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# **TURKISH-BALKANS RELATIONS**

**The Future Prospects of Cultural, Political and  
Economic Transformations and Relations**

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Turkish-Balkans Relations: The Future Prospects of Cultural, Political and Economic Transformations and Relations

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# **A Critical Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Western Balkans**

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The paper aims to critically analyze Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans since the 1990s. A particular emphasis will be stressed on the Turkish foreign policy under the leadership of Justice and Development Party and since the appointment of Ahmet Davutoğlu to the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey. Another important emphasis of this paper is an analysis of different diplomatic phases in the relationship between Turkey and Western Balkans. Besides, key issues, actors and as well as the political discourses, which have dominated the dynamics in each one of these diplomatic phases, will be analyzed. Turkey's position *vis-à-vis* specific Balkans countries and regional powers, including the EU will be examined too. Discussion and analysis in the paper shall demonstrate possible weak points in Turkish foreign policy such as conflicting diplomatic views, apparent lack of cohesive strategy and public-relations blunders in public/media sphere. The potential for Turkish foreign policy improvements will also be examined, based on several strong positions Turkey has in the Western Balkans such as dominant regional position, favorable demographics in Turkey, long-term prospective for economic development, lack of cohesive and long-term strategy by other regional players.

## **The Western Balkans EU Prospects**

As a consequence of turbulent events during the 1990s, Western Balkan countries suffered immensely in terms of direct demographic, economic and infrastructural destructions and changes. However, probably even more significant were consequences of inefficient recovery after the war and haltingly accomplished transition to democracy from socialist system of governance. The lasting effects of the wars and post-war crises had destroyed the very fabric of society, due to mass forced migrations, ethnic cleansing, and

protracted political crises. Then, flawed exercises in democratic elections brought corrupt elites to power. Their lack of legitimacy to rule coupled with inexistent accountability mechanisms in the public sphere were translated into ineffective governance. Kleptocracy as a prevailing social norm caused general breakdown of social order and lack of societal values. Poverty, corruption, lack of perspective and pessimism among ordinary people became pervasive features in the Western Balkans. The region also suffered disproportionately from the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. Spillover effect of the crisis in more developed countries affected the Western Balkans significantly. But the crisis was further compounded by the inability of incompetent elites in power to create and implement policies that would address these problems. As a result, people across the Western Balkans watched their countries' economies and their incomes sink into a cesspool.

The only hope for the future that majority people in the region had was the prospect of eventual integration into the European Union (EU). To the suffering masses, the EU appeared as a polar opposite to the prevailing gloom blighting their lives. However, while the EU could once be truly believed to promise better future to the suffering masses of the people in the Western Balkans, it has since lost much of its allure and appeal. Reasons are multifold, and include both objective and subjective factors. On the objective side, the EU integration drive is slowing down for well known reasons, including economic and financial crisis within the Union itself, which limits its ability and appetite to help the prospective member countries. Recession heavily affected the EU, which resulted not only in the economic hardship felt by the population, but also had caused rising tide of *euroskepticism* and *anti-immigration* (and by extension anti-foreign) sentiments. The net result of such social climate was the political shift to the right, which, in combination with all other factors gave rise to the so-called enlargement fatigue among the present EU members. On the subjective side, the EU has botched its popular image by treating the region as pariah for much of the past two decades. Indecisiveness in the face of crises, such as the ones in Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, was coupled with perceived pandering to the local elites that could not produce much more positive. The EU's indecisiveness was juxtaposed with the United States' forceful and decisive interventions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Macedonia, where even the critics of intervention were forced to admit that it led to some kind of resolution. In post-conflict period, the public image of the EU was that of long visa queues

and humiliating treatment of the local people by the apparatchiks employed in the consular sections of the EU member states embassies.

Crucial to regional stability and further NATO enlargement are halted due to unclear policy prospects of Serbia, as well the entity of Republika Srpska, which holds the key to Bosnia's accession to the block. Kosovo's path to NATO (and the European Union) remains blocked by the political deadlock among the EU member states, including some NATO members that refuse to recognize Kosovo as an independent state. On top of this situation is almost total lack of interest by the United States in the region since the early '00s. Therefore, instead of using the stick, or decisive action, as would have been expected of the United States had it remained involved in the region, the EU employed carrot approach to further the cause of regional integration into the EU. The approach, promising full EU membership in exchange for structural reforms in the applicant countries, is known as the Stabilization and Accession Process (SAP). Promised carrots have, however, been of no interest for the corrupt local political elites, which only stood to lose from the process that would bring their countries closer to the EU standards of public accountability and the rule of law. And these elites, in full control of media, long ago learned how to manipulate public opinion in order to disentangle public interest in joining the EU from the everyday policies they pursue. By wrapping the policies that keep their countries away from the EU in the mantle of 'national interests,' local power brokers have been mostly successful in maintaining their grip on power using seemingly democratic means.

### **Turkey and the Western Balkans: Historical Connections**

What is connecting Turkey with the Western Balkans anyway, especially as the region has its eyes set firmly on the European Union? First of all, Turkey has been the key player in the Balkans for half millennia, and its policies and actions decisively influenced the course of history in the region's formative age. The Ottoman conquest, rule, legal system, culture, language, religion, as well as its withdrawal from the region following the Balkan Wars, left a lasting legacy, both in positive and negative terms.

There is large Balkan diaspora in Turkey today, which form significant bond between the two sides. These ties are, however, largely symbolic, as most migrants left long time ago, following the end of the Ottoman rule in the late

19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The migrants usually moved in large population groups with extended families and left their villages and small towns migrating en masse. Thus, they maintained practically no family ties with their former homelands. Furthermore, these immigrants were after arrival subject of intensive *turkification*, which resulted in changed family names, inability to use mother tongue, etc. For example, very few of the estimated four million ethnic Bosniaks that live in Turkey today (twice the number remaining in Bosnia itself) can actually speak Bosnian, and almost none retained surnames in their original (non-turkified) form.

Turkey, however, could still utilize significant historical capital in the region. After all, it once created and maintained a thriving cosmopolitan society in the Balkans, which, by the means of the *Millet* system, accorded significant autonomy to different religious and ethnic communities. Socially inclusive, the Ottoman Empire was upwardly mobile, with numerous examples of non-Turk and non-Muslim subjects advancing to occupy some of the most important administrative and military posts in the empire. Contrary to popular belief, the Ottomans never enforced mass conversions of their subjects to Islamic faith. Throughout the Balkans, Muslims remained minority population during much of the Ottoman rule. Even in Bosnia, which together with Albania was the site of the only en masse conversions, Muslim population in early 16<sup>th</sup> century stood at around 38% of the total. At the very end of the Ottoman rule, population census of 1875 varyingly estimated total Muslim population in Bosnia at between 32-51% of the total (Pejanović, 1955).

Even though at times some people were treated as less equal than others (only non-Muslims paid taxes, the main reason why Ottomans did not encourage conversions to Islam), the Ottoman Empire nevertheless treated myriad clans, tribes, religions and ethnicities as members of single political and social entity. For instance, following Spanish Reconquista, tens of thousands of Jews fleeing the Inquisition, managed to find refuge in the realms of the Ottoman Empire, resettling with full citizenship rights as far north as present-day Western Balkans. The role of the Orthodox Church in the Balkans was actually strengthened by the Ottomans, who viewed it as a useful counterweight to the organized hierarchy of the Catholic Church. In comparison to this vibrant patchwork of religions and ethnicities maintained for centuries by the single political authority spanning three continents, with situation where hundreds of years later, the European Union could

comprehend and deal with tiny Bosnian cosmopolitan society only by sanctioning its destruction and breaking up into mono-ethnic reservations ruled by right-wing nationalists.

### **Noughties: Ascendant Turkey**

While the European Union's image in the region is that of an ailing and fractured power that cannot put its policies together, Turkey, once the infamous 'sick man of the Bosphorus,' is quickly recovering some of the glories of the former regional superpower. Its rise started with ascendance and stabilization in power of the Justice and Development Party, which completely changed the political and economic order in the society. In place of rigid hold on power by the entrenched elites with little interest in the overall progress of society (parallels with the current situation in the WB are just too obvious!) the Justice and Development Party brought millions of ordinary citizens onto the market by liberalizing credit and freeing up the society. The full enterprising spirit of the Turks was unleashed as a consequence, resulting in growth rates resembling those of China for much of the past decade. Turkey is now member of the OECD, WTO, and G-20 group of major economies.

The economic prospects remain positive for near-to-medium future, thanks in part to positive demographic outlook, with Turkey still a very young country, certainly so by the European standards. Median age of Turks is 28.5 years, compared to e.g. Italy's 43.8 years. Turkey's population growth rate stands at 1.197%, compared to e.g. Germany's -0.2% (Indexmundi, 2012). Turkey is also strategically placed country, the only pivotal one in the region, with huge and still relatively low-populated landmass. It is a key member of NATO, maintaining the biggest standing army in the block, second only to that of the United States. While the ascendancy to the European Union remains a distant dream, the tide has clearly turned in Turkey's favor. Its strategic position as a gateway to the Central Asia and the Middle East, economic prowess, large (75 mil.) and still growing population, assure Turkey's role in the future of the region. Indeed, some politicians and academics have long criticized the perceived myopia of the conservative European politicians who prefer to keep Turkey at an arm's length. At the time of the Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Ankara in February 2013, European Union Energy Commissioner Günther

Oettinger thus predicted that “Germany and France would beg Turkey to join the EU within the next decade” (Deutsche Welle, 2013).

Growing economic might brings along the growing self-awareness of Turkey’s importance and political and economic clout it could potentially have in its neighborhood. Thus under Ahmet Davutoğlu, first in his capacity as chief foreign policy adviser to the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and then as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey became increasingly active player in the area from Central Asian ‘Stans’ in the east to North Africa in the West, and Western Balkans in the North. The area that Turkey is becoming increasingly involved in broadly follows the outlines of the Ottoman Empire in its heydays. However, official Ankara is always keen to stress that such parallels are completely meaningless, as no one is pursuing – or even dreaming of – grand imperial designs of the past. Still, many observers remain unconvinced, noticing how often references of the perceived ‘glorious’ Ottoman history and Turkey’s ties with its former subjects pepper the speeches of key political figures in Turkish politics, including Davutoglu and Erdoğan themselves.

Being a rising economic power, Turkey could in the future bring much needed investments that could shore up ailing Western Balkan economies. Investments by the Turkish companies could in turn integrate the Western Balkans into the large Turkish internal market, as well as the markets in Central Asia and Middle East where Turkey is set to play increasingly prominent role in the future. Indeed, some analysts consider economy to be one of the key reasons for Turkey’s growing interest in the Balkans. According to Turbedar (2011) Turkey’s foreign trade with the Balkan countries rose from USD 2.9 billion in 2000 to USD 17.7 billion in 2008. The cumulative value of Turkish foreign direct investments in the Balkans in 2009 stood at around USD 4.6 billion, while the total value of Turkish construction projects in the Balkan countries, during the period of 1994-2009, was around USD 8.8 billion.

Being highly centralized and hierarchical society Turkey possesses a measure of resolve, something always welcome in the restive Western Balkans. One of the principal reasons for the EU fatigue in the region is its perceived inability to take decisive action in pursuit of its goals, backing it up, if necessary, with political and economic might (violent means being the thing of past). Turkey

in this regard resembles the United States more than the European Union, as it clearly speaks with one voice in its foreign policy, backing it up with appropriate measure of political and economic clout, as it deems necessary. When it saw potential for breaking the regional, or even internal, political deadlock, Serbia, was happy in recent years to repeatedly extend its welcome to visiting Turkish political figures, including President *Gül*, Prime Minister Erdoğan, and foreign minister Davutoğlu (the latter engaged in several rounds of high profile shuttle diplomacy in 2011, attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to broker an agreement between the rival factions in the Serbian Islamic Community).

Recent *Gallup Balkan Monitor Survey* confirmed that Turkey is considered as friendly nation among all countries in the region with sizeable Muslim population. In 2010, therefore, 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 considered Turkey to be a friendly country. Among the non-Muslim majority countries of the Western Balkans, the picture was, however, quite different. In Croatia, only 26.7 percent of the population considered Turkey a friendly country, while in Montenegro the figure was 33.5 percent, and in Serbia – predictably – only 18.2 percent (Gallup, 2010). However, it is important to note that in recent years Turkey's drive for preeminence in the region continue to push these figures higher and higher. Thus, according to the same *Gallup Survey* (2011), the percentage of population that considered Turkey as friendly nation rose to 33.5 percent in Croatia, while only 19 percent of the population in Serbia considered Turkey as a hostile country. Hostility towards Turkey was almost negligible in other countries in the region: 9.6 percent in Montenegro, 3.4 percent in Croatia, 1 percent in Kosovo, 8.6 percent in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

In terms of soft power, Turkey – however unintentionally – has been one of its primary champions in the Balkans. While citizens of the most countries in the Balkans until recently required visas to visit other European countries, no such requirements ever existed for Turkey, making this country one of the primary tourist destinations for the locals. Much lauded (and sometimes ridiculed) Turkish soap operas nevertheless served to bridge many existing cultural and social divides between the two sides, by portraying Turkey as a modern and attractive society, which still has a lot in common with people in the Balkans. Benefits of increasing personal contacts through visits to Turkey and positive

image conveyed by the soap operas boosted Turkey's overall image even among the traditional suspicious or outright hostile non-Muslim audiences in the region.

Businesses, charities and religious endowments spearheaded Turkey's drive into the education sector in the Balkans. In almost all countries in the region, several Turkish schools and universities have been in operation for almost a decade. In Sarajevo alone, two Turkish primary and two high schools, have been joined by two universities, the International University of Sarajevo and the International Burch University, ranking among the more prestigious institutions of higher learning in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even though Prime Minister Erdoğan, President Gül and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu regularly visit and have officially opened some of these institutions, none of them were actually established by the Turkish government. As such they probably rank as prime examples of the efficiency of soft power in supporting official government policies.

The positive impact of Turkey's policies in the region is visible even in places and among actors where one would least expect it. Serbia, often presumed to be at forefront of anti-Turkish sentiment regionally, has recently developed quite cordial relations with official Ankara. Following more than two decades of virtually no high-level visits, leading politicians from both sides now meet on a regular basis. Besides Davutoğlu, who, for a time, was almost a fixture of regional politics, Turkish President Abdullah Gül and Prime Minister Erdoğan visited Serbia in 2009 and 2010 respectively. The 2010 visit was especially cordial one, as Erdoğan and Tadić first met in Srebrenica on the ceremony marking the anniversary of genocide, where Erdoğan publicly proclaimed Serbian President a man of virtue and his friend, following which they jointly travelled to Belgrade on board the Erdoğan's helicopter. Tadić himself visited Turkey twice, in 2007 and 2010. Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković visited Turkey in 2011. Cordial relationship continued after the change of government in Serbia: in November 2012, new Prime Minister Ivica Dačić was received in Ankara, while in February 2013, new Serbian President Tomislav Nikolić met with President Gül, on which occasion Gül forecasted "economic boom" in Serbia, and proclaimed this country to be Turkey's "close neighbor" (Poslovni Dnevnik, 2013).

### **An Analysis of Turkey's Involvement in the Western Balkans**

Despite these glossy reports of cordial relations with its Balkan counterparts, Turkish overtures in the region earned it a lot of bad PR in the recent years. Turkey is often perceived as being one-sided or at best not completely impartial when it comes to dealing with the Western Balkans. Critics accuse Turkey of being pro-Muslim and anti-Orthodox, and of having covert neo-Ottoman, or even Islamist agenda. The number of public statements by leading Turkish politicians in recent years, such as the speeches by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu cited earlier, further strengthened this stereotype. In the Balkans, one should never underestimate the persistence of nationalist myths based on opposition to everything Turkish.

If one leaves aside the nationalist anti-Turkish mongering, the fact remains that official rhetoric by Turkey's leading political figures occasionally provokes uneasiness even among the objective observers of the regional politics. This is especially true when speeches and statements of leading Turkish politicians, meant mostly for consumption by general public at home, are published in the Balkan media and dissected by local analysts. In the conference "New Turkish Foreign Policy in the Western Balkans" organized by the International and Security Affairs Centre in Belgrade in April 2011 Serbian authors Žarko Petrović and Dušan Reljić were especially critical of statements contained in Davutoğlu's Sarajevo speech of 2009, where 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." Petrović and Reljić echo the sentiment of many neutral observers of Turkish foreign policy when they claimed that "Davutoğlu must be aware that such assertions are not winning the hearts of non-Muslims in the Balkans" (Petrović and Reljić, 2011).

Even among the supposedly pro-Turkish population (presumed to Muslims inhabiting the so-called 'green belt', from Bosnia to Macedonia) there is a great deal of resentment for being dragged into political game that they do not take as being their own. In the wake of Erdoğan's 2011 post-election speech proclaiming "Sarajevo's victory" (in Turkish parliamentary elections), incredulous Bosniak political commentators were quick to point out how such pronouncements serve only to provide ammunition to right wing Serb and Croat nationalists whose radical agendas constantly question where the primary allegiance of Bosniaks lay – Europe or Turkey. Number of columns,

articles, and features in Serb, Macedonian, and Croat media dealing with the subject attest to the importance that some off-hand remarks could have in shaping the policy debate in the Western Balkans.

Mainstream Serbian political daily newspaper, *Politika* (2012) published an article under the screaming headline “Return of Turkey to the Balkans”, and subheading “Did Turkish Prime Minister think of Belgrade as well when he stated that Bosnia is actually one of Turkey’s 81 provinces, and that his duty is to take care of Sarajevo.” Similarly, *Glas Srpske* (December 2012) as another mainstream daily newspaper published in the entity of Republika Srpska, prominently featured an interview with ‘Russian academic Fasih Baderhan’, with alarming title “Turkey brings trouble to everyone in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” Again, the newspaper’s aim to alarm its readers is clear from the sensationalist subheading: “By espousing the radical Islamic agenda in this area, Turkey could only be factor of destabilization, for sure negative for the Serbs, but also for the Muslims in BiH, because it will push them into unnecessary problems, no matter how much it claims to be their friend.” Such ‘analyses’ are not reserved for anonymous newspaper scribes only. Prominent Serbian academics also frequently voice similar opinions. Darko Tanasković, for example, the leading Serbian Orientalist and Turkologist considers that the enhanced involvement of Turkey not only in Bosnia and Herzegovina but also throughout the Balkans is an integral part of a 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 (interview with RTV BN in November 2010, cited in Turbedar, 2011).

Even casual reading of these and numerous other articles published in local newspapers during the past few years soon establishes that, beside obvious problem with facts, their authors have huge problem with Turkey itself. Reasons could only partly be found in continuing subservience to nationalist mythologies in the Balkans, where Turkey is singled out as culprit no matter what; or in the fact that professional standards in local journalism have sank to record lows. It is the fact is that most of these newspapers are owned by political elites and that such strong statements could never be published without permission ‘from the top’. Knowing ownership structure of these media outlets reinforces the feeling that elites in non-Muslim majority countries are generally suspicious of Turkey’s role in the Balkans.

Another source of resentment among the presumably Turkey-leaning inhabitants of the region is that Ankara's bold official rhetoric is usually not being backed up by hard figures in terms of economic investment, financial injections, and the like, which would demonstrate Turkey's genuine commitment to the people of the Western Balkans countries. Figures for most of the countries in the region do not rank Turkey among the top foreign investors. Even in Bosnia, presumably the focus of Turkish attention, Turkey does not feature among the top ten investors in the country. The fact that in this small and economically struggling country an investment in the range of US\$ 50 million ensures a country the place on the list of top ten investors does not bode well for Turkey's rhetoric whereby Bosnia is central to Turkish foreign policy interests. Indeed, already mentioned leaked US diplomatic cables somehow dismissively portray Turkey's foreign policy in the region as "having Rolls Royce ambitions, but Rover resources." In other words, Turkey does not possess the necessary economic and financial resources to back up its aspirations to the status of "central power" (Balkan Insight, 2010).

Cooperation in the economic sphere has had a patchy record, due to multiple reasons, but the situation in this regard is improving, with several important investment projects underway in all countries of the region. Beside direct investment in the economy, Turkey has also initiated several projects funding reconstruction and preservation of the Ottoman era monuments, mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. However, 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. The Balkan countries accounted for 6.7 percent in Turkey's total exports in 2009 and 3.4 percent in its total imports. 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 (Turbedar, 2011). Few months ago, Turkey also extended low-interest credit line to the tune of EUR 100 million in support of the returnees' enterprises in Bosnia.

So far, most discussions in the media and in academia have centered upon the premises based more on classic 19<sup>th</sup> century realist political thought than post-modernist political processes championing democracy and human rights as basic tenets of foreign policy activism. Vibrant Turkey has a lot more to offer, of course, than seemingly hegemonic official statements. It managed an

economic renaissance on a scale that very few countries could ever match. Compared to other countries in the region, it is incomparably more democratic and liberal. Such successes and the very visible role it played in recent events in the Middle East inspired a lot of discussion on the possibility of advancing the so-called ‘Turkish model’ as an inspiration to others (Kenyon, 2012; LeVine, 2011, Ülgen et al., 2011).

However, as Gamze Coşkun (2012) argues in an aptly named article in the Foreign Policy (Turkey’s weakest export), “Turkey still has a long way to go in developing its own democratic institutions”. It still faces “enormous challenges in protecting civil liberties and reforming (...) judicial system, to name but two crucial elements on the path toward genuine democracy”. Similarly the European Union and respected international organizations in their official documents, are critical of Turkey’s treatment of journalists and its ability to safeguard press freedoms – another basic element of genuine democracy (Corke, 2013). AKP’s inability to address continuing concerns about its treatment of the press “invariably create doubts about the consistency of the Turkish model in the international community” (Coşkun, 2012).

Again, in the modern world, the government is not the sole actor that furthers the cause of a country in the international arena. The ‘Turkish model’, if it exists, should be championed by numerous governmental and nongovernmental actors for it to be embraced away from home. Turkey has been quite active in this regard as well, with several Turkish NGOs, charities, or educational institutions, extending their operations to include the whole Balkans region. Several Turkish schools and universities sprang up in the region, and NGOs have been very active in the past few years, chiefly in projects to safeguard Turkish heritage and monuments in the Balkans. On the wider plain, however, Coşkun (2012) argues that “Turkish non-government organizations lack the relevant know-how and skills to exercise influence in the region. Notwithstanding their well-meaning rhetoric (...) all too often Turkish NGOs seem to have difficulties developing concrete plans or agendas and making them more public and affecting the policy-makers”.

Even the architect of the new Turkish foreign policy, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu stated in his ‘Strategic Depth’ the need for Turkey to reinvent itself and restyle its policies into something beyond 19<sup>th</sup> century geopolitical terms.

Emphasizing the need to find a way to use soft power on the path of ascending to the central power status, Davutoğlu stated:

“Turkey needs to put aside the militaristic image which its strong military and history of military tutelage over society and politics has bequeathed. Instead, it should promote conflict resolution, regional economic cooperation which would obviate the need for regional intervention of great powers” (Grigoriadis, 2010).

Reinventing a country and restyling its policies is not unheard of in modern real politics. In this endeavor Turkey could be inspired by none other but the European Union, which is constantly reinventing itself (some calling it an evolutionary process). Its most recent reincarnation, attested to by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize, is that of peacemaker. If European Union could in less than two decades shake off its image of lumbering economic giant and political dwarf on whose watch the term ethnic cleansing was introduced into the political vocabulary, Turkey should have comparatively easier task in healing centuries-old wounds in its relations with the neighbors.

### **“The Problem” with “Neo-Ottomanism”**

There are three main factors that have contributed towards excessive articulation of ‘neo-Ottoman’ policies, supposedly pursued by current government in Ankara. Careless public pronouncements and speeches by leading Turkish political figures are probably the key element feeding the ‘neo-Ottoman’ media frenzy. The oft-quoted Davutoğlu’s 2009 Sarajevo speech and Erdoğan’s 2011 general elections victory speech rank as the prime examples of this trend. In the speech opening a conference, Davutoğlu said that

"We desire a new Balkans, based on political values, economic interdependence and cultural harmony. That was the Ottoman Balkans. We will restore this Balkans. People call this 'neo-Ottoman'. I don't point to the Ottoman state as a foreign policy issue. I emphasize the Ottoman heritage. The Ottoman era in the Balkans is a success story. Now it needs to come back" (Gray Falcon, 2009).

Erdoğan's (in)famous speech included these highly controversial lines: "Believe me, Sarajevo won today as much as Istanbul, Beirut won as much as Izmir, Damascus won as much as Ankara, Ramallah, Nablus, Jenin, the West Bank, Jerusalem won as much as Diyarbakir." Contentious as they are, however, such statements form just the tip of an iceberg, as similar pronouncements could be heard daily from lower-level officials, read in Turkish newspapers, and echoed among the ordinary folk on the streets of Turkish cities.

Second factor consists of understandable fear by some of the less powerful states in the former Ottoman realm of the Turkey's real intentions when it comes to its policies in the region. Such fears seem not to be completely unfounded, as even the United States has occasionally – if only internally – rung the alarm bells concerning the course of Turkish foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party. US diplomatic cables sent from Ankara and leaked by the WikiLeaks demonstrate Washington's increasing concerns with "the 'back to the past' attitude so clear in Davutoğlu's Sarajevo speech," which, when "combined with the Turks' tendency to execute it through alliances with more Islamic or more worrisome local actors" has the potential to "constantly create new problems" (Balkan Insight, 2010).

Analysts not completely at ease with newly confident Turkish foreign policy tend to focus on Davutoğlu's book, the Strategic Depth, published in 2001, considering it to represent a kind of blueprint for the Turkey's perceived neo-Ottoman drive. Upon close inspection, the book does provide some ammunition to the critics, ranking, for instance, Turkey among the "central powers" and suggesting that "Turkey should develop a proactive policy commensurate to its historic and geographic depth, which is amplified by its Ottoman legacy."

However, detailed analysis reveals the book to be much more nuanced sample of academic and strategic thought. Davutoğlu actually argues that Turkey should aspire to become much more than a regional (i.e. former Ottoman realm) player. Instead, it should aspire to play a leading role in multiple regions it belongs to, including Middle East, Balkans, Caucasus, Central Asia, Caspian Sea Basin, Mediterranean, Gulf and the Black Sea basin. However, instead of resorting to violent means to achieve this, Turkey "should capitalize

on its soft power potential (...) based on its historic and cultural links with all the regions which it belongs to, as well as its democratic institutions and thriving market economy” (Grigoriadis, 2010).

The third and most interesting source of neo-Ottoman fear mongering – at least as far as the Western Balkans is concerned – stems from the nature of nation building process in this part of the world. One should always bear in mind that the majority of the Balkan nations were born and shaped through struggle against the Ottoman rule. Rebellions against the ‘heathen Turks’ basically provide cornerstone for these nations’ identities. They once allowed them to rightfully stake their claim to nationhood in the age of European nation building. Without these founding myths most of these nations would have nothing to fall back on, as their pre-Ottoman histories remain murky and patchy stories at best, obscured by centuries that have since passed.

Nevertheless, the popular anti-Turk lore continues to feed popular imagination, and provide fertile ground for anti-Turkish rhetoric based on – however irrational – fear of the Turk. It is not by chance that upon entering ‘liberated’ Srebrenica in July 1995, Serb army commander Ratko Mladić, exclaimed, “We give this town to the Serb nation.... The time has come to take revenge on the Turks.” (Mladić’s proclamation is featured in the 1999 BBC documentary *Srebrenica: A Cry from the Grave*). Mladić was justifying the ongoing massacre of thousands of Bosniak men and boys by bizarrely claiming it to be revenge for the Ottoman quashing of the 1804 Serb uprising. To those brought up on the diet of popular lore, the passage of centuries mean nothing when it comes to reasserting the founding myths based on supposed victimhood of their nation.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Turkey is an important regional player and will increasingly play such role in the foreseeable future. Number of factors work in favor of such outlook for Turkey. Its strategic position makes it an indispensable actor in involving great powers and likely future alliances. Its economic growth is projected to continue, given the positive demographic trends in the country, providing Turkey with resources to back up its political designs in the region. Still, Turkey has to tread its path in the Western Balkans carefully. It should stress the use of soft power in dealing with different sides of the Balkan divide. Its

PR effort needs fundamental rethinking in order to help Turkey brush up its image in the region. Turkey's investment in the region should also substantially increase, allowing it to claim substantial benefits to the people of the region from its presence. Finally, its position, size, and resources, will increasingly allow it to play the role of balancer between the numerous bickering states in the Balkans, none of which is likely to possess sufficient power to impose its will on the others.

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