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# Turkey's Foreign Policy toward the Western Balkans: Fact Checking the Popular Lore



By: Ešref Kenan Rašidagić

**Turkey has been a key player in the Balkans for half a millennium, and its policies and actions decisively influenced the course of history in the region's formative years. Ottoman rule, as well as its legal system, culture, language, and religion, as well as its defeats and eventual abandonment of the region following the Balkan Wars, have all left a lasting legacy, both positive and negative.**

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## ABSTRACT

The current situation in the Western Balkans warrants the involvement of external actors in the region. Sometimes, the European Union lacks energy and commitment, while the United States seems to have lost interest completely. Turkey, on the other hand, is a power in its ascendancy, with a long (albeit not recent) history of involvement in the region. Its economic and cultural prowess are sometimes considered to provide the ruling AKP with the means necessary to achieve a so-called 'Neo-Ottoman' foreign policy agenda. Official Turkish rhetoric also occasionally provides ammunition to its critics in this regard. However, upon close examination, the facts – in terms of Turkish foreign policy actions, investments, and accomplishments, and its reception among the local population in the Western Balkans – do not back up the theory that some sort of master plan for dominating the region exists.

**Keywords:** Turkey, Western Balkans, Neo-Ottomanism, AKP, Erdogan, Davutoglu

## THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC SITUATION IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Western Balkans suffered disproportionately from the effects of the 2008 financial crisis. The countries that constitute the region (former Yugoslav republics, less Slovenia, plus Albania) saw their economies destroyed as the result of turbulent, and often violent, transitions from communism. In addition, the very fabric of these societies has been torn apart due to mass forced migrations, ethnic cleansing, and protracted post-conflict political crises. The situation has opened the door to corrupt elites to take power; and the limited legitimacy of ruling elites has translated into ineffective administration and a general breakdown of societal values. Poverty, corruption, lack of perspective, and pessimism have thus become pervasive features of these societies. The only hope for the future held by a majority of citizens was the prospect of eventual integration into a united Europe. To the suffering masses, the European Union appeared to be a polar opposite to the forces that blighted their lives. However, while the EU could

once truly be believed to promise salvation to people in the Western Balkans, it has since lost much of its allure and appeal. The reasons are manifold, and are both objective and subjective.

On the objective side, the drive toward EU integration is slowing as a result of well-known causes, including the economic and financial crisis within the Union itself, which limits its ability and appetite to help prospective member countries. Recession has heavily impacted the EU, bringing not only economic hardship to the population, but along with it a rising tide of euroskepticism and anti-immigration (and by extension anti-foreign) sentiments. The net result of such a social climate is a political shift to the right, which, in combination with other factors, has given rise to so-called enlargement fatigue among present EU members.

On the subjective side, the EU has tarnished its popular image in the region by treating the people of the Western Balkans as pariahs for much of the past two decades. Indecisiveness in the face of crises – such as those in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo – was met with what was perceived as a pandering to local elites that produced no positive results, save for strengthening the latter's grip on power. The indecisiveness of the EU was juxtaposed against the forceful and decisive interventions of the United States in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia, where even critics of American policy were forced to admit it had produced the results it intended. In the post-conflict period, the public image of the EU in the Western Balkans was that of long visa queues and humiliating treatment of WB citizens by the *apparatchiks* employed in the consular sections of EU member states' embassies.

Crucial to regional stability, further NATO enlargement has been halted due to the unclear policy prospects of Serbia, as well as of Republika Srpska, which holds the key to Bosnia's accession to the bloc. Kosovo's path to NATO (and to the European Union) also remains blocked, by political deadlock among EU member states, including some NATO members that refuse to recognize it as an independent state. On top of this, the United States has shown almost a total lack of interest in the region since the early '00s.

Instead of using a proverbial stick, which could have been expected from the United States if it had remained involved in the region, the EU employed a carrot approach in order to further the cause of regional integration into the Union. This approach, promising full EU membership in exchange for structural reforms in applicant countries, became known as the Stabilization

and Accession Process (SAP). The promise of 'carrots' have, however, been of no interest to corrupt local political elites, who have only stood to lose from a process meant to bring their countries closer to EU standards of public accountability and the rule of law. And these elites, in full control of media outlets, long ago learned how to manipulate public opinion in order to disentangle real public interest in joining the EU from the everyday policies they pursue. By wrapping 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.

### Growing Turkey

While the European Union's image in the region is that of an ailing and fractured power that can't get its act together, Turkey, once infamously dubbed the 'sick man of the Bosphorus,' is quickly recovering some of the glory of a former regional superpower. Its rise began with the ascendance and stabilization in power of the AK party, which completely changed the political and economic order in Turkish society. In place of a rigid hold on power by entrenched elites with little interest in the overall progress of society (parallels with the current situation in the WB are painfully obvious!), the AK brought millions of ordinary citizens into the market by liberalizing credit and freeing up 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.

Economic prospects remain positive for the near-to-medium future in Turkey, thanks in part to the positive demographic outlook of what is a very young country, certainly by European standards.<sup>1</sup> Turkey is also a strategically-placed country, the only pivotal one in the region, with a huge landmass and a still relatively low population density. It is a key member of NATO, maintaining the biggest standing army in the bloc, second only to that of the United States. While accession to the European Union remains a distant dream, the tide has clearly turned in Turkey's favor. Its strategic position as a gateway to Central Asia and the Middle East, its economic prowess, and a large (75 million) 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 conservative European politicians who prefer to keep Turkey at arm's length. And at the time of Chancellor Angela Merkel's visit to Ankara in February 2013, European Union Energy Commissioner Günther Oettinger predicted that

“Germany and France would beg Turkey to join the EU within the next decade.”<sup>2</sup>

Growing economic might brings with it a growing self-awareness of Turkey’s importance and the 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 Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and then as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey became an increasingly active player in the area, from the Central Asian ‘stans’ in the east, to North Africa in the west, to the Western Balkans in the north. The zone in which Turkey has become increasingly involved broadly follows the borders of the Ottoman Empire in its heyday. However, official Ankara is always keen to stress that such parallels are completely pointless, as no one is pursuing – or even dreaming of – grand imperial designs of the past. Still, many observers remain unconvinced, noting how often references of a ‘glorious’ Ottoman history and Turkey’s ties with its former subjects pepper the speeches of key Turkish political figures, including Davutoğlu and Erdoğan.

### Where Does the “Neo-Ottomanism” Narrative Come From?

There are three main factors contributing to the emergence of stories of ‘neo-Ottoman’ policies supposedly pursued by the current government in Ankara. Careless public pronouncements and speeches by leading Turkish political figures are probably the key element feeding what has become a ‘neo-Ottoman’ media frenzy. The oft-quoted Davutoğlu’s 2009 Sarajevo speech and Erdoğan’s 2011 general elections victory speech rank as prime examples of this trend. In Davutoğlu’s speech, opening a conference, he 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.”<sup>3</sup> 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.”<sup>4</sup> Contentious as they may be, such statements form just the tip of an iceberg, as similar pronouncements can be heard daily from lower-level officials, read in Turkish newspapers, and echoed among ordinary people on the streets of Turkish cities.

A second factor contributing to the neo-Ottoman narrative is an understandable fear by some less powerful

states in the former Ottoman sphere of Turkey’s real intentions when it comes to its policies in the region. Such fears seem not 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 AK. US diplomatic cables sent from Ankara and leaked by WikiLeaks illustrate 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 [policy] through alliances with more Islamic or more worrisome local actors” has the potential to “constantly create new problems.”<sup>5</sup>

Analysts not completely at ease with a newly assertive Turkish foreign policy tend to focus on Davutoğlu’s book, *Strategic Depth*, published in 2001, and see it as a kind of blueprint for Turkey’s perceived neo-Ottoman approach. Upon close inspection, the book does provide some ammunition to critics, for instance ranking Turkey among the “central powers” and suggesting that Turkey should develop a policy appropriate to the “sense of responsibility” that its “unique combination of history and geography brings.”<sup>6</sup>

However, a detailed analysis reveals the book to be a 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 territory) player. Instead, he says it should aspire to play a leading role in the multiple regions it belongs to, including the Middle East, the Balkans, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Caspian Sea Basin, the Mediterranean, and the Gulf and the Black Sea basin. However, instead of resorting to violent means to achieve this, Davutoğlu believes Turkey should capitalize on the potential of its soft power, drawn from historic and cultural links with all the regions to which it belongs, “as well as its democratic institutions and thriving market economy.”<sup>7</sup>

The third and most interesting source of the neo-Ottoman storyline – at least as far as the Western Balkans is concerned – stems from the nature of nation building processes in this part of the world. One should bear in mind that the majority of Balkan nations were born and shaped through struggle against Ottoman rule. Rebellions against the ‘heathen Turks’ basically provided the cornerstone for these nations’ identities; identities that 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 no history to fall back on, as their pre-Ottoman sagas remain murky and patchy stories at best, obscured by the centuries that have since passed.

Nevertheless, popular anti-Turk lore continues to feed the common imagination and provide fertile ground for anti-Turkish rhetoric based on – however irrational – a 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.”<sup>8</sup> Mladić justified the ongoing massacre of thousands of Bosniak men and boys with the bizarre claim that it was revenge for the Ottoman quashing of an 1804 Serb uprising. To people brought up on a diet of popular lore, the passage of time meant nothing when it came to reasserting founding myths based on the supposed victimhood of their nation.

### **SO, WHAT PLACE IS THERE FOR TURKEY IN THE WESTERN BALKANS?**

What is it that connects Turkey with the Western Balkans anyway, especially since the region has its eyes set steadfastly on the European Union? First of all, there is history: Turkey has been a key player in the Balkans for half a millennium, and its policies and actions decisively influenced the course of history in the region’s formative years. Ottoman rule, as well as its legal system, culture, language, and religion, as well as its defeats and eventual abandonment of the region following the Balkan Wars, have all left a lasting legacy, both positive and negative.

There is also a large Balkan diaspora living in Turkey today, forming a significant bond between the two states. These ties are, however, largely symbolic, as most of these emigrants left their Balkan homelands following the end of Ottoman rule in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They usually moved in large population groups – with extended families, villages, and even small towns migrating en masse – meaning that almost no family ties remained in their former homelands. Furthermore, upon arrival as immigrants, they were subjected to an intense turkification process, resulting in changed family names, the inability to use their mother tongue, etc. For example, very few of the estimated four million ethnic Bosniaks living 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 has a lot of accumulated historical capital to wield. It once created and maintained a thriving cosmopolitan society, which, by the means of the millet system, granted significant autonomy to different religious and ethnic communities. The Ottoman Empire was an inclusive society that offered upward mobility, with nu-

merous examples of non-Turk and non-Muslim subjects advancing to occupy some of the most important administrative and military posts in the empire. Never a proselytizing culture, Turks – contrary to popular belief in the Balkans – did not pursue mass conversions of their subjects to Islam. Throughout the Balkans, Muslims remained a minority population during much of the Ottoman era. Even in Bosnia, which together with Albania was a site of the only mass conversions to Islam, the Muslim population in the early 16th century was estimated at around 38 percent. An Ottoman population census of 1875 varyingly estimated the Muslim population at between 32 and 51 percent.

Despite numerous shortcomings – for example forcing only its non-Muslim subjects to pay taxes, and otherwise treating them as second class citizens – the Ottoman Empire nevertheless managed to treat myriad clans, tribes, religions, and ethnicities as members of a single political and social entity. Following the Spanish Reconquista, tens of thousands of Jews fleeing religious-inspired violence managed to find refuge in the realms of the Ottoman Empire, resettling with full citizenship rights as far north as the present-day Western Balkans. The role of the Orthodox Church in the Balkans was actually strengthened by Ottoman leaders, who viewed it as a useful counterweight to the organized might of the Catholic Church.

Compare this vibrant patchwork of religions and ethnicities, maintained for centuries by a single political authority spanning three continents, with the situation hundreds of years later in which the only way the European Union could comprehend and cope with the tiny Bosnia’s cosmopolitan society was by sanctioning its demolition and breaking it into ethnic districts ruled by right-wing nationalists.

Being a highly centralized and hierarchical society, Turkey also possesses a certain measure of resolve, something always welcome in the restive Western Balkans. One of the principal reasons for EU fatigue in the region has been a perceived inability by the Union to take decisive action in pursuit of its goals, backing it up, if necessary, with political and economic might (violent means being a thing of the 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 and backs it up with an appropriate measure of political and economic clout. Even its supposed historical arch enemy in the region, Serbia, has been happy in recent years to repeatedly extend a welcome to visiting Turkish political figures, including President Gül, Prime Minister Erdoğan, and Foreign Minister Davutoğlu. The

latter also took an active interest and engaged in several rounds of high-profile diplomacy in 2011, attempting, albeit unsuccessfully, to broker an agreement between rival factions in the Serbian Islamic Community.

Being a rising economic power, Turkey could bring much needed investment to the Western Balkans in future years, which could shore up ailing regional economies. Investment by Turkish companies could in turn integrate the Western Balkans into the large Turkish domestic market, as well as into the markets of Central Asia and the Middle East, where Turkey is set to play an increasingly prominent role. So far, cooperation in the economic sphere has a patchy record, for multiple reasons, but the situation is improving, with several important investment projects by Turkey underway in all the countries of the region. Besides direct investment in the economy, Turkey has also initiated several projects funding the reconstruction and preservation of Ottoman era monuments, mostly in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A few months ago, Turkey also extended a low-interest credit line to Bosnia, to the tune of 100 million euro, in support of returnees' enterprises.

### ISSUES AFFECTING THE TURKISH ROLE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

Turkish overtures in the region have earned it a lot of bad PR in recent years. Turkey is often perceived as taking sides, or at best as not completely impartial, when it comes to dealing with countries of the Western Balkans. Critics accuse it of being pro-Muslim and anti-Orthodox, and of having a covert neo-Ottoman, or even Islamist, agenda. A number of public statements by leading Turkish politicians in recent years, such as the speeches by Erdoğan and Davutoğlu cited earlier, have further strengthened this stereotype. Even though most of these accusations have been found to be baseless constructions, one should not underestimate the persistence of nationalist myths based on an opposition to everything Turkish.

Even among the supposedly pro-Turkish population in the region (presumed to be Muslims inhabiting the so-called 'green belt,' from Bosnia to Macedonia), there is a great deal of resentment for being dragged into a political game that they do not see as their own. In the wake of Erdoğan's 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 – with Eu-

rope or with Turkey. Numerous columns, articles, and features in Serb, Macedonian, and Croat media dealing with the subject attest to the impact that certain off-hand remarks could have in shaping the policy debate in the Western Balkans.

Another source of resentment among inhabitants of the region who presumably tend toward Turkey is that such bold official rhetoric is usually not 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 Western Balkans countries. Figures for most of the countries in the region do not rank Turkey among their top foreign investors. According to the Turkish Ministry of Economy, Turkish investments in the *entire* Balkans region were valued at US \$189 million in 2011, the last year for which data are available.<sup>9</sup> Even in Bosnia, presumably the focus of much Turkish attention, Turkey does not feature among the top ten investors in the country. The fact that this small and economically struggling country saw a total Turkish foreign direct investment in the ten-year period between 2002 and 2011 of only US \$138 million does not bode well in supporting Turkish rhetoric that places Bosnia as central to Turkish foreign policy interests.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, aforementioned leaked US diplomatic cables somewhat 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."<sup>11</sup>

Even the architect of the new Turkish foreign policy, Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, stated in *Strategic Depth* the need for Turkey to reinvent itself and restyle its policies into something beyond 19th century geopolitical terms. Emphasizing the need to find a way to use soft power on the path of ascension to central power status, Davutoğlu asserted that Turkey must move past the militaristic image that resulted from its strong military and a history of military control over society and politics. Instead, he said, it should "contribute actively towards conflict resolution and international peace and security," which he deemed "a call to duty arising from the depths of a multidimensional history for Turkey."<sup>12</sup> Reinventing a country and restyling its policies is not unheard of in modern *realpolitik*. In this endeavor, Turkey could indeed have been inspired by none other than the European Union, which is constantly reinventing itself (some call it an evolutionary process). Its most recent reincarnation, attested to by a Nobel Peace Prize, is that of peacemaker. If the European Union could, in less than two decades, shake off its image as a lumbering eco-



conomic giant and political dwarf on whose watch the term ethnic cleansing was introduced into the political vocabulary, Turkey should have a comparatively easier task in healing centuries-old wounds in its relations with its neighbors.

## CONCLUSION

Turkey is an important regional player and will increasingly play such a role in the foreseeable future. A number of factors work in favor of this outlook for Turkey; its strategic position makes it indispensable in transactions involving great powers and likely future alliances. And, its economic growth is projected to continue, given positive demographic trends in the country, providing Turkey with future resources to back up its political designs in the region.

Still, Turkey has to tread carefully on its path in the Western Balkans. It should stress the use of soft power in dealing with different sides of the Balkan divide, and its PR effort should be fundamentally rethought in order to help brush up its image in the region. Turkey's investment in the Western Balkans should also substantially increase, allowing it to claim that significant benefits come to the people of the region through its presence. Finally, its position, size, and resources will increasingly allow it to play the role of mediator between numerous bickering states in the Balkans, none of which is likely to possess the power to impose its will on another. ■

## NOTES:

- <sup>1</sup> The median age of Turks is 28.5 years, compared to, for example, 43.8 years for Italians. Turkey's population growth rate stands at 1.197%, whereas Germany's, for example, is -0.2%. "Turkey Demographics Profile 2013," Index Mundi, February 21, 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Baha Güngör, "A New Chapter in Turkey's EU Bid?" *Deutsche Welle*, February 23, 2013, <http://www.dw.de/a-new-chapter-in-turkeys-eu-bid/a-16624273>
- <sup>3</sup> "What Turkey Wants," *Gray Falcon* (blog), November 5, 2009, <http://grayfalcon.blogspot.com/2009/11/what-turkey-wants.html>
- <sup>4</sup> "Turkey Election: Victorious Erdogan Pledges 'Consensus,'" *BBC News*, June 13, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-europe-13744972>
- <sup>5</sup> Besar Likmeta, "US Wary of Turkey's Ambitions in the Balkans, Cables Show," *Balkan Insight*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/us-weary-of-turkey-s-neo-ottoman-ambitions-in-the-balkans>
- <sup>6</sup> Ahmet Davutoğlu, *Strategic Depth* (Istanbul: Küre, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, *The Davutoğlu Doctrine and Turkish Foreign Policy*, Working Paper 8/2010 (Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, 2010), <http://bit.ly/qpnYvU>
- <sup>8</sup> Rachel Irwin, "Srebrenica Footage Shown at Mladic Trial," *IWPR, TRI* 741, May 17, 2012, <http://iwpr.net/report-news/srebrenica-fo-otage-shown-mladic-trial>

<sup>9</sup> Republic of Turkey Ministry of Economy, "Balkans Regional Information," 2012, <http://www.economy.gov.tr/index.cfm?sayfa=count-riesandregions&region=9>

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Likmeta.

<sup>12</sup> Davutoğlu.