

# TURKISH FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THE BALKANS: NEW ACTIVISM, NEO-OTTOMANISM OR/SO WHAT?

*It is often argued that Ankara has developed a new interest and manifested a growing economic and diplomatic role in its neighboring regions – including the Balkans. This trend is mostly referred to as “new activism” in media circles, and has taken a place in the endless discussions on the success/failure of the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government. Furthermore, it has reopened the notorious discussion of so-called “neo-Ottomanism”, particularly due to the personal background and speeches of Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu. This opinion piece aims to analyze the current stage of Turkish foreign policy in the Balkans in order to understand the essence and dynamics of this so called “new activism” and “neo-Ottomanism”.*

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There have been intense debates in recent years about a “new activism” or “neo-Ottomanism” of Turkey in the Balkans. However, it makes sense to analyze Turkey’s current activism within the context of a substantial historicity. This is not the first time in the past decade that we have heard sustained comments about Turkey’s active foreign policy. It was also mentioned ten years ago with similar enthusiasm, within the framework of Turkish-Greek and Turkish-EU relations.<sup>1</sup> Though the concept of Neo-Ottomanism was not a central issue of the debates at the time, Ankara’s interest and activism in the Balkans is certainly not new. Although it has not been always at the fore, mostly due to the dynamics of post-9/11 international politics marked by the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, it has never truly changed. Ankara is highly interested in the Balkans and it has been so since 1989, if not before. Besides, the revitalization of interest in the Balkans is not limited to Ankara, as it is also observed in many international actors, including the EU.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, interest in the Balkans is becoming a part of the international agenda once again, which is quite logical, considering that many problems in the region remain unsolved, despite intense and protracted international interventions.<sup>3</sup>

What seems new in Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans is the increasing importance of economic relations in Turkish foreign policy. In this sense, Turkish foreign policy is becoming more tied to the liberal understanding of international politics, which prioritizes the role of enhanced economic relations, and departs from its conventional roots in the realist/conservative school, which exclusively emphasizes political-security relations. To note, this is neither a Turkish invention, nor the first experience in recent history of the Balkans: late 1990s is marked by the transformation of Greek foreign policy towards economic diplomacy. One should remember the arguments on the increasing Greek economic influence in the region in the late 1990s, which could also be seen as an era of growth of political influence, and re-assess it in current conditions.

A second new dimension that can be considered even more significant than the first one (because it signifies a move beyond traditional state-centric conceptions of international politics) is the contemporary aspect of relations with non-state actors. This dimension of relations is rather recent, and requires extensive research before substantiated comments can be made. It can be observed that the political organizations of Turkish/Muslim communities in the Balkans, including political parties, behave in an independent way, rather than in accordance with Turkish foreign policy. In this sense, Turkey seems to have learned to cooperate with,

<sup>1</sup> Pam O’Toole, “Analysis: Shifting Attitudes towards Turkey”, *BBC News*, 12 September 1999; Misha Glenny, “Changing Face of Balkan Politics”, *BBC News*, 8 April 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Tim Judah, “Bring the Balkans back into the heart of Europe”, *Financial Times*, 27 July 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Soren Jessen-Petersen and Daniel Serwer, “The Balkans Can Still Be Lost”, *The New York Times*, 10 November 2010.

rather than control, these actors. One can argue that learning has often been part of the process in the last two decades and this argument is not necessarily groundless, but further substantiated research is still needed on the matter. It can also be debated whether religious communities should be included in the analysis of Turkey's relations with non-state actors in the Balkans. If yes, then what could the liberal standpoint be, as liberals have often promoted non-state actors? Do they have a real effect on or a relation with the Turkish government about foreign policy? Much needs to be researched and analyzed in this regard.

The success-failure dichotomy, which is one of the main markers in the polarized setting of Turkish domestic politics and in conventional foreign policy analysis in international politics, does not look particularly plausible within the framework of Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans. This is not to say that one cannot assess whether Turkey has been successful or has failed, as will be explained below.

Turkey has always been a part of the larger international presence in the Balkans, and this needs to be taken into consideration in assessing Turkey's success or failure in the Balkans. For instance, given that Bosnia-Herzegovina is still a dysfunctional state, one can argue that the international community failed dramatically there. Turkey is definitely included in the international community in this sense, as a country conducting its policies towards the Balkans based on the international community's efforts, it also failed. This is not to argue that Turkey would have been more successful had it acted unilaterally. On the contrary, unilateral Turkish action would have risked resulting in a disaster beyond imagination, since such a unilateralist approach could have caused a much broader regional conflict.

Turkey attempted to simply support Bosniak existence and strength, in the failed framework of the Dayton Agreement and help maintain minimum stability in Bosnia-Herzegovina within the framework of the international community – and nothing more. It is just the effort of one regional power to remain in the theatre and pursue what it defines as its interest, in this case the unity and stability of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bosniak existence and influence. Thus, Turkey's policy has been neither a success nor a failure.

If to remain in the theatre *per se* is considered a success, then Turkey has been quite successful. However, the transfer ceremony between the U.S./NATO and EU, in other words, increasing the role of the EU in the international community in Bosnia-Herzegovina, could risk pushing Turkey out. This has not entirely taken place, which is likely to be registered as a success in Turkish foreign policy. In any case, the Bosnian state cannot provide freedom, security and welfare to its citizens: this is a fact beyond the foreign policies of any country, including Turkey.

Ankara's mentioned achievement has also been evaluated by the media and policy analysts in comparison to its policy in other regions such as the Middle East. In this respect, particularly the summit of the three presidents (Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia) in Istanbul in April 2010 and the consequent Istanbul declaration was considered an important achievement, on the grounds that it included the statement asserting Serbia's respect of the territorial integrity of Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Turkey-Serbia rapprochement and Turkey's efforts to put Bosniak/Bosnian grievances into the European agenda in recent years are considered as examples that demonstrate the role Turkey can play with "correct vision and strategy".<sup>5</sup> The summit has been considered an outcome of Foreign Minister Davutoğlu's effort towards stability in the Balkans even by critical journalists.<sup>6</sup> Turkey succeeded in bringing Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia together. However, this gathering in and of itself could not deliver anything very substantial.<sup>7</sup> Bosnia-Herzegovina is still a dysfunctional state and Bosnian grievances ensue. Turkey alone cannot be blamed for this failure, but the so-called success seems limited to a mere interstate formal diplomatic routine.

Another novelty in Turkey's approach to Balkan relations is the improvement in relations with Serbia. Ankara hopelessly tried to establish effective relations with Serbia during the 1990s; however Serbia did not appear ready for this. Serbia has changed significantly since then; nowadays relations are improving, to the advantage of Turkey, Serbia, and the international community. The importance of Serbia for the stability of the Balkans is clear and acknowledged even by Islamist writers in Turkey, albeit reluctantly. Nevertheless, it is often argued that Turkey's relations with Serbia should be dependent on the conditions of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Bosniaks.<sup>8</sup> What seems neglected, particularly in Turkish public or elite opinion, is the position of Bosnian Serbs. Serbia does not possess entire control over the Bosnian Serbs, to the extent that Bosnian Serbs replaced their discourse of joining Serbia with arguably self-confident calls of independence, especially following Kosovo's independence. This issue is further complicated by Bosnian Serbs' enthusiasm for independence and how this relates to Serbia's efforts to prevent Kosovo's independence. In any case, to get along with Serbia and even convince it on the correctness of Bosniak grievances by Turkey or others does not necessarily provide Bosnian Serb conviction in the same way and hence, their loyalty to the Bosnian state. It can be argued that the Bosnian Serbs are a distinct variable in this equation.

<sup>4</sup> Sami Kohen, "Balkan Açılımı" [The Balkan Opening], *Milliyet*, 27 April 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Semih İdiz, "Türk Diplomasisi Balkanlar'da Başarılı" [Turkish Diplomacy is Successful in the Balkans], *Milliyet*, 10 February 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Ceyda Karan, "Tarihle Yüzleşirken Soykırımı Saplanmamak" [Avoiding Genocide in Confrontations with History], *Radikal*, 26 April 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Phil Cain, "The Limits of Turkey's Balkans Diplomacy", *World Politics Review*, 10 November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Osman Atalay, "Sırbistan'ın Özü, Boşnakların Yalnızlığı" [Serbian Apology, Bosniak Loneliness], *Yeni Şafak*, 6 April 2010.

To touch upon the inevitable Turkey-EU relations with all insurmountable-looking problems, it is not easy to understand the arguments that this new activism (including the “zero problem policy with neighbors” as Davutoğlu prefers to call it) provides an alternative to Turkey’s full EU membership. First of all, what is now labeled as a “zero problem policy” is not really new, and has actually been one of the main pillars of Turkish foreign policy since the declaration of the Republic. This is signified in the words “peace at home, peace abroad” of the republic’s founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

The AKP government’s emphasis on this policy by new approaches has sparked many commentaries. However, the “zero problem policy” does not necessarily mean that existing problems are (being) solved. In fact, none of the major political issues have been effectively resolved. The solution of the problems with neighbors does not depend solely on Turkey. Moreover, improvement of relations with neighbors does not necessarily constitute an “alternative” to Turkey’s EU accession process. In fact, improvement of relations with neighbors is one of the

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conditions of EU membership. However, this policy can be seen as an alternative to Turkey-EU relations in an economic sense. The decreasing rate of the EU in Turkish foreign trade volume is significant. The EU used to constitute more than 60 percent of Turkey’s foreign trade. Currently it is said to be below 50 percent. (It should be noted though that not all the loss of the EU has been filled by trade with neighbors). Finally, one should also consider this essential question: Why would neighbors be willing to be perceived as an alternative to the EU in Turkish foreign policy? For the moment, the candidacy to the EU, no matter how complicated and heartbreaking, is one of the major assets of Turkish foreign policy, to the chagrin of many in both western European political elite and Turkish public opinion.

However, it is often argued that the EU itself is troubled by Turkish activism. In particular, this is due to the Turkish insistence on the importance of the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In this regard, it is important to note that the habitual Turkish complaints on the reluctance, ignorance and historical prejudices of the EU remain steadfast.<sup>9</sup> However, recently Turkish diplomats have taken their complaints one

<sup>9</sup> Semih İdiz, “Türk Diplomasisi Balkanlar’da Başarılı” [Turkish Diplomacy is Successful in the Balkans], *Milliyet*, 10 February 2010.

step further, claiming that the EU has done nothing but destabilize the region. EU diplomats, meanwhile, counter this argument by criticizing Turkey's partiality in Bosnia-Herzegovina; they claim Turkey is biased towards the Turks/Muslims in the Balkans region. This supposed bias can be interpreted within the broader framework of the so-called "Neo-Ottomanism".

Turkey's supposedly new and enhanced activism has encouraged criticisms against Turkey, especially after the sensational term "neo-Ottomanism" was introduced.<sup>10</sup> International comments have been quite ambivalent at this point, as well; no happy medium has been reached in describing Turkey's active outreach. Some argue that AKP government is "re-engaging with territories once ruled by the sultans, from the Balkans to Baghdad, in a drive to return Turkey to a place

among the leadership of the Muslim world and the top ranks of international diplomacy." The same camp additionally claims that "the U.S. and the European Union praise this unobjectionable aim: to act as a force for stability in an unstable region", while noting that Davutoğlu rejects the expansionist label of "Neo-Ottoman".<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, it is said that "Turkey has increased its presence in the region... But realizing Davutoğlu's grand vision of reinventing the Ottoman empire's glory days is another matter"<sup>12</sup> which is "a kind of an imperial overstretch" that cannot be delivered.<sup>13</sup>

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Within Turkey, the discussion rings with similar ambivalence. In one ostensibly Neo-Ottomanist opinion, it is argued that Turkey has responsibilities towards former Ottoman citizens, such as those in Kosovo. However, it is delineated clearly that it would be illogical for Turkey to think in terms of territorial control or expansion, and instead that legitimate international mechanisms of international law must be used.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, it is noted that the intentions and actions of other states in the Balkans should not be miscalculated.<sup>15</sup> Another opinion, resounding

<sup>10</sup> "Neo-Ottomanism" has not been defined as of yet and in its present use, seems like a fancy, but inherently empty shell .

<sup>11</sup> Delphine Strauss, "Turkey's Ottoman mission", *Financial Times*, 23 November 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Phil Cain, "The Limits of Turkey's Balkans Diplomacy", *World Politics Review*, 10 November 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Dusan Reljic in Phil Cain, "The Limits of Turkey's Balkans Diplomacy", *World Politics Review*, 10 November 2010.

<sup>14</sup> Cevdet Akçali, "Balkanlar'ı ve Kafkasya'yı ne zaman kaybettik?" [When Did We Lose the Balkans and the Caucasus?], *Yeni Şafak*, 14 November 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Osman Atalay, "Sırbistan'ın Özü, Boşnakların Yalnızlığı" [Serbian Apology, Bosniak Loneliness], *Yeni Şafak*, 6 April 2010.

with Neo-Ottomanism, has emphasized that Turkey has been the only country to attend to the Balkans with special care for the views of the Balkan citizenry, thanks to the Ottoman past. Nevertheless, it is noted carefully that Atatürk's Balkan Pact idea and even the idea of a Balkan Federation was not different from this standpoint, in an effort to provide/present continuity with early republican foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> Commenting on Davutoğlu's definition of neo-Ottomanism in terms of the interest that Turkey presents to the countries that remained in the Ottoman political space, critics underline the fact that attempts at forms of territorial control over former Ottoman lands would be mere craziness, and that the key point in this endeavor should be the emphasis on the close relations with the West and the EU.<sup>17</sup>

In the economic sense, what can be achieved through a neo-Ottomanist policy can be important for Turkey, but Turkey is still far from being a dominant economic power in the region. Turkey is not a capital exporting country; on the contrary, it needs to import capital, and thus far it has done so, while facing serious nationalist and/or statist opposition within the country. Although it recorded a significant level of economic growth in the recent decade and even became part of the G-20, it can hardly be said that it is a core country in the world economy. Put simply, Turkey is not capable of dominating the Balkans economically in the "neo-Ottoman" sense. There is no ground, meaning, or need for a military action in this context either, and it would be unimaginable for Turkey to act unilaterally in a military sense in the Balkans. This was evident at the beginning of the 1990s, and is even more so now. Turkey has been part of international peacekeeping missions, and any military action outside of this international framework is inconceivable. In terms of diplomatic influence, it is fair to say that Turkey is controversial. As a matter of fact, Davutoğlu's ungainly words of "reinventing the Ottoman success story in the Balkans" provoke the reactions of Serbian nationalism<sup>18</sup> at the very least, which indeed harms Turkey's objective of becoming a mediator. To put it bluntly, the Ottoman reference is helpful considering Turk/Muslim populations in the Balkans, but self-destructive considering the rest, thus is harmful for the envisaged mediator role.

And what's more, there is no demand for a greater Turkish role in such a form of Neo-Ottomanism from the Turks/Muslims of the Balkans. This group would benefit the most if Turkey became the main regional actor in the Balkans, so its standpoint towards such a neo-Ottomanist project in the region means a great deal. For instance, Kosovars certainly want Turkish support for their independence, but at the same time they do not want a serious increase in any Turkish involvement

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<sup>16</sup> Abdullah Muradoğlu, "Yeni bir tarih yazılıyor, farkında mısınız?" [History is Being Rewritten, Are You Aware?], *Milli Gazete*, 14 February 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Sami Kohen, "Yeni Osmanlılık mı" [Neo-Ottomanism?], *Milliyet*, 25 November 2009.

<sup>18</sup> Phil Cain, "The Limits of Turkey's Balkans Diplomacy", *World Politics Review*, 10 November 2010.

in their other affairs. In other words, their main goal is independence –and Turkish support in this area is welcome–but not beyond that. They do not want to become dependent on Turkey outside of this sphere, for such dependence would be highly unfruitful while seeking independence so ardently. It is arguable whether even the Bulgarian Turkish leadership would prefer an increase in Turkey’s role in Bulgaria, as they seem comfortable in their current situation, despite serious socio-economic problems in rural areas (also the case elsewhere in the Balkans).

In regards to Turkish society, there is no real push towards a much larger Balkan role – however tempting the discourse can be in its role in swelling Turkish pride, most of the Turkish citizenry is mainly concerned with questions of “tomorrow’s bread”, i.e. employment and social security. If political questions were to be ranked in order of importance, then secularism and the Kurdish question would be higher on most people’s agendas. Given these factors, what can the Turkish citizens’ true interest or objective be in such a (neo-Ottomanist) project?

Hence, the discussion on neo-Ottomanism seems groundless, for there is neither a demand for this type of outreach by the Turks/Muslims in the Balkans or by Turkish society, nor a concrete base for the implementation of such a policy. The Ottoman Empire was a successful multinational, multi-religious, universal (agrarian) empire in the pre-capitalist and pre-modern era. However, fundamental changes took place since the once successful Ottoman era, and ultimately, the Turkish nation-state has emerged as a completely distinct force. This warrants no serious project and/or political force for “neo-Ottomanism,” even in Turkish domestic politics. It only follows that there would be no such policy implemented in the larger field of foreign relations.