

AN EVALUATION OF TURKEY'S WESTERN BALKANS POLICY UNDER THE AKP AND PROSPECTS FOR THE POST- DAVUTOĞLU ERA

TÜRKİYE'NİN AKP HÜKÜMETİ DÖNEMİNDE YÜRÜTTÜĞÜ BATI BALKANLAR SİYASETİNİN BİR DEĞERLENDİRMESİ VE DAVUTOĞLU SONRASI DÖNEME BAKIŞ

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Öz

This article argues that in the last decade there is a visible decline in the political, normative and economic power of the European Union (EU) as a dominant actor in the Western Balkans (WB). Particularly the slowing down of the EU's hegemonic project of Europeanization in the region created space for maneuver for other global and regional players. In this power vacuum, Turkey, alongside with Russia and China has aspired to play a central role in a region that is drifting into multi-polarity. This study aims to analyze Turkey's relations with the Western Balkans under the AKP Government.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Western Balkans, Turkey, AKP, Davutoğlu, Strategic Depth Doctrine.

Abstract

Bu çalışma, Avrupa Birliği'nin Batı Balkanlar'daki devletler üzerindeki siyasi, normatif ve ekonomik gücünün son yıllarda düşüşe geçtiğini ileri sürmektedir. Özellikle Birliğin 'Avrupalaştırma' politikasının etkilerinin azalmasıyla birlikte Batı Balkanlar'da diğer bölgesel ve global aktörler için bir manevra alanı oluşmuştur. Rusya ve Çin ile birlikte bölgesel bir aktör olan Türkiye'nin de bölgedeki faaliyetlerini arttırması neticesinde, Batı Balkanlar bölgesel alt sisteminde tek kutupluluktan çok kutupluluğa doğru bir geçiş yaşanmıştır. Bu çalışma, güç dengesindeki bu dönüşüm doğrultusunda, Türkiye'nin AKP döneminde bölge ile ilişkilerinde meydana gelen değişimi, analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Keywords

Batı Balkanlar, Türkiye, AKP, Davutoğlu, Stratejik Derinlik Doktrini.

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Introduction

In the last hundred years, the power balance in the Western Balkan region changed constantly. The power vacuum that emerged during the first and the second Balkan Wars had been filled by Yugoslavia until the end of the Cold War. Another power vacuum developed with the collapse of the country, which was filled by the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) after Dayton Agreement, which ended the Bosnian War. Since the shift from US to EU leadership in the early 2000s the EU started its hegemonic project in the form of the Europeanization of the Western Balkans. Until the 2008 crisis, in the golden years of enlargement, the EU perpetuated its domination and cast other players like Russia and China aside. However almost a decade long EU hegemony and leadership came to an end with the slowing down of the EU membership process in the Western Balkans. In this period, the competitor states to the EU hegemony such as Russia and China aspired to play a central role in a region that is drifting into multi-polarity. Ankara alongside with Moscow and Beijing deepened its soft power capacity within the Western Balkans, and become a major foreign actor.

In the Western Balkans, after the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia, the EU became a key actor in the post-conflict peace-building process (Rupnik 2011: 18). In the wake of the dissolution, the European Commission took decisive action in the region (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006: 660), enacting initiatives according to the EU's policy on Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). Beginning in the 1990s, the EU's enlargement policy towards CEE had been focused on what it called 'New Economy' politics—that is, the neo-liberal restructuring of CEE states from command economy to free-market economy—as well as on the transformation from authoritarian rule to parliamentary democracy (Holman 2001: 162). In the case of the former Yugoslav states, this process was launched with the 1996 Royaumont Process, whose main aim was the implementation of the Dayton Peace Accord throughout the Western Balkans under the headline of preventive diplomacy. The Regional Approach (1997), which followed The Royaumont Process, placed an emphasis on adaptation to the market economy (Türkes & Gökgöz 2006: 675). However, the 1999 Kosovo Crisis showed the Commission that stronger measures were needed in the area. Therefore, The Stability Pact (SP) was introduced that year alongside Resolution 1244 of the Security Council.¹ This can be described as the beginning of a joint preventive diplomacy pact between the EU, NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Group of Eight (G8) and other partner states, wherein the EU would take responsibility for decisions requiring agreement from pact members.² The EU thereby deepened its involvement in the region, especially with the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) in 1999 and The 2003 EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki. Until the end of 2000s, the EU implemented its Western Balkans policy within the framework of the SP, SAP and Thessaloniki Summit. This foreign policy strategy concentrated on economic cooperation, trade relations and financial assistance.³ However, the era that had begun with the Stability Pact—whose neo-liberal interventions at first had a relatively positive effect on the region—ended with the European debt crisis in 2009. Whereas the Western Balkan states had

¹ For "Resolution 1244 of the Security Council" see <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/1244.pdf> (Accessed on 20 January 2017)

² For "Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe on 10 June 1999" see <http://www.g8.utoronto.ca/summit/1999koln/pact.htm> (Accessed on 20 January 2017)

³ For the EU's Stabilisation and Association Process and more information about SAP and Thessaloniki Summit see https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/policy/glossary/terms/sap_en (Accessed on 20 January 2017)

initially achieved high economic growth rates, relatively low unemployment rates, and received large inflows of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), by late 2008, all experienced a dramatic decline in growth rates, an increase in unemployment rates and a sharp fall in FDI.⁴ The mini-boom experienced by the Western Balkan states thanks to EU backing became a Euro-centred crisis that highlighted the vulnerability of these states (Bartlet & Prica 2011: 6). Correspondingly, EU hegemony over the Western Balkans was also weakened following the debt crisis.

As the EU's Western Balkan hegemony decreased, Russia and China took a more active role in the region. In the case of Russia, the Balkans has always been a subject of great significance, especially since the early 19th century the Balkans retained its symbolic significance for the USSR (Jelavich 1991: 267). After the Cold War, post-communist Russia renewed its interest in the Balkans within a nationalist framework linked to the Tsarist ideals of the pre-communist Russian Empire (Tsygankov 2010: 9-10). This renewed interest took the form of a 'civilizational mission' derived from Eurasianist and Slavophile thought under the presidency of Vladimir Putin (Clark & Foxall 2014: 5). Russia, as an important supplier of natural gas to the world, had derived benefits from its energy agreements, and the idea of the Balkans becoming integrated with the European Union constituted an obstacle. After the European debt crisis, Russia seized the opportunity to sign bilateral energy transportation agreements with the Western Balkan states (Clark & Foxall 2014: 7). However, while Russia's energy dominance in the region has given it significant leverage, it was unable to offer an alternative economic structure or system of identity construction. On this basis, these bilateral agreements can be characterized as relations of economic cooperation rather than hegemonic influence.

As for China, the Balkan region was unable to sidestep conflicts of interest with the Soviet Union during the Cold War years (Necip & Mandacı 2012: 1-4). This left China with a limited sphere of influence characterized by temporary strong relations with certain states in times of conflict with the Soviet Union. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, however, new political conjunctures created a space within which Chinese foreign policy towards the Balkans was developed. While it was unable to maintain its influence in the region due to shifts in foreign policy priorities both in China and the Balkans (Robinson 1995: 120), beginning in 2009 China did prove its economic efficacy in the region through a series of trade agreements. In 2010, it signed EUR 2.6 billion-worth of bilateral trade agreements with Romania, EUR 1.1 billion-worth of business associations with Croatia, and EUR 630.5 million-worth of business associations with Bulgaria. These were significant manifestations of China's efforts towards economic convergence with the Balkans (Poulain 2011: 1). In addition, China has been a valuable partner on infrastructure projects in the region (Andromidas 2013: 33).⁵ However, as with Russia, China's influence was limited to economic relations.

Turkey has been involved in joint foreign policy initiatives within the region since the end of the Cold War,⁶ in fact, it served as an important buffer zone against the communist bloc in both the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean *during* the Cold War. Turkey's contemporary relations with the region era have been characterized by a series of policy shifts. By the mid-2000s, however, Turkey began to pursue an active foreign policy in the Western Balkans (Vračić

⁴ "25 Years of Transition: Post-Communist Europe and the IMF". *Regional Economic Issues Special Report*, October 2014, https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2014/eur/eng/pdf/erei_sr_102414.pdf (Accessed on 20 January 2017)

⁵ See the 2012 Serbian Memorandum of Understanding with Chinese Construction Communication Company, Ltd. regarding China's efforts to become an important partner of the Pan-European Corridors Project.

⁶ See The European Geopolitical Forum (EGF) from 2013.

2016: 8). Turkey's new activism in the Western Balkans is the focus of this paper, and will be explored by providing insight into the reasons for and tools of this activism.

In this regard, this study will initially focus on the tools that Turkey utilized under the AKP government to shape its foreign policy in the region. Next, the study will evaluate the successes/failures of Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans. It is also argued that although Ankara's activism in the region seems at the expense of the EU, Turkey was and still is an actor that aims at cooperation within the region and supports the integration of the Western Balkan countries to the EU. Finally, the paper will conclude by discussing the future of Turkey's Western Balkans policy under the 65th Government, which is referred to both in the domestic politics and the Turkish foreign policy literature as the "post-Davutoğlu" era. The analysis will conclude with a discussion of the prospects for future relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans. It is a question concerned with Turkey's foreign policy choices in the Western Balkans in this new era in comparison with Ahmet Davutoğlu era. Western Balkans is perhaps one of the few regions where his policies deemed successful.

Turkey's Western Balkans Policy under the AKP Government

Turkey has always been concerned with political developments in the Western Balkans due to its geographical proximity to the region. During the Cold War years, Turkey's foreign policy considerations were shaped first by its desire to join the Western alliance against communism, and later as an important link in that alliance (Oran 2001: 486-498). As the end of the road for the communist world showed itself through political developments in the Soviet Union and other Iron Curtain countries in the mid-1980s, Yugoslavia seemed to be particularly affected by the new political environment. Especially when combined with its latent ethnic conflicts, Yugoslavia's politically unsettled position soon escalated into a violent civil war. Alida Vračić has described Turkey's foreign policy during and after these events as "multi-directional" (2016: 7). It closely followed every political development in Yugoslavia and pursued an active policy (Ekinci 2009: 23), showing special interest in the situation of the Bosnian people in the event of dissolution. In 1993 and 1996, Turkey's Ministry of National Defense issued White Papers regarding ethnic conflicts and regional problems in Yugoslavia (Ekinci 2009: 246-48).⁷ This activism became the origin point for a new understanding of foreign policy making in Turkey. After all, with the end of military-supported ethnic conflict in the early 2000s, soft power became a key to influence throughout the region (Bošković, Reljić, and Vračić 2015: 99-100), and Turkey's subsequent foreign policy towards the Western Balkans was a product of this new approach.

There are several reasons for Turkey's the multi-directional foreign policy towards the region. The first and foremost reason was Turkey's economic and financial situation at that time. Economic capacity is an important criterion for states claiming to be an influential power. According to official numbers from the Turkish Statistical Institute, Turkey showed relative economic wealth for the mid-2000s, during which its new foreign policy debuted. In 2001 Turkey had been in the midst of an economic crisis, and its growth rate was -5.7%. After the 2002 general elections, in the first year of the AKP government, the growth rate increased to 6.2%, and this pattern of growth continued until the 2008 Global Economic Crisis. Growth slowed and then decreased in 2008 and 2009 at the rates of 0.7% and -4.8% respectively, then bounced back until 2012. Per capita GDP exhibited approximately the same pattern. In 2001, the GDP per capita change on the previous year was -27.1%. In 2002, this increased to 16.1%, and an

⁷ The 1996 White Papers paid special attention to the case of Bosnia.

annual increase was achieved each year until the 2008 Global Economic Crisis. Although sharp declines in 2008 and 2009 can be observed, from 2010 through 2013 the GDP per capita returned to high levels before falling sharply again: in 2014, the GDP per capita change on the previous year was -2.9% and in 2015, it was -9.1%.⁸

In this relatively positive economic atmosphere, Turkey gained self-confidence in foreign affairs, which was manifested in an increase in import and export activity with the Western Balkans. According to data published by the Turkish Statistical Institute, annual exports by Other European Countries (except the EU) increased from 35.4% in 2007 to 46.4% in 2008.⁹ In 2009 and 2010, due to the effects of the Global Economic Crisis, exports to the region declined,¹⁰ but between 2011 and 2013 Turkey again managed double-digit growth in exports.¹¹ However, starting in 2013, the export volume to the region began to shrink dramatically, and in 2016, the change on the previous year was -31.1%. In the case of imports from the region, it is worth noting that growth was not as significant as in the case of exports. Apart from this, the same pattern can be found: growth of imports until 2009, temporary decline around 2009 and finally, increases again until 2013, followed by dramatic declines afterwards. In 2016, change on the previous year for imports by Other European Countries (except the EU) was -22.1%.¹² By correlating these data with the timeline of Turkey's own economic well-being, Turkey's new activism in the Western Balkans beginning in the mid-2000s can be described as having been driven by the self-confidence that accompanied its relative economic prosperity.

The other reason for Turkey's active policy in the Western Balkans starting in the mid-2000s was the new direction of Turkish foreign policy under the AKP government. The term 'new direction' refers to a change in both interpreting and conducting foreign policy. Ahmet Davutoğlu, as the founder of this new direction, is the most significant figure in Turkey's restructured foreign policy: after being appointed as a foreign policy advisor in 2002, he began to realize his Turkish foreign policy vision (Ozkan 2014: 119). In his book *Strategic Depth*, which was published in 2001, he argued that Turkey needed a strategist like Henry Kissinger or Kazimiers Brzezinski, who would harmonize theory and practice (Davutoğlu 2001: 65). Ahmet Davutoğlu himself mentioned Turkish foreign policy's new vision in a 2007 article: "Since the year 2002, Turkey has begun to structure its policies on the basis of this new vision, keeping in mind well-defined targets, and looking to benefit from its geographical position and historical assets" (Davutoğlu 2008: 79). His emphasis on historical assets and cultural heritage is worth examining closely. On 9 March 2013, in a meeting with the Foreign Economic Relations Board, he listed economic restructuring and progress, development of democracy, and active foreign policy as the three inseparable and complementary components of the Turkish model.¹³ Along similar lines, in another speech on 23 May 2013, he described the expansion of Islamic civilization in the 6th, 7th and 8th centuries as one of the greatest civilizational unifications in

⁸ See Turkish Statistical Institute Website <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> (Accessed on 27 February 2017)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Turkish Statistical Institute Website <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> (Accessed on 27 February 2017).

¹³ See Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website for the speech, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-dis-ekonomik-iliskiler-kurulu-tarafindan-duzenlenen-toplantida-yaptiklari-konusma_9.tr.mfa (Accessed on 27 February 2017)

human history, leading to an era of scientific progress.¹⁴ His vision, in light of his own words, is of cultural heritage arising not from a nationalistic but a religious cultural landscape. According to this vision, Turkey is not only a nation-state that emerged from a national struggle, but also the centre of Ottoman heritage, a civilization that was weakened by the peace negotiations that followed the Turkish War of Independence (Davutoğlu 2001: 7). Therefore, Turkey should continue to play an active role across the former Ottoman world of the Middle East, the Balkans and the Caucasus, and should be building strong alliances and close relationships between different societies with this shared history. Correspondingly, Turkey seized on the opportunities afforded by regional political developments to achieve this consociation. In Ahmet Davutoğlu's own words, "Turkey's new position has both an ideational and a geographical basis" (Davutoğlu 2008: 78). This vision has become predominant in Turkish foreign policy since 2002, and with the country's relative economic prosperity it had the capacity to incorporate these ideals into foreign policy. Turkey's "zero problems with neighbours" policy was a consequence of this new approach. In the case of the Western Balkans, it was relatively successful for a short period of time. For Ekinci, Turkey managed to have a better image in the Western Balkans and have strong economic and socio-cultural relations with the region (2013: 29).

Starting in 2002, Turkey became more active in the Western Balkans. Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision for Turkey's new activism was achieved in two phases: first, as a partner of the EU, and second as an independent foreign policy actor in the region. As a partner of the EU and the North Atlantic Alliance, Turkey played an active role in the region after the armed conflicts came to an end, thereby becoming an important participant in regional peace keeping and EU-integration efforts. Alongside its role in the SFOR, KFOR and EUFOR peace-keeping initiatives after the violent civil war, Turkey also became a member of the South East European Cooperation Process (SEECP), the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI), the Peace Implementation Council (PIC), and the South-Eastern Europe Brigade (SEEBRIG) (Vračić 2016: 7-17). In addition, Turkey increased its interactions with the region. To this aim, it signed bilateral agreements in several different field, including trade, economy, cultural partnership, and visa exemption beginning in 2002 in order to strengthen cooperation with the Western Balkans (Ekinci 2014: 107-115). These attempts were reported on in the European Commission's reports: For example, in its *Turkey 2010 Progress Report*, the Commission emphasized Turkey's commitment and contribution to the political and economic stabilization of the Western Balkans: "Turkey has taken a number of initiatives in the Western Balkans, expressing commitment to promoting peace and stability in the region. Turkey supports integration of all countries in the region both with the EU and at the Euro-Atlantic level."¹⁵ Turkey mediated bilateral and trilateral meetings between conflicting parties in the region. From 2010 onwards, several trilateral summits between Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were mediated by Turkey. Following Croatia's accession to the EU in 2013, only Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina remained as participants in these summits. These summits were significant in achieving cooperation between the parties and maintaining peace in the region. In addition, they were regarded as the first meeting between Serbian President Boris Tadić and the Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina Haris Silajdžić (Vračić 2016:

¹⁴ See Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs Website for the speech, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/disisleri-bakani-sayin-ahmet-davutoglu_nun-mevlana-degisim-programi-tanitim-toplantisinde-yaptiklari-konusma_-23-mayis-2013.tr.mfa (Accessed on 27 February 2017)

¹⁵ See European Commission Turkey 2010 Progress Report, https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2010/package/tr_rapport_2010_en.pdf (Accessed on 27 February 2017)

10). In fact, after the 2010 Balkan Summit in Istanbul, with the signing of the Istanbul Declaration, Bosnia-Herzegovina's territorial integrity was reassured by the parties, including Serbia (Petrović & Reljić 2011: 160-61). This development among conflicted parties is indicative of Turkey's effectiveness at the time.

Relations between the Western Balkan states and both the EU and Turkey reached a turning point around 2008, when the EU's economic restructuring efforts were interrupted because of the global financial crisis, which evolved into the European debt crisis in 2009. The crisis hit the Western Balkan states hard, as they were economically and financially vulnerable (Bartlet & Prica 2011: 4-5). Turkey seized the opportunity to, as Ahmet Davutoğlu once stated, pick up where the EU left off by initiating independent policy efforts in the region (Ekinci 2014: 107-108). The acceleration of relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans was based on two important principles set out by Ahmet Davutoğlu in his speech at the Ministerial Meeting of the SEECP on 22 June 2010.¹⁶ The first principle was regional ownership, which refers to the willing participation of conflicting parties to resolve a problem facing the region. The second was inclusiveness, or taking all parties' arguments into account and acting accordingly.¹⁷ These principles provided a basis for political interactions as well as economic and financial ones. In the economic realm, alongside bilateral trade agreements, Turkey also supported the Western Balkan states financially. According to OECD Reports on Turkey's Official Development Assistance, Turkey seems to increase its financial assistance to the Western Balkan states (Ekinci 2014: 110). Turkey managed to coordinate all matters regarding bilateral relations with the Western Balkans via its official agencies. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TİKA), the Presidency for Turks Abroad and Related Communities (YTB), the Presidency of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) and the Yunus Emre Institutes were primarily responsible for cultural interaction around the region. Their main aim could be described as conducting public diplomacy (Kalin 2011: 18-21).

Through these agencies, economic and financial support, and bilateral trade agreements, Turkey conducted a successful foreign policy in the Western Balkans in terms of efficacy on issues such as mediating trilateral summits between Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia. In the Turkish academia, especially government-funded academic journals such as *Perceptions* and *Insight Turkey*, this success was interpreted as a turning point for Turkish foreign policy.¹⁸ However, by early 2013, this environment had changed. In every field of cooperation, Turkey failed to maintain its active policy in the Western Balkans. In economic and financial cooperation, both the amount of Turkey's investments and the number of bilateral agreements experienced sharp declines.¹⁹ Moreover, according to the OECD's Official Development Assistance reports, Turkey's aid shifted towards the Syrian refugee crisis that resulted from its

¹⁶ See Address by H.E. Ahmet Davutoğlu, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey at the Ministerial Meeting of the SEECP, 22 June 2010, İstanbul, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/address-by-h_e_-ahmet-davutoglu_-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-republic-of-turkey-at-the-ministerial-meeting-of-seecp_istanbul.en.mfa (Accessed on 28 February 2017)

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See for instance, Petrovic, Z., & Reljic, D. (2011). "Turkish interests and involvement in the Western Balkans: A score-card". *Insight Turkey*, 13(3), 159. Kalin, I. (2011). "Soft power and public diplomacy in Turkey". *Perceptions*, 16(3), 5. Ekinci, M. U. (2014). "A Golden Age of Relations: Turkey and the Western Balkans During the AK Party Period". *Insight Turkey*, 16(1), 103. Türbedar, E. (2011). "Turkey's new activism in the Western Balkans: Ambitions and obstacles". *Insight Turkey*, 13(3), 139.

¹⁹ See Turkish Statistical Institute Website, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

ongoing civil war, which had started in 2011.²⁰ In cultural cooperation, Turkey could not use tools of public diplomacy effectively because of an urgent necessity to focus on the Syrian refugee crisis, which redirected funding towards the needs of refugees in Turkey.²¹ There are two basic underlying reasons for this change. The first is to do with criticism from the Western Balkan States that Turkey was pursuing a neo-Ottomanist policy in the region; the second extends from the emergence of Turkey's own domestic political and economic problems.

Accusations of neo-Ottomanism from the Western Balkan states have mostly come in reaction to the discourse used by Turkish political figures and increasing attention paid to Ottoman history among Turkish intellectuals (Vračić 2016: 30). For example, Ahmet Davutoğlu, the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, highlighted the period of Ottoman rule over the Balkans in his speech at the Ottoman Legacy and the Balkan Muslim Communities Today Conference in 2009, stating, "The only positive exception to this historical neglect for the Balkans was the Ottoman state. During the Ottoman state, the Balkan region became a crucial center in world politics, beginning with the 16th century. This was a golden age for the Balkans."²² Similarly, in a 2013 speech, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan caused a conflict with Serbia when he asserted that "We all belong to a common history, common culture, common civilization; we are the people who are brethren of that structure. Do not forget, Turkey is Kosovo, Kosovo is Turkey."²³ After this speech, Serbian then-Prime Minister Ivica Dacic accused Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of being provocative, and President Tomislav Nikolic labelled the speech scandalous.²⁴ When Turkish political discourse is considered alongside Ahmet Davutoğlu's vision for Turkish foreign policy, the reasons of neo-Ottomanist criticism from the Balkans becomes clear. Turkish political leaders' emphasis on common cultural values with the Muslim community in the region also stoked concerns regarding the neo-Ottomanist tendencies of Turkish Foreign Policy. An anecdote once shared among Bosniak elites was about former-President Alija Izzetbegovic leaving Bosnia to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in order to "take care of" the country just before he passed away was a manifestation of such concerns (Vračić 2016: 30). In 2010, Professor Darko Tanaskovic from Belgrade published a book titled *Neoosmanizam – Povratak Turske na Balkan* (Neo-Ottomanism – the Return of Turkey to the Balkans). This book attracted a great deal of attention and prompted debates over neo-Ottomanism among scholars. Tanaskovic interpreted the vision of Ahmet Davutoğlu and Turkish foreign policy as a sequel to Ottoman imperialism (Tanaskovic & Corbic 2013: 19). For some Turkish scholars, this foreign policy vision had no imperialist connotations. Rather, it was understood as a manifestation of cooperation in many fields between the Western Balkan states and Turkey (Somun 2011: 37-38). However, the Turkish political leaders' controversial choice to emphasize Ottoman cultural and religious heritage arguably made neo-Ottomanist comparisons inevitable.

The second underlying reason for Turkey's decreased activity in the region is a consequence of its own domestic problems. These domestic challenges are related to economic recession, and the political environment. Economically, Turkey is not in the level of welfare

²⁰ See Turkey's Official Development Assistance data on the OECD Website, <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/turkeys-official-development-assistanceoda.htm> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²¹ See Turkish Development Assistance Reports on the TİKA Website, http://www.tika.gov.tr/tr/yayin/liste/turkiye_kalkinma_yardimlari_raporlari-24 (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²² See Proceedings of the Ottoman Legacy and the Balkan Muslim Communities Today Conference in Sarajevo, https://www.academia.edu/4316098/Surviving_Elements_of_Ottoman_legacy_in_the_Balkans_in_Non-Muslim_Communities_and_Cultures (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²³ See Al-Monitor News Agency Website, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/originals/2013/10/erdogan-kosovo-turkey.html> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²⁴ See Balkan Insight Website, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/davutoglu-erdogan-s-kosovo-statement-misinterpreted/2027/2> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

once it had in the mid-2000s. The Turkish Statistical Institute recorded a decrease in the country's economic welfare. The unemployment rate has been navigating in high levels since 2011: the annual unemployment rates in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2015 were 13.1%, 11.1%, 9.1% and 10.3%, respectively.²⁵ In addition, growth rates were in decline: the growth rates in 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2015 were -4.8%, -9.2%, -8.8% and -4.0%, respectively.²⁶ The GDP per capita has remained constant following a period of growth: the GDPs per capita in 2006, 2007, 2008, 2011 and 2015 were USD 7,906, 9,656, 10,931, 11,205 and 11,014, respectively.²⁷ In addition, the continuing crisis around Turkey's southeastern border has resulted in a huge inflow of refugees from Syria. When the funding to fulfill the needs of 2,901,281 Syrian refugees in Turkey²⁸ is taken into account, the additional burden on the Turkish economy becomes apparent. Political conditions in Turkey have also worsened compared to those of the mid-2000s. At the end of 2013, the AKP government started conflicting with the Gülen Movement. In the 2015 general elections, for the first time in 13 years, the AKP lost the necessary seats in the Grand National Assembly to form a government without a coalition partner. Right after the general elections, Turkey began to experience violent terrorist attacks across the country by both the PKK and ISIS. In a snap election on 1 November 2015, the AKP returned to power alone; however, the political environment has remained unsteady. On 15 July 2016, the Gülen Movement attempted a coup d'état in Turkey. The failed coup attempt shattered both Turkey's internal politics and its external relations. On the other hand the referendum regarding a new Presidential Government that was scheduled for 16 April 2017 has ended up with a political triumph for both the AKP government and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, yet economic instability has continued since then. When we take the reciprocal relationship of worsening domestic economic conditions and exchange rate fluctuations and its negative effect on the Turkish economy last year²⁹ into account, stability does not seem likely in the near future. All of these factors have tied Turkey's hands in foreign affairs, which have affected its relations with the Western Balkan states.

Turkey's Relations with the Western Balkans in the Post-Davutoğlu Era

In mid-2016 with the resignation of Ahmet Davutoğlu, the main architect of Turkish foreign policy since the early 2000's, Turkey entered the Post Davutoğlu Era in its foreign policy. According to Fuat Keyman (2017), the motto and modus operandi of this new era is "*proactive moral realism*". The most important feature of this era is increased attention to domestic affairs and in the foreign policy, Turkey's new focus is the Middle East. Relations with the Euro-North Alliance have become complicated and a divergence between Turkey and the EU is in question. As such, it is not easy to predict the effects Turkey's internal discourses on relations with the EU and the US.

²⁵ See Turkish Statistical Institute Website, <http://www.turkstat.gov.tr/UstMenu.do?metod=temelist> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Number of registered Syrian refugees in Turkey in 2017 according to UNHCR. See UNHCR Website, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=224> (Accessed on 4 March 2017)

²⁹ In order to have a meaningful connection with domestic economic conditions of Turkey and exchange rate fluctuations in the Turkish economy in 2017, see CPI Based Real Effective Exchange Rate, Domestic-PPI Based Real Effective Exchange Rate and Unit Labor Cost – Developed Countries Based Real Effective Exchange rate in the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey's Website, <http://www.tcmb.gov.tr/wps/wcm/connect/tcmb+en/tcmb+en/main+menu/statistics/exchange+rates/real+effective+exchange+rates+deneme/data> (Accessed on 31 January 2018)

In the new foreign policy era, Western Balkans is not a priority anymore. (Vračić et.al 2018: 199) Despite Turkey's declining activism in the Western Balkans the personal initiatives of President Erdoğan help maintain Turkey's leverage in the region and keep countries interests alive. President Erdoğan succeeded in establishing positive relations particularly with Serbia, which is a key regional player in the Western Balkans and ironically a historical enemy of Turkey. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's visit to Serbia in October 2017 during which several trade agreements were signed has been interpreted as a shift in Western Balkans focus of Turkey from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Serbia³⁰. In less than a year, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan met three times with Serbian President Aleksander Vucic who is also keen to attract Turkish investments to Serbia. In a period of diminishing interest, one of Erdoğan's pinpointed initiatives was the organization of a symbolic meeting between Aleksander Vučić and the Bosniak leader Bakir Izetbegović. His attempts for mediation between Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina reminds many of Turkey's activism in the late 2000s and early 2010s. (Bechev 2017) In addition to this, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar Kitarovic's request from President Erdoğan for his support in changing the electoral law in Bosnia and Herzegovina demonstrates that Turkey's continuing political influence in the region.³¹

Since the failed coup attempt the fight against Gülen movement became the main agenda of Turkey's Western Balkans policy. As a matter of fact Ankara's struggle against this movement in the region is not new. For years, the Turkish government has been exercising pressure on Western Balkan governments to close Gülen-sponsored schools and extradite Gülen-linked people. Pressure from Ankara has increased further since the failed coup attempt of July 2016. In this respect Turkey adopted a carrots-and-sticks diplomacy for curbing Gülen influence in the region. In order to compel the authorities to close down the Gülen-linked institutions Turkish authorities offer more investments and trade agreements to respective countries and uncooperative actions resulted in the annulment of bilateral deals. In Macedonia where the government was reluctant to close the institutions that are suspected of having links to Fethullah Gülen, Turkish governments annulled the dual diploma agreement that was made with Skopje. (Marusic 2017) As a result, governments of the Western Balkan states did partially respond to the demands from Turkey. Although none of the states shut down the Gülen schools, some took symbolic measures such as the prohibition of the use of Turkish symbols by schools linked to the Gülen movement. (Ekinci 2018: 178) In general the Western Balkan states are resisting the pressure coming from Ankara.

Conclusion

The negative developments concerning Turkey's interests in the Western Balkans policy over the last few years have been a defeat for Turkish foreign policy in the region. Firstly, though Turkey has insisted on pursuing foreign policy relations with the Western Balkans independently of the EU, collaboration with the EU in the region remains important. Secondly, the Syrian refugee crisis has had a detrimental effect on relations between Turkey and the Western Balkans, since the Western Balkans are geographically refugees' first stop en route to Western Europe. So, when Turkey threatens the EU with opening its northwestern border this directly affects its relations with the Western Balkan states, creating tension between the two

³⁰ See Balkan Insight Website, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/erdogan-visit-signals-turkey-s-new-passion-for-serbia-10-16-2017> (Accessed on 31 January 2018)

³¹ See Balkan Insight Website, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/croatian-president-asks-for-erdogan-s-help-over-bosnia-01-09-2018> (Accessed on 1 February 2018)

sides. Finally, Turkey hurt its prospects for taking an active role in the Western Balkans with its poorly received political discourse. Based on these factors, and considering both Turkey's domestic challenges in and neo-Ottomanist concerns from the Western Balkans, it is unlikely that Turkey will increase its activism in the Western Balkans in the foreseeable future. In the near future, a tough period is waiting for the Turkish foreign policy in the Western Balkans.

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