orientalist Darko Tanaskovic, who used to be the Yugoslav ambassador in Ankara from 1995-1999, is very critical towards Turkey's Balkan policy. He considers that the enhanced involvement of Turkey not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also throughout the Balkans is an integral part of a long-

term policy based on neo-Ottoman ideology. According to Tanaskovic, Turkey's motivation is to prove that it is "the boss" in the Balkans and to show that Ankara is able to solve the problems that others cannot.³²

Politicians, academics, and journalist of Bosnian Serbs are also arguing that Turkey has the intention to create a so-called "neo-Ottoman Balkan." Bosnian Serbs do not hide that they are disturbed by Turkey's Bosnia and Herzegovina diplomacy. Generally speaking, politicians from the Bosnian-Serb entity, Republic of Srpska, do not believe in the objectivity of Turkish diplomacy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, because according to them Ankara represents only the interests of the Bosniaks. The President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, thinks that Turkey is trying to somehow turn Bosnia and Herzegovina into a Bosniak state with the hope of undermining the autonomy of the Republic of Srpska.³³ For Dodik, the tri-partite Balkan Summit in Istanbul and its declaration has no significance for Bosnia and Herzegovina, as it has not been formally adopted. Since Silajdzic has signed it without the authorization of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for Dodik it is a non-existent document.³⁴

Until four and a half years ago, Ankara also had diplomatic relations with the Bosnian Serbs. As Bosnia and Herzegovina's former High Representative Christian Schwarz-Schilling said in 2006, Turkey helped out not only Bosniaks but the whole of Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁵ However, Dodik, having developed a secessionist discourse towards Bosnia and Herzegovina, caused the dialogue between Turkey and Bosnian Serbs to suffer a setback.

It is of special importance for Davutoğlu, who wants to mediate a settlement of the existing problems in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to develop dialogue with all the constitutive nations of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Therefore, on January 29, 2011, Davutoğlu, for the first time, visited Dodik in Banjaluka. According to Dodik, Davutoğlu's visit was important to strengthen mutual confidence between the two countries and to help develop economic relations. However, the attitude of Nebojsa Radmanovic, the Serbian member of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Presidency, dealt a blow to Davutoğlu's positive outlook. When Davutoğlu failed to show up on time for his appointment with Radmanovic due to his protracted meeting with Dodik, Radmanovic cancelled the meeting. On top of it, the cabinet of Radmanovic claimed that the Turkish delegation demanded the removal of the flag of Republic of Srpska from the meeting hall, which the Turkish officials denied.³⁶ Rajko Vasic, the Secretary General of the Union of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD), of which Dodik is the leader, qualified the flag crisis as an "Ottoman incident," thus implying that Turkish representatives are not very much

wanted in the Republic of Srpska. Bosnian Deputy Foreign Minister Ana Trisic Babic contended that Davutoğlu's visit to Banjaluka was driven by ill intentions. Some journalists, politicians and academics of Serb origin seizing on the flag crisis lambasted Turkey, with some going as far as saying that Davutoğlu aspired to set up a new Ottoman order in Bosnia and Herzegovina.³⁷ The so-called flag crisis has clearly shown that the Bosnian Serbs are not yet ready to forge good relations with Turkey. It is not just Bosnian Serbs who are suspicious towards Turkey's Western Balkans policy. A number of Serbs, especially those who still have the mentality of the 1990s, tend to believe the stories about "Turkish Ottomans returning to the Western Balkans." If those who govern Serbia also start to share this viewpoint, the current rapprochement between Ankara and Belgrade could go downhill.

Croatia, meanwhile, tends to argue, citing cultural and historical sources, that it is not a Balkan state.³⁸ Zagreb pays attention to relations with the West, and the engagement of Croatia in the Western Balkans was practically imposed upon by the EU. Turkey and Croatia have long enjoyed friendly relations. The mutual visits aimed at strengthening confidence led to the maturation of political ties. During her visit to Turkey on November 26-27, 2010, Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor said that Turkey and Croatia are very attentive to the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and they have similar attitudes as to how the problems in Bosnia can be resolved. But the perception of Turkey among Bosnian Croats is different, because Turkey does not provide support to them on the question of the establishment of a Croatian entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Turkey's Insufficient Cooperation with the West

The high representative of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Valentin Inzko, who came to Ankara on November 22, 2010 said he finds it useful that Turkey is maintaining its regional initiatives in the Western Balkans. But in general, Turkish presence in the Western Balkans has caused some suspicion in Brussels.³⁹ From the start, Europeans were arguing that Turkey favors the Bosniaks, and for this reason Ankara cannot be a moderator in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some European diplomats think that the importance of religion in Turkey has increased substantially, and this trend has substantial ramifications on Turkish foreign policy. But the fact is that Europeans are reluctant to see Turkey as an important player in the Western Balkans,

Europeans are reluctant to see Turkey as an important player in the Western Balkans, since they regard this region as their territory and they hope to remain the major influential force

Turkey uses its influence in the Balkans as an example of its geopolitical importance and Ankara wants to demonstrate that a permanent peace in the Balkans is unattainable without Turkey's help

since they regard this region as their territory and they hope to remain the major influential force. Although Turkey's involvement in the Western Balkans is in accordance with the EU and US agenda, Turkey's activism in the region has forced the EU to pay closer attention.

Needless to say, the European integration process was the most positive development the Western Balkans has witnessed recently.⁴⁰ For Western Balkan countries, EU membership is among their foreign policy priorities. However, they think the EU accession process should not hinder their relations with other countries, including Turkey, especially after the economic crisis in Greece has shown that EU membership does not guarantee better living conditions. Serbian analyst Dusan Reljic believes that the sympathy towards Turkey among Western Balkan peoples will be even greater if the European future of the region remains unclear.⁴¹ Being aware of this situation, and because some Europeans continue to exclude Turkey from its membership, Davutoğlu was trying to demonstrate that Ankara can do more for this region than Brussels. In his speech in Sarajevo on October 16, 2009, Davutoğlu did not even mention the EU. Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina have had strained relations for three years, which have not progressed in spite of efforts by European diplomacy. Turkey, however, almost overnight managed to organize a meeting between the presidents of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina in May 2010, where they promised to normalize relations and engage in regional cooperation.

According to the American think-tank Stratfor, Turkey uses its influence in the Balkans as an example of its geopolitical importance and Ankara wants to demonstrate that a permanent peace in the Balkans is unattainable without Turkey's help.⁴² Nevertheless, it would be wrong to argue that Ankara is trying to compete with the EU in the Western Balkans. On the contrary, Turkey's policy in this region has not significantly diverged from EU politics in the last two years, and Turkish officials are constantly repeating and supporting the EU prospects for the Western Balkans. Granted, in order to sustain the positive trends in the Balkans that were initiated in the last few years, Turkey should collaborate more with the EU, the United States, and other important international players. However, European diplomats should not look to Turkey with suspicion, but should treat it as a partner, who can make significant contributions for peace and stability in the Western Balkans. Currently there are signs that Turkish diplomacy is trying to act together with the US to im-

prove the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. But the Western Balkans has yet to become a realm of collaboration for Brussels and Ankara.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of the 1990s, Turkish foreign policy is showing increased efforts for improving relations with all Balkan countries. In the last two years, Turkey has developed a more active engagement in the region, which has been labeled as the new Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans. While developing bilateral cooperation with all regional countries, Turkey is trying to contribute to the peace and stability in the Western Balkans, through regional cooperation and mediation initiatives. Unfortunately, these efforts have not been welcomed by the EU and certain regional political players are uncomfortable with the increasing self-reliance and independence of Turkish foreign policy.

Fully aware of the fact that the developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina are crucial in terms of the stability of the entire Western Balkans, Turkey is engaged and pays close attention to the issues in this country. The Balkan Summit held in Istanbul was one of Turkey's major successes in the Western Balkans. Ankara uses every opportunity to demonstrate that Turkey's central aim is to be nothing else than a good friend of all Balkan countries. However, certain political groups in the Balkans believe that Turkish politicians are trying to open space for greater neo-Ottoman influence in the region. In its Republican history, Turkey has never had such ambitions. Fears of the so-called Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations in the Balkans are irrational and unjustified. But neo-Ottoman rhetoric against Turks still exists in the Balkans. There is an audience for this discourse not only in the Balkans but also in Europe. But none of the regional actors should be captive of historical prejudice, as they only can benefit from relations with a dynamic, developed and democratic country such as today's Turkey.

Since the Balkan nations are still not prepared to teach a more realistic Ottoman history, for Turkish officials, it would be better to speak about a common European future rather than giving examples from a common Ottoman past while engaging in cooperation with the Balkan countries. Turkey should consider a higher degree of cooperation with other international players, including Brussels, which would bring about more fruitful results in the Western Balkan. Besides, in order to achieve complete success in the region, all the outside parties involved in Western Balkans diplomacy will eventually have to demonstrate greater solidarity. Otherwise, the scene will be overcrowded with players, who are actually not producing any concrete results.

Endnotes

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2) Ahmet Davutoğlu, Speech delivered on the opening ceremony of the conference, *Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today*, Sarajevo, October 16, 2009, retrieved from http://www.ius.edu.ba/dzsusko/Davutoglu_transcript_dzs.doc.

3) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, "Nema Svetskog Mira Bez Stabilnog Balkana," *Danas*, December 23, 2010.

4) "Güney Doğu Avrupa ile Ticari ve Ekonomik İlişkiler Hakkında Genel Değerlendirme," *T.C. Başbakanlık Dış Ticaret Müsteşarlığı, Anlaşmalar Genel Müdürlüğü Raporu*, Mart 2010.

5) For a detailed analysis of this issue, see: Erhan Türbedar, "Türk-Amerikan İlişkileri Çerçevesinde Balkanlar," *Avrasya Dosyası*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2005), pp. 163-183.

6) Abdullah Aymaz, "Avrupa'nın Kudüs'ü Saraybosna," *Zaman*, December 18, 2006; Murat Karpuz, "Avrupa'nın Kudüs'ü Bosna Gözyaşlarını Sildi," *Sabah*, June 11, 2009; "Avrupa'nın Kudüs'ünde Karışıklık Bitmiyor," *Anadolu Ajansı*, May 5, 2010.

7) Barçın Yinanç, "Excluded by US and EU, Turkey Undertakes its own Mediation in Bosnia," *Hürriyet Daily News*, January 15, 2010.

8) Murat Karagöz, "Turkish Attempts for Pushing Through Needed Reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina," *Political Crisis in the Bosnia and Herzegovina: Which Way Now?*, Ankara, TEPAV, December 22, 2009.

9) Abdullah Gül, Presentation of foreign policy of Turkey towards Western Balkans to Turkish academics on occasion of President's official visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo, September 3, 2010.

10) Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today*.

11) Nevenka Jeftic-Sarcevic, "Zapadni Balkan u Projekciji Turske Strateske Vizije," *Medjunarodni Problemi*, Vol. 62, No. 4 (2010), p. 701.

12) Aleksandra Stankovic, "Balkans Stability Impossible Without Serbia," *Balkan Insight*, October 7, 2010.

13) Esad Dzurdzevic, Ankara, June 2, 2009, personal interview.

14) The free trade agreement between Turkey and Serbia came into force on September 1, 2010. The two countries' trade volume is expected to rise to higher levels thanks to this agreement. On the other hand, a cooperation agreement for infrastructure projects was signed in October 2009 to draw Turkish capital to Serbia. This agreement aiming to draw as many Turkish investors as possible to Serbia involves some priority projects such as the repair of certain roads in the Sandzak region, the construction of some parts of the Belgrade-Boljare highway and an industrial region and airports. Additionally, developing cooperation between the Turkish and Serbian airlines and encouraging the participation of Turkish companies in Serbia's privatizations are also being concentrated on. Turkey and Serbia enjoy a strong potential in developing their economic relations, especially in industry, energy, agriculture and tourism.

15) Not just Turkey, in recent years with their anti-NATO doctrine, Russians are also increasing their political and economic influence in the Balkans, especially in Serbia and the Republic of Srpska. Russia behaves as the protector of the Bosnian-Serb entity Republic of Srpska. It can be argued that Russians look with suspicion towards Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans.

- 16) "Skandalozno: Srbija Lobira Protiv Ukidanja Viza BiH!", *Dnevni Avaz*, November 7, 2009.
- 17) "Jeremic: Kosovo je Srpski Jerusalim," *Tanjug*, May 30, 2010.
- 18) Zarko N. Petrovic and Dusan Reljic, "Turkey's New Approach to the Western Balkans", *International and Security Affairs Centre*, Thought Paper developed for Round-table conference on Turkish Western Balkans Policy, April 2011, p. 17; Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Ottoman Legacy and Balkan Muslim Communities Today*.
- 19) Erhan Türbedar, "Üçlü Balkan Zirvesi'nin Nedenleri ve Önemi," *TEPAV*, April 2010, www.tepav.org.tr.
- 20) "Dodik: BiH ce se Raspasti," *Tanjug*, March 21, 2011.
- 21) While the Bosnian Serbs oppose the Serbian parliament's Srebrenica decision, ordinary Bosniaks do not think much of this decision as Serbia's parliament stopped short of calling the incidents "genocide."
- 22) Uğur Ergan, "Serbia Will Apologize for Srebrenica Slaughter, Turkish FM Says," *Hürriyet Daily News*, March 18, 2010; Servet Yanatma, "Turkey Sets Stage for Serbian Apology Over Srebrenica," *Today's Zaman*, April 2, 2010.
- 23) Bosnia Herzegovina filed a genocide lawsuit to the International Court of Justice against Serbia for the atrocities committed between 1992 and 1995 and the Court passed a 170-page ruling on February 26, 2007. The ruling said that the genocide occurred only at the Srebrenica municipality and the Bosnian Serb army was responsible for what had happened. The massacres outside of Srebrenica were not qualified as genocide on the grounds of insufficient evidence. The ruling leveled accusations against Serbia for both not abiding by the obligation to prevent the crime of genocide in Srebrenica and not having apprehended and surrendered the perpetrators of genocide to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). The accusation directed against Serbia in the ruling obliged Serbia to offer an apology to Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- 24) Milan Jajcinovic, "Sarajevo je Tursko: Hrvati i Srbi Tursko Vladanje Bosnom i Hercegovinom Mahom Smatraju Okupacijom," *Vecernji List*, October 27, 2009.
- 25) Adil Zulfikarpasic, Sarajevo, November 14, 2006, personal interview.
- 26) Aleks Buda, Kristo Frasheri, Hysni Myzyri and others, *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar, Rilindja Kombetare, Vitet 30 te shek. XIX-1912*, Vol. 2, (Tirana: Akademia e Shkencave e Shqiptare, Instituti e Historise, Botimet Toena, 2002), pp. 23-25.
- 27) For more details on this issue see Dennis P. Hupchick, *The Balkans from Constantinople to Communism* (New York, Palgrave, 2002), pp. 189-271.
- 28) Hupchick, *The Balkans from Constantinople to Communism*, p. 303.
- 29) Gallup Balkan Monitor Survey, Survey Data Chart, <http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/index.php/dashboard>.
- 30) Pirro Misha, "Neo-otomanizmi dhe Shqipëria," *Shekulli*, February 22, 2010; Arbën Xhaferi, "Sfida Osmane," *Shekulli*, October 31, 2009; Altin Raxhimi, "Albanian Muslims Grapple with Religious Identity," *Balkan Insight*, December 1, 2010.
- 31) "Vikiliks: Uloga Turske na Balkanu Alarmirala Zapad," *Srna*, January 22, 2011.
- 32) "Turska Neprihvatljiv Posrednik," *RTV BN*, November 5, 2010.
- 33) Vanja Strbac, "Cilj Turske da u BiH Dominiraju Bosnjaci," *Glas Srpske*, September 9, 2010.
- 34) Lidija Valtner, "Silajdzic i Turska Dovode u Zabludu Tadica i Srbiju," *Danas*, May 23, 2010.
- 35) Christian Schwarz-Schilling, Sarajevo, November 17, 2006, personal interview.
- 36) The Turkish embassy in Sarajevo said it was "surprised" by a claim from Bosnia's presidency member Nebojsa Radmanovic that he had cancelled a meeting on Saturday with Turkish

Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu due to a row over the displaying of the Republika Srpska flag. The embassy said in a statement where the term Republic of Srpska was placed in quotation marks that Davutoğlu was delayed in talks with the Dodik and thus had to cancel a meeting with Radmanovic.

37) Dejan Sajinovic, "Turski ministar ne poštuje obilježja RS," *Nezavisne Novine*, January 30, 2011; Boro Maric, "Turske Diplomate Uzdrmale RS," *Politika*, January 31, 2011; "Diplomatski Incident u Banjaluci: Turska Delegacija Trazila Skidanje Zastave RS," *Srna*, January 29, 2011; "Ambasada Turske u BiH "Iznenadjena," *Beta*, January 30, 2011.

38) Natasa Zambelli, "Izmedju Balkana i Zapada: Problem Hrvatskog Identiteta Nakon Tudjmana i Diskurzivna Rekonstrukcija Regije," *Politicka Misao*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2010), pp. 55-76.

39) Sabine Freizer, "Recent Developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Future of International Presence in this Country," *Political Crisis in the Bosnia and Herzegovina: Which Way Now?*, Ankara, *TEPAV*, December 22, 2009; "Surveying Turkish Influence in Western Balkans," *Stratfor*, September 2, 2010; İnan Rüma, "Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Balkans: New Activism, neo-Ottomanism or/so What?" *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4 (2010), pp. 137-138; Petrovic and Reljic, "Turkey's New Approach to the Western Balkans," p. 18.

40) In 2010 Montenegro was granted candidate status, while Croatia covered significant ground in its membership negotiations. Moreover, Serbia received a membership questionnaire on political, economic and social reforms that its government must tackle. Towards the end of 2010, citizens of Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina began to enjoy visa-free travel to European Schengen zone states.

41) Alexandra Scherle and Mehmed Smajic, "Uloga Turske na Balkanu," *Deutsche Welle Bosanski*, November 6, 2011.

42) "Surveying Turkish Influence in Western Balkans."