

## The return of Turkey to the Western Balkans: a challenge or an opportunity for the European Union?

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### Abstract

In the new Turkish foreign policy, besides the great interests in the Caucasus, Central Asia, Middle East and Africa, the Western Balkans are also important. Turkey is making great efforts to play a greater role on the international scene and creates its area of interest, especially where the links of Ottoman legacy can help. Although it is defined as a peaceful power in the region, some describe it as neo-ottoman, a term rejected by the Turkish authorities because of its possible soft imperialist connotation. Indeed, European prevarications about its accession to the European Union (EU) reinforce the belief of Ankara to open up towards other parts of the world. Through the diplomatic initiative, mediation, privatization of strategic sectors and cultural exchange, Turkey has emerged as a real player, making the Western Balkans the only region where the principle of "zero problems with neighbors" gives the most tangible results. However, the new Turkish influence also found some limitations concerning the fact that people living in the Western Balkans have not erased the days of Ottoman rule from their memory. Moreover, despite cooperation between Ankara and Brussels in areas such as peacekeeping or conflict mediation, the EU, which continues to maintain its leading authority in this close area, seems challenged somewhat by the assertive presence of Turkey. This paper aims precisely to study the return of Turkey to the Western Balkans. Our central question is: is the Turkish projection in the Western Balkans a challenge or an opportunity for the EU?

### Keywords

Cooperation, Competition, Emerging Power, European Union, Rivality, Turkey, Western Balkans.

## Introduction

Following the disappearance of the bipolar world, new players qualified as "emerging powers" have arisen worldwide. These may present an opportunity or a challenge for the international deployment of the European Union (EU) as the commitment of Turkey illustrates it in the Western Balkans. Turkey's new geopolitical doctrine derived from the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP*), in power since 2002, puts the emphasis on the importance of diversification of external relations; this leads Ankara to be more present not only in the Middle East, Africa and the Caucasus, but also in the Western Balkans. Turkey is making more efforts to increase its presence on the world stage and thus to create areas of interest, especially where it can mobilize the Ottoman legacy. It develops relationships with countries or groups of countries that it considers to be receptive to its influence poles, like the Western Balkans states.

Yet, just like Turkey, the Western Balkan countries aspire to join the EU. The accession prospect of the Western Balkan countries has accelerated at the Feira European Council (2000) and especially of Thessaloniki's one (2003), which reaffirmed the clear commitment of the EU to these states. In other words, the EU considers that these states will receive the membership once the membership criteria will be fulfilled. It is in this context that Croatia has become the 28th full member on July 2013.

However, the internal EU concerns, following the economic and financial crisis of recent years, have created a political and security vacuum in the Western Balkans. In this context, Turkey managed to profit from this situation, even though, as a candidate country for EU membership, simultaneously continuing its efforts in the context of a possible European integration. Thus, our research question is: **is the Turkish projection in the Western Balkans a challenge or an opportunity for the EU?** Our theoretical framework will be based on the combination of constructivist approach and realist theory, which seem most appropriate to analyze the Turkish foreign policy towards the Western Balkans. For the realization of this article we will use books, scientific articles, official documents, official statements and information obtained during the IAPSS Winter School 2015 at Sakarya

University in Turkey. Based on this qualitative approach, we try to provide a better understanding of the phenomenon under study.

This paper will specifically examine, in a first part, the new Turkish geopolitical doctrine and its relations with the EU and the Western Balkans. The second part will be devoted to the analysis of Turkish influence in the Western Balkans. Thirdly, the analysis will focus on the deployment of Turkey in the Western Balkans as a challenge or an opportunity for the expansion strategy pursued by the EU in its immediate neighborhood. We will assess at the end of these three parts the triangular relations between Turkey, the EU and the Western Balkans.

### **The New Turkish Foreign Policy, European Union and Western Balkans**

Since 2002, Turkey has lived a sustained economic development and does not hesitate, like other emerging powers (Brazil, China and India) to make efforts to consolidate its presence on the world stage by adopting an ambitious policy of regional and international order (Nahavandi 2012: 8 ; Marcou 2010: 269). Although the term "emerging power" remains relatively vague because of the difficulty to agree on a precise definition, this notion "[...] covers a particular reality, the one regarding distribution of global power and beginning with a progressive calling into question of the monopoly of power held for five centuries by the Western world" (Santander 2012: 10). Indeed, emerging players perceive themselves as being the future of the planet (Santander 2009: 22). This is also the case of Turkey, which increases efforts to fulfill its aspirations by creating areas of interest, especially where it can rely on the Ottoman legacy.

For many years, the Europeans were cautious in keeping good relations with Turkey without an accession in the EU, despite the frustrations of the Turks (Hill 2010: 195). However, European reluctance caused discontent among citizens and Turkish diplomats who doubt about the benefits of European integration: these ones defend their own identity and feel that their interests would be larger, perhaps, to maintain an autonomous framework thus pulling the benefits of their geostrategic position at the crossroads between East and West (Coskun 2011: 115). Thus, the Turkish authorities consider that their country is among the world's

greatest powers and feel that it is no more appropriate to define it only as a "buffer state" or a "bridge state" between these two worlds (Kazancigil 2012: 55). Therefore, in the face of opposition from some states such as Germany, France and Austria to accept Turkey in the EU, which are more favorable to a "privileged partnership" with it, the Turkish authorities decided to adopt a multilateral approach towards Asia, Africa and the Western Balkans. Ankara is also developing relations with regions that have never been part of the Ottoman Empire following the example of some countries in sub-Saharan Africa (Bayramzadeh 2014: 148-153).

The process of construction of Turkey's power status is based on a so-called global geopolitical strategy of "zero problems with neighbors" (Davutoglu 2010), thus leading to a fundamental change in its foreign policy. This multidimensional and pro-active policy is to impose the Turkish state as a regional power in a "globalized world" (Billion 2012: 48-49). The constructivist approach to international relations states that "no international reality [...] can exist without having been first formulated in our thought [...]" (Telo 2010: 134). This is also the case for the new foreign policy that was first thought and theorized in 2001 by Ahmet Davutoglu, a professor of international relations, in his book "Strategic Depth". Since 2002, Davutoglu held important state positions, first as a political adviser to Prime Minister Abdullah Gül and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan then; in 2009 he became Minister of Foreign Affairs, since 2014 he holds the position of Prime Minister. Indeed, these political office have allowed him to try to achieve in practice the theoretical vision of Turkish foreign policy that realist theory would describe as a power maximization objective based on the "national interest" (Battistella 2002: 144-145). In other words, according to the realist theory, ambitions to build power animates the way that States think the world around them (Mearsheimer 2001: 5). In this context, Turkey aim also to increase the political and economic partners and diversify foreign relations to become a major regional power and at the same time to play a greater role on the international stage. According to Joseph Nye "[...] power is the ability to effect the outcomes you want, and if necessary, change the behavior of others to make this happen" (Nye 2002: 4). In the analysis of an actor's power, Nye uses two notions of power which are the hard power, based on the military and the economic factors, and soft power seen as an indirect influence. Soft power, or power cooptation is defined as the seduction ability of a country to achieve its own goals, without using force, but through intangible resources such as attraction, positive

image, values and culture (Nye 2002: 8-9). In this perspective, the power would consist in tangible and intangible factors. The first apprehends the population, territory, natural resources, economic strength or military force, while the second (non-quantifiable) includes national cohesion, ideology, culture (religion) and influencing international institutions (Nye 2002: 4-5). But to complete the definition of power, representation and recognition of the actor must also be taken into account (Santander 2009: 24).

However, despite initial success of the approach "zero problems with neighbors", the Arab Spring, the war in Syria and the recent crisis in Iraq were difficult to face for the Turkish foreign policy. Therefore, a dramatic reversal of this one occurred in North Africa and especially in the Middle East replacing it gradually with the "no neighbors without problems" (Sisu Vicari and Lika 2014: 10-15). But this statement is not valid for the Western Balkans since these are the only geographic area where the principle of "zero problems with neighbors" has been most successful and gives the most concrete results (see below). Unlike the period following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and that of the Cold War, when Turkey was virtually cut off from this area (therefore from Albania and the former Yugoslavia at the time), since the end of the bipolar world and especially in the last ten years, under the energetic leadership of the AKP, the region has become again a real area of action for Turkish influence. By adopting policies based on both tangible and intangible elements, Ankara has made a change in its foreign policy that has enabled it to consolidate its presence in the Western Balkans.

### **The Western Balkans, action space for the Turkish influence?**

The region of the Western Balkans, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia (EU member since July 1, 2013), Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia, leaves no indifferent international actors. United States, Russia and the EU tend to adopt different strategies according to their own geostrategic interests. However, the commitments of Americans in other conflict regions, such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and more recently Syria, and the concerns of Europeans about their economic problems and enlargement fatigue, have created a "power vacuum" in the region (Anastasakis 2012: 202). This gap is filled by the presence, to a certain extent of Russia in Serbia and Montenegro, and especially Turkey in areas with a

Muslim majority such as Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (Poulain and Sakellariou 2011). Islam and the Ottoman legacy therefore tend to be to the eyes of Ankara a lever of influence in most countries of the Western Balkans. Thus, the close link to the historical and cultural fields, caused by the Ottoman period, is currently used as a starting point to deepen and revitalize all-round cooperation between Ankara and the Western Balkan states (Öner 2011: 229).

The Turkish strategy aims to overcome problems related to ethnic confrontations in order to consolidate a form of mutual respect between the Western Balkan people. In this context and on various occasions, the Turkish authorities were ready to play a mediating role between Kosovo and Serbia or between this last one and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, Turkey was one of the first countries to recognize Kosovo's independence and also intends to play the role of a lawyer who will defend the interests of the new state in international bodies, mainly by encouraging its partner countries to move towards the formal recognition of this one (Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs). In the case of Macedonia, Ankara strongly supports its membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) despite the Greek opposition claiming for a compromise on the name of this state.

Another important point which deserves to be mention is due to the key role of Turkish diplomacy regarding the adoption of a declaration by the Serbian Parliament condemning the Srebrenica massacre in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Hale 2013: 203). In addition, shortly after this act, in April 24, 2010, Turkish, Bosnian and Serbian presidents met on the Turkish soil to sign the Istanbul Declaration which promotes peace, dialogue and cooperation between Belgrade and Sarajevo while also noting the need to pursue together the path of European integration (Istanbul Declaration 2010). These diplomatic initiatives, based on compromise and practical solutions, demonstrate that since the end of the Cold War, as the EU, Ankara has become an unavoidable player in conflict resolution and peacekeeping in the countries of Western Balkans (Burdy and Marcou 2008: 115-116).

The presence of a large Turkish minority, particularly in Kosovo and Macedonia, is an additional reason for Ankara to pay more attention to this part of the Balkans. The presence of embassies in all Western Balkan countries, as well as the frequent visits of senior state

officials confirm the commitment of Turkey and in all directions influence that it wishes to exercise. There is also an important Balkans diaspora in Turkey, particularly composed of Albanian and Bosniak communities which often hold key functions within government institutions and undeniably contributes to the rapprochement of Ankara with their country of origin (Bozdémir 2007: 178 ; de Rapper 2005: 211). The presence of this diaspora is also confirmed by Ahmet Davutoglu, Turkey's current Prime Minister, who emphasized that "there are more Bosnians in Turkey than in Bosnia-Herzegovina, more Albanians than in Kosovo [...]" (Davutoglu 2010). According to some estimations, nearly eight million Turkish citizens with Albanian origin live in Turkey, including four million who still speak Albanian (Auzias and Labourdette 2012: 50). The large number of citizens, members of the Turkish Parliament, diplomats and state officials originating from Western Balkans (especially Albanians and Bosniaks), undoubtedly contributes to the strengthening of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkan countries (Lika 2013: 66).

Furthermore, in order to increase their influence, the Turkish authorities are investing in strategic sectors including: telecommunications, transports (highways, airports) and banks. The Turkish multinational companies continue to grow in the region, which are genuine competitors for European companies. The largest companies in mobile telephony, Telekom, Turkcell and Calik already present in Albania, aim to expand their activities to other states in the region. Other powerful companies are also present on the ground such as Bechtel-Enka, a US-Turkish consortium, which after building the highway connecting Albania and Kosovo (Bechtel-Enka 2010), was then commissioned to build the Kosovan part of a new highway linking Prishtina to Skopje / Shkupi, the Macedonian capital.

The Turks continue to increase their weight not only on political and economic exchanges, but also in the social and cultural fields. Regarding these ones, the effect is even more remarkable. Turkish soap operas broadcast especially during prime time are very popular and some of them meet a resounding success, making it a true soft power asset. They cost less to produce than those made locally or proposed by the West. Themes which are approached the most often are everyday life topics or romances based on common traditions, always remaining "politically neutral" (Paris 2013: 158). In addition, the Turkish Agency for Cooperation and

International Development (*Türk ve Kalkınma İşbirliği Ajansı - TİKA*) prints a constant presence through funding many reconstruction or restoration projects related to the Ottoman legacy like mosques, bridges and schools (TIKA 2007). The Turkish state also plans to build a Turkish university in Kosovo, on a 400-hectare place and of which the costs are estimated to reach an amount of approximately one hundred million euros (Municipality of Lipjan in Kosovo 2011). In this case, it is a strategic choice that allows to cover the Balkan region as a whole due to the geographical position of Kosovo.

Finishing this series of examples which suggests that, over recent years, the Turkish authorities have invested heavily in the plan to spread their influence in the Western Balkans. Through their growing presence, they contrive to prove that Turkey is a major peaceful regional power, promoter of peace and economic prosperity. In other words, this policy seeks and manages to seduce a majority of people while making this space increasingly dependent on Turkey. Thus, Turkey seems to be guided by the logic that to consolidate its power status, it must be based on tangible (economic investments) and intangible (culture or religion) resources.

### **Turkey, a rival or a partner power of the EU in the Western Balkans?**

Through the diplomatic initiative, mediation, privatization of strategic sectors and cultural exchange, Turkey has emerged as a real player, making the Western Balkans the only region where the principle of "zero problems with its neighbors" of his new doctrine gives the most tangible results (Poulain and Sakellariou 2011). This strategic deployment also changes its position as a candidate for EU membership since today Ankara presents itself as a redoubtable regional player, with specificities that characterize an emerging power (Bazin and de Tapia 2012: 295-300). Indeed, for reasons related to its strong economic growth, rising confidence in itself under the leadership of the AKP, as well as the weakening, at least relative, of the EU, Turkey is acting in recent years in the Western Balkans region much more unilaterally compared to the years just after the end of the Cold War (Bechev 2012: 227).

The process of diversification of foreign policy and openness to other regions such as the Western Balkans are seen as a distancing of Turkey in relation to the West. The current debate, especially in Western countries, focuses on the question of whether Turkey roll away from the



EU by developing an independent policy or if it remains committed to the Western alliance, despite its new misgivings about an European integration. Some scholars see in that the establishment of a pragmatic strategy of entry to the EU via the Western Balkans. According to this perception, conscious of Turkish influence in the region, Brussels would perhaps find more advantages to open its doors to Ankara rather than leave it on the steps. Consequently, this proactive projection in the Western Balkans occurs as a will of the Turkish state to establish itself as a regional power essential to the EU (Brljavac 2011: 42). This involvement of Turkey in the Western Balkans, according to Michel Bozdemir "[...] seems to be every time a pretext, an opportunity to reaffirm its European priority on one hand and its multiple affiliations on the other" (Bozdémir 2007: 186). Moreover, according to the Turkish authorities, the foreign policy of Turkey remains officially oriented towards the EU. The interest that Ankara announce for the Western Balkans would thus fall within a perspective of cooperation with the countries of the region with the ultimate goal of joining together the EU. In this sense, Turkish diplomats stress the fact that their foreign policy is in line with both the US and the EU (Davutoglu 2010).

But, within the Turkish specialists in international relations there are different opinions about this issue. While for Şaban Kardaş, associate professor of international relations in the Department of International Relations at TOBB University of Economics and Technology in Ankara, there is more complementarity than competition (Kardaş 2015), according to Ali Balci, professor of international relations at Sakarya University, there is a clear competition between Turkey and the EU especially in the Western Balkans states where there is a Muslim presence (Balci 2015). According to Inan Rüma, while especially for Greek and Serbian nationalists, the Turkish projection in this region conceal a hidden agenda whose ultimate goal is to create in the Balkans a "Muslim axis" which would be in line with Turkey's foreign policy (Rüma 2011: 137). But others still think that Ankara wants to restore in the Balkans especially a commercial space that existed under the Ottoman era, establishing a narrow field of cooperation with these countries (Rexhepi 2012). This would be a new geopolitical alternative of Turkish foreign policy against the country's EU accession postponement. Indeed, it is a response to the EU procrastination toward the accession that Turkey has chosen to "challenge" Brussels by its increasingly assiduous presence in the Western Balkans. The

Turkish government rather attempt to diversify its political and trade partners around the world, including the Western Balkans, adopting a more autonomous political trend in the international arena (Lika 2014: 59-60). However, it is important to stress that the economy and security of Turkey are largely dependent on the Western world, namely on the EU and NATO. This is the reason why its application for EU membership "[...] is likely to continue because of a lack of a credible alternative for Turkey" (Dorrnsoro 2009: 114). But it is precisely this aspect that lies the contrast made by Ankara which, on one hand, established close links with neighboring regions such as the Western Balkans, becoming step by step a regional leader, and also defends its accession to the European family (Barysch 2010: 1-11).

However, this new Turkish influence encounters some limits when it comes to the time of Ottoman rule because it remains persistent in memory of the Western Balkan countries. In this context, despite the fact that Turkey is now defining itself as a peaceful, safe, and caring power for the region, its presence is rather seen as a hegemonic will with a neo-Ottoman character (Josseran 2010: 42); a term rejected by the Turkish authorities because of its soft imperialist connotation. However, during their visits to Albania and Kosovo, countries which call conqueror the Ottoman Empire in their textbooks, the Turkish political leaders have asked their interlocutors to change these books of history in order that the Ottoman era could be presented as a civilizing source (Erebara 2010). Thus, the authorities intend to enhance the image of Turkey to the citizens of these countries, particularly toward the new generations. But following such an initiative, strong reactions emerged among Albanian intellectuals: it is considered by Ismail Kadare, one of the most influential figures among Albanians, as a cultural aggression (Koha.net 2013).

Some EU Member States also seem worried such a proactive policy of Ankara in the countries of the Western Balkans. While the EU is for twenty years one of the most visible players in these countries, recent dynamics of Turkey are considered a direct threat to European interests. This diplomatic and economic deployment of the Turkish state therefore meets a reaction that Brussels wants to maintain its authority in this area (Brljavac 2011: 38). In addition, now the Western Balkans region forms an enclave within the EU. Since the European Council of Feira (2000) and Thessaloniki's (2003), the EU strongly encourages the

Western Balkan States to move towards European integration. In fact, many reforms have been carried out in this direction through a substantial European support. Thus, since 2009, the date of its launch, the framework for investment in the Western Balkans (CIBO) funded some 137 projects which are worth over 13 billion euros in fields such as energy, environment, transport, social sector and private sector development (WBIF 2013). These figures show that despite the economic crisis of recent years, the EU remains the most serious investor in the Western Balkans as part of its strategy to prepare the area for a future membership.

Therefore, despite becoming more and more important, the economic influence of Turkey in the region remains lower compared to EU's one (Rüma 2010: 138). The current geopolitical context differs significantly from the one in power a century earlier; unlike the EU, Turkey has neither a geographical continuity nor has common borders with the Western Balkans, and especially, it doesn't determine the national policy of these states (Bugajski 2012: 5). As a result, the Turkish activism towards the Western Balkans seems to coincide with the European and American preferences, and a possible clash with the EU is much avoidable than in unstable regions like the Middle East; but this may change if the EU accession negotiations are totally broken (Bechev 2012: 227).

## **Conclusion**

Since 2002, the date when the AKP came to power, as well as other emerging powers, Turkey has been conducting a sustained policy of diversification of its external relations in order to play a greater role on the international stage. The European procranism about its accession in the EU indeed confirms Ankara's conviction of a necessary to opening to other regions of the planet. To do so, the Turkish government has initiated a foreign policy called "zero problems with neighbors", including the Western Balkans. Regular visits of state officials in the Western Balkans show that this space is the first concentric circle of Turkish foreign policy. Through the new geopolitical doctrine, the Turkish authorities have extended their influence and their diverse interests, intensifying diplomatic action, economic, trade and cultural relations in the region. Furthermore, the factors that contributed the most to strengthen their role in the Western Balkans are diverse. More concretely, relying in particular on Ottoman heritage and the significant presence of a Western Balkans diaspora in its territory, investing

in strategic sectors of the economy as well as taking advantage of the current European crisis, Turkey has managed to attract a large number of individuals and consolidate its presence in the region.

However, the increasing presence and more and more palpable of Turkey has not completely erased the traces of the past and the Western Balkans remembers the five centuries of Ottoman occupation. Turkish projection is therefore not always well received by the local population and Ankara can not dictate national policy to any of the states of the region. On the contrary, since Brussels has opened the prospect of accession to the Western Balkans, for more than ten years, these ones primarily aspire to enter faster in the European family. This affiliation seems to be the only plausible alternative for peace, stability, prosperity and interethnic reconciliation (Lika 2015: 131). Through the funds it allocates, the EU encourages reforms to prepare these states to a future membership, and thus continues to maintain its authority in this region as part of its area of interest. Therefore, it seems that the return of Turkey in the Western Balkans does not represent a major challenge for the EU. Ankara is not able, and it is certainly not on its near future plans, to offer to the Western Balkans a more attractive alternative project than the one offered by the EU.

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